

2017

# Intermediate Teachers' Perceptions of Reading Instruction Strategies and Professional Development Needs

Barbara Jean Joyner  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Barbara Jean Joyner

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2017

Abstract

Intermediate Teachers' Perceptions of Reading Instruction Strategies  
and Professional Development Needs

by

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MA, Strayer University, 2009

MA, University of Mississippi, 2007

BS, University of Memphis, 2003

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

Walden University

October 2017

## Abstract

In 1 urban Tennessee school, students in Grades 3 through 5 had not met adequate yearly progress in reading for the past 5 years. The purpose of this case study was to explore teachers' perceptions of current district-recommended teaching practice in reading. The research questions related to current instructional strategies, teaching practices, challenges, and perceptions of current instructional strategies and changes needed to improve students' reading achievement. This study was grounded in the constructivist theoretical framework of Vygotsky. Twelve educators from Grades 3 through 5 and a reading specialist participated in this study. The data were collected from interviews, minutes from professional learning community meetings, and the district guidelines for instruction. Data analysis included open coding to determine common patterns and development of common themes. Findings indicated that teachers described the district learning strategies and guidelines as aligned with the reading curriculum map, and they saw the reading specialist as a valuable resource. Teachers specified that although they were trained in district-recommended strategies, they needed more professional development and support to implement the reading strategies effectively. Teachers wanted job-embedded professional development (PD) to help them develop expertise in implementing effective reading instruction to increase student achievement. To address this, a professional learning community PD project was created. Participation in the PD project may help teachers to implement reading instruction using research-based strategies in accord with district guidelines to improve student reading achievement.

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## Dedication

This study is dedicated to my family, friends and cohorts, Cara, Tianay, and Yolanda. Also, special thanks to my two children, Jonika and Kenneth, and my three grandchildren. Andrea, Timesha, and Timothy. Thank you for your prayers, patience, love, and support during this long journey. I want to dedicate this study to my 7 siblings, Carol, Catherine, Joyce, Rachel, Constance, Larry, and Lee. A special shout out to a special friend Opeibea Omaboe and the “FAM” at the Grove. None of this would have been possible without you.

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## Section 1: The Problem

### **Introduction**

Students' lack of reading achievement is a national problem in the United States. In fact, based on research from the National Center for Education Statistics (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015), only 69% of fourth-grade students in the United States were at or above basic or proficient reading levels. In this study, I have examined this problem within the confines of one urban Title I prekindergarten through fifth grade elementary school located in the southeast district of Libby, Tennessee (pseudonym). As students advance through Grade 4 and beyond, they are required to read and analyze complex texts. Students who have reading problems during the early years sometimes continue to decline in reading. Acknowledging and addressing the reading problems during the early years for students to become successful readers and achieve at acceptable performance on state tests is essential (Speece et al., 2010).

When students at the study site were tested at the end of the spring semester for the past 5 years, the number of scores below proficient on the reading portion of the test indicated a gap in instructional practices and strategies. Reading is important for a successful education. When students struggle with reading skills, they are usually unsuccessful with other academic pursuits. Some of the most important survival skills students need include the ability to read, write, spell, and communicate. The percentage of students possessing the necessary skills to read and comprehend complex passages is minimal, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2015). The NEAP affirmed that only 3% to

5% of tested students were highly developed or advanced for reading accomplishment at the local level (NEAP, 2015).

The expectation was that by the beginning of intermediate grades, students would be proficient on state standardized tests in reading. That America's students continue to struggle in reading is evident in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report (2012), which ranks United States students in reading as 17<sup>th</sup> in a group of 25 nations, and states that there has been no significant change in these performances over time.

The National Reading Panel (2000) stated that the majority of students in Grade 3 struggled with learning to read, performing below proficient. According to the 2013 NEAP reading assessment, 36% of Grade 8 students were at or above grade level while 22% of Grade 8 students scored below the basic level in reading proficiency. More recently, the U. S. Department of Education reported in *A First Look Report* (2013), that the 2013 NAEP showed 80% of the students from low-income environments scored below grade level in reading on state tests, and 66% of fourth graders in the U.S. scored below proficient in reading.

Educators and policy makers in the United States understand that reading failure has increased in schools (Strauss, 2015). Students at the study site continue to struggle with reading skills. Reading proficiency at Grades 3 and 4 is a predictor of future success (Hernandez, 2011). Elementary teachers should use effective instructional approaches and a sound curriculum to help students avoid the consequences of early reading failure. If the foundation for proficient reading is not developed before students enter school,

teachers must build missing skills (Cooter, 2006). According to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (2002), all students were to be proficient or advanced in reading by 2014.

The district website recorded that the local districts have received six million dollars from the Reading First fund since 2003. According to the U. S. Department of Education (2009), the Reading First program was granted to school districts that scored basic or below basic on state tests. This research-based program was implemented in classrooms to increase students' reading performance on standardized tests so they would become successful readers. Educators across states implemented reading instruction in a variety of ways. Students had different learning styles, and educators were to deliver effective reading instruction that would accelerate growth in students' performance and address the discrepancy in achievement among the groups. The NCLB Act (2002) had expectations for all students regardless of disabilities, language, or any other traits.

As diversity increases in the student population, educators must discover effective ways to respond to diverse students by promoting cross-cultural understanding and academic achievement. According to the NCLB (2002), schools were held accountable for each subgroup of students' adequate yearly progress (AYP). The NCLB offered increases in federal aid to local school districts and to states for materials, educators, and Title I to improve students' learning. Educators sometimes found themselves lacking the confidence, knowledge, and skills to respond to students from diverse backgrounds, especially immigrant students, placed into classrooms for the first time (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001).

## **Definition of the Problem**

### **Local-Level Problem**

During the 2014-2015 school year, teachers at the study site had professional development (PD) in-service to help build instructional strategies and practices for struggling readers and writers in Grades 3 through 5. Nevertheless, based on the data from the state report card, students at the study site have not met sufficient yearly progress in reading; therefore, in this study I examined the current teaching practices and teachers' perceptions related to district standards and strategies. My purpose for the creation of this project study was to examine the current district-recommended teaching methods in reading as well as teachers' perceptions about these strategies. All public elementary schools in the state of Tennessee were required yearly to administer to students in Grades 3-5 the standardized achievement test, Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP). The TCAP measured students' proficiency in reading, mathematics, and language arts. TCAP results pointed to a gap in instructional practices and strategies in the public schools of Libby, Tennessee for students in Grades 3 through 5.

Students who succeeded in becoming fluent strategic readers are not guaranteed success in school or in their lives, but they can become successful readers during their educational journeys. However, children who are not proficient in reading skills or who become reluctant readers face a long arduous journey in achieving success in life and school (Allington, 2010). The main problem in elementary education is the gap in reading performance between disadvantaged students, middle class students, and students of

different ethnic groups. To prepare students for college, life, and a career, success in reading is essential (Rojas-LeBouef & Slate, 2012).

Researchers have offered many solutions for the problems students experience in reading. According to Polikoff and Porter (2013), if teachers implemented more effective instructional practices and strategies, students' achievement would improve. Urban schools invested enormous amounts in reading programs and remedial services for struggling students (Allington, 2013). Tennessee received funds from the Bill and Melinda Gates' Foundation: Measures of Effective Teaching as a way to measure teacher effectiveness in the classroom. Educators understand the great importance of success in reading and writing for millions of students (Walters-Braker, 2014); however, the struggle to teach students to read well was still present at the study site during the spring of 2015.

The state Discovery Education Assessment (DEA) measured the reading standards at the state level. Since the fall of 2006, the study showed that district and state students in Grades 3 through 5 were administered the DEA three times a year. Common Core is a set of academic standards in English Language Arts/literacy (ELA) and mathematics that are aligned with college and career goals. The standards outline student learning goals such as what they should know and be able to do at the end of each grade level. The DEA benchmarks provided state-specific and Common Core Standards performance levels as well as proficiency predictions that were used to inform instruction, measure student progress, predict performance on high stakes tests (such as the TCAP), and drive student achievement. The reports produced by the discovery system

showed school level, student level, district level, and teacher level results (Garrison & Ehringhaus, 2013). This formative test allowed analysis of student performance using reports that showed proficiency, item difficulty, content mastery, and state and national percentiles.

In Grades 3 through 5, the reading and language arts section of the state's DEA test measured students' understanding of several content areas selected from the state's test, including literature, information, language and vocabulary, communication and media, logic, techniques, and skills. The state's formative assessment test consisted of four achievement levels that range from Level One (Advanced), Level Two (Proficient), Level Three (Basic), and Level Four (Below Basic) as stated by the Tennessee Department of Education in 2013. When students' scores were below basic and basic, those scores weighed heavily on an educator's evaluation reports. The Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) broke down the performance data that showed educational progress for students in the school or per grade level (Tennessee Department of Education [TDOE], 2013a). This allowed teachers to use information from TVASS to enhance instructional practices in their classrooms (Papay, 2011).

During professional learning community (PLC) meetings, educators at the study site viewed test data and discussed the strategies that were implemented in their classroom that helped student achievement on test items (Reich & Bally, 2010). Formative predictive tests were implemented often during the school year to demonstrate measures of validity and reliability and to guarantee the effectiveness of correlation

alignment. The DEA test was also aligned to accommodate both Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the NCLB.

The district's superintendent's perception was that educational stakeholders at the site would benefit from understanding the importance of effective research-based instructional strategies (Hopson, 2015); however, based on data from this study, the effectiveness of district staff developments was less than satisfactory for many of the participants. This study's site presented the discovery formative assessment data during principals' CompStat meetings. Cash and Baker (2011), stated that a CompStat meeting allowed a collaborative process to exist where principals received support and feedback from their colleagues at the main district office and from other principals who faced similar issues at peer striving schools.

During the conclusion of the 2014-2015 school year, studies, reports, and details of schools that were placed on the district's failure list were generated, and those schools were identified for state takeover. School district officials arranged for underachieving students in Grades 3 through 5 to receive an additional 30 minutes of reading and language intervention daily, outside of their reading block. In spite of described efforts, students continued to fail in reading. Therefore, in this study, I sought teachers' perceptions to help identify possible gaps in instructional practice and training. When these areas are identified and addressed, this may help increase the reading levels of the identified struggling readers.

## **Rationale**

### **Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level**

I examined the problem of low reading achievement in an urban Tennessee public school district for students in Grades 3 through 5. The problem was detected by identifying and addressing the gaps in instructional practices and strategies in reading. Policymakers, parents, and educators understand the importance of reading in elementary schools. Struggling readers at the study site continued to score below grade level on state tests. Princiotta and Fortune (2009) stated that implementing the Common Core State Standards in classrooms may close the achievement gap in reading. This would promote equity for all students in the United states (Gamson, Lu, & Eckert, 2013). Students who were prepared with the necessary reading knowledge and skills would be able to compete and collaborate with their friends in other countries.

The district's superintendent of the study site informed the school board members and stakeholders of the implementation of the District's 80/90/100% Strategic Plan that began during the month of February 2015 (Hopson, 2015). The superintendent outlined the framework for the district's 10-year plan for student achievement, which included strategies and a district-wide performance dashboard to measure progress, metrics, and priorities. During the past 8 months, teachers, representatives from the community, school administrators and staff met and provided thoughtful views that will be used to determine and prioritize the best strategies to make a difference in the community as well as the classrooms.

During the school year of 2025, the district has guaranteed that 80% of seniors will graduate with college or career-ready readiness; 90% of seniors will graduate on time, and 100% of graduates who were college or career ready would be enrolled in a postsecondary school. The district's goal for the next 10 years will be centered on a specific "high-level priority level," which will increase students' readiness for college and careers. All endeavors and resources within and beyond the district will be aligned to these five priorities:

Priority 1: Strengthen Early Literacy

Priority 2: Improve Post-Secondary Readiness

Priority 3: Develop Teachers, Leaders and Central Office to Drive Student Success

Priority 4: Expand High Quality School Options

Priority 5: Mobilize Family and Community Partners (Hopson, 2015).

The district will continue to discover access points for the community and staff to become engaged with the plan. The district's comprehensive literacy plan began in February 2015. Steps are being formulated by the school district for further goals of full implementation for the new school year 2017-2018. Students at the study site were not performing on grade level, and many students still have a difficult time completing high school on time or enrolling in a post-secondary school. In the new district plan, teachers will deliver high state standards and instruction that will drive student success. These students started out behind, and it was strenuous for them to catch up with their peers. Therefore, many of the seniors stayed behind or dropped out of high school, resulting in a

negative impact in the study site's community. The plan was a significant change in culture for the district (Hopson, 2015). Student outcomes were the core of the plan; therefore, community, stakeholders, teachers, leaders, and family were accountable for the successes and failures of students.

Table 1 demonstrates the study site's 2013-2014 state report card for Grades 3 through 8.

Table 1

*2013-14 Libby Report Card Results for Grades 3 Through 8*

Grade level	Subject	State-issued grade	Achievement score
3-8	Mathematics	A	57
3-8	Reading	B	52
3-8	Science	B	54
3-8	Social Studies	A	57

*Note:* From Tennessee Department of Education (2014).

Table 2

*2014-15 Libby Report Card Results for Grades 3 Through 8*

Grade level	Subject	State-issued grade	Achievement score
3-8	Mathematics	B	50
3-8	Reading	C	45
3-8	Science	C	47
3-8	Social Studies	B	50

*Note:* From Tennessee Department of Education (2015).

Table 2 shows the 2014- 2015 state report card results for Grades 3 through 8. Students were tested in the subject areas as required by the state, and reading and science were five points below state target for the state achievement goal. Both Tables 1 and 2 show that students' scores declined by 7% in reading skills, science, social studies, and math (TDOE, 2015).

Researchers have validated the problem of below-average reading in Grades 3 through 5 and have also shown a connection between poor academic performance across subject areas and poor performance in reading throughout elementary school (Arthaud & Goracke, 2006). Therefore, below proficient status in reading needs to be corrected at the elementary school level to ensure students will become successful readers. Poor reading skills in subgroups of Libby's elementary grade span dictated the need for a modification in instructional practices and strategies in reading to place students of all races on the road to productive adulthood.

Teachers at the local level struggled with finding the best practices for implementing effective reading instruction. The district allowed principals from each school to select experienced teachers from their school, who used effective research-based strategies or practices in their classroom, to serve as master teachers and learning coaches (Hopson, 2015). Learning coaches at the study site provided individualized support to new and struggling teachers (Hopson, 2015). They completed informal observations and provided ongoing support using a research-based curriculum.

The master teacher supported teachers by conducting formal peer-to-peer observations, providing grade level PDs, and providing reflective practice technology so teachers could improve their practices. The master teacher and learning coach worked closely together to help teachers whom the principal had identified during an observation or walk-through as struggling in using best practices for instruction in reading in the classroom. These leadership roles were established by the district to help support teachers and to deliver PD.

The school's most current subgroups include Black and economically disadvantaged. Although the school had a population of students with disabilities, Hispanic, and multiracial, the total number of students in these subgroups was often less than 25 or not equal to 12% of the total school population; therefore, these subgroups were not calculated in the school's total population for AYP (TDOE, 2010). The school had a leadership team, which met monthly to discuss the school-wide literacy needs and to review reading data such as that in Table 3.

Table 3

*Libby School's AYP Reading Results for Grades 3 Through 5 Subgroups*

Student Enrollment	2010 Reading proficient met?	2011 Reading proficient met?	2012 Reading proficient met?
Black	No	Yes	Yes
Economically Disadvantaged	No	Yes	No
Students with disabilities	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: From Tennessee Department of Education (2013b).

In the 2010 assessment, scores declined drastically because of a change in standards, old proficiency cut scores, and the increased cut score for proficiency (TDOE, 2010). The study's site school did not show any change in percentages for advanced and proficient in reading on the state's test. The reading scores in 2009-2011 remained the same with students performing advanced and proficient in reading from 2010-2011 increased (Roberts, 2014). Below proficient levels in reading for Grades 3 through 5 students was a concern because students needed to reach their potential reading levels. Insufficient reading performance for students in Grades 3 through 5 indicated a gap in practice and the need for modification in reading instruction strategies.

#### **Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature**

The National Reading Panel (2000) identified the following five reading elements: (a) comprehension, (b) vocabulary, (c) phonics, (d) fluency, and (e) phonemic awareness, which played significant roles in the reading and writing Common Core Standards. Musti-Rao and Carledge (2007) stated that educators need to seek ways to identify and implement effective teaching strategies in reading and writing as well as develop in teachers' positive perceptions about these strategies for students to become life-long learners. Educators need to monitor students who may want to give up on education because of struggles in reading. Rasinski, Samuels, Hiebert, Petscher and Feller (2011) stated that silent reading fluency instruction for struggling readers increased student reading performance. When teachers utilized the reading program as part of their daily intervention plan and small group instruction, student reading comprehension level may improve. The silent reading program known as Reading Plus could have positive

effects on student reading performance. The Reading Plus intervention program can be utilized at home as well. Parents could monitor their child's reading performance. The family plays a major role in child's education. This helps them become successful citizens.

The family environment played a crucial part in children's learning and development stages. As a result of their environmental surroundings, students' experiences can be restricted; the environment that parents and guardians provide has a critical impact on children's brain development (Hokoda & Fincham, 2005). When the family is a strong advocate for good education, students will attain higher achievement levels and this will perhaps help close the achievement gap in reading for Grades 3 through 5 (Hernandez, 2011). When parents set high expectations for their children, they can influence their children's motivation for academic success. A positive learning environment is very important because the classroom learning environment influences how well a student receives instruction (Hokoda & Fincham, 2005).

According to Cartledge and Kourea (2008), by late elementary school, students who use reading comprehension strategies are able to comprehend effectively because teachers have modeled how to use these strategies. If the strategies were taught explicitly, these strategies engaged each student's whole brain. Because of technological advances and global competition, the complexities of the world will present events and challenges that will be incomprehensible without the ability to effectively read and translate information (PISA, 2012). Reading is an inherent and important part of people's daily lives (Gersten et al., 2008). Without a firm background, students will decline further in

their language arts skills each school year. Jairrels (2009) stated that reading failure rates of African American students are often subsequently high because they lack early interventions that are rich in print in their early years. The ability to read fluently is important for academic success. Therefore, when reading problems are evident, early intervention and strategies are crucial (Evers, Lang, & Smith, 2009).

Students who are unsuccessful in learning to read by the third grade are unlikely to become literate (Forbes, 2006). Students who read inadequately by fourth grade have a challenge reaching their reading level because once the sequence of reading difficulties begins, remediation is difficult (Allington, 2012). Some students may have a condition called *learned helplessness*. Learned helplessness is a condition in which a person experiences a sense of powerlessness by accepting failure as a way to succeed. When students experience repeated failures, they stop assuming accountability for their own education and start to blame others (Cemalcilar, Canbeyli, & Sunar, 2003).

Sometimes negative factors in the home environment or teachers' behavior are the cause of this helplessness (Hokoda & Fincham, 2005). When teachers implement effective strategies, provide positive feedback, and teach students how to focus their concentration on the learning objectives, students overcome helplessness. Teachers should provide meaningful opportunities for students to practice. When the previously mentioned strategies are implemented consistently, students remain motivated and interested in learning (Reutzel & Cooter, 2009).

## Definitions

*Accommodation:* Accommodation occurs when students have adaptations to support their learning based on their disabilities and to complete the same tasks and assignments as other students (Mele-McCarthy & Whitmire, 2007).

*At-risk:* The term *at-risk* describes children with certain characteristics that may require strategies that will help them become successful academically in school (Kavale, 2005).

*Cooperative learning:* Cooperative learning is a technique when students collaborate in a small session and group to comprehend instruction, to process ideas, and to give encouragement to others for academic success (Johnson & Johnson, 2001).

*Discovery Education Assessment Predictive Benchmark Assessment:* This benchmark assessment is given three times a year in Tennessee to raise students' proficiency level on state tests, enhance teachers' instructional practices, and to improve students' performance levels (Smith & Kurz, 2008).

*Explicit instruction:* Explicit instruction involves clear, direct, and visible instruction with direct explanation from the teacher. Instruction is clear and the students know the learning outcomes (Troia & Graham, 2002).

*Heterogeneous grouping:* Heterogeneous grouping refers to grouping students of all abilities and learning styles in the same class that requires them to work together on a rigorous curriculum (Harry & Klingner, 2006,).

*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*: This law controls the way public organizations and states provide assistance, such as early intervention and special education to families with disabled children (Mele-McCarthy & Whitmire, 2007).

*Scientifically based reading research*: Application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to research that has been approved by a panel of independent experts in reading (Cooter & Perkins, 2005).

### **Significance**

The Center on Education Policy (2010) in Libby, Tennessee stated that more than 80% of the public schools in the state of the study site's location did not meet the predictive percent on the formative test. Teachers administered the Predictive State-Specific Benchmark tests to monitor their students' growth within the state objectives and standards, which were aligned to the content measured on state tests. Parents also viewed the results to assist them in improving their child's skills. In 2010, 1,248 of the 1,623 schools made AYP in the state of this study (TDOE, 2010). This trend can be reversed and the situation improved.

According to Tennessee's 2013-14 state report, Grades 3-5 students showed growth in five of the seven subject-level tests, indicating the highest increase in students' achievement in 5 years (TDOE, 2014, TCAP data). However, the gaps in performance declined in math and reading for minority students in Grades 3-8 levels and high school. Grades 3-5 students achieved significant progress in their academic reading performance, but for continued success, more research is needed, making the current study very

important. The ultimate goal of our work is to send more students out of high school with higher skill levels (TDOE, 2014).

Reading is fundamental for all students; therefore, a study of effective reading instructional practices and strategies and teachers' perceptions related to those strategies is important in assisting learners to become strong readers. Effective instructional practices will help students to become lifelong learners. To understand the effectiveness of instructional practices, understanding the perceptions of the teacher who is accountable for delivering the instructional practices to students is crucial. Teachers need to be conscious of their knowledge of delivering the instruction and their effectiveness in providing instruction practices for learners. This study was significant in several ways. No studies have been conducted on gaps in instructional practices or strategies in reading in the classroom at the study site in the past 5 years. The local school needed to implement research-based instructional practices more effectively in order to improve reading proficiency for struggling readers in Grades 3 through 5. I identified current teaching practices, gaps in those practices, teachers' perceptions, and implications for change.

The data collected in this study provided a range of perceptions of the teachers and their instructional needs. The findings led to the creation of a project that will help teachers learn and improve so that the research-based instructional practices for struggling readers will be more effectively implemented, leading to an increase in student achievement and gained proficiency in reading. In addition, the results of this research will provide momentum for future research on teaching practices and teachers'

perceptions of instructional practices for struggling readers in schools in other demographical locations and teacher populations. The study results will also inform policymakers, students, teachers, parents, and principals about the challenges struggling readers encounter daily.

I identified current teaching practices, gaps in those practices, teachers' perceptions, and implications for changes. The project that I created was based on the findings of the study and addressed the need to provide sharing, planning, and collaborating time for teachers and professional development about how to more effectively implement research-based instruction. Teachers will find answers to questions, see strategies modeled, and gain knowledge of new research-based practices and strategies. This is important because teachers, like students, must be taught and need extensive practice to learn and store information into their long-term memories. When teachers learn how to implement current research-based instructional practices and methods, the achievement gap will close. At this site, the school had not met advanced or proficient status on the DEA in reading and language arts achievement in Grades 3 through 5. The findings of this research study will be helpful to local schools, districts, and students failing to meet AYP in reading.

### **Research Questions**

In this case study, I examined teachers' perceptions of their current teaching practices related to improving student performance in reading, those strategies that were shared during professional learning opportunities at the school's PLC meetings, and those recommended by the district. The goal of this case study was to explore current and

district-recommended teaching practices and techniques in reading as well as teachers' perceptions of these strategies. At this study site, teachers needed examples related to instructional strategies and practices to use with struggling readers that would improve reading scores. The essential question that guided this research was "What are Grades 3 through 5 teachers' perceptions of their current instructional practices in reading?" The following four subquestions also guided this study:

1. What are the current instructional strategies and teaching practices in the areas of reading that are supported by the district?

2. What instructional strategies and teaching practices are supported at the professional learning community (PLC) meetings?

3. What challenges are teachers facing when implementing these recommended teaching strategies?

4. What are the perceptions of teachers and the reading specialist regarding the adequate improvement in the reading performance for students in Grades 3 through 5?

A case study was appropriate to address this problem because it provided an in-depth view of the current strategies used by teachers in the school and helped identify research-based strategies that were missing or poorly implemented. The literature review helped support the research questions in this study and allowed me to identify numerous components of current research-based strategies and instructional practices in reading.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In this study, I examined input from teachers, identified gaps in instructional practices and strategies, and applied what I learned to address the students' achievement

problem. The constructivist Vygotsky's (1978) theory of learning provided the theoretical framework for this study. Chaiklin (2003) and Vygotsky (1978) believed that the community played an essential part in the process of "making meaning" through social interaction from guided learning as students construct their knowledge. Constructivists believe that students can build new learning strategies based on their prior learning experiences. When teachers become the facilitators, students are given the opportunity to discover and explore new information. Their peers become their learning partners and classmates (Bruner & Haste, 1987, Piaget 1985; Vygotsky, 1978).

Scaffolding is an instructional technique associated with Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) theory. This theory describes how children interact in a learning environment. Children can complete a task or assignment independently because they can do what they have learned to do (Rodgers & Rodgers, 2004). When teachers know a student's ZPD, they could provide a task that the student can do without assistance or one that they could do with assistance or in collaboration with competent peers (Vygotsky, 1978). When teachers have the line of communication open in the classroom environment and are knowledgeable of the concepts taught, students can learn the concepts through social interaction (Stanton-Chapman & Hadden, 2011).

