

ABSTRACT

HERRIDGE, ROBIN LEA. A Multiple Case Study of Literacy Instructional Leadership Behaviors of Elementary Principals in North Carolina. (Under the direction of Dr. Lance Fusarelli).

The purpose of this study was to explore the literacy instructional leadership behaviors of principals in two high poverty elementary schools in North Carolina who have experienced success with student growth in reading achievement over a three year period. This was a qualitative exploratory multiple case study. Data was gathered from 21 interviews that included central office personnel, principals, an assistant principal, a district coach, Title One teachers and regular classroom teachers.

The key findings of this study revealed that these principals utilized a Professional Learning Community and Response to Intervention structure within their schools, using data effectively to identify areas of needed improvement for students and teachers. The principals exhibited content and pedagogy knowledge that enabled them to have meaningful discussions with their teachers. Within this structure, there was a clear focus on students and a sense of urgency. High expectations were clear for students and teachers within a climate representing established relationships. The principals actively participated in on-going professional development with their faculty and staff. These two cases also had the added benefits of district support and low staff turnover. The districts and principals alike made use of shared leadership. The teachers were empowered to be leaders within the school and to try new strategies. Two distinguishing traits of the principals were that of humility by constantly “shining the light of praise” back on their staff for the success of the schools and in utilizing resources with intestinal fortitude when it was in the best interests of students.

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A Multiple Case Study of the Literacy Instructional Leadership Behaviors of Elementary
Principals in North Carolina

by
Robin Lea Herridge

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APPROVED BY:

Lance Fusarelli, Ph.D.
Committee Chair

Bonnie Fusarelli, Ph.D.

Matt Militello, Ph.D.

Steve Amendum, Ph.D.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my husband, Allen W. Herridge, II for all of his love, support and tireless reading and editing.

BIOGRAPHY

Robin Lea Herridge was born in Fairmont, West Virginia. She received her undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Development and Elementary Education from Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Virginia. She held a wide range of educational positions including pre-school teacher and director, kindergarten and first grade teacher before receiving the North Carolina Principal Fellows Scholarship in Educational Leadership. She completed this degree at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina. Thereafter, she became an assistant principal and principal in one of the largest and highest poverty elementary schools in Johnston County, North Carolina. She is currently the elementary director in the Johnston County, North Carolina. While completing her doctoral studies, she has also been an adjunct professor at Barton College, in Wilson, North Carolina. Her passion continues to be helping administrators understand poverty, literacy and student achievement.

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Chapter One

Background of the Study

Literacy continues to be an important goal for our nation. According to Literacy Volunteers of Buffalo and Erie County Inc. (2010), the statistics in our nation continue to be appalling with the negative lifelong impact associated with low literacy rates. For example, 60% of all prison inmates are functionally illiterate and 85% of all juvenile offenders have significant reading problems. Another staggering statistic is that 76% of adults that receive public assistance are illiterate or capable of only reading the simplest of texts and further, these adults with the lowest reading ability stay on public assistance longer. In our nation 41- 44% of adults with the lowest literacy levels live in poverty. According to Buffum, Mattos, and Weber (2009), poor literacy skills greatly impact dropout rates and the statistics are not favorable for dropouts (p. 62). On average, they earn approximately \$12,000.00 per annum, nearly 50% less than those who possess a high school diploma, and they are 50% less likely to have a job that offers a pension plan or health insurance. Not only that, they are more likely to have health problems. Therefore, literacy continues to have a great impact in our nation, not only for schools making their “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) as identified by the legislation of No Child Left Behind or NCLB (U. S. Department of Education, 2010), but in the lives of the children who do not learn to read. Succinctly stated by Buffam et al. (2009) “the difference between success and failure in school is, quite literally, life and death for our students” (p. 61).

Children who lack adequate literacy skills disproportionately come from families living in poverty. In fact, 42% of children under age 18 live in poverty in the United States and approximately 46% of children in North Carolina live in low income homes (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2009). Poverty not only effects students prior to the start of formal schooling but continues to impact students throughout their education. Schools with a high percentage of students living in poverty generally have poorer academic achievement. Since the publication of the Coleman Report in 1966 and despite legislative mandates and financial incentives to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools with higher incidences of economically disadvantaged families, poor academic performance of students in high poverty schools is a recurring theme in national studies (Fortune, 1972; Goldberger, 2008; Graves, 2009; Jerald, 2001; Murnane, 2007).

Perhaps no one feels the pressure to help students achieve more directly than principals of high poverty elementary schools. Since the advent of federal involvement in student achievement with NCLB, the demand for high quality performance by these leaders has never been greater. NCLB is actually a “punitive model” calling for disciplinary action for schools who do not meet their AYP. This model only affects the nations’ poorest schools or those who receive federal monies under Title One funding. According to Fielding, Kerr, and Rosier (2007), “early reading is a big piece of the ‘adequate yearly progress’ puzzle both at a student and district level” (p. XIV). With the advent of NCLB, the focus for schools is trying to ensure that all students are proficient in reading and math. Reading is the focus of this study as the essential skill not only in life but as a necessary avenue for all other subjects.

Students must have the ability to read and comprehend the questions on the math assessment. As reported by Fielding et al. (2007) with 40% of the nations' students two or three years below grade level, it is a major quandary for schools on how to not just make AYP, but to attempt to catch these students up (p. 168). It is essential for schools to ensure all elementary students have these basic skills. Once a student enters middle or high school without essential reading or math proficiency, their opportunities for success are greatly diminished.

With federal and state legislation in place for student achievement, the person at the helm of schools is under even more intensive scrutiny for performance. According to Gentilucci and Muto (2007) there are 30 years' worth of studies regarding the relationships between school administrators and student academic success. This research has shown that principals do have an impact on achievement. There is less agreement on exactly how they have the impact and whether or not their behaviors can be directly attributed to student proficiency. Few studies have looked at the leadership characteristics of principals specifically in regard to reading achievement (Mackey, Pitcher, & Decman, 2006). The leadership character traits of principals that impact student achievement is generally referred to as "instructional leadership" but Heck (1992) states that "the types of activities that are important for consideration as an effective instructional leader remain unclear" (p. 22). When the literature is searched with specific respect to reading instruction and the principal as a "literacy instructional leader," the number of studies diminishes considerably.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the literacy instructional leadership behaviors of two principals in high poverty elementary schools in North Carolina who have experienced success with student growth in reading achievement over a three year period. A multiple case qualitative study was utilized to gather in-depth information regarding this phenomenon. Each principal was considered one “case” with the information collected by those aware of the behaviors of the principal that may have been instrumental in improving that school’s scores in reading achievement. The purpose of this design was to examine the literacy instructional leadership behaviors exhibited by the principals of these schools. Principals, lead teachers, teachers and district level personnel were interviewed.

The goal of the study was to compare the cases for emergent themes related to specific leadership behaviors that the participants attribute to the success of the students in the school in regard to reading achievement. The intention was to fill a gap in the research about specific behaviors that principals engage in regarding supporting literacy instruction in their schools. Since meeting the needs of “at-risk” students of poverty is an even greater struggle that many in our nation face daily, reporting on the specific strategies with this subgroup of students will hopefully assist others who endeavor to overcome this challenge. If there are specific skills that can be taught, it would logically follow that universities could use this information in their principal preparation programs and districts could utilize it with their efforts for principal staff development and support.

The following research question guided this study: What does literacy instructional leadership look like of an elementary principal leading a large high poverty school that has shown consistent growth over a three-year period?

Definition of Terms

ABC's of Public Education. This is the accountability model in North Carolina established in 1996-1997, prior to No Child Left Behind. It measures a student and school's proficiency and growth on the End of Grade tests in grades 3-8. There are different recognition categories for schools under this model ranging from "Low Performing Schools (less than 50% of students are proficient and did not make "expected growth") to "Honor Schools of Excellence" (90% of students are proficient, "expected growth" was met as well as AYP). (www.ncpublicschools.org)

Growth Expectations (Under NC ABC's Accountability Model). The formula for calculating student growth in 1996-1997 was based on the statewide average of growth in the years prior to 1996. New formulas were developed in the 2005-2006 school year. The "expected growth" is the growth a student should make that equates to one year of growth for one year of instruction. "High growth" is above that average. Prior to the present economic downturn, teachers received bonuses when their school made "expected growth" (\$750.00) or "high growth" (\$1500.00). According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), "Even a school with 90% or more of its students scores at grade level has room for students to grow academically each year and schools should be showing growth

annually” (www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/reporting/abc/2009-10/backgroundpacket.pdf, p. 5).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). This is the measure used by NCLB to determine if a school has met the standards established by the federal government for proficiency as a whole and in each subgroup of students as determined by race, poverty level, exceptionality or language status. In order for a subgroup to qualify as such for a school, there must be 40 students in that subgroup. The more diverse the school as measured by the above standards, the more “hurdles” it has to jump to make AYP. Only Title One schools (that are identified by their high percentage of poverty-as qualified by their number of students on free/reduced lunch-generally beginning at 40%) have sanctions against them if they do not meet their AYP. North Carolina has adopted AYP into their accountability model to measure the proficiency within subgroups to establish the goal of closing gaps among subgroups.

End of Grade Tests (EOG’s). In North Carolina, these assessments are administered in May for students in grades three through eight in reading and math. A science test is also administered in grades five and eight. The tests are used to determine a student’s proficiency in that subject by scoring the student on a scale of one to four (where four is the highest possible outcome) and also to determine if a school has met their ABC’s for the state or AYP for No Child Left Behind.

