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# Teachers' Perceptions of the Reading Achievement Gap Between High-Achieving Students and Below-Basic Students

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Walden University  
2015

Abstract

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by

Helen Iaconelli

MS, Nova Southeastern University, 2003

BA, Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, 2000

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

Walden University

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## Abstract

Atlantic Avenue Elementary School (AAES) experienced reading achievement gaps between high-performing students and below-basic students within the school reading curriculum and balanced literacy framework. Vygotsky's theories of scaffolding and zone of proximal development served as the framework guiding this project, which used a qualitative case study design to explore reading teachers' perceptions of the ways in which they were addressing this reading achievement gap. Individual interviews, classroom observations, and lesson plans were the sources of the qualitative data collected from 6 reading teachers. The data were coded manually using emerging and constant-comparative strategies to identify common themes. The themes that emerged from the findings were the need for (a) balanced literacy instruction, (b) reading instruction to be taught at individual ability levels, (c) enrichment of students' background knowledge, (d) meaningful reading assessments to drive instruction, and (e) sustainable and informative professional development (PD). A teacher-informed PD plan was developed in the form of a professional learning community. The potential positive social impact of success of this PD at AAES could benefit similar schools in the district, state, and nation.

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## Dedication

I dedicate my doctoral journey and study to my husband, Michael, who is the love of my life, my soul mate, and my best friend. I extend my overwhelming feelings of gratitude to you for your strength, patience, love, and belief that I could accomplish this goal. Despite all of the obstacles, you were steadfast in supporting me through the difficult times and celebrating my achievements.

To my amazing sons, Michael, Gregory, and Anthony, thank you for standing next to me and believing in me throughout this long journey. Thank you for the hugs, help, and respect for the intensity in this venture. Thank you to Gregory's wife, Lucy, who joined in with my son's support. Thank you for Dominic, my grandson, who stole my heart and made me laugh and smile when the days were tough. I'm looking forward to meeting your baby brother or sister soon.

I dedicate this study to the dear friends, family members, and colleagues who supported me without hesitation throughout this journey. Your words of encouragement, proofreading efforts, debates, encouragement, and zip lining meant more to me than you probably will ever know. I also dedicate this study to the countless teachers in the world who have answered their call in life, who continue to not give up on their students and who do not conform to practices that are ineffective. You are paving the way for young people.

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## Section 1: The Problem

### Introduction

Atlantic Avenue Elementary School (AAES), an elementary school on the East Coast of the United States, has a student population from Kindergarten to Grade 8. During the 2012-2013 school year and continuing through the 2013-2014 school year, this school was added to the governor's reform list of schools in need of improvement for failing to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) milestones. Adequate yearly progress was developed by the U.S. Department of Education (USDoE, 2009) as a way to score a school's achievement. The concept was originally developed under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

Regional achievement centers (RACs) were formed by the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDoE, 2013) to monitor and guide these at-risk schools. On this reform list are three levels of monitoring. The lowest and most severe ranking is that of *priority school*, where three of every 10 students score only proficient on the state test. The highest ranking is that of *reward school*, meaning that the school's performance is improving and closing achievement gaps. Atlantic Avenue Elementary School is in the middle, having a rank of *focus school*, meaning that it is struggling to close a large gap between high-performing students and below-basic students (NJDoE, 2013). The intention of RAC was to raise the state test scores of below-basic students by 50% over the next 6 years.

The primary focus of the NJDoE's RAC team members specifically assigned to AAES was to close this achievement gap between high-achieving readers and below-

basic readers. When AAES students' state language art scores were compared, a large achievement gap in language arts between these two cohorts of readers became evident. The Teachers' perceptions of the reading curriculum and the instructional strategies used to deliver the curriculum content could help identify reasons for the reading achievement gap at AAES. An effective reading curriculum, along with equally effective teaching strategies, can have a very positive impact on students at high-poverty schools (Slavin, Lake, Chambers, Cheung, & Davis, 2010).

The reading curriculum at AAES follows a balanced literacy framework that encompasses reading, writing, and word study. The basic philosophy of the curriculum and the framework is to meet the needs of all students and help them to develop a love of reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). This balanced literacy curriculum and framework replaced a reading curriculum that followed an anthology approach, meaning that all students in a class would follow a one-level story, and the teacher would present prepared lessons from the teacher's manual. In contrast, the anthology approach is nonpersonalized and utilizes direct instruction.

The anthology approach might not meet the needs of all of the students at their individual reading levels. Students should be taught at their current levels of reading proficiency, with the goal of gradually moving students toward grade level. The reading curriculum and framework at AAES closely resemble Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist approach that requires teachers to help students to achieve mastery. The students receive support according to their zone of proximal development (ZPD), with the intention being the gradual release of control from the teachers to the students. The reading curriculum

and framework at AAES require teachers to supplement instruction so that students can master one reading level before advancing to the next level.

A common practice in this reading curriculum framework is guided reading, that is, individual reading material is placed on a gradient of text complexity (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001), allowing students to read at their own ability levels. The teachers choose specific books based upon the students' reading levels and needs, and they create lessons that are tailored in direct correlation to students' reading levels. Teachers receive extensive training in their first year in use of the reading curriculum and framework and then attend ongoing sessions the following years in order to deliver effective instructions. However, despite this training, the outcome has not been successful or productive because students are not reaching a proficiency level in reading. In this study, I focused on the reading teachers' perceptions of the reading achievement gap in AAES's reading curriculum and framework in order to develop a professional development (PD) workshop to help the teachers to use the school's reading curriculum, which adheres to a balanced literacy framework, more effectively.

Despite 10 years of teacher training and implementation of the balanced literacy curriculum and framework at AAES, the school's scores still have not met the state's AYP (NJDoE, 2011). The school continues to have a significant number of students who are not proficient in reading (NJDoE, 2011). If the achievement gap in reading is not addressed early in the primary grades, struggling readers will fall further behind (Shaywitz, 2003), thus widening the gap between high-achieving readers and students who are struggling to read. An achievement gap becomes evident when the results of

students' assessments identify a significant difference between the scores of high-achieving students and students with below-basic proficiency (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011a).

Atlantic Avenue Elementary School is a Title 1 inner-city school. The students at AAES commonly experience poverty, violence, ongoing medical needs, and crowded living conditions. Many of the parents of these students are employed by businesses that are open 24 hours a day, so their work schedules often conflict with family time and obligations. Many students are left alone or spend time in the care of other family members or friends. Students might not see their parents for days at a time, resulting in lost nurturing family time and valuable conversations. Students who grow up in poverty, chronic noise, violence, or turmoil can experience chronic stress that can increase the changes of emotional disorders such as anxiety and fear, resulting in impaired cognitive skills (Stromberg, 2013).

Marzano (2004) stated that students' lack of background knowledge and lack of exposure to the printed word can impede their reading ability. Students' lack of time spent with their parents also can contribute to a deficit in their basic background knowledge at AAES. These variables can have a negative impact on learning and can be one of the reasons for the gap between high-achieving and below-basic readers.

Deciphering the reasons for the reading achievement gap at AAES required that I considered all of the possible variables affecting the students' lives. Although it is not the role of AAES to solve students' various medical problems resulting from poverty, improve their crowded living situations, prevent violence from happening in the

neighborhood, or amend parents' work schedules, it is the school's role to provide students with a safe learning atmosphere; however, the school exhausts many resources in this effort to aid its students and their families. As best it can, AAES tries to provide students and their families with medical treatment and supplies, food, shelter, and clothes. Atlantic Avenue Elementary School also offers students after-school academic enrichment classes, sports, and clubs that provide them with a hot dinner. In addition, AAES provides parents with educational support and classes on parenting, health, finance, citizenship, and English language skills.

Learning to read requires a systematic building of one skill on another. Reading has five components: phonemic awareness; phonics; vocabulary; reading fluency, including oral reading skills; and reading comprehension (Birsh, 2005). Learning to read is difficult (Adams, 1990). The National Reading Panel (NRP) report (as cited in National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000) agreed on the components of reading, but over the years, disagreement over the method of teaching reading has arisen.

### **Definition of the Problem**

The problem at AAES is twofold. Atlantic Avenue Elementary School has not met AYP in language arts, so a reading achievement gap has developed between high-achieving and below-basic students (NJDoE, 2011). Atlantic Avenue Elementary School AYP is based upon state assessment scores, a tool used by the federal government to measure progress in closing the achievement gap (NJDoE, 2011). The state wants the achievement gap to close and is giving the school 6 years to achieve this goal. The focus

of my study was to obtain the reading teachers' perceptions for the reading achievement gap between the high-achieving and below-basic students in AAES within their reading curriculum and framework.

The widening achievement gap in reading at AAES has raised concerns about instructional strategies and curriculum content. For the last 10 years, AAES has implemented a new reading curriculum and a balanced literacy framework, but at the same time, the federal government mandated that AAES implement its Reading First program. Although the Reading First program and AAES's reading curriculum and balanced literacy framework recognized the same five basic components of reading, they disagreed on the organization, materials, and delivery of instruction. For example, Reading First constricted instruction in phonics, the decoding of words, and reading fluency, whereas the curriculum and balanced literacy framework were very fluid (Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman, 2007). These two programs conflicted, and the school's own curriculum became splintered, resulting in a curriculum gap within the school as well as other schools across the state that were in the same predicament. However, the Reading First program has since been discontinued in schools, so AAES began to implement its reading curriculum and balanced literacy framework unfettered.

Inside every classroom are countless possibilities for learning that are restricted only by the extent of a teacher's understanding and implementation of teaching reading within the curriculum and the balanced literacy framework. Atlantic Avenue Elementary School reading curriculum and framework are based upon individual students' needs and each teacher's ability to teach effectively. However, all of the changes have influenced



AAES reading teachers' understanding of the curriculum and framework, making implementation and delivery different from classroom to classroom. Having professional dialogues among the teachers at AAES about reading instructions will help them to ensure the future success of their students.

Reading is a basic skill that students need so that they can learn other subjects (Allington, 2002). Specific to the below-basic level group of readers, reading skills that are not proficient impede learning in other subject areas. In the near future, at this school as well as schools across the United States, state assessments are going to be replaced by national assessments that will integrate all subjects such as science and social studies into nonfiction reading passages (Common Core State Standards Initiatives [CCSSI], 2012). This process could mean that nonfiction texts will encompass science and social studies topics. Therefore, in order for students across the country to be successful, they need to be proficient readers who are knowledgeable in all content areas. Another benefit of having proficient readers is that AAES would then move from being a focus school to becoming a reward school.

### **Problem Rationale**

Nationally, achievement gaps have been studied in depth. Researchers' answers to the causes have appeared to be as wide as the gaps themselves. Teaching practices, socioeconomic status (SES), and racial issues have been the most common causes discussed. It is common for students leaving Grade 8 without the skills that they need to succeed in high school; one of these skills is reading competency. According to the *Nation's Report Card* (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2009), only

32% of first-year high school students were reading at a proficient level as of 2009. If the lack of proficiency continues, students could become high school dropouts (Alliance for Excellent Education [AEE], 2011) because they will not have the literacy skills to obtain jobs that will sustain households. Reading is essential to being functioning and contributing members of society.

Many jobs in the United States require that workers be able to read, understand, and response to a variety of communication modes (AEE, 2011). Having proficient reading skills can build self-confidence, creativity, and imagination. It also can contribute to being effective problem solvers and strong communicators. Many day-to-day activities rely heavily on reading, including understanding road signs and warning signs while driving, reading various types of maps, and using the Internet (Djikic, Oatley, & Moldoveanu, 2013). It is possible that students who are struggling will drop out prior to graduating from high school, thus precluding any thoughts of entering a trade school, pursuing a military career, or obtaining a college degree. It is important to address the literacy needs of struggling students early (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010).

The reading achievement gap at AAES is not exceptional, and it gave me the unique opportunity to understand the causes of the gap in students' success. The students have diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, but the poverty rate is consistent throughout the student population. At AAES, more than 90% of students are enrolled in the free or reduced-price lunch program, and only about 25% speak English at home (NJDoE, 2011). In this school environment, there is an achievement gap: Some students become high-achieving readers, but others become below-basic readers. I focused on

investigating the perceptions of the reading teachers regarding the reading achievement gap at AAES and developing a PD workshop that could help them to use the school's reading curriculum, which more effectively adheres to a balanced literacy framework.

The reform movement, which provides evidence-based instructions and PD workshops for teachers, has introduced many reading programs into schools. However, these programs have sometimes been less successful than anticipated and have been one dimensional in offering restricted or narrow instructional strategies. The International Reading Association (IRA, 1999) claimed that teaching reading using different modes of instruction and delivery is integral to students' success. Reading instruction needs to meet the needs of all students, so teachers need to use different strategies when teaching reading that can address students' different learning styles (IRA, 1999). No reading curriculum can be effective unless it is modified to meet the needs of students (Hoffman & Dahlman, 2007).

Even after 10 years of training and use of the balanced literacy framework to guide the reading curriculum content, the majority of students AAES have still not made AYP. I interviewed the reading teachers to obtain their perceptions of the reading achievement gap between the high-achieving readers and the below-basic readers. I also observed their lessons using AAES's reading curriculum and framework. Other schools that are experiencing similar situations as AAES might be able to use these results to improve their own students' success.

## Definitions of Terms

*Adequate yearly progress (AYP):* A measurement defined by the USDoE (2009) under the NCLB that a public school is performing at a proficient level.

*Anthologies:* Textbooks used in the classroom to teach reading, commonly referred to as basal readers (Vacca et al., 2009).

*Balanced literacy framework:* This school subscribes to the literacy collaborative model, a research-based model that believes in self-regulated learning in reading, writing, and word study (Fountas & Pinnell, 2007).

*Below-basic reader:* A below-basic reader can read basic material at grade level, understand the words, and read with enough fluency to decipher the material enough to answer simple questions (NCES, 2011b).

*Common Core State Standards initiative (CCSSI):* National curriculum standards adopted by each state to provide a guide on what students will learn (CCSSI, 2012; National Governors Association [NGA], 2011).

*Constructivist approach:* A learning approach that believes that students learn by being active participants in their education. It uses the scaffolding approach by building on prior knowledge. The classroom is child centered, and teachers are considered facilitators of learning (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006).

*Frequent formative assessments:* Frequent assessments that can come in many forms. Informal assessments are used to help teachers to modify instructional strategies to meet the needs of diverse learners (Marzano, 2010).

*National Reading Panel (NRP)*: A congressional panel established in 1997 to examine the different effective approaches in teaching reading (NICHD, 2000).

*Zone of proximal development (ZPD)*: A term developed by Vygotsky (1978) to describe what students can do on their own (independent) and when they need help from their teachers (dependent). In the classroom setting, ZPD can be seen as scaffolding, guided help, or cooperative groups.

### **Significance of the Problem**

The problem at AAES is the gap in reading achievement between high-performing students and below-basic students. Students in the low-performing population consistently advance to the next grade without being able to read adequately and be as successful as they could be in their academic achievement. These struggling students lack fundamental reading skills, a situation that will confine them to a low SES in adulthood (Huang, 2013) and limit their opportunities to contribute to society (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010). These students deserve the tools (i.e., reading, in particular) and opportunities to go to college or training school.

The teachers at AAES cannot deviate from the reading curriculum and the balanced literacy framework. Although the teachers are given the choice of reading material to use in lessons, they must follow the balanced literacy framework to teach the reading curriculum. The reading curriculum and framework do not come with prepared lessons or a teacher's manual. It is up to the teachers to develop their own lesson plans. I focused on investigating the perceptions of the reading teachers regarding the reading achievement gap at AAES and then developing a PD workshop that could help the

teachers to use the school's reading curriculum, which adheres to a balanced literacy framework, more effectively.

Teaching within this framework can be time consuming, and the benchmark tests can be subjective. The collaborative team from the curriculum company stated that it can take up to 5 years before teachers are effective in planning instruction, preparing the material, and assessing students. Meanwhile, the stakes are getting higher in the teaching profession because teachers are being evaluated based upon their effectiveness in producing proficient students. If they do not succeed in this endeavor, they can be terminated.

As mentioned previously, students at AAES face social and economic issues that can and do impede their motivation and learning. Although the teachers at AAES deal with different issues every day at the school, they must still hold students to the same standards as those in neighboring school districts. The teachers rely on strong administrative and other support systems in the school and community, but teachers can fall into a trap that Finn (1999) termed *domesticating education*, which refers to empathizing with students and accepting results achieved from any minimal effort. The result often is a lowering of expectations as well as students' abilities. Domesticating education could be another variable in the reading achievement gap.

### **Research Question**

Reading is fundamental to academic success. Educators and policymakers have studied the cause of the achievement gap in reading, but they have not reached consensus, despite speculating about the causes (educators) and formulating possible remediation

strategies (policymakers). Until they reach consensus, implementing changes will be difficult or impossible. I studied this problem of the achievement gap in reading from the multiple perspectives of a sample of six reading teachers at AAES. One research question guided this study: What are the teachers' perceptions of the reasons for the significant reading gap between high-achieving readers and below-basic readers at AAES? The teachers' perceptions allowed me to develop a PD workshop that can help them to implement the curriculum more effectively.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review helped me to identify many components influencing reading instruction in the classroom. Reading is a complex process involving the intake of information through the senses. It involves all three domains of learning, that is, cognitive, affective, as well as psychomotor skills (Anderson et al., 2001). Reading is not just reading words out loud or silently; reading also involves listening and communicating orally or in writing (Birsh, 2005). At AAES, students must be able to read proficiently at grade level to meet AYP mandates. Concentrated efforts by school leadership teams and regional teams from the NJDoE have focused on closing the gap between high-performing readers and below-basic readers by trying to improve the achievement of struggling readers.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study was exploratory. The reading curriculum and balanced literacy framework at AAES are comprehensive. Despite encompassing reading, writing, and word study, they do not provide materials that follow a supportive

scope-and-sequence method of instruction. Scope refers to the range and grade level of the skills to be taught and mastered; range refers to the suggested time frame. Units of study are offered in the curriculum, but there are no materials, rubrics, or assessments to support learning. The quality and effectiveness of instructional strategies depend on the knowledge and experience of the teachers who are using them. Therefore, teacher quality can have the most significant impact on students' academic success. Effective teachers can be successful working with any curriculum content as long as they can decide on the reading strategies that they want to use based upon the students' needs (Allington, 2002).