Teachers who implement a variety of strategies in their classroom have opportunities to plan differentiated instruction based on each student's needs or independent thinking level so students will be able to achieve their goals. The position of the educator is to serve as a facilitator, construct the learning in the classroom, and address any misconceptions students have (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Students who have

been taught how to master problem solving will be able to make the associations between experience and concepts (Coffey, 2009). By modeling and guiding students through explicit instruction in the learning environment and implementing effective strategies for struggling readers, teachers will help ensure that students progress to appropriate reading levels. A cooperative effort at the study site is necessary to solve the gaps in reading instruction. This study was built on collaborative efforts to identify perceptions, misconceptions, and better ways of teaching to improve students' achievement.

### **Review of the Literature**

The focus of this study in the current district was on teachers' perceptions of effective teaching strategies in reading. In this literature review, I investigated the following topics: (a) the conceptual framework on which the study was based, (b) instructional strategies for effective teaching and learning, (c) the influence of family structure on students' academics, (d) urban versus suburban students (e) physiological factors that caused students to become strugglers in reading, and (f) factors which resulted in closing the gap in achievement. The literature review helped me gain a better understanding of factors that influenced reading instruction and identified possible gaps in instructional practices that existed at the study site.

### **Searching the Literature**

For this study, I used several strategies to search the literature. In the review of literature, I focused on students' achievement, effective instructional strategies, small group instruction, and student performance. Primary sources related to effective instructional strategies, small group instruction, and vocabulary acquisition and came

from the Walden University databases, ERIC, and EBSCO using the key words *reading instruction, student achievement, instructional practices, and vocabulary*. I supplemented these with dissertations from the ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Databases.

In the review, I focused on research-based instructional practices that helped improve reading performance. This information is important in administrators' and teachers' plans of curricula and the implementation of effective instructional strategies and practices for struggling readers. Many changes have occurred with the teachers' delivery of effective instruction in the classroom. Student-centered learning offers a more permanent form of learning. The learning environment plays a vital part in the learning process. Vygotsky (1978) believed that students' learning increased through social interactions and they should be actively engaged in the learning process. This learning process helps students to internalize the information and to construct their knowledge through guidance from peers and adults to become independent learners (Vygotsky, 2002).

### **Instructional Strategies for Effective Teaching and Learning**

Students need to be explicitly taught both word-learning strategies and specific words. Vocabulary is essential for reading success in all grades. When students improve their vocabulary skills, their social confidence will improve (Taffe, Blachowitz, & Fisher, 2009). Readers better understand what they are reading when they understand what the words mean. As students learn to read more complex and in-depth informational texts, they must know and understand the meaning of new words that are not included in their daily conversations (Reutzel & Cooter, 2009).

Vocabulary affects all areas of skills in reading and language arts and is crucial and essential to reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2008a). Unless students are able to understand word meaning as they read, the reading process is reduced to decoding (sounding-out). Students who come to school with thousands of words in their head will be able to hear, understand, and use words in their daily lives and thus will be successful in learning (Allington, 2002). Reutzel and Cooter (2009) discussed how students who have limited listening, speaking, and reading vocabularies usually come from “language deprived homes” (p. 29), and they need immediate reading instruction if they are to have any real opportunity of reading successfully.

Balanced reading instruction is an excellent method for educators to use in classrooms for students who struggle with basic reading skills. Balanced reading instruction requires explicit teaching that builds on spelling and writing skills, reading comprehension strategies, text processing, oral language vocabulary, fluency in word recognition, phonemic decoding skills, and phonemic awareness (Cooter & Perkins, 2005). These types of explicit instructions, when implemented daily, will provide higher results for reading more than any other type of program in reading instruction (Pearson, 2010). According to results from state tests, students who are having a difficult time with reading, language arts, and vocabulary skills should receive intensive instruction. Educators must continue to provide the repetition of skills that they have previously taught (Tompkins, 2013).

A study conducted by Vaughn et al. (2000) examined two different aspects of how to implement research-based practices in a small school district by designing PD

with a mentor approach for 2 years. The study took place in both urban and rural areas of the school district. Twelve teachers, 11 third grade and one second grade, were selected for this study. Six of the teachers served as mentors, who modeled, coached, taught, and provided effective comments to the mentees in the study. Research-based practices were selected based on whether the teachers who served as mentors could coach and teach their colleagues the research-based instructional method within a certain time period. Educators in this study implemented the Collaborative Strategic Reading or Partner Reading strategy, where students were paired with different levels of readers. Semistructured interviews, teacher implementation logs, and classroom observation checklists were used for data collection (Vaughn et al., 2000). The findings suggested that having mentees teach the strategy to a partner was more beneficial than attending PD workshops.

When educators effectively used Marzano, Pickering, and Heflebower's (2010) nine instructional strategies, students made performance in reading and language arts skills. In one of Marzano et al.'s (2010) strategies known as cues, questions and advance organizers allowed students to ask and answer higher order questions. Teachers used scaffolding strategies with students for them to answer the key questions from a story or topic. This approach helped students master a task or goal with support in reading and writing. Teachers used cues and questions to help students predict what would happen next, so the strategies can be connected to their present knowledge. Teachers can model how to ask and answer higher order questions over a period, then students could perform the skills independently (Reutzler, Jones, Fawson, & Smith, 2008). Cues and questions

can be used by teachers before and after a lesson or project and need to be linked into the main point of what is important in the unit. This approach should focus on what is important and is very effective when teachers present the approach before the learning experience (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001).

### **Differentiated Instruction**

As the population of learners in classrooms becomes more diverse, differentiated instruction is being required of classroom teachers. Two of the most difficult problems that educators are facing today are the pressures of high accountability related to meeting Common Core standards on state tests and addressing the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, including non-English speaking students (Lesaux & Marietta, 2012). In addition, teachers are challenged to teach to the different levels of intelligences and learning styles so all students will learn to their full potential (Chapman & Gregory, 2007). Since diversity exists in classrooms, students will be successful when teachers use effective instructional practices to meet the needs of individual students.

An effective differentiated learning environment is proactive, and teachers know how to plan and adjust lessons according to students' different learning needs and styles. Teachers look for opportunities to better understand their students' needs and styles through observations, formal and informal assessments, conversations with students, and student work (Tomlinson, 2014). Teachers in differentiated classrooms have a clear and current knowledge about effective research-based instructional practices, Common Core State Standards, and the district's curriculum. Students need the skills that are necessary to take on the next important stage of learning (Konsanovich, 2012). Therefore, teachers

need to understand how to modify the curriculum and instruction so each student will have knowledge and understanding of the concepts taught.

The learning environment is a key to student academic success in differentiated classrooms. Teachers need to carefully modify the curriculum to communicate what is crucial for students to comprehend and apply in all subject areas (Konsanovich, 2012). Students should leave the classroom with knowledge, understanding, and skills to apply what they have learned in their everyday lives and be effective problem solvers. Instruction must be clear so that the students, assessments, teachers, and curriculum are connected for each individual success (Brassell, 2009). To prepare students for life, teachers should help students to independently question and create higher order responses (Ciardiello, 2012).

In an exploratory study conducted by Gibson, Little, Ruegg, and Davis (2014), the researchers examined several types of survey questions to complete a follow-up on SEM-R framework. The SEM-R framework is a reading program implemented to improve students' reading achievement and prepare them to become lifelong readers. Students and teachers were engaged in one-to-one reading conferences in an elementary setting.

The problem in the above exploratory study was that teachers were not implementing differentiated questions to promote advanced comprehension of reading instruction. Three teachers from Grades 3 through 5 participated in this study. One teacher per grade level selected three students from their classrooms who were identified as a high, medium, and low level readers based on the Development Reading Assessment (DRA) conducted in the classrooms. The study involved one-on-one conferences with

teachers to determine the different types of follow-up questions to ask students who were on separate levels. Teachers had sample questions that were to address literacy components, genres of books to be used during individual student reading meetings, and reading attitudes and behaviors. The teachers in the research received incessant and specialized training. The major finding from the study suggested that teachers in Grades 3 through 5 needed follow-up PD to help them to implement differentiated instruction to respond to student needs and differences in reading instruction (Gibson et al., 2014).

Differentiated instruction means that teachers must accommodate the individual learner in a learning environment to meet his or her learning styles and needs. For differentiated instruction to be successful, educators must become accustomed to different reading strategies and a collection of differentiated resources that will meet students' diverse background, learning styles, and intelligences (Chapman & Gregory, 2007; Tomlinson, 2014). Teachers must implement small group instruction and use student data to form literacy centers that will lead to an increase in reading performance (Torgerson, Brooks, & Hall, 2006). Struggling readers will benefit from small group and differentiated instruction where these skills can be taught more directly and explicitly.

Beecher and Sweeny (2008) conducted an 8-year study on closing the gap in student performance among students in Grade 4. The problem in this local elementary school was that students were performing low on state tests. On the state and district assessments in writing, mathematics, and reading, students at Central Elementary School performed in the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile. About 45% of the students received reduced lunch or free lunch, which indicated that the poverty level was an issue. The diverse student

population expanded from 435 students who were linguistically and culturally diverse students over an 8-year period to 75% of the population. About 30% of the students in this study were English speakers. The study used differentiated instruction facilitated by a new principal. The Strategic Plan for School Improvement was the method used in this study. This plan incorporated the behavioral, academic, emotional, and social needs of students, which both enriched and differentiated curriculum (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008). The matrix helped teachers write lesson plans that included differentiated instruction that engaged students in learning. The strategic school profile and state test score were used to determine students' achievement. Diverse students' failure rate declined from 62% to 10% over the 8-year period. The teachers, who received training and learned how to implement differentiated instruction in an enriched classroom while focusing on each student's interests and needs, had gains in student achievement (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008).

According to Fountas and Pinnell (2008b), using small groups is another effective reading strategy that helps struggling readers. Small group instruction provides opportunities for students to express what they have learned and receive feedback from other students and the teachers. During small group sessions, instructional conversations are easier to support and conduct (Vaughn, Hughes, Moody, & Elbaum, 2001). Teachers can use differentiated instruction in small groups based on students' needs and abilities. Teachers need to group students based on their reading abilities (Reutzel et al., 2008). When students receive small group instruction three times a week, they will improve their reading skills (Huebner, 2010). Educators must monitor students' learning abilities and

learning needs as a continuous routine (Boud & Molloy, 2013). For educators to meet students' needs and implement other strategies or interventions, educators need to monitor accurately so students will move to the next step of learning.

Miller and Satchwell (2006) suggested teachers modify instructional approaches until students achieve success in reading. Teachers must provide students with learning opportunities that will encourage successful learning experiences (Vadasay & Sanders, 2008). After ongoing formative assessments, teachers need to give students corrective feedback on their currently performing level and on the level where they need to be performing in reading and writing. Teachers need to set high expectations and achievable learning goals throughout the school year. When students have a risk-free conducive learning environment, they will accept feedback and work harder on their learning goals (Chan, Konrad, Gonzales, Peters, & Ressa, 2014).

According to Berry (2003), another strategy that has been shown to help struggling students is the jigsaw strategy, which helps students to solve story element problems in a story, using text events. Students who are struggling with reading skills improve their skills and learn how to place information in sequence by using this method. Students work together to collect and collectively place information to resolve the problem, like a jigsaw puzzle of information. When educators implement this strategy effectively, students improve their academic performance in reading skills (Conderman, Bresnahan, & Hedin, 2012). Students need to be accountable for their own learning and responsible to assist their peers in learning.

## **Strategies for Struggling Readers**

The Reading and Analyzing Nonfiction (RAN) strategy is an excellent way to enhance students' knowledge about important research skills using a variety of tools such as a know, want, and learned (K-W-L) chart (Reutzel & Cooter, 2006). Teachers should be aware that all students, especially struggling readers, will benefit from nonfiction reading activities. Students who are taught how to read expository and informational texts will be able to speak and listen in a group setting.

The second part of RAN is used when students are able to research information selected by the teacher prior (scaffolding) to reading, confirm background knowledge while reading, and complete a student anchor chart with the information they have researched. This method allows students to apply the learning process of inquiry. RAN is also used as a prewriting tool for struggling readers in Grades 3 through 5. This prewriting skill will prepare students for the state writing assessment based on common core standards (Carr, 2014). When students read expository texts and use evidence from the texts, they think more critically.

Another instructional method that teachers can implement in their classrooms is reciprocal teaching. In the reciprocal method, students take the role of the teacher during small reading groups. Educators who use the reciprocal strategies will help students to understand what they have read. The teacher will first model the strategies and then assist students on how to direct discussions among peers by using these four strategies in small groups: predicting, summarizing, clarifying, and question generating (Chan et al., 2014). After students have learned to apply these strategies, they will be able to take on the role

of the teacher in managing a constructive dialogue (scaffolding) about what they read (Cooter, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). This strategy also will help students to develop and ask questions during reading so text will be more comprehensible. If the strategy is taught effectively, students' reading comprehension scores on state tests may increase (Joseph et al., 2014).

### **Software for Struggling Readers**

IStation (Mathes, Torgesen, & Herron, 2011) is researched computer-based reading intervention software that teaches students to read fluently with comprehension. IStation Indicators of Progress (2007) is a scripted reading approach with teacher directed-lessons. This was the study site school's core reading program for grade K-5 at the study site. IStation curriculum provided explicit and systematic instruction in the key reading subjects. The progress reports identified appropriate teacher intervention resources, tracked scores, and identified each student's needs and intervention (Patarapichayatham, Fahle, & Roden, 2014). This software helped reinforce ISation teaching instruction during guided reading.

Students need to complete 30 minutes of IStation intervention two to three times weekly based on tier groups (Mathes, Torgesen, & Herron, 2011). Researchers have found that when correctly implemented, the following programs will close the gap in improving reading instruction and student achievement reading and analyzing nonfiction, reciprocal teaching strategies, jigsaw strategy, and IStation Reading software (Mathes, Torgesen, Herron, 2011)

### **Influence of Family Structure on Student Learning**

Students' academic performance is an important issue in measuring success in students. The family environment is an essential foundation for students' development (Cooter, 2006). The family background consists of educational background, socioeconomic (SE) status, and family structure. This background plays an important role in social integration and students' educational attainment (Gordon & Louis, 2009). According to a Census Bureau report (2012), 48 million people live in a poverty-stricken condition, and income for a family of four is less than \$32,096 annually. This number includes 15% non-Hispanic white children, one in three Hispanic children, and one in three African American children.

In the context of students' learning environment, social environment affects their level of performance and their external and internal supports from family (Gordon & Louis, 2009). Students learn better when there is a supportive learning environment at home and financial resources are available for meeting children's needs (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2006). Single parents who are the sole financial provider for their home may have little time to spend with their children and assist them in completing homework assignments. They also have less parental control, and they may not provide consistent discipline (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). These conditions may lead to lower academic achievement in reading and language arts (Jeynes, 2007). Some of the failures or successes that play a role in the language abilities of students are the support that parents provide academically. In some of the single parents' homes, parents have few literacy materials to help their children. In some instance parents do not take the time to

transport their children to places where literacy materials are available (Anderson & Minke, 2007).

### **Urban Versus Suburban Students**

The gap between typical urban public schools and suburban public schools continue to expand yearly (Sandy & Duncan, 2010). There are schools that excel and schools that consistently measure below average on state tests. There is a gap in reading in Grades 3 through 5, and additional school resources cannot close this gap (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011). Often compared with their suburban peers, urban college students have been educated in schools that are low performing in low-income communities with low-income families and are the first generation to attend college in their families (Miller, Votruba-Drzal, & Setodji, 2013). In contrast, many students from suburban schools have wealthy parents who have invested more money and time in their children's education and leisure activities (Lewis & Moore, 2008). These leisure activities include tutors, sports, gymnastic lessons, ballet, music lessons, and overall involvement in their children's schools. Often parents who live in an urban community cannot afford the leisure activities for their children. Stakeholders and policymakers may recognize that unequal school financing across the school districts is unfair, and they may be reviewing policies that will close the educational inequalities gap (Hall & Ushomirsky, 2010). The most important factor for educational inequality between European Americans and African Americans is SE status (Leventhal & Gunn, 2004). European American students' parents tend to higher levels of income, occupational status, and education than do African American students' parents (Cooper, 2009).

### **Physiological Factors that Cause Students to Struggle with Reading**

Several physiological factors can cause students to have problems mastering reading skills (Weissbourd, 2008). These factors include cognitive factors, psychological factors, hereditary factors, and basic physiological factors such as fine motor skills (Seijeoung, Mazza, Zwanziger, & Henry, 2013). Other issues that also contribute to reading difficulties among students in Grades 3 through 5 are vision and hearing problems (Valle & Connor, 2011). Students' learning is often impaired because of vision disorders. According to the National CDC Early Hearing Detection Intervention (EHDI, 2013), 47% of students in Grades 3-12 fail hearing screenings. According to American Optometric Association (AOA, 2015), 27 % of school-aged students fail vision screenings. When students cannot see words clearly or hear the words pronounced correctly, they struggle in reading. When students have had several physiological factors and still have difficulty in the learning process, teachers need additional resources to accommodate the students' needs.

Valle and Connor (2011) suggested that dyslexia is a psychological factor contributing to academic failure. This inherited neurological difference that includes attention, concentration, and processing differences results in language and perceptual deficits. Dyslexia is a neurologically based language and cognitive disorder that affects students' ability to function and learn. Dyslexia also increases remedial and disabled students' vulnerability to altered interactions and perceptions with the world (Lyon & Weiser, 2009). Students with dyslexia could have problems receiving and processing learned information. They could have delayed reading skills and failure to translate

instruction into necessary action, write down ideas, or sequence thoughts (Musti-Rao & Cartledge, 2007). Regular education classroom educators usually do not have the time or the experience to accommodate dyslexic students (Katz, 2012). These students learn differently and require accommodations to be empowered in the classroom. When educators used the proper intervention and recognition such as multisensory learning approaches, dyslexic students became successful learners using their skills and talents to prepare them for society (Rose, 2009). When underachieving students are identified and their problems properly diagnosed, the chance of reversing underachievement is greater.

Another problem that causes students in Grades 3 through 5 to experience problems in reading is hearing impairment. Students who have endured hearing loss often have a low impact reading ability and language arts skills, depending on the level of their hearing loss (Berndsen & Luckner, 2012). Some students who have a slight hearing loss might need help with the development of vocabulary skills. Students with hearing loss may experience problems with understanding words with multiple meanings (Vaughn et al., 2000). Students who have a transient loss of hearing will avoid the use of vocabulary practice and will need help with reading and writing instructions (Pataki, Metz, & Pakulski, 2013). Students who suffer from a greater loss of hearing will have a more complex time developing the different consonant and vowel sounds than students without hearing impairment.

### **Factors That Result in the Broad Achievement Gaps**

Across the country, school districts are spending millions of dollars on educational products and services, software, commercial providers, and non-profit

organizations in an attempt to solve the reading achievement problem (Burch, Steinberg, & Donovan, 2007). Currently, educators can only hope for a more enlightened political debate in education. Educators should place more emphasis on being able to apply what is being learned instead of just having knowledge of the information being taught.

Learning involves constructing meaning and application of the processed information to the learners' everyday lives (Hardin & Hardin, 2002). The goal of every educator who currently teaches reading is to make sure that all students become the finest readers possible.

Presently, in every state, there is interest about the differences in reading performance of students. School districts are cutting funds for programs and resources that have been used for students struggling in reading for Grades 3 through 5 (Leachman, Albares, Masteron, & Wallace, 2016). Educators are referring students to special education programs because of low test scores and reading and writing failure. When students in the primary grades fail in reading and writing, they usually are not successful later in school (Good & Kaminiski, 2002). Many school districts lack the resources to provide supplementary help to students who are struggling in reading (Leachman & Mai, 2014).

There is a concern at the state and federal levels of the gap in the academic performance of students in reading (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011). Students who consistently lag behind their peers exhibit lower test scores, lower graduation rates, and experience performance on a lower academic level. Policymakers have discussed ways to place higher standards of performance on testing and accountability for educators and

students. One reason students from low SE backgrounds scored lower on state assessments in literacy than charter and private schools students were because they did not understand what they read (Fore, Riser, & Boon, 2006).

Teachers in general are leaving the teaching profession for numerous reasons. Teachers are stressed about state tests and the rigorousness of Common Core. When teachers viewed their data from the TVASS report, some teachers chose to leave the teaching profession because they felt the data reflected their teaching ability. Ingersoll (2003) stated one reason that teachers in general remained in the teaching profession was due to administrative support within the school environment. Teachers in general have communicated a desire to work in an encouraging learning environment. They feel more supported and appreciated by their principal and other administrative staff (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). When teachers are nurtured, both the students and teachers can concentrate on the learning process, with the result of higher levels of student performance and higher staff morale (Protheroe, 2006). Both the students and teachers work together so students will master necessary skills to shape academic growth.

### **Implications**

According to the professional literature, educators' strategies and instructional practices will improve students' reading performance. Using a qualitative research approach allowed me to collect data through interviews so that teachers' perceptions of current district-recommended instructional strategies and practices could be determined. Such information helped identify instructional gaps and other information that may be contributing to student's low achievement at the study site. Analysis of the data collected

has led to a job-embedded PD model to support teachers with effective instructional practices in reading for a social change and to encourage educators to investigate other strategies that may close or improve achievement gaps in reading and writing (Hirsch, 2006).

The results of this case study inspired the creation of a project that may lead teachers to learn and effectively use research-based strategies and practices in reading instruction. The results may also accentuate respect for students' learning styles through differentiated instruction while fostering students' self-worth so that students can succeed and learn in their society. New knowledge and insights will enhance and enrich reading instruction, resulting in higher student achievement.

### **Summary**

Students who were struggling readers in Grades 3 through 5 were scoring below basic on the state assessment despite efforts to change the results (Gersten et al., 2008). Closing the achievement gap in reading will play an essential role in improved students' performance. Students becoming better and more fluent readers is important (Kagan & Kagan, 2009). When teachers effectively implement research-based strategies, students learn to read and comprehend well, and the achievement gap in reading and writing closes (Clarke & Whitney, 2009).

In this research study, I investigated current district-recommended teaching strategies in reading and teachers' perceptions about these approaches. The results were based on teacher interviews, review of district curriculum guidelines, meeting minutes from PLC, and research-based teaching strategies for reading that teachers shared with

me during interviews. Section 2 provides the research methodology, a description of the participants involved in the study, and justification of how I collected and analyzed the data. Section 3 includes a description and discussion of the project based on data collected. Section 4 includes the final reflections and conclusion of the project study.

## Section 2: The Methodology

### **Introduction**

Most students in Grades 3 through 5 who have reading problems have low reading scores. When students fail to learn effective strategies that will enable them to recognize words and comprehend text, they are prevented from understanding and reading well, which is crucial for students to become successful students and adult readers. Students are not often exposed to research-based interventions or practices (Compton-Lilly, 2011).

### **Research Design**

The research design for this project was a case study. This case study allowed me to investigate recommended and implemented teaching practices and examine teachers' perceptions about their current teaching strategies and gaps in teaching methods to improve reading performance for Grades 3 through 5 students. By using teacher interviews, district guidelines, and notes from PLC meetings, I examined teachers' perceptions about current strategies and the effectiveness of meeting district goals. The reading specialist attended the PLC meetings and brought notes back from the meetings to me. In addition, I collected information about district curriculum guidelines and their implementation. Conclusions drawn from this study may be applied in other settings with a similar problem. The specified boundary for this research study was limited to one urban elementary school.

I considered other types of studies. A phenomenological study was not suitable for this study because it would have involved describing or interpreting the lived

experience of the participants. A quantitative design would have been a less effective approach for collecting open-ended data from participants to provide the answers needed for this study's research questions because I was not measuring students' academic achievement. In a quantitative study, participants respond to closed-ended questions that require them to select from predetermined options such as questionnaires or Likert-scaled surveys and only involve numbers (Merriam, 2002).

The findings in a quantitative study can easily be quantified through a software package and can be collected and analyzed quickly (Creswell, 2012). The survey also allows for anonymous responses and a much larger number of subjects in the sample. The written or online survey would not allow me to reword a question or to add other questions to gather more rich in-depth information for data collection. The survey would only allow participants to disagree or agree with closed responses. A survey would not have been appropriate for this study because the survey would not allow the participants to give more details in their own words about their perceptions. I wanted to explore teachers' perceptions of their current instructional practices in reading with unknown variables. The case study allowed me to take a detailed look at the identified problem from the perspective of the participants and to summarize data collected from interviews and documents.

A case study is a form of qualitative description research used to view individuals, group as a whole, or a small group of participants (Yin, 2012). A case study approach was suitable for demonstrating what happens in a "real life situation" and responding to "what and how" research questions (Yin, 2012). Researchers collect data about

participants by using collections of writing samples, test, protocol, interviews, and direct observations (Yazan, 2015). In this qualitative study, I used a case study because this study is based on teachers' perceptions about their current instructional teaching practices at the local urban school. The problem addressed in this study was reading achievement. One local school, which had not met AYP in reading for the past 5 years may benefit from the results of the study of their current instructional teaching strategies and practices for effectiveness in reading. The essential question that guided this research was "What are Grades 3 through 5 teachers' perceptions of their current instructional practices in reading?" Guiding research questions included the following:

1. What are the current instructional strategies and teaching practices in the areas of reading that are supported by the district?
2. What instructional strategies and teaching practices are supported at the Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings?
3. What challenges are teachers facing when implementing these recommended teaching strategies?
4. What are the perceptions of teachers and the reading specialist regarding the adequate improvement in the reading performance for students in Grades 3 through 5?