Literacy Instructional Leadership Behaviors. Activities that the principal engages in to encourage effective literacy practices in his/her school. These behaviors are not well-defined in the literature. They can include leading staff development on effective reading practices,

and/or leading Professional Learning Communities (PLC's) or grade level meetings on how to identify students who are "at-risk" or below grade level in reading. They can also pertain to such things as providing strategies to aid the student in an effort to rectify those areas identified as deficient, and providing time in the schedule and resources for research based curriculum and teaching strategies such as small group instruction. Hence the literacy instructional leadership behaviors can be directly related to the content and/or the pedagogy of teaching reading.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This Act of 2001 was implemented in the 2002-2003 school year with standards for schools to increase levels of proficiency with the ultimate goal of achieving 100% by the school year 2013-2014 in reading and math. Under these guidelines, schools must also meet graduation and attendance requirements. Sanctions are established for Title One schools which consistently do not meet their AYP. For example, if a school does not meet their AYP in one subject for two years in a row, they are then required to offer Schools of Choice where the district must allow students to attend another school selected in the district and provide transportation. If the school does not meet the AYP for another year they must offer after school tutoring free of charge. It is important to note that one student can meet the criteria to be in many different subgroups and subsequently count more than once. Consider a Hispanic student who qualifies to receive English as a Second Language (ESL) services, who may also be in the Students with Disabilities (SWD) program and who is in poverty (ED-Economically Disadvantaged). In

such a scenario, that one student would qualify as a member of four subgroups and it can take only one student for a school not to meet their AYP.

Proficiency. The term used in the ABC and NCLB models of accountability to determine if a student is achieving in an acceptable range in a subject area.

Professional Learning Communities (PLC's). Teachers and administrators working together to establish common goals and expectations for grade levels by moving well beyond what has traditionally been considered “grade level meetings.” These groups are more concerned with raising student achievement for all students and sharing best practices to help all students and teachers become more successful.

Response to Intervention (RtI). This is the term now used to identify the practices delineated by the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) for the early identification of struggling students and prevention strategies to assist them in program. It encourages a school to review the “core” instructional program to assure that the instruction is differentiated in such a manner as to provide strategies to assist with struggling learners prior to their identification as “exceptional.”

Race to the Top Fund (RTTT). This is the term for the competitive grants awarded to states by the federal government for comprehensive school reform. North Carolina received this grant in 2010. (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html>).

Significance of the Study

This study adds to the body of research on the literacy instructional leadership behaviors of principals in schools of high poverty where students are achieving growth on their reading

scores. By examining the comments of the teachers, principals, and district leaders regarding the traits these principals have and what they have done in the realm of literacy instructional leadership, it provides a model for other schools with similar demographics that are struggling to increase their students' reading achievement scores. The study used multiple cases which allow emerging themes to provide more clear direction and guidance for principals, districts, and institutions of higher education. Since instructional leadership has not always been a well-defined term regarding behaviors and practices, and literacy instructional leadership is even more ambiguous, it may well stand to reason that the practices of these successful leaders will lead to more specific and replicable behaviors. This study also has implications for school district leaders that seek to employ the most qualified candidates who have literacy instructional leadership skills or to have staff development for those principals who need to improve in this area. For the universities, the study may have implications for the training programs for those seeking to become principals. Too often knowledge about principal leadership lacks specificity and does not have universally accepted norms. Perhaps this in-depth exploratory study will help the principals and the universities who train them to more specifically define these behaviors in a "real life" school environment.

Overview of Methodological Approach

This study was a qualitative study which according to Bogdan and Biklen (2007) means that "the data collected have been termed **soft**, that is rich in description of people, places, and conversations, and not easily handled by statistical procedures" (p. 2). This research

utilized a multiple case study approach of two principals. Purposeful sampling was used to identify the participants. According to Creswell and Clark (2011), purposeful sampling is used when participants are selected who have experienced the “central phenomenon or the key concept being explored in the study” (p. 173). These principals were selected because they have been at high poverty schools for at least three years and whose EOG reading scores have steadily shown improvement over this period of time in regard to student growth. It was a multiple case-study approach which according to Yin (2003) could make the “evidence more compelling” (p. 46).

The study involved interviewing lead teachers, teachers, principals, and district personnel to identify literacy instructional leadership behaviors and traits of the principals at these schools. These interviews were transcribed and coded to identify emergent themes among all participants. These themes were analyzed against the literature for comparison.

Since qualitative research is considered to be “soft” research, it is important to establish what Guba (as noted in Edmondson & Irby, 2008) has termed the “model of trustworthiness” in terms of validity and reliability. This model embodies four components: (a) truth value, (b) applicability, (c) consistency and, (d) neutrality (Edmondson & Irby, 2008, p. 79). Peer examination accomplished by asking an expert in the field to review the data is a way to establish the truth value method. This study was reviewed by several experts in the field each with at least 30 years’ experience in education, including in administration.

In qualitative research there is not what is considered “generalizability” but instead dense description of the informants and context is utilized to give enough detail to allow the reader

to make use of the information. This dense description of data assists with the “applicability” component of trustworthiness. These strategies also serve to answer the concern of consistency. Another strategy to assist with consistency is the dependability audit where there is also a dense description of all components of methodology in such a manner that the study could potentially be replicated. To address any concerns on neutrality the strategy of reflexivity was utilized which is also termed the researcher’s bias. I reflected on my influence in the study and prior perceptions regarding the study (Edmondson & Irby, 2008).

Chapter Summary and Organization of the Study

Educational leaders battle great odds when a school has a high percentage of students living in poverty. Students living in poverty begin school at a disadvantage and must overcome uneven academic hurdles. Literacy is important in all aspects of schooling and in all subjects. The EOG math and science tests must be read by students. If students do not become literate, their chances for success in life are greatly reduced and pose further negative consequences for their health and welfare. Principals of schools that have high poverty yet have made consistent growth with their students’ proficiency in reading are beating these odds. This study sought to explore two principals that have had success to ascertain the literacy instructional leadership behaviors of principals in relation to the improvements.

Interviews of lead teachers, teachers, principals, and district level personnel were conducted and analyzed to investigate emergent themes. To maintain validity and reliability, peer examination of the data was included to determine if the concepts “rang true” to other professionals in the field. I kept notes on my perceptions and influence in the study that may

affect the study. The data was also reviewed in light of the literature review to make a connection to the current research in the field. It is expected that the dense rich description of the activities of these principals in North Carolina will yield information that can be used to assist others as they seek to improve upon their respective literacy instructional leadership skills. It is also anticipated that this study will significantly add to the body of research in terms of clear identification of specific behaviors. Via utilization of the information from the lead teachers and the district personnel, it is also hoped that districts can use the information in planning professional development for lead teachers and administrators. It is also anticipated that there will be information that could be used by institutions of higher education in their principal preparation programs. The vast majority of all principals want their students to be successful in school and in life. Their role in helping students to become literate is more than just meeting the guidelines of the state or federal regulations; it is a moral imperative.

In Chapter 2, a literature review is conducted regarding the current research on principals and their backgrounds or practices that may influence student achievement. It outlines the national need for improvement in regard to literacy and the impact of reading on academic achievement and life success. The chapter explains national models that are in place for successful leadership traits as utilized by institutions of higher education. It also explains the past research on the impact of principals with student achievement and the difficulty in clearly defining the relationship. Instructional leadership and literacy instructional leadership are defined as traits or activities important in the administrators' roles. Current research is

shared regarding components advocated for reform and improvement within schools as a potential structure of how principals could experience success. Part of this research is the current national use of Response to Intervention (RtI) and Professional Learning Communities (PLC's).

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used for this comparative case study of two principals in North Carolina. This qualitative method is explained regarding the relevance to this study and specifically outlines the details of the research. The specific methods of data collection include interviews of teachers, principals, and central office personnel and dense description of the environment. The data was analyzed in an on-going fashion as is consistent with the methodology of case studies. Research validity and reliability was assured through a clearly delineated process and peer reviews.

Chapter 4 gives the description of the participants and the context in a thorough manner so the information can be utilized by the reader. It explains the study in detail in regard to the data obtained. The chapter then proceeds to provide the analysis of key findings.

Chapter 5 contains the culmination of the study by explaining the interpretation of the data in light of the potential use of the study among districts and institutions of higher education. It also explains the impact the study will have in adding to the body of knowledge on the subject.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The enactment of the federal legislation entitled No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has brought much attention to the competency level of our students and schools. Since the principal is the recognized leader at these schools, they face greater public pressure now more than ever to prove their ability to not only “manage” the building but to lead their students to a standard of excellence for reading and math. Even with this pressure to “perform” and raise the level of achievement in our schools, literacy continues to be an issue in our nation at large. For our students, lacking proficiency in reading not only causes issues for them while they are in school, but for the rest of their lives.

For principals who serve schools with high levels of poverty, the challenge is even greater because the students arrive at school already behind in their pre-reading and vocabulary skills (Jenson, 2009; Moore and Redd, 2002). Kainz and Vernon-Feagans (2007) also state that “children from families who experienced low income during early elementary school demonstrated lower reading skills at kindergarten entry (p. 419). According to Fielding, Kerr, and Rosier (2007), their challenge becomes not only helping them to achieve one year’s worth of growth for one year of schooling, but to make catch-up growth so they can attain the same level as their same age peers. It is also these schools of higher poverty that have greater sanctions against them from the regulations of NCLB.

This literature review will first examine the current issue of literacy in our nation. Then it will review the issue of the effect of poverty in our schools. The current high accountability standards in our educational system will be explored for understanding of the challenges of

educational leadership. The changing role of the principal and his/her significance in regard to student achievement is then explored in regard to this high stakes accountability. This naturally leads to an examination of what a principal specifically does to help students achieve. The role that focuses on academic achievement is termed “instructional leadership.” While this term has been in vogue with educational leadership for the last twenty years, and numerous studies have been conducted attempting to prove this trait helps principals lead educational reform, this review examines the specifics of what this entails in principal preparation programs and in their positions. While many researchers have completed meta-analyses regarding principals and their effectiveness in schools and institutes of higher education have identified characteristics or traits that effective principals have, there still seems to be elusiveness about the specificity of the work involved in being an instructional leader.

Since the focus of this research pertains to elementary principals and their work within high poverty schools regarding improved reading achievement, the scope is narrowed further to the literature that is specifically targeted to activities the principals may perform that would make a difference in regard to reading improvement in their schools. In several books, and current dissertations, this new phrase is entitled Literacy Instructional Leadership. A small selection of peer reviewed articles has been identified that target the specific behaviors or activities that the principal, as leader of the school, has been involved with who have reading as a priority for improvement.