Gaining the perceptions of the six reading teachers about the reading achievement gap between high-achieving readers and below-basic readers provided valuable information about the daily decisions that the reading teachers made in planning lessons. The results of this study facilitated the development of the PD workshop for teachers of reading instruction at AAES. It enabled the teachers to share and develop forums to match students' learning needs to reading instructional tools and strategies that improved their learning. Future PD workshops have the potential to become a conduit for teachers to access updated information frequently, offer valuable information on the daily decisions other reading teachers make in planning lessons, and support the development of professional learning communities (PLCs) across grade levels and content areas.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The teacher's role in education has been experiencing a paradigm shift, especially in the delivery of instruction. Teacher-centered lecturing type of instruction has been shifting toward more child-centered learning environments that provide more optimal



learning. This practice reflects Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory, which has contributed to the social constructivism theory. The child-centered approach supports the belief that students should be active, not passive, participants in their learning. Vygotsky asserted that students increase their learning success through social interactions and that their social and cultural experiences contribute to their cognitive development. The classroom environment plays an important role in the learning process.

Vygotskian lessons give students the opportunity to explore and discover new information actively, develop meaning from interactions, internalize that meaning, and learn from each other. Inside the constructivism classroom (Vygotsky, 1978), classmates become learning partners, and teachers become facilitators, resulting in the building of a sense of community that is imperative to learning. Students and teachers discover and construct meaning together, a process that can help to build a learning community.

Piaget and Vygotsky had very different beliefs about cognition. The teacher-led, traditional Piagetian approach subscribed to the sequential cognitive developmental stages of children. In this approach, students go through specific stages of cognitive development in order that cannot be skipped completely. Piaget's linear theory states that children must complete one stage before they can advance to the next developmental stage, making the focus a summative assessment (Piaget & Inhelder, 2000). For example, at the end of a unit, the teacher would sum up the child's learning through a test, an essay, or a project.

The child-centered approach favors a Vygotskian belief to learning. Students and teachers discover and create meaning together, a process that can help to build a learning

community. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is a natural process that starts at birth and continues throughout life. In the process, many bridges form from the unknown to known. Vygotsky termed those bridges the ZPD, which is where learning takes place. Vygotsky believed that the process of learning is far more important than the end result. He supported scaffolding instructions and formative assessments to assess the progress of students.

Atlantic Avenue Elementary School's reading curriculum and balanced literacy framework subscribe to this Vygotskian approach to learning. Vygotsky (1978) believed if children are not learning, it is because the learning environment and materials are at fault; Piaget believed that students who are not learning have plateaued at a particular stage and are not yet ready to move on (Blake & Pope, 2008). Atlantic Avenue Elementary School's reading curriculum and balanced literacy framework also subscribe to this Vygotskian approach to learning. One of the practices in the reading curriculum and framework at AAES is guided reading, whose intention is to find students' instructional levels and teach slightly above those levels. Scaffold lessons are planned carefully so that the control of reading can be released gradually to students so that they can become independent readers (Vygotsky, 1978). Using anecdotal notes, teachers achieve this critical process of finding students' ZPD, knowing what to teach, why to teach it, and when to teach it by analyzing students' learning progress (Vygotsky, 1978).

The daily decisions that teachers make about instructional strategies can be a direct reflection of their perceptions of educational beliefs. Practicing a Vygotskian approach to reading instruction might be what students need to become successful and

independent readers. Communicating about and reflecting on effective lessons have the potential to strengthen instructional practices and increase students' academic success.

### **Achievement Gap**

Resolving the achievement gap between high-achieving and below-basic readers has been the focus of educators and policymakers for the past 20 years (NAEP, as cited in NCES, 2011b). The achievement gap is calculated by averaging students' state test scores at the same level. After the scores are calculated, students are placed in subgroups (e.g., race, SES, and gender); these groups are then compared to identify differences (NAEP, as cited in NCES, 2011b). The achievement gap is one measurement that the NCES (2011b) continues to use to measure the effectiveness of schools.

In 1966, Coleman was commissioned to identify reasons for the achievement gap in the U.S. public school system. The Civil Rights movement in 1964 shed light upon inequalities in U.S. society, especially in education (American Civil Liberties Union, 2003; USDoe, 2005). Coleman's findings evolved into the NCLB in 2001 (USDoe, 2001) and, more recently, the Race to the Top (USDoe, 2013). Coleman's report was the foundational research into the probable causes of achievement gaps occurring in the U.S. public school system. Coleman asserted that the home and the community heavily influence students' performance at school.

Berliner (2009) found that students classified as living at the poverty level struggle with academics more than students of middle-income status, a reality that also could be contributing to the reading achievement gap between middle-income and low-income students. The lack of educational resources, class sizes that are too large, and

inadequate technology resources could be other factors contributing to the achievement gap (Graham & Provost, 2012). Exposure to lead (Amato et al., 2012) or frequent transfer from school to school (Kerbow, 1996) can contribute to the achievement gap. Possible other factors include the school climate, disruption of instruction, school safety involving bullying, and violence in the neighborhood. Some achievement gaps have been identified in schools where the teachers lack experience or they have a poor attendance record (Barton, 2003). Sometimes, low expectations and low standards of student learning can be variables in the achievement gap.

As mentioned previously, the school that was the focus of this study is a Title I school, which means that more than 40% of the students are living in poverty. At AAES, 90% of students live at the poverty level. However, even though the students attending AAES have the same economic disadvantages, they are performing at different levels of academic achievement. According to Barton (2003), the possible lack of rigor in the curriculum and inadequate PD opportunities can have a negative impact on students' success. Therefore, developing a more rigorous and challenging curriculum and assessments could result in closing the reading achievement gap between high-achieving and below-basic readers (Barton, 2003; Burris & Welner, 2005).

### **Definition of Reading**

The written word is a fundamental form of communication (Robinson, 2005). The objective of reading instruction is to give meaning to written material (Fielding & Pearson, 1994). Reading is the practice of extricating and building meaning from written language (RAND, 2002). Clay (1991) contended that reading is the ability to extract

knowledge from printed sources and that the more frequently one engages in reading, the stronger the reading skills become. Reading is a conglomeration of complex skills executed simultaneously. It is the acquisition of learned skills (Birsh, 2005; NCES, 2009).

Reading allows children to develop intellectually and build confidence in their personal and social lives. It helps them to transfer knowledge learned in school to application in the outside world. Reading instruction needs to be prepared carefully and with a purpose. Reading skills need to be cultivated every year and taught in all content areas to expose students to new ideas and vocabulary. Reading is a lifelong process that provides people with opportunities to find answers to questions, develop empathy, share ideas and thoughts, solve problems, and make better choices. Reading provides students with the opportunity to advance in school, seek satisfying employment, and improve society (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2000).

### **Components of Reading**

In 1997, the USDoE, along with the NICHD, decided to form the NRP to find the best way to improve the reading ability of children in the United States. The report from the NICHD in 2000 identified five components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary.

**Phonemic awareness.** Phonemes are the smallest units of sound in a specific language (NICHD, 2000). There are basically 44 phonemes in the English language (Birsh, 2005). Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate sounds (Stanovich, 1993), and it is the capacity to be able to recognize sounds in a word (Griffith

& Olson, 2004). Phonemic awareness in reading instruction greatly improves students' likelihood of becoming proficient readers and spellers, and enhances their ability to sound out unknown words (NICHD, 2000). Understanding phonemes is comparable to obtaining directions to the English language. Strong writing skills, particularly in spelling, have been attributed to strong phonemic awareness and have been acknowledged as important to phonics instruction (Birsh, 2005).

Phonemic awareness encompasses eight subcategories: isolation of individual sounds within a word; identification of sounds or common sounds between words; categorization of phonemes to be able to distinguish the odd sound when offered a series of three or more words; rhyming; phonemic blending, in which sounds are blended to make a word; segmentation, the ability to distinguish separate sounds in words; segmenting of the beginning and/or ending sounds in words; and phonemic addition, deletion, and/or substitution to make new words (NICHD, 2000). Birsh (2005) claimed that students in Kindergarten who have problems with phonemes could struggle with reading in Grade 1 or Grade 2, a factor possibly attributing to the achievement gap.

**Phonics.** Phonics is a method of connecting sounds with letter or groups of letters in the English language (Birsh, 2005). Identifying words by their sounds is the foundation of reading. A systematic phonics program is the most effective in developing reading proficiency when taught in the early grades. As mentioned previously, a strong grasp of phonics relies on a solid understanding of phonemic awareness. Together, they help readers to decode unknown words while reading so that fluency and comprehension are continuous.

**Reading fluency.** Padak and Rasinski (2008) defined reading fluency as the ability to understand what is being read with speed, intonation, and fluidity. Rasinski (2003) identified three subcategories involving reading fluency. The first subcategory is accuracy, the ability to decode words in an automatic way. Accuracy relies on strong phonemic awareness and knowledge of phonics. The second subcategory is automatic processing, which takes little mental processing of decoding text so that more effort can be allotted to the comprehension of text. The third subcategory is prosodic reading, which refers to the inflection, pitch, and pauses that readers use effectively in oral reading (Rasinski, 2003).

Fluency rates might fluctuate when readers experience different text genres or when the level of text increases in complexity. Fluency is the most neglected component of reading instruction (NICHD, 2000). Students who struggle with comprehension usually also struggle with fluency (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Once students achieve success at a new level of text or genre, fluency usually increases at the same time (Pinnell et al., 1995).

Fluency, comprehension, and confidence in reading are cyclical. Reading fluently builds confident readers by allowing them to focus on the meaning and comprehension of the reading material. At the same time, when readers become confident and understand the reading material, they become more fluent readers (Birsh, 2005; Vacca et al., 2009).

**Comprehension.** Comprehension is the ability to understand what one is reading and then extract information from the text (Honig, 1996). Reading effectiveness increases when comprehension is incorporated with the other components of reading to contribute

to the overall success of the reading process (Birsh, 2005). Students need a combination of direct and specific instructions in reading to be able to acquire and develop their reading skills (Birsh, 2005). A significant part of reading effectively is being able to employ specific strategies automatically and spontaneously while reading (Adler & Van Doren, 1972; McEwan, 2004; NICHD, 2000). As a result, students who are taught these metacognitive reading strategies can increase their recall and comprehension skills at all levels and genres (Keene, 2006; Pressley, 2002).

McEwan (2004) organized reading strategies into seven categories: (a) activating prior knowledge, (b) inferring information that the author has not stated in the text, (b) monitoring comprehension while reading and clarifying confusion after reading, (d) questioning the content of the reading material while reading, (e) searching for and selecting text for a purpose and knowing where to find it, (f) summarizing by restating the meaning in one's own words, and (g) visualizing and organizing one's own cognitive map and image of the text. These reading strategies are cognitive strategies that give readers the confidence and independence to know how to apply them to any genre or level of text (McEwan, 2004).

**Vocabulary.** Vocabulary refers to the meanings of words. In reading, there is a strong connection between vocabulary and reading comprehension (NICHD, 2000). Birsh (2005) viewed vocabulary as the words that people have command of and how well they use those words in daily communication. Vocabulary has four components: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The first component to develop is children's ability to listen to the vocabulary around them (Elley, 1989). Exposure to and interaction with oral



language in the home environment can influence children's future reading success (Birsh, 2005).

Each of the five aforementioned components relies on the others for overall success. It is important for each component to support the others. Many educators seem to be in agreement with the five components of reading, but a common disagreement has been in the methods to teach reading (Birsh, 2005). The following section explains the possible types of teaching methods and the philosophies of reading instruction that are practiced in the U.S. public education system.

### **Reading Methods**

Many educators agree that reading can be separated into five basic components (Birsh, 2005), all of which I described in the previous text. The NRP report published by the NICHD (2000) asserted that these components should be taught in an explicit, sequential, and systematic approach, not via an incidental or opportunistic approach. A strong foundation in phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary develops readers who are fluent and effective readers. Therefore, students can focus their attention on the meaning on the text rather than trying to decode and decipher words. The NRP (as cited in NICHD, 2000) reported that the best reading instruction combines techniques, meaning that it should be delivered as direct and explicit instruction to the class and then switch to student-led instruction, with discussions facilitated by the teacher. Many instructional approaches have been developed, but they all have fit into one of three models of reading: the bottom-up model (Grabe, 1991); the top-down model (Hudson, 2007); and the interactive model (Bamford & Day, 2004).

**Bottom-up model.** The bottom-up model begins with the written mark on the page. Readers learn how to distinguish between letters and know that sounds make words when combined. When words are strung together, they make sentences, paragraphs, and then texts (Vacca et al., 2009). The bottom-up reading model originated from Gough's (1972) reading model and emphasized that children who are good readers are able to make good letter-to-sound connections, that is, they have good decoding skills. In Gough's model, using context to be able to read was indicative of being a poor reader. Samuels (2004) elaborated on the bottom-up model, noting that reading starts with the smallest units of the English language and continuously builds upon them.

**Top-down model.** The top-down model stresses that reading occurs when readers use prior content knowledge and new knowledge to understand reading material. This model has been criticized and is still considered flawed because readers need to process phonemes and phonics in order to begin to read the written word (Vacca et al., 2009). In the development of a top-down model called whole language, Goodman (2005) and Smith (2006) claimed that people cannot learn to read in bits or fragments; instead, they need to read continuous, relevant, and meaningful thoughts and ideas as a whole. Goodman and Smith claimed that reading instruction involving having to learn letters, phonemes, and phonics interrupts the reading process and confuses the readers. Smith claimed that reading and language development follow a natural learning process, that is, it is learned from a whole perspective and then considers smaller pieces such as phonics. According to Smith, the lack of reading comprehension is based upon a lack of background knowledge, not a lack of knowledge of phonemes or phonics. Goodman's

whole language approach believes that teachers should be facilitators of reading and that students must take ownership of their own education. Fielding and Pearson (1994) stated that although having prior knowledge of experiences and content of the reading material is important, it is highly unlikely for a true top-down model to exist in instruction because readers must be attentive to the printed word and construct meaning at the same time.

**Interactive model.** The interactive model has been classified as a balanced literacy approach. It encompasses the bottom-up model as well as the top-down model, where learning the smallest units of the English language such as phonemes and graphophones is just as important as understanding the author's message. The bottom-up model of reading instruction gives students a strong base to develop their word-decoding skills, but at the same time, focusing on just the small units could mean that comprehension might suffer. However, in the top-down model, which requires readers to use their background information to construct meaning, students might struggle to recognize words. Both models have strengths and weaknesses in reading instruction (Kern, 2000). The benefit of the interactive model is that it provides a balanced literacy approach.

Many approaches to reading instruction could be categorized within these three reading models. Researchers have claimed that many curriculum programs and frameworks are effective in teaching children to read, but the success rate of many of these research-based approaches have not been consistently successful from school to school (NICHD, 2000). The NRP (as cited in NICHD, 2000) concluded that no single program, framework, or instructional strategy is the most appropriate approach for all the

students. Fielding and Pearson (1994) called for a multiple approach to obtain and use the best components of various instructional methods. Different approaches and instructions should be practiced (National Council of Teachers of English, 2012). The NRP (as cited in NICHD, 2000) also recognized the influence of teachers' decision making on students' reading success.

### **Professional Development**

In recent times, students' academic success has been measured solely by state testing that is administered once a year. The results of these tests have not met the USDoE's expectations, so the USDoE has tried to resolve the problem by issuing consequences to individual states in order to improve education (as cited in Darling-Hammond, 2014). Over the last 30 years, the field of education has changed radically, but teacher preparation programs and PD for teachers have continued to lag behind (Darling-Hammond, 2014). More than two thirds of U.S. teachers have classes in which 30% of the students are living at the poverty level; the immigration population to the United States has increase by 31.2 million people since 1970 (Nwosu, Batalova, & Auclair, 2014); and school reforms have sought to reorganize and reengineer the process of learning to increase students' academic performance, making it essential that teacher preparation programs and PD workshops keep up with these changes (Darling-Hammond, 2014).

PD can empower teachers to be in the vanguard of positive change, guide the process of teaching, and improve instruction. Taking the focus off results such as state testing could be beneficial in helping to strengthen reading instruction to meet individual

students' needs. The result, which is to achieve AYP, could be more reasonable if schools could provide teachers with meaningful PD throughout the year. A Vygotskian social development approach to PD could be more effective and contribute to higher student achievement.

PD is more constructive when it is designed to give teachers time and opportunities to collaborate with colleagues. Just as teachers help and guide their students in reaching their goals, teachers can benefit by engaging in the same practice with each other. In doing so, teachers can receive meaningful feedback and gain different perspectives about lessons that might make the lessons more effective (Darling-Hammond, 2014).

### **Belief Systems, Decision Making, and Effective Teaching**

The overall school environment can make a significant contribution to reducing the achievement gap by having smaller class sizes, maintaining a rigorous curriculum, and providing a safe learning environment (Barton, 2003). Birsh (2005), however, claimed that for students to become successful in reading, they need effective teachers who can make daily decisions based upon their content knowledge, instructional strategies, and students' learning styles. Distractions and influences from outside the school environment can become an obstacle to students' ability to learn. Obstacles such as health issues, poverty, ineffective parenting, other physical and/or emotional influences from the home environment, and/or residential mobility can contribute to the achievement gap.

In many cases, teachers assume other roles in order to provide a nurturing environment to facilitate learning (Brown, 2007). However, teachers' perceptions and belief systems about reading instruction can be the most direct and immediate influence over students' reading success. These belief systems can be so strong that they can positively or negatively influence students' success. A classic example of this influence is Rosenthal's experiment from 1962 that was known as the Pygmalion effect (as cited in Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992). The teachers' expectations of their students' IQ levels were manipulated, so they thought that their students had higher IQs than what they actually had scored. As a result, because of these higher expectations, the students rose to the expectations and gained points on their IQs. Rosenthal's experiment showed that teachers could influence the lives of their students (as cited in Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992).

The goal of reading instruction is for students to become independent readers. Differences among teachers' belief systems can lead to differences in teachers' perceptions of how students can attain this goal. Differences in belief systems also can influence the choices that teachers make regarding the content and delivery of reading instruction (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992). Knowledge and belief systems might be the most powerful forces in influencing decisions and modifying instructional practices (Costa & Garmston, 1994).

Teachers' belief systems influence their daily decisions in the classroom. According to Nespor (1987), beliefs are the amalgam of cognitive knowledge and personal and/or professional experience, along with the possible influence of colleagues

and/or the school environment (Bandura, 1986; Fang, 1996; McLaughlin, 1993; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Rokeach, 1968; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Teachers' belief systems usually encompass the selection of instructional methods, the ability to work effectively with the curriculum, and an understanding of the parameters of students' abilities; they also reflect the amount of effort that teachers put into developing each lesson (Nespor, 1987).