### **Participants**

#### **Criteria and Justification**

The participants in this study were Grades 3 through 5 general education educators who worked in a Title I Southeastern urban school district. The participants were 12 teachers in Grades 3 through 5 and the reading specialist who has attended the

literacy academy (Grades 3 through 5) at one elementary school who were selected from the population of 15 teachers at those grade levels. Thirteen people volunteered for the study.

### **Selecting Participants**

I conducted 13 individual interviews with four teachers who have taught Grade 3, four teachers who have taught Grade 4, and four teachers who have taught Grade 5, to discover the experiences of each participant. I was able to select teachers from the school teacher database and sent an e-mail to potential participants explaining the study, its purpose, and the voluntary nature of participation. Purposefully selecting two apprentice and two veteran teachers from each intermediate grade level gave me the opportunity to better understand teachers' perceptions of their current instructional practices in reading to increase student performance. The training and knowledge of these teachers have influenced the effective instructional practices in reading and mathematics.

Participants in this study were literacy teachers in Pre-K through fifth grades as well as the reading specialist in the public school district of Libby, Tennessee. I invited teachers with at least 5 years of teaching experience in the study district to volunteer as participants.

### **Procedures to Gain Access to Participants**

Before submission of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application, I obtained a certificate to work with human participants from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). In the study site district, I obtained permission from the superintendent of the district to conduct research. To conduct research, I followed the required guidelines and

procedures for the district. After the request and proposal had been reviewed and approved by the research department, I sent the principal in the district a copy of the letter of permission to conduct research. Once the principal gave me permission to interview teachers and the reading specialist, I invited teachers who met the criteria to participate in the study. I informed participants that participation was voluntary. I also had several ways of communicating to the participants so I could have a good rapport with them. They were able to contact me by phone or email if there were any problems or concerns.

### **Ethical Concerns**

The methods I used to contact participants were telephone calls and email communication. The steps I took to provide ethical protection for the participants were to submit a formal request to the Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. Once IRB was approved (No. 09-03-2015-0114436), I emailed participants the information concerning the ethical considerations of this study. The ethical considerations for the study consisted of a formal consent form that included ensuring confidentiality of each individual and protection against any harm. I gave the participants the choice to decline to answer questions or withdraw from the study at any time. To ensure confidentiality, I excluded all identifying factors of the participants from the results.

### **Ethical Protection of Participants**

The participation in this study was voluntary, and subjects had the opportunity to withdraw at any time. The risks to participants, such as the stress of participating in a job

interview were minimal. I removed district identifiers from coded data and references for all participants. The participants were identified by numbers 2-30, and the district code was Libby. I kept all information locked in a portable safe. I will destroy the data 5 years after the conclusion of the project study. I will shred all hand-written notes and PLC notes and delete each audio recording after 5 years. All processes, including transcription and audio recording, were made clear to each participant. I conducted the interviews in the school library on six different days to avoid any interruption of instructional time. There were two interviews daily; each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

I also gave each potential participant a blank sheet of paper and a self-addressed return envelope with specific information about any questions or concerns on the study that were not raised during the initial informal session. The potential participants mailed me their concerns or questions within a week using the provided self-addressed envelope. My telephone number was included in the information, and people who agreed to participate in the study signed a consent form.

### **Researcher-Participant Working Relationship**

Establishing a good rapport with each participant was important (Creswell, 2012) to minimize any negative feelings or threats so I could obtain rich, in-depth information. Through email communication and telephone calls, the participants and I built a relationship. I assured the participants that my role as the researcher was not to judge their responses and that the information they shared would remain confidential. After the interview session, I gave each participant the opportunity to ask questions related to the interview questions for clarity.

### **Data Collection**

I conducted the voluntary interviews with 12 elementary teacher-participants and one reading specialist to answer the guiding research questions. I purposefully selected the reading specialist from the study site to provide perceptions of how the district obtained effective reading strategies and practices and delivered effective reading instruction. This small sample allowed me to concentrate on the perceptions of the reading specialist and teachers on the current instructional practices in reading at the study site while comparing the two points of view. I also collected minutes from the PLC meetings and information about district guidelines and implementation procedures. The analysis of documents provided a closer look at how well teachers planned and what strategies were implemented in Grades 3 through 5.

The sources of evidence in this study consisted of district curriculum guidelines, PLC meeting minutes, teacher interviews, and an interview with the site reading specialist. The semistructured, face-to-face interviews revealed the participants' current teaching practices and techniques in reading as well as their perceptions about these strategies. I used the curriculum guidelines and PLC minutes to triangulate expectations with perceptions and implemented strategies.

I used the interview guides as a reference for asking questions about the local problem at the site to ensure all potential participants in the study were asked the same questions. I facilitated the dialogue to keep the interviews on task and ease the line of communication between myself and the interviewees. I intended to gain a multifaceted

understanding of the participants' perceptions on their current teaching strategies and teaching practices at the study site.

I interviewed the reading specialist and 12 teachers who taught Grades 3 through 5 for approximately 45 minutes each in the school library after school. I used a digital recorder to record participants' responses, and I used a journal to take notes. I used handwritten notes to document nonverbal cues and body language. Additional interview tools included a jetPhone 9 and an application for blue cloud storage of digital audio of each participant responses for data backup. During the collection process, I used the NVivo software to code themes from the interviews. As Glesne (2011) suggested, I also made an effort to minimize distractions during the interviews. After each participant interview, I transcribed the data into a document and emailed their responses to them for member checking. I also classified samples of the participant responses that supported emergent themes from data and placed them in categories.

Creswell (2009) recommended inviting participants to review their interview transcripts to verify accuracy and clarification. If participants saw changes or additions that needed to be made, they highlighted those in yellow and made notes of the changes in the margins. They returned the corrected transcripts to me via my Walden email within 1 week. If no changes were needed, participants did not need to return the transcripts, and I assumed that they agreed with my copy. After receiving the transcripts from participants, I checked them for the accuracy of content based on input from the participants. This process minimized bias and provided validity to the study.

Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle (2010) advocated the use of a composition book journal to keep track of the collected data, and to record the dates of interviews, participants' information, and the length of each interview. Immediately after the follow-up meetings, I used the notes from the journal to categorize my thoughts and prepared the inductive data analysis by seeking emerging themes throughout the collected data from the interviews. The interviews allowed me to ask questions and listen to responses about the implementation of the current teaching strategies, district guidelines, and PLC meeting notes with the participating teachers through open-ended questions.

As Hatch (2002) suggested, the use of open-ended responses provided the participants' perceptions. Glesne (2011) recommended the use of in-depth, rich data on teachers' perceptions about their current teaching strategies that would increase students' performance in reading and writing. I remained respectful, nonthreatening, nonjudgmental, and bias-free to avoid compromising the data in any way. I explained the procedures to the participants, which included using open-ended questions in an interview for educators.

I used these interview questions to gain an understanding of the teachers' perceptions and experiences of their beliefs. I asked teachers how their knowledge and training and good first teaching practices support the expectations of the district guidelines and ELA curriculum maps. I encouraged the teachers and the reading specialist to share their ideas about the practices and strategies they felt were needed to implement instructional reading practices effectively in the classroom. The individual

interviews provided data that provided an in-depth understanding of the concerns of the instructional gaps in instruction and teaching practices that exist.

### **Professional Learning Communities Meetings and District Guidelines**

In addition to the interview data, I collected and analyzed minutes from PLC meetings and from the district guidelines for instruction. The data collected gave me a better understanding of district expectations, and current teaching strategies and methods. The PLC meeting notes and district guidelines also became part of the data triangulation process, which contributed to the validity and reliability of this qualitative case study (Creswell, 2012).

### **Role of the Researcher**

I am currently in my 14th year as a third grade teacher where I served as a grade level chair for the school leadership team. Before conducting this research with the participants in this study, I obtained approval from the principal at the local school. The principal at the local school was aware of the research study and data collection procedures. I recruited the participants, conducted the interviews, and wrote the letters of consent for the study. I collected and analyzed the data. During the time of the study, I was an educator in the school district. I formerly taught fourth grade reading at the local urban school for 9 years. I had a professional rapport with the participants. I have been a mentor, school leadership leader, and learning coach with the role of supporting teachers as they incorporate current strategies, interventions, and practices into teaching and learning. I did not have a supervisory role in the district.

Furthermore, I did not allow personal history and biases to intervene with the participants' responses on the topic. I believe that educators need to implement effective research-based instructional strategies that will improve achievement in reading for students in Grades 3 through 5. Therefore, I minimized the influence of my biases by being a passive observer; I gathered documents and observed the individual or individuals without doing anything to disturb the situation (Davies & Dodd, 2002).

### **Data Analysis**

I was the primary instrument for analyzing the data. According to Glesne (2011), data analysis consists of organizing what the researcher has read, heard, and observed. In this study, I used the general inductive analysis because this study consisted of open-ended interview questions.

Through interviews, I collected teachers' narratives regarding effective current teaching strategies and teaching practices that could improve students' performance in reading and writing. I interviewed each participant who signed the consent form. Twelve of the 15 and the reading specialist agreed to participate in the study. Before the interview, I notified each participant that I would record responses, transcribe, and give them the chance to check the accurateness of the transcript. During the interview process, I used the interview guidelines to interview each participant face-to-face in a disclosed place. Participants were given sufficient time to respond to each question. I immediately transcribed the data after each interview, which took about five hours. I emailed a copy of the transcripts to the participants to verify accuracy.

The natural setting where teachers interacted with their students provided a conducive environment for data collection where I conducted face-to-face interviews. The participants were within their comfort zone. I immediately transcribed the data following each interview because I wanted a clear understanding of the data. This step allowed me to be cognizant of the differences or similarities between participants' responses, the district guidelines, and PLC minutes.

I transcribed notes, read the data thoroughly, and coded the information, organizing it into folders (Glesne, 2011). I used content analysis and analytic induction to merge the data into themes. I also reviewed each participant's gestures and responses, which I had recorded in a journal during the interviews.

I purchased a student license for use of the NVivo analytic software for qualitative analysis (Saldana, 2013). I used the NVivo to code the data, test the development of dominant themes into theory from interview data, determine the validity of emergent themes, and categorize codes into dominant themes. Before uploading the NVivo, I prearranged transcripts in a text document to outline the start and end of each response to the interview questions. I began by reading the transcribed interviews and began the process of identifying patterns searching for similarities and differences. I sorted the codes by the research questions and typed codes into divaricate tables into the text document by each participant pseudonym name. I loaded the transcripts into NVivo for extra coding and analysis and created structured nodes in NVivo. For this study, I generated a case node to keep individual source data for the 13 participants' interview transcripts (Saldana, 2013). I analyzed data and sorted into categories. To keep track of

the data, I kept typed files and tables. I also used coding multiple times over several rounds during the process.

The NVivo process is a technique of labeling particular data and sorting the information into different categories. I could categorize each participant response as related to one of the 11 interview questions (Saldana, 2013). I highlighted the NVivo codes when identifying words commonly used in each transcript. Next, I manually listed typed codes on color-coded note cards based on identifying participants' responses and information from my research journal. I placed the typed codes on a core board to identify patterns noted from participants' statements. I used this method so I could easily group and regroup codes as I continued to analyze the data and condense larger codes to smaller codes. I broke down the larger domains into smaller categories. I used the research questions to guide this process, which allowed me to condense codes as I grouped codes together with similar codes. I completed several checks of the data to check for the accurateness of the software information. I reread the transcripts multiple times to locate any new perceptions that emerged until the final categorized themes were produced. The last round of grouping codes provided the major themes that produced the categories. From these categories, the final themes emerged. This process of coding allowed me to examine and read words and sentences to that show patterns in data that signaled emergent themes. The identified themes were district's instructional strategies and instruction, individual students' level, challenges teachers faced, a collaboration of PLCs meetings, and PD that would benefit teachers to deliver effective instructional practices.

Analyzing the teachers' current strategies and perceptions, district guidelines, and PLC meeting minutes helped me discover gaps in instructional practices that may contribute to the lack of adequate reading improvement and performance for students in Grades 3 through 5. Coding and determining themes from the teachers' interview responses, PLC meeting minutes, district guidelines and the prior research literature on the topic provided for triangulation of the data. I analyzed the documents using the same coding method used for interview transcript analysis. I explored all data and sorted into themes.

In addition, the information from the documents supported the participants' responses to the interview questions. I reflected upon subjectivity and monitored it during the length of the research to avoid personal bias. Coding the small amount of text by hand was time consuming and thought provoking. To ensure the reliability of the study, I used member checks. I sent a brief synopsis of the findings to participants by email for feedback on the findings for credibility. I received no feedback from participants in the study. I present a summary presentation derived from actual responses to interview questions and from described documents. Participants included a reading specialist and 12 teachers.

### **Triangulation**

The use of multiple sources of data (i.e., interviews, PLC minutes, and district guidelines) helped me to validate the data and check the findings in contrast to the multiple sources from this study and to examine for reliability among the emerging themes (Glesne, 2011). After reviewing the documents, I triangulated them with the

interview data to assess the delivery of effective instructional practices in reading. I noted and coded the perceptions of the teachers and the reading specialist about the adequate improvement in the reading performance for students in Grades 3 through 5.

After comparing the transcripts of the interviews and the documents, I was able to check for consistency and inconsistency in the data collected. Triangulation of the three sources of data assisted in minimizing biases. Figure 1 shows the triangulation of data between individual interviews, interview notes, notes of the PLC meetings, and district guidelines.



*Figure 1.* Data triangulation.

**Documents: Professional Learning Communities Meeting Notes and District****Guidelines**

The PLC meeting notes were not created for the interviews but were added, written notations that reflected teacher collaboration during a weekly meeting among grade levels. I asked each grade level for copies of their weekly PLC meeting notes. The notes included discussions of data for growth, formative assessment data and weekly assessments, target process skills for students who struggled with reading, lesson plans aligned with district guidelines and curriculum maps, preparing for TN Ready, and strategies that would assist struggling students in reading for Grades 3 through 5. The information was also significant as a medium for creating guidelines in the alignment of allotted times for reading instruction and practices mentioned during interview sessions.

**Discrepant Cases**

Planning the project study from the results of the data collection and analysis helped to clarify some of the beliefs and assumptions that I held concerning teachers' perceptions of the district reading and instructional practice to close the gap in reading for Grades 3 through 5 students. One participant's responses could have changed the interpretation of the data. This participant felt that all PD in reading provided by the district was useful in preparing her to deliver effective instructional practice in reading for Grades 3-5, but the other participants felt they were not prepared to deliver effective instructional practice in reading. I met with participant 9 again after school one evening in the library, and I asked more questions to get clarity. I probed and continued to ask questions until I understood her response. Participant 9 and I reviewed the transcript

carefully for discrepancies. Some discrepancies were noted and revised, and I immediately transcribed the new data.

### **Evidence of Quality**

I assembled the data through triangulating the data from the three data sources used: district guidelines, interviews, and PLC meeting notes. I triangulated the data from these sources to ensure the credibility of this study. I gave the participants an interview transcription and provided the opportunity to review and clarify their responses for accuracy (Creswell, 2012). To ensure the reliability of the study, I used member checking to help protect the study from any biases. To ensure dependability of this study, I kept a journal, and I placed all data collected in a locked file cabinet. I protected the files that were on my personal notebook with secure passwords.

### **Timeline**

Once the IRB gave permission to move forward with data collection, participants were invited by email and sent a description of the study in the consent form. Then I obtained approvals from the superintendent and principals in the local district. I completed the interviews and data analysis of the project study during the winter semester (October – February) 2016. I interviewed participants and collected information from each interviewee to answer the research questions. When interviews were completed, I immediately coded the data. I created a data grid to help with establishing and conducting the data into categories and domains, which were used to discover the themes. The information from the themes allowed me to acknowledge the need for PD

and to design a PD project to address teachers' perceptions of their current reading instruction and teaching practices for Grades 3 through 5.

### **Findings**

Five themes emerged from the analysis of the data from the interviews, district guidelines, and copies of the teachers' PLC meeting notes. These included the following:

1. Effective Instructional Strategies
2. Teaching to Individual Student Levels
3. Common Classroom Challenges
4. Data-driven PLC Meetings
5. Teacher Access to Learning Resources

I explain these themes in detail below. Throughout the data, I noted that participants articulated the need for PD to help in the steps of reviewing, learning, understanding, and implementing Common Core State Standards (CCSS) reading standards, district strategies, and district guidelines. Participants expressed that they wanted to gain a clearer and more profound understanding of how to deliver effective instruction in reading. Furthermore, they wanted to more fully understand what students are expected to learn and be able to do independently. Participants agreed that reading strategies need to be research-based to help support the rigor of the CCSS requirements. These points are evident in the themes, which are supported with quotes from participants to provide validity and clarity.

**Theme 1: Effective Instructional Strategies**

Nine out of 13 teachers in the study stated that teachers who teach reading should know how to implement district-supported strategies, concepts, and skills. However, even though teacher participants know their teaching needs to be aligned with the district curriculum, guidelines, and suggested instructional strategies, several teachers, said they do not have time to teach the concepts and skills during the reading block. Three out of the 13 participants stated that the district-supported strategies, concepts, and skills require more time to implement than the 90 minutes ELA block will allow. Similarly, four out of the 13 participants expressed that majority of their students are confused when the daily lesson plan requires them to teach too many new concepts in a single lesson. Each lesson builds on the next lesson and students are not able to master the skills when too many are presented at one time without adequate time for practice. Eleven out of the 13 participants expressed the need for PD trainings on how to implement the district's instructional strategies and locate other resources for effective instructional practices in reading to improve students' performance in Grades 3 through 5.

All 13 of the participants stated that students require a variety of instructional strategies to ensure academic achievement in reading. Data revealed that teachers are struggling to implement district mandated strategies on the timeline expected by the district, and the gap between where students are and where they need to be increases. While some teachers felt the strategies are not effective, they want more training to build confidence in implementing the strategies at a high level.

**Comprehensive Literacy Improvement Plan (CLIP).** Nine of the 13 participants interviewed stated that to deliver effective instructional practices to students, it is important to know how to use the district-recommended instructional strategies in reading included in the previously discussed Destination 2025 Strategic Plan. Four out of the 13 participants stated that they know it is important to know how to use the district-recommended instructional strategies. The 13 participants expressed that they do not have a complete understanding of the following: comprehensive literacy improvement plan (CLIP), gradual release, curriculum, mini-lessons, whole and small group instruction, and finding your own resources. The participants asked how they can implement the strategies effectively if they have not had PD in the implementation of the Destination 2025 Strategic Plan.

CLIP is one of the district strategies that participants believed was necessary to ensure a quality balanced approach to delivering instruction that would result in improved levels of literacy for students. According to the school district (Shelby County Schools [SCS], 2015), CLIP is a plan used to ensure that teachers implement daily practice for reading and writing instruction across all subject areas and grade levels. This approach will help teachers plan academically rigorous lessons. Teachers believed that CLIP ensures that all students will be prepared for college and career. They stated that CLIP provides effective literacy instruction that includes Response to Intervention. CLIP is also included in the teachers' evaluation process. Nine of the 13 participants expressed interest in learning more about the CLIP program, and four were confused about how to use it and other strategies.

Eleven out of the 13 participants felt unprepared to implement the current district-supported instructional practices in reading. For example, Participant 2 stated there was a lack of training in implementing the district-recommended reading strategies and practices. “I do not know if I am doing CLIP right or wrong!” Participant 3 stated that little to no instruction was provided to show teachers how to implement research-based strategies in the classroom.

Only one of the participants, Participant 9, stated that she understands how to implement the CLIP strategies. Participant 6, on the other hand, stated that CLIP is important when planning effective lessons, but she doubted her ability to effectively deliver the program. She stated, “It is important to implement the literacy plan into my instructional practices in reading because it is aligned with the new state test.” In addition, Participant 3 said, “This [CLIP] is one the district recommended strategies, and I must be in compliance.” The desire to use the program was present, but the participants wanted more PD.

From the interviews, district guidelines, and copies of the PLCs meeting notes all participants had some directions around district recommended strategies and instructional supports. However, some of the participants were confused about actually implementing CLIP and some of the other strategies. Seven out of the 13 participants in the study had different perceptions of the CLIP strategies. Five of the 13 participants stated that CLIP is a good strategy as recommended by the district, but it requires extra planning times when teachers plan their reading lessons. Six out of the 13 participants stated they always go over the allotted times when they implement CLIP into their daily ELA routine. The

reading specialist expressed that the teachers' instructional techniques in reading were based on CLIP, gradual release, and the reading series, *Journeys*.

**Curriculum maps: CLIP vs. English Language Arts (ELA).** When discussing reading curriculum, the participants referred to tools connected with the curriculum including curriculum maps. The teachers used the Common Core's curriculum map, implemented district-wide. All participants recognized curriculum as part of their literacy fulfillment for their district. Participant 1 noted that "lessons need to be structured and curriculum based."

Even though participants recognized the value of curriculum maps, they expressed that they most often used the English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum map, which is not as complicated as CLIP. They understood the ELA curriculum map, and they have focused on literacy learning and teaching that includes instruction in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language (CCSS, 2014). The ELA quality instructional resources provided, which eliminated the need for teachers to create materials, enabled teachers to allocate more time to delivering reading instruction and evaluating the effectiveness of instruction for all students. Participants 1 and 3 acknowledged similarities between CLIP and the ELA curriculum maps because both identify a definite way of observing learning. The difference was that the ELA did not provide directions on how to teach the ELA skills; it only outlined the allotted times and skills to complete all ELA components. CLIP, on the other hand, includes instructional methods. CLIP and ELA maps provide ways to observe learning in the classroom, but ELA only maps time,

whereas CLIP teaches instructional methods. There seems to be a need for more training in the use of CLIP.

**Gradual release.** Gradual release is a technique used in classroom instruction to move teacher-centered instruction to the whole group, then students collaborating with others, and students working independently to complete the task. Gradual release is a district-supported strategy that aligns with the Common Core Standards Initiative (2014). Twelve out of the 13 participants stated that CLIP and gradual release are the most effective district-supported strategies. Participant 12 said, “I felt comfortable when implementing both strategies in the classroom. The trainings prepared me on how to implement these strategies effectively.” Participant 1 stated, “After I attended the district’s workshop on gradual release, I was still uncertain of how to model it to my students. So, I watched videos from the Teaching Channel on how to implement gradual release effectively.”

Participants 7, 10, and 13 identified gradual release as an approach for shifting classroom instruction from teacher-led, whole group delivery to student-led collaboration and independent practice. They felt that this approach is effective when teachers provide direct and guided instruction, feedback, and support to students, so students can take full ownership for outcomes. Participant 11 stated, “When gradual release is modeled and delivered effectively, students are able to build vocabulary, use schema, think critically, and communicate with peers when justifying their learning or answers.”

Participant 8 stated, “Students need purposeful reading instructional skills and techniques. This will help them to be able to read and write effectively in society.”

Participants 1, 2, 7, and 13 stated that students should assume all of the responsibility for their own learning and their ability to think, which is inconsistent with the role of the teacher in the gradual release process. Twelve out of the 13 participants expressed that when students understand the gradual release model, they learn how to work alone on a specific task.

**Guided reading.** Five out of the 13 participants described their process for guided reading as a small group reading instruction designed to provide differentiated teaching that supports reading proficiency. Individual student needs are attended to with guided reading groups, according to participants. The specific reading skills students struggle with could be taught explicitly in small groups. Participant 1 declared, “Good teaching begins with having the lesson prepared with each student’s outcomes in mind.” On the other hand, Participant 11 felt that to prepare for a particular lesson teachers should always have mini-lessons available to teach according to each student’s needs “if you can find the time to do five small groups daily.” Her comment and some others implied that teachers felt some frustration about the amount of time that the reading curriculum required.

Participants 2, 3, and 6 stated that the mini-lessons are short segments or extensions of reading skills taught in guided reading lessons. When the teacher breaks the students into smaller groups, the skills continue to be taught in small group instruction. Students must be able to explain in their own words, and in “I Can statements,” the outcomes for a lesson. These learning statements are individualized for groups of students. Participant 13 suggested that when students understand their learning outcomes,

they are better prepared to learn the strategies. Participants 1, 5, and 7 revealed that small groups are vital to teaching struggling students strategies based on each child's learning ability.

All 13 participants stated that small reading groups were effective when teachers know students' instructional reading levels, instructional needs, and allow students to scaffold during the lesson. On the other hand, eleven out of the 12 teachers stated that the teachers' essential role in guided reading is to scaffold learning and to enhance students' understanding of the lesson taught. After students read a text, teachers check for comprehension. This method helped students to apply new and existing skills and to become independent readers. One out of the 13 participants expressed that this method does not fit all students because some students need one-on-one interaction. Participants 2, 3, and 6 explained that during small reading groups they took notes about individual students to determine what strategies or interventions they needed to focus on so that students would master the concepts. All 13 of the participants were invested in using guided reading lessons.

**Journeys.** The district adopted the reading series *Journeys* for grades K-5 as their Common Core reading program. *Journeys* is a research-based comprehensive balanced literacy reading program that allows teachers to implement effective reading and literacy instruction across a variety of instructional models in the classrooms. *Journeys* is used in the district's classroom as a reading supplement for grades K-5. Teachers use *Journeys'* resources and materials in whole and small group sessions to provide opportunities for students to think about the text, beyond the text, and within the text.

