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# Improving the quality of teaching: an applied research study on improving the quality of teaching in third-grade reading at Tigerville elementary school

Valeree Ellis-Barnes

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF TEACHING:  AN APPLIED RESEARCH STUDY ON
IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF TEACHING IN THIRD-GRADE READING AT
TIGERVILLE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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Valeree Ellis-Barnes

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Abstract

This applied research study sought to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading at Tigerville Elementary School (TES).  The need to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading was identified through Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading (STAR. 2017-2018) reading data and Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP, 2017-2018) test data.  This study used three elements, providing instructional support for teachers, building teaching capacity, and improving student achievement to address the central issue of improving the quality of teaching in third-grade reading.  The program utilized an action plan and a program evaluation design to address improving the quality of teaching in third-grade reading. The data derived from STAR, teacher reflective journals, and teacher interviews were primarily used to determine the success of this applied research study.  The findings from this study indicated the need to increase teacher collaboration by using Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as the vehicle to provide instructional support for teachers.  This study also found the quality of teaching improved when teachers were provided effective instructional strategies to teach the five components of reading

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my loving husband Poindexter, my wonderful children (Poinesha, Dexter, Christina, Markis and Chasity), my only granddaughter (Ava), and to my grandson, Dexter, Jr. (DJ), who will be born in August, 2019. You have been the steady wind that powered my sail in the tumultuous deep. Thank you for remaining steadfast and always encouraging me to stay the course, even when the weary path shed no light. I do this work for you as an example of commitment, grit, and perseverance. Thank you for consistently listening, and at times, recalling the fleet.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**Chapter I:**

**INTRODUCTION**

Every student must learn how to read. Dr. Seuss wrote, "The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go" (Geisel, 1990, p. 2). Most educators would affirm the relevance of this quote and testify to the infinite learning possibilities when students can read at a proficient level. Learning to read is key to student success. Research confirms that learning to read is one of the most important skills school-aged children need to develop and must be a key objective in early education (Hulme & Snowling, 2013).

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2011) researched the importance of students reading at or above a proficient level by the time they exit third grade. Their research pointed to a major reading problem in the United States. Specifically, they showed a reading proficiency problem existed in early grades in the United States and continues to be unacceptably low for students from low-income families and children of color.

For students to become proficient readers, reading instruction must become a critical focus in early grades, leading to reading proficiency by the time students leave third-grade. Zakariya (2015) noted, "The research is clear: if children cannot read proficiently by the end of third grade, they face daunting hurdles to success in school and beyond" (p. 1). When students cannot read proficiently, they fall increasingly behind in their education. To ensure every student is a proficient reader before they exit third grade, it is imperative to focus on the problem of reading in third grade.

**Statement of the Problem**

Tigerville Elementary School (TES) is home to approximately 625 students in pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) through grade six.  This rural-community school is situated approximately 20 miles south from a thriving university and two A-rated school districts, as given by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE).  Tigerville Elementary School (TES) serves high-poverty students from an increasingly undereducated population and has experienced stagnant school ratings.  The student population at TES continues to grow as more families are moving to the rural community.

During the 2016-2017 school year, the MDE listed the TES student population as 44.7% African-American/Black and 51.1% Caucasian.  Meanwhile, less than 5% of the TES student population identified as Asian, Native American, Hispanic, or Pacific Islander.  Teachers must educate students from various backgrounds and ethnicities, so they are key to student success.

Because TES will use STAR test data to prepare and predict third-grade student performance on the MAAP (2019) test, the correlation between students' scores on the STAR and MAAP assessments is relevant and worthy of further study. Work conducted by Renaissance (2017) concluded there was a strong relationship between Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading (STAR) and the Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) test scores. The researcher pointed out test scores showed correlations between STAR and MAAP test scores.  The STAR test data showed positive correlations, averaging .79 and .80 between the MAAP test and STAR reading data respectively.

Tigerville Elementary School struggled to show consistent reading improvements on the Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) test.  Tigerville Elementary School (TES) earned 379 accountability points on the MAAP test for the 2015-2016 school year (MDE, 2017).

For the 2016-2017 school year, TES earned 342 total accountability points on the MAAP test, and for the 2017-2018 school year, TES earned 362 accountability points. The data trend points to inconsistencies and fluctuating accountability scores on the MAAP test. The inconsistent MAAP test scores continue to be a problem for TES. While all three accountability scores (2015-2016; 2016-2017; 2017-2018) ranked TES as a passing school (D, C, C), concern has increased over the inconsistent MAAP test scores for the past three years. Further data analysis of the MAAP test scores revealed a deficit in third-grade reading instruction. While some data improvements were evident on the third-grade MAAP test reading scores (2017-2018), data did not show enough growth to improve the overall school rating. Because the future of every student at TES depends on a quality education, the expectation and directive from stakeholders mandated that TES improve the overall school rating to at least a B by the end of the 2019-2020 school year.

Upon hiring of a new administrative team for the 2017-2018 school year, teacher conversations revealed an urgent need for more instructional support and guidance to effectively teach third-grade reading. In August 2018, the Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading (STAR) test was administered to all third-grade students. Based on the results of the STAR assessment, 52% of third-grade students showed a deficiency in reading and needed reading interventions. With the increasing number of students in need of reading interventions, teachers reported the need for instructional support. Teachers also expressed heightened anxiety and concerns over the overwhelming percentage of students who needed reading interventions. With the use of STAR reading data as a predictor of student performance on the upcoming MAAP (2019) test, teachers also revealed professional learning communities (PLCs) needed to be

restructured with a focus on the five components of reading and research-based instructional strategies.

The researcher had several teacher conversations where teachers continued to share the need to focus on improving third-grade reading test scores. While the STAR test was administered to students each month to predict student performance on the MAAP test, teachers were increasingly concerned with the increase in the number of students who needed reading interventions. Teachers also noted the data trend increase over the past three years on third-grade MAAP reading test scores with 86.7% in 2015-2016, 90.8% in 2016-2017, and 92.7% in 2017-2018; however, this was not sufficient to render consistent and overall improvements on the upcoming MAAP (2018-2019) reading test. Teachers shared feelings of professional inadequacies and embarrassments because of inconsistent MAAP test scores. Additionally, teachers expressed sadness and frustrations of personal failure when students did not pass the third-grade MAAP reading test. Teacher conversations consistently revealed more instructional support and guidance were needed to improve the reading problem in third grade.

The central issue of concern for this applied research study proposal at TES was to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading. Based on the latest STAR test (August, 2018), 52% of third-grade students needed reading interventions. Because the STAR test was used to predict student performance on the MAAP (2019) test, the MAAP reading trend data from three different cohort groups (2015-2016; 2016-2017; 2017-2018) appeared to be aligned to STAR test data predictions. Based on STAR and MAAP test data, teachers were adamant that the quality of teaching in third-grade was a problem. Because STAR data provided a gauge for student performance on the upcoming MAAP test (2019), STAR data was a critical focus for this research study. Teachers also shared continual teacher replacement of third-grade teachers over

the past three years added to their frustrations and inconsistent STAR and MAAP test scores. Teacher conversations revealed the continuous need for instructional support in order to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading.

To better understand the definition of teaching quality, the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA, 2009) reported teaching quality not only referred to the teachers' credentials, but also to the prospective teachers bring with them to the classroom, the instructional strategies they use, and the organization of the school community. Based on the inconsistent STAR and MAAP state test scores, teachers believed urgent attention was needed to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading; especially being that TES services a wide span of grades on one school campus.

Teachers play a pivotal role in promoting students' success. By providing quality professional development and instructional support for teachers, the quality of teaching and student achievement should improve (Lin, Cheng, & Wu, 2015). One way to support teachers' instruction is through PLCs, which focus on learning, a collaborative culture, and a results-oriented thinking process (Jessie, 2007). Teachers also should receive the tools and resources necessary to improve the quality of teaching. Previously, TES teachers were not given the necessary tools and instructional support to be successful in the classroom. Consequently, reading instruction suffered.

Based on the 2015-2016 MAAP data, 86.7% of the third-grade students passed the MAAP reading test. In 2016-2017, 90.8% of the third-grade students attending TES passed MAAP reading test. In 2017-2018, 92.7% of the third-grade students passed the MAAP reading test. Student scores on the MAAP reading test will continue to range from a one to a five. According to the MDE (2017):

A student performing at Level 1 inconsistently demonstrates the knowledge or skills that

define basic performance. Students at Level 2 demonstrate partial mastery of the

knowledge and skills in the course and may experience difficulty in the next grade or

course in the content area. These students can meet some of the content standards at a

low level of difficulty, complexity, or fluency as specified by the grade-level content

standards. Students at Level 3 demonstrate general mastery of the knowledge and skills

required for success in the grade or course in the content area. These students can

perform approaching the level or at the level of difficulty, complexity, or fluency

specified by the grade-level content standards and are considered proficient. Students at

Level 4 demonstrate solid academic performance and mastery of the knowledge and

skills required for success in the grade or course in the content area. These students can

perform at the level of difficulty, complexity, or fluency specified by the grade-level

content standards. Students at Level 5 consistently perform in a manner clearly beyond

what is required to be successful in the grade or course in the content area. These

students can perform at a high level of difficulty, complexity, or fluency as specified by

the grade-level content. (pp. 1-2)

In previous school years (2015 through 2017), third-grade students were only required to

score a minimum of Level 2 in order to be promoted to the fourth grade. At the end of the 2018-

2019 school year, third-grade students must score a minimum of three to be promoted to fourth

grade. While at first glance 92.7% (2017-2018) may not be alarming, the stark reality is eight

(7.3%) third-grade students failed the reading test and were required to retake the third-grade

reading assessment. Additionally, the STAR reading diagnostic assessment administered in

August 2018, revealed 60% of the current third-grade students had a reading deficiency. That

means 33 out of 55 third-grade students who tested on STAR in August, 2018, needed reading interventions. Based on STAR assessment and the reading trend in third-grade, low reading performance is prevalent among the students. Because TES prides itself on providing a quality education for every student, the percentage of students who need urgent reading interventions must decrease in order for students to pass the MAAP (2019) reading test indicating proficient reading ability.

Teacher conversations at the end of 2017-2018 school year revealed teachers needed more administrative and instructional support. Third-grade teachers wanted to improve teaching quality but recognized more support and specific teacher development were needed to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading. Teacher conversations also revealed TES teachers had little time to collaborate and share best teaching practices. Teachers revealed the pressure to increase test scores surpassed the need to focus on instruction. Teachers stated lack of collaboration time limited direct connections between quality instruction and a reduction in the number of students who needed reading interventions. Teachers stated the need for collaboration on the standards was secondary to producing expected test results.

Teacher conversations also revealed the need to focus on improving third-grade reading instructional practices, while decreasing the number of students who needed reading interventions. Teachers asserted STAR reading data provided necessary information for instructional focus, but there was an urgent need for more instructional support. Teacher conversations further revealed the number of students in need of reading interventions continued to be a problem.

Tigerville Elementary School (TES) will use STAR reading data as an indicator to predict student performance on the MAAP (2019) test; therefore, TES administrators decided to

review previous STAR (2015-2016; 2016-2017; 2017-2018) and MAAP (2015-2016; 2016-2017; 2017-2018) test data to narrate the reading data trend. The STAR trend data from previous school years (2015-2016, 2016-2017; 2017-2018) indicated 45% (2015-2016) of third-grade students needed reading interventions. In 2016-2017, STAR trend data indicated 63% of third-grade students needed reading interventions. In 2017-2018, STAR trend data indicated 46% of third-grade students needed reading interventions. When the STAR test was administered to third-grade students this school year (2018-2019), STAR reading data indicated 52% of third-grade students needed reading interventions. Trend data reading from STAR suggested TES had a problem with reading.

Following the latest release of MDE state accountability data (2017-2018), TES School Leadership Team (SLT) and administrators met, as a team, in June 2018, to review test data. The team agreed STAR and MAAP test data would be presented during the July 2018, school board meeting. The team also agreed improving the quality of teaching in third-grade reading should be a top priority for the 2018-2019 school year. The team also agreed improving the quality of teaching should be tied to the three key elements in this applied-research study: providing instructional support for teachers, building teaching capacity, and improving student achievement. The meeting concluded as the administrative team agreed the focus of PLCs will be on the five components of reading, while linking PLCs to three critical areas of third grade: (1) providing additional classroom support to teachers; (2) providing quality, standards-based professional development (PD); and (3) providing quality observations and feedback. These three areas support the goal of improving the quality of teaching by providing additional support for PLC meetings. Additionally, the need to decrease the number of third-grade students who need reading interventions, while increasing the number of third-grade students who pass the

MAAP (2018-2019) reading test would also be priority.  Improving the quality of teaching in third-grade reading may decrease the likelihood TES will have to rehire third-grade teachers each year.

**Significance of the Study for the Audience**

This applied research study benefited the students, teachers, and administrators at TES. Because students were enrolled in classes that require deep reading skills, the need for this study is great.  For students who planned to enter the work force or attend a college, the ability to read more complex texts was critical.  Based on STAR reading data (August, 2018), the number of students who needed reading interventions must decrease, as STAR was used as a predictor of the number of students who will pass the MAAP reading test that will be given in April, 2019. Additionally, the need for students to pass the MAAP test was significant, as students' test scores become part of the school's overall accountability rating.  The school's accountability ratings remained key to TES receiving state funding.  Currently, students must score at least a two on the third-grade MAAP reading test to be promoted to the next grade.  Beginning in the 2018-2019 school year, the state of Mississippi increased the student's passing score on the third-grade MAAP reading test from a two to a three.  The increase created even more pressure for teachers to perform.

This study provided instructional support to help teachers teach the five components of reading, while building teaching capacity, and improving student achievement in third-grade reading at TES.  Additionally, educators at TES developed a more systematic approach to improve the quality of reading instruction.  This applied research study may serve as a district-level prototype to improving the quality of teaching district-wide.  This study may reduce the number of students who need reading interventions and ultimately reduce the number of students

who fail the third-grade MAAP reading test.  This study may provide better understanding of why teachers indicated, during teacher conversations, that the lack of instructional support was the number one cause for teachers leaving TES in previous years (2015-2017).  This applied research addressed building teaching capacity through best teaching practices during PLCs and focused on improving the process of collaboration to strengthen the organization for continuous organizational improvement.

This applied research study adds to the existing body of research of how to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading.  Administrators from other school districts may gain helpful information to provide instructional support for teachers using the five components of reading.  This applied research study may also provide insight on how to provide quality, standards-based professional development for teachers, while providing a quality observations and teacher feedback.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this applied research study was to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading.  An applied research program evaluation design was used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data to evaluate the action plan and to report results of the study.

This applied research study was conducted at TES.  This study was guided by two sets of questions used at different points in the process.  An initial set of preliminary questions was used to develop the action plan.  The purpose of these questions was to provide the information necessary for the collaborative development of a comprehensive action plan to address the problem of quality teaching in third-grade reading.  The first question examined the reasons quality of teaching is a problem.  The second question sought to identify and summarize existing and relevant research on the use of PLCs to improve teaching quality.  The final preliminary

question focused on developing a set of goals to be achieved through the research process consistent with the organizational mission.

The definition of teaching quality is a hotly debated topic. Goe (2007) defined teaching quality not as teachers' training and certification, but rather what teachers do in the classroom. Goe further asserted that teacher quality and quality teaching have long been used interchangeably but are not actually the same. Teacher quality deals with the inputs like teacher college preparatory programs, degrees, and certifications. Quality teaching deals with teacher outputs. The outputs focused on what teachers did in the classroom and encompassed the teachers' daily instructional practices.

With the mounting teacher pressure to decrease the number of students who need reading interventions, the effective use of PLCs was centered on creating a systematic approach to improving the quality of teaching at TES. Too often, the directive to improve test scores overshadowed the need to focus on improving the quality of teaching.

**Research Questions**

Collaborative analyses of the data collected in response to the preliminary questions were used to develop the action plan presented in Chapter Three. The goals of the action plan sought to provide instructional support for teachers, build teaching capacity, provide quality, and increase student achievement. Collaboratively, the research team decided to use PLCs as the vehicle to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading. As a result, this research project assessed the implementation process to identify areas of strength and weakness. Based on the needs identified, the following set of research questions will be used to evaluate the results of the collaborative action plan:

1. Was there at least a 5% decrease in the number of students who need reading interventions on the STAR assessment from the beginning of 2018-19 school year to the end of the 2018-2019 school year?

2. What changes, if any, occurred in teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of PLCs post-implementation of PLC elements from the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year to the end of 2018-2019 school year?

3. What instructional areas, if any, changed through the implementation processes of the PLCs at the end of the 2018-2019 school year?

4. What problems and constraints impact successful implementations of the PLCs in the 2018-2019 school year?

**Overview of the Study**

This applied research study was used to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading at TES. The collaborative effort for collecting and analyzing the data produced an action plan to be implemented and evaluated. The plan was evaluated to determine if there was at least at a 5% decrease in the number of students who need reading interventions at the end of the 2018-2019 school year.

Chapter One presented the significance of the study and specific research questions to guide the action plan. Chapter Two provided a thorough explanation of the extant research on the five components of reading, best instructional practices in reading instruction, improving teaching quality, and the role and benefits of PLCs. Chapter Three presented the development of the action plan through stakeholder collaboration, implementation of the plan, and the program evaluation.

This evaluation plan included a comparison of STAR reading data from August, 2018 to February, 2019. Specifically, STAR reading scores from the same third-grade cohort group (August, 2018 to February, 2019) were evaluated to determine if there was at least a 5% percent decrease in the number of students in need of reading interventions at the end of the 2018-2019 school year. This 5% decrease indicated an improvement from the number of students who needed interventions on the STAR test in August, 2018. The plan included surveys and interviews to gain a better understanding of PLCs before implementation of the action plan and post implementation. The implementation and evaluation timelines were proposed. Chapter Four reviews the evaluation results, and Chapter Five presents conclusions and implications for continued organizational improvements.

## Chapter II:

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**Introduction**

According to journalist Peg Tyre, there is a right way to teach reading (Tyre, 2017). In order to be effective, reading teachers must use consistent, research-based practices. Given the inconsistent Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading (STAR) and Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) test scores in the overall accountability scores for the 2016-2017 school year, Tigerville Elementary School (TES) third-grade reading teachers need access to research-based instructional practices to improve reading instruction.

This literature review focuses on research-based practices to improve third-grade reading and is organized in three parts. The first section addresses research-based reading practices for elementary education, as well as the benefits of providing a strong reading foundation as early as Pre-Kindergarten. The second part focuses on research-based strategies to improve teacher practices in the classroom. The final section connects three elements of PLCs to improvements in teaching quality. The literature reviewed supports the need to systematically implement best reading practices in the classroom and provide teacher support and training. The use of PLCs as a vehicle to improve instructional practices in third-grade reading is also supported.

**Standardized Test for Assessment of Reading (STAR) Assessment**

The use of Standardized Test for Assessment of Reading (STAR) reading program at Tigerville Elementary School (TES).is a powerful instructional tool that provides insurmountable data for teachers. Since TES will use STAR test data to prepare third-grade students to become

proficient readers on the Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP), it is vital to understand the research associated with the alignment of STAR.

According to Renaissance Learning (2010), the STAR Reading Enterprise Assessment is a computer-adaptive assessment developed to give reliable, accurate, and valid data quickly, so it can be used to guide instruction and student learning. STAR Reading Enterprise is designed for independent student readers. It measures students' reading comprehension and compares individual student reading data to data from other students across the nation. The test provides norm-referenced scores for students in grades first through twelve. Kindergarten students who have begun to read may take the Early STAR Literacy. Most schools give the test at least twice, once in the fall and once in the spring. Some schools use STAR Reading for screening purposes in the fall, winter, and spring. They also monitor the progress of the students receiving interventions with weekly, biweekly, or monthly testing. The STAR Reading brochure published by Renaissance Learning (2010) states, "Teachers who use STAR Reading Enterprise can monitor progress toward college and career ready standards, such as Common Core State Standards, as well as, predict proficiency on state tests" (p. 4).