Nespor (1987) also stated that teachers' belief systems could influence instructional knowledge. Pajares (1992) asserted that different beliefs have different affects on the delivery of reading instruction and that the stronger the belief and/or the longer that teachers possess a certain belief, the more difficult it becomes for them to change those beliefs (Landrum, Cook, Tankersley, & Fitzgerald, 2007).

### **Reflective Teaching**

The practice of being reflective, that is, assessing belief systems and discarding nonproductive practices, can lead to open communication and effective collaboration among colleagues (Brookfield, 1995). Reflective practice guards against following the latest trends in instructional strategies, not all of which are effective or productive. Being reflective means taking the time to seek evidence of the effectiveness of instructional methods (Phelan, 2005). Teachers need to reflect on their belief systems and challenge their perceptions of their instructional strategies and the curriculum (Phelan, 2005). Reflective teaching can lead to a sense of purpose, strengthening teachers' self-efficacy and students' academic success (Marzano, Boogren, Heflebower, Kanold-McIntyre, & Pickering, 2012). Reflective practice allows teachers to assess the success or failure of

their lessons objectively (Brookfield, 1995) and revise lessons when the course objectives are not being met (Marzano et al., 2012). Reflective practice also can be combined with creativity so that teachers can put information and ideas into practice (Moon, 1999) and communicate why lessons were or were not successful (Vacca et al., 2009). According to Phelan (2005), a lack of reflective professional practice can weaken instruction.

### **Implications**

According to the new CCSSI (2012), the goal of reading instruction is to deliver effective lessons so that the students can master grade-level skills. The language arts state test scores at AAES have placed the school on a monitoring list from the state. More specifically, the state requests AAES to close the gap in language arts test scores between high-achieving students and below-basic students. The results of this study allowed me to develop a PD workshop that will help the reading teachers to implement the curriculum as well as monitor and respond to the learners, expand their repertoire of effective instructional strategies, and engage students so that they will learn to read more effectively. An anticipated result of the PD workshop is to improve the school's state-mandated language art tests scores, achieve AYP, and narrow the reading achievement gap at AAES.

### **Summary**

Despite the balanced reading curriculum and framework that AAES has implemented over the last 10 years, the school is still experiencing a reading achievement gap between high-achieving readers and below-basic readers. The reading curriculum and



framework are considered by the teachers to be labor intensive and heavily reliant on the experience of the individual teachers.

The next section describes how I used a case study method to explore the perceptions of six teacher participants in regards to AAES's reading achievement gap. I interviewed the participants individually, observed them during reading lessons, and reviewed the lesson plans that they shared with me from the observed reading lessons. Also included in Section 2 is a discussion of the results. The findings will contribute to the PD for AAES in reading using a PLC approach.

## Section 2: Methodology

### **Introduction**

Finding a way to close the achievement gap in reading between high-performing students and below-basic students at AAES was the focus of this project. Teachers at this school have been trained in and have implemented a reading curriculum using a balanced literacy framework for the past 10 years. The framework is comprehensive and relies heavily on teachers' vast knowledge of and experience in reading instruction. However, despite its efforts, the school has not yet made AYP, and an achievement gap in reading has developed between high-achieving readers and below-basic readers. The intent of this study was to gain the teachers' perspectives of the variables causing the reading achievement gap. The results of this study contributed to the development of the PD workshop (see Appendix).

### **Research Design**

Reading instruction can be complex, and the perceptions of effective reading instruction can be just as complicated. I conducted this project study using a bounded case study design to explore the perceptions of reading teachers at AAES about the reading achievement gap between high-achieving and below-basic readers. I determined that a qualitative case study approach was the best choice to explore this real-life phenomenon (Hatch, 2002). I did consider other methodologies, but I discarded them in favor of a qualitative case study method when I realized the level of quality that the responses would offer through interviewing and observing. I determined that a quantitative research design would not be beneficial because of the potential to

overgeneralize the findings and overlook pertinent details about the perceptions of the participants (Hatch, 2002). I decided that a case study approach was the most appropriate way to obtain and understand the participants' perceptions (Stake, 1995).

Creswell (1998) divided qualitative research into five traditions: biographical, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, and case study. A biographical study focuses on a specific individual. In this study, a biographical approach was not acceptable because I was studying multiple teachers. I did not consider using a phenomenological approach because I did not study a particular experience or incident. A grounded theory approach presents a theory about a study. I designed this study to explore the teachers' perceptions, not develop a theory. Another approach that I considered was ethnographic research, which was designed to study a specific culture. I did consider this approach because the school comprises multiple cultures, but I rejected it because the teachers' perceptions and decision-making were not based upon the students' cultural backgrounds.

Creswell (1998) defined a case study as an "exploration of a bounded system" (p. 61). Similar to Stake (1995), Creswell as well as Merriam and Associates (2002) described the case study as an approach that is rich and comprehensive. Stake (1995) and Yin (2009) defined case studies from different perspectives. Stake classified case studies as instrumental (i.e., having insight into an issue or defining a theory); collective (i.e., differences among several case studies are compared, similar to Yin's [2009] multiple case studies); and intrinsic (i.e., the researcher has a genuine interest in comprehending the phenomenon more clearly, but not necessarily wanting to build a theory). I considered the approach of my study as intrinsic.

Yin (2009) described case studies as descriptive, exploratory, and explanatory. Descriptive case studies usually involve comparing and contrasting two or more case studies with each other. I did not consider this approach because I was proposing to conduct only a single case study. Exploratory case studies usually begin with questions that want *what* or *who* responses. This kind of case study usually comes before any formal research has been performed on a particular topic. An explanatory approach was the best fit for this study because my goal was to find possible answers to the main research question without having any control over the phenomenon.

I used the case study approach to study the perceptions and decision making of six reading teachers at AAES. Using a case study design allowed me to ask *how* and *why* questions without manipulating the behavior of the participants (Yin, 2009). The case study was bounded within a specific time frame, place, and group of teacher participants (Merriam & Associates 2002; Yin, 2009).

### **Participants**

The sample comprised six reading teachers from a target population of 89 full-time, highly qualified teachers at AAES. I conducted an in-depth inquiry to gain a deeper understanding of the research question. Before I collected the data from the participants, I submitted my study to Walden's University's Institutional Review Board (IRB approval #12-03-14-0016882). I sent an abstract and a letter explaining the purpose of the study to AAES's principal and the local board of education. I received a letter of permission from AAES's principal in return. In addition, Walden University sent me a letter of cooperation explaining the criteria to be selected as participants.

Miles and Huberman (1994) compared qualitative studies to a play: The actors are the participants, the setting is where the problem occurs, and the event is what the participants will be doing while being observed and interviewed. In this bounded qualitative study, it was important that the participants whom I purposely selected were in the same setting, were experiencing the same event, and were directly connected to the research problem (Creswell, 2009). The purposeful sample of six full-time, highly qualified, and certified reading teachers shared common traits in terms of PD training and teaching assignments (Patton, 2002). All six had been trained in using the reading curriculum and balanced literacy framework at AAES. To be in the study, the participants had to have at least 2 years of training from an AAES reading coach. Their assignments were to teach reading skills to students in Grade 1 to Grade 6. It was important to select the participants purposefully so that I could collect data that focused on the problem and the research question (Creswell, 2014).

### **Access to the Participants**

After I received permission from Walden's University's IRB, AAES's board of education, and the principal at AAES, the principal provided me with this list of teachers who met the criteria to participate. The list had been generated based upon the teachers' teaching assignments and the fact that they were reading instructors who had received PD training in the reading curriculum and literacy framework at AAES. I sent a letter of invitation to the eligible participants. Selection of the participants was based upon the first six teachers who responded to my invitation and were willing to join the study. I

then communicated with the potential participants through personal face-to-face contact, e-mail, and/or a telephone call to solicit their voluntary participation in the study.

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

It was important to establish a good rapport with the participants (Hatch, 2002) to minimize any feelings of threat or vulnerability and obtain rich, in-depth information (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I assured the participants that my role as the researcher was not to judge or evaluate (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I also advised the participants that the information that they shared with me would remain confidential. Following the interview sessions, I gave the participants the opportunity to read and revise their transcriptions to ensure their accuracy and make any corrections (Creswell, 1998). This process is known as member checking.

### **Protection of Participants' Privacy**

Confidentiality is an important component of building trust (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). To further protect the identities of the participants, the list generated by the principal contained the names of more potential participants than I needed for this study. This extra information made it difficult for anyone outside of the study to ascertain who participated.

After the participants agreed to join the study, they signed the consent form for the interview, the observation, and the lesson plan. All stakeholders (i.e., teachers, administration, the school, and the school district) were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities (Hatch, 2002). No identifying information (i.e., name, years of experience,

race, gender, any additional degrees or accreditation, or position or assignment) was released (Hatch, 2002).

I exchanged contact information with the participants to schedule the interview dates and answer any questions that they might have had about the study. Participation in the study was voluntary, so no one received a stipend, reward, or gift for being in the study. If any participants chose to withdraw early from the study, they were free to do so without penalty or repercussions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Reasons or situations for early withdrawal will remain confidential. I processed the data gathered from the observations on my private computer, backed up the data on a flash drive specifically used for this study, and locked all documentation in a filing cabinet in my private residence (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

### **Data Collection**

Upon receiving the necessary approvals and/or consent forms from the stakeholders and participants, I collected data from the interviews, observations, and lesson plans (Creswell, 1998). The interviews took place after the school day in various quiet locations to reduce interruptions.

### **Interviews**

I interviewed six participants individually and privately in quiet locations to reduce interruptions. I followed an interview guide of open-ended questions while taking a conversational approach to conducting the interviews. Interviewing the participants helped me to gain a deep understanding of their perspectives, whereas surveys would have overgeneralized the findings (Stake, 1995). Using this dual approach allowed me to

organize the interviews to cover all of the planned topics and gave the participants the flexibility to expand on their responses (Patton, 2002).

Interviewing the participants allowed me to pursue an in-depth exploration of their perceptions. Individuals can develop perceptions based upon personal experiences, expectations, and motivations, and particular interests can serve as the frame of reference for their belief systems (Hockenbury & Hockenbury, 2008). In this study, the participants' frame of reference was that of reading teachers and their role in closing the reading achievement gap at AAES between high-achieving and below-basic readers.

Each interview lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, depending on how expansive the participants' responses were. I recorded the interviews on a digital voice recorder and made notes about their responses in a table that I developed in Microsoft Word. In addition, I kept in mind the context of the interviews, such as tone of voice, body language, mood, and voice inflections (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I requested that the participants bring copies of their lesson plans to their individual interviews so that we could discuss the lesson objectives, how they taught their objectives, and how they assessed students' learning. I transcribed the interview responses verbatim within 2 to 3 days post-interview (Hatch, 2002). After each transcription was complete, I used member checking to ensure that the narrative was correct (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006).

### **Observations**

Observing the participants in the classroom setting was another way to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions of reading instruction based upon the school's reading curriculum and literacy framework (Hatch, 2002). I observed the participants



teaching reading shortly after their individual interviews. I specifically looked for points that the participants mentioned during their interviews, namely, students' reactions to the lesson, assessments used, and the participants' perceptions of the school's reading curriculum and balanced literacy framework in action.

Depending on the reading lesson plans that the participants had developed, the observations continued for 40 to 90 minutes each. I took notes in a table that I developed in Microsoft Word. I received copies of the reading lesson plans prior to the observations and followed them as a guide during the observations.

### **Lesson Plans**

The only document that I collected was a copy of each participant's lesson plan for the reading lesson that I observed. The lesson plans were confidential and helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' responses and understand their instructional intentions. Obtaining and examining copies of the lesson plans helped me to confirm and strengthen the common themes that emerged during the coding process. The lesson plans also became part of the data triangulation process, thus making the results more valid (Creswell, 1998).

### **Role of the Researcher**

In my role as the researcher, I recruited the participants, conducted the interviews, wrote the letters of consent and confidentiality, and collected and analyzed the data. At the time of the study, I was a general education teacher in the district, so my role in the study was not that of an evaluator or a supervisor (Hatch, 2002). The participants were and continue to be my colleagues. Building trust with the participants was important to

me to ensure that I was providing them with an interview climate that was comfortable and nonjudgmental. The main goal of the study was to gain the reading teachers' perceptions of the reasons for the significant reading gap between high-achieving readers and below-basic readers using AAES's reading curriculum and balanced literacy framework. The teachers' perceptions allowed me to develop the PD workshop, which will help AAES to implement the curriculum more effectively.

### **Data Analysis and Validation**

The purpose of examining, interpreting, and identifying themes and patterns in the data collected from the interviews, observations, and reading lesson plans was to gain insight into the research question (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Interviews were audiorecorded using a digital tape recorder, and observations notes were handwritten on a prepared Microsoft table. According to Creswell (2007), it is necessary to organize the data early on in the collection process, so I typed the participants' responses in the order of the interviews. I then aligned the responses to the interview questions in a column to the right. Handwritten notes about the observations were typed into another master table for each participant. I generated master documents to keep the information together and available for possible segmentation and placement into other tables. I numbered each paragraph to easily locate original information in the master document further on in the coding process. After transcribing all of the interview responses, I planned member checking with each participant to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions and give the participants the opportunity to make adjustments to their responses. After member checking, I then read the participants' responses, the observational notes, and the reading

lesson plans several times before I organized the data into categories. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to member checking as the practice of having the participants review the transcriptions to clarify and confirm that the responses were not misunderstood. The participants in this study were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the accuracy of the transcriptions.

After reading through the data a few times, I initiated a process that Creswell (2014) referred to as open coding and Patton (2002) referred to as first-cut coding. Coding is a way to reduce the data without losing the meaning (Hatch, 2002). I began by identifying some major categories running through the data and organizing the data by interview question per participant in to one table. I read the data again, keeping one category in mind and highlighting the information pertaining to that category only. I repeated this procedure using a different color code for each category. Each row was designated to a specific category, and columns were designated for correlating participants' responses or data collected. When placing the correlating responses or data collected in the columns, I placed participant identifiers, summaries of the data, and where I could find the original data in the master documents (Creswell, 1998; Hatch, 2002).

I then used an inductive data analysis method to facilitate the emergence of the themes within each category (Hatch, 2002). I read through each category several times to generate the themes. I also made what Hatch (2002) referred to as a protocol sheet that held a list of themes, corresponding codes, identifiers, and location of information. Protocol sheets save time in locating information pertaining to themes and participants.

The next step was to determine whether the patterns were supported by the data (Hatch, 2002). While reading the data multiple times, I practiced two deductive methods that Patton (2002) referred to as convergence and divergence. Convergence refers to making a judgment about the degree of similarity of the data within the theme by deciding whether it belongs in that theme. Divergence is the possible connection of data with other themes in across the data. I looked for reoccurring regularities and judged them based upon the adequacy of evidence in the data collected (Patton, 2002). In refining my analysis, I decided to use Hatch's (2002) master outline to gain a visual conception of the data in this study. I printed out the information and placed it on a large board in my home office. This final step in the analysis helped me to make adjustments and strengthen my understanding of the findings.

### **Triangulation**

Researchers who use only one method of gathering data can be vulnerable to making mistakes (Patton, 2002). The use of multiple sources of data (i.e., interviews, lesson plans, and observations) helped me to validate the data and check the findings against the multiple sources from this study to test for consistency among the emerging themes (Patton, 2002). The participants whom I interviewed were the same participants whom I observed. Conducting interviews and observations and also reading copies of the participants' lesson plans allowed me to cross check for regularities and irregularities in the data (Donoghue & Punch, 2003). In this case study, I was the only one collecting the data, so gathering the information was a consistent process that added to the quality of the findings in the themes that emerged.

Triangulation of the three sources of data helped to minimize any biases that I might have had (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Use of a digital tape recorder ensured that I had recorded the data properly, along with the bracketing of my notes to distinguish between personal jotting and participant's responses (Creswell, 1998). Triangulation of the data balanced and strengthened the findings (Altrichter, Feldman, Posch, & Somekh, 2008).

### **Validity**

The credibility of the data, which came from multiple sources, was established through triangulation (Hatch, 2002). I was able to gain different perspectives of the reading instructions by using these multiple sources. Validity of the study was strengthened when common themes surfaced through the coding of the data from the interviews, lesson plans, and observations.

### **Discrepant Cases**

I did not have any discrepant cases in this study. If any corrections had been requested, the participants and I would have discussed the discrepant information. If any data had been found in need of correction, they would have been adjusted (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006).

### **Limitations**

As the researcher and a teacher in the school under study, I could have experienced researcher bias by misreading behaviors or making selective perceptions during the observations, making assumptions based upon incomplete lesson plans, or misinterpreting responses during the interviews (Patton, 2002). To reduce the likelihood

of researcher bias, I used multiple sources of data, incorporated quotations from the participants from the interviews and observations into my results, used a digital tape recorder to record the interview responses objectively, engaged in member checking, used brackets to distinguish between personal notes and the participants' responses, and was cognizant of my responses and body language during the interviews (Creswell, 1998).

### **Data Analysis Results**

Atlantic Avenue Elementary School is an elementary school that did not make AYP. When the state language art scores of students within the school were compared, a large achievement gap in language arts between high-achieving readers and below-basic readers became evident. Subsequently, the school was assigned to a state intervention team in an effort to improve students' achievement. The aim of this exploratory case study was to explore AAES's reading teachers' perceptions of the reasons for the reading achievement gap of students within their reading curriculum and balanced literacy framework. One research question guided the study: What are the teachers' perceptions of the reasons for the significant reading gap between high-achieving readers and below-basic readers at AAES? The data were collected from interviews, observations, and copies of the teachers' lesson plans in reading pertaining to the observations. The six participants were certified elementary reading teachers who had completed 2 years of the district's PD in implementation of the reading curriculum and framework. The data collection process involved individual interviews outside of school hours with the participants in a conference room to ensure privacy and reduce interruptions. Participants

were asked to share copies of their reading lesson plans before the observations. The individual observations were isolated and solely focused on the participants' behavior. The observations presented opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' responses during the interviews and their perceptions about ways to close the reading achievement gap between high-achieving readers and below-basic readers.

### **Interviews**

I conducted private audiotaped interviews with the six participants after school hours in a quiet location to reduce interruptions. I asked the participants 11 interview questions as well as follow-up questions regarding their perceptions about the reading gap, and I advised them that they were free to expand on their responses as much as they felt comfortable doing so. The participants were enthusiastic and accommodating in scheduling the interviews and preparing for the observations. The stakeholders in this study were the participants, the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, the principal, the vice principal, the reading coaches, and the reading teachers of AAES.