Participant 9 expressed that because the district did not purchase the entire kits for each grade level, she had to obtain resources outside of the district to fulfill the gap for reading instruction. In addition to district's resources, teachers used online books, and interactive activities to engage students in reading skills. To increase literacy learning, teachers used a variety of Internet resources in the classrooms. Participants stated that online resources were helpful for supporting reading instruction.

Participant 8 stated:

When I created a reading lesson rigorous to meet the needs of all my students who are on different levels, I used different websites to find books or activities.

Sometimes the books or activities on the curriculum were too high for my strugglers and too low for the advanced students to support reading instruction.

Therefore, I always searched the Internet for resources that would help my students to become successful learners.

Teachers have to find their own resources that meet the needs of each student yearly. Twelve out of the 12 teachers expressed that the use of online resources made it easier for teachers to find numerous strategies and differentiated instruction to help students learn how to succeed in reading.

The interview responses revealed that there were varying degrees of understanding and implementation of the district-supported strategies including CLIP, Gradual Release, Guided Reading groups, and the *Journeys* curriculum. All participants recognized that CLIP and Gradual Release were required, but some wanted additional

assistance implementing them. The *Journey's* curriculum resources were not comprehensive enough; thus, some teachers looked to online resources to fill in the gaps.

**Further exploration of Theme 1.** I further explored by reviewing PLC meeting minutes and research journals. I read the PLC minutes to see if the same topics, themes, and patterns of data emerged, related to the district's recommended strategies. I compared these data to the interview findings. Some of the same patterns were repeated in the PLC meeting documents. Teachers in Grades 3-5 needed additional PD on how to effectively implement the district's recommended strategies.

The PLC agendas indicated that grade level members interchanged ideas and shared reflections at PLC meetings. Topics discussed were data, strengths, areas of need, an action plan for the next month, school improvement plans, and reflections (curriculum-strategies-materials). All discussions were based on the district's guidelines, ELA curriculums, state standards, school and student data, ideas, strengths, and weaknesses.

As noted in previous discussions, sharing is an essential part of PLC agenda item noted as "Reflection." The following examples from the agendas and minutes related to Theme 1.

On November 2, 2015, Participant 5 shared and modeled a main idea reading lesson, including ideas on how to deliver effective instructional strategies using CLIP and gradual release in small and whole groups.

Later, on December 1, 2015, there was a discussion about addressing particular areas of need. Teachers were asked, "What district-supported instructional reading

strategies are you and your team implementing to meet the needs of the struggling students?” All members shared strategies and ideas that are supported by the district. Participants 2 and 3 shared that they needed additional PD on CLIP and gradual release. Participants 9, 10, and 11 shared how they use data to plan an effective lesson and to prepare students for the TCAP, which include TNReady and (Northwest Evaluation Association) NWEA tests.

I noted that on January 3, 2016, some of the CLIP concerns were addressed. The district had a District Learning Day (DLD) PD for teachers to attend and learn how to deliver effective instructional strategies and teaching practices using CLIP and gradual release. On this day, there was further discussion about how to align the standards with the district’s guidelines for planning and delivering effective instructional lessons that support the district current instructional strategies.

I identified the district-supported strategies of most concern to the teachers. When the documents and interview data were reviewed, some needs emerged. On the whole, the teachers valued the district’s guidelines, curriculum maps, and research-based strategies and attempted to implement these. Some teachers, however, expressed the need for further training. The participants’ responses focused mostly on the implementation of CLIP and gradual release. Some participants felt that previous PD trainings did not prepare them fully to deliver effective instructional reading strategies using CLIP and gradual release. They expressed the desire for modeling from professional with experience in implementing effective instructional strategies.

## **Theme 2: Teaching to Individual Student Levels**

The Lexile level can provide teachers with information about a student's reading ability. This helps teachers determine the correct text for students to read and promote reading growth. Teachers should match students' reading levels to appropriate texts. Twelve out of the 13 participants stated that teachers should assess students' reading Lexile levels frequently so they can adapt instructional strategies and teaching practices supported during PLC meetings. Nine out of the 13 participants used a passage that fits the student's reading level and running records to access student's Lexile level. Four out of the 13 expressed they used Benchmark books to determine their students' Lexile levels. The Benchmark books will help them to determine their students' comprehension strengths and different ways to plan instruction. I asked participant 9 a follow-up interview question that allowed the participant to compare the district's PD with the PLC meetings at the school. Participant 9 wanted more modeling from professional development presenters. She stated:

When I attended the professional development at the district level, I went in thinking that I am going to bring a wealth of knowledge back on instructional practices in reading, but the presenter just lectured. I did not get the information needed to deliver effective research-based strategies.

I asked Participant 7 the same follow-up question, and she discussed how the district staff developments did not explain or model in-depth how to use the Lexile reading books for each grade level in small reading groups. Participant 7 further stated, however, that she believed the teachers would be completely lost without the support of

PLC meetings. Participant 12 said that teachers are in grade level PLC meetings, they can discuss how to use data to plan lessons and place students in their appropriate reading groups. Sharing and collaborating were important to the participants.

Participants stated that on-grade-level reading occurs when students have mastered the skills that they need to read and understand words in text on their instructional grade level. Twelve out of the 13 participants used assessments to determine students' Lexile levels in the classroom during instructional reading periods. Teachers' perceptions were that knowing the reading level and providing texts on the instructional level for each student is essential to effectively guide student instruction. They felt that this helps students focus on the reading skills needed for them to become successful readers. Participants 4 and 6 expressed, that students become great readers when they have the correct Lexile books to read in small groups. All 13 of the participants in the study mentioned appropriate reading levels as a way to meet students' needs. They felt that it was important to know what is needed at the next level for students to read above grade level.

All 13 of the participants expressed that grouping by Lexile level would enable differentiation for groups of students during small reading groups where differentiation can occur with more ease. Reading groups are based on data, assessments, and instruction. Effective reading instruction helps move readers forward so they can increase their reading ability. Participant 12 stated, "If we are going to push struggling readers, we have to plan effective lessons and place students in their appropriate reading groups." Participant 1 stated that when students have shown growth after assessments, students

should move to a more challenging group. This will help students increase their reading level. Participant 7 commented, “Planning effective lessons for whole and small groups should be based on data from the district as well as daily classroom assessments. We should teach to the whole child not half of the child.”

Participant 13 revealed:

Because of scheduling for intervention, students need to be tiered according to abilities so they can learn the target skills. During whole group, when I asked my students to talk to their peers [They Do] about their responses from a question on the content, I can do a quick assessment.

When discussing training, all 13 of the participants expressed that the most effective PD that met their needs in understanding how to use Lexile levels to form small reading groups and to work with these groups was addressed at the local level. It would be the easiest and most beneficial strategy, which would help students with reading skills.

The interview responses and the PLCs demonstrated that assessment drives instruction in this school. Appropriate reading levels are identified for students, and small group instruction includes a combination of ongoing and more formal assessments. The data revealed that teachers want more local staff development sessions where presenters model relevant and effective reading instruction.

### **Theme 3: Common Classroom Challenges**

Based on PLC minutes and interview responses, some of the classroom challenges include planning effective lessons, delivering effective instructional practices,

communicating effectively with parents, identifying prerequisite reading skills, and accepting changes the district has made that help to improve student achievement.

Planning lessons at the study site was one of the challenges 12 teachers faced daily in their classroom. Teachers shared with their colleagues and other teachers that they do not have enough time to finish all of their daily lessons. The district guidelines expected teachers to address all the student's learning goals during one lesson. Twelve out of the 13 participants write daily lesson plans weekly. The ELA lesson plans are not scripted and teachers must plan skills and locate activities to make sure students are able to grasp the concepts and teachers are told what to do teach. Eight out of the 13 participants expressed that the district's guidelines for instruction are too fast for the students and teachers. They cannot deliver all of the daily required skills within the allotted times and students become frustrated because they cannot remember the skills or strategies that have been taught from day to day. Four out of the 13 participants stated that there are too many skills and concepts that students need to learn in a daily lesson. On the other hand, two out of the 13 participants said they have to modify their lessons to go faster or slower to accommodate students' needs. Nine out of the 12 teachers expressed that they lacked support and resources when planning effective lessons to meet all of the different learning styles. Participant 3 stated that the challenges she faced were connecting the standards and the Task on the Table activities so that students will be able to demonstrate mastery of skills involved and meet student outcomes set by the standards. Teachers' lessons must exhibit effective planning skills, as these are important to meet

state standards and to raise students' achievement in reading. Participant 9 expressed her frustration with planning effective lessons.

When I planned lessons that were aligned with standards, district strategies and assessments that would help my students develop the skills they need to be successful, I would have to include an addendum to my plans. If anyone from the district or principal entered my classroom, I had to justify why certain students were reading second grade texts in a fourth grade classroom. I had to plan additional lessons to meet the needs of those students and this was very difficult for me!

Five out of the 13 teachers shared that they needed training on how to develop a lesson that would prepare students for new learning goals and to help them on how to present the lesson. They created a plan that would provide clear structure to help them master the strategies and standards that enhance the delivery of effective instruction in their classrooms.

One of the biggest challenges teachers faced daily at the study site was delivery of effective instructional practices in reading. Eight out of the 13 teachers expressed that they needed training on how to deliver effective instructional practices for students to read above level. Teachers shared their frustration about planning lessons to meet the standards and they had a hard time delivering the lessons so students could become more efficient readers. Prior to this PD, although teachers had attended PD, former sessions did not include the opportunity for practice in implementing effective reading instruction.

Participant 1 commented about the challenges she faced when planning lessons according to guidelines presented at the district PD:

I planned a lesson on Main Idea, and I tried to follow the techniques I learned from the district PD. I knew that during the lesson, I had to use the district recommended strategy gradual release as a way of assessing the student during the lesson. When I could not deliver the lesson effectively based on the PD, I used anchor charts to deliver most of the instructional practices. I did not understand how to deliver the instructional practices effectively and to keep the students engaged in the learning.

Eleven out of 13 teachers stated that it was a challenge for them to deliver effective instructional practices, and they needed training in delivering effective instructional reading practices. Participant 5 expressed that she could overcome her challenge if she had a deeper understanding of how to deliver effective instructional practices through modeling and training from an expert. Teachers collaborated in their weekly grade level PLC meetings on ways to better deliver instructional practices to improve students' performance in reading. On the other hand, some teachers come to PLC meetings unprepared to discuss student data and progress on monthly reading assessments. They stated they wanted effective PLC meetings where teachers understood how to read and share data to plan effective lessons and assessments.

An important element for teachers' success in the school is communication between teachers and parents. Data from the participants revealed that communication between parents and teachers was a challenge for them. During PLC meetings, teachers

had few discussions about how to get parents involved in their child's education. Communication between the teachers and parents would help improve student academic performance. Participant 3 acknowledged that some parents communicated with her only when the weekly progress reports were sent home and the parents noticed their child's failures. Parents can find multiple opportunities to find out what can they do to help their child improve their grades. All 13 participants expressed that communication between both was vital to the development of school culture as learning communities. Teachers stated that parents need to know how and what their child is learning in school and they need the feedback from parents about their child's academic performance and needs. Twelve out of the 12 teachers stated that when they attempted to make calls or send parents emails to discuss the student failures, most of the contact information was often wrong. Participant 5 commented that a challenge for her was sending notes or letters home with students and parents failing to respond or return the letters or notes. On the other hand, six out of the 12 teachers stated that during their PLC meetings, they discussed how the school could purchase incentives to give to parents during Parent Night.

All 13 of the participants expressed this could be one way to get parents involved and this would open up the door of communication with the parents on ways to help their child academically. Five out of the 13 teachers communicated that some teachers have not been trained about communicating effectively with parents about their child's progress and they may need additional training about communicating proactively with parents.

The 13 participants claimed that the lack of a vast number of prerequisite reading foundational skills is a major issue for teachers in Grades 3 through 5. Nine out of the 13 teachers expressed how students who did not attend Head Start or Pre-K programs lack the necessary literacy skills. Participant 5 stressed that Head Start and preschool have a significant impact on language and vocabulary development and the basic foundational skills that will prepare them for what is expected for them to learn at school. According to Participant 5, “If a child lacked the prerequisite skills needed in the early grades, the delivery of instructional practices in reading could be a challenge for me.”

Participant 7 shared:

When a child entered my room and have [has] limited vocabulary skills, I would asked [ask] the parents if their child attended pre-school or Head Start. The parent responds, ‘My child didn’t have the opportunity to go to pre-school and daycare...that’s why my child don’t know many words.’ Now, I have to plan lessons based on their background knowledge and locate resources and materials to meet the needs of the child. Sometimes, I cannot find all the materials needed to teach the lessons and meet students’ outcomes.

Participant 5 also felt that students lacked the prerequisite reading foundational skills from Grades K-2: “Students lack automatic decoding skills and this prevents them from being able to read fluently.” Participant 13 expressed that students were not aware of applying skills in reading or retaining the necessary skills to become better readers.

Eleven out of 12 teachers recognized that they had students who may not have the skills that they need when they enter their classroom. Thirteen of the participants agreed

that it is important to create a literacy environment for students that will help them develop the skills they need to become lifelong readers.

#### **Theme 4: Data-Driven PLC Meetings**

In data-driven PLC meetings at the study site, teachers looked at the data that provided feedback to them so they would be able to improve areas of concerns. Twelve of the teachers used data from the PLC meetings to create assessments and plan effective lessons. To increase student performance on state tests, the study site implemented data-driven PLC teams. Students' performance in reading is low across the study site local district level. 12 out of the 13 participants valued these teams and stated that students' achievement can improve if PLC meetings and information learned in them are effectively implemented. All 13 participants felt that planning is an essential part of an effective PLC team. During team meetings, teachers work together to plan rigorous lessons for their students. The data revealed that during the PLC meeting teachers had a specific plan to focus on in their reading instruction.

Five participants noted how teachers collaborated during their grade level PLC team meetings to effectively use assessment data and plan effective lessons that implement research-based strategies and programs to improve students' reading performance. Some of the data from PLCs meetings that were used to plan lessons were based on the data and the district recommended assessments. As stated earlier, the 13 participants expressed that staff development within the PLC structure was more effective than district-supported PDs because the PLC discussions were more specific to the teachers' and students' needs.

December 1, 2015 PLC minutes for Grade 3:

At the third grade weekly PLC meeting, all teachers decided as a team to implement the strategies and reflect on how these strategies work in their classroom at the next weekly PLCs meeting.

January 15, 2016 PLC Minutes for Grades 4 and 5:

During this PLC meeting for grades four and five, teachers collaborated about research-based strategies to use as a team after reviewing students' data from the prior week's assessments. They needed strategies that would help them prepare students for the TNReady test and to improve growth in reading. As a team, they planned to implement one new strategy bi-weekly. Then, they would assess the students after the implementation of the strategies, and reflect on the effectiveness of the strategies.

**Assessment.** Based on the data from PLC meetings, participants' responses, and the district guidelines, these findings revealed that assessments are important to planning lessons and student outcomes. All 12 teachers at the school identified assessment as a way of measuring or evaluating students' performances over time, and they valued the time provided to analyze data during PLC meetings. Assessments drive the daily instructional lessons at this local school. In this local district, planning and delivering effective instructional practices in reading is the main focus. Ten of the 12 teachers and the reading specialist expressed that it is important to know and understand students' reading levels to plan instruction. Teachers use assessment results to place students in proper learning groups and to track student performance through district benchmarks.

Seven of the 13 participants identified techniques that they discussed in their PLC meetings including the I-Station program, rigorous lessons, reading assessment forms, and research-based strategies to check for understanding.

During weekly PLC meetings, teachers would collaborate to plan lessons from the data based on the district recommended assessment. Nine out of the 13 participants stated that the school data helped them plan effective lessons that would promote reading achievement for students in Grades 3 through 5. The district used the I-Station Program as an assessment to determine students' reading abilities and to plan small and whole group lessons. All 13 of the participants believed that their assessments were useful and adequate in conducting their instruction. "The data from I-Station was useful in planning small group instruction and in delivering teaching explicit lessons during whole group," said participant 10. The first assessment tool used by the district to determine students' reading levels is the computer-based I-Station. The level of complexity is reduced when students answer the question incorrectly or increases when students answer the questions correctly.

**Planning effective lessons.** Twelve out of the 13 participants stated that they planned effective rigorous lessons and assessments for students' accountability, which is a part of the district Destination 2025 plan. The lessons are planned to teach students on a higher learning level. Eight out of the 13 participants expressed that the lessons must be rigorous so students will be able to apply the learning to their everyday lives. Four out of the 13 participants expressed that the lessons and skills are planned to increase rigor and relevance across all subject matters. During PLC meetings, teachers discussed

implementing assessment data to plan effective lessons in reading groups. Participants 7, 8, 9, and 10 said that during their PLC meetings, they brought students' artifacts, oral and written responses, and test data from the weekly assessments to discuss new strategies and to show reflections of student's growth.

Participant 7 expressed:

It is time-consuming to create lessons and assessments in reading based on the curriculum map, common core standards, and the district guidelines. The need for more rigorous lessons and aligned assessments are deemed necessary for grade-levels so students will be able to master the skills and to improve students' outcomes. The district recommended assessment can be used as part of planning and delivering effective reading practices because teachers need more than one way to assess students' abilities.

Five out of the 12 teachers stated that they need to plan data-driven lessons that would enhance their instructional practices based on data they received from the district recommended assessments. Six out of the 13 participants shared that their practices and data lessons should be directed by the results of assessments that should be implemented during reading instruction in the classrooms. Grade level PLC meetings provided an opportunity for teachers to collaboratively create and plan lessons from the results of data from common and district recommended assessments to deliver effective instruction. Teachers expressed that more PLC training and support on how to make data-driven decisions in planning effective lessons and ongoing assessments to check students' progress.

**Effective and ineffective PLC meetings.** Based on the interview responses, few of the participants stated that students' achievement in reading had improved because of their grade level PLC meetings. Some of the participants stated the PLC meetings were not effective because they were not trained how to read student data from the district's tests. Participant 3 said that teachers need to take the PLC meeting more seriously and should not have private conversations on their phones or check the status of social media. According to the participants, some of the grade-level PLCs were more effective than others. Participant 7 stated that when she attended other PLC meetings, the teachers did not have a planned agenda and the meetings were more reactive rather than proactive. The teachers at the study site seemingly have basic knowledge of the PLC concept, but some of the participants stated that they needed to know the difference between effective PLC meetings and typical teacher meetings.

Eleven out of the 13 participants stated that all grade levels have weekly PLC meetings. Each person on all grade levels has a designated role that contributes to the outcomes of the meetings. This will help teachers plan effective lesson and promote student academic progress. Participant 9 commented that based on her experience, because it is mandatory from the district and state levels, teachers attend PLCs. However, some teachers attended their PLC meetings because it was required. When teachers fail to understand the important characteristics that underlie the PLC concepts, such as engaging all the participants and sharing and receiving information, teachers begin to lose confidence in the PLC process and often a lack of trust is the end product.

On the other hand, one out of the 13 participants' responses regarding the impact of PLCs on collaboration was negative. Participant 5 said that some teachers on the team were competing against each other to have their students outscore the other students when these teachers should work collaboratively to improve instruction for all of the students. Ten out of the 13 participants expressed the need for more PD for teachers in grades 3-5 to help them gain more knowledge about assessment and how data are interpreted. More PD would be essential to improving student achievement.

Twelve of the teachers reported that they relied heavily on the district-supported assessment tools to plan and reflect on instruction. Five out of the 12 teachers also used additional research-based assessment tools. Sharing assessment data and planning instruction was an integral part of the PLC meetings, but seven out of the 13 participants did not feel well trained in the interpretation of the assessment data.

### **Theme 5: Teacher Access to Learning Resources**

Nine out of the 12 teachers at the local level expressed that they needed additional learning resources for students and teachers to implement effective instructional practices. The documents and interviews revealed that the learning resources used in the classroom need to be approved. Learning resources are used to help teachers deliver effective instructional practices and to help students in the classroom to meet their goals for learning. Learning resources for teachers include textbooks, computer software, videos, and other valuable educational materials. Six out of the 13 participants stated that additional resources and more meaningful PD training were needed to deliver effective reading instruction to accommodate students' needs.

Nine out of the 12 teachers commented about the lack of textbooks in the classrooms and how they had to make copies of pages from the books to plan lessons, address the standards, and meet the needs of the students. Three out of the 12 teachers said that sometimes they have run out of copier papers and ink. Participant 2 stated that she networked with other teachers to find resources that were related to instructional practices and free of charge.

The district budget cuts have reduced resources for teachers and students. Participant 1 explained that due to budget cuts in PD, faculty members have to present professional sessions for the teachers at the school. Budget cuts also mean a shortage of teachers in the classrooms. Participant 3 indicated that because of the shortages of textbooks and other reading materials for students, teachers at the school must find other resources or materials to fill the gap.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

In this section, I interpret the findings of this qualitative case study for the research questions and the findings for each theme: Effective Instructional Strategies, Teaching to Individual Student Levels, Common Classroom Challenges, Data-Driven PLC Meetings, and Teacher Access to Learning Resources. These themes addressed the four research questions and provided knowledge in reading for teachers in Grades 3 through 5. The identified themes revealed teachers' perceptions of their experiences to provide explicit reading instruction to their students.

The findings from this qualitative case study revealed the 13 participants' perceptions about the current instructional strategies and teaching practices that were

used to close the reading achievement gap in Grades 3-5. Throughout the literature, researchers supported the use of research-based practices such as differentiated instruction, reciprocal teaching, vocabulary, balanced reading instruction, cues and questions approach, and small group instruction in the classroom (Coffey, 2009; Fountas & Pinnell, 2008, Marzano, 2010; Taffe et al., 2009; Tomlinson, 2014; Vaughn et.al., 2000). The district's current instructional strategies and teaching practices include Guided Reading (similar to reciprocal teaching), CLIP, small group instruction and gradual release. These have been implemented for the last 5 consecutive years and were expected to increase reading performance for struggling readers in Grades 3 through 5. Delivering the current instructional practice in the area of reading is important for students to become successful readers.

**Theme 1: Current instructional and teaching practices.** Teachers who plan effective lessons and implement differentiated instruction provide students with the opportunity to attain and practice skills that have been taught. Beecher and Sweeny (2008) measured the impact of an 8-year study using the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM). This model focused on closing the gap in students in grade 4 who were performing low on state and district assessments in writing, mathematics, and reading. Differentiation and enrichment were used to improve students' the learning environment. Certain components of the strategic plan were used simultaneously. The findings indicated that students showed gains in reading when teachers received training and learned how to implement differentiated curriculum and instruction while focusing on students' needs. The study revealed that delivery of effective reading instruction and the

need for research-based strategies to support student achievement. The key finding from the study also revealed a need for additional effective PD that will provide teachers with multiple ways for planning and delivering effective instruction practices in reading (Beecher & Sweeney, 2008). Teachers in the study struggled with ways to deliver remedial instruction to struggling readers. They needed a precise understanding of how to close the achievement gap and ways to improve student learning by knowing their students' strengths and weaknesses. Teachers in the present study requested more training, resources, and guidance from experienced teachers on the implementation of instructional strategies to improve students' reading achievement.

**Theme 2: Teaching to individual student levels.** When teachers deliver explicit instruction and provide support and feedback to students, they will be successful in mastering the skills being taught independently. Concannon-Gibney and McCarthy (2012) conducted a 12-week after-school PD to change how teachers implement instructional practices in reading comprehension in the subject matter of science. The Do-Read-Do model was used along with the implementation of the gradual release model. Concannon-Gibney and McCarthy stated that the delivery of explicit reading comprehension instruction using the Do-Read-Do model and the implementation of the gradual release model provided support to both student and teacher on how to apply the new information through modeling and guided practices. The findings from the cited study indicated that when teachers understand how to deliver explicit reading comprehension strategies to their students, they can help increase students' reading

performance. Teachers in the present study delivered individualized instruction during guided reading to meet the needs of students at their individual reading levels.

**Theme 3: Common classroom challenges.** Classroom environments that are rich in print provide students with the opportunity to become aware of print and oral language and to build upon new skills. Baroody and Diamond (2016) examined the relations among students' early reading skills, engagement in literacy activities, and the classroom literacy environment by using the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO). Teachers reported that students enjoyed and frequently participated in literacy activities in the learning environment. These findings revealed that a literacy rich pre-school classroom environment assists students in mastering early reading skills before they reach kindergarten. Teachers at the site of the present study focused on strategies that will improve student reading performance.

PD can support teachers in delivering effective literacy and content learning in the classroom during the allotted times. Spear-Swerling and Zibulsky (2014) suggested that general and special education teachers need professional training rather than a one-time training. They also stated that more time should be allotted in a reading block for these teachers. The findings from the cited study could help school districts support their teachers in delivering research-based literacy instruction with fidelity. Ongoing PD is essential for teachers to stay abreast on current issues in education. In other research, Berry et al. (2010) stated that when teachers have interactive PD they are able to create a professional support team and learn from their colleagues. In their study teachers felt that an ongoing PD was helpful in improving student performance.