The STAR Reading Enterprise is a brief, interactive, and challenging assessment, consisting of 34 questions per assessment. The STAR Reading Assessment has set time limits for test items. Students in kindergarten through second grade have up to 60 seconds to answer each item. The students in grades third through twelve are allowed 45 through 60 seconds based on the item type. There is an option of extending time limits for individual students who are in need of more time to read and answer each question, i.e., students with disabilities or English Language Learners. Students receive a 15-second remaining warning for answering an item. The items that students do not answer in the allotted time are counted as incorrect. The software

will increase in the level of difficulty for the next item if a student answers an item correctly. By

continually adjusting the difficulty of an item to what the student has already shown that he/she

can or cannot do, the software can target accurate assessment of ability (Renaissance, 2010).

According to Renaissance Learning (2010), an assessment is considered to be reliable if it

has a reliability level of .60 or higher. After collecting and analyzing four types of reliability

data, STAR Reading reliability exceeds .90 (Renaissance Learning, 2017). Not only should the

data be reliable, it should also be valid. To assess validity, schools were asked to submit

students' STAR Reading results and scores on other assessments such as Dynamic Indicators of

Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIEBELS), Stanford Achievement Test, FCAT, California

Achievement Test, and Iowa Test of Basic Skills. The analysis showed a correlation with these

assessments that exceeded the guidelines provided by National Center on Response to

Intervention (Renaissance Learning, 2010).

To determine student performance level on the STAR Reading Assessment, a benchmark,

or lowest acceptable performance level, is set. The default benchmark score in STAR Reading is

40th percentile, meaning students scoring in the 40th percentile perform better than 40% of the

students in the national sample in that same grade at that time of year. The 40th percentile is the

default benchmark because researchers consider students to be performing at grade level or at a

proficient level. After the students are assessed, they are then placed in categories called cut

scores. Cut scores are a set of numbers intended to help with identification of at risk students and

to guide educators toward the best interventions to improve student learning (Renaissance

Learning, 2010, 2014). The cut scores on the Screening Report are scaled scores that correspond

to percentiles. The categories are as follows: (1) At/Above Benchmark- At/Above 40th

percentile; (2) On Watch- Below 40th percentile; (3) Intervention- Below 25th percentile; and (4) Urgent Intervention- Below 10th percentile.

**Five Components of Reading Instruction**

The National Reading Panel (2000) advised that every effective reading program should include instruction in the following five components: (a) phonemic awareness, (b) phonics, (c) fluency, (d) vocabulary, and (e) comprehension. While the panel recommended that every reading program include these five components, they did not offer a definitive script or pedagogical strategy for addressing elementary students who are not proficient readers (Simmons et al., 2011).

Teachers differ in how they provide reading instruction to their students. However, the most effective approaches use systematic and explicit instruction. Explicit instruction refers to the teacher's direct communication with students about the specific standards that will be taught (Rosenshine, 2008). When using explicit instruction, teachers should model and demonstrate what is expected from students. Systematic instruction refers to the planned, progressive sequence of the lessons. Lessons are based on clearly defined objectives. Students have numerous opportunities to be taught using meaningful and engaging instruction, which leads to mastery and retention of new information.

Goldstein et al. (2017) conducted research to better understand the effects on students who do not develop early literacy skills. The study used a cluster-randomized design with 104 preschool-age children in 39 different classrooms to look at the efficacy of a supplemental phonological-awareness curriculum. This curriculum included 36 different interactive scripts and included 10 mini-lessons using games to teach phonemic awareness and alphabetic skills. Results indicated the group of students who received support using the Dynamic Indicators of

Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS) and the Word Parts Fluency (WPF) curriculum showed greater gains in early literacy skills than students who did not receive instructional support using that same curriculum.

      **Phonemic awareness.**  According the National Reading Panel (2000), phonemic awareness and letter knowledge are the two best school entry predictors of how well children will learn to read during their first two years in school.  Wade-Woolley (2016) defines a phoneme as the smallest unit of sound.  Phonemes are represented by graphemes, which are single letters or clusters of letters that represent single sounds.  Phonemic awareness refers to the knowledge of how combinations of individual sounds form words. Phonemic awareness is commonly defined as the understanding that spoken words are made up of separate units of sound that are blended together when words are pronounced (Wade-Woolley, 2016).

      Wade-Woolley conducted a research study on single-syllabic and multisyllabic words. The purpose of the study was to examine how reading single-syllabic and multisyllabic words involved different processes.  The method of the study included 110 students in grades four and five who were asked to read monosyllabic and three- and four-syllable words matched for frequency.  Results showed that phonemic awareness was an independent predictor of short-word reading.  The study also revealed phonemic awareness was a necessary component when teaching students to learn to read successfully.

      Kruse, Spencer, Olszewski, and Goldstein (2015) designed a study to evaluate the efficacy of phonological-awareness interventions designed for tier-two instruction.  Tier-two instruction provides reading interventions for students to help them become successful readers. The study included the delivery of response to intervention instruction with small groups of preschool-age students.  The multiple-baseline design method was used to evaluate the efficacy

of the interventions on low-income preschool students.  The study included 28-36 lessons that lasted approximately 10 minutes each.  The results of the study revealed that the specific interventions produced consistent gains among students on weekly progress-monitoring assessments using First Sound Fluency (FSL).  First Sound Fluency (FSL) is used to measure a student's phonemic awareness.  Students also showed gains on other measures of phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge.  The study also found that scientifically based reading strategies, such as providing explicit, systematic small-group instruction and frequent progress monitoring, tend to increase the reading achievement of K-3 students.

Pirzadi et al. (2012) reported on four phases of literacy associated with phonemic awareness by studying the effects of cooperative teaching on the development of reading skills among students with reading disorders.  The study included three female students from a primary school in Iran and used a multiple-baseline, single-subject design with different children to diagnose disorders.  The researcher constructed a test to measure the development of reading skills.  The results revealed that cooperative teaching yielded phonemic gains, and co-teaching showed great promise in improving reading disorders.

The study also noted that the pre-alphabetic phase refers to a student's ability to make connections between print, pronunciation, and word meaning (Pirzadi et al., 2012).  For example, students may recognize a McDonald's or Coca-Cola logo without being able to read the letters or words.  At this stage, learners do not make connections between print, sounds, and word meaning.  The second phase, called partial alphabetic, concerns a student's ability to partially make connections between letters within a printed word.  During this phase, meaning and pronunciation are stored in the oral vocabulary.  In the third phase, the full alphabetic, a student can make connections between a word's sequence of letters, meaning, and pronunciation.

During the fourth phase, a student can understand how new words are formed and use cluster of letters to make new words.

Valbuena (2014) conducted a study focused on promoting phonemic awareness among ESL students using a phonics program called Tucker Signing. Twenty-five first-grade students used this phonics program and were given a pretest and posttest. The results showed that the phonics program supported children in developing phonemic awareness through identification of the relationship between each alphabetic letter. Segmenting words into phonemes involved counting the sounds for each word, and new words were made by adding sounds. Substituting phonemes involved making new words by replacing sounds.

Kelley, Roe, Blanchard, and Atwill (2015) examined the influence of phonemic-awareness instruction on students' vocabulary, phonemic awareness, word-reading fluency, and reading comprehension. Study participants were 80 Spanish-speaking kindergarteners who attended one of three public elementary schools in predominantly Hispanic communities. All the students were eligible to receive free or reduced-priced meals, and none had participated in preschool programs. Students participated in a daily two-hour reading block taught primarily using basal readers. The students were grouped by English-language ability levels and received supplementary instruction from teachers, reading coaches, and teachers' assistants. Students' vocabulary development was measured using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. Phonemic awareness and oral-reading fluency were measured with the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). Reading comprehension was measured using the Terranova reading-comprehension subtest. The students received vocabulary lessons that focused on phonemic awareness. Results indicated that vocabulary instruction increased the scores of students who were at or above Spanish receptive vocabulary. Phonemic-awareness instruction improved the

students' vocabulary scores, and building on students' prior Spanish-language knowledge had the greatest impact on reading comprehension.

**Phonics.** The NRP (2000) proposed that effective, systematic phonics instruction should be presented in a variety of grouping patterns, such as one-on-one tutoring, small groups, and whole-class instruction (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2001). During phonics instruction, teachers should explain how letters and letter combinations represent certain sounds. Teachers should also include multiple opportunities for practice. The goal of phonics instruction is to connect sound to text (Cihon, Gardner, Morrison, & Paul, 2008). Therefore, during phonics lessons, the focus should progress from letter and sound recognition to applying decoding skills to text so students understand that the purpose of phonics is to help them read. When students can identify relationships between letters, sounds, and language, they have less difficulty identifying words and comprehending meaning (Uhry, 2013).

McIntyre et al. (2005) focused on supplemental reading instruction for struggling readers. The purpose of the study was to compare phonics and reading comprehension achievement of first grade students and reading achievement of second grade students who received daily supplemental reading support with students who did not receive additional reading support. The methods of data collection involved collecting data through individual use of phonics and reading tasks, classroom observations, field notes, and teacher interviews. The results of the study revealed second grade students who received daily supplemental instruction, in addition to their regular classroom reading support, achieved significantly higher scores on reading comprehension assessments than students who did not receive additional reading support.

Uhry (2013) defined English-language phonics instruction as memorizing the names of 26 letters and approximately 98 letter-sound combinations. Uhry examined the spelling skills of

native Spanish-speaking kindergartners after they received phonics instruction for short vowels. The author sought to determine whether the students' spelling would contain phonological errors that were influenced by their first language. The results indicated no differences on the number of correct short-vowel spellings, even though the sounds for four of the five English short vowels do not exist in Spanish.

According to McGeown and Medford (2014), two types of systematic phonics instruction are: (1) synthetic phonics, which is associated with sounding out words by matching sounds to letters and blending the sounds to form words and (2) larger-unit phonics, which is associated with detecting and blending words. The authors conducted a study to examine the skills that predict early reading development. The study included 85 students who were taught to read using a systematic, synthetic approach to reading. Two separate groups of students were tested on reading and cognitive approaches prior to reading instruction. The results indicated that student reading development could be predicted based on letter-sound knowledge and short-term memory.

**Vocabulary.** The NRP (2000) identified the explicit teaching of vocabulary as an important strategy for classroom instruction. A study conducted by the NRP (2000) found significant gains in reading comprehension when readers received cognitive-strategy instruction. According to the NRP, discussion of text comprehension and explicit instruction teaches students to use specific cognitive strategies when reading. They identified 10 strategies for teaching reading comprehension:

1. Students learn to monitor their understanding of the text being read to them. They learn to analyze and deal with reading comprehension as problems occur.

2. Using cooperative learning, readers work together in groups, listen to peers, and learn to help each other use strategies to promote reading comprehension.

3. Reading strategies are integrated into the curriculum to help readers improve reading achievement within the academic environment.

4. Graphic organizers enhance meanings and relationships of ideas to help readers relate words in the text and improve comprehension and memory.

5. Students practice active listening to improve memory and comprehension in relation to the text.

6. Mental imagery or visualization is used to improve textual understanding.

7. Readers use mnemonic devices to organize information and establish relationships within the text.

8. Students use multiple strategies to create links that construct meaning from text.

9. Prior knowledge of a text improves a student's reading ability and academic achievement.

10. Finally, the psycholinguistics strategy encourages readers to use relevant knowledge about language to identify links to previous connections (NRP, 2000).

Griffin and Murtagh (2015) conducted a three-week study that found students can increase their vocabulary in several ways. The purpose of the study was to determine what ways students can increase vocabulary comprehension. The study reviewed an intervention program called Precision Teaching (PT) and its effect on vocabulary instruction. The method of the study included a mixed factorial design. The study included 40 Irish primary school students who were learning the Irish language as a second language. The groups were evenly divided into an experimental and a control group. The study also included seven support teachers. Participants

were given tests of isolated sight word reading fluency and contextualized reading fluency before and after the PT intervention program. The experimental group used the PT program that focused on isolated Irish vocabulary, while the control group used the normal Irish teaching style. The results of a one-way multivariate analysis of variance and a series of dependent-samples $t$-tests suggested that vocabulary grows indirectly when students listen and speak to the people around them, read independently, and listen to others read. Students should also receive explicit vocabulary instruction, especially for new words in disciplines such as social studies and science.

Wasik, Hindman, and Snell (2016) contended that, aside from formal, direct instruction, two other factors contribute to vocabulary growth: (1) the frequent introduction of unfamiliar words and (2) the volume of words that are read. For vocabulary growth to occur, students must be exposed to words that are not a part of their current vocabulary. Moreover, students are more likely to increase their vocabulary through exposure to words in written texts and by interacting with unfamiliar texts, rather than by engaging in speech or listening to the television or radio. Ultimately, students increase their vocabulary through active engagement. Active approaches to understanding unfamiliar vocabulary include discussing new words with peers, asking questions, and clarifying definitions of unfamiliar words. Students can be exposed to a plethora of new words through frequent opportunities to see, hear, read, and write new words in different contexts.

Solis, Miciak, Vaughn, and Fletcher (2014) conducted a study using the Response to Intervention (RtI) strategy. The purpose of this longitudinal study was to determine the role and use of multi-tiered reading instruction. The study focused on adolescents in grades six through eight with reading disabilities and poor reading comprehension. The methods of the study

included analyzing longitudinal studies from a response to intervention framework over a three-year period.  Fifth grade reading comprehensions scores were used to identify participants for this study.  Students were then randomized for treatment or comparison conditions.  Students were assigned to a specific intervention beginning in sixth grade.  Those same students were provided treatment for either 1, 2, or 3 years based on their response to instruction for each preceding year.  The results of the study revealed researchers found that students who experienced reading difficulties, particularly older readers, needed extensive intervention.  The results of the study provided recommendations which included (a) using a database to locate and organize interventions, (b) using a decision-making format to consistently modify instruction in PLCs, (c) using a conceptual framework that emphasizes reading for understanding, and (d) studying the effect of group size when delivering reading instruction.  Additionally, the researchers used screening procedures, progress monitoring tools, tiers of instruction, and findings from each year of the study to determine the findings.

Vaughn and Wanzek (2014) described three sets of questions that should be considered when considering reading interventions for students with reading disabilities:

1. Can intensive interventions be provided in the general education setting?  At what grade level?
2. Has sufficient research been conducted to develop and implement these intensive interventions?
3. Can these interventions be implemented within the school environment (Vaughn & Wanzek, 2014)?

Roberts, Vaughn, Fletcher, Stuebing, and Barth (2013) conducted a three-year study on the reading comprehension of sixth through eighth graders.  The purpose of the study was to examine the effects of multiyear, response□based, tiered intervention for struggling readers in grades six through eight.  The methods of the study involved a sample size of 768 sixth□grade

students with reading problems.  The students were randomly assigned to a response□based, tiered□intervention condition.  To estimate the effect of treatment on the students and to address questions about how students were learning, a multiple□indicator, multilevel growth model was used to represent the likely path of the group of students who were originally randomized to treatment.  The results revealed researchers found that the reading-comprehension instruction used in an intensive year-long intervention with sixth through eighth graders had a greater impact on older readers.  The results also indicated treatment students, on average, did better than the students who received the normal instruction when the instruction was characterized using slope over time.  The results also indicated a sizable gap in the reading comprehension of students in both groups by the time the students reach the spring of eighth grade.

**Comprehension.**  The NRP (2000) concluded comprehension is critically important to development of children's reading skills and therefore their ability to obtain an education. Carlson, Jenkins, Li, and Brownell (2013) used data from a large national sample to examine interactions among children with disabilities.  The study used a structural equation model to examine relationships among phonemic awareness, decoding, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.  The structural equation model revealed that there were two paths to reading comprehension—decoding and vocabulary.  The study also revealed students' prior knowledge is important because it the mechanism through which they process meaning to new information encountered in the text.

Rouse, Alber-Morgan, Cullen, and Sawyer (2014) conducted a study using the prompt-fading strategy to improve reading comprehension among fifth-grade students with learning disabilities.  The method of study included teaching fifth-grade students to use self-generated questioning skills.  The students were given a text and then provided embedded questions.  As

students became to demonstrate reading proficiency, the questions were faded and then replaced with self-generated questions.  The results indicated the multiple baseline showed an increase with the fifth graders who learned to read using the fading strategy.

Edwards and Taub (2016) investigated the relationship between blending, sound segmentation, and reading comprehension.  The purpose of the study was to investigate the impact of reading instruction on elementary school-age African American students.  The methods of the study reviewed a total of 84 African-American students and two multiethnic first-through fourth-grade students who attended an inner-city charter school.  Thirty-eight percent of the participants were male, and 48 were female. All the students received free or reduced-priced meals. The study was carried out in an inner-city Title I charter school in Florida.  The results of the study revealed 61% of African American students do not achieve proficiency in reading by grade four compared to 26% of White students.  The results of the study also revealed African American students tend to use dialect while White students tend to speak Standard English.  The dialect used by African American students may have a negative impact on their reading performance as it relates to comprehension, phonemic awareness, phoneme blending and segmentation.  Additionally, the study findings indicated that blending had a moderate to large direct effect on the students' reading comprehension scores, which was consistent with previous research.  Because of the study, Edwards and Taub (2016) suggested that when providing phonemic instruction, teachers should use short words, pictures, sound and spelling patterns. The researchers also recommended that teachers spend at least 15 minutes per day on phonemic awareness instruction, and they provided interventions which include blending acquisition.

Catts and Kamhi (2017) defined comprehension as "…the goal of reading instruction which always involves constructing meaning from words" (p. 73).  The purpose of their study

was to argue that reading comprehension is not a single ability which can be assessed by one or more general reading measures or taught by a small set of strategies or approaches. The methods of the study included evidence for a multidimensional view involving reading comprehension that demonstrates variability of the readers' ability, text, and purpose. The results of the study indicated reading comprehension is best conceptualized by using a multidimensional model that should not be assessed by one general measure.

Ferrer, Vidal-Abarca, Serrano, and Gilabert (2017) conducted two experiments to analyze how text availability and question format affect readers' processes and performance on measures of expository-text reading comprehension. The method of the experiment encompassed junior high students reading and being assessed online using a computer software program called Read and Answer. The results of the study concluded readers reread prior text segments during the beginning reading of the text more often when they knew and understood the text would no longer be available while answering questions. Additionally, when the reader knew the text would be available to answer questions, they did not read the text thoroughly and entirely the first time.

Basar and Gürbüz (2017) determined questioning is a skill used by proficient readers. The authors conducted research to examine the use of SQ4R (Survey, Question, Read, Reflect, Recite, Review) as a reading comprehension strategy. The methods of the study included sampling of 57 students from two different areas of the Ataturk Elementary School. Both groups were given the same sets of questions prior to the experiment. The method also involved an independent sample t-test and Kruskal Wallis-test methods to analyze the data. The results revealed growth in the comprehension abilities of the students who learned to use the SQ4R method.

Similarly, Bulut (2017) conducted research to determine the best reading comprehension strategy. The purpose of this research was to conduct action research to investigate reading comprehension skills when using the SQ4R. The methods of this study included seven primary age students who were struggling with reading comprehension. An action plan was developed to support the struggling students over the course of three hours a day for three days a week over a period of ten weeks. The author carried out the intervention with a classroom teacher. Teacher diaries and three different written forms were used as part of the methodology. For example, a reading comprehension test, student interview form, and student observation forms were used to collect data. The results of the study suggested the SQ4R-based reading program increased students' reading comprehension level. Additionally, students' ability to visually analyze texts, along with predictive and note-taking skills improved.

**Fluency.** The NRP (2000) offered several strategies teachers can use to improve students' fluency. Two forms are repeated reading and guided oral reading. Repeated reading involves rereading passages a certain number of times and providing opportunities for the reader to reflect on what was read. Repeated reading activities included listening to fluent reading being modeled, choral reading and reading in unison. Guided oral reading refers to the support for students as they attempt to read unfamiliar words. Therefore, teachers may read a passage aloud as students follow along. After modeling occurs, students should have numerous opportunities to read the same text repeatedly aloud at least four times, either with one of their peers, in a small group, or to themselves. After reading the text several times, the teacher should engage students in a discussion about the text to enhance comprehension. Other strategies include pronouncing unfamiliar words so students can focus on constructing meaning, grouping words into meaningful phrases, having a less fluent reader read aloud simultaneously with a

more fluent student, and playing a recording of a passage as the student reads along silently.