The 11 primary interview questions and follow-up questions were as follows:

1. What kind of support and training did you receive in AAES reading curriculum and framework? How accessible was the source of support in planning your lessons and carrying out instruction? What would you consider the most valuable of the support?
2. What is your understanding of a balanced reading program? How do you think students learn to read best? Are you familiar with phonic based reading? Whole language? What parts of AAES's reading curriculum and framework

do you feel is effective? Are there any parts of the reading curriculum and framework disagree with and how so?

3. How do you prepare for reading instruction to meet the individual learner pertaining to phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary? How do you make daily decisions in your reading instructions?
4. What reading assessments have you experienced with your students? How do these assessments dictate your instructions?
5. What challenges do you experience in closing the gap in reading between high-achieving students and below-basic students within the districts reading curriculum?
6. According to the reading curriculum framework your school uses, it includes the practice of guided reading and shared reading. How does guided reading benefit your students? How does whole-group shared reading benefit your students? If you had to choose between one or the other, what would you chose, and why?
7. How do you decide what to reteach?
8. What decisions as a reading instructor do you make to ensure your students can read on grade level?
9. There is an achievement gap between high-performing students and the struggling readers; how do you think the school's curriculum can be enhanced to close the achievement gap between those students?



10. How do you think the new national CCSS and the school's reading curriculum framework will work together for the goal of becoming a strong strategic reader and passing the state assessments?
11. How much autonomy are you granted within the reading curriculum framework to modify the reading curriculum and framework in order for your students to reach success?

### **Observations**

After interviewing the participants and reviewing the copies of their reading lesson plans for the observations, I was able to focus on the participants individually during the delivery of their reading lessons. The observations were a way for the participants to demonstrate the instructional intentions stated in their interview responses. I specifically looked for the use of assessments to determine student mastery in reading.

The observations were between 40 and 90 minutes each. The classrooms contained a wide assortment of books organized and labeled in book bins; *Books We've Shared* posters; community meeting centers; and a multitude of charts illustrating minilessons, strategies, model text, and writing.

I also observed evidence of careful planning. All participants had forms with written lessons. Some participants created their own forms or used others, but all forms had book and level listed, lesson objectives, strategies, specifics pages to focus on, and word work planned pertaining to the book being used in the lesson. There also was a section for anecdotal notes taken from the group or individually. The guided reading assessment book was close by in each observation for quick reference.

During the observations, five of the six participants were able to teach two different lessons within one observation, that is, one to a high-achieving group and one to a below-basic group. This gave me the opportunity to compare their methods of instruction pertaining to different learners.

### **Documents: Teacher Lesson Plans**

The reading lesson was not to be created for the observation; rather, it was to demonstrate what happened in the classroom on a daily basis in reading instruction. Each participant was asked for a copy of the lesson plan for the observation. The lesson plan included minilessons, targeted processing skills and reading strategies, and an assessment. The lesson plans served to demonstrate an alignment of responses and actions between the interview and the observation. I was looking for the intended objectives, rationales for the reading instruction, and practices mentioned during the interview.

### **Findings**

Five themes emerged from the analysis of the data gleaned from the interviews, the classroom observations, and the copies of the teachers' reading lesson plans. Following is a brief overview of each theme.

**Finding 1: Practicing balanced literacy.** From the interviews, observations, and copies of the lesson plans, all participants had individual definitions of balanced literacy. The reading teachers believed that their instructional methods were considered balanced literacy. Some examples of a balanced literacy that the participants offered included teaching students in small guided ability groups and as whole-class groups; teaching

literacy skills immersed in the literature and in isolation; and scaffolding instructions at students' individual levels of ability through reading workshop, writing workshop, and word study.

**Finding 2: Individual levels.** Each teacher spoke about the importance of delivering lessons to students at the students' individual levels so that they could improve their reading proficiency. The practice that all of the participants identified as the most successful was guided reading. In the guided reading sessions, students were grouped according to ability level, and instructions were scaffold in order for the students to find their individual ZPDs and allow the teachers to gradually release the control of learning to the students.

**Finding 3: Background knowledge:** The teachers claimed that the large amount of background knowledge that their students did not possess was a major factor in their struggle to reach reading proficiency. General grade-level background knowledge can inhibit or delay the attainment of new knowledge.

**Finding 4: Reading assessment.** The teachers claimed that student reading assessments were necessary to guide instruction. All of the participants felt that their assessments were sufficient.

**Finding 5: PD.** All of the teachers believed that PD was important to the successful growth of teachers and students.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

**Finding 1: Balanced Literacy: AAES's Reading Curriculum and Framework**

The participants had different perceptions of whole language, balanced literacy, and phonics-based learning. Participant A acknowledged similarities between whole language and AAES's reading curriculum and framework in that both subscribed to a certain way of looking at learning. The difference was that whole language did not have direction. Participant A claimed, AAES's reading curriculum and framework follow authentic practices of what readers and writers do. The other participants were unable to respond because they did not have enough knowledge of whole language.

From the interviews, observations, and copies of the lesson plans, it was evident that all of the participants had different individual definitions of balanced literacy and believed that their instructional strategies reflected a balanced literacy approach. Many of their definitions included direct and indirect instruction, along with teaching both skills in isolation as well as being immersed in the literature. The participants also included in their balanced literacy the importance of scaffold instruction at students' individual level through reading workshops, writing workshops, and word study. Balanced literacy basically refers to integrating a whole-language approach with a phonics approach to reading. Atlantic Avenue Elementary School's reading curriculum and framework follow a constructivist literacy approach, meaning that instruction is delivered based upon students' abilities. The reading curriculum and framework also subscribe to whole-group reading in order to expose students to grade-level material. In whole-group reading, reading of a text is modeled, usually by the teacher, and discussed as a whole group.

During the interviews, participants explained how they used guided reading groups to deliver instruction at students' individual ability levels. Participant A asserted

that effective teaching starts with being prepared for the lesson. This preparation includes developing a minilesson statement for the lesson. Participants B, C, and F identified the minilesson as an objective but worded it so that students could comprehend it. For example: Participant A's minilesson stated, "Readers notice the differences between fiction and nonfiction books," but Participants B, C, and F wrote the learning objective as, "We will be learning...and completing ...with 85% accuracy." Participants D and E wrote their learning objective on the board and also restated it as a minilesson, similar to what Participant A did. In all of the cases, students knew the learning target for that day.

Participants B, C, and F also noted that preparation included reading the guided reading books, knowing the characteristics and the targeted skills at the particular text level, and gathering supportive materials to help students to comprehend challenging words from the text. All participants believed that guided reading groups with scaffold lessons would eventually help students to read at grade level. Participants A and C stated that maintaining anecdotal notes during the lesson was important to plan for the next lesson. During the observations, Participants C, D, E, and F were the only ones who took anecdotal notes; Participant A took a few minutes to write everything down once the group was finished.

All practices that I observed were building toward grade-level reading. The focus was solely on the participants, not the students. I asked each participant to present a reading lesson that I could observe. All participants chose to demonstrate the guided reading approach, with word work at the end and oral assessments. According to their interview responses, although the participants considered shared reading important, all of

them unanimously chose guided reading. During the observations, reteaching was evident in the lessons conducted by Participants A, B, C, D, and E. They used different styles and approaches, and they demonstrated different levels of experiences in the lessons. It appeared that the better the participants knew the students and gave them appropriate response wait times, the more relaxed, flexible, and seamless the lessons became. Preparation for the lessons was evident by all participants.

### **Finding 2: Individual Levels**

All of the participants believed that the most effective approach for students to learn to read was in guided groups targeting their individual levels of ability. In guided reading, students can be taught at individual instructional levels that will help them to fill gaps in their knowledge before they can be brought up to grade level. These lessons would focus on the specific skills to learn and master at their level. Participants A, B, and D claimed that there was no academic benefit to giving students texts that were too difficult for them to read.

However, Shanahan (2011), one of the developers of the CCSS, claimed that students should be exposed to and read only grade-level texts. Participants A, B, C, and F expressed the need to expose students to grade-level material to help them to comprehend grade-level topics and skills. Participant C remarked that teachers should be more aggressive in getting their students to achieve these milestones and reach grade level while remaining cautious about placing expectations that might be too high on the students.

Most of the participants used interactive read aloud as one grade-level reading strategy. The teacher reads a book to the students, and the students contribute to the meaning and comprehension of that text through active participation. In this practice of interactive read aloud, the students did not have a copy of the text. However, Participant B felt that it was necessary for students to have a copy of the text. During the observation, Participant B referred to a read aloud previously read in class. The book was used as a mentor text in their genre study.

During their interviews, four participants mentioned the practice of placing students at levels that they did not test in as one way to manage the groups (i.e., reduce the number of groups in order to meet with them more frequently). Participant C believed that no student should be held back or placed in advanced level(s) because of group management problems. Having only one student qualify for a certain level did not mean that the student should be placed in another group that did not fit that student's needs. Participant C did add that a student could be motivated if placed in a slightly higher group, but only within a span of one to three levels. This decision would have to be carefully thought out because effective placement would have to depend on the number of students and the characteristics of the level.

During the observations, Participants A, B, C, D, and F did not need to offer extra support at one particular time, but in the observation of Participant E's lesson, support was overbearing. According to Participant A's interview, when this occurs, either the material does not fit the interests or ability levels of the students or the mistake is in the

delivery of instruction. In the prepared lesson plans, the reading group was listed based upon the instruction. Therefore, one level appears on the lesson plan.

Participant B believed that as long as the student was reading, the level did not matter. Participant F had a student who tested at a certain level, but because of the scheduling of the intervention program, the student was placed in a group four levels higher. Surprisingly, this student met the expectations of the new level and was performing well. Participant A stated that students should always be challenged and groups should always be flexible. When individual students show growth, they should be moved to higher groups.

### **Finding 3: Background Knowledge**

The participants claimed that the large amount of background knowledge that their students did not possess was a major contributing factor to the students' struggle to reach reading proficiency. The consensus was that students' lack of general grade-level background knowledge inhibited or delayed the attainment of new knowledge. All participants expressed the need for more time during the day to teach reading in order to close the reading gap. They felt that students needed more time to comprehend, process, and practice new reading skills and information.

During their interviews, Participants C and D expressed concern about the students' lack of rich conversations with their families. They stated that a connection could be made between students who often lacked life experiences and rich conversations to their lack of general background knowledge, which then could be contributory to the reading achievement gap at AAES. Participant C reflected on this problem and



mentioned a study by Hart and Risley (2003), who contended that exposing children to rich vocabulary in the early years had a lasting impact throughout their lives. Participants C and D became more aware of this missing element in their students' lives by conversing with the students and reading their daily journals. Participant C claimed that creating special learning opportunities during the school day helped to build students' general background knowledge, which was important to their academic achievement.

The other participants felt that building a sense of community within the classroom also helped to build students' background knowledge and make them more willing to share what they did know and take risks by asking questions about what they did not know. Participants A, B, and C felt strongly about taking the time to build this community. Participant B claimed that it helped to motivate the students to read. Participants B and C claimed that building the community in the classroom helped students to expand their background knowledge through meaningful conversations and opportunities to expand their vocabulary. The lesson plans indicated that all participants took time to build community at the beginning of the instruction and during the observations. Participants B and E demonstrated community at the beginning of instruction, whereas Participants B and F demonstrated community at the close of their instructions.

Once the participants identified the need to increase students' background knowledge, they had different opinions about the most effective way to achieve it. Participant D believed that it was important to take the extra time when introducing guided reading books to below-basic students. This participant believed that it would

improve students' text comprehension. During the observation, a large amount of time was spent introducing an unfamiliar topic about birds. Participants C and F believed that strengthening students' word (phonics) and grammar knowledge would help below-basic students to become higher achievers in reading. Participant A asserted that students needed to read every day, whether it was independently, guided, or shared, to gain the background information necessary to read fluently. Participants D and F were the only participants who stated the target for background knowledge and words in their lesson plans.

During the observations, it was evident that the teachers spent time building and assessing students' general background knowledge. Participant C would stop the lesson to fill in necessary background information, understanding that if the lesson continued as planned, it would have not been productive, and the objective would not have been met. This did not coincide with the planned lesson plans. During the interview, Participant C did express the frustration of an interrupted lesson because of the students' lack of background knowledge. Participant D wanted more time during the lessons to build students' background knowledge so that they could comprehend the text. Participant C expressed the need for teachers to get to know their students to predict when they need help to build their background knowledge. This participant saw written responses, essays, small groups, classroom community sharing, and conferencing as opportunities to assess and get to know the students better.

**Finding 4: Reading Assessments**

At first, all of the participants felt that their assessments were sufficient and helpful in guiding their instruction. They explained that assessments start right at the beginning of the school year. The first assessment tool used by AAES to establish students' reading levels is the computer-based Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI). The level of complexity increases when students answer the questions correctly or decreases when they are incorrect. Participants C, D, E, and F mentioned the computer-generated SRI reading comprehension test, but they did not express their opinions about its effectiveness. All participants mentioned the importance of administering individual assessments to the students in the beginning of the year from the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System. The benchmark test entails students reading a fiction or nonfiction text, reading part of it out loud to the teacher to test speed and accuracy, and then orally answering open-ended comprehension questions. At the same time, teachers scribe all of the answers exactly as the students state them. At this point, there was a discrepancy among the participants' responses whether or not students could look back in the text, with either way being a major variable affecting the outcome of the score.

Each benchmark assessment takes approximately 20 minutes. After it is complete, the teachers calculate the scores for accuracy, comprehension, and reading level. The decision to continue another round of tests lies with the teachers, but they are encouraged to conduct at least three tests at the beginning of the year for each student to identify independent, guided, and frustration levels. All participants found the test a valuable reading diagnostic tool. Participants B, C, D, E, and F described the benchmarking

assessment as a time-consuming process that usually took 6 weeks to complete, and they found the open-ended comprehension questions subjective. Other twice-a-year assessments were in word analysis. Participants A and F stated that these assessments offered a glimpse into the students' mastery of word knowledge (phonemic and phonics knowledge). Again, these tests were performed twice during the school year. Atlantic Avenue Elementary School's reading curriculum and framework, place a high value on the usefulness on these benchmarks.

Some of the participants questioned the validity of the testing system and wondered whether another assessment would be more efficient and make better use of their time. These benchmarks are located in a locked and secure area in a folder in the classroom. They were not brought out for the reading instruction, and individual levels were not written on the lesson plans.

Another part of the reading curriculum and framework that Participants A, B, and C felt was important for assessing was individual conferencing. One-on-one conferences between teachers and students provided copious information about students' progress in reading and allowed teachers to teach, reteach, or reinforce specific reading skills. Conferencing served as a more frequent assessment between testing at the beginning of the year and at end of the year. The participants also claimed that it helped the teachers to assess students who might otherwise have been overlooked in a whole-class setting. Participants A and C felt that it was necessary to learn about their students' interests in reading in order to make complete reading assessments, even though it was a very time-consuming process. Participant B felt that conferencing was the best way to assess

students' reading performance. As a management piece, when Participant A conferred with students, notes were recorded on a weekly grid, providing current information about everyone's progress for that week and making it easier to make decisions about future lessons. Conferencing on individual cases did not happen during the observations or located in the lesson plans.

According to the participants, daily reading assessments came in the form of oral responses during guided reading and shared reading, written responses to reading, running records, and anecdotal notes on individual students. Participants C, D, E, and F managed their guided reading oral assessments by calling on specific students to answer certain questions. Some of the participants expressed that the biggest pitfall of that practice was that the most verbal student in guided reading groups dominated the discussions; therefore, they felt that the assessments were not as thorough or reliable as they could have been. During the observation, Participant C remedied this situation by sending the more vocal students back to their seats.

As an alternative to oral assessments, Participant C preferred to use written responses to open-ended questions, usually assigned in shared reading or reading in other content areas such as science or social studies. During the observation, Participant C had assigned a written assessment during the guided reading lesson. The assignment's objective was finding the main idea of each paragraph in a specific section of their nonfiction text. Participant C was not satisfied in the lesson's outcome and claimed that more support is needed before this assignment can be successful. Participants A and B sometimes used written responses as a guided reading assessment and thought that it was

good practice for the state test. One participant used running records to analyze accuracy; other participants recorded the words that their students struggled with or mastered. None of the participants offered any responses about fluency skills or the record keeping of them.

An assessment prescribed by AAES's reading curriculum and framework is for students to write letters in their notebooks about the books that they were reading. During my observation, Participant A explained to the students the importance of keeping the reading logs in their notebooks, but the teacher had not planned or used any assessments to check on the students' efforts to keep the reading logs. As for the letters written about their reading, Participants A, B, D, and E had different expectations and rubrics for them. Participants A and B stated that their students could write about any books that they were reading, but Participant C restricted the letter to guided reading books. Participant E restricted the students to write only about their guided reading books. Participants C and E used the assessment as a rigorous comprehension grade, whereas Participants A and B felt that it was a good vehicle for students to converse with peers about their reading. Participants C and E noted that the high-achieving readers wrote letters depicting depth of thought but the below-basic readers struggled with their letters. Participants C and E used the letters to provide information in order to scaffold reading instruction in conferencing, small groups, or whole groups.

Participants C, D, and E felt that AAES's required assessments could not be used as indicators of progress to drive instruction because there were too few of them to assist in daily decisions regarding instruction. They measured progress from the beginning of

the year to the end. Daily or weekly assessments such as letters in notebooks or oral responses in guided reading were too subjective and lacked individual student accountability. They also expressed how exhausting and time-consuming it was to design and prepare lessons and assessments in this reading curriculum and framework on a daily basis. All participants listed group discussions in their lesson plans as their forms of assessment for the lessons. The need for more rigorous, frequent, standardized, and aligned assessments of the grade equivalent skills and knowledge was noted.

#### **Finding 5: PD Support and Training**

Atlantic Avenue Elementary School's reading curriculum and balanced literacy framework are two separate components. The curriculum comprises the units of study, and the framework provides the structure for reading instruction. The reading curriculum and framework have three components: reading, writing, and word study.

After AAES adopted the new reading curriculum and framework, PD needed to be carefully planned and in place to be successful. Reading coaches attended training at the university, which was sponsoring the framework. The coaches received intense training each month. A few times each year, the university faculty visited AAES and provided onsite PD for the teachers. Participant A explained that because of budget cuts in PD over the last 3 years, AAES could not sustain the university connection, so it was discontinued. Despite those budget cuts, PD and training in the reading curriculum and framework have consistently been provided at AAES by the two reading coaches since 2003.