PD that is content-focused and correlated to the curriculum state and district standards will help teachers to deliver and implement effective instruction that will improve student performance. Desimone (2011) stated that when PD is content-focused and coherent, teachers would be able to increase student learning and implement effective instructional strategies. During PD, teachers should be focused on how to deliver the subject matter content and how students will use the content. The district can plan and align key PD training sessions and make them top priorities within the district. The findings in this study suggested that the district needs to monitor and follow up with continuous feedback that would support changes in teacher practice and student achievement. Teachers in the present study attended PD to help them plan and deliver lessons that are aligned with the district standards and assessments.

Teachers need to build a solid foundation with parents so both will have a connection to the child's academic success. When parents and teachers have a good rapport, students' academic achievement is more likely to improve. Topor, Keane, Shelton, and Calkins (2011) conducted a multiple mediational analysis to examine student-teacher relationships between the child's academic performance and parental involvement. The findings from Topor et al.'s study indicated that parental involvement influenced children's perception of cognitive competence, increased student-teacher relationship, and enhanced academic performance. This may help to close the reading gap. The findings of the present study revealed that school administrators should continue to find ways to increase parents' positive attitudes about their child's education and to improve student-teacher and parent relationships. Topor et al.'s research is supportive of

the findings because it gives teachers various ways to communicate with their parents to discuss their child's academic progress.

**Theme 4: Data-driven PLC meetings.** During PLC meeting, teachers use student data as a way to determine what students need to know to master the learning outcomes. Sims and Penny (2014) conducted a qualitative case study to examine teachers' perceptions of participating in a PLC data team. They also examined the effects of time management, teaching, and lesson planning on the data team program. The findings suggested that teachers wanted effective PLCs that would not only address student performance data but that would also help teachers collaborate to implement effective instruction. According to Sims and Penney, teachers need to understand that for PLCs to be effective, school districts need to monitor PLCs, invest time in training and feedback, and support teachers on how to implement PLCs in their entirety.

PLC meetings are essential for teachers because they help them to reflect on how to improve their instruction and enhance student learning. Popp and Goldman (2016) conducted a mixed method case study to examine PLC meetings among English Language Arts teachers at one school over a school year period. The findings in the present study revealed that the PLCs should be aligned with other professional development that promotes effective instruction. A common ground should be established regarding literacy skills and student data assessments. Teachers at this site have weekly PLC meetings to plan and determine reading instructional practices and strategies for student outcomes. Locating additional resources to use in the classroom was an issue for teachers in this study due to the district budget cuts.

**Theme 5: Teacher access to learning resources.** Budget cuts have limited district resources and teachers often use their personal money to purchase resources to improve instructional practices and increase students' academic achievement. Odden and Picus (2011) confirmed that school districts and states are facing financial pressure because of poor performance in the schools. Although state funding is often cut to poor performing schools, teachers are expected to guide students to perform at a high level. Odden and Picus concluded that schools must find ways to enhance student learning in spite of the shortage of funds. At the local study site which also faced limited funding, teachers were confronted with this challenge.

The findings from the present study suggested the need for the development of a project that will help reading teachers deliver effective reading instruction to struggling readers in Grades 3 through 5. The findings also suggested the need for a project that may help enhance teachers' knowledge of the ELA curriculum map and district guidelines. Recommendations from the participants in the study indicated the need for the development of PD training in effective reading instruction strategies that integrates a schedule for collaboration among teachers to close the gap in reading for students.

### **Relationship of Findings to Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework that guided this study was Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), and it was used in the present study to examine factors which influenced teachers' perceptions on how to plan and deliver reading instruction and strategies that may improve students' reading performance.

Teachers need to deliver explicit research-based strategies that can help students to develop higher order thinking skills. Teachers expressed that they needed more professional development on how to deliver the district's current reading instructional practices and strategies to keep the students involved and engaged in the learning. Teachers can implement and deliver instruction above students' levels but to the levels which they can strive to achieve the task with guidance and support.

The simple explanation of the zone of proximal development is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978; 1935, p.86). Teachers can provide scaffolding and collaboration through modeling, delivering, and implementing instructional practices and strategies that will help students to master concepts or skills. All of the participants stated that regardless of all the different professional development trainings and resources available in the district, learning how to implement effective reading instruction and strategies, collaborating as a team to utilize student's data to plan reading lessons during PLC meetings, utilizing the district's guidelines, and staying abreast on current research-based strategies is an ongoing challenge. All participants, even the reading specialist, expressed concern about the present and future PDs. The PDs need be more aligned with district-recommended strategies so students can be able to achieve their goals independently. The participants' perceptions were that students in Grades 3-5 can make adequate improvement in their reading when the instruction is implemented effectively and aligned with the curriculum and state and district standards.

The majority of teachers expressed a need for more scaffolding and support from the district to help them plan and implement effective reading instruction for students.

### **Summary**

The findings addressed the four research questions and indicate a need for PD on how to deliver effective instructional research-based strategies and teaching practices to improve students' performance in reading supported by the district. When a theme was related to more than one research question, I placed each theme with the most closely related research question. The interpretations were based on the document data and perceptions and responses of each participant. Based on the interviews, district guidelines, and PLC meeting notes, the district learning strategies and guidelines are aligned with the reading curriculum map. The reading specialist has become a valuable resource to the staff and understands the district guidelines, reading program, and curriculum maps. Teachers, however, wanted to develop more expertise about implementing effective reading instruction and teaching practices. Seven out of the 12 teachers expressed that the reading specialist provided intensive instruction to grades 3-5 students who were struggling readers during intervention times. Four out of the 12 teachers expressed that the reading specialist also provided valuable resources to use in their classroom to help struggling readers. The reading specialist helps teachers at the study site in different ways. Sometimes, however, the reading specialist may not have the opportunity to present PD at the times when teachers are in the most need for these PD sessions. The reading specialist also works with parents at the study site to help them with reading strategies or books to read at home to improve their child's reading level.

Eight out of the 12 teachers stated that the reading specialist modeled how to deliver effective instructional practices in the area of reading during in-service days. Four out of the 12 teachers wanted the reading specialist to model different lessons weekly in the classroom because they still have problems with delivering effective instructional practices and strategies. The reading specialist's role is to support all teachers at the study site. The reading specialist is not there to teach lessons or replace teachers, but to meet the needs of struggling readers.

The 13 participants demonstrated enthusiasm about learning new ways to reach struggling readers and looking at challenges in instructional practices in reading. Based on the participants' responses, I decided that more PD was needed; therefore, I created a PD project for these and other teachers wishing to improve their teaching practices in reading and writing.

The results of this study revealed that the participants needed job embedded professional development that would help them to gain expertise in planning and implementing district-recommended research-based reading instruction. They also wanted greater access to relevant reading resources.

As I analyzed the data, I concluded that participants honestly communicated their challenges and beliefs about effectively implementing the district's guidelines and curriculum for reading instruction. In addition, participants' responses often indicated a need and desire for further and more effective training. PD that is local and more specific to the needs of the participants will ensure that effective research-based strategies are

implemented in reading to support the district guidelines and the needs of the students, resulting in improved achievement and test scores.

### **Conclusion**

**Research Question 1: What are current instructional strategies and teaching practices in the areas of reading that are supported by the district?** The findings related to research question 1 highlighted a variety of strategies that teachers used that are supported by the district's reading curriculum. These strategies are required by the district to improve student performance in reading and writing. The instructional strategies and teaching practices (CLIP, gradual release) supported by the district were used by the teachers to promote student learning outcomes in literacy. Implementation of the recommended strategies, intervention programs, and practices has narrowed the gap in reading for Grades 3 through 5. Overall, the participants stated that they supplied good quality delivery of the current instructional strategies and teaching practices. Participants differed with the practices in implementing instruction. This could be ascribed to the participants' lack of training in some of the current instructional strategies and practices.

Findings indicate teachers' desire for PD that is meaningful and related to CLIP, small group instruction, guided reading, and gradual release. Failure to adequately train the participants in these areas may be one of the reasons for the current achievement gap. Theme one addresses research question one in the core description of the present study. The participants in the study expressed the belief that implementing the district's required instructional strategies and practices are important. Teacher participants said they wanted relevant PDs where they can gain knowledge on how to deliver effective reading

instruction that may close the reading gap for students in Grades 3-5. Teachers expressed a desire to increase their knowledge in modeling reading strategies so students can learn how to scaffold the learning.

**Research Question 2: What instructional strategies and teaching practices are supported at the Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings?** The findings related to research question 2 focused on instructional strategies and teaching practices supported during PLCs meetings. Research-based strategies and effective practices are used to help increase students' knowledge in reading. The strategies and practices identified were small group instruction, researched-based strategies, CLIP, and gradual release. Teachers collaborated and reflected with each other to gain effective reading strategies. Not every teacher has the same teaching style. In PLC meetings, teachers discussed different strategies that they could use to help students become better learners in all subject areas.

The examination of student data led teachers to recognize and target areas for reading improvement. Teachers discussed the use of student data to help them track their progress. Teachers described how they have students track their weekly progress on the reading test and Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) tests better known as Measures of Academic Progress (MAP). Teachers believe that students' attention to their progress helped them become more accountable for their learning. Theme four is connected to research question two because it explains teachers' dialogue about student data. Teachers discussed how pertinent it is to plan effective instructional practices in the area of reading during PLC meetings. They can use student data to plan differentiate

instruction based on assessment results and to modify instructional strategies and teaching practices to meet all student's needs. Teachers stated that they needed additional PD to give them practice using student data to plan lessons that may increase students' reading performance.

**Research Question 3: What challenges are teachers facing when implementing these recommended teaching strategies?** The findings related to research question 3 revealed the challenges that teachers faced when implementing reading instruction. In the interviews, the teacher participants expressed that some of the challenges were the lack of educational resources, prerequisite literacy skills for Grades 3 through 5 students, delivery of effective explicit instructional practices in the area of reading, and implementation of research-based and district-recommended strategies. They saw the need for PD in delivering effective instructional practices and strategies and wanted relevant PD presented by professional with classroom experience. They wanted a person from the district level to come and demonstrate a lesson in an actual classroom setting.

Each year teachers learn to implement a new instructional strategy in professional development training provided by the district. During the 2016 school year, the strategy was CLIP. The teachers said that they did not know if any of the strategies work because the district has not given them an adequate amount of time to see a change in the students' performance. As a result, the participants need support and training on how to effectively deliver CLIP and CCSS for reading. These outcomes indicate a need for PD on reading instruction. Theme 3 (common classroom challenges) and Theme 5 (teachers

access to learning resources) are connected to Research Question 3 because these help to explain teachers' conversations about the common classroom challenges that they faced daily. Teachers stated that they need more PD on how to deliver the district's recommended strategies so students can apply the strategies and skills in reading with teacher support. Teachers expressed that due to budget cuts, the district may not provide additional learning resources to use in the classroom that would help them to close the reading achievement gap. Participants stated that collaboration with peers helped them to plan and implement effective reading lessons for students.

**Research Question 4: What were the teachers' perceptions regarding the adequate improvement in the reading performance for students in grades 3 through 5?** The data related to research question 4 focused on teachers' perceptions regarding adequate improvement in reading performance for students in Grades 3 through 5. The foundation with literacy awareness is in the lower grades. As a result, there is a need for PD on intervention and research-based strategies and practices to improve students' comprehension skills in reading.

The goal of this project study was to explore current district-recommended teaching practices and techniques in reading and teachers' perceptions about these strategies. Based on the findings of the collected data, I designed a PD session to address how to deliver effective explicit instructional practices in the area of reading, differentiate instruction, district-recommended and research-based strategies, and to address the lack of access to educational resources. The 13 participants in this study noted that teachers of Grades 3 through 5 needed to collaborate with each other and collect necessary resources

that would enable effective reading instruction. The district provided a DLD for teachers three times a year to ensure an apparent and common vision for improving literacy across grade levels and content areas. The DLD also provided meaningful PDs on implementation of new adopted strategies to teachers and other related staff and to support the superintendent's 80/90/100% Strategic Plan. This provided teachers with meaningful approaches to deliver effective instructional practice that would prepare students for college readiness. Theme five is connected to research question four because teachers expressed that delivering and teaching to the student level is a great way to access the students' needs and abilities. This will improve students' levels based on their level of readiness. Teachers expressed the need of PD training on how to plan effective lessons, locate research-based strategies, and deliver instructional practices in which students can inquiry.

Teachers met three times a week with intermediate teachers in PLC meetings to collaborate and discuss effective reading strategies. Teachers discovered, however, that they needed to see how to implement the district's strategies so they can deliver the reading instruction effectively. They need additional training in modeling. Teachers had the district guidelines and the curriculum map, but they did not understand how to make it fit together when planning reading instruction. Teachers stated that there was not enough time allotted for planning and teaching all skills required by the district within the reading block for their grade levels. I planned a 9-week (9 sessions) PD that focuses on teacher collaboration to share and build a strong foundation that will improve their

teaching instructional practices, and students' learning outcomes in reading. These were important findings that helped guide the development of the project.

In Section 2, I described this qualitative case study by presenting the explanation of the research and design and data collection and analysis. I presented the findings from the interviews, PLCs notes, and district guidelines, which were provided to the teachers and reading specialist at the study site. Section 3 includes an introduction to the project goals, the rationale for the project, the review of literature of the themes and how they connect to the project, project description, project evaluation plan, and project implications. Section 4 includes the reflections and the conclusion of the final project study.

### Section 3: The Project

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this case study was to explore current district-recommended teaching practices and techniques in reading and teachers' perceptions about these strategies. Findings demonstrated teachers' perceived lack of PD on ELA curriculum map, gradual release, CLIP, and other research-based reading strategies. Additional local PD is needed to address students' low performance in reading for Grades 3 through 5. Lack of training in these areas will affect students' reading performance. The findings provide details about PD issues expressed by teachers for Grades 3 through 5 during the weekly collaborative PD meetings.

The participants have weekly faculty meetings at the study site. During some of the faculty meetings, grade-level teams present a PD session on different topics. Strategies are discussed at faculty meetings and in training sessions, but few strategies are being modeled. According to the findings, the participants suggested that they could benefit from additional PD that provides: (a) an understanding of the curriculum maps and district guidelines and (b) models for the implementation of effective reading instruction practices.

Based on concerns of the participants, I designed a 9-week PD to address the strategies that can be implemented to effectively teach reading instruction that will be used to raise performance of students in Grades 3 through 5. Teachers in the planned PD will also be trained on how to deliver effective teaching practices. Ineffective teaching practices play a role in students' failures in reading.

One objective for the PD is for all intermediate teachers to exchange ideas and collaborate during a planned PLC PD. Teachers will be allowed to share among each other new insights on reading strategies, resources, and their weaknesses and strengths in reading practices.

Based on these findings that teachers preferred their PLC over district PD, I believed a PLC model might be an effective PD approach at the school. Therefore, using the PLC model in the planned staff development, teachers will meet to discuss district guidelines, plan lessons with research-based strategies, and learn how to effectively align district guidelines with the ELA curriculum maps in reading. The change in the proposed staff development will be in the format of the PLC meetings, but the sessions will be held after school instead of during the regular PLC meeting times; thus, planning time will not be jeopardized. This new PLC meeting will give teachers the chance to work collaboratively on the identified objectives.

The PLC meetings will allow the participants to communicate their beliefs about effective reading instruction and teaching practices that align with the district guidelines and reading curriculum map. However, meetings will go much further by reviewing resources and including modeling activities that are related specifically to the needs of the group. This section includes a description of the project, its goals, and learning outcomes specific to the teachers at the study site. I also present a review of literature to support the rationale for choosing this project

### **Description and Goals**

The PLCs at the study site are planned for teachers of prekindergarten to Grade 5 who meet twice a week with colleagues and once a week with the principal or the professional learning coach during their planning periods. An administrator, either the principal or the professional learning coach, will supervise this project. The project resulting from this study was a PLC PD training to provide educators with district-supported research-based strategies that can be used in the classroom to improve students' reading performances in Grades 3 through 5. The strategies will be based on identified topics of need and will be modeled for the participants. I used the needs identified in the data obtained from the results of the case study to create the topic strategies for the PD sessions for the PLCs. Another goal beyond learning strategies of this PLC is to provide support for teachers in developing effective full lessons in reading instruction. Thus, the majority of time in the PLC will be used to improve teachers' skills with research-based strategies, but there is also support for full lesson development. The staff development will be offered at the study site after school for 9 weeks with each session lasting 2 hours in addition to their regular PLC meeting time.

The project will provide teachers with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of how to implement strategies and instructional practices. Teachers will engage in a series of discussions, reflections, peer observation, role-playing, and modeling. The PLC will bring greater awareness on how to use data to drive reading instruction for student success in reading. It will also bring awareness to challenges that teachers face when implementing district recommended strategies. The PD was planned

for face-to-face meetings after school, so that participants can collaborate with their grade level coworkers.

### **Rationale**

The project was selected as a result of the findings in which teachers demonstrated a need to be better prepared to face challenges and deliver effective instructional practices using research-based reading strategies. Among the teachers of Grades 3 through 5, there was a critical need for more personalized PD to close the gaps in reading instruction for students. The delivery of ineffective instruction and lack of training in research-based strategies hindered the teachers as they sought to facilitate growth in their students' reading levels. Furthermore, a lack of content knowledge regarding reading had impeded teachers' ability to effectively educate.

Teachers need to participate in PD programs so they can stay abreast on current instructional practices. Collaborating with peers is one way to support teachers in education by endorsing instructional support. Darling-Hammond and Rothman (2011) stated that teachers need to be lifelong learners to continue to attain knowledge. The interview responses indicated that the training teachers received in their teacher preparation programs were not effective at teaching them how to deliver effective reading instruction.

The participants in the study expressed the need for training in effective research-based strategies. Teachers felt that reading instruction should meet the demands of both the CCSS and the district recommended strategies. The data revealed that teachers' instruction was not clearly aligned with the CCSS, and they expressed that their reading

instructional practices did not provide students with the rigor of the CCSS reading standards and expectations. Previous professional trainings provided by the district were limited in space and were held after school hours; therefore, the delivery of new knowledge lacked consistency across the district. The reading specialist at the school was required to provide professional training for K-5 teachers during regular school hours and this impinge upon teachers' instructional planning time.

Providing students with instruction at their Lexile level was a significant concern of participants. Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 7 stated that students were not reading on grade level. Teachers said that the curriculum map was too fast, and they could not deliver effective reading practices. The teachers felt that district guideline-allotted times do not allow teachers time to implement good teaching practices to struggling readers.

The presenter will share differentiation instruments that should be implemented in the teachers' daily instructional practices. Teachers said that having mini-lessons ready for guided reading groups was also a useful way to differentiate. Therefore, mini-lessons will also be discussed. The district reading practice of gradual release will also be integrated in the PD sessions on differentiation.

As I reflected on the participants' responses, aspirations, concerns, and ideas, I realized that a change was needed. The need for a change is based on the analysis of participants' responses and a thorough examination of the district's guidelines and the PLC notes.

Teachers can implement rigorous lessons, align them with the current district recommended teaching practices, and engage instructional strategies to improve students'

reading achievement. They also can give support and reflective responses to students in small groups. Teachers expressed that they did not have good modeling on how to deliver effective reading instruction training during DLD days. During the minimal DLD days, the presenter shared reading strategies but did not model them or help with implementation. The district guidelines do not allocate enough time to learn the gradual release methods. Teachers need significant time to collaborate with colleagues. As a result, the presenter will implement different strategies to help improve the teachers' knowledge of the ELA curriculum maps, district guidelines, and research-based reading strategies.

I believe that this PD will provide teachers with sufficient training and skills necessary to implement effective research-based strategies in reading so student performance in reading will improve. PD can provide teachers with the ability to target skills and goals needed for each grade level and for individual students, while enhancing their own instructional practices, reading strategies, and reflective practices. Teachers will learn how to implement differentiation within the lessons created for effective reading instruction and practices.

### **Review of Literature**

The literature in this study presented the need for effective research-based strategies and differentiation in reading instruction and practices. In the first part of the literature review, I focused on PD and validated why this training would provide opportunities for teachers to deliver effective research-based strategies for reading instruction for students in Grades 3 through 5. The second segment of the literature

review includes information on the support of the PD that emerged from the themes and findings. I searched Google Scholar and the research databases EBSCOHost, ProQuest, and SAGE for significant literature. The literature was used to define these key terms including *PLCs, reading instruction, professional development, adult learning theories, achievement gaps, ELL learners, differentiation, differentiated, job-embedded, adult, prerequisite skills, and effective instruction.*

### **Adult Learning and Professional Learning Relationship**

Before PD can be effective, it is essential to understand how adults learn when applying and maintaining new programs (Samaroo, Cooper, & Green, 2013). Knowles' adult learning theory is an andragogical approach that is problem-based and collaborative (Knowles, 1980; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). In this model, the presenter serves as the facilitator in providing the learner with the skills for using the integrated curriculum program and supporting the learner with resources and methods to obtain the knowledge. The process elements of andragogy consists of eight elements: (a) preparing the learner, (b) establishing climate beneficial to learning, (c) constructing a mechanism for mutual planning learning, (d) diagnosing the needs by mutual learning, (e) generating program content objectives that will gratify these needs, (f) creating a pattern of learning skills, (g) performing the learning skills with appropriate materials and methods, and (h) rediagnosing) the learning necessitates and evaluating the learner results (Knowles et al., 2011).

I chose Knowles's (1980) work as the conceptual framework for this project study. Knowles's theory suggests that teachers should possess the ability to instruct more

toward a learner-centered style of teaching, which would provide a flexibility of knowledge and understanding that relates towards instructional approaches to promote student outcomes (King, 2013). Using the theoretical framework of Knowles will positively support the institutional efforts to assist instructors in gaining and continually improving their expertise and knowledge to educate learners in an effective manner. The goals for each session will be attainable in one 60-minute session.

### **Effective Professional Development (PD)**

Teachers take away a new meaning of learning when they attend PD training on-site or off campus. PD is most effective when teachers focus on instructional strategies, teaching practices, and student achievement (Killion & Roy, 2009). When teachers attend PD training outside of the school environment, they feel great about the new ideas and are anxious to bring the information back to the school to share with colleagues (Buczynski & Hansen, 2010). Their effectiveness is based on how well the presenters delivered the PD. Teachers sometimes had a difficult time delivering the information back to the staff because there was too much information delivered in one day for them to comprehend (Killion, 2012).

Effective PD for teachers should include modeling how to deliver the instruction effectively and demonstrating ways to improve students' academic outcomes (Killion & Roy, 2009). Teachers should be able to share common grounds and goals after attending a PD (Killion, 2012). According to Fullan (2014), teachers need effective PD and opportunities for learning, so they can apply the new knowledge and implement effective instructional strategies that will promote student progress.

Effective PD will enhance teachers' pedagogy and support them in acquiring new learning knowledge. Teachers can apply the new knowledge and place into effective instructional approaches to promote student learning outcomes. PD is effective when teachers are provided with strategies to enhance their current teaching practices and instruction (Lumpe, Czerniak, Hanry, & Beltyukova, 2012). PD that provides ways to implement effective instruction happens with the support of specialists in training new initiatives such as the CCSS reading standards and the district recommended strategies (Walter-Braker, 2014). Teachers should have the chance to both attain and implement the new knowledge.

Teachers need to adjust their teaching and instructional practices by incorporating strategies that will help students to enhance their learning (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). PD also gives teachers opportunities to reflect on their daily teaching, and offers multiple ways of enhancing reading instruction, so the lessons will be effective (Hargreaves & Fink, 2012). Professional learning for teachers should be intellectually stimulating and should provide a positive aspect of the experience that teachers need and expect (Dodman & Swain, 2011).

Teachers need to stay abreast of current, effective, research-based reading instruction and strategies, and they need to communicate and share about their experiences with each other (Levine & Marcus, 2010). They can discuss the new methods they implement with peers during PD workshops (DuFour et al., 2010). PD also helps teachers continually reflect on their instruction (Hargreaves & Fink, 2012), and it helps them discover ways and resources to improve reading performance for all students (Levine & Marcus, 2010).

Another professional strategy that can be used is video clips of other teachers modeling and teaching an effective lesson (Sher & Shea, 2011). Teachers can view and discuss the video clips in groups during the PD sessions (Rook & McDonald, 2012). Teachers can (a) discuss what the students were doing as it relates to the topic of the presentation, (b) rate the teachers' performance based on the Teacher Effective Measures (TEM) rubric on the lesson being taught, (c) offer suggestions to the peers in the group to analyze the videos, and (d) include reflections of good first teaching practices and share the videos with their peers.

Another strategy that could be used with a TEM rubric is peer observation. Peer observation occurs when teachers come into the classroom to observe a teacher's teaching techniques and students' interactions during the lesson (Hendry & Oliver, 2012). Teachers give feedback to peers about the lesson, weaknesses and strengths of the lesson, and the delivery of the lesson by using the TEM rubric. The feedback from peer observations can help teachers make modifications to their instructional and teaching practices with the objective of student outcomes in mind (Lukowiak & Hunzicker, 2013). Teachers can do a self-score on their performance on the instructional practices and assessments implemented during the lesson so they can re-teach or modify the lesson (Hendry & Oliver, 2012; Showers & Joyce, 1996; Swafford, 1998).

Teachers need to provide multiple ways for students to become actively and passively engaged in the lessons and plan lessons based on students' levels and needs. According to Benedict, Brownell, Park, Bettini, and Lauterbach (2014), "Teachers who received problem-solving support through coaching, teacher learning teams, or other

forums for collaborative planning and observation were able to make the greatest changes to their instructional practices” (p. 155).