Therefore this literature review will set the background of the continued need in our nation to focus on literacy and to understand the effect poverty has on academic achievement. It will then move on to explain the high stakes accountability that principals endure. It will then identify where the research and institutes of higher education are in assisting principals in dealing with these issues as leaders. As with the multi-faceted nature of the principalship, this literature review will set up the multi-faceted issues that face the principal in leading his/her school for improvement. The literature review will examine the concept of instructional leadership and the current understandings of that term. Finally the review will examine the specificity of literacy instructional leadership and what the books, research and the Children's Literacy Council have espoused as the practices of that terminology.

Literacy as a Key Issue

The report on "Double Jeopardy: How Third Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation Rates" (Hernandez, 2011) reiterates the importance of students achieving proficiency in reading by the end of third grade. This report highlights the fact that without attaining this goal during this time frame, the chances of "catching up" are much more difficult and in fact, the high school drop-out rates are the highest for the low, below-basic readers: "23% of students drop out or fail to finish on time, compared to 9% of children with basic reading skills" (p. 3). Our National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>) indicates that for 2009 in our fourth grade reading assessment, 67% of the students were not proficient in reading. Even though our nation has

focused more on school reform efforts and student achievement in the last twenty years, there is still much room for improvement and analysis of what it will take to improve our student's reading abilities.

Findings from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) indicate that only half of U. S. adults have the level of proficiency in reading needed for today's labor market (National Institute for Literacy, 2003). They also indicate that in 1992, 1 in 3 prison inmates performed at the lowest level of literacy compared to 1 in 5 in the general population. Winn and Behizadeh (2011) identify literacy as a "civil right" and state that "low-quality literacy education is a key component of the school-to-prison pipeline" (p. 150). Principals deal with personal and societal pressure of the need for students to be literate and the yearly pressure of meeting the standards set by the government for achievement.

The Effects of Poverty

With the current economic downturn, schools are having more students qualify for free and reduced lunch based on the income and number of persons living in the home. Jenson (2009) defines poverty as those without the income to provide themselves with basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing. Ruby Payne (1996) has done extensive work on the culture of poverty and how it affects students in schools, not only relating to peers but in their academic achievement. She also espouses the concept that to be effective in reaching these students, the teachers and staff need to understand the environment that these students live in and how it may differ from the culture of middle class where most of our teachers were raised.

Jensen (2009) also reports that brain research has actually indicated a difference in the brain scans of low socio-economic students and higher socio-economic students. This confirms with empirical evidence what kindergarten teachers have intrinsically known all along when they have the children of poverty enter their classrooms already behind. Jensen also reports that students come to school with a vocabulary that is often 3,000-5,000 words behind.

Principals who serve at schools of poverty have tremendous social pressure to ensure their students “perform” on the state achievement tests. In a study by Wenglinsky (2002) poverty in education does effect academic performance with the effect size on student learning being .76 which translates to 28 percentile points (p. 23). When an entire school has a high percentage of students in poverty, there is a distinct disadvantage from the perspective of the students making their AYP. According to the Wallace Foundation report (2012), “career success in a global economy depends on a strong education; for all segments of U.S. society to be able to compete fairly, the yawning gap in academic achievement between disadvantaged and advantaged students needs to narrow” (p. 5). Jensen (2009) reviewed the data from the top research on schools who have high poverty but have also had high achievement such as McREL Insights: Schools that “Beat the Odds” (Mid-Continental Research for Education and Learning, 2005), and High Performance in High Poverty Schools: 90/90/90 and Beyond (Reeves, 2003) and No Excuses: 21 Lessons from High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools (Carter, 2000) and identified 20 common characteristics. Jensen (2009) however, even states that “the problem with this list is that although all of

these factors are important, no school has the time, money or human capital to substantively change 20-plus factors at a time” (p. 68). Principals of high poverty schools therefore have a task of greater complexity than principals who serve primarily higher socio-economic students. Their understanding of the culture of poverty and the physical and emotional impact on the students and staff will impact the achievement of the students. As a result of their study (Edmunds, Ewing, Kendall, Kendall, Mulford & Silins, 2007) conclude that “research on successful principalship in high-performance schools in high-poverty communities needs to be given greater priority. Despite emerging evidence, research on leadership in the area is limited” (p. 477). They proceed to give definition of the areas that they feel need to be explored further such as the curriculum and pedagogical knowledge of the principals.

When considering the negative impact for students who are not literate by third grade, when the added complication of poverty is in the equation, the task for principals is compounded. Hernandez (2011) reports that “overall 22% of children who have lived in poverty do not graduate from high school, compared to 6% who have never been poor” (p. 3). Even when you can catch a poor student up with their reading skills by third grade, 11% still do not finish high school (Hernandez, 2011, p. 4).

Not only does poverty in general make a difference in school overall success, but the amount of poverty in one school is also an indicator as reported by Kesselring and Wheelan (2005) in their analysis of faculty group development and achievement. Their study revealed that “significantly more children were proficient in math, reading, and writing in schools

located in low or average poverty school districts than in schools in high poverty school districts” (Kesselring & Wheelan, 2005, p. 328). In the study by Sutton and Soderstrom (2001) their proposal based on the results of their research would be that states would consider adjusting outcome measures based on the factors that the school cannot control such as poverty. They further state that Indiana currently uses the practice of weighing their assessments in a “statistical manner” to more fully level the playing field when regarding uncontrolled variables (Sutton & Soderstrom, 2001, p. 338).

Poverty not only affects schools in the United States, but around the world as well. Edmunds et al. (2007) in their study from Australia on successful principals of high performance schools in high poverty communities indicate that “world-wide poverty is a major issue and that there is a nexus between poverty and education” (p. 461).

High Stakes Accountability

The educational leader at the helm of every school in the United States is called the principal. Their roles have changed over the course of time from being the “manager” of the facilities but also the instructional leader. The principal is held accountable now more than any other time in our nation’s history for the academic achievement of students. According to Hernandez (2011) No Child Left Behind was enacted with the understanding of the importance of acquisition of early reading skills. That was the reasoning behind the need to assess the students starting in third grade and to report these results by poverty status and race-ethnicity with increased pressure for an ultimate goal of all children being proficient by the school year 2013-2014. However, the act became more punitive in nature than creating

school reform. If schools consistently do not meet their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as defined in the law, principals may be removed from the leadership position of the school (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Prior to that drastic action, principals face a negative social stigma of leading a school that has to provide “choice” to parents to attend another school in the district which was able to make their AYP and publically proclaim why their school is “inadequate.”

Often parents and the public in general do not realize that schools that are not identified as Title One schools (due to their high numbers of students in poverty) do not have these sanctions leveled against them even if they also do not make AYP. They also do not have the understanding that you can miss making AYP by one student. At-risk students are often in multiple subgroups so if they are not proficient, this score can count against a school in more than one area.

Significance of the Principalship

Heck (1992) posits that “while effective schools research has established that strong principal leadership affects school academic achievement at least indirectly this relationship is more complex than originally thought” (p. 21). Hallinger and Heck’s (1998) review of research from 1980-1995 indicate that the pattern of results show that principals have an indirect impact on student achievement that though small is statistically significant. A recurrent concept among the literature (Anderson, 2008; Cotton, 2003; Cotton & Savard, 1980; Gentilucci & Muto, 2007; Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1990; Hallinger & Heck,

1998; Heck, 1992; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008) is the notion of direct versus indirect behaviors.

At this point research begins to become more fractured regarding interpretation of results. While all information reviewed agrees with the concept that principals play an essential role in the “success” of schools as identified by student achievement and indicated by their “indirect” behaviors, there is less agreement among the literature about the “direct” effects. At the conclusion of her literature synthesis, Cotton (2003) states that principals do have a “profound and positive influence on student learning” but indicates that it is not direct (p. 74). Gentilucci and Muto (2007) state that “although evidence correlating principal leadership and student achievement is compelling, the search for a causal relationship between these two variables has long been one of the ‘holy grails’ of educational research - seductive but elusive” (p. 220).

Roles of the Principal

The role of the principal is seen as one that has many duties and responsibilities as indicated by numerous studies and standards developed. Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) listed 21 different “responsibilities” ranging from order and discipline to visibility and intellectual stimulation. In his meta-analysis of 69 studies, researchers correlated these behaviors with student achievement and found “situational awareness” to possess the highest correlation. From this meta-analysis, Waters and Cameron (2007) identify a relationship between school leadership and student achievement in statistical terms. They proceed to utilize the 21 leadership responsibilities and 66 practices or behaviors to create the Balanced

Leadership Framework making it easier to comprehend this plethora of information. The organizing structure of this framework is based on leadership, focus, magnitude of change, and purposeful community (Waters & Cameron, 2007). An important distinction with this work is the need for the principal to be able to facilitate first and second order change and to understand when each is important for the school. In Cotton's analysis of 81 key research articles over the last 20 years (2003), she identified 25 similar essential traits and behaviors of effective principals.

National standards have been developed to assist universities in their principal preparation programs called the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders (Shipman, Queen, & Peel, 2007) which consists of six standards. These standards are abbreviated to include the following: 1. Facilitating a vision of learning, 2. Facilitating a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff growth, 3. Managing the building and resources for safety and effectiveness, 4. Collaborating effectively with families and the community and being responsive to diversity, 5. Performing all actions with integrity and fairness while constantly maintaining high ethics, and 6. Understanding, responding to and influencing the larger political, social and economic legal and cultural contexts of the school (ISLLC Standards, 2010). Each of these standards contains detailed lists of the type of knowledge, performance, and disposition required by the principal for effective implementation. Cheney and Davis (2011) however state that "the ISSLC standards are much too general and fail to zero in on the most important indicators of effective school leadership related to school performance (p. 12). Schmoker (2006) concurs

with this statement by indicating that our principal preparation programs address the topic of instructional leadership in a superficial manner without really addressing specific skills and characteristics needed by the principal in order to be effective.

In the national report on states' progress in improving the quality of school leaders (Cheney & Davis, 2011), North Carolina was not noted as a state leading in policies to increase principal effectiveness. Some of the standards that institutes of higher education in North Carolina use for their principal effectiveness programs such as the ISLLC standards are considered by this report to be specifically lacking in the role of the principal in managing and developing teachers and staff.