All of the participants believed that PD was important to the growth of teachers and the academic success of students. Participant A referred to the whole experience as a paradigm shift, noting that “I needed to take everything I knew about reading instruction and place it to the side in order for this framework to work.” The participants found the reading coaches supportive, approachable, and highly visible every day in the school setting. The teachers could reach them via phone calls or e-mail, and they always responded promptly.

Participant B noted that support from the principal was important in valuing the training required and materials needed in order for the reading curriculum and framework to be successful. Participants B and E claimed that not all schools in AAES’s district have been as successful in implementing the reading curriculum and framework. Participants D and E attributed the successful adoption of this framework at AAES to the enthusiasm, professionalism, and dedication of the reading coaches and the principal. Participant A stated, “Reading coaches are reading specialists, who help the teacher to become better reading instructors, and because of the training I have received, I can use any piece of literature and be able to teach a student.” Participant B commented on the importance of receiving immediate feedback from reading coaches, stating that “I am always working towards improvement, the coach helps me to alleviate the frustration and preventing me from resorting back to old ways of reading instructions.”

Despite the training of the teachers and all participants claiming that the PD was supportive, AAES continued to experience a reading achievement gap. Participant C’s responses added depth to the perspective on training. The participant proposed leveled



PD, that is, training at a higher level for teachers who were ready or who wanted a deeper understanding of the reading curriculum and framework. Participant C, who claimed that the training had begun to focus on basic learners, wanted more intense training with more specific lessons.

### **Summary**

Reading effectively is complex and requires many skills to occur simultaneously (e.g., background information, supportive word work, and applied reading skills); however, the process varies from person to person. Based upon the interviews, lesson plans, and observations, it was clear that the participants were prepared for the lessons and gave students adequate wait times to respond. Not all components of AAES's reading curriculum and framework were observed. A large portion of AAES's reading curriculum and framework is student driven; so another qualitative study would have to be developed to encompass the observation and assessment of students. This study focused only on the perceptions of the teachers.

Atlantic Avenue Elementary School's reading curriculum and balanced literacy framework rely heavily on the experience, knowledge, and judgment of the reading teachers. The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of the reading teachers about the achievement gap between high-performing and below-basic readers.

The participants exhibited eagerness to accept new challenges, learn ways to obtain higher academic results from their students, and try new books to reach reluctant readers. Their eagerness and willingness to participate were the main reasons that my committee and I decided that PD would be the best project genre for this study. The

results of this study were applied to the development of a PD project for the reading teachers at AAES. In Section 3, I describe the rationale for and details of the PD project that has been planned for AAES's reading teachers.

### Section 3: The Project

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this exploratory study was to explore the teachers' perceptions of the reasons for the reading gap between high-achieving readers and below-basic readers at AAES within the school's reading curriculum and framework. The qualitative data gathered in this project provided in-depth views into the perceptions, motivations, and rationales behind the participants' instructional strategies. I gathered qualitative data by interviewing the participants and then by observing each participant teach a reading lesson. I also received a copy of their prepared lesson plans to review before the observation. After presenting and discussing the findings with my committee members, we decided collaboratively that the most appropriate project genre would be PD. The PLC model was the PD genre selected based upon the possible sustainability of the PD and the willingness of the participants to commit to a common focus, share their beliefs about effective reading instruction within AAES reading curriculum and framework, and work interdependently (Rentfro, 2007).

The PLC method of PD can emerge and be sustainable within a spirit of collaboration among the participants at AAES, along with the knowledge base of the rest of the school community. Based upon these findings, it was concluded that a PLC model might be the most effective PD approach at this school. The next section includes a description of the project, its goals, and learning outcomes specifically for reading instructors at AAES. I also present a review of literature to support the rationale for choosing this project.

### **Description and Goals**

PLCs refer to the small but collaborative grade-level teams developed for this project. I used the rich data obtained from the findings to formulate the topics for the PD sessions for the PLCs. PLCs are planned for teachers of Kindergarten to Grade 6, who will meet once a week during their planning periods. An administrator, either the principal or the vice principal, will oversee this project.

The goal of developing the PLCs will be for the teachers to share and build a knowledge base with colleagues to improve their instructional practices and students' learning outcomes. The project will comprise five sessions. The first session will focus on building an effective PLC. The session will explain the basic premise of a PLC, clarify the expectations regarding the level of dedication required of each member, and establish members' roles within the group. The first session of the PLC also will establish the ground rules that shape behavior, establish expectations, increase positive interactions, and boost productivity.

The other four sessions will encompass the last four findings in this study. The objective of the second session will be to practice balanced literacy in the classroom. Balanced literacy refers to the balance between phonic-based literacy instruction and whole language (Pressley, 2002). The third session will focus on reading instruction delivered to students at their individual ability levels. The fourth session will show the teachers ways to build students' background knowledge to enhance reading comprehension. The fifth session will focus on ways to develop meaningful assessments

in order to drive reading instruction. Each session will be accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation to facilitate the initiation of each PLC workshop.

Once the PLCs become established in this school, the teachers will be better positioned to continue them on their own. The teachers will be able to leverage the success of this pilot PLC into continuous and evolving PD that will help to remove or mitigate obstacles between students and their academic success. The teachers might have memberships in more than one PLC, that is, in such diverse subject areas as science, math, social studies, and reading.

### **Rationale**

I used a qualitative, exploratory, case study approach to examine the reading teachers' perceptions of the reasons for the achievement gap between high-achieving readers and below-basic readers within their reading curriculum and framework. Currently, the reading curriculum and framework are comprehensive in nature, but the lessons, scope, and sequence within the reading curriculum and framework have not been developed by the teachers in concert with one another. Ten years after adopting the reading curriculum and framework, the practice of PD at AAES was to provide weekly sessions after school to support the teachers. Diminishing budgets resulted in less frequent PD workshops.

After I collected, transcribed, and coded the data, I began to identify themes emerging from the data. The participants pinpointed and identified specific areas of concern in relation to the achievement gap occurring between high-achieving readers and below-basic readers. The participants reflected on their work, and Participants B, C, D,

and E stressed that students' lack of general background knowledge affected their low levels of vocabulary and lack of connectedness with what they were reading. These participants felt that this lack of background knowledge was the most significant factor in the reading achievement gap between high-achieving readers and below-basic readers.

I reflected on the openness of the participants' responses and their desire to share their beliefs and concerns. Based upon the analysis of their responses and an examination of AAES's reading curriculum and framework, the participants' professional discipline, and the reading achievement gap, it became my goal to develop a PLC in an effort to give the teachers the opportunity to work collaboratively on these specific goals, offer support in the form of group-constructed reflective feedback, and develop rigorous and meaningful assessments to enable them to interpret their students' achievements.

Learning to read is a complex cognitive process, so a PLC can offer teachers the flexibility and ability to target specific skills for each grade level. I designed the individual PLC teams to be teacher driven and to fit into the day without the need to rearrange schedules, making it possible for PLCs to become a sustainable component of PD offered at the school. Information and knowledge can be shared among members of the school community and used to achieve better results from students.

### **Review of Literature**

The purpose of this study was to explore the reading teachers' perceptions of AAES's reading achievement gap between high-achieving readers and below-basic readers within their reading curriculum and framework. The organization and analysis of the findings should help to support future collaboration among the teachers. I chose to

develop this PD project using the PLC model to communicate the findings from the participants from this study to the rest of the school community. In addition, because AAES's school district is going through a structural reorganization that will resemble a more flat distribution of power, PLCs could become a more effective way to communicate important information among the teachers at the school (Harris, 2014).

In order to understand the background of AAES's reading curriculum and framework, I received permission to access the school's professional library to obtain relevant information. I also searched several databases for relevant literature: EBSCOhost, ERIC, and ProQuest. I used the keywords of *learning theories and meanings, adult learning theories, andragogy, professional development, flat organizational structure, PLCs, lesson studies, professional standards for teachers, and achievement gaps* to find other sources.

### **Professional Development**

Effective PD should have a direct impact in the classroom (Harris, 2014). Some workshops in the teaching profession are still driven by businesses that have chosen profits over results and might not relate to schools' local issues. Sometimes when a teacher attends PD training from a source outside the school grounds with the intention of turn-keying it back to the school community, it might have been invigorating and exciting on-site, but losing its original vivacity back at school (Harris, 2014). PD for teachers should be about informing them of ways to improve the academic achievement of students. PD for teachers should allow them to share common interests and goals. Members of effective PLCs want to enrich and improve their teaching practices.

Effective PLCs require time to meet, reflect on teaching practices, try new practices in the classroom, perform assessments, and meet in follow-up session to discuss the results.

PLCs can help teachers to comprehend the link among curriculum, CCSS, assessments, and teaching practices. Teachers need to know the ability levels of students and the learning objectives to be achieved so that students can be successful (Heller, Daehler, Wong, Sinohara, & Miratrix, 2012). PD also needs to show teachers how they can use assessments to drive instructional practices and expand on content knowledge (Vega, 2013). In order for PD to be effective and for teachers to experience continuous learning, PD must be ongoing and sustainable.

### **Professional Learning Communities**

PLCs are self-guided, collaborative teams usually comprising teachers who teach similar grade levels or curriculum content. The goal of PLCs is to improve instruction in order to achieve student success (Harris, 2014). Members of PLCs can belong to more than one team, depending on time and availability. The characteristics of effective PLC teams can range from collective inquiry about specifics in the curriculum, generation of innovative ideas in practices, ways to address the specific learning needs of students, formulation and use of meaningful assessments, and communication of the outcomes with each other (Harris, 2014). Belonging to effective PLCs should be an on-going process, it is cyclical in nature, and all members agree on sharing a clear goal (AISR, 2004). Responsibility for and ownership of the learning outcomes for students should be equally distributed and shared among the members.



Belonging to PLC teams can provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate with colleagues to target specific needs, including lesson plans, modifications, and assessments. Teachers can then take these ideas back to the classroom, practice them, and reflect on the results with other team members at the next meeting. PLCs can help teachers to develop innovative ways to support struggling students and enrich the education of students who have already mastered the requisite skills (DuFour & DuFour, 2012). This ongoing practice can be effective in keeping teaching practices current and affordable (Schmoker, 2006).

Teachers can learn from each other by participating in PLC teams and committing the time to collaborate (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). By doing so, members who participate in strong and continuous practices within PLCs are more likely to improve their teaching strategies (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). PLCs are only as effective as their members, and they are meant to be ongoing. When teachers collaborate to improve their instructional practices, they can tailor lessons to respond to the specific local circumstances within their school settings. This collaborative practice could be a major contribution in closing the reading achievement gap (DuFour et al., 2006; Protheroe, 2008).

PLCs are classified as job-embedded PD, which means that they provide training and learning for teachers. Members meet to discuss teaching practices and assessments collaboratively and openly; generate new practices; try these new practices in the classroom, and after assessing the effectiveness of the practices, bring the results back to the PLC to discuss them with the other members. Effective PLC teams help the members

to decipher the information and offer feedback in order to improve teaching practices. This cycle continues as they try the suggestions and revisions in the classroom (Croft, Cogshall, Dolan, Powers, & Killion, 2010). One advantage of job-embedded learning is that it allows teachers to individualize instruction for students and relate it directly to local issues (AISR, 2004).

Effective PLC teams have distinct formats and clear goals that all members have to agree upon. The teams are more than a casual gathering of a few teachers talking about their concerns. PLC teams are self-driven action teams that are motivated to develop more effective practices to reach all students. Initially, PLC teams need to set the tone by practicing respect for and trust in the other members. Time is important, so the members also need to be efficient in their use of time to be productive.

Each team should establish rules so that each member knows what to expect, how to contribute, and how to keep the session flowing (DuFour et al., 2006). Each member of the team should have the opportunity to contribute to the development of the rules (DuFour et al., 2006). A good exercise to establish the rules for a team is to reflect on past experiences with other committees and think about the obstacles that inhibited their effectiveness (DuFour et al., 2006). Some anticipated responses might be in relation to respecting the importance of the meeting by being on time, staying for the whole meeting, not multitasking by grading papers or texting, not engaging in side conversations or other non-PLC topics during the meeting, and giving members equal opportunity to be heard during discussions (DuFour et al., 2010).

During discussions, members should avoid judgments, sarcasm, and destructive criticism of others; likewise, they also need to respect other members' stages of development (DuFour et al., 2010). A discussion about what to do when rules are violated can be a valuable and timesaving exercise (DuFour et al., 2006). At the end of a session, all members should have at least one idea to take back to the classroom to try and then assess.

In general, PLCs can facilitate the development of learners and leaders in a professional environment who share the responsibility of ensuring that all students receive the best education possible (Little, 2006). When a school adopts the PLC model, new collective learning strategies can emerge and lead to greater student success (AISR, 2004). Supportive and shared leadership can empower teachers individually and collectively to develop leadership roles within the larger school community (AISR, 2004). The stress of the expansion of teachers' roles in the classroom as statisticians, assessment specialists, and diagnosticians, along with the pressures of the new teacher evaluations, CCSS, and PARCC testing, can have an overwhelming effect (Senge, 2006). The complexity of these changing roles has challenged teachers' efficacy.

Belonging to PLC teams can help teachers to support one another by giving them the time to work together and focus on learning outcomes. PLCs can empower teachers to strengthen their professional practice, adapt lessons, and produce better academic outcomes for students (Senge, 2006). The PLC method of PD also can facilitate the distribution of leadership by giving teachers the opportunity to be involved in the school's decision-making process (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Schools with effective

PLCs can experience higher morale and enthusiasm in the work environment (AISR, 2004).

Collaboration among colleagues should reflect a common interest in reaching students' goals and the belief in a high level of learning for each student. Little (2006) recommended that all members of PLC teams be involved in designing lessons, actively participating in research, planning assessments, reflecting on the results, and scheduling sessions. Sustainability of the PD, consistent scheduled sessions, and meeting in timely matter is imperative to the effectiveness of the PD. It is important not to let too much time lapse between trying and assessing new instructional practices. Having follow-up discussions (i.e., about the results of new designed lessons) is important at future sessions to discuss modifications of lessons (Mintzberg, Lampel, & Ahlstrans, 2005).

The role of the principal is another important factor in determining the success of PLCs. Teams of teachers can form independently and be referred to as PLCs, but in order for all students to benefit, all of the educators in the school should consider themselves a community of professional learners. First, in order for PLCs to be considered, the principal and staff must understand the functions and benefits of the PLC environment. The initial step is to focus on the school climate. In most cases, the principal sets the tone of the school climate (Eller & Eller, 2013), which should have high expectations of professional staff to be ongoing learners and foster an atmosphere of learning for students as well staff. The school climate also involves a consistent and trusted practice of open communication and decision making between teachers and principal about school issues. Principals who are successful in promoting a healthy school climate are usually highly

visible within the school and frequently interact informally with teachers and students (DuFour et al., 2006). PLCs can thrive in a school with a healthy school climate.

The second part of the principal's role is to believe in the PLC model of PD by directly supporting teachers' commitment to participate (Hord & Hirsh, 2009). In order for PLCs to be effective, PLC members must commit to meet on a continuous basis, keep records, collect evidence, and bring students' artifacts to meetings to study (AISR, 2004). Supportive principals might organize the initial sessions by developing the PLC meeting schedule and perhaps allowing additional release time for cross-grade PLCs (Thompson & Goe, 2006). Supportive principals might assign meeting places during the initial phase that are easily accessible during the release time, are comfortable, and offer privacy (AISR, 2004). Lastly, supportive principals might need to guide and monitor the PLC teams at first, but then move aside, so that the PLCs can be sustained by the members (Rentfro, 2007).

The commitment to becoming effective PLC team members can be complex. Trust between and among PLC team members needs to be nurtured to develop a comfort level when discussing strategies and skills. Taking the time to establish the rules and expectations of PLC teams can lead to better decisions and the accomplishment of targeted goals (Lencioni, 2007).

Teachers belonging to effective PLC teams can assume many roles that demonstrate the distribution of leadership in the school setting (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Supportive and share leadership can enhance learning strategies and empower teachers to develop leadership roles by inviting input during the decision-making process

(AISR, 2004). In addition to increasing teachers' abilities and students' success, effective PLC teams can become opportunities to increase morale and enthusiasm in the work environment (AISR, 2004).

### **Theoretical Framework**

I developed this project with adult learners, particularly teachers, in mind. The knowledge of how adults learn and the motivation and behind their desire to learn can attribute to the success of PD. The theoretical framework applied the theories of Knowles (as cited in Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015) and Vella (2002) to the PLCs. These theories explain the motivation inherent in adult learning. The shared principles between the theories include the relevance and immediate use of training, the self-driven and motivated characteristics of the learners, and the active participation of all of the participants in the PD. These theories support the PLC model of PD.

Effective PLCs cannot be a mandated PD by an authority; it is a self-driven PD and is based upon the value a teacher places on an effective team by producing results and the willingness of their dedication. If it is not created and maintained by the members, it is not a PLC. Some school administrations have tried to set up small, grade-level PD sessions and refer to them as PLCs, but by definition, they are not PLCs. They are grade-level meetings without administrators. PLCs are effective because the individual team members create it and sustain it. It is beneficial for the members of effective PLCs to be self-driven, be dedicated to their roles and assignments, use professional courtesy in following the rules, and believe in the PLC model to produce sustainable and useful PD.

In addition to addressing how adults learn, this doctoral project also subscribed to other learning theories to enhance the optimal PD experience. In teachers' PD, the workshop leaders should consider the different learning techniques or theories that address different variables in learning, such as content, principles of andragogy, and ways to reach all learners in the classroom setting. In developing this project, I took other learning models into account, including Bandura's (1986) social development theory; Bandura's (2006) self-determination learning theory; and Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory relating to social constructivism, where people learn through social encounters.

### **Knowles, Vella, and Adult Learners**

Knowles (as cited in Knowles et al., 2015) claimed that educators of adult learners must be facilitators of their own learning by setting goals and guiding the learning to fulfill these goals. Knowles's (as cited in Knowles et al., 2015) assumptions about adult learners involved the desire of the learners to know why something is necessary to learn. Adult learners are self-directed, have rich background knowledge from experiences, have a need to apply new information, and are motivated to learn if they see that the information is relevant to their lives (Knowles et al., 2015).

Vella (2002) contributed specific guidelines for teachers. Vella's emphasis was on the dialogue shared in PD opportunities and the key principles necessary for PDs to be effective. The participating learners should complete a needs assessment survey or a questionnaire; the information for this project was gathered through in-depth interviews and observations accompanied by copies of the lesson plans for the observation.