The three approaches to fluency instruction outlined by Kuhn, Rasinski and Zimmerman (2014) are (a) Fluency-Oriented Reading Instruction (FORI), (b) Wide-Reading, Fluency-Oriented Instruction (Wide FORI), and (c) the Fluency Development Lesson (FDL).  FORI includes scaffolded repetition using grade level texts over a five-day cycle that begins with a new text on the first day of the cycle.  Pre-teaching activities include providing background knowledge, webbing, or vocabulary building.  The cycle begins with full support from the teacher on the first day.  This support is reduced throughout the five-day cycle, leading to more independent reading by the student.  The process includes copies of the texts being read in class to take home, discussions of the texts, graphic organizers, and question and answer sequences. The process also includes echo reading, where the teacher reads a short passage of two or three sentences that the students then echo or repeat; choral reading led by the teacher; partner reading; and extension or literacy activities.  While FORI involves a single text read repeatedly over the five-day cycle, Wide FORI uses three different texts over the same interval.  The five-day cycle for Wide FORI introduces the primary text on the first day, followed by echo reading of the primary text, extension activities, and echo reading of the two other texts.

The FDL is based on both FORI and Wide FORI but is accelerated and completed in one day (Kuhn et al., 2014). With the goal of reading a new text every day, passages include poetry and other rhythmic texts, such as song lyrics and speeches incorporating rhythm and rhyme to provide ways for students to predict and memorize parts of texts or words from the texts.  While poetry usage has declined in recent years (Kuhn et al., 2014), the standards from the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmark (CCLB) standards suggest the poetry genre is a good fit for effective reading instruction.  By reading a new text each day, the goal of FDL instruction is for

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students to read with accuracy, fluency, and comprehension (Kuhn et al., 2014). As a result of the research, these three strategies are considered viable instructional techniques for teaching reading fluency. The researchers cited the amount of time students read each day as a critical factor in the success of any program. Using challenging texts with extensive scaffolding was identified as another critical factor.

Kim (2015) conducted research to expand the understanding of reading fluency. The author wanted to demonstrate the difference between reading fluency and reading comprehension which can change over time. The author defined reading fluency as the ability to read text aloud and accurately with rapid pacing and intonation. The researchers examined longitudinal data from 143 Korean-speaking students. The longitudinal study data were taken at two distinctive time points which included the mean age that was equivalent to five years and two months and six years and one month as the child of the children. The results of the study revealed listening comprehension had a connection to text reading fluency at both distinctive time points. Both times text reading fluency was connected to reading comprehension, and reading comprehension was connected to text reading fluency over and above word reading fluency and listening comprehension. Orthographic awareness was connected to text reading fluency over and above other emergent literacy skills and word reading fluency. Vocabulary and grammatical knowledge were independently connected to text reading fluency and reading comprehension; whereas, theory of mind was related to reading comprehension, but not text reading fluency. These results revealed developmental nature among relations and mechanism of text reading fluency in the development of reading.

Al Otaiba et al. (2009) looked at growth in oral-reading fluency across second- and third-grade Latino students. The students were grouped into three English-proficiency levels: (a)

students receiving ESL instruction, (b) students who had exited from ESL, and (c) students who did not need ESL services. The group receiving ESL services had a total of 2,182 students. The group who exited ESL totaled 965 students, and the group of students who did not need ESL services were 1,857. The authors compared proficiency levels and growth in oral reading fluency in English between and within groups to state reading test expectations. The results indicated oral reading fluency scores were notably different with students who had learning disabilities over those students who were developing reading proficiency within the group.

Young-Suk et al. (2013) conducted research on vocabulary and comprehension in spelling. The purpose of the study was to examine the relations of phonological, orthographic, and morphological awareness and vocabulary to word reading and spelling. For this study, 304 first-grade students received differentiated instruction using a response to intervention model. The methods of the study involved assessing first grade students phonological, orthographic, and morphological awareness, expressive vocabulary, word reading, and spelling. The results of the study indicated three linguistic awareness skills—morphological awareness, expressive vocabulary, and word reading—were considered predictors of word reading. Phonological and orthographic awareness were predictors of spelling. The contributions of these linguistic-awareness skills and vocabulary to word reading and spelling did not differ by response to intervention status.

A study from Katzir, Goldberg, Aryeh, Donnelley, and Wolf (2013) sought to determine if the Reading through Automaticity, Vocabulary, Engagement, and Orthography (RAVE-O) reading intervention program increased reading comprehension in struggling readers. The participants of the study included 80 children in grades one through three. The reading fluency strategy was examined over two periods during nine months. The two review periods included a

four-hour afterschool intervention program and a one month long, 44-hour summer intervention program.  The results of the study suggested both programs showed gains after a single intervention, but a significant difference was evident between intervention groups.  However, after school intervention groups showed a larger pre-post intervention difference scores.

Strickland, Boon, and Spencer (2013) conducted research on repeated fluency and comprehension skills involving elementary students with learning disabilities.  The methods involved a systematic review of literature that was published from 2001 to 2011.  The methods involved 19 research-based repeated reading studies.  Specific criteria were set for the study using four approaches which included repeated reading as an intervention, comparing reading to other interventions, repeated reading in combination with other interventions, and reading as part of the prescribed reading program.  The results of the study revealed repeated reading is an effective reading strategy to increase reading fluency and comprehension skills.  The study also revealed moderate to large reading fluency gains and comprehension on practiced passages.

Kuhn, Rasinski, and Zimmerman (2014) identified three research-based instructional strategies for teaching fluency.  Reading fluency is normally developed through practice in reading texts that require more than decoding words.  Fluency involves reading at a normal talking rate with prosody or expression, appropriate phrasing, and comprehension of the text.  The authors' recommended best fluency practices should include giving learners connected texts to read; providing feedback and modeling focused on word recognition, phrasing, and expression; incorporating scaffolding to provide support for reading more difficult texts; and providing texts for students to read.

**Best Practices in Reading**

Afflerbach (2012) provided a perspective concerning the nature of reading and motivation:

> Reading is the act of constructing meaning from text. We use skills, strategies, and prior knowledge, all of which are developmental in nature, to understand what we read. The act of reading is supported by reader motivation and positive reader affect. We read to help us achieve our goals, within and outside of school. (p. 14)

The Annie E. Cassey Foundation (2011) cited evidence-based research to support when teachers implement best reading practices with students beginning in early childhood programs, reading achievement improves. Children who do not learn to read well in early grades are more likely to struggle with reading their entire lives. Additionally, substantial research points to the importance of developing strong early literacy skills, which are closely linked to reading achievement in early childhood and primary school grades. Strong reading skills are the basis for successful performance in school and beyond (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

*The ABC's of Early Childhood* focused on trends and evidence in developing literacy during early childhood (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1999). The study aimed to create policy to support investments in early childhood education to ensure children start school ready to learn. It included extensive research in eight categories: (a) growth for workforce participation, (b) trends in child well-being, (c) brain-development research, (d) cost-benefits of early care and education, (e) health care, (f) family support, (g) preschool programs, and (h) childcare education. The authors urged an emphasis on early childhood education in order to see major academic gains.

Another project of The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Kids Count* (1999), tracked state-by-state reading achievements of children in the United States.  The results suggested that high-quality early childhood programs which included consistent parental support had a powerful impact on children as they continued into adulthood.  An additional study by the National Early Literacy Panel (2002) synthesized scientific research on early literacy to build support for policies to improve literacy instruction for children ages birth to five years.  The authors identified studies with strong findings and rigorous relationships.  The results revealed that the strongest predictors of a child's early literacy are the development of alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness and memory, naming letters and objects, and writing letters.

Similarly, The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (2009) conducted the Reading First Study to ensure all students can read at or above grade level by the end of third grade.  The study, which was conducted over three years, included observational data on reading instruction in Grades 1 and 2 and assessment of students' reading comprehension in Grades 1-3.  The two comparison groups included one group that received Reading First funds and another group that did not receive Reading First funds.  The results found improvements in instructional practices with funding and the use of five components of reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary.

Duke and Block (2012) conducted a study on strategies to improve reading in the primary grades.  The purpose of the study was to determine if the actual recommendations from a previous seminal study, Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children, were still being implemented with fidelity in the classroom.  The method of the study involved the authors' interviews from 15 fourth and fifth grade teachers in a small rural school district in east Tennessee.  The data in this grounded qualitative study were collected through semi-structured

interviews. The results revealed that word-reading skills had been implemented in kindergarten and were effective. However, vocabulary and comprehension had been neglected in the primary grades. The study also found that gaps in conceptual and content knowledge in the primary grades affected reading development in the long-term. This study suggested that all five components of reading should be part of classroom instruction; one component should not be taught to the exclusion of the others.

In a meta-analysis from The Education Commission of the States, Rose (2012) compiled a report which indicated the importance of students reading at a proficient level by the end of third grade. The author sought to determine if retaining a student in the same grade helped students who did not meet each state's required reading expectations. The study revealed that students who did not read at a proficient level by the end of third grade were at a higher risk of becoming high school dropouts. To improve the quality of teaching, teachers should receive support in teaching and understanding the five components of reading which minimizes the possibility of student retention (Rose, 2012).

**Improving Teaching Quality**

The quality of teaching is critical to student success. Instructional leaders should provide teachers with instructional support to effectively teach reading. A consistent platform that nurtures learning can provide teachers the necessary tools and guidance to support reading instruction. Teachers should see quality instruction modeled and have support to grow and practice instructional strategies in a nonthreatening environment. Effective professional development is one way to improve the quality of teaching in reading (Burnette, 2002).

Moats (2001) contended teachers need professional development to be equipped to teach reading. Moats referenced case studies conducted by the NRP, National Research Council of the

National Academy of Sciences, Learning First Alliance, and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development that all suggest teachers who use proven instructional methods and who receive high-quality Professional Development (PD) can effectively teach children to read.

A study by Penuel, Fishman, and Yamaguchi (2007) revealed specific strategies that make PD effective. The purpose of the 454-teacher study was to explore teacher learning and the effects to implement the learning. The authors analyzed teachers' survey responses from 28 different PD providers. The results of the study indicated effective PD, coupled with provisions for teacher time for planning, were significant in the implementation of expectations from PD.

Improving the quality of teaching is a necessary component for students to become proficient readers by the time they exit third-grade (Annie E. Casey, 2012). While teachers should integrate best reading practices in the general education classroom setting, or Tier I, on a consistent and daily basis, teachers must also be given a platform to build teaching capacity. The overall quality of instruction is a critical factor in student achievement (Nye, Konstantonopoulous, & Hedges, 2004). Teachers who consistently use research-based practices and who receive high-quality PD show improvements in teaching practices.

Marzano (2011) conducted descriptive research on instructional rounds. According to Marzano (2011), instructional rounds was a form of professional development that focused on a problem of practice in the school. Marzano affirmed instructional rounds was one of the most valuable resources any school could use to improve teachers' pedagogical skills, while developing a culture of collaboration. The author expressed the purpose of instructional rounds was not evaluative but should be used as a comparative method of one's own instructional

practices. Marzano cited the major benefit of instructional rounds were the teacher debriefings and collaborations that take place after instructional rounds take place.

Additionally, a conducted study by Marzano and Toth (2013) supported the use of instructional rounds as a form of PD. The descriptive study focused on the use of instructional rounds. The study focused on three to five teachers who conducted instructional rounds. The study recommended five specific areas for districts to focus on to improve teacher practice and growth: (a) teacher self-audit, (b) progress tracking, (c) instructional rounds, (d) PLCs, and (e) coaching.

Goodwin (2015) researched the use of teacher collaboration as a PD model to promote teacher growth. The purpose of the study was to determine what made the difference in the experiences and dispositions of the teachers who showed instructional improvements. The researchers reviewed the professional growth of four school systems and approximately 10,000 teachers in three large urban districts and a charter school. Researchers collected and analyzed professional growth data from approximately 10,000 teachers with the goal of understanding what distinguished year-over-year teacher growth on performance evaluations from teachers who showed little to no growth on the teacher performance evaluation. The study suggested mere PD did little to improve teaching quality, and short-term PD, without close follow-up, was ineffective.

Lin, Cheng, and Wu (2015) reviewed the connection between teacher PD and student learning. This two-year project used Readers' Theater Teaching Program as a PD mechanism to discover how participants applied new information and skills to their instructional practices. The study collected data from multiple sources using observations and PD portfolios. The study

revealed that, through high-quality teacher PD, Reader's Theater positively influenced students' reading fluency and the classroom climate.

Teachers need systematic training to improve any type of instruction. A study by Ehri and Flugman (2017) looked at a year-long mentoring program for kindergarten through third-grade teachers and students to improve teacher knowledge. The study revealed teachers needed support in systematic and specialized phonics instruction through PD in order to make improvements.

Sharma and Christ (2017) studied culturally relevant text selection and pedagogy supports. The study included 17 preservice teachers' challenges and success with culturally relevant text selection and pedagogy. The methods of data collection were reader responses, lesson plans, and reflections. The study revealed PD should help teachers learn about their students' cultures and identities and then apply this knowledge when selecting texts for instruction. Teachers must have support throughout this text selection process to be successful. PD provided that support for teachers.

A study specific to Mississippi was conducted by Folsom, Smith, Burk, and Oakley (2017). The purpose of the study was to determine changes in teacher knowledge of early literacy skills and in ratings of quality and early literacy skills instruction between Winter 2014 and Fall 2015. The methods of the study included the use of two instruments development by the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Southeast. The team developed the Teacher Knowledge of Early Literacy Skills (TKELS) survey and the Coach's Classroom Observation Tool (CCOT). The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) invited all teachers who taught kindergarten through third grade to complete the TKELS survey four times between Spring 2014 and Fall 2015. Literacy Coaches were deployed to observe classroom instruction in targeted

schools and documented observations on the CCOT four times between the Winter 2014 and the Spring 2015. The study revealed teacher knowledge increased with PD, moving from an average of the 48th to the 59th percentile on Teacher Knowledge of Early Literacy Skills survey.

Baum and Krulwich (2017) argued that schools often offer a variety of opportunities for teacher learning, but those sessions fail to meet teacher and principal needs. The authors defined what teacher collaboration should look like in PD. The two discovered teachers needed direct leadership with defining their work by a leader who understands how to properly define the scope of his or her work. In other words, teachers need support to understand the true definition of collaboration. In order to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading, best-practices in teaching must be implemented and monitored. Best practices must include ongoing PD for teachers with a focus on teacher collaboration.

**Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)**

The words Professional Learning Community (PLCs) were used as early as the 1960s. Researchers suggested the PLC concept as an alternative to meet teacher needs in the United States. More explicit research on PLCs in the late 1980s and early 1990s became available (All Things PLC, 2018). At Tigerville Elementary School (TES), the term PLCs was overused and often associated with meetings with many purposes. As a result, PLCs had taken on various meanings that had nothing to do with improving student learning. However, PLCs can have more than one approach and still be considered effective. Richard DuFour (2004) defined PLCs as groups of staff members who are determined to find creative ways to help students learn. DuFour warned that overuse of the term PLC had almost rendered the intended meaning of PLCs unclear. DuFour (2004) noted effective PLCs should have three components: (a) ensuring students learn, (b) a collaborative culture, and (c) a focus on results.

Burnette (2002) defined a PLC as a school where individuals work collaboratively to improve their practices, leading to student achievement. The collective understanding of a common purpose and vision are evident and should be shared. The PLC model should be systematic and should involve a continuous cycle of learning.

**Dimensions of PLCs.** Hord (1997) listed five dimensions of successful PLCs: (a) shared and supportive leadership, (b) shared values and vision, (c) collective learning, (d) supportive conditions, and (e) shared personal practice. Hord's five dimensions resulted from a five-year, multimethod study for the Southwest Education Development Laboratory on PLCs. The study looked at the evolution of PLCs and included schools that wanted to improve the PLC process to boost teaching and learning. The research methods included interviews with teachers and administrators, questionnaires, and continuous PD for PLC leaders.

Huffman and Hipp (2003), in conjunction with Hord, asserted that school improvement must begin with leaders who support and believe transformation is possible. The case study involved the development of PLCs with six K-12 schools. The case study revealed with a well-defined PLC culture; PLCs can be an effective form of professional development for teachers.

**Benefits of PLCs.** Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), when conducted effectively, can yield huge teaching benefits. One of the first and most beneficial aspects of PLCs will be teacher learning. Through PLCs, teachers will be able to identify those challenging instructional areas, while collaboratively finding strategies to improve reading instruction.

Jacobson (2010) contended that when teachers take an active role in their own learning through PLCs, they readily identify their challenges and take action which leads to a deeper understanding of effective teaching strategies. This study examined the role of PLCs and questioned if PLCs could provide all the PD teachers needed. The study reviewed two

approaches to PLCs: inquiry-based and results-oriented thinking.  The study revealed that both

approaches were necessary components of a PLC, and PD for teachers needed to be ongoing and

connected to instructional practices.

According to Horn and Little (2010), teacher capacity increases when PLCs provide a

collaborative platform where teachers can focus on specific issues.  The two-year project

investigated the routines of two teachers from the same high school.  The researchers reviewed

audio and video tapes of teachers' work in PLCs.  The study noted that teacher learning can be

improved through the systematic support of a PLC.

PLCs offer a learning model in which new strategies and ideas develop.  The research

also indicates there are challenges with PLCs. Relational trust is important for PLCs (Maloney

& Konza, 2011).  For PLCs to be successful during the development and sustaining stages

relationship barriers must be overcome.  Teachers, principals, coaches, must develop

relationships through communication that is ongoing to build and maintain relational trust.

Lomos, Hofman, and Bosker (2011) conducted a meta-analysis on the effect of PLCs

on student achievement.  The results of the analysis implied the effects of PLCs are diverse

but positive.  Although effect sizes were relatively small, the authors found that the

relationship between PLCs and student achievement was positive and significant.

Teague and Anfara (2012) concluded that when schools set a goal to ensure equitable

and effective learning for all students, instructors pursue their own personal learning more

vigorously and more effectively.  Working in this manner has shown a significant impact on

student achievement.  Along with increasing the efficacy of teachers and administrators, the

PLC process motivates the educators to maintain confidence and high expectations, which in

turn increases academic performance.

Also, Aylsworth (2012) conducted research that compared teacher participation in PLCs and student performance. A pre- and post-PLC design was used to test independent and two-sample *t*-test. Ten PLCs from one suburban high school were used as the focus of the study. The study revealed seven out of ten PLCs experienced growth in student achievement after the school functioned as PLCs.

Blank (2013) also conducted a meta-analysis regarding the relationship between PLCs and student achievement. Blank reviewed 16 studies in a meta-analysis that revealed the importance and structure of PLCs and their significant impact on student achievement. The study results found common elements that contributed to the effectiveness of a PLC and therefore contributed to an increase in student achievement: (a) content focus, (b) time and attention to task, (c) additional time for professional learning, (d) multiple professional learning activities, (e) learning goals, and (f) collective participation by teachers.

Student achievement is the central consideration in beginning the process of creating a collaborative school culture. School culture, leadership behaviors, and collaboration are all elements that could have an impact on student achievement. Williams (2013) noted that consistent collaboration positively impacts student achievement when practiced consistently and effectively: "Once more, findings supported continuous collaboration as pivotal to shifting the education focus from how teachers teach to how children learn. Students showed improvements across all grade levels after the principal established PLCs and collaborated alongside teachers" (p. 2). Williams also highlighted the importance of principals' involvement in PLCs as a causal factor in student success. Stakeholders' perceptions of limited principal involvement in PLCs and the problem-solving process within the school were correlated with low student achievement. Those student achievement scores improved

following the establishment of a PLC that focused on instructional strategies and data analysis. The recommendation was school administrators become integral members of the PLC within their school and work alongside teachers to problem solve and create effective instructional environments.