Notwithstanding, understanding these standards alone, however, does not guarantee that the principal has the skills required to implement them. For example, under Standard 2, a subcategory is for the principal to understand the principles of effective instruction. If a principal is confronted with the situation of someone not implementing effective instruction, what are the next steps involved in dealing with the situation? Does the principal know how to effectively model that instruction or provide the staff development and follow-up needed for improvement? Does the principal have the skills to further deal with the situation if the teacher does not make the necessary changes, such as taking disciplinary action?

There are also the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards, created jointly by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and ISLLC, which add the component of an internship. This added component of an internship gives future leaders some training in the field with experienced principals that should assist

them in attaining of these skills. However, clearly it is seen from these standards and multiple lists from research that principals have many hats that they wear in their roles as the educational leaders in their schools.

Principals not only have to provide the “management” of their schools by ensuring the building is kept clean, performing fire drills, balancing their budgets, working with parents and the community, making sure students get fed and transported safely, but they also are expected to be what is termed the “instructional leader” of the school. Cobb (2005) states, “Any one person who could provide knowledge and guidance in all areas of the curriculum and still have time to manage a building full of teachers and students would have to be Superman or Wonder Woman” (p. 472). However, those are clearly the current expectations of principals today with the new accountability guidelines. Succinctly stated by Cheney and Davis (2011), “The old job of principal as administrative building manager is no longer sufficient to dramatically improve student achievement. The job has evolved into a highly complex and demanding position that requires strong instructional and leadership skills” (p. 1).

Instructional Leadership

Most current research and books on educational leadership mention the term “instructional leadership” and attempt to define it (Booth & Roswell, 2007; Goldwin, 2008; McEwan, 2002; McGrath, 2010; Millward & Temperley, 2009; Stollenwerk, 2009; Thomas 2010; Tooms et. al., 2007). Stollenwerk (2009) simply states that “this is leadership that has

direct influence on the process of instruction” (p. 10). Elaine McEwan (2002), however, has a more detailed description in her book, *Seven Steps to Effective Instructional Leadership*:

Instructional leaders must be knowledgeable about learning theory, effective instruction, instruction, and curriculum - the power within the educational force. In addition, instructional leaders must be able to communicate and represent to the students, teachers, and parents what is of import and value in the school. They must be a symbolic force. Finally, instructional leaders must be skilled in the actual construction of a culture that specifically defines what a given school is about. The educational, symbolic, and cultural dimensions are critical to leadership in the school setting. (p. 6)

Michael Fullan (2005) says that leaders also need to be change agents who understand the process of creating a culture of change. Because of the emphasis on student achievement from states and the federal government, there is also the connection that instructional leadership is one that fosters student achievement (Blasé & Blasé, 1998). Again referring to change as explained by Marzano et al. (2005) in regard to instructional leadership, the principal must be aware of what it takes to facilitate first and second order change. First order change would be described as more of a continuation of past activities with the existing knowledge and skills adequate for the tasks. Second order change however is more of a “deep change” that would require breaking with the past traditions of the school, changing of paradigms and acquiring new knowledge. From the 21 responsibilities that Marzano et al. (2005) outlines as necessary for instructional leadership, with second order change, there are seven that need intensive focus. These are knowledge of curriculum, instruction and

assessment; optimizer; intellectual stimulation; change agent; monitoring/evaluating; flexibility; and ideals and beliefs (Marzano et. al, 2005, p. 116). As the key “optimizer” in the school, the principal involved with this level of change “must be willing to be the driving force behind the change initiative and take a stand for its success” (Marzano et. al, 2005, p. 118).

A search in the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database under “instructional leadership” alone currently yields 2,006 results. Many researchers (Cotton 1980; Heck, 1992; Marzano et al., 2005; and Wallace Foundation, 2011) have done meta-analyses of numerous studies to identify the importance of not only the principal but instructional leadership as a key component of the principal’s role in improving student achievement. In regard to the effectiveness of the principal on student achievement, there is evidence in current research that indicates the “role of instructional leader” surfaces as an important component of school improvement. Anderson (2008), in her quantitative study on schools in four Latin American cities examined the effectiveness of observable and quantifiable traits in and approaches of school principals that enhanced school achievement. She identified three key roles that surfaced: 1. Instructional leadership, 2. Organizer of the school community and manager of interpersonal relationships, and 3. Resource provider or maintenance manager (p. 37). Duke and Salmonowicz (2010) focused their case study of one elementary principal (specially trained as a “turn-around” specialist to address Virginia’s concern with high poverty and low-performing schools) with the notion of the “strategic thinking” that underlies the principals’ ability to be an instructional leader (p. 35). Millward

and Temperley (2009) in their case study of a principal of a high poverty school in New Zealand identified “instructional leadership, tight coupling and boundary spanning practices” as the necessary characteristics or elements in leadership that had a positive impact on student achievement (p.139).

Gentilucci and Muto (2007) posit that the principals who engage in direct instructional leadership may actually be interpreting their roles as an instructional leader differently than most. They indicate that these principals have clear and specific behaviors that put them into direct contact with students, teachers, and the curriculum. Their study takes a unique perspective into these direct behaviors as reported in a qualitative study by examining students’ views. The position adopted in their research is that the students are the ones whose opinion should be taken into account when analyzing whether or not the principal has a direct impact on school improvement and instruction. They had the students give input on their current principals (middle school) and their principals from elementary school. The results from this study provided consistent comments from students, regardless of the socio-economic, ethnic, or academic achievement of the schools (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007, p. 228). Students that identified principals as “teacher-principals” were thought of as more effective than administrator-principals when the principal would actively engage with the students regarding instructional issues such as school-work problems (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007). In Anderson’s (2008) study, her purpose was to empirically test the relationship between student achievement and quantifiable characteristics of school principals. She stated that the complexity of the role of the principalship does make the study difficult but her

results indicated that both community involvement and instructional roles for principals were associated with student improvement (Anderson, 2008, p. 36).

Birch's position (2007) in her research on instructional leadership was that "if people truly understood what it means to be an instructional leader and were able to act on that understanding, schools would improve" (p. 195). She continued to elucidate that many people do not even understand the extent of the misunderstanding of what it is and how to do it. She posited that while there has been much interest and research around that topic, there are still competing interpretations and understandings. In her research involving 59 schools in 55 schools districts, she found that "in each district, the meaning of instructional leadership at the school level came to signify something quite different from the meaning of instructional leadership as projected by district administrators" (Burch, 2007, p. 211).

Fletcher, Greenwood, Grimley and Parkhill (2011) conducted research in New Zealand to explore the leadership styles and practices of the principals of five primary schools with staff identified as having implemented a consistent, systematic reading program in the final years of primary school with students achieving higher than normal levels on standardized tests for reading. The authors succinctly state "many studies show that school leadership is a key factor in supporting change within schools but few have specifically considered the impact leadership has on gains in students' reading outcomes" (2011, p. 61).

Literacy Instructional Leadership

Identification of the principal as the instructional leader of the school has been an effort to narrow the scope of roles more directly attributable to academic achievement. An even

further refinement of this label has more recently been used to identify the role of literacy instructional leadership. This terminology identifies the activities with specific regard to the acquisition of reading in schools. When adding the term of “reading achievement” specifically to the ERIC search, the results are narrowed from 2,006 to 36. When conducting an ERIC search on “literacy instructional leadership” the results are 56 articles in all and investigation of these articles reveals that only eight truly pertain to the principal and his/her role as the instructional leader with literacy. Likewise a search for “elementary principal” and “reading achievement” in ERIC revealed that out of 32 results, only six had the direct information of how the principal works to specifically increase reading achievement. The other articles embrace a variety of elements relating to the principalship and important factors in a school such as working in Professional Learning Communities, creative pedagogy, technology and building teacher leaders, but do not narrow in on the specific involvement of the principal and his/her role in the reading program at the school level. Finally, not only is it important to understand what the research tells us about the principal in his/her role as the one responsible for academic reading achievement, but to understand the current research behind the knowledge base that is imperative in understanding the components advocated for reform, improvement, and success.

It could be argued that the term “instructional leadership” became vogue in the 1980’s after the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) which renewed the focus on academic standards in education. The term “literacy instructional leadership” or “instructional leadership in literacy” is an even more current term starting to appear in the literature.

Murphy (2004) in his peer-reviewed article, “Leadership for Literacy: A Framework for Policy and Practice,” (which included a review of 500 articles, chapters and books, examining the tenants of leadership as well as literacy) makes a distinction by stating “the analysis represents an important dimension of what we refer to as second-generation work on instructional leadership” (p. 65). There is a focus on examining instructional leadership in regard to specific curricular dimensions. Even though it is acknowledged that instructional leadership embraces literacy as well as math, the spotlight on literacy distinguishes the content as a critical life skill. Not only is the need to be “literate” imperative for student success but the ability to comprehend text on grade level ensures that a student is able to participate in all subjects.

In a mixed methods study by Mackey, Pitcher, and Decman (2006) the researchers utilized an ethnographic approach to develop composites of the influences of four elementary principals at high-poverty schools. They then compared these profiles to three years’ worth of reading achievement. The three concepts which emerged from this study included: 1. The principal’s vision of the reading program, 2. The educational background the principal brings with her/him, and 3. How the principal defines and applies her/his role as an instructional leader in the school (Mackey, Pitcher, & Decman, 2006, p. 52). The principal with the highest sustained reading growth proficiency in this study indicated that it was the first time in ten years that he “actively became part of the literacy program” by “rolling up his sleeves” and getting directly involved with the classroom instruction (Mackey et. al., 2006, p. 46). Likewise, the case study in New Zealand (Millward & Timperley, 2009) reflected the literacy

instructional leadership practices of a principal that created a drastic increase in the reading achievement of students.

Timperley (2006) also reports on a rather failed project in New Zealand of an initiative called “Literacy Leadership” where the Ministry of Education sought to raise literacy scores through learning-centered leadership since their students continued to score very poorly on standardized tests. While the initiative had all of the components recognized in research as assisting school improvement, such as setting a vision, and increasing teacher capacity for literacy instruction, setting goals and strategies to achieve them, and increasing teacher collaboration, “few of the schools undertook their projects in an evidence-engaged way that would typically be associated with action research and the resource materials given to schools” (Timperley, 2006, p. 553). In fact, they could not clearly identify how they knew students needed assistance with reading and an analysis of their data indicated they could not use the information to determine if they had met their goals because of the lack of specificity. Furthermore, even though there was the assumption that the principals would identify themselves as the main learner who would ensure the success of this initiative, “no principal or literacy leader nominated themselves or each other, however, but rather nominated teachers and students as the focus” (p. 552).