When planning PLC team sessions for adult learners, all of the members must be actively involved in the decision-making process, placing trust in the other members when sharing information and having trust in the competency of the session leaders (Knowles et al., 2015). Members of PLC teams must be able to work collaboratively as well as independently. Team members also need to assume different roles for the sessions to be productive. Lastly, the topic for each session should be achievable in one 45-minute session and be immediately useful in the classroom (Vella, 2002).

### **Bandura**

Bandura's (1986) self-efficacy beliefs from the social development theory were applied in developing the PLC teams for this PD project. According to Bandura, self-efficacy is the expectation of having the ability to accomplish a task and reach the desired outcome. People who suffer from a low level of self-efficacy usually doubt their capabilities usually concentrate on their weaknesses rather than their strengths and might hesitate to experience new tasks (Bandura, 1977).

Strong self-efficacy can come from using coping strategies to meet difficult challenges and the discipline of staying positive. It also can come from witnessing peers complete the same task successfully. People with high self-efficacy are considered more successful in implementing new instructional methods by taking more risks. Having a strong sense of self-efficacy can influence accomplishments and can be strengthened when teachers begin to try new instructional methods introduced during PD in a supportive environment with peers, such as within PLC teams. Self-efficacy can play a



key role in teachers' willingness to adopt new instructional practices introduced in PD sessions.

The intention of PD is to enrich the teachers' instructional methods so that they can contribute to students' success. Teachers can build a stronger self-efficacy by engaging in social interactions with colleagues, coaching to sustain and support efforts, and modeling new instructional methods, all of which can stimulate innovative thinking about learning (Hallowell, 1999). Teachers in PLC teams support other teachers' efficacy, and as a result, they perform at a higher level, referred to as *collective efficacy*. Hence, teachers as a collective body can transfer this support, which can have a positive effect on students (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009).

### **Self-Determination Learning Theory**

A general theory of motivation classifies motivation as either intrinsic or extrinsic. Extrinsic motivation refers to the performance of a task to obtain external rewards or an advantage, whereas intrinsic motivation refers to performance to gain internal rewards such as satisfaction or pleasure. To ensure the success of this project, I needed a more in-depth understanding of motivation. I used the self-determination theory of learning (Bandura, 1986) to understand teachers' motivation to participate in PLC teams. This theory focuses on the motivation to learn, learning dynamics within the group, and the need to belong to peer groups such as PLC teams (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). In using the definition of motivation from the self-determination theory of learning, members meet the three essential needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

The first essential need of competence is related to Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory; the need to be competent in a task is based upon the need to master skills to achieve the desired outcomes. The second essential need to motivate is relatedness, the desire to interact with and be part of a community with similar interests (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). The learning goals become stronger when the members of PLC teams have the support of and connection with peers. Autonomy, the last part of Bandura's (1986) self-determination theory of learning, refers to the responsibility of being practicing professionals. Teachers should have the autonomy to practice alternative strategies to teach students. Teachers should not be restricted to using one program simply because the program has already been purchased by the school. Autonomy should be based upon the needs of students and the professional judgment of teachers.

### **Vygotsky's Constructivism**

Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory's contributions to constructivism also can be applied to the learning experienced by members of PLCs. Vygotsky emphasized that optimal learning occurs in sociable and community-based environments, so working with colleagues on the PLC teams during PD will be beneficial to the teachers. As a practice in ongoing PLCs, members will revisit topics with other team members after they have applied the new knowledge in the classroom and have assessed students' progress. In each PLC session, a different team member can assume the role of the leader. The role of leader should be more like a facilitator, giving information when needed and encouraging teachers to use the new information independently in the classroom setting.

Vygotsky (1978) argued that people learn the most efficiently by constructing their own knowledge, so PLC teams that encourage and welcome the contributions of all members can be more effective than ones driven by authoritarian leadership styles. Pearson and Gallagher (1983) developed their gradual release of control model from Vygotsky's work. Even though the model was directed toward the teacher-student relationship in the classroom, the model can also be applied to the policymaker-teacher relationship.

### **Curriculum, CCSS, and Assessments**

The CCSS is not a curriculum; rather, it refers to the requirements to be introduced or mastered at each grade level (NGA, 2015). The reading curriculum and framework at AAES are comprehensive and do not follow a teachers' manual. The primary level is more structured than at the intermediate level. There is a basic curriculum of reading and writing projects, suggested minilessons, time frames, and the appropriate CCSS strands. At the intermediate level, the standards are not written in the reading curriculum and framework; rather, the intermediate teachers choose lessons based upon their perceptions of students' needs.

After reflecting on the reading curriculum and framework at AAES, I came to believe that the curriculum could be aligned with the CCSS. I use the word "could" after reflecting on and studying the participants' responses. Atlantic Avenue Elementary School's reading curriculum and framework are fluid and adaptable, so the project does not clearly illustrate a lesson in teaching a standard, but does have the standard acronym

written next to the project. It will be up to the teachers to create the lessons and align them with the CCSS.

The framework is separated into three blocks to organize the lessons, determine the content, and schedule the amount of time for the lessons. Many participants claimed that they had to reteach standards many times for mastery; however, there was no clear organizational procedure or system to ensure the validity of this statement. During the PLC sessions, one of the targeted goals will be to encourage the teachers to organize their lessons systematically so that they will know which standards they have taught and which standards the students have mastered (Achieve 3000, 2015).

### **Reflection and Collaboration**

Belonging to PLC teams involves reflecting on teaching practices and collaborating with the other members of the group (DuFour et al., 2010). Recognizing the importance of improving and changing instructional practices is critical for the growth of teachers and the academic success of students (Brookfield, 1995). Teachers who can deal with setbacks and overcome obstacles are effective leaders (Lipp, 2013). Learning to be reflective individually, with a partner, or within a group can sometimes challenge teachers' belief systems or make them more aware of the limitations of their knowledge, both of which can be uncomfortable (Brookfield, 1995; Marzano, 2007; Marzano et al., 2012). Keeping a diary or some other form of record of lessons and saving students' artifacts are critical components of the reflection process of the PLC team sessions (Provenzano, 2014).

PLC team members also recognize the importance of sharing ideas and knowledge. Collaboration between and among the teachers in PLC teams helps to establish trust and an understanding that collective inquiry can improve instructional practices and students' academic results (DuFour et al., 2010). Members of newly formed PLC teams must support the benefits of the practice and see that the information can be used immediately in the classroom setting (Knowles et al., 2015).

Effective PLC teams rely heavily on the members' ability to have open and purposeful communications as well as resolve conflicts successfully (Gratton & Erickson, 2007; Pentland, 2012). The success of the teams also relies on the emotional and social intelligence, cooperative nature, and willingness to coach as well as be coached of each member (Gratton & Erickson, 2007). Fostering this kind of safe and collaborative environment can be a learning opportunity.

The responsibility of sharing the leadership rests on all the team members. Collectively, team members decide on clear objectives for the sessions, create the agendas, monitor the sessions, and focus on common goals (Schawbel, 2013). All PLC team members must agree to respect the time planned for the sessions, organization of the sessions, and the rules (Schawbel, 2013). Roles need to be assigned to ensure the effectiveness of the PLCs. All members are encouraged to monitor and redirect negative behaviors, maintain the rules, contribute ideas, hold each other accountable for the quality of work and participation, and encourage each other with positive responses. A debriefing session should be held at the end of a session before the next agenda is

created. Clear roles and objectives are will ensure the success of PLC teams (Erkens et al., 2008).

### **Poverty Issues at AAES**

Many students AAES are English language learners (ELLs). Students either are learning English or are bilingual. All six participants quickly asserted that the ELL status of many of the students was the reason for the reading achievement gap between high-achieving students and below-basic students. Participants C and D recanted their first responses and claimed that the lack of exposure to life experiences and rich conversations within the family structure was the cause.

The variable of poverty also might have had a significant impact on students' reading achievement at AAES. Title I was established to allocate academic enrichment funds to schools with at least 40% of student populations living at or below the poverty level (USDoe, 2004). At AAES, the poverty level is higher than 90%. Title I schools are considered high-poverty school. Common problems expressed by teachers in Title I schools are students' tardiness and temperaments (McClowry, Snow, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2005).

Temperament has two components: Reactivity houses negative mood, irritability, anger, and reaction; self-regulation controls emotion and behavior (Rothbart, 2011; Sanson, Hemphill, Yagmurlu, & McClowry, 2011). Temperament is assigned by birth and environmental influences, and as children mature, it can be molded. A study of the temperaments of children living at the poverty level found that it is more likely that the

children will display difficult temperaments because of the environmental risks (Sanson et al., 2011).

During the data collection for this study, none of the participants mentioned problems with disruptive behavior from students. However, the participants did express concern about and frustration with the large number of students who exhibited inattentiveness and a lack of background knowledge as well as vocabulary. A few participants explained that they had become aware of the students' lack of connection with their parents in terms of conversations and rich experiences (Hallowell, 1999). Other concerns were about health and housing.

As a Title I school, AAES has been fortunate to be placed in a new building and receive funding for various programs for students. At AAES, the majority of students receives a free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch. Afterschool programs such as sports, the arts, and academic tutoring include a free dinner. Atlantic Avenue Elementary School has modern computers and technology in each classroom; the teachers are highly qualified, are supported by academic coaches, and consider their pay scale to be higher than the state average. Low teacher-to-student ratios and an adequate number of basic skills, ESL, and special education teachers are available. Atlantic Avenue Elementary School has been flexible in making budget decisions and following procedures in an effort to provide a sound education for students, yet a wide achievement gap in reading remains between high-achieving readers and below-basic readers. The participants found this situation frustrating and damaging to their professional sense of self-efficacy.

Tactfully addressing the needs of students living in poverty or coming from low-SES backgrounds can be difficult for teachers, leaving them feeling overwhelmed and powerless (Gorski, 2008). Delivering the curriculum to low-income students using the same instructional methods as those used for their middle-income counterpart used to be considered fair and just. According to Jensen (2013), this instructional approach needs to change because there is the potential for significant learning differences between middle-income students and students who live at or below the poverty level.

The provision of proper nutrition needs to begin prenatally (Antonow-Schlorke et al., 2011). Children who lack proper nutrition could be at risk of reduced cognitive functioning (Basch, 2011; Taki et al., 2010). Children who live at or below the poverty level also face more medical problems, such as ear infections and hearing loss (Menyuk, 1980) and asthma (Gottlieb, Beiser, & O'Connor, 1995), than children from middle-class backgrounds. According to Jensen (2013), these health and nutritional concerns can affect children's ability to stay focused and can have a negative impact on their learning.

Jensen (2013) claimed that children who lack these important resources during their formative years can face deficits in brain and cognitive development. As a result, students who come from low-SES backgrounds might find it difficult to catch up to middle-income students. According to Jensen, delays in brain and cognitive development can be temporary. Instructors who are aware of the developmental needs of low-SES students can learn specific techniques to deliver more effective and more diverse instructional methods to reduce the affects of poverty and strengthen the students' academic development. Teaching low-SES students differently does not mean lowering



expectations or delivering unequal education (Jensen, 2013); rather, it means knowing and addressing their developmental needs, assessing their strengths, and building upon them (Jensen, 2013). Providing informative and effective instructional strategies can help to engage all students.

### **Poverty and Health**

Jensen (2013) identified seven differences between middle-income and low-SES students. Health and nutrition is the first one. A report on food consumption among U.S. citizens living in poverty found that they even though they want to eat healthy foods, they cannot afford them (McMillian, 2014). Poor nutrition can affect cognition and higher absentee rates among students (Basch, 2011). It also makes it more difficult for students to pay attention and concentrate. AAES tries to provide nutritional support to students.

Health issues can pose problems for students. For example, exposure to lead paint can affect cognitive functions such as using working memory or recognizing cause-and-effect relationships. Chronic ear infections can interfere with auditory processing, such as sounding letters and listening to directions. They also can have an impact on students' reading ability (Jensen, 2013).

Parental competency is another major concern for children who live at the poverty level. Parents who lack sufficient general knowledge of the health care needs of their children might not schedule well visits or eye exams, and students who experience health care neglect, intentional or otherwise, are at risk of developmental delays (Perna & Loughan, 2013). Having sufficient skills to practice acceptable and responsible health

care are general parenting skills that can be a major concern for children living in poverty (Walsh, Stille, Mazor, & Gurwitz, 2011).

Evidence-based information from RAND's Promising Practice Network (PPN, 2012) concluded that educating parents at the poverty level could reduce the health and developmental problems of infants. Between 1985 and 1988, eight centers across the United States began intervention programs with families living at the poverty level who qualified. The interventions were comprehensive and included home visits, required child attendance at a child development center, and parent group meetings. Interventions and assessments pertained to medical, childhood development, and social areas. The PPN found significant improvements in children's cognitive development by the age of 24 months.

### **Poverty and Vocabulary, Background Knowledge, and Rich Conversations**

Vocabulary development, improvements in background knowledge, and engagement in rich conversations and experiences with parents are deficits that low-SES students face. Vocabulary is a key part of the ability to read, speak, organize, and manipulate information learned or about to be learned (Hart & Risley, 2003). At AAES, many of the students' parents do not have a fluent command of English, and students are not exposed to English at home; this lack of reinforcement impairs vocabulary development. By the age of 4 years, students from low-SES environments hear 13 million words, middle-income students hear 26 million words, and upper-income students hear approximately 46 million words (Hart & Risley, 2003). The gap between the classes is significant.

Achievement gaps can start to emerge by the age of 3 years. When low-SES students enter Kindergarten, the gap is already apparent. The quality of a preschool or a day care program can have an impact on a child's development. Exposure to more complex language, positive peer interactions, high-quality early childhood care with highly educated adults, plenty of space to play, and opportunities to use their fine and gross motor skills will lead to higher social and cognitive development (Rothstein, 2004). Lack of parenting knowledge can sometime contribute to these deficits. Choosing to spend family time playing a video game instead of engaging in family talk, reading, or a board game forfeits valuable bonding and educational opportunities (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997).

Being a positive role model for students can help them to make good choices, provide examples of what to do in different situations, build positive attitudes, and see the future as full of possibilities (Robb, Simon, & Wardle, 2009). Students might be from homes where their parents might be unstable, overworked, or absent. Being supportive adults in students' lives and getting to know them can help teachers to provide more effective interventions (Jensen, 2013).

### **Inattentiveness and Chronic Stress**

Low SES and the accompanying financial hardships can be correlated with depressive symptoms (Butterworth, Olesen, & Leach, 2012). Students' inattentiveness and learned helplessness are symptomatic of a stress disorder and depression. The school environment can be a positive motivating factor in students' lives (Irvin, Meece, Byun,

Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011). Teachers can use sincere affirmations, challenge and encourage students to work harder, and provide daily feedback to them.

Stress is the brain's reaction to a stimulus or the response to an environment. Individuals can interpret stress in different ways; some stress can be seen as life saving such as fight or flight and some harmful to your body. Usually, when a stimulus is removed, the body returns to a state of homeostasis. However, chronic stress is physical or mental stress that continues for too long, even after the stimulus has been removed (American Psychological Association [APA], n.d.; Toxic Stress, n.d.). Symptoms of chronic stress can include anxiety, insomnia, muscle pain, cardiovascular disease, depression, and obesity (APA, n.d.).

Children who live in poverty are more likely to experience chronic stress at home in the form of poor nutrition, poor health care, inadequate or overcrowded housing, inadequate parental guidance, and violence in the home or neighborhood (Stromberg, 2013). This prolonged state of stress can be harmful to the development of cognitive functions (Listen, McEwan, & Casey, 2009). Chronic stress also can compromise the immune system (Blair & Raver, 2012); negatively affect social competence (Evans & Schamberg, 2009); weaken control of the attention span; influence impulsivity; impair working memory (Evans & Schamberg, 2009); result in difficulty monitoring the quality of work and solutions to problems (Alloway, Gathercole, Kirkwood, & Elliot, 2009); and deflate creativity (Stromberg, 2013). Children experiencing chronic stress because of poverty also might have more emotional disorders such as anxiety and fear (Stromberg,

2013) or might have to make behavioral choices between being oppositional or withdrawing into learned helplessness (Buschkuehl & Jaeggi, 2010).

Although stress can inhibit brain growth, changing the child's environment, promising research discovered the possibility of reversing some negative effects (Stromberg, 2013). Teachers who give students the cognitive and organizational skills to overcome poor processing skills have seen such students resolve problems (Jensen, 2013). Cognitive capacity is a skill that can be manipulated and enriched through instructions (Buschkuehl & Jaeggi, 2010). Jensen (2013) recommended using positive reinforcement, introducing small chunks of information, and repeating lessons and skills.

### **Project Description**

This project will use the PLC method of delivering PD training for teachers at AAES. For the sake of this study, the teachers will be organized into PLC teams according to grade level. A common practice for PLC members is to formulate their own objectives, but in order to share the findings of this doctoral study. Four more PLC sessions will follow the initial session. I will serve as the main facilitator in this project. Before the PLC team sessions begin, I will schedule an initial meeting with AAES's administrators to establish a clear and mutual understanding of PLC teams, rules, procedures, and beneficial outcomes. My duties in this project will encompass the guidance, the organization, and delivery of the necessary materials to the PLCs for the training such as the PowerPoint slides and workshop evaluations to the school community. The members will use the computers and projectors already in the classrooms and will have the opportunity to meet during their planning periods.

### **Scheduling, Management, and Motivation**

Time and scheduling can present problems for PD at this school. After school would be the best time for the PLC teams to meet, but asking the teams to meet after school would not be effective because of the teachers' personal and professional obligations, as well as the teachers' union contract limiting mandatory afterschool staff meetings to two per month.

In compliance with the teacher's union contract, administrators could plan one meeting per week during the teachers' preparation periods. Planning the PLC team sessions during this time could give the teachers the opportunity to meet with other teachers from the same grade levels. The PLC teams would meet once a week for 5 weeks. The initial session would cover the rules and establish the purpose; the next four sessions would focus on the collective inquiry and best practices in learning. The stated expectation would be for the teachers to bring the information back to the classroom, apply it, and then discuss their reflections and gather information at the next PLC session. This practice would be ongoing. The PowerPoint slides will be divided for a series of meetings. Suggestions for future topics will be encouraged.

### **PD Topics**

The topics for the PD sessions came from the data collected during this study. According to the participants, reasons for the reading achievement gap at AAES are diverse and multifaceted. To benefit from these findings, I developed PowerPoint presentations for all five PLC sessions. The topics and accompanying material had to have a direct impact on students' success in order for the teachers to consider using them.

In order for the information to be studied and shared, it had to be ongoing in order for the teachers to have an opportunity to try the new materials or strategies and bring the results back to the PLC sessions for reflection.