Through the use of PLCs, teachers have opportunities to build leadership capacity. Sahlberg (2013) believed teachers should be empowered to become leaders. In this research study conducted in Finland, the author found when teachers were given opportunities to showcase best-practices from their classrooms, teacher leadership potential increased. Sahlberg noted that Finland had raised the standards for teachers who entered the profession. The author noted when teachers were empowered to do and be their best, excellent teaching happened in the classroom. By allowing teachers to showcase their best teaching practices through the use PLCs, teachers gain the knowledge and expertise to strengthen instruction and to improve the quality of teaching.

The Red Clay Consolidated School District (n.d.) cited the Focus, Strategy, Assessment, and Response (FSAR) model as the primary cause of improvements and consistency in their PLCs. It was unclear if the Red Clay Consolidated School District proposed the FSAR model or if it was adopted. However, the school district used the FSAR model to provide a systematic process to their PLC. The results of the use of the FSAR model suggested teachers from the Red Clay County School District took a more active role in learning from one another.

In a meta-analysis, Patrick (2013) reviewed 21 dissertations using the Hord model. The purpose of the study was to determine if significant relationships existed between PLC implementation and student achievement in PreK-12 schools. The methods of this study involved a thorough review of unpublished dissertations using five specific criteria. The criteria

to be included in this study included: a) availability of the database b) the study originated between 1997 and 2012 from a college identified as Carnegie Doctoral/Research Universities-Extensive c) the study included some characteristic of a PLC and achievement data d) the effect size was calculated and reported for some quantitative data in the study.  The results of the study indicated shared and supportive leadership, shared vision, and relations factors of supportive conditions proved influential.  On the contrary, the study revealed the hypothesis that PLC implementation significantly increased student academic achievement was only partially supported.

Research from Mintzes, Marcum, Messerschmidt-Yates, and Mark (2013) studied the importance of teacher relationships to building social capital and improving public schools.  The purpose of the study was to examine the role of PLCs on self-efficacy in science teaching.  The study consisted of mixed-research methods and a non-equivalent control group experimental design.  The study evaluated self-efficacy changes and expected outcomes among teachers who participated in PLCs that included Demonstrations Laboratories, Lesson Studies, and annual Summer Institutes.  Participants noted the emotional benefits of participating in a PLC.  There was also reported change in instruction, moving from a textbook centered to inquiry style of teaching.  The study also noted increase in teacher knowledge based on information presented at PLC meetings.

The effectiveness of PLCs was also examined by Wells and Feun (2013).  In their study, a survey was developed to assess the effectiveness of PLCs.  They based their survey on five domains of PLCs: supportive and shared leadership, collective creativity, shared vision and values, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. Data revealed sharing was a major benefit of working in a PLC.  The study also found that what was shared differed

between District A and District B, where one district was more successful in establishing an environment where the sharing and analysis of student learning occurred.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can also impact student achievement. Williams (2013) completed a causal comparative study on the impact of PLCs on urban students' reading achievement. There were 76 participating schools, and 35 teacher interviewees sampled for research. Teams of reading teachers collaborated weekly in PLCs for learning, planning, and problem-solving. Results indicated significant student growth in reading after PLCs were established. Qualitative data indicated that teachers perceived that PLCs had a positive impact on teaching practices and student achievement. A study of an effective teacher network in Philadelphia indicated the value of teachers having a space to share best practices and resources (Schiff, Herzog, Farley-Ripple, & Iannuccilli, 2015). Being able to hear ideas from others was seen as valuable.

In a case study of PLCs, Owen (2014) explored the experiences of teachers in Australia and teams involved in PLCs. The methods of the study included interviews and focus groups. The results of the study revealed instructional practices changed by co-examining student work and having mature dialogue. Teacher instructional practices also changed as a result of PLC processes of planning, observing, and having time for collegial work.

**Role of PLCs.** Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have many roles. One of the most informative PLC roles should be instructional collaboration. During PLCs, teachers will have opportunities to glean new instructional ideas through collaborative instructional conversations. In a study on PLCs, Sompong, Erawan, and Dharm-tad-sa-na-non (2015) looked at the role of PLCs in primary schools in Taiwan. Their study aimed to identify the need for developing PLCs in primary schools, develop a model for PLCs, and to study the

findings of implementing PLCs.  The study reviewed responses from surveys which indicated teachers could collaborate on instruction, methods of teaching, and share ideas every day in small groups, while experiencing sharing every week.  Their research noted that when teachers had opportunities to collaborate, they developed different ideas and colleagues helped in their ability to improve their instructional practice.

In a 10-year study of faculty members at three universities, Sheehy, Bohler, Richardson, and Gallo (2015) researched the impact of PLCs on educators.  In this study, teachers worked collaboratively in groups called communities of practice.  Findings revealed the impact the group leverage played in supporting the group to improve all aspects of each member's academic teaching, research and service.  The collaborative grouping allowed for ongoing, collaborative development and professional learning.  The research also noted a common challenge for collaborative communities is sustainability.

Hands, Guzar, and Rodrigue (2016) identified the characteristics of transformative PLCs.  Their research revealed the characteristics that promote practices of deep thinking to analyze and transform teacher practice and student achievement.  A major factor in creating communities of transformative practice was trust between the facilitator and members of the learning community for growth to occur.

**Conclusion**

Students must learn to read (Zakariya, 2015).  Providing instructional support for teachers to teach the five components of reading can help students learn to read.  According to Schmoker (2006), "the use of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) is the best, least expensive, and most professionally rewarding way to improve schools.  Such communities hold out immense, unprecedented hope for schools and the improvement of teaching" (p. 137–138).  Also, the use

of the Focus, Strategies, Assessment, and Response (FSAR) model into PLCs will add consistency to PLCs.

The literature revealed several themes involving research-based practices to help teachers improve their instructional practices with the five components of reading. The literature also suggests PLCs have great academic and instructional benefits. Literature suggests PLCs should have specific dimensions and roles to be effective. Larger studies indicated an increase in teaching quality with effective leadership and effective use of PLCs meeting time. Several extant literature studies suggested a connection between teacher collegiality, teacher leadership and the work that happens during PLCs. PLCs show great promise for improving teacher practice and student success.

To date, more research is needed to determine the effects of PLCs on providing instructional support, building teaching capacity, and improving student achievement in schools with diverse socioeconomic demographics. The literature affirms that teachers can learn to teach reading by focusing on best practices in reading, collaborating, and thinking in terms of results. Research points to the need to provide teacher support, and, when used effectively, PLCs led to improvements in student achievement. When founded on research-based practices, PLCs provide teachers with a much-needed platform for a systematic focus on learning, collaborating, and emphasizing results-oriented thinking. By integrating the FSAR model into PLCs, teachers will have a consistent model and expectations for PLC meeting structure. Additionally, the FSAR model will provide a much-needed teacher focus to increase collaborative learning.

Due to the positive impacts of PLCs found in the literature, as well as the need to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading, research is needed to examine the results of an organized action plan that aims to improve student success through PLCs. The overall goal

of this applied-research study is to use research-based practices to use the five components of reading to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading at TES and to provide continuous organizational learning.  Chapter Three will describe in detail the methods for this study.

**Chapter III:**

**METHODS**

**Introduction**

Chapter Three presented the applied research design and methods used in this project to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading at Tigerville Elementary School (TES). Because TES used Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading (STAR) test data to predict the number of students who would pass the state-mandated Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) in reading, this project used professional learning communities (PLCs) and the Focus, Strategies, Assessment, and Response (FSAR; Red Clay County School District, n.d.) model as the systematic process to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading.

TES is an elementary school in a small town in North Mississippi with an enrollment of 625 students. This applied research study was designed to address a specific problem of practice and to improve organizational effectiveness by developing the capacity for organizational learning. The details of the applied research guiding this project are presented and explained in this chapter, which is divided into three sections. The first section explained the collaborative development of the action plan to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading. This section included an overview of collaboration with stakeholders, a review and timeline of the process, extant research guiding the project, resources of time and materials, and the internal data that informed the creation of the action plan.

The second section presented the action plan, beginning with the project's research questions. Each research question was designed to guide the evaluation of one element of the

action plan.  The other elements of the action plan represent specific collaborative efforts to address the problem and include one or more measurable goals.  This section provides the details of each element; the systematic process used to execute the element; the timeline; resources, such as time and material; and the responsible party for each activity.

The final section of Chapter Three presents the program evaluation of the action plan, followed by a one-year implementation timeline.  Both formative and summative assessments were used to evaluate each element of the action plan.  Each element was evaluated using multiple sources of quantitative and qualitative data.  The focus of the evaluation was to determine whether the goal of improving organizational capacity to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading was achieved and to evaluate the action plan.  The research questions were evaluated in light of the data collected and analyzed through the program-evaluation process.  The following research questions were used to evaluate the results of the action plan:

1.  Was there at least a 5% decrease in the number of students needing reading interventions on the STAR assessment from the beginning of 2018-2019 school year to the end of the 2018-2019 school year?

2.  What changes, if any, occurred in teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of PLCs post-implementation of PLC elements from the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year to the end of 2018-2019 school year?

3.  What instructional areas, if any, changed through the implementation of the PLCs at the end of the 2018-2019 school year?

4.  What problems and constraints impacted successful implementation of the PLCs in the 2018-2019 school year?

**Development of the Action Plan**

A set of preliminary questions guided the development of the action plan to address the problem of third-grade reading at TES. The first question examined teachers' beliefs about PLCs and what PLCs looked like in the 2016-2017 school year, before the new administration was hired. The second question sought to identify and summarize existing classroom instructional practices teachers used to support students who did not master a reading concept. The final question focused on understanding what specific teacher supports were needed, which led to the development of an action plan.

The development of the action plan included several components and phases. STAR was used as a predictor of student performance on the MAAP test, so it is critical to understand how the state of Mississippi assigns school ratings of A-F as part of its school accountability system. For the past three years, TES's overall state accountability test scores fluctuated between a D and C school rating. The 2015-2016 MAAP test scores showed a 37-point decline on the state accountability model. The decline in 2015-2016 school year MAAP data did not set a positive trajectory for students, teachers, or other stakeholders' success. While the overall accountability scores for TES showed an increase for the 2017-2018 school year, the third-grade STAR results from August 2018 did not indicate a successful growth correlation for the upcoming MAAP (2018-2019) reading test.

Teacher conversations led to teachers voicing concerns over the lack of instructional support in the classroom. Teachers openly shared their desire to improve reading instruction but were not sure which strategies were needed to improve third-grade reading. Moreover, teachers voiced concerns over how PLCs were structured. Further teacher conversations revealed that

PLC meetings lacked consistency and a focus on reading instruction. More specifically, PLCs lacked focused reading instruction on how to teach the five components of reading.

Upon hiring the new administrative team for the 2017-2018 school year, the new administrators began conversations about restructuring the School Leadership Team (SLT). The administrators and the SLT met to collaborate on who should serve as a new member of the SLT. The goal of restructuring PLCs was to have a representative from each grade to serve as the new team leader. The SLT and the new administrators began conversations regarding the school's daily structure and instructional practices.

Next, the SLT and the administrative team continued teacher conversations through an interview process. Teachers expressed the need for instructional support in the area of reading. Teachers revealed students had a lethargic response to reading instruction and appeared disinterested in reading. Teacher conversations further revealed that TES students scored As and Bs on all weekly reading assessments, yet the STAR and MAAP reading test scores revealed a discrepancy between STAR, MAAP reading scores, and weekly reading assessment scores. Based on the discrepancy between weekly assessment scores, STAR, and the MAAP reading test results, the new administration had concerns about the rigor of assessments given at the classroom level.

Upon further review of the August 2018 STAR and MAAP reading assessment scores for 2017-2018, the new administration initiated a preliminary root-cause analysis to identify areas of strength and weakness throughout the school and possible courses of action to improve STAR reading test scores and achievement on the MAAP test. The root-cause analysis identified two major areas of weakness from the August 2018 STAR and the MAAP for 2017-2018 that were consistent across the entire third-grade class: reading comprehension and vocabulary. The new

administrative team and the SLT recognized a decline in the overall reading MAAP scores. Third-grade reading scores also showed fluctuating test data. In June 2018, the SLT and the researcher reviewed trend data from the April 2018 STAR test. The researcher and the SLT noted 47% of third-graders at TES were classified on the STAR reading assessment as On Watch, Intervention, or Urgent Intervention. The STAR assessment identified third-grade students in need of more instructional support in the areas of vocabulary and reading comprehension. As a result of the inconsistent third-grade reading test scores, the team decided to focus on improving the quality of teaching in third-grade reading, as the MAAP reading scores determined if students were promoted to fourth grade.

The researcher presented trend data during the July 2018 school board meeting. Data from the STAR (2015-2016; 2016-2017; 2017-2018) reading assessment and the third-grade MAAP reading test scores from the 2015-2016, 2016-2017, and 2017-2018 school years were presented. Data revealed 86.7% (2015-2016) of the third-grade students passed the MAAP reading test. In 2016-2017, 90.8% of the third-grade students passed the MAAP reading test, and 92.7% of the third-grade students passed the MAAP reading test in 2017-2018. The researcher also presented published research and theory about the importance of third-grade reading. The researcher explained the four levels of STAR: At/Above Benchmark, On Watch, Intervention, or Urgent Intervention. When students are At/Above Benchmark, that indicates the student is ready for instruction at their grade level. When a student is On Watch, that means the student needs reading intervention. Urgent Intervention means the student needs reading support immediately to prevent getting further behind academically. As a result of the July 2018 data presentation and the existing published research and theory, a proposal to focus on improving the

quality of teaching in third-grade reading was accepted, and TES school leaders were charged with crafting and executing an action plan.

The SLT, the researcher, and third-grade teachers from TES met in late July 2018 to devise an action plan to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading. The team agreed on an action plan that would restructure PLCs and then use PLC meetings as the vehicle to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading. PLC meetings would focus on the five components of reading and the use of common assessment data and state test data to improve reading instruction. The team chose to use grade-level PLC meeting times because each grade level had a planning hour during which teachers could work collaboratively.

The action plan was based on a thorough review and use of quantitative (i.e., STAR and MAAP) and qualitative data (i.e., teacher conversations) from the 2015-2016, 2016-2017, and 2017-2018 school years. After teachers, administrators, and the SLT members reviewed the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) protocol for third-grade reading, students and teachers decided it was critical to ensure every student who had not passed the MAAP reading test in the 2017-2018 school year had a detailed Individualized Reading Plan (IRP) to support the specific reading needs of that student. Data from the August 2018 STAR was compared to the February 2019 STAR data to determine if the number of students who needed reading interventions decreased by 5%. The STAR data was used to create IRPs for third-grade students. Student scores from the 2017-2018 third-grade MAAP reading test were used to support teacher understanding of the Mississippi College- and Career-Ready Standards (MS-CCRS) in reading.

The SLT also felt it would be helpful to collaborate with another school with similar demographics and an A rating to learn about PLCs. The goal of the school-based peer visit was to glean information about how their third-grade PLCs operated. Prior to the site visit, the SLT

designed three specific questions to guide the site visit.  The first question focused on the

administrative support systems that were in place to support teachers. The second question

focused on how third-grade PLC time was used, and the third question was about the use of data

to improve reading instruction.

The SLT determined the objective of the PLCs was to create a culture of sustainable,

high-quality teaching with a focus on the five components of reading.  Another objective of the

PLCs was to address reading challenges while providing structure and purpose for learning.  The

action plan was designed to support continual organizational improvement.  The team chose two

primary goals for the action plan to improve the third-grade PLC meeting process: (1) to

decrease the number of students who needed reading interventions by at least 5% by February

2019 and (2) to develop the organizational capacity to continually improve the quality of

teaching in third-grade reading.

**Action Plan Overview**

This section of the chapter described the three elements used in this applied research

study to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading: (1) providing instructional

support, (2) building teaching capacity, and (3) improving student achievement.  The section also

described the implementation process of the three elements.  The first element described the use

of PLCs to provide instructional support for teachers to teach the five components of reading.

The second element described the use of PLCs to build teaching capacity.  The third element

described the use PLCs to improve student achievement.

Table 3.1 outlined the action plan and provided specifics of each goal, objective, and

element.  This table also provided beginning and ending dates, the responsible party for each

step, the resources needed for completion, and the goal for each element.  Each part of the action

plan is included to support the short- and long-term goals of the action plan.

Table 3.1

*TES Action Plan*

| Element | Goals | Timeline | Who | Budget |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Providing Instructional Support** | Short-term – Active teacher collaboration with focus on learning; use of five components of reading. Long-term – Continued use of PLCs for organizational growth. | July 2018 – February 2019 | Researcher, SLT, Administrators, Teachers | $5,000 |
| **Building Teaching Capacity** | Short-term – Teacher collaboration in PLC meetings. Long-term – Teachers gain greater collaborative capacity tied to pedagogical skills using five components of reading in a safe and non-threatening environment. | July 2018 – February 2019 | Researcher, SLT, Administrators, Teachers | $3,200 |
| **Improving Student Achievement** | Short-term – Incremental increase on common assessments to 80%. Long-term –Focus on results with at least a 5% decrease in students needing reading interventions on STAR. | July 2018 – February 2019 | Researcher, SLT, Administrators, Teachers | $17,500 |

**Element one: Providing instructional support.** The first element of the action plan focused on using the five components of reading to provide instructional support for teachers. PLC meetings focused on the five components of reading, beginning with phonemic awareness. PLC meetings were systematically structured using the Focus, Strategies, Assessment, and Response model (FSAR; Red Clay Consolidated School District, n. d.).

The researcher met with the third-grade teachers at TES in August 2018 and proposed PLC meetings should occur twice a week (Tuesday and Thursday). The teachers suggested having PLC meetings every two weeks, as opposed to having two PLC meetings each week. Further conversations indicated teachers needed additional time to process and implement instructional reading strategies before having an additional PLC meeting within the same week. The third-grade teachers also suggested the first two consecutive days of professional development should be used to provide an overview of PLC meetings. Teachers also suggested a two-week rotation schedule for the FSAR model. For example, teachers suggested PLC meetings should begin with the "FS" (Focus and Strategies) part of the FSAR model to better understand one of the five reading components and the instructional strategies to teach the specific component of reading. Then the next PLC meeting should focus on the "AR" (Assessment and Response) part of the FSAR model. As a result of these suggestions, the PLC meeting schedule was changed to every two weeks. The schedule change allowed teachers time for grade-level planning and implementation of the five components of reading. The teacher suggestion for a rotating cycle of the FSAR model was also accepted (see Appendix B).

The PLC meeting process included the introduction a new component of reading every two weeks. The instructional cycle was repeated until all five components of reading were introduced and implemented. The instructional cycle continued until the effectiveness of teacher

reading instruction was analyzed, assessments were given, and the responses (next steps) were charted. While the researcher initially led the PLC meetings, teacher-leaders were encouraged to lead some PLC meetings. Therefore, the amount of time spent on a specific reading component was sometimes adjusted. As part of the continuous learning cycle, PLC meetings also included instructional videos to provide support for teachers. Teachers were encouraged to consider how instructional strategies from the videos could be adapted and used to improve reading instruction in their classrooms. Teachers had the opportunity to share additional thoughts on the PLC meeting structure.

There were a minimum of 10 PLC meetings for the 2018-2019 school year, beginning in August. During Tuesday PLC meetings (9:45 a.m.-10:35 a.m.), the researcher introduced one of the five components of reading and provided several instructional strategies to teach that component of reading. For example, one PLC meeting focused on phonemic awareness. During that PLC meeting, teachers received research-based instructional strategies to support phonemic-awareness instruction. For the remainder of the week (Wednesday-Friday), teachers planned individually and as a team how they would introduce that component of reading and use the specific instructional strategies learned in PLCs. The following week (Monday-Thursday), third-grade teachers focused their instruction by using the instructional strategies taught during the PLC meeting.

Each Friday, teachers checked student reading abilities by creating and administering a common reading assessment. As a team, teachers created common assessments using the Case 21 item test bank purchased by the district. Teachers analyzed the results to find specific areas that students did not master and planned to reteach specific areas of the five components of reading that students did not master (see Appendix B).