Components Advocated for Reform/Improvement/Success.

Similar to the multi-faceted roles of the principal, there are also many components involved in literacy instructional leadership. Each researcher, author, and organization may use different terminology to identify practices important with this process. In reviewing this

literature, most of the information can be identified using the structure established at a conference by the Children's Literacy Initiative (Booth & Roswell, 2007). They identified what they have termed the Nine Areas of Content Knowledge (Booth & Roswell, 2007) which include:

1. School Culture
2. What the Experts Say
3. Children's Literature
4. Curriculum Instructional Models
5. Curriculum
6. Learning Time and Space
7. Assessment Practices (PLC's)
8. Support for Struggling Readers (RtI)
9. Research

(pp. 31-32)

School culture.

The culture of the school encompasses many elements, including the vision, mission, and climate of the school. These factors are part of what Hallinger and Heck (1998) in their review of quantitative research term the "mediated effects" or those effects which cannot be measured directly but nonetheless are seen to have an impact (p. 163). In research done by Hallinger, Bickman, and Davis (1990), in the first test of the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development (FWL) model, the researchers found no effect of

principal leadership on student learning. However, the second model estimation revealed a statistically significant relationship between leadership and school climate variables, which included a clear school mission. It was the evidence of these variables that had a positive effect specifically on reading. In the study of two school reform models to improve reading achievement (Ross, Nunnery, Goldfeder, McDonald, Rachor, Hornbeck, & Fleischman, 2004) the emphasis on the school climate was an important variable in the effectiveness of the models. Stollenwerk (2009) and Fletcher et al. (2011) note that it is vital for the principal to assist with establishing “core values” within the school that focus on a culture of clear expectations and guidelines in the area of reading. Murphy (2004) also specifies an important focus on literacy that is readily apparent in the school culture. He even reports that it should be visible to the naked eye in terms of school displays, classroom decorations and books everywhere with the huge emphasis on the importance of reading. Fletcher et al. (2011) also indicated that there needs to be a safe culture of learning that evolved from shared goals and purposeful school improvement (p. 70). This needs to be clearly understood and supported by students, parents, teachers, the central office, and the community at large.

Recreating the school culture was a significant indicator in the report of those schools that made improvement in the Turnaround Schools Program in North Carolina (Brown, Fortner, Henry, Thompson, & Townsend, 2011). These were the schools in North Carolina that had performance composites below 60% in academic achievement for two consecutive years that were provided assistance from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. A huge part of this culture building involved “accountability pressures within the context of strong

relationships and engagement of teachers in planning and problem solving” and assisted teachers in developing a belief that “this is possible!” (Brown, et al., 2011, p. vii-viii).

What the experts say.

Since knowing all there is to know about reading instruction itself could be an overwhelming task given all of the other responsibilities of the position (Cobb, 2005; Stollenwerk, 2009; Tooms et. al, 2007), several researchers recommend establishing a “Literacy Team” at the school. Booth and Rowsell (2007) also embrace this concept of “shared leadership” at the school involving teachers in the process of seeking current research and best practices of reading instruction. Another recurrent theme throughout much of the literature (Bickel, Garnier, Matsumura & Sartoris, 2009; Fletcher et. al, 2011; Nelson & Stein, 2003; Steckel, 2009) is the concept of a literacy coach to serve as a type of guide for building teacher capacity for literacy instruction and in assisting the principal in the instructional leadership roles. The principal would still need to take the lead role in this group or with the coach and have the knowledge themselves of the current pedagogical practices proven effective. For example, there are research-based strategies endorsed by the International Reading Association (IRA) (International Reading Association, 2011) that include five elements essential to reading instruction: 1. Phonemic Awareness, 2. Phonics, 3. Fluency, 4. Vocabulary, and 5. Text Comprehension. Within text comprehension alone, there are eight research based strategies that have been shown to be effective in increasing student reading comprehension. These include: 1. Comprehension Monitoring, 2. Cooperative Learning, 3. Graphic Organizers, 4. Story Structure, 5. Answering Questions, 6.

Question Generation, 7. Summarization, and 8. Multiple Strategies used in a natural contextual blend. If a principal does not have a solid foundation of the knowledge of the essential components of literacy instruction, they must surround themselves with those who can provide the needed professional development and support for teachers.

Curriculum content/children's literature.

Another link to principal leadership in regard to reading would be their involvement with the reading programs at their schools. Wepner, Strickland, and Feeley (2002) indicate that principals "are responsible for ensuring that the reading program is being implemented through observations, conferencing with teachers, workshops and professional development opportunities" (p. 20). Murphy's (2004) research concurs that the principals must be actively engaged in the process with frequent classroom visits. Wepner et al. (2002, p. 21) further elucidate if the principal has a reading background, a powerful partnership can be created at the school level with the reading specialist. In the study by Mackey et al. (2006) the principal with a stronger reading background (as indicated by a M.Ed. in reading) along with his visionary leadership and leading the professional development himself, led to an increase in his urban school's achievement (20% in proficiency in one year). Conversely, the principal whose scores fell in one year did not have a background in reading nor attempted to understand the school's current program. Bickel et al. (2005) use numerous studies where the principal's direct involvement with professional development was associated with higher instances in changes in practice, which they relate to the increase in student achievement. In Cotton and Savard's (1980) review of Kean's study of "What works in reading?" one of the

factors that appeared to promote reading achievement included former reading professionals as principals (p. 13). The researchers' conclusions included that a principal's background in reading be considered before hiring. Duke and Salmonowicz (2010) also state, "principals of low-performing schools cannot know too much about reading and literacy in general" (p. 54).

The knowledge and understanding a principal has of current pedagogical practices such as guided reading groups and what content needs to be taught in reading helps them as they perform other related tasks such as observations and conferences with teachers as recommended above. In the case study by Duke and Samonowicz (2010) of a first year, "turn-around" principal, one of her top three priorities was to develop an effective reading program. If principals do not have the understanding of how reading should be taught, how will they know whether or not a teacher is being effective when they perform their classroom observations? Sharratt and Sharratt (2006) concur with this thought in their analysis of two studies and conclude specifically in regard to reading, "school leaders should know what precise and focused practice looks like in classrooms and be accessible to discuss student and teacher problems at any time" (p. 14). Cotton (2003) also noted that "principals of high achieving schools do not visit classrooms just for social reasons, nor do they appear only at evaluation time. Instead, they study teachers' instructional approaches, take their turn at delivering instruction, and follow up with feedback and mutual planning with teachers" (p. 31). This reinforces the students' views in the study from Gentilucci and Muto (2007) that the "principals who were comfortable assuming the role of teacher (i.e., assisting individual students or groups) in addition to the role of administrator had a powerful reported effect" (p.

231). Conversely, the low-influence behaviors in regard to classroom visitations involved principals who were passive observers of teachers and students. “The actions of a principal who is a literacy leader will always speak louder than words” (Cobb, 2005, p. 473).

Nelson and Stein (2003) used the phrase leadership content knowledge as a new construct to identify the type of knowledge needed to be strong instructional leaders. Nelson and Stein (2003) propose that “the field of educational administration offers few, if any, images of what it might look like or the advantages it might confer to those who possess it” (p. 424). The importance of the principal understanding teachers as learners themselves in the delivery of professional development is also essential with this model. The results of this cross-case analysis were that this depth of subject matter and knowledge of how students and teachers learn seemed to give the administrators an advantage as effective instructional leaders (Nelson & Stein, 2003, p. 443).

Another study involved five principals in New Zealand (Fletcher et. al, 2011) who had been involved with the literacy training provided for the teachers from the external consultant and developed an understanding of the content and instructional practices needed to instruct literacy. Due to their participation with the staff development, they were able to engage in the conversations knowledgably with their teachers around literacy pedagogy. For example, one principal commented, “when you have a look at what that often means for the students, they are often decoding at a high level but their comprehension is quite significantly different, quite lower” (Fletcher, et. al, 2011, p. 74).

Gentilucci and Muto (2007) again reiterate the importance of the view of instructional leadership from the student and indicate that their direct involvement with the students regarding curriculum is a “high-influence” behavior. The high-influence behaviors included the principals being more than just “visible” around campus but actually meeting and interacting purposefully with students. One student (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007) described a scenario where her principal donned a gorilla costume and came to the class for any student who read 100 pages. According to this student, “He was so fun. It made everybody want to read more and do better” (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007, p. 230). Students on all campuses in this study (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007) reported that “if the principal doesn’t care about our work, why should we care?” (p. 232). Even though these two studies are qualitative, Heck (1992) reported high scores on making regular classroom visitations and encouraging the discussion of instructional issues in his quantitative analysis of instructional leadership.

Assessment practices.

One of the essential components attributed to the success of a high poverty school in North Carolina (Bell, Fields, Johnson & Powell, 2007) was that of using frequent assessment and data analysis to guide instruction and to focus on problem areas. Noonan and Renihan (2006) identify the ability to lead the on-going assessment process so important that they give it the term “assessment leadership.” They identify that principals need “knowledge, appreciations and skills” to be effective in this area (2006, p. 10). Noonan and Renihan (2006) Murphy (2004), and Sharratt and Sharratt (2006) all concur that principals need to work with teachers collaboratively to make these tools meaningful to drive instruction.

Fletcher et al. (2011) identify this need to have school wide standardized assessment use to target the specific skills needed to be worked on in reading.