### **Past PD**

The first 4 years of PD for the reading curriculum and framework focused on the new concepts and was delivered once a week for 1 hour. Twice a year, AAES would have PD days, meaning that the teachers would be in training workshops and would have the opportunity to discuss, ask for clarification, and exchange ideas pertaining to the reading curriculum and framework. Once the grant that funded the training ended, scheduling workshops after school every week without pay became a union issue; as a result, PD for reading was reduced to the contracted required amount, that is, once every other month.

Currently, there is no consistent format to share PD information at the school. The greatest obstacle to this process is time. The reading coaches were able to attend a recent weeklong professional workshop directly tied to AAES's reading curriculum and framework. Feedback about the workshop was positive, but no plans were made to share the information with anyone. The restriction of time is an issue involving the teachers' union, the school district office, and the budget.

### **Project Evaluation**

I planned the PD sessions to enhance reading instruction to close the reading achievement gap at AAES between high-achieving and below-basic readers. It is important to receive feedback from the sessions to maintain quality and sustainability. The summative evaluation will occur at the end of the last session. The responses in the

final evaluations will reflect the teachers' perceptions of the benefits of the PLC model and predict their future sustainability.

I developed an evaluation form to serve as feedback to assess the success of the PLC sessions. Success will be measured by the members' responses and willingness to continue the PLC practice. Each member will be asked seven questions; four questions will have a response rating between 1 and 5; 1 being strongly disagree, 3 neutral, and 5 strongly agree. There will also be three questions will be open ended. Members will be asked whether the sessions gave them enough time to synthesize the material, how useful the material was to them in the classroom and whether the sessions maintained a collaborative atmosphere. I also intend to ask whether the goal intended was met and, if not, what adjustments could be made to attain the goal. The members will be asked whether they would be willing to continue this training on their own. The directions for the evaluations are to complete it and return it to me at the end of the last session. I will share the results with administrators and other members of the school community.

### **Project Implications**

Sharing the data with the stakeholders, including the superintendent, the school principal and vice principal, and the teachers, can provide them with a deeper understanding of the reading achievement gap as well as ways to close that gap and reach the population of below basic readers. Closing the achievement gap between high-achieving readers and below-basic readers will lead to positive social change at AAES. Students who are struggling to learn to read will learn that reading is possible and reading well is achievable. Students who find success in reading will start to believe in



themselves and see their confidence grow. They will find new learning opportunities that will give them more choices in life because their proficiency in reading has improved.

As for teachers and others in the school community, they will see membership in PLCs as valuable in improving their instructional strategies and the academic achievement of students. Belonging to PLCs can help the teachers to become empowered practitioners who foment change, prepare developmentally appropriate lessons, and able to communicate with others in the educational community. Membership in PLCs allows teachers to explore the theories behind instructional practices and make sound judgments in the classroom.

## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the teachers' perceptions of the reading gap between high-achieving readers and below-basic readers at AAES. The qualitative data provided in-depth views of the perceptions of and motivation and rationale for the participants' instructional strategies. The intention of this project was to present a forum to share that information.

### **Project Strengths**

The project is expected to be cost effective to the school and time efficient for the stakeholders. Because there will be no need for release time for any teachers, there will be no need for substitute teachers. The sessions will be held during the teachers' regular planning periods, so no funds will be budgeted for teachers to attend PD sessions outside of contract hours. In addition, the sessions will be held during the day, so attendance will not be a concern, and afterschool activities will not have to be canceled.

Before project implementation, I will hold an initial meeting with the administration at AAES to explain the specific purpose of the PLC teams, what administration's role will be, and how this activity can fulfill the requirements of the school's improvement plan in PD. In establishing this practice, it will be easier for an administrator to monitor the progress of each PLC team initially because the sessions will be conducted one at a time throughout the day. It is beneficial to monitor the sessions until teachers see the advantages of them and take ownership of them.

Sometimes, when PD is brought into a school, the material and presenter(s) do not understand the local situation, and as a result, the training has no relevance to the students. This training will have a direct connection to AAES's teachers, who will have the opportunity to reflect on and inquire about the latest developments and strategies in education within the local context.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this project involve the administrators and teachers, who must have a complete understanding of PLCs and believe in the potential benefits to the school. Otherwise, PLCs become an exchange of stories and pleasantries, and the members will gradually see no value in the sessions. Eventually, the PLCs will cease.

Teachers often work in isolation from one another, so in order for PLCs to be effective, team members must understand that PLCs are a venue for collaboration and trust with colleagues. They must show their willingness to participate in the PLCs. The basic limitation of this project would be the failure to build those relationships among members of the school community.

PLCs need to be organized, sustain their purpose, establish rules, and be goal oriented. Team members need to be dedicated to the process of PLCs and the effort required to belong to effective teams. PLC members also have to establish lines of effective communication between meetings. Communication between other PLC members and the school's administration also is important to having productive meetings. If PLCs lack these elements, they will most likely fail.

### **Recommendations for an Alternative Approach**

Closing the achievement gap between high-achieving readers and below-basic readers is a concern at AAES. The PLC model of PD to address the reading gap requires dedication and such professional courtesies as being on time, being nonjudgmental, working collaboratively, and respecting the privacy of the team members. These courtesies would be agreed upon during the first PLC session.

Instead of following the PLC model, an alternative approach to PD could be lecture styles of workshops at the school. Although lecturing is not the most effective way for teachers to take ownership of new material or exercise leadership in their profession, but it is, nonetheless, a way to communicate information. At first, a policy paper highlighting the five emergent themes would have to be presented to the principal. A series of workshops would be proposed based upon the five themes. Each theme would require approximately three 1-hour workshops (15 sessions).

### **Scholarship, Project Development, Leadership, and Change**

When developing this study, I reflected on a problem that the school was experiencing. By studying the participants' responses and observations, it became apparent to me that collaboration and self-discovery were important partners in being effective teachers. I found that the teachers were eager to share their perceptions, practices, and even frustrations. Although I was not able to share my personal ideas at the time of data collection, I imagined the richness of collaboration if all of the participants could belong to one PLC team and draw collectively upon their knowledge and openness to examine their instructional practices.

When developing this project, I became aware that self-discovery was critical to my personal growth as a doctoral student and as a teacher. Discovering this newly learned information through research and critical thinking transformed me from student to scholar.

In developing the sessions for this project with my committee, I reflected on the excitement of self-discovery in taking ownership of my new knowledge. The notion of presenting this PD project to teachers was unnerving. Once I obtained my findings, I realized that I had sufficient information to share my knowledge with colleagues.

Transitioning from student to scholar made me realize that I could learn and conduct research on my own and develop my own opinions without undue external influence. I truly thought this was just going to be an assignment of going out to the field gathering. As I typed the transcriptions and analyzed the data, I became aware how much I had matured as a student and a researcher. I began to realize that this is an exciting time in education. A shift is occurring, and the field of education is opening up for teachers to lead. PLCs are the vehicle for teachers to influence and establish policy.

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

In developing this project, I became aware that self-discovery was critical to my development as a doctoral student and as a teacher. My topics for the individual PLC sessions needed to be focused, to be used as a guide, and not to become proselytizing lectures. Collecting, organizing, and analyzing the data required a disciplined practice to prevent predisposed ideas from influencing the results. Based upon this conception, I began to draw a correlation with the doctoral research process and being a member of a

PLC. In both cases, being a doctoral student and a PLC member simultaneously required me to take an objective view and make decisions based upon the findings. While on my journey as a doctoral student and exhausting every avenue in my search for data relevant to my study, I began to realize that I was becoming a researcher while enriching my knowledge base as a teacher. These are the same roles that PLC team members would assume as they read educational journals and other primary sources, and then collaborated with colleagues.

It became evident to me while gathering and then analyzing the data that I needed to be able to distinguish between sound instructional practices and the latest teaching fads. As a researcher, I understood the importance of primary sources to my study, but as a teacher, I understood the importance of questioning and understanding the theories undergirding instructional practices so I could make sound judgments in my classroom. I felt that I had become more empowered and had more control over my education as a researcher and a teacher.

The importance of this project lies in the transference of knowledge to the classroom setting. Analyzing data in the doctoral process is analogous to analyzing student assessments. In both situations, it is imperative to be objective and follow procedures methodically to obtain accurate results.

### **Implications, Application, and Direction of Future Research**

The intent of this study was to explore the reading teachers' perceptions of the reading achievement gap at AAES. While I was collecting and reflecting on the data, something emerged that I did not expect, namely, the level of eagerness that the

participants expressed. By freely sharing their lesson plans and even frustrations, and by participating in the interviews and observations, the participants demonstrated their eagerness as a need or desire to be heard, to be involved in making positive changes to the profession, and to share their in-depth knowledge. It became apparent to me through those actions that the participants also viewed collaboration and self-discovery as important to being effective teachers. Although I was not in a position as the researcher to share my personal ideas with the participants at the time of the data collection, I imagined the richness of collaboration if all of the participants could belong to one PLC and draw collectively upon their knowledge and openness to examine instructional practices.

PLCs can be a starting point for social change for teachers. The ultimate goal of education is to help students to reach their full potential. The implications of this study for social change for teachers would be to expand their roles in education, going from quiet to influential stakeholders. It can start at the grassroots from their school to influencing schools and practices countrywide. In doing so, teachers need to exercise the power of their diverse roles in education today such as; being a student always learning, being a practitioner belonging to effective PLCs by studying and creating innovative ideas, and then as an agent of change by communicating learned information to the other stakeholders in the community. The world in where we live is drastically changing and the profession of teaching not only needs to keep up, but to be in front of it.

Effective teachers who are willing to be leaders need to use their knowledge to make positive change by influencing policymakers. Teachers need to become involved: At the local level, they can choose effective materials, select PD, develop curriculum

content and schedules, and at the to state and national levels, they can focus on evaluations, standards, and testing. Teachers are at the forefront of education, and they are exposed on a daily basis to what works and what does not in terms of instructional strategies. Teachers are making instructional choices and receiving immediate feedback from the ultimate stakeholders, that is, their students. No longer can teachers remain silent about important issues such as unrealistic teacher evaluations, expensive and non-effective mandates, and the state and federal tests that are beyond the students' grade levels. A new perspective of and attitude toward the teaching profession is needed within schools, colleges, and the country, but change will not happen until teachers as a collective body are willing to address it (Louise, 2006).

Social change implications for the students involved concentrating on the reasons for the reading achievement gap. Exploring the teachers' perceptions of the reading achievement gap at AES was important to identify these factors. PLCs for teachers will help to explore ideas and provide them with a discussion forum to identify what instructional strategies are effective and which ones need to improve.

Most of the students at AAES speak a language other than English at home. Many interventions lean toward meeting the needs of ELLs. These interventions have been applied to instruction and have helped the students; however, AAES continues to experience a reading achievement gap with many students still struggling to read proficiently. The participants expressed frustration that the interventions and extra instruction targeting ELLs still did not produce the desired results. These struggling readers remain at a below-basic level of reading ability.



Future researchers might wish to consider targeting the reading achievement gap and the effects of poverty on students. Even after all available resources are applied; some stakeholders are bewildered why more positive results are not evident in the data. Again, language for some students could be a contributing factor to the lack of reading proficiency; however, the participants made it clear that their students had a good command of English and were not in classified as special education students or ELLs. The participants continued their lessons and interventions with the below basic readers with the same approach, but not realizing the underlying problems interfering with success were perhaps related to poverty, instead of ELL. An effective reading curriculum, along with equally effective teaching strategies targeting poverty, could have a positive impact on students at high-poverty schools (Slavin et al., 2010). The PD at AAES should address the educational needs of this student population. Meeting the instructional needs of students from low-SES backgrounds will result in positive academic outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

Establishing PLC teams at AAES can empower teachers to explore possibilities and seek solutions that address the students' needs. Having a firm understanding of PLCs is needed in order for them to be effective. Committed members of PLC teams can add to the quality of instruction and improve students' academic results. Atlantic Avenue Elementary School's reading curriculum and framework require intensive teacher preparation and rely heavily on the experience and knowledge of the reading teachers. Sharing this wealth of knowledge through PLC teams can support new as well as

experienced teachers. The construction of databases of lessons and assessments by members of PLC teams could cut down on the workload of individual teachers. In addition to having a positive impact on students' results, effective PLC teams can empower teachers to emerge as leaders in the school community.

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Appendix: Project

A Tool in Closing the Reading Achievement Gap:

Professional Learning Communities

Prepared by: Helen Iaconelli

### **Professional Learning Communities**

PLCs are teams of professional educators within and outside of the school setting who work together to improve the education of their students and to optimize participation and team effectiveness. They also can belong to more than one team, depending on time and availability. PLCs usually comprise the whole school as a unit, but they also can be larger units, such as school districts. I used the term *teams* for the smaller groups within the school and *PLCs* for all the teams as a whole unit within the school. As I conducted the interviews and performed the observations, I noticed the eagerness of the participants to share ideas about closing the reading achievement gap. Based upon the results of the literature search and a sense of the school's environment while gathering the data, I determined that a PLC method of PD was the best fit for this school.

### **Background**

The school in this study had implemented a new reading curriculum and framework for the teachers to use. The reading curriculum and framework were comprehensive and relied heavily on after-school training in order to help the teachers to implement them effectively. The reading curriculum and framework do not follow a teaching manual; instead, the teachers rely on a multitude of resources and books with similar reading instruction philosophies. The school, the teachers, and the students relied heavily on the teachers' knowledge and experience. For the first 10 years after adopting the reading curriculum and framework, AAES used to hold frequent PD sessions to

support the teachers, but budget costs resulted in these meetings occurring less frequently.

The goal in developing a PLC was to give the teachers the autonomy of selecting their own topics and the opportunity to work collaboratively on these specific goals. PLCs can offer support in the form of reflective feedback, the development of assessments, and the ability of veteran teachers to novice teachers to interpret their students' progress. Learning to read is a complex cognitive process, so PLCs can offer teachers the flexibility and ability to target specific skills for each grade level: PLCs and/or individual teams can be teacher driven, and they can fit into the day without the need to rearrange schedules, thus making it possible for them to become a sustainable practice. Information and knowledge can be shared, manipulated, and used to achieve better results from students.

### **Expansion of Teachers' Role**

The stress of having to assume the expanding roles of statisticians, assessment specialists, and diagnosticians, along with the pressures of new teacher evaluations, CCCS, and PARCC testing, can have an overwhelming effect on teachers (Senge, 2006). The complexity of these changing roles has challenged teachers' efficacy. The benefits of belonging to a team within a PLC can help teachers to support one another by giving them time to work together and focus on learning outcomes. PLCs can empower teachers to strengthen their professional practice, make lessons adaptable, and produce better academic outcomes for students (Senge, 2006).



### **Teacher Leader**

In general, PLCs can facilitate the development of teams of learners and leaders in a professional milieu who share the collective responsibility of ensuring that students receive the best quality of education (Little, 2006). When the PLC model is adopted in a school, new collective learning strategies can emerge and lead to greater student success (AISR, 2004). Supportive and shared leadership can empower teachers individually and collectively to develop leadership roles within the larger school community (AISR, 2004). The PLC method of PD can facilitate the distribution of leadership by offering opportunities for teachers to be involved in the school's decision-making process (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Schools with effective PLCs can experience higher teacher morale and more enthusiasm in the work environment (AISR, 2004).

### **Purpose**

The collaboration among colleagues should reflect a common interest in reaching students' goals and believing in a high level of learning for each student. Little (2006) recommended that all members of individual PLC teams should be involved in designing lessons, actively participating in research, planning assessments, and reflecting on the results. The sustainability is imperative to the effectiveness of the PD because follow-up discussions (i.e., the results of new designed lessons) are important at future sessions (Mintzberg et al., 2005).

The intention of effective PLCs is to monitor students' progress in a timely manner, create innovative ways to support struggling students, and enrich educational opportunities for students who have already mastered the requisite skills (DuFour &

DuFour, 2012). Belonging to a team within a school's PLC can provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate with colleagues to target specific needs, including lesson plans, modifications, and assessments. Teachers can then take these ideas back to the classroom, practice them, and reflect on the results with other team members at the next meeting. This ongoing practice can be effective in keeping teaching practices current and affordable (Schmoker, 2006).

Teachers can learn from each other by participating in the teams and making the commitment to allot time to collaborate (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). By doing so, members who participate in strong and continuous practices within PLCs are more likely to improve their teaching strategies (DuFour et al., 2006). PLCs are only as effective as their members, and they are meant to be an ongoing process. When teachers collaborate with each other to improve their instructional practices, they can tailor lessons to respond to the specific local circumstances within their school settings. This collaborative practice could be a major contribution in closing the reading achievement gap (DuFour et al., 2006; Protheroe, 2008).

### **Role of Principal**

The role of the principal is another important factor in determining the success of PLCs. Teams of teachers can form independently and be referred to as PLCs, but in order for all students to benefit, all educators in the school should consider themselves a community of professional learners. First, in order for PLCs to be considered, the principal and staff must understand the functions and benefits of the PLC environment. The initial step is to focus on the school climate. In most cases, the principal sets the tone

of the school climate (Eller & Eller, 2013), which should have high expectations of professional staff to be ongoing learners and foster an atmosphere of learning for students as well staff. The school climate also involves a consistent and trusted practice of open communications and decision making between teachers and principal about school issues. Principals who are successful in cultivating a healthy school climate are usually highly visible within the school and frequently interact informally with teachers and students (DuFour et al., 2006). PLCs can thrive in a school with a healthy school climate.

The second part of the principal's role is to have a firm belief in the practice of the PLC method of PD by directly supporting teachers' commitment to participate (Hord & Hirsh, 2009). In order for PLCs to be effective, there must be a commitment from each PLC member to meet on a continuous basis, keep records, collect evidence, and bring students' artifacts to meetings to study (AISR, 2004). Supportive principals might organize the initial sessions by developing the PLC meeting schedule and perhaps allowing for additional release time for cross-grade PLCs (Thompson & Goe, 2006). Supportive principals might assign meeting places during the initial phase that are easily accessible during the release time that are comfortable and offer privacy (AISR, 2004). Lastly, supportive principals might need to guide and monitor the teams within the PLCs at first, but then move aside, so that the PLCs can eventually be sustained by the members (Rentfro, 2007).

### **Clear Objectives and Commitment**

Effective PLC teams have distinct formats and clear goals that all members have agreed upon. The teams are more than a casual gathering of a few teachers talking about

their concerns. PLC teams are action teams, and their function is to research and develop strategies and lessons to reach all students. Initially, the PLC teams need to set the tone of practicing respect for and trust in the other members. Time is important, so the members need to be efficient in their use of time to be productive. At the end of a session, all members should have at least one idea to take back to the classroom in order to try and assess it.