After teachers administered the weekly common assessment, they focused on the assessment and response part of the FSAR model. Teachers analyzed weekly common assessment data by noon each Monday and then completed the data form. Teachers worked collaboratively during PLC meetings to develop a response to the data (next steps) that was implemented in small instructional groups in the classroom. Teachers brought completed TES data forms and presented their findings to colleagues during PLC meetings. Teachers also participated in professional development sessions one Wednesday a month. The professional development sessions were conducted separately from the scheduled PLC meetings and aligned with the five components of reading instruction, as well as additional teacher-driven instructional needs.

Each teacher, the SLT, and the researcher participated in two instructional rounds (IRs), one per semester. The IRs focused on a problem of practice at TES by providing a time to observe and gather evidence of reading instruction. Prior to IRs, the SLT and the researcher underwent professional development on how to properly conduct IRs. This professional development was facilitated by an outside presenter and included best practices, along with understanding the purpose of IRs. The professional development also included role-playing sessions and described the role of descriptive evidence. The facilitator reiterated that the purpose of IRs is not evaluative or judgmental. After each IR, the SLT and teachers debriefed on the findings.

A budget for PLC meetings provided adequate resources to effectively operate. The budget for Element 1 was $5,000 and included the cost of materials. The timeline for implementation of the PLC model began in August 2018 and concluded in May 2019. Short-term goals for the PLCs were determined as teachers learned how to teach the five components

of reading.  Long-term goals for the PLC meetings were determined by continual use of PLCs to provide instructional support for teachers, leading to organizational growth.

**Element two: Building teaching capacity.**  The second element of the action plan focused on using the five components of reading to build teaching capacity.  The SLT decided there was a need to build teaching capacity using the five components of reading.  The SLT also believed teacher collaboration would build teaching capacity and strengthen a collaborative culture.  To effectively build teaching capacity, the SLT believed the need to assess the current teaching capacity and culture at TES was critical to success.  The researcher interviewed third-grade teachers to learn more about the school's existing culture and teaching capacity.  The researcher wanted to understand more about the teachers' perspectives on the existing culture and teaching capacity in order to have more accurate data to make informed decisions.  Based on information gathered from teacher interviews, the researcher decided to focus on building teaching capacity through a more collaborative culture using the five components of reading.  In order to build teaching capacity, third-grade teachers used PLC meetings to implement the Critical Friend (CF) approach (Bambino, 2002).  The CF approach required teachers to identify either a mentor or a teacher friend to collaborate with on instructional ideas and planning.  This CF provided additional support to teach the five components of reading.

Teachers developed group norms for the CF approach.  Teachers watched a short instructional video to provide a better understanding of CFs.  Teachers did a quick-write about the video and then shared with a teacher buddy.  Teachers collaborated to establish protocols, rituals, and routines for the CFs.  Teachers established shared values and commitments using CFs to improve collaboration.  The CF model focuses on building teaching capacity through establishing teacher trust.  The CF model also provides meaningful, evidence-based feedback by

reflecting on the CF process, sharing feedback, and offering suggestions to improve pedagogical skills using the five components of reading.

As teachers continually worked to build teaching capacity, each teacher worked collaboratively with their CF during a mutually agreed time during the week to describe how the specific component of reading and instructional reading strategy was being implemented. The teacher and the CF collaborated on the implementation process of the five components of reading. Next, the teacher and the CF created a lesson plan using the five components of reading. After the lesson plan was created, with support from the CF, the teacher asked the CF for constructive feedback. The CF asked clarifying questions regarding the lesson plan and provided feedback. The teacher had the option to self-video the lesson or invite the CF to observe the lesson. After observation, the teacher and the CF met to debrief the lesson. Both the teacher and the CF completed a short, written reflection about the collaborative observation and feedback process. Teachers also journaled about their thoughts on the CF process as it relates to implementation of the five components of reading. After a teacher taught a lesson, students took a weekly reading common assessment. Once the assessment was scored, teachers analyzed the assessment results for patterns and trends in the data. Teachers brought student work samples to the PLC meetings to help determine next steps for reading instruction.

A budget was created for building teaching capacity. The budget for element two was $3,200 and included the cost of materials. The timeline for implementation of this element ran from July 2018 to May 2019. The short-term goal was active participation of teachers in weekly PLC meetings. Long-term goals for the PLC meetings were for teachers to increase teaching capacity using the five components of reading and to increase pedagogical skills in a safe and nonthreatening environment.

**Element three: Improving student achievement.** The third element of the action plan focused on the five components of reading to improve student achievement. Teachers watched a short TED Talk video on results-oriented thinking and student achievement. Teachers worked collaboratively to share the focus of the video with a teacher buddy. Next, teachers collaborated to produce testing dates for (a) weekly common assessments in reading based on the standard, (b) progress-monitoring for STAR, and (c) common benchmark assessments for each of the nine weeks.

Teachers collaborated on instructional strategies to teach the five components of reading, implement the reading strategies in the classroom, and then assess student learning of each component of reading. Teachers collaborated to improve student achievement using the five components of reading. Teachers supported each other through collaborative teacher talks and support for implementation of reading strategies in the classroom. Teachers assessed students weekly using the Case 21 online testing platform. After common assessments were administered online using a 50-minute block scheduling time, the data were analyzed. Teachers brought student work samples to PLC meetings. Instructional conversations during the PLC meetings centered on results from the common assessments. Teachers then discussed the data from the completed TES data form with third-grade colleagues and the researcher. Teachers focused on next steps for the students who scored less than 80% on each assessment.

Teachers collectively developed a response to the results from the weekly common assessment data. Teachers created a coordinated intervention plan focused on timely, directive, diagnostic, precise, and systematic results (Richard DuFour & Mattos, 2013). The data response centered on specific improvement goals that aligned with the school's mission, vision, and the PLC meeting goals. Teachers examined results from the common assessments to determine

strengths and weaknesses, including teacher delivery of the five components of reading. Teachers identified students who scored less than 80% on the common assessment and collaborated to provide enrichment assignments for those students. Teachers whose data demonstrated success, based on 80% goal attainment, shared which reading strategies worked for students. Teachers whose data did not reach the predetermined goal of 80% of students with passing scores collaborated with the SLT on additional reading strategies to support students who did not master the assessed standard. Teachers continually reevaluated the data to make instructional adjustments to ensure all students learned. Teachers responded by completing a teacher reflection on the assessment process to determine any needed instructional adjustments.

The budget for implementing element three was $17,500 and included the cost of materials. The timeline for element three ran from August 2018 to February 2019. Short- and long-term goals were assessed. Short-term goals included teachers' reading instruction improving to the level where students' common assessment scores showed an incremental increase after the administration of each common assessment. The long-term goal was for teachers' instruction in reading to lead to students mastering each common assessment with at least an 80% pass rate and at least a 5% decrease in the number of students who needed reading interventions.

**Action Plan Evaluation**

This applied research design was evaluated for the purpose of answering the research questions listed at the beginning of Chapter Three. The quantitative method of data collection was used to evaluate the overall success of the program, while qualitative methods provided a deeper description of the factors surrounding implementation of the action plan, as well as possible strategies for improvement.

**Evaluation design.** This evaluation plan contains an outline of the model that was used to conduct the program evaluation. The program evaluation used PLCs as the vehicle to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading. The program evaluation also evaluated the use and implementation process of the five components of reading to improve the reading problem. The PLC meetings followed a rotational cycle using the FSAR Model (Red Clay Consolidated School District, n. d.) for each element of the PLCs, and the FSAR model was used to collect data. This evaluation document contains a logic model (see Table 2) of the organizational flow of activities for PLC meetings and the questions used to guide the evaluation process. Third-grade reading teachers were the focus of this applied research study. Data from the STAR assessment pre- and post-tests (from August 2018 and February 2019) were compared and analyzed for a 5% decrease in the number of students who needed reading interventions. The logic model is displayed in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2

*Logic Model*

| Element | Goals | Timeline | Who | Evaluation Data |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Providing instructional support for teachers** | Short-term – Teacher collaboration with continuous focus on learning; Long-term – Continued use of PLCs for organizational growth. | July 2018 – February 2019 | Researcher, SLT, Administrators | Sign-in sheets, Classroom observations, Instructional rounds, Teacher interviews |
| **Building teaching capacity** | Short-term – Teacher collaboration and participation in PLC meetings; Long-term – Teachers gain greater collaborative capacity and increasing pedagogical skills with five components of reading in a nonthreatening environment. | July 2018 – February 2019 | Researcher, SLT, Administrators | Sign-in sheets, Teacher reflections, Lesson plans, Collaborative evaluations, Teacher interviews, Teacher planning |
| **Improving student achievement** | Short-term – Increase of 80% on common assessment; Long-term – Focus on results with decrease in number of students needing reading interventions using STAR. | July 2018 – February 2019 | Researcher, SLT, Administrators | Sign-in sheets, Reflection journals, SMART goals, Common assessments and calendar, TES data-tracking form, STAR data |

**Types of Data Collection**

Each element of the action plan had specific data points to be collected throughout the implementation process. Data were both quantitative (STAR) and qualitative (e.g., teacher interviews, classroom observations, instructional rounds). Teachers were given the interview protocol two weeks before the interviews were held. This was done to give the teachers ample time to gather their thoughts before the interviews were conducted. The interviews lasted an average of 20 minutes in duration. All of the interviews were conducted in the principal's office and by the principal. Teachers were interviewed individually. Teacher responses were recorded using a hand held device, transcribed, and coded for themes.

This section describes the means by which data for each element of the action plan were collected, including a description of each element, the protocols for data collection, and a measurable goal for each element. The means of data collection and the goal for each element is found in the evaluation column of the action plan in Table 3.2.

**Providing instructional support.** The first element of the action plan was the quality of instructional support teachers received as they taught the five components of reading. Instructional support to teach the five components of reading was provided through PLCs. Instructional support was evaluated using various methods to assess progress towards short- and long-term goals. The short-term goals of providing instructional support was to increase teacher collaboration using the five components of reading. The long-term goal of providing instructional support for teachers was the continued use of PLCs for organizational growth. Teachers worked with the SLT and the researcher to learn instructional strategies to teach the five components of reading (one at a time), beginning with phonemic awareness. Teachers chose one reading strategy from the research-based articles provided by the SLT or the researcher.

After the team agreed on the reading strategy for the week, teachers were evaluated on the

instructional implementation of the reading strategy.  The researcher observed each third-grade

reading classroom a minimum of two times each week and documented the evaluation and

implementation of instructional practices for effective use of the reading strategies associated

with that specific component of reading.  Documentation notes were used to evaluate and track

teacher use of instructional support provided through the School Status classroom observation

system.  The researcher evaluated instructional practices to determine if teacher performance

increased using the School Status observation system. Meeting sign-in sheets were evaluated to

determine if PLC meetings happened as indicated.  Teachers were interviewed once a month to

determine the level of the instructional support, if any, that was provided to teach the five

components of reading (see Appendix C).

Teachers received professional development once a month based on their needs.

Additionally, professional development was aligned to the five components of reading.

Professional development also included additional best instructional practices and instructional

strategies in reading.  Additional sessions included findings from instructional rounds and

teacher requests (see Appendix D).  Professional development occurred outside the regular

Tuesday PLC meeting times.  Instructional rounds were used to determine how instructional

support was used during instructional time.  The goal for this element was to provide

instructional support for teachers through a minimum of 10 documented PLC meeting sign-in

sheets and one teacher interview per month (August to February) for the 2018-2019 school year.

Qualitative data collected from classroom observations and teacher interviews were utilized for

formative assessment.

**Building teaching capacity.** The second element of the action plan to be evaluated was teacher collaboration on the use of the five components of reading to build teaching capacity. Building teaching capacity was evaluated using various methods to assess progress towards short- and long-term goals. The short-term goal of building teaching capacity included teacher collaboration and participation in PLC meetings every other week. Long-term goals for building teaching capacity included greater teacher collaborative capacity, leading to an increase in pedagogical skills with the use of the five components of reading in a nonthreatening environment. Each teacher implemented the instructional strategies associated with each specific component of reading. Teachers identified a CF from the SLT or a mentor within the building to discuss how the instructional strategy was implemented. Building teaching capacity was also evaluated using the CF rubric to determine if collaboration was beneficial. Each teacher also collaborated on the lesson-plan process. The collaborative process and completion of weekly lesson plans was evaluated to determine what additional support was needed to build teaching capacity in the five components of reading. After lesson plans were developed, each teacher decided if he or she would evaluate the lesson using a self-video or if the CF would evaluate the use and implementation of the five components of reading. The teacher and the CF documented collaboration using a collaborative CF rubric (see Appendix E) and teacher reflections. Meeting sign-in sheets were used to document evidence of collaboration in PLC meetings. A minimum of two teacher interviews with a CF about the collaborative process and use of the five components of reading were used as part of the evaluation. The goal for this element was to build teaching capacity using the five components of reading, with a minimum of two documented CF meetings for the 2018-2019 school year.

**Improving student achievement.** The third element of the action plan to be evaluated was the use of the five components of reading to improve student achievement. Improving student achievement was evaluated using various methods to assess progress towards short- and long-term goals. The short-term goal of improving student achievement included incremental increases on common assessments, leading to at least an 80% pass rate on common assessments. The long-term goal included a focus on instructional results, leading to at least a 5% decrease in the number of students who needed reading interventions on the STAR test. Student improvement was also evaluated based on completion of one teacher entry each month in their teacher reflection journal on the results-oriented video documenting the processes from the video. Each teacher was evaluated based on the completion of a testing calendar for weekly common assessments, which included phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Monthly STAR progress-monitoring was evaluated to determine progress towards decreasing the percentage of students who needed reading interventions. Each teacher evaluated student achievement based on the agreed 80% pass rate on weekly teacher-created common assessments. The completion of the testing calendar was also evaluated within the first month of PLC meetings, along with the execution of the STAR monthly progress-monitoring dates. The testing schedule included each of the nine weeks' benchmark assessment dates. Results from the common assessments were analyzed and documented for at least an 80% pass rate each week using the TES data-tracking form (see Appendix H).

Teachers developed Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-Oriented (SMART) goals for each weekly common reading assessment (see Appendix F). The SMART goals also included an 80% individual student goal on common assessments, and actions of instructional improvements were noted on the TES data-tracking form. Teachers created a list of

next steps for students who did not score at least 80% on the weekly common reading assessments. Teachers supported students with the creation of their own SMART goals for each weekly common assessment. The goal of improving student achievement was evaluated by determining if the number of third-grade students who needed reading interventions decreased by at least 5% by the end of 2018-2019 school year. Teachers evaluated PLCs to determine if PLCs helped improve student achievement using the five components of reading (see Appendix F).

**Data Analysis**

The purpose of this study was to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading. The action plan was developed to accomplish this goal by providing instructional support for teachers, building teaching capacity, and improving student achievement. Throughout the implementation of the action plan, quantitative and qualitative data were collected, analyzed, and triangulated to evaluate the action plan.

Analyzing data was critical for understanding key findings in the research. Both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed to determine if the research questions in this applied research study were answered and to determine instructional support for the five components of reading. Patton (2002) recommended, that "each unit of analysis implies a different kind of data collection, a different level at which statements about findings and conclusions would be made" (p. 228).

Research Question 1 was addressed using data collected from one source. This source was the STAR test percentages from monthly progress monitoring (August 2018 to February 2019). The data collected were analyzed to determine if the overall percentage of students who needed reading interventions decreased by 5% post-implementation of instructional support using the five components of reading.

Research Question 2 was addressed using data collected from two sources: (1) teacher interviews and (2) teacher reflection journals about PLCs. These data sources were treated separately and with brief descriptions of the steps of data collection and analysis, providing enough details for the study to be replicated by other researchers. The data collected addressed Research Question 2, which explored what changes, if any, occurred in teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of PLCs post-implementation of PLC elements from the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year to the end of the 2018-2019 school year.

**Teacher interviews.** Four third-grade teachers were individually interviewed for approximately 20 minutes. Individual interviews were recorded by a hand-held device. Teachers were asked open-ended questions from an existing protocol, addressing their perceptions of the PLC process, aspects of teaching reading, the FSAR model, and the five components of reading. In keeping with Creswell (2009), the researcher asked additional probing questions to draw out examples and narrative to add depth to the understanding of teachers' perspectives. Audio recordings were sent to REV Transcription Service for immediate written transcription. The researcher listened to the recordings and edited transcripts for accuracy prior to analysis. Analysis was organized around research questions, with specific attention to teachers' comments on the relative success of PLC teacher perceptions and PLC implementation. Transcripts were reviewed for comments that both aligned with the researcher's expectations and represented surprises, using the grounded theory approach (Patton, 2002). Teachers' comments were initially color-coded to align with the elements of Research Question 2, with yellow representing positive views of PLCs and orange representing suggestions for improvement. The researcher was mindful of saturation (Creswell, 2009) during the data analysis period, selecting the most compelling and representative quotations from each of the four participants. The researcher

blended narration and teachers' comments into an account of PLCs within that specific context

that revealed both commonalities and unique perspectives. To provide additional details on PLCs

at the research site, Appendix G shows both pre- and post-PLC evaluation rubrics.

**Teachers' reflective journals.** In addition to data from teacher interviews on PLC

perspectives, teachers were asked to comment on three related areas: instructional support,

teaching capacity, and student achievement. After each of five PLC meetings, teachers were

given a set of questions related to the specific component of reading under discussion during that

session. After each 50-minute PLC meeting, teachers were given 5-10 minutes to complete their

reflections in a physical notebook. The researcher reviewed the hard copies of journals and typed

them into Microsoft Word, maintaining a digital copy for future coding and analysis. As with the

teacher interviews, the researcher coded reflective journal transcripts based upon alignment with

Research Question 2. In addition, the same coding (yellow = positive, orange = negative) was

used for preliminary analysis. In keeping with the grounded theory approach (Creswell, 2009),

additional themes emerged based upon consensus from participants. Finally, the researcher kept

in mind that her experience with PLCs meetings had a direct impact on qualitative analysis

(Patton, 2002).

Research Question 3 was addressed using data collected from four sources. These sources

included (1) lesson plans, (2) classroom observations, (3) instructional rounds, and (4) evaluation

of the teacher collaborative process using the CF rubric. These data sources were treated

separately and provided a brief description of the steps of the data collection and analysis, giving

enough details for the study to be replicated by other researchers. The data collected were used

to determine what instructional areas, if any, changed through the implementation process of

PLCs at the end of the 2018-2019 school year.

**Lesson plans.**  In addition to evaluating teachers' reflective journals, teachers were asked to submit weekly lesson plans.  Lesson plans were evaluated for completion and for specific language and use of the specific component of reading from the previous week's PLC meeting.  Teachers were asked to place a hardcopy of their lesson plans in a binder, with the most recent lesson plan on the top.  Teachers were expected to place their lesson plans at a designated area in their classroom for quick administrator access.  Each teacher also submitted a digital copy of their weekly lesson plans to a lesson-plan email address.  The researcher compared both lesson plans, digital and hard copy, to see if they were the same.  The researcher also evaluated lesson plans for weekly submission and evidence of the specific component of reading from the previous week's PLC meeting.  Teachers were expected to plan lessons together and could submit the same reading lesson plan.  However, each teacher had to submit a lesson plan to the lesson-plan email address under their name.

**Classroom observations.**  In addition to evaluating weekly teacher lesson plans, the researcher conducted at least two weekly observations in each of the third-grade teachers' classrooms.  The data collected were used to determine what instructional areas, if any, changed as a result of the instructional support to teach the five components of reading through PLCs.  During classroom observations, the researcher looked for evidence and use of at least one of the five components of reading.  The researcher also looked for evidence of small-group reading instruction.  The researcher used *School Status* to take notes on the classroom observations.  The researcher made remarks and used the *School Status* digital camera to provide evidence of teacher use of at least one of the five components of reading and the use of small-group instruction a minimum of two times each week.