The specially trained principal in Virginia made it one of her first priorities for teacher accountability to establish benchmark assessments (Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010). This served two purposes. First, it allowed her to have meaningful conversations with teachers about student performance and secondly to see which teachers might be struggling. In the case study by Millward and Timperley (2009), the principal specifically targeted student achievement data to improve reading. She incorporated on-going formative assessments coupled with frequent staff discussions around particular students and how to make gains throughout the year. Though the authors termed this “boundary spanning practices” it replicates the model of Professional Learning Communities (PLC’s) espoused by DuFour, DuFour and Eaker (2008) as having tremendous impact for school improvement. This is also emphasized by Sudsberry (2008), Duke and Salmonowicz (2010), Fletcher et al. (2011), Murphy (2011) and Sharratt and Sharratt (2006) indicating the need for the principal to be an active part of the small group discussions with teachers around instructional practices. This again explicates the need for the principal to have content knowledge in the area of reading and what is important to assess and when. In the format of PLC’s, even though it is a collaborative environment, principals must set the stage for priorities and involvement. They must help the teachers understand how to use the data to drive instruction and share their best practices. Moving away from the teacher isolated in the classroom takes a skilled leader. Kesselring and Wheelen (2005) report that “our findings suggest that although staff size,

rural or urban location, and district poverty level do influence student outcomes, the manner in which faculty members work together as a group also is influential, particularly in high poverty schools” (p. 329).

Support for struggling students (RTI).

One of the key areas of focus with No Child Left Behind is the awareness of the achievement levels of all subgroups within a school. Schools with a high proficiency overall could be overlooking the achievement level of their subgroups. Not only must principals be aware of the federal guidelines imposed by NCLB but also the potential consequences for not achieving Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for each subgroup. If a school does not meet these standards for two consecutive years then they must allow parents the choice of sending their children to other schools and provide after school tutoring free of charge for their at-risk students.

There is also another federal regulation that helps principals target their at-risk students, termed Response to Intervention (RtI). Although not referred to in the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) with this title RtI has become the new educational buzz word for the 21st century. The U.S. Department of Education defines RtI as a “comprehensive early detection and prevention strategy that identifies struggling students and assists them before they fall behind” (2009, p. 4). The National Association of State Directors of Special Education defines RtI somewhat differently by stating it “is the practice of providing high quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals and

applying student response data to important educational decisions” (2008, p. 1). According to Walker Tileston (2011) “the goals of RtI are to prevent academic problems by responding early and to determine which students need to be served as learning disabled” (p. 22). It is an alternative to identifying students in the category of Learning Disabled in the Exceptional Children’s program by the discrepancy model of the significant difference between the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and achievement.

The problem with the old model was threefold: 1. A wait to fail model of waiting until the students were further and further behind in order to “classify” them for special education services, 2. Misidentification of students as Learning Disabled when it could be that they are just behind due to their lack of opportunities or poor education or 3. Disproportionate representation of the population with 75% of Specific Learning Disabled students being male, and 30% of the African American male population in special education (Walker Tileston, 2011, pp. 26-27). RtI therefore is a process to ensure that the core curriculum is differentiated to meet the needs of students prior to a student being considered Learning Disabled.

The RtI model was adapted from models used with social sciences and medicine in terms of tiers of intervention. Since the law does not specifically address these tiers, this is the model that has “evolved.” The RtI model therefore addresses the issues of early intervention by examining the core instruction that is presented to all children in what is termed Tier One. With Tier Two, students are involved with a different level of research-based, small group instruction targeted to the specific area of academic deficiency. Tier Three is generally

considered another level of intervention, usually individualized, when students do not respond at the appropriate rate for Tier Two. Progress monitoring is involved along each tier to identify student progress. Universal screeners are also used at each school site in order to identify the areas of concern early. This is the preventative measure. Some school systems consider Tier Four the tier that would be “entitlement for special education” services.

According to the IRA (2010), the federal government intentionally provided few details for the development and implementation of RtI procedures so the states and districts could establish their own procedures. Hence, the aforementioned three or four tiered system is not a mandate, nor the only possible approach. There are two common models, including the standard treatment and the problem-solving model (National High School Center, 2009). The standard treatment model uses a series of steps with a treatment being standard for a given issue, as opposed to a team making a determination of a treatment to be identified as in the problem-solving model.

The advocates of RtI, besides those in the commercial fields who are attempting to use this as a new profit-making tool, are those who see this as a way to improve what is being done in the regular classroom to assist those students who are below grade level for whatever reason. As stated by Brown and Abernathy, “at a practical level, RtI is just sound effective teaching” (2009, p. 52). There are proponents, as reflected by Brown and Abernathy (2009) that this model should be used for the other end of the spectrum, as in identifying and serving students who are above grade level, or perhaps, gifted. The proponents also applaud the model being preventative in nature for at-risk students, instead of the traditional “wait to fail”

model of discrepancy. Since RtI addresses the core curriculum in Tier One with a focus on the instruction all children are receiving, it is being viewed as a potential for providing entire school reform.

One primary source of veto power that teachers have been able to utilize effectively with new policies, is that of closing the classroom door (Cooper, Cibulka, & Fusarelli, 2008, p. 163) which would be a “non-negotiable” in this RtI model of collaborative work. As with any reform model, the method of introduction and implementation will depend on the acceptance and utilization by teachers. Tier One addresses what transpires in the general education classroom with the “core” curriculum of what is being offered to all students. Schools must evaluate whether or not their current programs are indeed “research-based.” Scrutiny of these programs could potentially lead to resistance to change if they do not lend themselves to appropriate practices. RtI involves all teachers examining their practices related to under-achievers and will necessitate professional development to address how this will be accomplished. The principal must manage the various interest groups of parents, special education teachers, regular education teachers and central services personnel as they strive to implement RtI. These groups will have their own agenda in seeking services and the principal must keep the best interest of the student at the forefront.

One way Cooper et al. (2008) define a manner in which teachers and principals interact formally is in PLC’s. Cooper et al. (2008, p. 164) label these communities as opportunities for potential “arenas of struggle” among teachers. Buffum et al. (2009) also indicate that if teachers and administrators are trained in and are effective with this model, then they are in a

much better position for implementation of RtI with potentially less conflict. This model addresses how these teams collaborate for the improvement of student achievement.

However, if a school attempts to enter this RtI model, with no previous work with these formal arenas of interaction, there is greater concern for conflict and territorialism.

Brown and Abernathy (2009, p. 53) liken the process to the “it takes a village” concept with the statement, “Unless RtI has leadership support and district/and or state policies, it will not be implemented with fidelity and will lose its potential as a framework for overall student achievement.” Kimberly Harrison, a principal in Jacksonville, Florida says this about the model, “This process allows teachers to see me as an instructional leader and creates a culture of climate that values the idea that we are all learning. I am ultimately responsible with the task of leading (the school) and ensuring students are prepared according to grade-level standards and expectations” (Hardcastle & Justice, 2010, p. 19).

Although the study of five principals in New Zealand in regard to the principal’s leadership of reading reform did not mention the terms PLC’s and RtI, the model of their best practices was exactly that (Fletcher et. al, 2011). They used their assessments specifically to target certain skills that students needed additional assistance on, and worked collaboratively as a team to develop intervention strategies for struggling students. This also involved them being willing to flex their student groups across their grade levels to meet the needs of the students. They even took this a step further than most with the PLC concept and worked with their feeder schools to identify needs at that school as well. Another research study (Murphy, 2004) that did not specifically mention RtI, did however advocate for the same

practices. In reviewing highly productive literacy schools, they recognize the need to “develop and maintain well-crafted safety nets to prevent youngsters from falling behind and to quickly return them to the mainstream when lags appear” with the hope to “prevent lags from turning into gaps and to ensure that all pupils achieve mastery of a sound portfolio of basic literacy skills by the end of third grade” (Murphy, 2011, p. 85).

In the Turnaround Schools that made improvement in North Carolina (Brown et al., 2011) there was also a focus on the aspect of assistance for struggling students (though not termed RtI) and for working collaboratively in a PLC model. Time, training and support for teacher-led collaboration on pacing guides, lesson plans, mutual observations and use of formative assessments was provided in the most successful models (Brown et al., 2011, p. xiii).

School effects.

Heck (1992) points out that there are school effects that impact a principals’ instructional leadership skills such as the size, level (elementary or secondary), and socio-economic demographics of the school. These include all of the practices that could potentially have an influence on the learning that goes on in the school, from how schedules are arranged to allow for an uninterrupted block of literacy instruction, to actually “role modeling” effective practices in the classroom. Anderson (2008) indicates that one of these effects is low-socioeconomic status as reflected in her results that these schools had lower scores in both reading and math all throughout the study. Duke and Salmonowicz (2010) declare “there is no clear criterion for the acceptability of a solution... every problem seems to be hopelessly entangled in other problems” (p. 36).

Summary

Although there are many so called “how to” manuals for principals on being an effective leader, there continue to be unresolved issues in our nation with students not being proficient in reading. In the first national study to calculate high school graduation rates with students’ poverty levels and reading levels by third grade, the results clearly show a direct relationship of both factors (Hernandez, 2011). Even though 38% of our children live in poverty, 70% of those who do not graduate live in poverty and of the students who do not graduate, 88% of them are not proficient readers (Hernandez, 2011).

As indicated in the review of the current literature, principals don many hats in their positions. The focus on literacy instructional leadership alone has many components as clearly outlined ranging from having content and pedagogical knowledge to being able to facilitate effective PLC meetings with teachers. It would seem that the expectations for these administrators in schools of high poverty are akin to the supernatural. As principals try to balance these responsibilities with the new legislation of RtI, will they find that it is “one more thing to do.... or the right thing to do?” This multiple case study of elementary school principals in schools with high poverty that have experienced success with reading over a three year period is intended to provide more detail and description to how real life principals are making this happen. Figure 1 explains the connectedness of the components advocated for literacy reform and the place that literacy instructional leadership holds in supporting those components. The students, their reading achievement, school success and life opportunities are at the epicenter of these components. As one of the teachers from Millward

and Timperley (2007) so eloquently reflected, “Literacy is equality. Without literacy, you are putting them in the path of the haves and have-nots” (p. 123).