Each team should establish ground rules so that each member knows what to expect, how to contribute, and how to keep the session flowing (DuFour et al., 2006). Each member of the team should have the opportunity to contribute to the development of the rules (DuFour et al., 2006). A good exercise to establish the rules for a team is to reflect on past experiences with other committees and think about the obstacles that inhibited their effectiveness (DuFour et al., 2006). Some anticipated responses might be in relation to respecting the importance of the meeting by being on time, staying for the whole meeting, not multitasking by grading papers or texting, eliminating side conversations or other non-PLC topics during the meeting, and giving members equal opportunity to be heard during discussions (DuFour et al., 2010). During discussions, members should avoid judgments, sarcasm, and destructive criticism of others; likewise, they also need to show respect for other members' stages of development (DuFour et al., 2010). A discussion on what to do when ground rules are violated can be valuable and time saving (DuFour et al., 2006).

The commitment to becoming effective members of PLC teams can be complex. Trust between and among PLC team members needs to be nurtured to develop a comfort

level when discussing strategies and skills. Time establishing the ground rules and expectations of PLC teams can mean better decisions and the accomplishment of targeted goals (Lencioni, 2007).

Teachers belonging to effective PLC teams can assume many roles that demonstrate the distribution of leadership in the school setting (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Supportive and share leadership can enhance learning strategies and empower teachers to develop leadership roles by inviting input during the decision-making process (AISR, 2004). In addition to increasing teachers' abilities and students' success, effective PLC teams can become opportunities to increase morale and enthusiasm in the work environment (AISR, 2004).

### **Reflection and Collaboration**

Belonging to PLC teams involves reflecting on teaching practices and collaborating with the other members of the group (DuFour et al., 2010). Recognizing the importance of improving and changing instructional practices is critical for the growth of teachers and students (Brookfield, 1995). Teachers who can deal with setbacks and overcome obstacles are effective leaders (Lipp, 2013). Learning to be reflective individually, with a partner, or within a group can sometimes challenge teachers' belief systems or make them more aware of the limitations of their knowledge, both of which can be uncomfortable (Brookfield, 1995; Marzano, 2007; Marzano et al., 2012). Keeping a diary or some other form of record of lessons and saving students' artifacts are critical components of the reflection process of the PLC team sessions (Provenzano, 2014).

The members of PLC teams also recognize the importance of supporting each other by sharing ideas and knowledge. Collaboration between and among the teachers in PLC teams helps to establish trust and an understanding that collective inquiry can improve instructional practices and students' academic results (DuFour et al., 2010). Members of newly formed PLC teams must support the benefits of the practice and see that the information can be used immediately in the classroom setting (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015).

Forming effective PLC teams relies heavily on the members' ability to have open and purposeful communications as well as resolve conflicts successfully (Gratton & Erickson, 2007; Pentland, 2012). The success of the teams also relies heavily on the emotional and social intelligence of each member, a cooperative nature, and a willingness to coach as well as be coached (Gratton & Erickson, 2007). Fostering this kind of safe and collaborative environment can be a learning opportunity.

The responsibility of sharing the leadership rests on all the team members. Collectively, team members decide on clear objectives for the sessions, create the agendas, monitor the sessions to keep them flowing, and focus on common goals (Schawbel, 2013). All PLC team members must agree to respect the time planned for the sessions, organization of the sessions, and the ground rules (Schawbel, 2013). Roles also need to be assigned to ensure the effectiveness of the PLCs. All members are encouraged to monitor and redirect negative behaviors, maintain the ground rules, contribute ideas, hold members accountable for quality of work and participation, and encourage members with positive responses. A debriefing session should be held at the end of the session

before the next agenda is created. Clear roles and objectives are necessary for the success of the PLC teams (Erkens et al., 2008).

### **Project Strengths**

The project will be cost effective for schools and time efficient for the stakeholders. Because there will be no need for release time for any teachers, there will be no need for substitute teachers. The sessions will be held during the teachers' regular planning periods, so money will not have to be budgeted for teachers to attend PD sessions outside of contract hours. In addition, the sessions will be held during the day, so attendance will not be a concern, and after-school activities will not have to be canceled.

Before project implementation, an initial meeting has to be held with the principal of the school to clearly explain the specific purpose of the PLC teams, what the principal's roles will be, and how this activity can fulfill the requirements of the school's improvement plan in PD. In establishing this practice, it will be easier for an administrator to monitor the progress of each PLC team at first because the sessions will be conducted one at a time throughout the day. It is advantageous to monitor the sessions until teachers see the advantages of them and take ownership of them.

Sometimes, when PD is brought into a school, the material and presenter(s) do not understand the local situation, and as a result, the training has no relevance to the students. This training will have a direct connection to AAES's teachers, who will have the opportunity to reflect on and inquire about the latest developments and strategies in education within the local context.

## **Conclusion**

Reading is an important skill for individuals to obtain. Teaching reading is a complicated task, and teachers must have a wealth of knowledge and be able to individualize instruction. Sharing knowledge and experience with colleagues has been beneficial for many PLC teams. However, the design and purpose of the PLC method have been widely misunderstood and have resulted in missed opportunities for many school communities in the United States. Teachers and students do not have the luxury of time; collectively reflecting on reading instruction as members of a PLC team might be the most effective way to achieve results.

Establishing PLC teams can empower teachers to explore possibilities and seek solutions that address the students' needs. Having a firm understanding of PLCs is needed in order for them to be effective. Committed members of PLC teams can add to the quality of instruction and improve students' academic results. AAES's reading curriculum and framework require intensive teacher preparation and rely heavily on the experience and knowledge of the reading teachers. Sharing this wealth of knowledge through PLC teams can support new as well as experienced teachers. The construction of databases of lessons and assessments by members of PLC teams could cut down on the workload of individual teachers. In addition to having a positive impact on students' results, effective PLC teams could empower teachers to emerge as leaders in the school community.



**A Tool in Closing the Reading Achievement Gap:  
Professional Learning Communities  
Professional Development Syllabus**

Title: A Tool in Closing the Reading Achievement Gap: Professional Learning Communities

Length: 5 – 45 minute sessions

Location: Conference Room in Media Center within school

1. PLC Description:  
The PD workshops will help teachers to develop initial PLCs sessions. As for now, in this initial PLC project, teachers will be grouped into PLCs according to grade level being taught.
2. Course Prerequisites:  
Participants should be full-time teachers employed at AAES. They are welcome to bring notes and issues to the meetings.
3. Learning Outcomes/Course Objectives
  - Increase collaborative skills for the benefit of students and the school
  - Increase rigor of instruction and assessments by discussing students' work and assessments
  - Share knowledge, skills, experiences, and also remove obstacles so that learning is being experienced by all students
  - Focus on results, and cultivate the power of teacher leadership
  - Discuss the professional literature
4. PD Methodology  
The method for this PD will be in the PLC groups supported by slides and guidelines.
5. Materials:  
No textbook is needed. A quiet and private area for the PLC sessions is needed. Chart paper, markers, computer, and computer projector will be needed for the slides. Once roles are selected, an agenda, notebook for notetaker, and possibly a timer.
6. Course Educational Resources:  
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7. Course Dates and Times:

Once started, it will be once a week for 45 minutes for 5 weeks during the teachers' planning period.

8. Course Requirements:

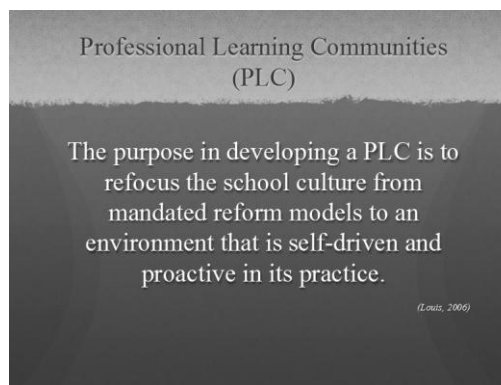
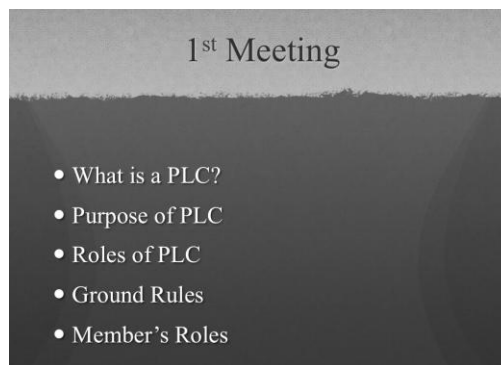
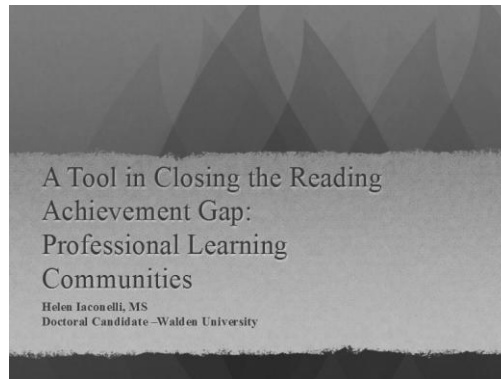
Each member will agree to a role in the PLC group. Ground rules agreed upon. The requirement is to make a commitment and to abide by the ground rules.

9. Evaluation:

All participants will complete an evaluation form at the end of the five PLC sessions.

## **A Tool in Closing the Reading Achievement Gap: Professional Learning Communities Professional Development Agenda**

### **45-minute instruction session**



## Purpose of a PLC

Routinely working together to monitoring students' learning, apply interventions, offer support, and plan enrichment for students who have mastered planned outcomes.

*(DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Mary, 2006)*

## Roles of the PLC Teams

As a whole organization, all members take on the responsibility of all the students.

*(DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Mary, 2006)*

## Roles of PLCs

The PLC would collect and use the knowledge of the school's professionals to establish a on-going collaborative and reflective practice of collective inquiry and action with the focus on gaining better results for all students.

*(DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Mary, 2006)*

## PLC: Learning by Doing

1. Gathering evidence of current level of student learning
2. Developing strategies to build on strengths and strengthen weaknesses
3. Take strategies back to the classroom
4. Analyze the results
5. Bring it back to the team as evidence to analyze

*(DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Mary, 2009)*

## PLC: Team of Professionals

### Teacher as the professionals:

- Sharing and developing knowledge and skills through collective inquiry
- Working together to achieve goals through analysis and practice
- Assessing present practice and compare to best practices to achieve optimal results
- Attitudes → beliefs → habits → culture

*(DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Mary, 2006)*

## Ground Rules

- Time: When? Where? How often? How long?
- Listening to each other: Respect each other/ideas
- Confidentiality: How will ideas be shared outside of team?
- Decision Making: Reaching decisions- conflicts
- Participation: All members participate – attendance
- Expectation: What each member can and should bring?

*(DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Mary, 2010)*

## Member Roles

- Facilitator
- Recorder
- Agenda and Time Keeper
- Process Checker
- Visual and Chart Maker
- Materials Organizer

*(Erkens, Jakicic, Jessie, King, Kramer, Sparks, ... Twadell, 2008)*

2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting

Achievement Gap at AAES:

□ The achievement gap is when a significant gap develops between groups of students state assessment scores. In this case it is between the high achieving readers and below basic readers at AAES.

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2011b)

Discussion:

What is contributing to the cause of the Achievement Gap between the High Achieving Reader and Below Basic Reader at your school?

**Date:**

**45-minute session:**

Topic: Achievement Gap at AAES

Discussion: What is the contributing to the cause of the Achievement Gap between high achieving readers and below basic readers at your school?

Task	Materials	Activity	Time Allotted	Outcomes
Go over Ground Rules	A copy of the rules		5 min	
Topic introduction	Data supporting Copy for everyone	Read	5 min	
Discussion of topic			10 min	Teachers identify problems
Create ways to solve (lessons)			15 min	instruction
Create and agree on time to evaluate to assess			5 min	Creating an evaluative tool
Wrap up and decide what will happen next session	notes	Note taker	5 min	

### 3rd Meeting

#### Effects of Poverty:

- Title I Program
- Chronic Stress
- Teaching Strategies

### Title I Program

A federally funded program that provides funds to school districts with a high percentage of students who are economically disadvantaged. Its overall purpose is to ensure all children have equal opportunities to receive a high quality education.

(LSDoE, 2004)

*40% or above percentage of the students have to meet the criteria in order for the school to qualify.*

(LSDoE, 2004)

*At AAES over 90% of the students qualify.*

### Effects of Poverty...

#### Resources :

*Building Background Knowledge*

(Marzano, 2006)

*Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind: Practical Strategies for Raising Achievement*

(Jensen, 2013)

### Effects of Poverty...

There are differences between these students, by understanding the differences and how to address them may help reduce some obstacles.

~~~~~  
First and foremost, get to know your students.

Without respect and personal connections... all efforts in reaching them will have little meaning.

(Jensen, 2013)

### Effects of Poverty...

Students from Title I schools are more likely to struggle with engagement than students from middle income schools.

(Yazzie-Mistr, 2007)

### Effects of Poverty...

The chronic stress experienced with poverty may also increase the changes of emotional disorders such as anxiety and fear and in turn impair cognitive skills.

(Stromberg, 2013)

**Date:**

**45-minute session:**

Topic: Effects Poverty

Discussion: What are the effects of poverty in learning? Could the effects of poverty be holding back your students at your school?

| Task                                             | Materials                            | Activity   | Time Allotted | Outcomes                    |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------|---------------|-----------------------------|
| Go over Ground Rules                             | A copy of the rules                  |            | 5 min         |                             |
| Topic introduction                               | Data supporting<br>Copy for everyone | Read       | 5 min         |                             |
| Discussion of topic                              |                                      |            | 10 min        | Teachers identify problems  |
| Create ways to solve (lessons)                   |                                      |            | 15 min        | Instruction                 |
| Create and agree on time to evaluate to assess   |                                      |            | 5 min         | Creating an evaluative tool |
| Wrap up and decide what will happen next session | notes                                | Note taker | 5 min         |                             |

4<sup>th</sup> Meeting

## Balanced Literacy:

Whole Group  
versus  
Guided Reading Groups

## Creating a Reader...

"A book is a cooperative venture. The writer can write a story down, but the book will never be complete until a reader, of whatever age, takes that book and brings to it his own story." *Katherine Paterson*

(Stover, 2007)

Developing into this kind of reader requires children to become conscious of the multiple comprehension strategies that allow them to deeply understand and engage with the material.

(Stover, 2007)

## Balanced Literacy

**Guided Reading**

There is an important difference between implementing parts of a guided reading lesson and using guided reading to bring readers from where they are to as far as the teaching can take them in a given school year.

(Fountas and Pinnell, 2012)

vs

**Whole Group**

Daily struggle with very difficult material will not permit smooth, proficient processing, no matter how expert the teaching.

(Fountas and Pinnell, 2012)

## Guided Reading

## Discussion:

Whether it is described as "ladders of success" (Clay, 1991) or Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) students learn best when they are provided strong instructional support by reading text that are on the edge of their learning, but not too easy and not too hard.

(Fountas & Pinnell, 2012)

## Whole Group

## Discussion:

Teaching students on grade level helps them reach grade level reading. No consistent research supports the relationship of matching student-text and learning.

(Shanahan, 2013)



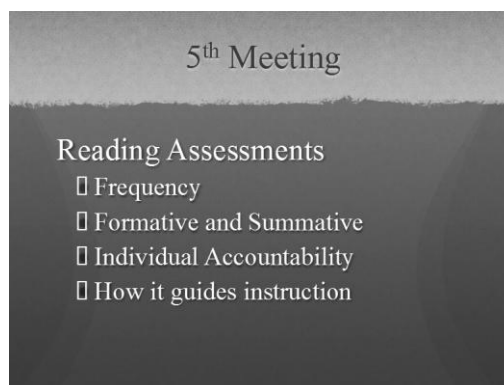
**Date:**

**45-minute session:**

Topic: Balanced Literacy: What does it mean?

Discussion: How does a student learn to read best? Are we holding students back when they are taught in guided reading Groups? Are we losing students when we teach whole group reading? What are the benefits and disadvantageous of each?

| Task                                             | Materials                            | Activity   | Time Allotted | Outcomes                    |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------|---------------|-----------------------------|
| Go over Ground Rules                             | A copy of the rules                  |            | 5 min         |                             |
| Topic introduction                               | Data supporting<br>Copy for everyone | Read       | 5 min         |                             |
| Discussion of topic                              |                                      |            | 10 min        | Teachers identify problems  |
| Create ways to solve (lessons)                   |                                      |            | 15 min        | instruction                 |
| Create and agree on time to evaluate to assess   |                                      |            | 5 min         | Creating an evaluative tool |
| Wrap up and decide what will happen next session | notes                                | Note taker | 5 min         |                             |



**Date:**

**45-minute session:**

Topic: Reading Assessments: How effective and objective?

Discussion: How effective are your assessments? Do you know what they measure and what to do with them after the data is collected? How often are the reading assessments taken and used?

| Task                                             | Materials                            | Activity   | Time Allotted | Outcomes                       |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------|---------------|--------------------------------|
| Go over Ground Rules                             | A copy of the rules                  |            | 5 min         |                                |
| Topic introduction                               | Data supporting<br>Copy for everyone | Read       | 5 min         |                                |
| Discussion of topic                              |                                      |            | 10 min        | Teachers identify<br>problems  |
| Create ways to solve (lessons)                   |                                      |            | 15 min        | instruction                    |
| Create and agree on time to evaluate to assess   |                                      |            | 5 min         | Creating an<br>evaluative tool |
| Wrap up and decide what will happen next session | notes                                | Note taker | 5 min         |                                |

PD Evaluation

Workshop Title: \_\_\_\_\_

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

*With a rating of 1 to 5; 1 being strongly disagree, 3 neutral, and 5 strongly agree;  
Please rate the following pertaining to the PD session you just experienced.*

|                                                                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| 1. How satisfied were you with the PLC sessions.                                      |  |
| 2. Time used in the session was efficient and it allowed you sufficient time to learn |  |
| 3. The atmosphere was collaborative, and enthusiastic, and interesting.               |  |
| 4. The content and strategies of the sessions will be useful in your classroom        |  |

5. What was the most significant thing you learned today?

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6. Was the intended goal met and if not what adjustments could be made to attain the goal? Were there any challenges that occurred during the PLC sessions? What suggestions can you make to adjust for improvements?

|  |
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|  |
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7. How willing are you to continue this training on your own?

|  |
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|  |
|--|

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