Overall, PD can be characterized in various ways. Teachers described PD workshops or in-service as the support system that teachers need to learn and acquire new information about the content areas they teach, so students will become independent learners (Darling-Hammond, 2012). PD is an ongoing process for teachers in today’s educational environment. Teachers who focus on effective classroom instructional practices will use the practices received from PD in their classrooms to increase student achievement (King, 2013). The most important predictor of student success is the quality of a teacher (Darling-Hammond, 2014). There is a growing acknowledgement of the need to associate PD with school improvement initiatives (Fang, 2013). When students are taught by highly qualified teachers and the instructional practices are delivered explicitly, students will be able to master the skills taught.

PD is effective when teachers are provided with learning opportunities that are used to actually implement and model the new research-based strategies that may enhance their current teaching (Lumpe et al., 2012). Teachers can then apply the new knowledge and implement effective instructional approaches to promote students’ learning outcomes (King, 2013). PD provides ways to implement effective explicit instruction. This happens with the support of other specialists in the particular field of teaching new initiatives such as the CCSS reading standards (CCSS, 2014).

PD is needed to help teachers navigate the connections between the district guidelines and assessments. Teachers must be familiar with and know how to deliver the

CCSS standards and the objectives to students (Hill, Beisiegel, & Jacob, 2013). Teachers need PD to show them how to use the data from assessments to drive the instructional strategies and practices and to increase content knowledge in all subject areas (Evans, 2013).

### **Effective Professional Learning Communities (PLC)**

PLCs are categorized as job-embedded PD. A job-embedded learning PD can empower teachers to develop leadership roles within the school and lead to higher student success (Harris et al., 2013). PLCs provide learning and training for teachers on all grade levels. According to Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos (2009), an effective PD program encourages best practices in learning and teaching. PLCs provide teachers with opportunities to learn in supportive groups across grade levels. Teachers can apply new knowledge on research-based strategies. They can do analysis of curriculum map standards to align with district expectations. PD is an ongoing process that will help teachers to model highly effective methods to introduce new concepts and to help them implement explicit instructional practices (Grodsky & Gamoran, 2003; Little, 2012).

Because the school's primary focus is learning for all, principals and other school leaders often participate in PD so they can communicate to their teachers how to build a better learning environment for everyone (Barth, 2006; Devlin-Scherer, Devlin-Scherer, Wright, Rodger, & Meyers, 1997). Principals and stakeholders review how the PD is going throughout the school. They also identify the next plan of action in PD for their teachers.

During an effective PLC PD, members recognize the need to build significant trust through sharing knowledge and ideas. Collaboration among the teachers in PLC groups helps them to build trust (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011). Teachers should assemble and have follow-up meetings to discuss what strategies worked and did not work (Evans, 2013). For PLCs to be effective, teachers need time to meet in grade levels, reflect on current teaching practices and strategies, test new methods in the classrooms, and create and execute assessments (Evans, 2013). Teachers should also discuss and plan lessons based on the data results from the district's tests and other assessments (Musanti & Pence, 2010).

One component PLCs attend to is student assessment data on state standards. PLC teams will provide opportunities for teachers to share and collaborate with their grade to target assessments, accommodations, modifications, lesson plans, and test data (DuFour & DuFour, 2012). Teachers can take shared ideas, implement the ideas, and reflect on the findings from tests with other members during their next planning time (Erkens et al., 2008). PLCs focus on the outcomes of the students' learning and the alignment of that learning with state standards. Teachers can collaborate with their colleagues on benchmark tests and plan rigorous lessons to guide instruction.

PLC communities are guided by lead teachers who work collaboratively in teams and teach the same grade levels or curriculum maps. The purpose of PLCs is to improve teaching practices and instruction to attain student success (Hill et al., 2013). Associates of PLCs could belong to more than one team, depending on scheduling and subject areas. PLC groups can discuss questions about district guidelines and curriculum maps (Earley

& Porritt, 2013). The teams can collaborate to elucidate precisely what all students need to know and learn, observe students' learning outcomes, discuss implementation of assessments, and provide intervention ideas to make certain each student will receive support and additional time for learning the skills with which they are struggling (Little, 2012). Teachers can enhance the learning in all subject areas for students who have mastered the learning outcomes (Lindsey, Jungwirth, Pahl, & Lindsey, 2009). All members should be equally responsible for joint-ownership of the student learning outcomes communicated among the group.

The uniqueness of a PLC PD is that teachers can collaborate and support their team members. They will become advanced at implementing different types of assessment to address the unique needs of all learners and to use culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices and instruction (Archibald, Coggshall, Croft, & Goe, 2011).

### **Common Core State Standards, District Guidelines, Assessments, and Curriculum**

The curriculum maps, district guidelines, and the CCSS play a vital part when planning assessments during PLC meetings. Assessments must be designed to address the objectives in the CCSS as well as the district guidelines, and instruction should follow the timing on the curriculum maps (Malik & Malik, 2011). The CCSS (2014) is one way for the nation to achieve a more common vision of educational goals. However, not all teachers fully understand and implement these standards (Drew, 2012). When teachers do not have a precise understanding of how to teach the standards and what students should know, they are ineffective when preparing students for assessments (Brown, 2011).

School districts provide leadership for schools to follow the blueprints of CCSS, curriculum maps, and the assessments related to reading. One challenge teachers face is that the balance of content that is vital to assist learners to achieve CCSS standards and to make proficient on TNReady tests without missing the purpose of teaching students how to be independent learners, knowledgeable in the content areas, and proficient readers (Shriner, Schlee, & Libler, 2010). When teachers collaborate in teams to plan effective lessons and assessments while concentrating on delivering effective instruction and implementing instructional materials, they can give each other the support needed for students to be successful in reading (DuFour & DuFour, 2010). During PD the facilitator should take into consideration the different methods or theories that will focus on various ways to address all students, subject matters, and the principles of andragogy (Zhang, Lundelberg, & Eberhardt, 2011).

### **Connecting Themes to the Professional Development**

The PD is entitled, “Bridging the Gap in Reading Instruction to Improve Students Reading Performance.” I chose the topics in the project to address the findings from data collected in this case study. Five themes emerged from the data that could support teachers with delivering effective reading instruction and research-based strategies to improve reading performance for students in grades 3 through 5. These themes were (a) delivery of effective reading strategies, (b) addressing student levels connected to reading, (c) teachers’ challenges in classrooms, (d) data-driven PLCs meetings to plan lessons, and (e) access to learning resources available to teachers and students. There were three external factors themes that I felt if addressed successfully could support

teachers with implementing effective instructional practices and research-based strategies to improve reading success in grades 3 through 5. These themes were (a) delivery of explicit effective instructional practices to improve support students' outcomes in reading, (b) addressing students' reading levels, and (c) recognizing students' reading failure and the possible reasons for lack of learning.

**Effective instructional practices.** The first theme from the findings disclosed a need to include a practicum where participants can observe “how” to implement district recommended reading strategies and instruction effectively to improve student achievement. Regan and Berkeley (2012) stated that one way to deliver effective reading instruction is through explicit modeling of the lesson. When teaching students to use cognitive learning techniques, modeling is essential in the areas of reading and writing. Therefore, having PD leaders present the techniques through modeling is the most important part of delivering effective instruction that enables learners to apply new strategies and expertise. During whole and small group instructions, explaining in-depth why students should use a particular strategy and when to apply the steps during the reading process is vital (Wichadee, 2011).

Common Core standards focus on building students' background knowledge in reading comprehension. This will help students to become confident readers. Fisher and Frye (2015) stated that Common Core is introduced early to students in elementary and through high school. According to some researchers (e.g., Bortnem, 2011), the need to implement nonfiction texts to students in the primary grades did not need to be recognized because reading non-fiction texts to students is nothing new. Fisher and Frye

(2015) expressed that CCSS have enhanced reading instructions and practices for teachers to deliver and this will enable students to read on their grade level. One of the developers of the CCSS stated that students should read only grade-level texts (Shanahan, 2011). Others argued that primary students can benefit from reading complex texts through guidance from teachers, and scaffolding during read-aloud (Hacker & Tenent, 2002).

Modeling teaching strategies is an effective way to help students become independent learners and to complete tasks at their own pace. Cummins and Stallmeyer-Gerard (2011) stated teachers must model how to analyze the texts using multiple strategies and practices. After students have implemented the strategies and skill, they will be able to cite evidence from texts to justify their responses and share their ideas. Fisher and Frye (2015) stated, “Students are guided to deeply analyze and appreciate various aspects of the text, such as key vocabulary and how its meaning is sharply by context; attention to form, tone, imagery, and rhetorical devices” (p. 56). Students will become better readers when they investigate, interrogate, and investigate the importance of a context because students will learn how to be accountable for their own learning (Harvey & Goudvis, 2013). Students will be able to read and compare nonfiction texts through writing (Stead, 2014).

Teachers should reflect daily on their teaching practices to determine how well they delivered the lesson and the students’ perspectives on the lesson. Taylor (2007) stated that within the limits of teachers’ classrooms, teachers should reflect and focus evenly on the “what” and the “how” of delivering their explicit reading instruction.

Teachers should always make better academic options to meet students' needs and abilities based on their daily reflections (Hiebert, Morris, Berk, & Jansen, 2007). Many students have different learning abilities and cultural backgrounds, and these must be taken into consideration when planning lessons (Connor et al., 2013).

The foundational reading instruction consists of the basic components of an effective reading program supported by research-based reading (Mathes et al., 2011). The five reading elements are instruction in phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and phonemic awareness (Shanahan et al., 2010). According to the National Reading Panel (2000), these important features are part of the daily reading program during effective classroom reading instruction (Garland, 2012; Taylor, 2007). The components of the foundational reading skills have been extensively studied, and a majority of elementary teachers has had current PD on the "five components of reading" during the 2014 District Learning Day. Teachers at the study site need to organize and plan daily for a 90 to 120-minute reading block including the above components in each reading lesson while focusing also on the students' learning needs and tasks that are aligned with the district ELA guidelines (Puccioni, 2015). Overall, teachers need to model the learning, ask open-ended questions, gradually release the skills during small and whole group lessons, and provide feedback to students as they contributed in literacy activities or tasks (Taylor & Parsons, 2011).

To summarize, teachers in the classrooms need to provide a high quality of balance between whole and small group instruction, maximize instructional time with the purposes of the lesson in mind, implement differentiated instruction in workstations, and

provide students with challenging work based on their learning ability (Puccioni, 2015). When students attend other special classes, the classroom teachers and resource teacher should also collaborate and discuss lessons and individual students' literacy knowledge (Vaughn & Wanzek, 2014).

**Gradual release and instructional methods.** Reading comprehension consists of various skills and strategies. Teachers can use an array of reading strategies that support students to interact with text in meaningful ways in the classrooms. Diehl, Armitage, Nettles, and Peterson (2011) conducted a naturalistic experimental study to measure growth in reading comprehension of Grades 3 through 5 students. Five classroom teachers from two rural public schools were part of the study. Both schools had the same principal. Students were from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The students in the study were placed with their classroom teachers for 30 intervention sessions in small groups. The purpose of the study was (a) to gain insight into the instructional degrees that lead to comprehension gains for students and (b) to investigate the effectiveness of a reading intervention program that combined all three key types of instruction (Diehl et al., 2011). The three key types were metacognitive, comprehension strategies, and peer-led discussions. The model consisted of implementing three phases, one phase per each type of instruction, and the recursive gradual release instruction was grounded in each phase. Teachers at the school received training to teach readers how to comprehend text. The gradual release is a key strategy that the participants in this study used and for which they expressed appreciation.

The gradual release model, called Three-Phase Reading Comprehension (3-RRCI), was used in the Diehl et al. (2011) study to improve student reading comprehension. Teachers administered the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI-3) as a screening tool to measure growth. During Phase 1 (five sessions), metacognitive strategies were taught to the students. There were four comprehension strategies used in reciprocal teaching: predicting, clarifying, questioning, and summarizing. In the goal of Phase 2 (15 sessions), students were given tools to help think while reading. In Phase 2, teachers also supported students in using the learned scaffold strategies to text and provided support as they reduced explicit gradual release (Diehl et al., 2011). During this stage, teachers provided support by using a graphic organizer. For the last stage, Phase 3 (10 sessions), students participated in peer-led discussions with guidance from the teachers. The students who received the 3-RRCI interactive style of teaching made the most gains. Another group who received the recitative made minor gains (Diehl et al., 2011). Thus, the gradual release model to be included in the Diehl's study PLC has been shown to be effective in research.

When students have acquired the necessary reading skills or strategies in reading, they will become fluent readers and will comprehend texts (Allington, McCuiston, & Billen, 2014). Students will read on or beyond their grade levels and overcome their frustration levels in reading (Therrien, Kirk, & Woods-Groves, 2012). Teachers should plan think-aloud models and address the purpose of the lesson (Grant & Fisher, 2009; Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006). When students hear how teachers think, they will be able to fill in the gaps in their background knowledge, build vocabulary, and access prior

knowledge (Carlisle, Kelcey, Rowan, & Phelps, 2011). When teachers implement the gradual release of responsibility model in the classroom with a well-planned lesson, students will use what they learn and connect it to their real-world environment, using their prior background information and techniques obtained through classroom strategies (Grant, Lapp, Douglas, Fisher, Johnson, & Frey, 2012). Through the implementation of the gradual release model and effective instructional practices from teachers, students will attain knowledge and understand concepts taught while learning to work independently using the inquiry process (Grant et.al, 2012). Students can then become lifelong learners in all content areas.

**Prerequisite skills.** I discussed learning histories in this study as an external issue related to student performance in reading. Some students in grades 3 through 5 did not attend any early childhood Head Start or prekindergarten programs. Teachers must be conscious of their students' educational background knowledge. When teachers know that students in the classroom lack prerequisite foundational reading skills, they can begin implementation of intervention and strategies in reading to close the gaps. Sonnenschein, Stapleton, and Benson (2010) stated that students who have low socioeconomic environments and entered kindergarten with early phonological abilities would demonstrate growth measured in reading comprehension skills in grades 3 through 5 because of early educational resources. When teachers provide students with learning opportunities in early education, this can prevent a gap in reading comprehension later on.

Students who attended a Head Start program have the necessary prerequisite skills needed to enter kindergarten. These students have greater advantages over students who did not attend an early childhood program. Students who attend Head Start or preschool enter kindergarten with background knowledge in vocabulary skills, letters and letter-sound recognitions, social and emotional growth, and mathematics skills. Hawken, Johnston, and McDonnell (2005) conducted a study based on a national survey of 500 Head Start preschool teachers to assess their practices and views that were related to emerging literacy. The participants in the study were teachers who worked in a Head Start preschool program. The address list of the Head Start programs was purchased from the National Head Start Association. The sampling was based on the percentage of children under the age of five years who lived in one of the nine census regions in the 2000 U.S. Census. The Head Start Child Outcomes Framework and skills were used in the study to determine practices and views from preschool teachers.

The findings from this study revealed that the majority of the implemented strategies did not involve teacher-child interactions or direct teaching (Hawken et al., 2005). Teachers modeled the strategies and provided an environment that promoted opportunities for children to interact and explore with literacy-related materials. The findings also stated that the use of phonological awareness skills and activities were more limited than other emerging literacy activities. Phonological awareness skills are essential for children to become successful readers. Students who perform at low levels in science, language, engineering, technology, and mathematics are students from low-income and minority families. Some of the students did not attend early learning programs such as

Head Start or prekindergarten (Kermani & Aldemir, 2015). Teachers should make an effort to learn and understand students' backgrounds. When teachers implement effective emerging literacy skills and instruction at an early age, children will increase in language and literacy skills.

In the United States, Head Start is federally funded. The early childhood program is for children from low-income families. They are part of a community partner of state-funded prekindergarten programs. Students who attend early education programs have had prerequisite background in phonological skills. Claessens, Engel, and Curran (2014) conducted a study to examine the connection between reading and mathematics content in kindergarten and student learning by using the nationally representative data for students who participated in other childcare, attended Head Start, or attended some other preschool before kindergarten. The findings from the study revealed that kindergarteners, who had attended some type of preschool were more advanced than students who did not attend preschool in both mathematics and reading through elementary and middle school (Claessens et al., 2014).

Barnett (2011) stated that to balance the impact of insufficient learning settings of low performing students, early interventions should be used to help them achieve. When teachers have a wealth of knowledge about their students' background, they can close the reading gaps early by placing students at their appropriate levels and by addressing their specific needs. When children are educated at a young age, they may perhaps grow up to read, write, and perform mathematics at grade level, graduate from high school and find a job. Teachers have faced many challenges on how to raise the bar

to increase reading levels to close achievement for struggling readers. During weekly PLC meetings, teachers can examine the data and standards to establish effective teaching practices to implement the standards and instruction to learners using a variety of differentiated approaches (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2006). To improve student performance in reading, teachers must provide the best possible learning and increase instruction that includes differentiating for all students. Differentiation is an effective strategy that will sustain this purpose.

**Differentiation.** Differentiation is an instructional technique that is used to help teachers teach students by their learning ability as well as teaching the content. The goals of the teachers are to ensure that teaching and learning work together so students can reach their full potential learning ability. Tomlinson and Imbreau (2010) stated the four components (learning setting, instructional strategies, assessment, and standards) must be implemented effectively to ensure that all students' needs are met in all content areas.

Sparapani (2013) suggested that differentiating instruction should be connected to current standards, should consist of challenging lessons, and should show accountability of student outcomes from the learning. When teachers use explicit instruction and implement effective lessons that are aligned with the standards, students stay on task and stay focused on learning (Andreassen & Braten, 2011). Many ways to explore and deliver subject matter exist so every student can attain his or her unique abilities. Sparapani (2013) stated, "Differentiated instruction works from the premise that there is no "one size fits all" (p. 18). Therefore, teachers should include multiple ways of implementing

assessments and instructional practices that will create a productive learning environment for learners.

Differentiated instruction is widely used throughout the years in education; however, the term is misguided many times in the educational realm (Watts-Taffe et al., 2012). Differentiated instruction should contain such methods as effective teaching and learning, a variety of instructional strategies, a thorough and thought out lesson plan, a conducive learning environment, and different assessments (Tomlinson & Imbreau, 2010). These are just a few components that help students to reach their full learning capacity in a 20<sup>th</sup> century classroom.

A study conducted by the Oakwood City School District (Kappler & Weckstein, 2012) determined district-wide steps that ensured that educators were implementing differentiated instructional strategies with fidelity and making sure that all the students' needs were met academically. A developed plan for educators was necessary to ensure students' success. Therefore, to prepare educators for implementation of differentiated instruction in their classrooms, PD provides teachers with the use of modeling strategies, one on one peer learning, and cohort group opportunities (Kappler & Weckstein, 2012). The purpose of this PD was to allow educators to perceive how differentiated instruction is important to reach students at their learning capabilities (Kappler & Weckstein, 2012). As a result, educators had an opportunity to reflect on their own teaching practices and align them with the teaching practices learned during their PD. The PD allowed them to embrace the concept of different learning opportunities for their students (Kappler & Weckstein, 2012).

In addition to providing PD for educators, the school district also developed rubrics for their educators to use to plan effective instructional strategies while they were developing their lesson plans. Teachers ensured implementation of differentiated instruction in their classrooms daily. As a result, educators felt more confident in their teaching practices, student achievements, and academic goals in their schools (Weber, Johnson, & Trip, 2013).

Differentiated instruction theory posits that all students learn through different approaches. When teachers understand the interests of English Language Learner (ELL) students in the classroom and use their interests in creating lessons, they make the learning meaningful to the students (Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, Chinn, & Rattleff, 2011). Kappler and Weckstein (2012) conducted a study of a district's approach in an elementary school to develop effective educators and leaders for differentiated classrooms. Students' test scores begin to decline over the years due to a huge influx of ELLs, whose learning needs were not being met in the classroom. They were not performing as well as the other students who were not ELL (Weber et al., 2013). As a result, the administration team, literacy coaches, and instructional lead teachers developed a differentiated instruction framework designed to help meet the ELL population at the school.

To implement this framework, activities included discussions with grade level members, staff meeting workshops, strategies to help meet the needs of students, observations, and learning walks with peer feedback. This gave educators an opportunity to design a formula that would best fit diverse learners in their own classrooms. There

were several strategies provided to them during their staff workshop meetings. Throughout the school year, teachers were provided with additional learning strategies, support, and materials for differentiated instruction in their classrooms (Kappler & Weckstein). Because educators were exposed to new opportunities for learning how to adapt their instructional practices to fit students' individual needs, a gradual change of student's success began to happen. Although many educators expressed that implementing the change was a challenge, they felt that it was important to learn how to address the needs of all learners.

Educators feel a great concern when it comes to providing differentiated instruction for ELLs. Educators often forget that ELLs also need differentiated instruction (August, McCardle, Shanahan, 2014). Although these students typically receive support from an ELL teacher, they must also receive accommodations from their regular teacher in the form of differentiated instruction. Educators usually set up learning stations for ELL students because this is a differentiated group or learning area that will provide each student the chance to learn the tasks at their current level. Students are tested on their reading fluency levels to determine the activities that students receive in their learning centers. Educators use anecdotal records to track the progress of the students who began in the elementary setting (Martin & Green, 2012). These records allow educators to track the academic progress of their students to determine if students need more or less rigorous work for their learning center. Educators realized that implementing differentiated instruction with their ELL students would improve their reading and writing skills (Weber et al., 2013). Educators also realized that implementing the use of

differentiated instruction in their daily teaching practices provides all learners with an opportunity to become successful regardless of their current academic levels (Watts-Taffe et al., 2012).

Dixon, Yssel, McConnell, and Harding (2014) stated that differentiated instruction is successful when educators meet and accommodate the needs and abilities of all their students. Educators must model explicit instruction to struggling and ELL students (Andreassen & Braten, 2011). Educators are aware of the different learning styles of their students (Tricarico & Xendol-Hoppey, 2012). They can best identify with their students' learning styles through teacher observations, survey, assessments, and student conferences. When educators engage in meaningful conferences with their students, students become problem solvers and think critically (Jones, Yssel, & Grant, 2012). All these components merge to help educators plan for explicit differentiated instructional practices and strategies for students.

### **Implementation**

The project created from this study is a PD PLC for teachers to implement effective reading instruction and teaching practices to support struggling readers in grades 3 through 5. In Section 2, the findings from the research suggested that teachers in grades 3-5 wanted support on “how” to deliver effective reading strategies. This can be supported with videos of excellent teachers implementing the strategies from Annenberg online as part of the PLC. The current PD on instructional practices and research-based strategies were reduced due to budget cuts in the district. Concerns and challenges by the participants were communicated through the interviews in this project. Teachers would

benefit from this PD by obtaining knowledge on research-based reading strategies and implementing successful instructional practices. Students would benefit from the PD because they would be receiving the reading instruction. In this section, I outline the plan for the project, which has the descriptions, resources, potential barriers, roles and responsibilities, evaluation measures, and social change implications.

### **Project Description**

#### **Potential Resources and Existing Supports**

The support team to guarantee that the planned PD will occur includes the local principal, grade level team leaders, the reading specialist, and me, the facilitator. The principal and assistant principal will need to discuss the time and the date of the PD. They will provide the materials needed and the location for the PLC. The school has an assistant principal who is in charge of informing teachers of planned events and planning PD days based on the school calendar. There will not be a cost to participate in this project. Teachers will need to arrive promptly for the PD. A scheduled initial meeting with the administrator at the study site will confirm a clear and common understanding of rules, positive outcomes, PLC teams, and methods. My obligations to this project will be to facilitate the sessions and deliver the essential materials to the PLCs for training. For example, the facilitator will deliver workshop evaluations and presentation to the school and the organization of each session.

#### **Potential Barriers and Solutions**

I do not anticipate many barriers that will keep the PD project from taking place in its entirety. Two possible barriers could affect the effectiveness of this project. Time is

a barrier that might affect the project. Teachers are frequently taken from their instructional time for parent conferences, Individual Education Plan (IEP), and meetings with social workers. To keep these interruptions to a minimum, teachers should communicate with the PD administrator to eliminate these issues. Another barrier to consider is collaboration among the participants with their peers. Some teachers may not want to speak, share, collaborate, or reflect during the PD. The facilitator cannot force participants to participate in the PD seminar. The facilitator needs to make sure teachers understand they will have time to work collaboratively in groups to communicate during the PD. This method will help teachers learn how to deliver effective reading instruction and to develop a plan that outlines the course of action to attain their goals.

### **Proposal for Implementation and Timetable**

The PD will be in 9-weekly segments offered after school for 2 hours per week beginning in August. An array of tools will be used to keep the participants energetically engaged during the PD such as presentations and modeling. These will include preparatory discussion meetings for small and whole groups, collaborative planning, and videos clip viewing. Teachers will use the district standards template each week to analyze the ELA curriculum maps and district guidelines to target for instruction the following week. Other resources provided in the PD project include a lesson plan template, post evaluation form, and a reflection of standard guide. I created these resources based on teachers' need expressed during interviews and results from data analysis.

The weekly agenda will have the same format each week. It will include a reflection on work completed from the preceding week, analysis of the next reading standard, analysis of student work, and collaborating in grade level team meetings to create lesson plans. The reading standards were chosen based on district's instructional calendar and introduced one week before the skills are expected to be taught in the classroom. The student work samples will be selected among grade-level teams as they generate lessons and assessments. An introductory presentation will be presented on the first day to identify effective PD and establish norms and goals for work (Appendix A).