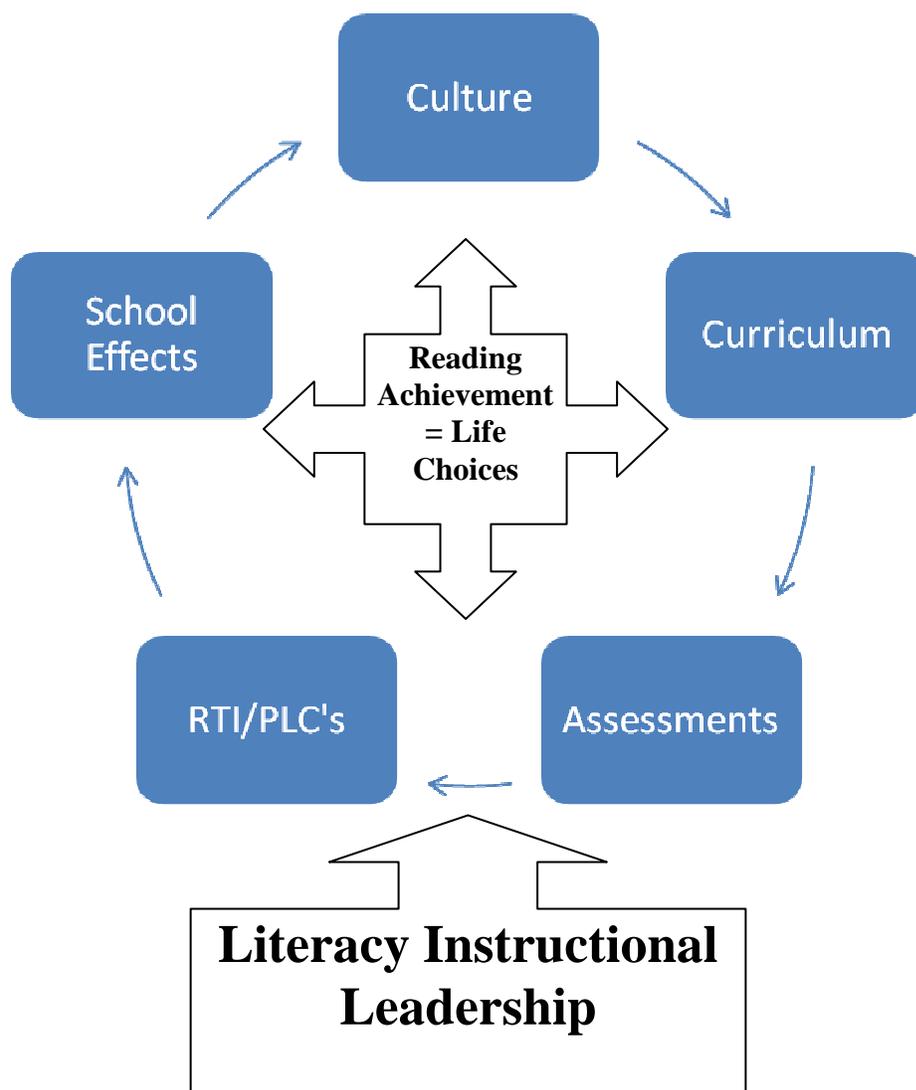


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Chapter Three: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify the literacy instructional leadership characteristics of principals currently in high poverty elementary schools who have shown success as indicated by improvement in their reading scores in the last three years. By making use of a qualitative approach, each case was examined in an exploratory manner to attempt to identify which traits or behaviors principals exhibited in order to advance the cause of literacy in their respective schools. The objectives were to more clearly identify and define “literacy instructional leadership” since this is not succinctly defined through current research. By identifying these behaviors they can be incorporated as a part of effective principal training programs in institutions of higher education as well as in ongoing staff development. The study of the role of the principals in the literacy instruction at these schools more concisely defines the term “literacy instructional leader.” It also adds to the body of research for what Murphy (2004) terms second generation instructional leadership by adding the component of the specific subject matter.

Research Design

This study was a qualitative study which sought to answer a question of the phenomenon of participants in the education field who are engaged in effective practices. Instead of seeking support of a pre-determined theory, the study was “exploratory” and sought to hear from the “voices in the field” about the current behaviors of principals that may have an influence on the academic reading achievement of students in their schools. The study was a multiple-case study of two principals who have been successful in this capacity to obtain a

broader perspective of the phenomenon. Even though there were two cases (two principals), there were actually three schools involved in which data was gleaned since one principal moved from one school to another school that fell within the parameters. Yin (2003) states that case studies are effective tools for exploratory research.

Case Studies

Yin (1993) specifically states that case studies are the method of choice when the “phenomenon under study is not readily distinguishable from its context” (p. 3). He specifically makes mention of the use of this type of study in educational research where there are so many variables in the environment that necessitates thorough description of the environment and methodology. In regard to the use of case studies, Stake (1978) makes the point that “case studies will often be the preferred method of research because they may be epistemologically in harmony with the reader’s experience and thus to that person a natural basis for generalization” (p. 5). Stake (1978) further elucidates that the case study is a tool to assist with further understandings of social problems. This study fit neatly into Stake’s explanation of a case study being one that sought to provide “understanding, extension of experience, and increase in conviction” (p. 6). Yin (2006) concurs with this definition by stating in his summary point that “compared to other methods, the strength of the case study method is its ability to examine in depth a “case” within its “real life” context (p. 111).

This study explored the real life experiences of principals and their interactions within their educational environments of their schools. It investigated the activities that the principals participated in and the background or content knowledge of the principals. The

purpose of this study was not to prove a theory or to create a law, but to increase the knowledge of principal behaviors and/or characteristics which may increase the success rate of students for reading. Stake (1978) states in regard to case studies, that, “Its best use appears to me to be for adding to existing experience and humanistic understanding” (p. 6).

In regard to this study being considered exploratory, Yin explains this with his analogy to “exploration” with Christopher Columbus. As Yin explained, even though Columbus started with rationale and direction (which is what we all should do) he did not wind up where he thought he would. Likewise, the literature review gives some direction and concepts as to what one might expect to find in literacy instructional leadership of principals whose schools are showing improvement but by using an “exploratory” approach one must be open to the fact that the study might actually take one in a totally different direction.

Multiple Case Studies

A multiple case study approach was conducted meaning that data was collected separately at two sites (two cases but three schools) but then compared and contrasted to each other and the literature. Yin (2003) states that using multiple sites or cases could make the “evidence more compelling” (p. 46). He also states that in bringing multiple cases together the logic in doing this should be considered “replication logic” with the hopes of replicating a certain finding and that “the more replications, the more robust your findings will be” (p. 33). Borman, Clark, Cotner, and Lee (2006) in their chapter on cross-case analysis, agree that “multiple cases allow for greater opportunity to generalize across several representations of the phenomenon” (p. 123). Yin (2003) also mentioned that the “unique strength” of a case

study was its ability to deal with a “full variety of evidence” which also reinforces that this was the right method for this study (p. 8).

Purposeful sampling was used to identify the initial participants. Interviews were conducted for each site that included two assistant superintendents responsible for curriculum, one elementary director, one district coach (former principal), three principals, one assistant principal, one district coach who is assigned to a school, one literacy lab teacher, four Title One teachers, and five regular education teachers. Further involvement included reviewing email data responses from two other teachers. Other information gathered and utilized was from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, school and district websites, and data provided via email regarding the schools. The interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The table was created in order to better analyze the data for themes that emerged. By using multiple sources of data from various participants at different sites, triangulation was established. Finally peer examination of the results was used to assist in determining if the findings “rang true” to other professionals in the field.

Research Question

The following research question guided this study: What does literacy instructional leadership look like of an elementary principal leading a large high poverty elementary school that has shown consistent growth over a three-year period?

Site Selection and Sampling Criteria

Purposeful sampling was used to identify the participants. According to Creswell and Clark (2011), purposeful sampling is appropriate when participants are selected who have experienced the “central phenomenon or the key concept being explored in the study” (p. 173). These principals were selected because they have served at high poverty schools for at least three years where End of Grade (EOG) reading scores have steadily shown improvement. This information was obtained through the Center for Urban Affairs and Community Service through North Carolina State University (NCSU) using the following parameters:

- Poverty schools as indicated by 50% or more poverty
- Large elementary schools as indicated by a student enrollment of 700+
- Schools who have steadily increased their reading proficiency over a three year period
- Schools who have achieved growth or high growth in reading as determined by the NC ABC accountability model over time (looking at a 3 year window)

Thirty-two elementary schools were identified in the report with these criteria out of approximately 1800 elementary schools in North Carolina according the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) website (<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/fbs/resources/data/factsfigures/2011-12figures.pdf>). Upon receipt of this information, a review of the Education First North Carolina School Report Cards (www.ncreportcard.org) was conducted to determine if the same principal has

been in the school for the three year window identified (2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010). When analyzing the schools in the report consideration was taken into account for the largest percentage of increase in proficiency over time as well as “ease of access” to the site by the researcher. Once this list was narrowed, districts were contacted to determine if they would allow the research to be conducted. One district had an extensive separate application and review process which was completed. Afterwards, the district notified the researcher that they would not approve the project. Another district was contacted via email to determine if the research would be allowed as the researcher was formerly employed in that district. The district stated that they did not allow research from anyone other than their own current employees. Finally, two districts were selected which allowed the research to occur. The assistant superintendents were contacted by phone to discuss the research and to verify that the principals had indeed displayed qualities of Literacy Instructional Leaders. The selection was narrowed to two principals who “best fit” the central phenomenon of literacy instructional leaders. Even though the selection was narrowed to two cases, or principals, one principal has been transferred this year to another school within the district which had also shown up on the list. By interviewing the principal and the staff in that school as well as the teachers and administrators from her former school, additional data was obtained.

Table 1 shows the data from the schools that were selected under the guidelines. The table shows the names of the principal, reading proficiency, year of the assessments, and growth reported. Growth for this report is listed as “Not Met, Met, or High Growth” as

reported for a year's worth of growth for the students in this subject. High growth is calculated at more than a year's worth of growth.