**Instructional rounds.** In addition to evaluating classroom observations, the SLT conducted at least two instructional rounds (one per semester). The SLT spent approximately 10 minutes in each classroom, as a team, taking notes. The SLT met before each instructional round to review the instructional protocol and to decide which specific reading component was the focus. The SLT was advised not to interrupt instruction with questions. After the SLT decided on the component of reading focus, the SLT entered each third-grade teacher's classroom as a team. Each SLT member took individual notes using the instructional-rounds sheet (Appendix D) to note specific actions of the teacher and actions of the students. As evidence of the teacher actions, the SLT was instructed to look for teacher evidence and use of at least one of the five components of reading. After the instructional-rounds sessions were completed, the SLT conducted a collaborative group discussion on the findings. Each SLT member shared findings, and the researcher noted themes and patterns. Once all findings were discussed and noted, the themes and patterns were discussed with third-grade teachers in the next PLC meeting. Teachers had the opportunity to share their thoughts from the evidence presented by the researcher and to make instructional adjustments where deemed appropriate by the teachers and the researcher.

**Critical friends (CF) rubric.** In addition to the researcher evaluating the instructional-rounds process, the researcher provided teachers with the CF rubric. Each third-grade teacher evaluated the collaborative PLC process pre- and post-PLC implementation, for a total of eight CF rubric evaluations. Each third-grade teacher evaluated the level of collaborative needs met through PLC process using the following five areas from the CF rubric: (1) target, (2) exceeds expectations, (3) meets expectations, (4) approaching expectations, and (5) not yet meeting expectations. Patterns from the CF rubric were thematically coded (yellow = positive and orange

= negative) to determine the patterns and trends among collaborative lesson-planning, constructive feedback, and trustworthiness of the planning process.

Research Question 4 was addressed using data collected from four sources: (1) teacher interviews, (2) teacher reflection journals, (3) the PLC evaluation rubric (Appendix G), and (4) document analysis. These data sources were treated separately, with brief descriptions of the steps of data collection and analysis, providing enough details for the study to be replicated by other researchers. The data collected were used to determine what problems and constraints impacted successful implementation of PLCs in the 2018-2019 school year.

**Teacher interviews.** A teacher-interview process, similar to that of Research Question 2, was used to answer Research Question 4. Teachers were asked specific questions regarding the implementation and use of the FSAR model.

**Teacher reflective journals.** In addition to teacher interviews, a teacher reflective journal process, similar to that of Research Question 2, was used to answer Research Question 4. Teachers were given a set of questions related to constraints that may have impacted successful implementation of PLCs during the 2018-2019 school year.

**PLC evaluation rubric.** In addition to teacher reflection journals, the researcher evaluated problems and constraints, if any, that impacted successful implementation of the PLCs for the 2018-2019 school year by completing the PLC evaluation rubric (Appendix G). The researcher evaluated the PLC evaluation rubrics and thematically coded teacher responses to determine how much PLCs provided instructional support, focused on building teaching capacity, and improved student achievement. The same thematic coding was used throughout this study (yellow = positive and orange = negative).

**Document analysis.**  In addition to using the PLC evaluation rubric, the researcher performed document analysis.  Bowen (2009) suggested using document analysis to determine the relevance of documents for a study.  The researcher evaluated each evaluation document to determine meaning and contribution to the study, using a coding aligned with Research Question 2 (yellow = positive contribution to the study and orange = negative contribution to the study). The researcher evaluated the documents in this study to determine if they fit the conceptual framework of the study.  The researcher also evaluated the study to determine authenticity, credibility, and accuracy for comprehensiveness using the same coding process.

**Conclusion**

The fidelity of the action plan was essential to the successful implementation of the five components of reading and the use of PLCs as the vehicle to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading.  The development of the action plan ensured all stakeholders had input prior to the implementation of the action plan.  Stakeholder input was instrumental in the support and use of the FSAR model.  After the researcher presented extensive research on PLC models, stakeholders believed the FSAR model could be used to transform PLC meetings at TES. Additionally, stakeholders concurred that the FSAR model would provide a systematic approach for teachers to collaborate and learn during PLC meetings.

The evaluative process took place throughout the implementation of the action plan.  The evaluative process ensured a process that was fluid and included the Plan, Do, Check, Act (PDCA) model (Deming, 1994).  The integration of the PDCA model within the evaluation plan provided a clear model to support and modify the PLC process if needed.  The PDCA model was critical to effectively implementing the action plan.  Once the action plan was implemented, the results were analyzed for the overall effectiveness of using PLCs as the vehicle to improve the

quality of teaching in third-grade reading.  Chapter Four presents the findings and themes that

emerged from the implementation of the action plan.  Chapter Five presents a summary of the

findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

**Chapter IV:**

**FINDINGS**

**Introduction**

The purpose of this applied mixed-method research study was to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading at Tigerville Elementary School (TES). This study was initiated from an in-depth data analysis of the third-grade Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading (STAR) and Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP; 2018) test results. As a result of the data analysis, third-grade teachers, along with the school leadership team (SLT), wanted to improve the teaching quality but quickly recognized more instructional support and specific teacher development were needed to improve the quality of teaching. Additionally, third-grade teachers and the SLT expressed heightened anxiety and concerns over the overwhelming percentage of students who needed reading interventions. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were used as the vehicle to present research-based instructional strategies to teach the five components of reading, thus improving the quality of teaching in third-grade reading. A review of literature was used to develop and implement an action plan designed to address the high percentages of students who needed reading interventions.

The literature presented in Chapter Two supported the development of the action plan presented in Chapter Three. Chapter Three consists of the methodology, the action plan, and the program evaluation used to assess the merits of the action plan. Chapter Three also outlines three specific elements of the program evaluation. The first element of the action plan focused on using PLCs to provide instructional support for teachers to teach the five components of

reading, beginning with phonemic awareness.  The second element of the action plan focused on

using the five components of reading to build teaching capacity.  The third element of the action

plan focused on the five components of reading to improve student achievement.

**Organization of Findings**

This chapter presents results for each of the four research questions.  For Research

Question 1, quantitative testing data were used to determine if instructional strategies put in

place through PLCs were effective in terms of student growth on the Standardized Test for the

Assessment of Reading (STAR) assessment. Research Questions 2-4 were answered through

multi-source qualitative data including classroom observations, instructional rounds, teacher

interviews, and document analysis.  The chapter is organized by each of the four research

questions.

**Research Question (RQ) 1**

Was there at least a 5% decrease in the number of students who needed reading

interventions on the STAR assessment from the beginning of the 2018-19 school year to the end

of the 2018-2019 school year?

**Data Set.** Quantitative data were derived from students' STAR reading data which were

used to determine if the number of students who needed reading interventions decreased by at

least 5% after teachers participated in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).  In August

2018, the STAR test was administered to all third-grade students, and based on the results of the

STAR assessment, 52% of third-grade students showed a deficiency in reading and needed

reading interventions.  Student scores from the bottom quartile in reading were analyzed to

compare growth from the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year to the end of the 2018-2019

school year.  The researcher identified students in the bottom quartile by reviewing the school's

universal reading screener (STAR) Fall 2018 reports.  Tigerville Elementary School (TES) administered the screener in August, 2018. After students were screened, the students' cut scale scores were categorized into four quartiles based on the STAR Renaissance cut score percentages.  Tigerville Elementary School (TES) placed any student who scored Level 2 or below the 40% percentile range on the STAR Renaissance test in the intervention process. Tigerville Elementary School (TES) used the predetermined STAR cut scores to determine student reading levels, percentage categories, and tier levels.  These predetermined cut scores set by STAR were categorized into the following tiers/levels:  a) Level 1—at or above 40th percentile b) Level 2—below 40th percentile c) Level 3—below 25th percentile, and d) Level 4— below 10th percentile.  Students who scored below the 40th percentile were the focus of this study.  Students' Beginning of Year (BOY) STAR reading scores from August, 2018 were compared to End-of-Year (EOY) STAR reading scores.

**Results to RQ 1.**  Research Question 1 asked was there at least a 5% decrease in the number of students who needed reading interventions on the STAR assessment from the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year to the end of the 2018-2019 school year.  Based upon results of the fall STAR testing administration, the first key finding from RQ 1 indicated 37 students required remediation, while only 35 required remediation after the spring administration. Therefore, the overall number of students requiring remediation dropped by two, or 5.41%, during the intervention period. With regard to RQ1, actual reduction in percentage of students requiring remediation dropped by more than the hypothesized 5%.  This percentage indicated students improved in terms of reading achievement and met the criterion of a 5% decrease for the number of students who needed reading interventions from fall to spring for this question. This finding aligned with Blank's (2013) study shared in Chapter Two which suggested

there was a relationship between PLCs and student achievement.  This research question was related to STAR scale scores and the relative representation of students in need of reading interventions based upon the quantitative results.  While teachers used STAR scale scores to monitor all third-grade students' progress each month, this study, along with RQ 1, focused on pre- and post-STAR scale scores.  In the fall administration, 37 of 72 students scored below the cut point and required remediation (52%).  In the spring administration, only 35 out of 72 students scored below the cut point requiring remediation (48.6%). Results for Research Question 1 are summarized in table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1

*Number and Percentage of Students in Need of Remediation after Fall and Spring STAR*

|  | Fall Test | Spring Test | Difference |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Remediation Yes | 37 | 35 | -2 |
| Remediation No | 35 | 37 |  |
| Overall % Requiring Remediation |  |  | -5.41% |

**Participants in Qualitative Data Collection**

The remaining three research questions required qualitative data. The Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were conducted during the 2018-2019 school year.  The STAR benchmark data from fall and spring assessments in 2018-2019 were used to provide a baseline level of growth for the bottom quartile of students.  This baseline data were used to target instructional adjustments. Fall-to-spring growth for the same group of students was compared to determine if students in the bottom quartile increased their level of growth following the implementation of PLCs focused on the five components of reading.  All of the students whose

scores were used in this study had performed in the bottom quartile in reading on the STAR

assessment and completed the full two years of school at Tigerville Elementary School (TES).

The teacher participants in this study were four third-grade teachers.  See Table 4.2 for teacher

participation information.  All four teachers participated in the PLCs during the 2018-2019

school year. Teachers were asked open-ended questions from an existing protocol that addressed

their perceptions of the PLC process, aspects of teaching reading, the Focus-Strategies-

Assessment-Response (FSAR) model, and the five components of reading.

Table 4.2

*Description of Teacher Participants*

| Participant | Gender | Ethnicity | Years Teaching |
|---|---|---|---|
| Teacher 1 | F | Black | 31 |
| Teacher 2 | F | White | 18 |
| Teacher 3 | F | White | 9 |
| Teacher 4 | F | White | 3 |

**Qualitative Data Sources for Research Questions 2-4**

Qualitative data were obtained from teacher interviews, teacher reflective journals, lesson

plans, classroom observations, instructional rounds, Critical Friends (CF) rubric, Professional

Learning Communities (PLCs) evaluation rubric, and document analysis.

During the teacher interviews, the researcher sought to gain teacher perspectives of the

PLC process and how the process and use of the five components of reading, if at all, improved

the quality of instruction.  Teacher participants of the study answered questions about their

previous PLC process, how they used data to drive instruction, and their perceptions of pre- and

post-PLC reading strategies used to teach students who struggle to read.  Teacher participants also answered questions regarding PLC implementation process using teacher reflective journals. During teacher interviews, teachers were given an opportunity to evaluate the collaborative PLC process, as well as to hear specific and individual teacher feedback from instructional rounds and classroom observations.

## Research Question (RQ) 2

What changes, if any, occurred in teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of PLCs post-implementation of PLC elements from the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year to the end of 2018-2019 school year?

The literature reviewed in Chapter Two revealed research from The National Reading Panel (2000) whose authors advised every effective reading program should include instruction in the following five components: (a) phonemic awareness, (b) phonics, (c) fluency, (d) vocabulary, and (e) comprehension.  If perceptions of PLCs are to become more positive, PLCs should include a focus on reading instruction using the five components of reading.

Teacher interviews and reflective journals were utilized to collect additional qualitative data for this research question.  Teachers were given a specific question, quote, or video to view after each PLC was conducted.  The researcher used a timer to keep teachers on track as they made their journal entries.  The researcher considered journal entries complete with at least three coherent sentences that were on topic with the question, quote, or video.  Teachers were also given directives to journal from the moment the timer was set until the timer sounded again. There were times when teachers did not have enough time to complete their journal entries. Consequently, some teachers chose to verbally share what they would have written in their journals had time permitted.  While reflective journals were used to collect qualitative data for

this research question, additional findings for this research question came from teacher interviews.

**Focused teacher interviews.** The phase-one interview protocol was used to answer this question along with classroom observations. Only a few reading strategies were mentioned by the third-grade teachers. It was clear this group of teachers could benefit from training to enhance their repertoire of reading strategies, which would encourage student achievement. Research-based reading strategies shown to assist students needed to be implemented, especially with students who were experiencing reading difficulties.

The teachers needed to be well-versed in the components of reading as well. Even though the teachers were able to give the five components of reading, they did not fully exhibit the ability to state what each of the components entailed. This observation was made from the phase-one interview protocol. Knowing the five components of reading and having the ability to provide guidance to students in these areas based on students' areas of weakness was vital for assisting these students. The teachers stated they addressed the five components of reading in their reading instruction on a regular basis; however, during observations of their classrooms, only the components of fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension were observed. There was a great need for teachers to use an assessment to test students in vocabulary.

Phase one interviews were conducted from February to March, 2019. However, short teacher interviews were conducted each month to gather additional qualitative data about PLC perceptions. During the second part of the teacher interviews, the researcher determined if the third-grade teachers found the PLCs to be beneficial in addressing the needs of the students. Interviews also allowed the teachers to discuss what worked and which elements of the intervention should be addressed to improve reading instructional strategies.

The themes derived from the interviews are shared and discussed in this chapter as pertinent qualitative data. Providing students with scaffolding instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension to promote independent reading was one of the 10 best practices mentioned.  Identifying students' areas of weakness through the universal screening process provided information to address the needs of each student.  The use of varied assessments to inform instruction was also an evidence-based best practice mentioned in Chapter Two.  Teacher interviews for RQ 2 focused on recurring themes and teacher perceptions of PLC meetings.

**Teacher interviews.**  Teacher interviews were a consistent and critical component throughout this study.  Several themes were uncovered during the interview process.  To protect teacher identity during the qualitative interview phase, teachers were identified as teacher participants 1 through 4.  The following teacher statements were noted upon reviewing the interview protocol during phase two responses.  When teachers were asked about their perceptions of PLC meetings, Teacher Participant 1 stated:

> PLCs meeting this year were great.  Last year, we were not focused on five components of reading or the data.  Now, we do more on comprehension and vocabulary. Those are the two main areas we focus the most on.  We focus on comprehension because they've got to be able to read the text and understand what was asked. For vocabulary, they have got to be able to understand third-grade vocabulary words and often a lot of times it's even higher than third-grade vocabulary.

Teacher Participant 2 stated, "More work was needed in the area of student comprehension."  As the interview continued, Teacher Participant 2 continued to state, "Students just do not come to third-grade prepared."  Teacher Participant 3 had the same sentiments of

students not understanding vocabulary or contextual meaning.  Teacher Participant 4 stated, "I cannot say enough positive things about PLC meetings this year."

Throughout the teacher interviews, each participant reiterated the need to focus on vocabulary and helping students gain support.  Teachers also focused on the consistency of PLCs this school year.  Interestingly, not one teacher participant stated they needed additional help despite student STAR data not reaching the expected level of growth resulting in a decrease in the number of students in need of reading interventions.

**Teacher PLC perceptions and processes.**  Teacher interviews revealed the perception that students came to third-grade with specific academic weaknesses.  During teacher interviews, all teacher participants (1-4) reiterated the belief that the previous school year's (2017-2018) PLC meeting model and process was not sufficient to address the growing reading challenges of third-grade students. Teachers believed the previous PLC model (2017-2018) did not maximize time needed nor did PLCs focus on the much-needed five components of reading.

During teacher interviews, all teacher participants stated, "The current structure and use of PLCs were not effective."  Teacher Participant 1 stated:

I know I need to differentiate the instruction, but I don't know where to begin.  I feel like I just need help putting all this together.  I do not want to just come to a meeting and leaving empty handed.  Give me something practical.

Post PLC implementation, teachers believed they were able to see the need for differentiated or individualized instruction to meet the needs of the students.  Small group instruction was also beneficial in meeting the needs of the students who were performing in the bottom quartile in reading.  Teachers were able to work closely with these students to better understand and address their gaps in reading.  Teachers used a teacher-made phonics and

phonemic awareness screener to determine if students needed phonics instruction, and this level of instruction made a difference in their perception of PLCs.

**Aspects of teaching reading.** Teachers shared they enjoyed using the more specific strategies within their instructional practices since the lessons were outlined and the given activities following the stated standards. The reading series gave a slated list of vocabulary words which coincided with each of the stories from the basal text. This resource, the basal text, was convenient and easy to follow which in return required less of the teachers' time in regard to lesson plan preparation. Most of the teachers had mapped out their submitted lesson plans from the previous years based upon the basal reader outlined lessons and activities. Teachers were instructed to revise some of their lesson plans to fit the current standards and lesson expectations shared from the principal. As stated by Teacher Participant 1:

> I'm using a lot of close reading this year. Using a lot of context clues. Adding
> more vocabulary because vocabulary seems to be a spot where the children are
> weakened, too, so some of those components of reading where I feel like the
> children have weaknesses, those are the ones that we are trying to spend more time
> on to make sure they have a stronger base. Because some of those tests that we have
> taken showed students have weak spots in those areas.

**FSAR model.** The Red Clay Consolidated School District (n.d.) cited the Focus, Strategy, Assessment, and Response (FSAR) model as the primary cause of improvements and consistency in their PLCs. Based on this research presented in Chapter Two, Tigerville Elementary School (TES) implemented the FSAR Model to provide a consistent structure to PLC meetings. Teachers were introduced to the use of the Focus-Strategy-Assessment-Response (FSAR) model to unpacking the standards and analyzing data. When teachers were first

presented with the FSAR model, the two veteran teachers appeared relatively more skeptical than the others. For example, Teacher Participant 1, who had 31 years of teaching experience stated, "I have been around a long while. This is probably the same stuff we used 25 years ago, but they have renamed it." Teacher Participant 2 (18 years of teaching experience), stated, "The educational pendulum swings every 10 years, so let's wait and see what the latest happening on the market is."

The researcher explained how the FSAR model would be used in PLC meetings, and teachers listened and took notes after the initial comments. Teachers asked questions about how this model would work and how it was different from any of the other models they had seen. The results showed teachers tried the model and perceived great value with the consistent use of the same instructional model. Teacher Participant 4 stated, "I really like the idea." Teacher Participant 3 stated, "We used something similar to this in our previous school but not this exact one." Teachers were asked by the researcher to verbally rank the FSAR model based on their current exposure and experience. On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest, teachers ranked the use and understanding of the FSAR model an 8.5. Additionally, teachers consistently used the FSAR model with their colleagues during teacher collaboration time.

**Five components of reading.** Teacher Participant 2 stated: "Even at this age, I know phonics is not one of our top ones. But still there are still some kids that struggle with phonics." When each teacher was asked to describe the five components of reading, all teachers described similar definitions, Phonemic awareness, which is the ability to hear word sounds. Phonics was described as sounding out words. Comprehension was described as asking and answering questions. Reading fluency was another common theme and was described as being able to fluently read a passage and vocabulary (understanding the words that are in the story).

Additionally, Teacher Participant 3 stated, "It really helped my students with fluency and with their writing. They began doing more and more writing as we went on, and also their vocabulary got stronger."

**Probing Questions**

As a result of asking more in-depth and probing questions, the researcher was able to gain a better understanding of teacher PLC perceptions and how teachers used specific reading strategies in their classrooms post-PLC implementation of the five reading components. Teachers understood reading strategies were needed, but they needed more specific terminology support to bridge the gap. When Teacher Participant 3 stated, previous PLCs were not perceived to have trust factor, the researcher asked, "Tell me more about the trust with PLCs." As referenced in Chapter Two, Hands, Guzar, and Rodrigue (2016) presented trust as one factor that strengthened PLCs and the teacher collaboration process. Teachers lacked confidence that if mistakes were made with teaching five components of reading it would not become the school gossip.