The majority of the participants in the study stated that they needed PD that would provide teachers with modeling and learning that would support ongoing PD of effective explicit reading instruction throughout the school year. The participants were concerned that the school district has proposed cuts, which include eliminating PD for teachers and staff, and funding for books and classroom supplies. This planned project will help alleviate some of the stress that could have developed from lack of PD or support. In the study site's district, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation provided funding for PD for teachers and principals. To improve highly effective teachers in the study site's district, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funding will be used for PD for teacher improvement and student performance. The school district will receive a 1-year extension from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to support teacher quality efforts (Kumar, 2016). The money will be used for PD to support teachers and principals. The money will not close the budget gap, but it will allow the district to invest the funds for teachers and school leaders. During the new school year, teachers and principals would not have been

able to attend PD and coaching support without the funds from Bill and Melinda Gate Foundation. The grant will also be used to foster stronger bonds between the community and school, improve student learning, and build a student data system that will assist schools in effectively tracking student achievement.

The Gates grant cannot be used for other programs because it is only aimed for teacher improvement. Teachers and principals will not be paid to participate in the PD. The funds will be used to purchase adaptive resources that are aligned with the CCSS, which will support students and teachers in the classrooms. The grant encouraged the district to begin its Teacher and Leadership Effectiveness initiative to preserve talent for classrooms and schools, and to concentrate on failures to recruit (Kumar, 2016). The extension is important as leaders search to protect the initiative from cuts. According to the district school survey, the majority of the teachers stated that students' test scores are up marginally especially in the lowest performing schools. A third of elementary schools' students in the district are reading at grade level based on test findings. The district stated the quality of teachers in the district must be improved; the district's goal is to transform the school system (Kumar, 2016). PD is crucial to teacher improvement, work, and student achievement.

The weekly PD sessions will exemplify the system of a PLC. The reading specialist will speak during one session, and as the facilitator, I will provide authentic classroom practice and time for reflections each week. The work will occur in a PLC format. According to Tam (2015), PLCs are planned to have teachers look at their practices closely, identify areas in need of improvement, be reflective of the new

techniques learned with other teachers, practice and apply the new learning in their classrooms, and to receive research-based strategies to support their instruction.

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

The role of the facilitator is to present the presentation and direct teachers in effective communication that will support the objectives of this PLC PD. The principal's role is to offer feedback and support the facilitator in attaining the necessary supplies needed to manage the PD at the school. The teachers' role in this PD is to attend all sessions and to engage energetically in the learning process to take away important information that will affect reading instruction. The teachers' role is to also present comments to the facilitator and implement the plan of action into their instructional practices and lessons.

### **Project Evaluation**

The workshop evaluation consists of a formative evaluation that all participants will complete. The teachers will have the opportunity to share feedback during short breaks throughout the training to evaluate the rate of the session (too short or too long). After the daily closure of the training, teachers will receive the formative evaluation to evaluate the usefulness of the daily presentation and make suggestions on how to improve future presentations. The evaluations will happen throughout the PD for feedback or concerns about the information delivered. After the last session of the training, teachers will be asked to provide comments or suggestions on the PD training using a summative evaluation form. The feedback or comments will help the facilitator to evaluate the project to assess its effectiveness in reaching the objectives of the seminar

and to improve its design (Fink, 2009; Sturko & Holyoke, 2009). The participants will place completed evaluations into the suggestion box. The results from the reflections could address ongoing PD planning. The use of a formative evaluation is necessary because as the facilitator, I will be searching for ideas and ways to improve implementation for future sessions (Haslam, 2010). The findings from the PD will be shared with the administrator, stakeholders, and teachers during a faculty meeting. The context of these evaluations will serve as resources for needed modifications.

### **Implications Including Social Change**

#### **Local Community**

This project addresses the issues that affect reading achievement of Grades 3 through 5 students. The concerns from participants in the case study reflected a need for meaningful staff development that would eliminate ineffective reading instruction and that would enhance student achievement in reading. Improving teachers' skills and understandings will allow a new empowerment in the mindset of all teachers who teach reading. Teachers have seen an in-depth change in the instructional expectations in reading since the change from the No Child Left Behind Act to CCSS. A PD segment on delivering effective reading instructional practices and strategies could facilitate teachers to learn from their colleagues in a trusting environment of collaboration.

Many will benefit from the staff development. Teachers will benefit from this PD by learning different ways to effectively implement research-based strategies and instructional practices. They will have their questions answered and they will see effective teachers in action. Students from Grades 3 through 5 will profit from this PD

because they will be provided with research-based reading techniques and receive effective instructional practices that will contribute to their achievement in reading. Closing the achievement gap in reading and writing will lead to a positive change at the study site for Grades 3 through 5 students. When teachers deliver effective instructional practices and strategies to students who are struggling to read texts in Grades 3 through 5, students will be more successful in reading and in school. The district stakeholders will be greatly influenced to implement this staff development in other schools if students' achievement scores rise after the implementation of the PD.

### **Reading Strategies for Professional Development (PLC Model)**

- Differentiated instruction
- CLIP
- Gradual Release
- Small and Whole Group Instruction/Building Comprehension Skills and Strategies
- Facilitating Meaningful Student Connections- Explicit Teacher Modeling- Scaffolding Instruction

### **Far-Reaching**

Teachers will begin to more effectively implement and share research-based strategies and deliver effective instructional practice to students in Grades 3 through 5. Students' achievement scores in reading and other areas will improve. Teachers will conduct additional PD sessions at the school to teach other teachers "how" to incorporate good reading practices. The PD has the potential to become part of the local district's PD

courses and to reach other school districts within the United States. As the achievement gap in reading begins to go from narrow to closed, students in Grades 3 through 5 will have multiple opportunities to teach their families and friends how to read. As a result of students becoming proficient in reading, they will be able to attend college. After completing a 2- or 4-year college degree, they will be on their way to a successful career with a good salary so they can give back to their communities and family.

### **Conclusion**

In this section, I outlined an inclusive PD based on data analysis and themes connected to research questions. I discussed the literature review, the implementation plan with barriers addressed, an evaluation procedure, and the implications for social change. In Section 4, I will analyze the project's strengths, limitations, scholarship, and impact on future research.

## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

### **Introduction**

In Section 1 of this case study, I stated the problem at the local level, which was that one local urban school in Tennessee had not met AYP in reading for the past 5 years in Grades 3 through 5. In the literature reviews, I found that much ineffectiveness in teachers' instructional practices and strategies in reading exists. The data from this study suggested that there is a need for a productive PD to help teachers deliver effective instructional practices and research-based strategies to improve students' reading performance.

I used a qualitative case study approach to examine the knowledge of 12 teachers and the reading specialist at the study site school. During weekly PLCs meetings, teachers across grade levels have collaborated on how they can improve reading performance for students in Grades 3 through 5 and implement multiple ways for delivering effective instructional practices and strategies in reading. Despite these efforts, students continue to not meet standards on achievement tests. A project was planned that addressed the needs discovered from the data collection. A two- page synopsis of this study and project will be shared with the principal and participants in the belief that they will be impassioned and interested in participating in a staff development training. The project plans will also be accessible in my dissertation for others to use as needed.

### **Project Strengths**

The first strength of this project study is that the PD program is generated based on teacher interviews and document data. The PD is designed to meet the specific needs

of the participants. The participants communicated a need for PD on how to deliver effective reading instruction as well as how to gain trust. Darling-Hammond and Rothman (2011) stated that, during the learning process, all participants should be actively engaged in the learning while sharing their experiences and beliefs with peers. The project will provide teachers with multiple ways to create a community and to deliver effective reading instruction. Teachers will disclose their beliefs and knowledge with their peers, and findings supported by the conceptual framework of Knowles et al. (2011) will be implemented. The school, community, stakeholders, and adult learner methods and strategies will be used to support teachers during this project. The topic of “Bridging the Gap in Reading Instruction” is important to the school district.

The guiding principles of Knowles’s model can be used to create improved learning outcomes for adults (Chan 2010; Holton, Wilson, & Bates 2009; Jodi 2011; Knowles et al., 2005 & Merriam 2004). The participants have numerous years of experience in teaching general education for Grades 3 through 5 at the school. The experiences of the participants will be discussed and shared during grade level PLCs meetings on how to deliver effective reading instruction and strategies. The PD training can be extended to middle school teachers. The teachers will provide background knowledge on how to deliver effective reading strategies and differentiate instruction for student success in reading.

The professional development sessions from the project will be conducted during weekly after school sessions so there will not be a need for the district to hire substitute teachers or provide compensation of time. Therefore, the district will not have to budget

for teachers to attend the PD because it will be during school hours. All materials teachers will need for the PLCs PD are located at the school. The 9-week training with 2-hour weekly sessions will be implemented after school for Grades 3 through 5.

### **Project Limitations**

The design for this project will be based on interviews collected from teachers who are currently teaching Grades 3 through 5 as well as the reading specialist, so it is somewhat limited in scope. There is a limit to how many stakeholders can participate in the training activities. Early childhood, middle, or high school teachers and parents are not involved in this project. There is only the facilitator and the reading specialist in the school to provide the training. A final limitation of this project is the budget cuts in the district. No funds from the district will be available to help with cost for materials.

### **Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations**

The goal of this project is to provide teachers with training pertinent to delivering effective reading instruction and teaching practices to improve students' reading performance. The data from the study disclosed that teachers in Grades 3 through 5 collaborated during PLCs meetings to discuss and plan effective instructional strategies and lessons for reading, but they still lacked professional training on how to deliver the instruction effectively for student achievement. The analysis of the data disclosed that teachers felt that effective reading instruction and research-based strategies depended on (a) delivery of explicit and systematic instructional practices to support students' outcomes in reading in the classrooms, (b) teaching practices or research-based strategies used to improve student reading levels, or (c) lack of prerequisite skills. This staff

development will focus on modeling how to implement specific strategies and is planned for after-school delivery.

Another limitation of this project is its limited scope. There is only one reading specialist and myself at the school to provide the training. It would be beneficial to provide the information from the project study during each grade-level meeting so other teachers from Grades 3 through 5 could train kindergarten through second-grade teachers, thus, expanding the number of people who are exposed to the materials.

The training received can provide new teachers with a summary of the collaboration process. To address the problem of budget cuts, teachers can be encouraged to take online PD related to areas of need and to watch videos of effective teachers from the links that I will email to them.

### **Scholarship**

The word scholarship has taken on extra meanings throughout this project. This meaning consists of an in-depth understanding of individuals' perceptions and beliefs and acquiring new knowledge. I perceived professional learning as something that is mandated at the local and state level. Teachers need to read research-based articles or journals so they can stay abreast of new information. This information will enhance their professional learning experiences and knowledge. Scholarship is a never-ending journey. During the research stage, implementing all the support that professors, family, friends, and colleagues can present to extend the scholarship is essential.

Obtaining a doctoral degree for the past few years, while still experiencing the new changes in the district, including closing schools and cuts in the budget, has

intensified my role as a scholar-practitioner. These events have helped me to have a special gratitude regarding my ability to reach my goals. The research process was tedious and stressful; sometimes I had 2 to 3 hours of sleep and prayed daily. Editing and revising the paper was tiresome at times and a long process.

However, I have learned how to write a scholarly research because of the coursework at Walden University and edits from my committee members and others. Interviewing the participants was the best part of this learning process because I was able to understand other teachers' perceptions better, which made me understand that I was not alone in this teaching and learning process.

As I was coding the themes, I was able to view how teachers communicated about the same strategies, frustrations, and ineffective instructional practices that I also experienced daily. I have experience teaching early childhood and upper elementary students. I feel that there needs to be a change in Grades 3 through 5 instructional strategies and teaching practices. New reading programs and intervention software are always being implemented in these grades.

### **Project Development**

Creating a project is time-consuming when considering the effectiveness of the project that is to be developed and the long hours of research. All Grades 3 through 5 teachers were required to implement the school district's recommended strategies and teaching practices that were aligned with the district guidelines, reading curriculum map, and CCSS. Teachers had to learn the contents of the standards and plan how to deliver effective instructional strategies for student achievement. After focusing on the interview

questions and participant responses, it was evident that the professional learning needed to include methods for teachers to collaborate. Receiving feedback from my chair, committee member, and university research reviewer played an essential role in helping me to organize a well-written paper. I derived my project from the themes, and the data and results guided the development of this project.

I designed a plan that would allow the teachers to collaborate with colleagues on their grade level while providing ongoing support to them for implementing the school district's reading strategies, lesson plans, and effective reading instructional practices. Based on data from participants and the reviewed research articles related to PD and professional learning, I decided that PLCs would best fit the needs of each teacher at the local school.

Planning and developing the PLCs' PD project to align with the standards of CCSS and the district guidelines for teacher excellence was a major task. I worked to include the significant components of meaningful PD aligned with my second literature review.

Changes in the way teachers deliver and model explicit instruction will benefit teachers and students. After attending previous workshops, I know how important it is to keep the audience's attention. The PD will include time for modeling the methods; teachers will be able to share and collaborate with colleagues. They will also implement the strategies into their classrooms from the training. When scheduling PD, one should consider the time, financial funds, and space accommodation.

The techniques I will use for evaluating the PD project will be goal-based and continual. The summative evaluation will be provided to participants to determine if the PD training met their learning goals. The formative evaluations will include a post-it-note parking lot chart for concerns and questions posed. Participants will complete exit slips at the end of each session and discussion. The summative evaluation form will be placed at the end of Appendix A for participant's feedback from the workshop.

### **Leadership and Change**

As an educator who is currently serving on the leadership committee and is grade chair member in one of the district's schools, leadership for me means taking charge and accepting challenges. Working on my project has been a learning experience and a long hard journey, during which I had to overcome many obstacles. I became conscious about attaining new skills and knowledge as well as becoming a critical thinker and writer.

Leaders at the local level need to allow teachers to plan PD within their grade levels to improve Grades 3 through 5 students' reading scores on state assessments. School leaders' support of teachers and making changes that will influence teachers' reading instructional practices and support student learning based on the state standards adopted by the district is important. Improvement in student learning may lead to changes in instructional practices in reading.

### **Analysis of Self as Scholar**

Conducting a qualitative case study has enhanced my research knowledge. I had to begin by learning the basics. For example, I learned how to distinguish between primary peer-reviewed sources and secondary sources and how to use Boolean search to

find current articles. I progressed to learning about different types of studies and choosing the type that best addressed the problem, which I had chosen to study. When I shared pertinent research information with the principal, grade level members, and other colleagues, I grew as a professional. Teachers who attend the same PD or participate in the same doctoral program come away with different knowledge or perceptions about the program. I believe that I have made outstanding progress as a scholar through my participation in this program. I learned that there are various problem-solving approaches that can be implemented to solve problems among colleagues. Through collaboration and teamwork, the teacher can find out what approach works best for the team.

As I was evaluating the information for this project, I learned that schools across the United States have similar issues and problems at the local and district levels. By reading a large amount of education literature, I learned many new strategies and ideas to enhance teaching and learning. This new knowledge allowed me to create a proposal, research study, and project that will give teachers a voice at the school and empower them to become better teachers.

As I was developing the study and project, I realized that the products from this process will cause changes at my school. The changes will result in improved teaching, learning, and student achievement. The level of professionalism at my school will be raised as a result of my work. A better learning environment will be created teachers and students. Last, I learned that for me to complete this project study, I needed guidance, prayers, willpower, and perseverance to embark on this long journey.

**Analysis of Self as Practitioner**

As a practitioner, I learned how to share my knowledge about a job-embedded PLC model using my research as the groundwork to model how to deliver effective instructional practices in the areas of reading. This project has given me new communication skills and experiences that helped me to grow as a researcher as well as a teacher. To become an expert at these jobs, I have had to discover new knowledge and test new research-based strategies.

There is a change in the way teachers plan now from the way they did in the past. When I think back to my third year of teaching, I met with colleagues during planning time 2 days a week to discuss assessments for the week. Now, the district has adopted a PLC meeting format for teachers to follow during planning time.

Based on my past and current experiences as grade level chairperson, I think teachers benefit from sharing expertise and reflection. Knowledge is power, and power is knowledge; when a group of knowledgeable people acts in unison, that effort outweighs the power of an individual. I have learned how to look beyond my beliefs and focus on the beliefs of others. I have learned to be a lifelong learner who reflects and grows improving my teaching practice daily.

**Analysis of Self as Project Development**

As a project developer, I have learned that there are many approaches and perspectives to the PD of skills and strategies on every grade level. I had to read and review the project to make sure the central concepts are understood. I have also learned that for the project to be effective and implemented successfully, I will need the support

from the faculty members and the principal. I have enjoyed creating a project study that will help Grades 3 through 5 teachers learn how to deliver effective research-based instructional strategies that will improve students' academic achievement in reading. A project developer must have a clear mind and be open to accepting others opinions and beliefs. I have learned that a project developer must reflect on both summative and formative evaluations and make changes as needed.

### **Reflection on the Importance of the Work**

As I reflected on the process of this research project, I felt overwhelmed and at times discouraged when I came across certain barriers. I learned how to overcome these enormous barriers. I kept pressing toward my ambitions and goals. I had to learn that procrastination is not an option and to understand that the hard work is part of me achieving my goal. Whenever I thought about straying away from my obligations, I could hear my chairperson's voice in my head saying, "You can play later but work as hard as you can now." I created a semester time-management schedule to follow to avoid additional impediments.

I have learned that self-determination and effective communication skills are important when creating any project of this enormity. On this journey, I have gained a greater understanding of professional growth. There are innumerable opportunities to improve professional learning by using different techniques. My self-reflection has motivated me to inspire others at the school. I can encourage other novice and veteran teachers to learn from each other while making sure that each has a fair chance to share and participate in the learning.

### **The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change**

Professional learning can support the culture of learning within the school. PD is important for teacher effectiveness because it helps teachers stay abreast on current research, attain and apply new knowledge and skills, and implement effective instructional practices for student success. Listening to teachers' perceptions and reading current research articles on the topic showed me that PD can be performed anytime. Teachers need PD training that is relevant to effective instructional practices, good first teaching, and research-based strategies that can be applied in the classrooms. The training will provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate with colleagues throughout the school on the effectiveness of implementing reading instructional practices and strategies. Collaboration and support among colleagues during the PD training will have a tremendous impact on teaching and learning, and most important, skills and practices learned in staff developments and implemented in the classroom can increase students learning and achievement. When teachers implement in-depth instruction to students, students will perform at higher levels. This project study can contribute to positive social change by providing teachers of Grades 3 through 5 with a PLC PD designed to enhance how these teachers deliver effective instructional practices in reading and research-based strategies and to improve student achievement. The implementation of a PLC of this source can provide teachers with knowledge and skills to improve students' reading skills, which prepares them for school success, college-readiness, and future careers.

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

Change happens, technology advances, and as a result, future research will lead to new information and data about effective instructional practices and strategies to improve students' reading achievement. Some ideas for future research related to reading achievement include more research on the use of technology to enhance reading skills in struggling readers and more brain research to help teachers better understand children with dyslexia or other reading disorders. Whatever the need, administrators at schools must provide teachers with support in their endeavors to learn and enhance their reading instruction.

In this study, teachers perceived that current staff development needed to be improved, and a PD was a cost effective answer to improving teaching and learning at this school. When teachers attend PD training, they need time to collaborate with other grade levels. Teachers should be given the opportunity to share and provide feedback on topics. Teachers can open up a new community for collaboration. Teachers gain an understanding of how to deliver effective instructional practices in reading and how to use research-based strategies during, before, and after a lesson to improve students' performance.

The district in the study site requires that all local schools have at least 60 hours of high-quality PD yearly. The project created for this study may be helpful to other school districts. I plan to collaborate with other schools in the district and provide PD training for teachers of Grades 3 through 5.

Once the PD has been implemented, future research should be conducted to determine the effectiveness of the PLC PD. This can be done by creating a survey of all the elected teachers asking how well they thought they could implement the strategies and the importance of learning each of the strategies. Another study could use a mixed-methods design to examine the impact of the PD implementation on the students' reading scores.

### **Conclusion**

Reading allows children the opportunity to learn and apply important skills needed throughout their school years and beyond. Teaching reading to struggling readers is a challenging job; therefore, teachers must have in-depth knowledge on how to deliver effective reading instruction. Although the project study has not been a simple task, the work, and implications have been far beyond gratifying. I developed a PD training based on participants' responses and perceptions.

The problem statement and rationale for the case study focused on the gap in instructional practices and strategies in reading. The resulting staff development project focuses on delivering effective reading instruction and practices to improve students' achievement in reading. I plan to present the project to administrators and the reading specialist at my school. My desires and dreams are that the school will implement the PD project in the future.

The study also focused on teachers' perceptions about the current district recommended strategies and the concerns of teachers because the lack of training in reading instruction. After researching this topic, I feel that the project will address the

problem and provide a professional learning opportunity for teachers in Grades 3 through 5 to enhance their current knowledge of delivering effective instructional practices and strategies to improve student growth in reading. There is a critical need to provide effective instructional practices in the areas of reading so that students will be successful in the classroom and the achievement gap in reading will be closed. This case study and planned staff development should bring participating schools closer to achieving this goal.

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## Appendix A: The Project

### **Bridging the Gaps in Reading Instruction to Improve Student Performance:**

#### **Professional Learning Communities**

#### **Professional Development Syllabus**

Title: Bridging the Gaps in Reading Instruction to Improve Student Performance:  
Professional Learning Communities

Length: 9 – 120 minute sessions

Location: Library Room in Media Center within School

1. PLC Description:  
The PD workshops teachers will be grouped into PLCs according to grade level being taught.
2. Course Prerequisites:  
Participants should be Grades 3-5 teachers and have attended the Literacy Academy. They need to bring laptops, ELA curriculum map, and notes to the meetings.
3. Learning Outcomes/Objectives
  - Ensure that all teachers develop the skills, knowledge and strategies to effectively implement curriculum and best instructional practices
  - Increase delivery of effective explicit instructional practices and assessments by discussing students' artifacts and assessments
  - Share experiences, research-based strategies, knowledge, skills.
  - Eliminate barriers so that learning is experienced by all students
  - Empower teacher leadership
  - Discuss the professional literature (Gradual Release, Explicit Instruction, and students and teachers' Resources)
4. PD Methodology  
The method for this PD will be in the PLC teams supported by slides and guidelines.
5. Materials:  
No textbook is required. A spacious and quiet area for the PLC sessions is needed. Chart paper, markers, post-it-notes, pens, Smartboard, computer projector, Slides, laptop, timer, sign-in sheet, district's lesson plan template, agenda, and video hand-outs.

6. Course Educational Resources:

DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2010). *Learning by doing: Handbook for professional communities at work*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.).  
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DuFour, R., & DuFour, R. (2012). *The school leader's guide to professional development: Communities at work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

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Annenberg Institutes for School Reform. (2004). Professional development strategies that improve instruction. Retrieved from <http://annenberginstitute.org/pdf/proflearning.pdf>

7. Websites/Activities:

Annenberg Learner: Engaging With Literature: A Video library Grades 3-5. <http://www.learner.org/libraries/engagingliterature/responding/>

Annenberg Learner: Differentiating Instruction Assignment  
<http://www.learner.org/workshops/readingk2/session6/assignments.html>

Vocabulary and Background Knowledge Frontloading (Part 1) – 4<sup>th</sup> Grade. <http://explicitinstruction.org/video-secondary-main/6-vocabulary-and-background-knowledge-frontloading-part-1-4th-grade/>

Comprehensive Literacy Improvement Plan: CLIP (2015). Destination 2025.

Retrieved

<http://www.scsk12.org/uf/memo/index.php?URLdatetime=2015-02-02>

8. Course dates and Times:

Once started, it will be once a week for two hours for 9 weeks after

school.

9. Course Requirements:

Each member will agree to an actively participate in the PLC group activities and follow PD norms.

10. Evaluation:

All participants will complete an exit slip after each session and an evaluation form at the end of the nine PLC sessions.

## **Professional Development Presentation**

### **Bridging the Gaps in Reading Instruction to Improve Student Performance A PLC Professional Development for Teachers**

The goals of the professional development series are as follows:

- Goal 1: Teachers will demonstrate knowledge of research-based and district recommended strategies (CLIP and Gradual Release) for implementing differentiation, and planning and delivery of explicit instructional practices in the area of reading.
- Goal 2: Teachers will use differentiation, explicit instruction, and student motivation into their rigorous ELA lesson planning.
- Goal 3: Teachers will collaborate on ways on how to increase reading performance for students in Grades 3-5 and to address lack of entry to educational resources for teachers and students.

### **Learning Outcomes**

During this PLC professional development series, teachers will:

- ✓ Explain what is differentiation and how it looks in a daily lesson and create rigorous lesson plans reflecting differentiated reading lesson based on district's ELA guidelines.
- ✓ Recognize the key components of explicit reading instruction and how to implement them into daily ELA lesson plans for Grades 3-5.
- ✓ Understand other issues that affect student knowledge.

### **Audience**

The main focus audience for this PLC professional development series will be Grades 3-5 teachers who work with struggling readers.

#### **Professional Development Norms**

- ✓ Be prompt
- ✓ Come prepared
- ✓ Work collaboratively with colleagues
- ✓ Understand it is okay to disagree
- ✓ Respect others' opinions
- ✓ Listen well
- ✓ Participate

#### **What is Professional Learning Communities?**

- ✓ Turn to your left elbow partner and discuss an answer to this question.

#### **Answer to the Question:**

- ✓ A professional learning community is characterized by the collaborative work of teachers.

#### **How Do We Learn as Educators?**

- ✓ Reading
- ✓ Hearing
- ✓ Seeing
- ✓ Both hearing and seeing
- ✓ Collaborating with others
- ✓ Personal Experiences
- ✓ As a result of Teaching

#### **Strategies to Build Strong PLCs**

- ✓ Differentiate Instruction
- ✓ Jigsaw
- ✓ Consulting Line
- ✓ Academic Controversy
- ✓ Give One/Get One
- ✓ Carousel Brainstorm

#### **Collaboration**

- ✓ Collaboration on reading instruction across the curriculum maps and school:
- ✓ Grade-level teams
- ✓ Grade-level teachers and reading specialist

- ✓ Across-grade levels

Do Now: Think Pair and Share

What is CLIP and “how” do you implement it in the classroom?

Turn to your right elbow partner and discuss answers to the questions.

### **Objectives**

Participants will

- ✓ Know the District’s vision for college and career readiness, including Destination 2025 and CLIP – TNCore standards for College and Career Readiness (CCR) and other subject areas
- ✓ Instructional shifts in Literacy and Math-Focus on improving good first teaching/Tier 1 (e.g., close reading of complex texts)
- ✓ Understand and be able to leverage district resources to support Destination 2025 and CLIP implementation
- ✓ Revised curriculum guides-CLIP
- ✓ Teachers’ Guide
- ✓ Demonstrate knowledge of the Gradual release model

### **CLIP- Comprehensive Literacy Improvement Plan**

CLIP is an effective plan requires the skillful use of data about student performance, literacy needs and expectations in the school and community, school capacity to support literacy development, current teaching practices, and effectiveness of the literacy program. Comprehensive Literacy Improvement Plan (CLIP) as a Road Map to Real Changes in Teaching and Learning. DLD2015SCSk12.org

### **Watch and Discuss Video of CLIP**

<http://cloud.swivl.com/v/a31ab213f4ec603a4bff18c6d57d365c>

### **CLIP AND CCR**

In CLIP and CCR-aligned literacy classrooms, all students engage with high quality, grade level texts and tasks (in Tier 1) and receive the differentiated scaffolds and support they need to do so (across tiers). The standards across the domains of literacy, reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language, are integrated to ensure all students are spending their time well and are ultimately prepared for college and career.

Note: In effective literacy instruction, decodable, leveled, and complex texts are purposefully selected and used to support specific learning objectives.

**Activity-** Participants will create a lesson plan among grade levels that will include the district’s recommended and research-based strategies, outside resources, and district’s guidelines allotted times for reading skills.

### **Overview of CLIP**

The CLIP is intended to provide teachers with information about key ideas and strategies to ensure that their students are prepared to meet the demands of the TNCore standards. Teachers and school staff are expected to seek out additional resources and supports as needed to ensure that literacy achievement increases significantly. An overview of the CLIP

for teachers and school-based staff. It is designed to ensure that all teachers understand our plan for ensuring equity in academic rigor across the District and explains our thinking about high-quality literacy instruction (including Response to Intervention) and how our supports for teachers (including the TEM evaluation system) will enable us to ensure that all students are prepared for college and career.

### **Other Resources**

This might include pulling resources from the Student Achievement Partners website or the TNCore website, attending targeted professional development after registering through MLP, or studying exemplar classroom videos from TeachScape or the Teaching the Core website. SCSk12.org

### **Next Steps**

Teacher implement lesson created in session and also bring students' artifacts from lessons and assessments.

### **References**

Clay, M. M. (2005). *Literacy lessons designed for individuals part two: Teaching procedures*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. (see Section 10, pages 99–118)

Comprehensive Literacy Improvement Plan: CLIP (2015). Destination 2025. Retrieved <http://www.scsk12.org/uf/memo/index.php?URLdatetime=2015-02-02>

**Resource:** <https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/differentiating-instruction>

**(Differentiated Instruction)  
Professional Development (PLC Model)**

**Norms**

**Protocols**

- Use Real Names
- Respect
- Be on Topic
- Contribution
  - Questions
  - Resources
  - Ideas
  - Reflecting
  - Connections
  - Wondering
  - Aha's- Insights

**What is Differentiation?**

- Differentiation means tailoring instruction to meet students' needs.
- Teachers differentiate content, process, products, or the learning environment,
- The use of ongoing assessment and flexible grouping makes this a successful approach to instruction.

**Building Teachers' Practices from Scientifically-Based Reading Research**

- ✓ Common understanding across the grades and across schools of the scope and sequence of skills/strategies, the district recommended strategies and teaching practices for instruction, consistent language and terminology across grade-levels.
- ✓ On-going collaborative professional development
- ✓ Reading specialist to model, observe, provide feedback on instruction for reflection on and refinement of practice.
- ✓ Use student assessment and test data to inform instructional decisions as grade level teams and across grades.

**Assessment Drives Collaboration**

Teachers can...

- ✓ Monitor the learning of students who are expected to acquire the same knowledge and skills.
- ✓ Use the same instrument/process for assessing the quality of student work.
- ✓ Gauge the alignment of the curriculum and the effectiveness of their instruction.

**Delivery of Effective Explicit Instructional Practices in the Area of Reading Objectives:**

Participants will:

- ✓ Understand some of the components of a Literacy Squared lesson.
- ✓ Have tools to include higher level questions in planning a rigorous lesson that is aligned with the district's ELA pacing guides.
- ✓ Understand the process of and the importance of using the gradual release responsibility.

### **How Do We Learn?**

- Think about something you learned to do?
- Why did you want to learn it?
- How did you learn it?
- How did you know you learned it?
- **Turn to a partner on your left and discuss the answers to questions.**

### **Building Comprehension**

- ✓ As you watch the video, consider the following questions:
- ✓ What do good readers do?
- ✓ What can teachers do to develop comprehension?
- ✓ What can teachers do to help struggling readers?

### **Annenberg Foundation (Videos)**

- ✓ <https://www.learner.org/workshops/teachreading35/session3/sec2p2.html>
- ✓ [https://www.learner.org/workshops/teachreading35/pdf/Dev\\_Reading\\_Comprehension.pdf](https://www.learner.org/workshops/teachreading35/pdf/Dev_Reading_Comprehension.pdf)

Video #1 discuss how to shift the cognitive load to learners and teachers will be asked how these strategies can be used in planning and delivering explicit instructional practices in reading.

### **Activity (Small groups)**

- ✓ In this activity, teacher will choose two standards and plan out how they can include task on the table, small group activities, and differentiate workstations to support students' reading skills.

### **References**

- Barton, J., and D. M. Sawyer (2003). "Our Students Are Ready for This: Comprehension Instruction in the Elementary School." *The Reading Teacher* 57(7), 334-347.
- Block, C. C., and M. Pressley (2002). *Comprehension Instruction: Research-Based Best Practices*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Cazden, C. (2003). *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Clark, K. F., and M. F. Graves (2005). "Scaffolding Students' Comprehension of Text." *The Reading Teacher* 58, 570-580.

Resource: Video #1 <https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/professional-development-for-teachers>

Video # 2 <https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/differentiating-instruction>

### 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting

**Date:**

**120- Minute session:**

Topic: Overview of CLIP

Objective: Promote literacy development K-12 and in all content areas

Discussion: How can CLIP improve reading in Grades 3-5?

Task	Materials	Activity	Time Allotted	Outcomes
Go over Norms	Agenda, computer, lesson plan template, Presentation hand-outs		5 min	Teachers will learn how to use CLIP in their classrooms.
Meet and Greet	Reflection notebooks, pens	Reflection about how CLIP is used in the classroom	20 min	Teachers will share knowledge about CLIP.
Topic: Introduction of CLIP	Presentation Slides, laptop, Smartboard,	Role Play CLIP in a classroom	20 minutes	Look at key components for effective implementation of CLIP, small group instruction and complex text
Discussion of topic: CLIP	Reading/TNReady	Video Clip/Activity	30 min	Role-Play of strategies presented by after-school students
Create lesson using district template			30 min	Create an evaluation tool aligned with CLIP
Wrap up and discuss next steps session	Notes	Role-Play	15 min	Teachers collaborate to plan reading lesson implementing CLIP.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting

**Date:**

**120- Minute session:**

Topic: Gradual Release in Reading

Objective: Promote literacy development K-12 and in all content areas

Discussion: How can Gradual Release be implemented in reading and writing across the disciplines positively that will improve students' achievement?

Task	Materials	Activity	Time Allotted	Outcomes
Go over Norms	Presentation and activity hand-outs, name tags,	Ice Breaker	2 min	Teachers
Review Week 1 assignment	Reflection notebooks		15 min	Teachers will share and present artifacts lesson.
Topic: Introduction	Presentation Slides: CLIP	Pair with PLC teams to chart and explain how to use CLIP	10 minutes	Teachers able to model and use CLIP among grade levels.
Discussion of topic: Gradual Release in Small group	Laptop, Reading passages, Smartboard	Activity: teachers plan out additional questions to ask during grade level meetings.	20	Teachers collaborative with teams to align CLIP to students' assessments and learning.
Wrap up and discuss next steps session	Articles, paper, pens,	Discussion Articles	10	Create a Lesson Plan to implement gradual release in reading and writing from the two articles.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting

**Date:**

**120- Minute session:**

Topic: Implementing Gradual Release during Guided Reading

Objective: Promote literacy development K-12 and in all content areas

Discussion: Why is it important to implement gradual release during small group?

Task	Materials	Activity	Time Allotted	Outcomes
Go over Norms	Agenda, computer, lesson plan template, Presentation hand-outs		5 min	Teachers will use gradual release in classrooms.
Meet and Greet			20 min	Teachers will write a reflection of what guided reading looks like in a classroom using gradual release model.
Topic: Introduction	Presentation Slides Guided Reading Using Gradual release	Read	20 minutes	Look at key components for effective implementation of small group instruction and complex text
Discussion of topic: Guided Reading	Reading: Assign teachers chunked reading selections	Video Clip/Activity  Purposeful instruction: Mixing up the "I," "We," and "You."	30 min	Roundtable Discussion on Reflections from the video
Create lesson using district template			30 min	Create a list of their students and match strategies targeting how to implement instructional practices for that particular student.
Wrap up and discuss next steps session	Notes	Role-Play	15 min	Teachers collaborate among grade levels to plan lessons.

### 4<sup>th</sup> Meeting

**Date:**

**120- Minute session:**

Topic: Differentiation Instruction and Research-based Strategies to Improve Reading Achievement

Objective: Teachers will demonstrate knowledge of research-based to deliver effective instructional practices to improve reading achievement for students in Grades 3-5.

Discussion: How can I implement research-based strategies to differentiate instruction in the classroom?

Task	Materials	Activity	Time Allotted	Outcomes
Go over Norms	Agenda, computer, lesson plan template, Presentation hand-outs		5 min	Teachers will plan differentiate instruction lessons for Grades 3-5.
Meet and Greet	Reflection notebooks, pens	Reflection – Reflect on how do you differentiate instruction in your classrooms?	20 min	Teachers will share knowledge about using differentiated instruction in the classroom.
Present Students' Artifacts	Presentation Slides Marzano Research-based Strategies to improve reading skills	Read Passage from Flexible Grouping for Literacy in the Elementary Grades.	20 minutes	Look at the effectiveness of flexible grouping in literacy.
Discussion of topic: Research-based Strategies	Reading/Research-based strategies to implement differentiate instruction in whole and small groups.	Activity Create a list of research-based websites to use among grade levels.	30 min	Teachers will use online research-based strategies in classrooms.
Wrap up and discuss next steps session	Notes	Evaluation	30 min	Teachers will demonstrate and plan differentiation in their classrooms.

**5<sup>th</sup> Meeting****Date:****120- Minute session:**

Topic: Unpack/Analyze District's Guidelines, Reading Curriculum, and CCSS

Objective: Teachers will demonstrate knowledge of planning and delivering effective instructional practices based on district's guidelines, CCSS, and reading curriculum.

Discussion: How can I plan effective lessons based on the district's guideline, reading curriculum, and CCSS?

Task	Materials	Activity	Time Allotted	Outcomes
Go over Norms	Housekeeping Items Addressed		5 min	Teachers to review class syllable
Meet and Greet	Agenda, computer, copy of district's guidelines and reading curriculum, Presentation hand-outs	Parking Lot- Teachers will write questions on post-it note and place on board.	20 min	Share one thing expected to learn from the PLC PD
Present Students' Artifacts form last session.	Presentation Slides: District's Guidelines for Literacy	Turn/Talk/List on Chart Paper	20 minutes	Allow for discussion
Discussion of topic: District's Guidelines and Reading Curriculum	Read Passage entitled "Revised Publishers Criteria for the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy, Grades K-2" by David Coleman and Susan Pimentel.	Activity Chose one standard and plan how to align to curriculum and district guidelines in reading.	30 min	Question for Discussion: Do you about integrated curriculum and the district guidelines?
Wrap up and discuss next steps session	Wrap up, reflection, evaluation	Discuss action plan to present on next meeting	30 min	Teachers create a lesson to implement CCSS, reading curriculum, and district's guidelines.

## 6<sup>th</sup> Meeting

**Date:**

**120- Minute session:**

Topic: Delivering Effective Reading Instruction Using *Journeys*

Objective: Teachers will demonstrate knowledge of research-based to deliver effective instructional practices to improve reading achievement for students in Grades 3-5.

Discussion: How can I implement research-based strategies to differentiate instruction for Grades 3-5?

Task	Materials	Activity	Time Allotted	Outcomes
Go over Norms	Agenda, computer, lesson plan template, Presentation hand-outs		5 min	Teacher acquire new knowledge in how to deliver effective instructional practices.
Meet and Greet	Reflection notebook, pens, pencils	Reflection on how to plan small and whole group instruction using <i>Journeys</i>	20 min	Teachers will Turn/Share/Discuss Reflections
Present Students' Artifacts	PowerPoint Presentation, role-play, students' artifacts, model effective reading lessons	Presentation of each grade-level lessons and assessments	20 minutes	Teachers will be able to ask question from presentations.
Discussion of topic: <i>Journeys</i>	PowerPoint Slides The shift in reading using Journeys and CCSS.	Activity: Read the passage From <i>Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement</i>	30 min	<b>Create a chart to explain:</b> What do you notice about how Journeys and the CCSS/RS addresses the order and depth of the reading foundational skills?
Wrap up and discuss next steps session	Notes	Evaluation (Exit Ticket)	30 min	Teachers will share their learning.

## 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting

**Date:**

**120- Minute session:**

Topic: Effective Instructional Practices in Reading

Objective: Teachers will incorporate reading instruction into their lesson planning for Grades 3-5.

Discussion: How could the content or instructional reading practices and strategies be modified so that the student can learn what was intended?

Task	Materials	Activity	Time Allotted	Outcomes
Go over Norms	Agenda, computer, lesson plan template, Presentation hand-outs		5 min	Teachers prepared for PLC PD to acquire new knowledge
Meet and Greet	Reflection  Notebook	-Reflect on why is it important to plan effective instructional lessons?	20 min	Teachers will share knowledge about the effectiveness of planning.
Present Students' Artifacts	Laptop, Smartboard, PowerPoint, hand-outs, role-play, and charts	Each grade level present and share action plan from last meeting.	20 minutes	Teachers will be able to take new knowledge and use in classrooms.
Discussion of topic: Research-based Strategies	PowerPoint Presentation on district's recommended strategies.	Activity  Role Play the district recommended strategies.	30 min	Teachers take strategies and apply in classroom daily.
Wrap up and discuss next steps session	Notes, reading curriculum map, district guidelines, CCSS, chart paper, evaluation	Evaluation	30 min	Teachers collaborate with PLC members to plan action plan for a reading lesson.

## 8<sup>th</sup> Meeting

**Date:**

**120- Minute session:**

Topic: Delivery of Effective Instructional Practices and Research-based Strategies in Reading

Objective: Teachers will identify the components of explicit instructional practices and research-based strategies and incorporate them into their daily reading lesson plans.

Discussion: How can I determine which research-based strategies is effective for all students?

Task	Materials	Activity	Time Allotted	Outcomes
Go over Norms	Agenda, computer, lesson plan template, Presentation hand-outs		5 min	Teachers will be able to acquire new knowledge to implement in their classrooms.
Meet and Greet	Reflection notebooks, pens	Reflect on how to deliver explicit instructional practices to improve reading scores.	20 min	Teachers will views on explicit instruction on their grade levels and share one piece of information from their journal with peers.
Each Grade level Present a Lesson in collaborative groups.	Smartboard, computer, chart paper, markers	Share out example lessons and assessments.	20 minutes	Grade level teams will provide feedback.
Discussion of topic: Vocabulary and Background Knowledge Frontloading (Part 1) – 4 <sup>th</sup> Grade. <a href="http://explicitinstruction.org/video-secondary-main/6-vocabulary-and-background-knowledge-frontloading-part-1-4th-grade/">http://explicitinstruction.org/video-secondary-main/6-vocabulary-and-background-knowledge-frontloading-part-1-4th-grade/</a>	Smartboard, laptop, paper, pencil, Parking lot	Video Clip: Share and chart observations with peers.	30 min	Teachers will be able to share responses with colleagues.
Wrap up and discuss next steps session	Notes		30 min	Teachers work in collaborative teams.

## 9<sup>th</sup> Meeting

**Date:**

**120- Minute session:**

Topic: Differentiation Instruction and Research-based Strategies to Improve Reading Achievement

Objective: Teachers will demonstrate knowledge of research-based to deliver effective instructional practices to improve reading achievement for students in Grades 3-5.

Discussion: How can I implement research-based strategies to differentiate instruction in the classroom?

Task	Materials	Activity	Time Allotted	Outcomes
Go over Norms	Agenda, computer, lesson plan template, Presentation hand-outs	Ice Breaker Pin the Tail on the best effective research-based strategies for each grade level.	5 min	Teachers will focus on how to deliver effective instructional practices and motivate students during the learning process.
Meet and Greet	Reflection notebooks, pens	Reflect about how can I motivate students to learn reading skills?	20 min	Teachers will share their experiences about how they motivate students to learn.
Present Students' Artifacts	Read Passage from Flexible Grouping for Literacy in the Elementary Grades.	Activity: Turn/Talk/Share information from article.	20 minutes	Among grade levels, teachers will examine student work sample from previous lesson to determine students' reading ability.
Reading Progress	IStation data (grades 3-5), computer, Smartboard	Teacher will analyze reading data from IStation.	30 min	Teachers share student's progress and next steps.
Wrap up and discuss next steps session	Notes	Evaluation  (Formative)	30 min	Teachers will demonstrate differentiation in their classrooms.

**Evaluation of Professional Learning Community Experience**

- 1) After each session did you feel prepared enough that you went back to your classroom and tried the reading strategy covered? Share an example please.
- 2) Did you observe any examples of students learning when you were trying the reading strategies? Share an example please.
- 3) Was there enough modeling of the reading strategy?
- 4) Were you prepared enough to do the role playing activity in a serious way?
- 5) Was there enough role playing where you got to practice the reading strategy?
- 6) Were you able to implement differentiated instruction in your classroom?
- 7) Did the professional development format and structure facilitate your learning?
- 8) What did you like most about this training?
- 9) How do you hope to change your teaching and instruction practices as a result of this session?
- 10) What aspects of the training could be improved?

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

Interview performed by: Barbara Joyner

Teacher Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher Interviewee Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Start Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview End Time: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What current district approved reading strategies are you implementing?
2. Based on your knowledge, what currently used reading strategies are effective for Grades 3-5 students?
3. What does the district offer teachers that will enhance their knowledge of the current reading instruction strategies?
4. What PD training or in-service training in reading do you believe is needed?
5. How do PLC meetings support the strategies and teaching practices implemented in the classrooms?
6. What challenges have you faced when implementing the recommended strategies?
7. What are your plans to overcome these challenges?
8. What is your perception regarding adequate improvement in students' performance in reading?
9. What are your personal experiences regarding the improvement in reading for your students' achievement in Grades 3-5?
10. How do you differentiate instruction in reading?
11. How would you know if new research-based reading strategies were working or not?
12. How can teachers be encouraged to implement the current, district-recommended teaching strategies in reading?

13. What are the experiences and challenges of elementary reading specialists in implementing reading?

In addition, for each question the following probes will be used as appropriate

(Merriam, 2009, p.101):

- How do you feel about this situation?”
- What do you mean about certain teaching practices in the suburban schools?
- I am not sure if I understand about your experiences about the district guidelines for District Guidelines.
- Would you explain that in-depth?
- What were your thoughts at that time?
- Give me an example of one of your best research-based strategies.
- Tell me more about your relationship with your colleagues.”
- Take me through your teaching experience.
- Thank you for all that valuable information, Is there anything else you’d like to add before we end?”

Thank you for participating in this interview. I appreciate your support and time.

Your participation will remain confidential. Once the interview has been

transcribed, you will be provided with a copy of the interview to verify validity.

## Appendix C: Member Checking Form

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for participating in the interview. Attached you will find a copy of the transcript of the interview. Please review the attached interview transcript. If you see changes or additions that need to be made, highlight those in yellow and make notes of your changes in the margins. Return the corrected transcript to me by my Walden e-mail within one week. If no changes are needed, you do not need to return the transcript, and I will assume that you agree with my copy. Please contact me if you have questions or additional information.

Thank you again for participating in the study.

Sincerely,

Barbara Joyner

Appendix D: Professional Learning Community and Elementary School



Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Staff Members in Attendance:

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Data:

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Strengths:

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Areas of need:

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Action Plan for next month

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How does this tie into our School Improvement Plan (SIP)?

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Reflections (curriculum/strategies/materials):

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## *ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS GUIDELINES FOR INSTRUCTION*

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### *PURPOSE*

At the beginning of a new school year, students are anticipating 180 days of instruction that provides rigorous learning opportunities across the curriculum. Instructional delivery of the written curriculum is key to guaranteeing that each student is engaged in learning that will result in mastery of the current state standards as they transition to the common core standards. Equitable access to all parts of the curriculum should not be contingent upon which school, or classroom within a school, a student is assigned. The guidance in this document is intended to support access and rigor that is consistent across the district, classroom by classroom.

The SCS Guidelines for Instruction outlines the general instructional expectations of each content area. There are references to planning, instructional time, instructional sequences, high impact strategies and resources for each part of the curriculum. Project-based learning, interventions, textbooks, assessments, instructional technology and vocabulary development are also addressed across the curriculum.

### *A WORD ABOUT PLANNING FOR INSTRUCTION*

As the district moves closer to the full implementation of the common core standards, the role of instructional planning will become even more critical. Instructional lessons and units must be carefully designed to promote deeper understanding of content that prepares students for the increasing challenges of college and careers. Using SCS Curriculum Maps is absolutely necessary in this process. In these curriculum frameworks, teachers can determine the pacing of the content and skills to be taught and review the practices, assessments, learning outcomes, and resources associated with them. It is expected that teachers will access the Curriculum maps for their course and/or grade level through the Curriculum and Instruction website as they develop their instructional plans.

The steps in instructional planning have been made clear in the new SCS Teaching Frameworks and Rubrics. Step number one is to begin with the students in mind: know students' levels of performance, their background, interests, and specific learning needs. This is followed by establishing measurable achievement goals for individual students and the class as a whole. At this point, standards-based instructional plans are designed or adapted using the SCS Curriculum Maps as a guide for the pacing of the content and skills in grade- or course-level standards. Instructional plans, at a minimum, should include: "formative and summative assessments that measure student mastery of standards, lesson objectives aligned to the content standards and connected to prior learning, and instructional strategies and activities aimed at bringing students to meeting the lesson objectives." The instructional strategies must comport to the expectations of the "differentiating instructional strategies" outlined in the SCS Teacher Evaluation Rubric. The Curriculum Maps contain many examples of the instructional practices that are aligned to the content and skills upon which teachers will base their lesson objectives.

*ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS GUIDELINES FOR INSTRUCTION*

**ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS**

<b>Planning</b>	Content and Pacing based on ELA Curriculum Map, Pacing Guide, and PARCC Planning Guide
<b>Minimum Instructional Time, K-2</b>	150 Minutes, total; 90 minutes of uninterrupted Reading instruction
<b>Minimum Instructional Time, 3-5</b>	120 minutes, total; Reading and Writing should be integrated and, whenever possible, taught by the same teacher
<b>Structure of Lesson Delivery Objective Whole Group Small Group/Independent Work Closure</b>	See following pages
<b>High Impact Strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing exemplars of high quality work</li> <li>• Modeling/thinking aloud</li> <li>• Higher-order questioning</li> <li>• Flexible grouping to differentiate instruction</li> <li>• Frequent checking for understanding</li> <li>• Scaffolding</li> <li>• Writing in response to reading</li> </ul>
<b>Resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Common Core Exemplars from Appendix B</li> <li>• Reading Street basal</li> <li>• Content area textbooks</li> <li>• Trade books (literature and connected to content area studies)</li> <li>• Decodable readers (K-2)</li> <li>• Newspapers, magazines</li> <li>• Articles from the Tennessee Electronic Library (TEL)</li> <li>• Electronic texts</li> </ul>
<b>Interventions</b>	<p><b>Tier II</b> 90 minutes of computer-assisted instruction (3 x week) plus 60 minutes small group targeted support (2 x week)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• iStation (K-3, all schools; selected schools, 4-5)</li> <li>• Reading Plus (4-5, selected schools)</li> </ul> <p><b>Tier III</b> 60 minutes Computer Assisted Intervention weekly (2 x week); 90 minutes small group targeted support weekly (3 x week)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• iStation (K-3, all schools; selected schools, 4-5)</li> <li>• Reading Plus (4-5, selected schools)</li> </ul>