**Reading strategies.** Teachers responded with an array of responses when asked about reading strategies they were using in their classrooms at the time. Out of the four teachers, three identified reading strategies, but one teacher did not appear certain of what to call the reading strategy. The others gave components of reading. For example, fluency and comprehension were stated as strategies, instead of one of the five components of reading. This may have been due to their misunderstanding what was being asked, or it may suggest these teachers were not knowledgeable of strategies that could be used during reading instruction. All the teachers stated they had identified the students in their classroom who struggled in reading. Their identification

of these students was conducted through the STAR program and through observation of the

students' classroom performance.

**Teacher reflective journals.** After each PLC meeting, teachers were given a specific

question about which to write. Sometimes, teachers would be given a video to watch and then

would journal about the aspects of the video. Journal entries focused on teacher needs, five

components of reading, and teacher assessments of structure and practicality of PLC meetings.

Teachers were asked specific questions relating to their perceptions of the quality of instructional

support provided through PLC meeting, their perceptions on whether or not their teaching

capacity improved because of PLCs, and PLCs support needed to improve student achievement.

Teachers were also asked to elaborate on the strategies presented during PLCs to teach the five

components of reading. Teachers were given approximately five minutes to write in their

journals. Some teachers stated they needed more time, perhaps 10 minutes, to complete the task.

Themes from the teacher journals were consistent with the need for more time to complete the

given task.

## Research Question (RQ) 3

What instructional areas, if any, changed through the implementation processes of the

PLCs at the end of the 2018-2019 school year? Findings for this research question are organized

by the data sources, including a) lesson plans, b) classroom observations, c) instructional rounds,

d) and Critical Friends (CF) rubric.

**Lesson Plans.** Teachers collaborated weekly as a team and with their Critical Friend (CF)

to produce lesson plans. Teachers used the pacing guide to determine the standard of focus for

the week. Once the standard was identified, teachers planned thematic lessons using the five

components of reading. Results of this study revealed teachers revised some lesson plans

without being asked. Then teachers were asked why they needed to revise some lesson plans, the response was, "My students were not ready to move on." Lesson plans were printed and placed at the lesson plan station for weekly evaluation. The CF met with the teacher to gain clarity on specific areas of the lesson plan that needed revision or more collaboration. Teachers reported positive responses on the lesson plan collaboration.

**Classroom observations.** The School Leadership Team (SLT), the Critical Friend (CF), or researcher observed each teacher's instruction at least twice a week. The classroom observers used a rotating schedule to make classroom observations. Whole group instruction was observed to be the main instructional practice, despite the research presented in PLC meetings. Three of the four teachers used small group instruction at least two times each week.

**Instructional rounds.** As stated in Chapter Two, Marzano and Toth (2013) supported the use of instructional rounds as a form of Professional Development (PD). In keeping with the research about the use of instructional rounds, the School Leadership Team (SLT) conducted two instructional rounds throughout this study—one in the fall (2018) and one in the spring (2019). The first instructional round was performed in September and the second instructional round was performed in February. The SLT met to decide which of the five components of reading would be the focus. The team visited all three classrooms and noted specific instructional behaviors of the teachers and the students. The team took notes without sharing until they debriefed. The instructional rounds revealed teachers were struggling to shift from spending more time on whole group instruction. The team recognized a need to conduct Professional Development (PD) to provide stronger instructional support for teachers with the goal of decreasing whole group instructional time.

**Critical friend (CF) rubric.**  Each of the third-grade teachers chose a CF from the School Leadership Team (SLT), or they chose a CF from one of the teachers on the staff who had a minimum of five years of teaching experience in the area reading instruction. As part of the teacher collaborative process, all teachers participated in PLC meetings every other week. Teacher Participant 3 missed two PLC meetings due to scheduled appointments.  All teachers stated the use of planning hour to meet was a good time because they would already be at school. Teachers met with their CF to discuss how they used the strategies for the specific component of reading for that week.  The CF offered implementation suggestions, as well as feedback when the teacher needed help.  Each teacher met with their CF two times during this study.  Teacher Participants 1 reported the use of the CF proved more beneficial than she had initially thought. Teacher Participant 1,

> I had some preconceived notions about having a mentor because of the number of
> years I have been teaching.  I didn't want my colleagues, who often came to me for
> support, to think differently of me and my instructional techniques.  I can honestly say
> I was just really nervous.

Teachers collaborated with their CF as a team to produce one lesson plan.  Each teacher printed one copy of the grade-level lesson plan and placed it in a binder.  Teacher Participant 4 stated, "Doing lesson plans as a team is so much more convenient."  Teachers were asked if they liked the lesson plan collaboration process because it was convenient or were there other factors. Teacher participate three stated, "It was convenient, but it just makes sense to work together and produce the same lesson plan since we are giving the same common assessment."  Teacher participants one, two, and four concurred that planning together was more practical that planning for the same content in isolation.  Not all teachers completed the self-evaluation.  Two teachers

consistently completed the self-evaluations and two teachers used a CF to evaluate their

instruction. Results for Question Three also revealed teachers became more reflective about their

instructional practices after collaborating with their CF.

**Research Question (RQ) 4**

What problems and constraints that impacted successful implementation of the PLCs in

the 2018-2019 school year.  Findings for this research question are organized by the data

sources, including a) teacher interviews b) teacher reflective journals c) PLC evaluation rubric

(Appendix G), and d) document analysis.  The responses from teacher interviews, reflective

journals, PLC evaluation rubric, document analysis, and teacher interviews were transcribed and

coded into themes to triangulate the research findings.  After the researcher reviewed the

documents to answer this question, several themes surfaced.  The themes of time, resources, and

additional training were among the major themes and are outlined in the section below.

**Time constraints.**  Teachers shared a lack of time was a major factor that made it hard to

implement the new information received in PLCs.  Before it was decided to implement a new

reading curriculum, the original plan was for third-grade teachers to exercise small group

rotations in an effort for all third-grade students to receive the information received in PLCs.

Students were to be grouped according to their cut scale score level using the STAR reading

data.  The teachers applied the Word of the Day at the beginning of the reading block.  The

teachers would normally visit with students and ask them questions about their reading book to

check for comprehension.  While students read independently or worked on other reading tasks,

the third-grade teachers were able to work with the students from their class who populated the

bottom quartile in reading to apply the information received in PLCs.  Each classroom teacher

had no more than four students who were identified to apply the information received in PLCs.

The following responses from teachers were obtained from phase two of the interview

protocol.  Teacher Participant 3 explained:

We needed more one-on-one time working with the students. I just feel like our

PLCs this year were worth our time. I feel like we are getting more out of them. I

feel like we received materials that we were able to go back and utilize, as team,

when we're planning, making our lesson plans, and creating the thematic units that

we use.

Teacher Participant 2 added, "We just needed more time to work with them. Moreover,

Teacher Participant 4 agreed:

I think PLCs, this year, are motivating. I think we have done a lot of motivational things

that, if we had not done those, I'd be like, "I've had enough." And then, all of sudden,

we come in with a motivational PLC, and I'm like, "Okay, back on track again." So, I

really like the motivational stuff that we've done. I like that we have talked more at our

PLCs.

A collection of materials was provided to the third-grade teachers as resources upon their

completion of the vocabulary training.  However, the third-grade teachers shared they were not

trained how to effectively use the materials.  Although these resources were not explained for

effective usage, the lack of knowledge for effective usage of the materials did not hinder the

application of the information received in PLCs.  The resources were provided to enhance the

teachers' overall reading instruction. One resounding common theme throughout the reflective

journals was the need for more collaboration time.

**Increased personnel**. Teachers were asked, "What additional resources would be

beneficial to make a stronger impact on classroom instruction?"  Teacher responses expressed

the need for additional human resources. The teachers felt they could better meet the needs of the other students, while implementing the information received in PLCs, if they had a full-time teacher assistant.  Currently, all third-grade teachers share one teacher assistant.  Teacher participate two stated, "Students who were performing in the bottom quartile could work with a teacher assistant on some days, while teachers worked with other students on a rotational schedule." Teacher Participant 1 responded, "I would like to have an additional teacher assistant in order to give more support to my students. The teacher assistant could work with some in small groups."

      **Professional development**. Several of the third-grade teachers expressed a desire for additional training.  The teachers felt the vocabulary training needed to be ongoing and not just at the onset of PLCs.  Teachers wanted to be able to observe instruction at a different school at least three times per year.  Teachers wanted to see and observe how reading strategies were being implemented in other school's PLCs.  Teachers also suggested having a trainer do professional development using a live demonstration of strategies within the classroom.  Teachers believed this would help the teachers with their confidence and assurance of proper delivery and application of the vocabulary reading strategy.

      Another resounding theme was the need for additional training. Teacher Participant 3 said: "More training is needed to deepen the understanding of the program.  Peer observations would be helpful."  Teacher Participant 6 expressed: "I'd like a hands-on training with our assistants. I would like to begin sooner than we did this year."  In addition, Teacher Participant 3 explained: "I feel like I need more training to better implement vocabulary strategies for all my students."

The factors of time, additional assistance, and additional training were voiced among the third-grade teachers as impacting instructional implementation for the bottom quartile of students. These factors should be addressed to ensure the academic success of students in the bottom quartile. Students in the bottom quartile will be less likely to move toward proficiency if these factors are not addressed.

**Summary**

This applied research used a program evaluation with quantitative and qualitative analysis of data to determine if the program achieved its goals and to learn how to improve the efforts moving forward. The quantitative results in this study revealed that students in the bottom quartile progressed toward proficiency but did not reach the expected goal resulting in a minimum of 5% decrease in the students who needed interventions at the end of the 2018-2019 school year. The STAR reading program was used to track student progress after the implementation of the five components of reading learned by teachers in PLCs. The percentage of students who needed reading interventions were calculated using Excel Spreadsheet. The STAR cut scale scores from the STAR reading assessments were used to determine percentage of students who needed reading interventions. Teachers reported a change in the perception of PLCs, as well as instructional practice changes. After the researcher compared pre- and post-STAR levels, the students did not show a minimum of 5% decrease in the number of students who needed reading interventions.

The qualitative results in this study revealed time, resources, and additional training as major themes. Teachers desired more time to intervene with students in the bottom quartile using the information received in PLCs. An interview protocol was used to inform the researcher of the initial state of the reading program at Tigerville Elementary School (TES). The

qualitative data from phase one interview protocol spoke to the previous limitations and use of research-based reading strategies and a failure to identify the needs of students regarding the five components of reading.  Students were identified as having reading difficulties, but their specific reading deficits were not examined.  These deficits must be addressed in order for the students to excel and to close the achievement gap.  There should also be efforts to continually search for other resources to help address all five components of reading.

Moreover, the qualitative data yielded results that possibly would not have come to light through a quantitative study alone.  The qualitative study gave valuable insight into teacher perspectives of the reading program. The teacher perspectives and their attitudes regarding their instructional practice yielded a greater level of commitment and drive, which in turn should lead to an increase in student achievement.

## Chapter V:

## DISCUSSION

**Introduction**

The purpose of this applied research study was to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading. This study was designed using a mixed-method quantitative and qualitative approach. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were used as the vehicle to address the three PLC elements: a) provide instructional support for teachers b) build teacher capacity, and c) improve student achievement. The researcher sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Was there at least a 5% decrease in the number of students who need reading interventions on the STAR assessment from the beginning of 2018-19 school year to the end of the 2018-2019 school year?

2. What changes, if any, occurred in teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of PLCs post-implementation of PLC elements from the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year to the end of 2018-2019 school year?

3. What instructional areas, if any, changed through the implementation processes of the PLCs at the end of the 2018-2019 school year?

4. What problems and constraints impact successful implementations of the PLCs in the 2018-2019 school year?

This chapter included a discussion of the identified problems and examines data related to the three PLC elements that were used to improve the quality of teaching in third grade.

Teachers' perceptions were that students came to third grade with academic deficiencies. Consequently, teachers believed the students' academic deficiencies may be a contributing factor to the 52% of students who needed reading interventions in August, 2018.

As stated in Chapter Two, The National Reading Panel (2000) advised every effective reading program should include instruction in the following five components: (a) phonemic awareness, (b) phonics, (c) fluency, (d) vocabulary, and (e) comprehension. A vast majority of the research in Chapter Two suggested using Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a collaborative tool to provide instructional support for teachers to teach the five components of reading.

In retrospect, the researcher acknowledged teachers should have met in PLCs at least once each week. The researcher made changes to the planned PLC meeting times from once a week to every other week. This change was made as a result of teachers revealing meeting once each week was too often, and teachers would not have enough time to plan lessons outside of the PLC meeting time. Since the researcher was in her first year as lead principal at Tigerville Elementary School (TES), the researcher believed supporting teachers with the change of PLC meeting times would establish trust with the teachers. Some teachers did not have enough time to complete all journal entries, so they shared reflections verbally. The researcher acknowledges quantitative results may have been adversely affected because of time constraints.

The research team consisted of the lead principal (the researcher) and the School Leadership Team (SLT). Members of the SLT were teacher-representatives from each grade (PreK-6). The team used STAR reading data to identify students who needed reading interventions. This study found teachers needed instructional support to improve low reading achievement at TES.

**Researcher's background**.  This applied research study was implemented during the researcher's first year as lead principal at TES.  Tigerville Elementary School (TES) served approximately 625 students in grades PreK through sixth grade.  The student population was 44.7% African-American/Black and 51.1% Caucasian.  Less than 5% of the TES student population identified as Asian, Native American, Hispanic, or Pacific Islander.

The researcher is identified as an African-American female in her late 40s. Prior to becoming lead principal at Tigerville Elementary School (TES), the researcher served an assistant principal at TES the previous year.  The researcher has approximately eight years of administrative experience.  During the one year as assistant principal at TES, the researcher noted the STAR data pattern and the increase of students who needed reading interventions.  While the researcher provided discipline support as the assistant principal, she noted several areas that could possibly improve the culture.  These areas of improvement included the use of PLCs to help teachers and to produce a sustainable culture of continuous learning for TES.

As previously mentioned in Chapter Two, the research identified the importance of using the five components of reading to improve reading achievement.  The researcher was aware of the need to build trust prior to implementing major changes to the reading program.  Extremely low reading proficiency was an obvious problem and a logical initial area of focus based on the Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) and Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading (STAR) reading data.  As the data analysis process continued to unfold, the benefits of focusing on the five components of reading proved beneficial to teachers and students.

As further explained in Chapter Two, the research suggested quality instruction in the five components of reading is necessary when building strong, proficient readers in early grades, especially third grade.  In no way is this action plan meant to imply reading instruction alone can

substitute for quality instruction or achieve reading proficiency as a stand-alone practice. Instead, the researcher sought to discover how teacher support in PLCs can improve the quality of teaching and increase student reading achievement.

In hindsight, the researcher acknowledged gaps in instruction and curriculum unknown at the beginning of the study. Perhaps a focus in one of these areas could have produced more beneficial results. However, this study provides relevant information about the importance of reading instruction, despite the presence of weaknesses in other instructional practices. These circumstances could most likely be found in any school and any area. While this study was site-specific and may not be generalizable to all areas, it provided valuable information about reading instruction in a district with "less than perfect" curriculum implementation.

**Identified Problems**

**Time.** Throughout this study, teachers referenced the need for more time to perfect their instructional craft. Teachers initially agreed meeting twice a week was too often, but later stated, "More time is needed to help my students." Teachers worked hard in PLCs to learn and to implement best practices to improve the quality of teaching and reading instruction but wanted to spend more time planning outside of PLCs, dialoguing and sharing new ideas learned. This process revealed the need to provide a stronger support system for teachers to communicate and share happenings in their classroom. All four teachers stated the reflective journals were a great concept, but there was not enough time to consistently make the journal entries. All teacher participants wanted the number of reflective journaling entries to be decreased because they did not have time to complete all the journal entries. Teachers believed if more time was built into PLCs for journaling, then maybe reflective journals would include more thought-provoking descriptors. Instead of journaling, teachers wanted to spend more time collaborating on

instructional practices than reflective journaling.  Teachers also wanted more time with their

Critical Friend (CF).  Teachers stated, building teacher collaboration made it easier to accept

constructive criticism because they were more comfortable with their CF.

**Student preparation.**  Teacher perceptions revealed students' preparation for third grade

was a concern.  Some of the teachers shared some of their students were not ready for third grade

and should not have been promoted based upon their grades and present performance within their

classroom.  The lack of student preparation influenced the difficulty teachers had reaching some

of their students.  One of the teachers expressed her belief that second-grade teachers send

students unprepared to third grade, knowing these students will have to repeat third grade due to

their inability to pass the third-grade literacy state assessment.  Teacher participant two stated,

"Students are not entering third grade on grade level and this is a serious problem." Since

teachers believed students enter third-grade not on grade level, it was imperative for the third-

grade teachers to focus on setting up small groups in their classrooms to better address the needs

of students.  This caused the teachers to focus on differentiating instruction to meet the needs of

all students.

**Personnel.**  Teachers reflected on the additional planning time needed to teach the five

components of reading.  While reflecting on the amount of time needed to properly prepare a

reading lesson, teachers revealed their desire to have a full-time teacher assistant in each

classroom.  At the time of the study, TES had one teacher assistant assigned to service four

teachers in third-grade.  The teacher assistant schedule was developed by the principal and had a

rotating schedule to afford each teacher the same allocated time and use of the teacher assistant.

The most encouraging part of this personnel dialogue was that the researcher was able to hire one

additional teacher assistant using Title I funds.  However, this teacher assistant will not begin

work until the 2019-2020 school year.  Consequently, teachers were pleased with the outcome and expected support.  As a result of continued personnel discussions, the teachers and the researcher agreed to let teachers develop the schedule for both teacher assistants.  This way, the teachers can meet as a team to identify classrooms in which the assistants would need to spend more time.

**Omission of key personnel.**  Although the school counselor and the interventionist were members of the SLT, for this research study, the school counselor and the interventionist were not part of this study.  In hindsight, the counselor may have provided insight on why students possibly come to school unprepared and the interventionist could have provided additional reading strategies to help teachers reach the lower performing students.

## Unexpected Findings

Throughout the action plan implementation, an increase in the use of the five components of reading was evident through observations, conversations, and teacher feedback.  As progress monitoring began, it was surprising to find teachers meeting more often of their own free will. Further exploration revealed a change in teacher instructional practices and the mindset about teacher support.  An unintended outcome of this program resulted in an increased teacher awareness of how agreeing to have colleagues observe their instruction created closeness and room for more instructional dialogue.  Teachers began requiring students to read more on-grade level materials, while teachers decreased impromptu quizzes.  Teachers worked to improve the quality of teaching by voluntarily increasing student reading time, thus revealing an increase in individual student reading stamina.

**Trust.**  The principal/researcher worked to establish trust with teachers.  During previous administrations at TES, teachers stated they had felt like they did not have a voice in the

direction of the school. Teachers had felt like they were being told what to do. As a result of the researcher intentionally listening to teachers and focusing on building trust with the staff, the researcher was able to get buy-in for team teaching. Beginning in the 2019-2020 school year, the four third-grade teachers will work in teacher teams of two. Teachers were excited about the upcoming team-teaching possibilities, and the researcher supported teachers choosing the teacher with whom they would form a team. One teacher shared with the researcher that she used to teach first grade and secretively harbored the thoughts of going back to teach first grade. The teacher shared going back to first grade could help her implement the five components of reading and strengthen the reading foundation of students well before entering third grade. The researcher agreed to transfer the teacher to first grade, and a new teacher hire was made. After the third-grade teacher team met the new teacher applicant, teachers voluntarily decided to let the newly hired third-grade teacher teach math and science so teachers who had been part of this action research study could continue the upcoming school year as the reading teachers.

**Candid conversations.** One day, the researcher was frustrated and did not feel student achievement was progressing at a level hoped. The researcher entered a PLC and shared with the teachers that she was physically and mentally exhausted and needed to regroup. To the researcher's surprise, the teachers provided support for the researcher. The researcher asked for ideas to improve student performance, and the team shared ideas and suggestions and the researcher listed teacher ideas on the board. The team prioritized the list, laughed, and then just sat to discuss happenings in the classroom. The researcher believed this type of dialogue reflected the beginning of support and team building at all levels.

**Program Evaluation Standards**

**Utility.** According to Yarbrough et al. (2011), programs should be evaluated using five quality standards: utility, feasibility, propriety, accuracy, and accountability. The use of these five standards provided an outlet for the researcher to investigate the overall quality of the program and to make reliable decisions that would lead to continuous and ongoing learning. This study also used the five program standards effectively gauge new possibilities of implementation of new information gained throughout this action plan process.

The researcher used the utility standards to determine the value this study added to Tigerville Elementary School's (TES) needs and the district's needs as a whole. During this study, stakeholders had the opportunity to discuss how this program was impacting reading achievement at TES. Moreover, this project empowered teachers to share what they were learning, while collaborating as a team. Teachers were able to work together and to make decisions based on what the research suggested as a best practice to teach reading. This collaboration process provided stakeholders an avenue to hear teachers take ownership of their learning, to make judgement calls, and to make necessary adjustments to improve reading achievement. Stakeholders also had the opportunity to make recommendations and adjustments throughout this process as teachers shared happenings in their classrooms. The use of utility program standards also provided an outlet for stakeholders to review the cultural values and why there was a such a great need to improve reading achievement.

**Feasibility**. Feasibility represented the effectiveness and efficiency of this study. Yarbrough et al. (2011) suggested that feasibility of evaluations should recognize, monitor, and balance the political and cultural interests of individual and group needs. This study was convenient, as the study was conducted at the researcher's workplace. While the district leadership team recognized and embraced opportunities to improve reading achievement at TES,

stakeholders should have been more conscientious when it came to the omission of the school counselor and the interventionist in this study.  It is highly possible, had the additional stakeholders, school counselor and interventionist, been onboard from the onset of this study, teachers may have had more access to additional reading strategies to target the low volume of reading achievement.  This project used PLCs to provide instructional support to teach five components of reading.  The researcher had to consistently monitor student reading progress and teacher collaboration and remain steadfast to making necessary changes when needed.

**Propriety**.  Yarbrough et al. (2011) defined propriety as supporting what is proper, fair, legal, right and just in evaluations.  Throughout this study, the researcher assured the protection of teachers' names and identities.  Prior to the implementation of this study, the researcher was required to participate in the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training and gain permission from the university's Internal Review Board (IRB) before this study could be conducted.  Teacher participants were required to sign a permission slip if they chose to participate in the study.  Each teacher participant was given an opportunity to opt out of the research study without fear of repercussion or penalty.  Teacher participants were also given the option to opt out at any point during the study.  The research team and the school board were provided data reports from Mississippi Academic Assessment Program 2017-2018 school year and STAR (2017-2018) data.  Throughout this study, stakeholders had access to STAR data. Classroom observations and instructional rounds were used to provide instructional support to teachers.  This study continuously allowed collaborative opportunities for stakeholders to offer suggestions for improvement based on research and needs of teachers.

**Accuracy.**  Accuracy standards were intended to increase the dependability and truthfulness of evaluation.  Dependability should be comprised of representations, propositions,

and findings that support interpretations and judgments about quality of the product being evaluated (Yarbrough et al., 2011).  It was imperative that the researcher was held accountable throughout the entire study.  The researcher had to protect data and be honest with data reporting.  Every study has limitations; however, an abundance of documentation supports the findings of this study.  As a result of keeping accurate, clear, and concise documentation, the researcher intentionally kept data of the stakeholders in strict confidence.

**Accountability.**  Yarbrough et al (2011) also stated that accountability standards should encourage adequate documentation of evaluations and a meta-evaluative perspective focused on accountability and improvement.  While Chapter Three describes the methods of this study and details how data were collected, the researcher acknowledges limitations to this study.  As a precautionary measure to support accuracy, all documentation was kept in the researcher's office in a designated locked file cabinet.  Multiple data points were used to triangulate the data for accuracy of findings.

**Next Steps**

In addition to increasing teacher collaboration time, Tigerville Elementary School (TES) will continue to promote higher levels of reading instruction using the five components of reading to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading.  Data from this research study will be shared with other administrators and teachers within the district.  Additionally, data will be shared with teachers who teacher K-2 with the goal to begin to implement findings in lower grades. The School Board will be notified of findings from this study.  Teachers and administrators will become active participants in the decision-making process to determine next steps and set follow-up goals.  A greater focus on reading strategies to teach the five components of reading will be a strong recommendation from the researcher.  When analyzing emergent

themes from this action research study, time for teachers to plan became a major theme. Teachers and administrators will be asked to provide feedback for future direction. Electronic surveys will be used to gather data for future direction.

During implementation of the action plan, 72 students participated in this study. The study started out with 80 students, but as students transferred to other school districts, the number decreased. As teachers continue to focus their efforts on reading improvement, a focus on grade-level reading materials was evident. Third-grade teachers reported individual desires to continue working to improve the quality of teaching and reading stamina with third-grade students.

**Evaluation of organizational learning.** As a result of this research study, third-grade teachers have worked more as a team. Even though teachers planned as a team throughout this study, third-grade classrooms were structured using the self-contained classroom model. Consequently, teachers volunteered to team teach for the upcoming 2019-2020 school year. The researcher realized the importance of providing a team approach to solving organization problems, giving teachers a voice, and making them more willing to take instructional risks and to speak openly about what worked in their classrooms and what did not**.**

**Recommendations for further research**. Additional recommendations for future studies at TES will continue to focus on methods for improving the quality of teaching in third-grade reading. Research should further investigate and track changes in the reading achievement of this third-grade cohort group. Further research should also investigate the differences between female and male reading achievement. Additional related variables for improving reading achievement should also be explored, particularly in terms of growth scores. The researcher recommends additional study in this area to determine if there is a correlation between

implementation of the reading program and student reading outcomes.

A future study would require teachers and students to keep reading logs to track words and minutes read on a daily basis for both the classroom and at-home reading and then compare those finding to STAR testing results. The logs could reflect reading level, words read, and time spent reading. Correlational studies could provide valuable information to determine the relationship between reading achievement and each of these variables. Positive outcomes could be used to demonstrate success and enlist parental support to increasing reading proficiency among future students. More extensive research to gather parental viewpoints on the importance of reading is still needed and recommended.

Another recommendation for future study would be for the district to reevaluate when students are placed on the intervention path. Tigerville Elementary School (TES) currently gives the STAR assessment to all students the first week in August. It should be noted that students are just returning from the summer break and the *summer slide* may be in effect when students take the STAR test. The recommendation is for TES to consider at least two weeks on reading instruction before the STAR test is administered to third-grade students. Comparing the data of students who were administered the STAR assessment the first week in August, as opposed to students to were administered the STAR test two weeks after reading instruction has occurred. The data could be used to determine the role of assessment timing in student performance. It is the recommendation of the researcher for future research to continue exploring reading volume and key factors associated with how teachers teach reading on a daily basis. Teacher and student motivation should be considered.

Implementing plans with a growth mindset for the benefit of students would possibly yield the greatest results. Additionally, professional development should be provided for reading

teachers during the summer months.  Professional development would strengthen teacher

knowledge and increase teacher capacity and collaboration prior to the beginning of the school

year.  This time during the summer could also be used for teachers to plan and create a level of

cohesiveness for the upcoming school year.

**Conclusion**

This applied research study used a mixed-method approach combining both, quantitative

and qualitative data to determine if the reading program reached its goals.  As a result of this

study, the need to provide research-based practices to improve organizational learning was

paramount.  Although the quantitative part of this study required a 5% decrease in the number of

students who needed reading interventions, the findings in this study revealed there was a 3.4%

decrease in the number of students who needed reading interventions.  While this decrease did

not meet the 5% quantitative expectations for this study, the study did show some progress post-

Professional Learning Communities (PLC).

Qualitative data revealed progressive efforts were made to provide instructional support,

build teaching capacity, and to improve the student achievement using the five components of

reading.  This study revealed more collaboration among teachers and stakeholders was necessary

to improve the quality of teaching.  The study also identified the need for additional instructional

support to help teacher implement the five components of reading within their instruction.  This

study revealed reading was vitally important to the future success of all students.

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APPENDICES A-H

Appendix A: Definition of Key Terms

| Key Terms | Description |
|---|---|
| Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) | A school-based community of learners where educators work together towards a common goal—student learning |
| Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading (STAR) | A state option to use an a universal screener to monitor student's reading growth |
| Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) | A governmental agency that oversees the educational progress at a local level |
| Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) | A non-profit organization that works to provide equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools; IDRA strengthens and transforms public education by providing dynamic training; useful research, evaluation, and frameworks for action |
| Focus, Strategies, Assessment, Response (FSAR)Model | A Professional Learning Community (PLC) strategy adopted by the Red Clay County School District) |
| Tigerville Elementary School (TES) | Pseudonym to protect the school's identity |
| Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) | The Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) is designed to measure student achievement in English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics, Science, and US History.  Students are assessed in grades 3 through 8 in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics, grades 5 and 8 Science, Algebra I, Biology I, English II, and US History.  The results of all MAAP assessments provide information to be used for the improvement of student achievement. |

Appendix B:  Sample PLC and FSAR Rotational Schedule

| PLC Meeting Date | Agenda Topic(s) |
|---|---|
| August 6 | PLC Overview |
| August 7 | PLC Overview |
| August 14 | Focus & Strategies (FS part of the FSAR model) PLC meeting day<br><br>Focus:  Phonemic Awareness (PA)<br>Strategies:  Research-based strategies to teach PA |
| August 15-17 | Teachers plan collectively on their own for next week reading instruction in the classroom; NO PLC |
| August 21-24 | Teacher implement PA (one reading component) during instruction; NO PLC |
| August 28 | Assessment & Response (AR part of the FSAR model; PLC meeting day<br><br>Assessment:  Analyze assessment data<br>Response:  Next steps to teach |
| September 4 | Focus & Strategies (FS part of the FSAR model); PLC meeting day<br>Focus: Phonics (P)<br>Strategies:  Research-based strategies to teach (P) |
| September 5-7 | Teachers plan collectively on their own for next week instruction; NO PLC |
| September 10-14 | Teacher implement P (one of the five components of reading; NO PLC meeting |
| September 18 | Assessment & Response (AR part of the FSAR model<br><br>Assessment:  Analyze assessment data<br>Response:  Next steps to teach |

Appendix C: Teacher Interview Protocol

**Teacher Interview Protocol**

**Research Topic:**  Improving the quality of teaching in third-grade reading

**Specific Research Questions:**

- Explain how Tigerville Elementary School (TES) used the PLC process during the school year (2016-2017).
- Explain teacher perceptions to PLC meetings.
- Explain what areas of instructional support is needed to improve reading instruction.

**Conceptual Framework:**  *professional learning communities, five components of reading*

**Statement of Consent:**

*This interview is part of an applied research study to fulfill partial requirements for a Doctor of Education (EdD) degree for Valeree Ellis Barnes from the University of Mississippi.  The study is uses Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as the vehicle to improve the quality of teaching in third-grade reading.  Any questions pertaining to this project and its findings should be emailed to the following:*

*vbarnes@go.olemiss.edu*

*Any questions or concerns can also be emailed to the Dissertation Chair, Dr. Jill Cabrera Davis at The University of Mississippi.*

*jdcabrer@olemiss.edu*

*Thank you for taking the time to speak with me regarding your experiences with PLC meetings. Any information you provide today will help us to understand the implementation process of PLC meetings and the potential long-term sustainability of PLCs.  Protecting your rights is paramount; therefore, any identifiable information will be removed from the responses you provide.  We want you to feel comfortable with the interviewing process, so please be aware, there are no right or wrong answers.  We simply want you to answer any questions without reservation and to the best of your ability.  To that end, are you willing to proceed with the interview process?*

**Icebreaker Questions:**

Tell me about your reading experiences (i.e. teacher, what did you do, etc.) in third-grade. When I say PLCs, name the first three words that come to mind.

**Implementation Questions**

Describe your beliefs about the PLC process at Tigerville Elementary School (TES) during 2016-2017 school year? What did PLCs look like at TES during 2016-2017 school year?
When students do not master the standard you have taught, describe what steps you take to help those students.
What additional teacher supports do you think would help you teach reading?

**Specific Instructional Questions**

Tell me what you think is the most important aspect of teaching reading.
Tell what aspects of the Focus, Strategies, Assessment, Response (FSAR Model) are most beneficial.
How will we know when students have learned what has been taught?
Describe how you decided what standard-based instruction to focus on for the week.
What strategies do you deploy to teach reading?
Describe how students are assessed in reading.
How do you respond when students do not learn?
How do you respond when students have reached the expected learning goal?
Describe the five components of reading.

**Final Consideration**
Is there anything else you'd like to share with me that I may have not asked?

Appendix D: Instructional Rounds

School Leadership Team (SLT) Observer: _____

Teacher Observed: _____

Date: _____

SLT Time In: _____ SLT Time Out:_____

Focus of Observation (Write or type focus area in the box below).

|  |
| --- |
|  |

| Actions of the Teacher<br>What specifically is the teacher saying? What actions is the teacher doing? | Actions of the Students<br>What specifically are the students doing? Use specific examples to describe actions. |
| --- | --- |
|  |  |

Appendix E: Critical Friends Collaborative Rubric

| Target | Exceeds Expectations | Meets Expectations | Approaching Expectations | Not Yet Meeting Expectations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Focuses and participates in collaborative lesson planning process | Consistently stays focused on the lesson planning process<br><br>Consistently encourages and supports the process | Stays focused on the lesson planning process most of the time<br><br>Encourages and supports the lesson plan process most of the time | Focuses on the lesson planning process sometimes<br><br>Encourages and supports the lesson planning process sometimes | Rarely focuses on the collaborative lesson planning process<br><br>Rarely encourages and supports the lesson planning process |
| Provides constructive feedback in non-threatening manner | Consistently provides support and follows through with documented notes from support meetings | Provides support and follows through with documented notes from support meetings most of the time | Provides support and follows through with documented notes from support meetings sometimes | Rarely provides support and follows through with documented notes from support meetings |
| Trustworthy | Consistently and respectfully listens without being judgmental | Respectfully listens without being judgmental most of the time | Listens sometimes without being judgmental | Rarely listens without being judgmental |

*Note.* Adapted from "Rubric for Cooperative and Collaborative Learning," by ReadWriteThink, 2012 (http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/30860_rubric.pdf ). Adapted with permission.

Overall Evaluation:  Place a check mark in the space below indicating the overall performance level that describes your collaborative experience.
Exceeds Expectations: _____          Meets Expectations: _____

Approaching Expectations: _____          Not Yet Meeting Expectations: _____

Appendix F: Smart Goals

**Smart Goals Worksheet**

**Directions:  Type or write your response in the appropriate section below.**

**Teacher Quotes:**

_____

_____

**S.M.A.R.T. Goals**

**S**pecific:  What specific goal do you expect to achieve?

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                                                                       │
│                                                                       │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

**M**easurable:  How will you know the goal has been met?

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│                                                                       │
│                                                                       │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

**A**ttainable:  What steps are needed to attain the goal?

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│                                                                       │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

**R**elevant:  Is this goal vital to the expectation?

```
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│                                                                       │
│                                                                       │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

**T**ime-Oriented:  Wat is your timeframe to reach this goal?

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                                                                       │
│                                                                       │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

Appendix G: PLC Evaluation Rubric

| PLC Element | Starting Out | Developing | Deepening | Sustaining |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Providing instructional support for teachers (tied to mission and vision) | PLCs have not developed norms, nor share diverse values and goals related to reading instruction | PLCs have developed some norms and share some values and goals related to reading instruction | PLCs are mostly clear on norms and share most values and goals related to reading instruction | PLCs share high degree of commitment to continuous collaboration and reading achievement and share norms and goals related to reading instruction |
| Building teaching capacity | PLCs struggle to collaborate and never use critical friends approach | PLCs collaborate around planning and the learning lacks focus and sometimes uses critical friends approach | PLCs collaborate as a solid team, sharing thoughts and demonstrating collective responsibility for student learning and focus | PLCs are high performing and collaborate with a sense of community focused on collegial support and trust |
| Improving student achievement | PLCs struggle to use common assessments to improve instruction | PLCs use common assessments sometimes to improve reading instruction | PLCs use common assessments often to improve reading instruction | PLCs are high performing with a continual focus on student achievement and common assessments |

*Note.* Adapted from "Implementation Rubric: 5 Essential Characteristics of a PLC," by Your Professional Learning Community (https://www.upsd.wednet.edu/cms/lib/WA01000687/Centricity/Domain/57/Professional%20Le arning/PLC%20Implementation%20Rubric.pdf).

Appendix H: Tigerville Elementary School Data-Tracking Form

Teacher's Name _____ Grade _____

Data Meeting Date _____ Assessment Date_____

**Note:** This form must be completed each week.  It must be brought with you each Thursday to your PLC Data meeting.  Please be prepared to discuss your data with your team.  In addition to the weekly assessment, be prepared to discuss informal indicators you are using to assess instruction and student performance.  Only the first section will indicate student's numerical performance levels.  Adapt each section according to the numerical guide in the first column under homeroom.

MS College and Career Readiness Standard Measured by Assessment

| | _____ <br> Homeroom | _____ <br> Homeroom | _____ <br> Homeroom |
|---|---|---|---|
| Average Score on the Assessment | | | |
| Proficiency Level Breakdown Percentages | Advanced (1) _____ <br> Proficient (2) _____ <br> Pass (3) _____ <br> Basic (4) _____ <br> Minimal (5) _____ | Advanced _____ <br> Proficient _____ <br> Pass _____ <br> Basic _____ <br> Minimal _____ | Advanced _____ <br> Proficient _____ <br> Pass _____ <br> Basic _____ <br> Minimal _____ |
| Students Meeting Growth on Assessment | Number _____ <br><br> Percentage _____ | Number _____ <br><br> Percentage _____ | Number _____ <br><br> Percentage _____ |
| Number of Discipline Referrals from Previous Week | | | |

**BOTTOM 25%**

|  | _____ Homeroom | _____ Homeroom | _____ _____ Homeroom |
|---|---|---|---|
| Average Score on the assessment |  |  |  |
| Students Demonstrating Proficiency on Assessment | Number _____<br><br>Percentage _____ | Number _____<br><br>Percentage _____ | Number _____<br><br>Percentage _____ |
| Students Meeting Growth on Assessment | Number _____<br><br>Percentage _____ | Number _____<br><br>Percentage _____ | Number _____<br><br>Percentage _____ |

**DATA REFLECTION**

What does your data show?  Consider both the strengths and weaknesses.

_____

_____

_____

How will you use the data for future planning?

_____

_____

## Targeted Students for this Skill for Remediation

| _____ Homeroom | _____ Homeroom | _____ Homeroom |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |

VITA
**Valeree Ellis-Barnes**

## Education

**Delta State University**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Educational Specialist, (EdS) | Educational Leadership & Supervision | (May, 2014) |

**University of Mississippi**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Educational Specialist, (EdS) | Elementary Education | (August, 2009) |
| Master of Education, (M.A.E.) | Elementary Education | (May, 2004) |
| Bachelor of Education (B.A.) | Elementary Education | (May, 2000) |
| Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) | Psychology | (May 1997) |

## Professional Affiliations & Honors

**Honor Society** Sigma Tau Delta (English Honor Society)

**Nomination:** 2009 Teacher of the Year *Finalist*; Oxford High School Oxford, MS

**Co-Sponsor:** Future Educators of America (FEA)

## Professional Experiences

**Water Valley School District**

July 1, 2018-current Principal; Davidson Elementary School

July 1, 2017-June 30, 2018; Assistant Principal, Davidson Elementary School

**North Panola School District-Sardis, MS**

Principal (July, 2015 to August 2016; medical leave until July, 2017)

**South Panola School District-Batesville, MS**

Assistant Principal July, 2012-2015

**West Tallahatchie High School-Webb, MS**

Assistant Principal (July 2011 to 2012)

**Oxford High School – Oxford, MS**
    English Teacher (2006 to 2011)
**Lafayette County School District, Oxford, MS**
    English & Reading Teacher (2000 to 2006)