Table 1

Data from DPI (www.ncschoolreportcard.org) of Schools

Mars Elementary School: Apple County

School Years	Reading Proficiency	Growth	Principal
2005-2006	86.3	Met	Another Principal
2006-2007	82.2	Met	Another Principal
2007-2008	57.4	Met	Retired Principal
2008-2009	70.2	High	Retired Principal
2009-2010	72.03	Met	Retired Principal
2010-2011	76.2	Met	Retired Principal
2011-2012	69.1	Not Met	Retired Principal

Globe Elementary School: Apple County

School Years	Reading Proficiency	Growth	Principal
2005-2006	87.4	Met	Ms. Johnson
2006-2007	80.2	High	Ms. Johnson
2007-2008	49.6	High	Ms. Johnson
2008-2009	62.3	High	Ms. Johnson
2009-2010	68.8	High	Ms. Johnson
2010-2011	67.5	Met	Ms. Johnson
2011-2012	71.2	High	Ms. Johnson

Crater Elementary School: Beech County

School Years	Reading Proficiency	Growth	Principal
2005-2006	83.6	Not Met	Ms. Trent
2006-2007	89.5	High	Ms. Trent
2007-2008	48.0	High	Ms. Trent
2008-2009	64.9	High	Ms. Trent
2009-2010	74.0	Met	Ms. Trent
2010-2011	70.6	Met	Ms. Trent
2011-2012	70.3	Met	Ms. Little

Data Collection

This study involved collecting data through interviews and information from the Center for Urban Affairs, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) and the websites regarding the sites within two districts. The two districts will be identified as Apple County and Beech County. The interviews were conducted with nineteen participants in person and two additional participants via email.

Permission was granted in Apple County, which is located in a region of the state that required travel arrangements and more extensive coordination of interview times. The principal, Ms. Johnson who had worked at one of the schools on the original list (Globe Elementary) had been transferred to another school in this district (which had also shown up on the list, Mars Elementary) within the last year. The assistant superintendent, Ms. Blakely agreed to an interview accompanied by the elementary director, Ms. Mitchell. Both participants had knowledge of Ms. Johnson and the work she had done at Globe Elementary that resulted in the improvement in reading. Ms. Blakely also recommended that Ms. Johnson be contacted at her current school as well as the principal, Mr. Peters and teachers from the school she had previously supervised. Ms. Johnson (now at Mars Elementary, but formerly at Globe Elementary) agreed to the interview as well as having her teachers interviewed. Since Mars Elementary School had also shown growth over a three year period, they were also able to not only provide some data on the current principal (Ms. Johnson) but also on the retired principal and the things that were accomplished or implemented at the school that they felt contributed to the success of the school. Globe Elementary was also visited and the

current principal (Mr. Peters) and the assistant principal (Ms. Rose), two Title One teachers, and one literacy lab teacher were interviewed. Even though Mr. Peters was not at this school under the direction of Ms. Johnson, as the current principal he was able to explain processes and staff that had been put in place by Ms. Johnson that he felt contributed to the school's success. Ms. Rose was also able to identify programs implemented and staff that were empowered to become teacher leaders within the school.

The research process for Beech County was less extensive in regard to travel arrangements. However, coordination between district personnel and the school was also involved. I initially made contact by phone with the assistant superintendent, Mr. Giles to obtain permission for the research. In Beech County, the principal, Ms. Trent, had moved to a central office position (district lead coach). Therefore, the interviews involved the assistant superintendent, Mr. Giles who was familiar with the principal's work during her time at Crater Elementary school as well as Ms. Trent. Since the study involved interviewing teachers who had worked with Ms. Trent, it was professional courtesy to interview the current principal as well, Ms. Little.

Interviews

According to Warren (2002) and Tierney and Dilley (2002), the interview is an effective tool in qualitative research, specifically in regard to educational research. Warren (2002) states, "the purpose of most qualitative interviewing is to derive interpretations, not facts or laws from respondent talk" (p. 83). Tierney and Dilley (2002) likewise consider that "the interviewer hopes to understand the setting - the relationships among the components and

members of particular institutions or groups from the respondents' viewpoint" (p. 455). This study involved interviewing coaches, teachers, principals, and district personnel to identify the literacy instructional leadership behaviors and traits of the principals at these schools. Warren (2002) recommended taking along a list of questions, fact sheets for demographic information, informed consent letter, tape-recorder and the back-up pencil and paper. She also cautions the interviewer to be aware of the "off the record" remarks that may be as or more important than the on the record comments. These interviews were recorded by a digital voice recorder, transcribed, and analyzed to identify emergent themes among all participants. These themes were reviewed against the literature for comparison. See Appendices B, C, and D for the interview questions for all participants.

Warren (2002) and Tierney and Dilley (2002) urge the interviewer to be aware of the "perspective" of the interviewee in regard to not only their gender, race and class but also to their various roles they may be assuming as they answer the questions, such as employer or leader, etc. Tierney and Dilley (2002) specifically mention making note about "how the interviewee utilizes varied frameworks of knowledge and language to make sense of, and to account for, his or her world experience" (p. 460).

The interviews for the central office personnel were conducted at their offices. The interviewer used a digital voice recorder and followed the list of interview questions as appropriate. The purpose for the interview was stated to help the participants understand the reason behind the research. All participants signed the consent forms. The interviews with the central office personnel lasted approximately one hour. Interviews for the other

participants, i.e. principals, coaches, and teachers were conducted at the school sites. This was scheduled at the convenience of the school personnel. The interviews with the principals were conducted in his/her office and each lasted approximately one hour. Because the principals in the study had each moved to a different position or school, it opened up the opportunity to interview teachers at an additional school and two additional principals. Since the participants did not seem to want to be interviewed alone, there were also additional people brought in to several interviews which provided additional information. For example, the current principal of Globe Elementary School was interviewed along with the assistant principal, Ms. Rose. The two teachers at Crater Elementary school also invited another first grade teacher to join them. The assistant superintendent, Ms. Blakely, invited the elementary director, Ms. Mitchell to participate as well. Ms. Johnson actually set up the situation at her school where there was a group interview with her, the district coach and the teachers. While this process of acquiring additional data through additional participants was not a pure “snowballing sampling” it did fall in line with the technique identified by Bogdan and Biklen (2007) to have a participant identify others who may provide useful in the research.

As previously stated and for reasons unknown, only one person allowed an individual interview (Ms. Little - who technically was not a key player in the process but the current principal at the school where there had been consistent growth, Crater Elementary). Individual interviews had been sought but each interviewee had asked if they could interview with someone else or managed to have a coworker present during the interview process. It should also be noted that there was a sense of “surprise” by the members of the schools that

they had been selected based on the criteria. This may have been due to the negative connotations associated with No Child Left Behind and because they were accustomed to criticism based on their AYP results. Clearly, they were not familiar with being identified as having achieved “success” based on this type of data. This could be why there was some reluctance with many of the counties to grant the researcher access or why the participants were reluctant to be interviewed alone.

Data Analysis

According to multiple resources (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Edmondson & Irby, 2008; Richards, 2009; Yin, 2003) coding the data and “memoing” are two effective forms of analyzing data for qualitative research. Edmondson and Irby (2008) posit that “coding involves assigning set codes to certain characteristics or recurring themes within your data” (p. 97). The information provided by each interview was coded separately and then compared with each other for recurrent themes. Memos were utilized as recommended by Richards (2009) in order to keep track of ideas or concepts as the data was analyzed. With the plethora of data from this multiple-case study, the data needed to be analyzed as it was completed. Yin (2006) actually distinguishes case study research from other methods of research because of the need to do data collection and analysis concurrently. It was helpful for me to not only conduct the interviews, but to transcribe each interview myself. In the process of listening and re-listening to the tapes to create the transcripts, the ideas and themes began to emerge. Yin states (2006) that the researcher must be in a state of constant thought and analysis throughout the project while processing all of the data. Memos will need to be

written and revised as themes emerge and the information is processed. A cross-case synthesis as recommended by Yin (2003) was performed since multiple-cases were used. Therefore, with each interview, I was constantly analyzing what was said and what “wasn’t said.” Throughout the compilation of data I was able to constantly process the information. I developed a table to analyze the data that was being presented as well as what the information meant.

Peer review is a technique utilized to assist with validity as the data is reviewed by experts in the field. This process was completed during data analysis by two educators who have been both teachers and administrators. The educators each have 30 years’ worth of experience and provided detailed, page by page feedback on the analysis of the data and insights into the results. They also indicated that because of the plethora of participants there was potential for confusion so I created a table to identify the participants and their roles. (Appendix E).

One final analytic strategy that proved effective is that of “rival explanations” as espoused by Yin (2003). These are explanations that may emerge that are seemingly contrary to the other recurrent themes or theories developed by the literature review or other data. These rival explanations should be further explored with the rest of the data. Yin (2003) summarizes his view of this by stating that “the more rivals that your analysis addresses and rejects, the more confidence you can place in your findings” (p. 113). An example is given by Yin (2006) that when doing one interview, a conflict may surface among the information from another participant. This actually did happen when I had interviewed the group with

Ms. Johnson and then the teachers who had worked for her. While I had been experiencing jealousy that their district had such a structured reading process, I heard discontentment with this from some of the teachers. I asked Mr. Peters, the current principal and Ms. Rose, the assistant principal to help me resolve that information. The result of this was an analysis that Ms. Johnson as the literacy instruction leader had recognized the need for both a consistent approach but thinking outside of the box as they began to encounter new opportunities or challenges with the new curriculum.

Research Validity and Reliability

Since qualitative research is considered to be “soft” research, it is important to establish what Guba (as cited in Edmondson and Irby, 2008) has termed the “model of trustworthiness” in terms of validity and reliability. This model embodies four components: (a) truth value, (b) applicability, (c) consistency, and (d) neutrality (Edmondson & Irby, 2008, p. 79). Triangulation is one strategy of truth value and can be achieved by utilizing different sources of data, including interviews from multiple participants at multiple sites. According to Yin (2003), triangulation is not merely collecting data from multiple sources, it is when the data is analyzed and compared with and to each other. In qualitative research, there is not what is termed “generalizability,” but instead dense description of the informants and context in order to give enough information to allow the reader to make use of the information. It is this dense description that addresses the notion of “accountability.” Dense descriptions are given of the participants, the environment of the interviews and the information received.

The idea of “generalization” for case studies is redefined by Stake (1978) by his use of the concept of “naturalistic generalization” meaning the act of recognizing the similarities of issues in and out of context and by sensing the natural co-variations of happenings (p. 6). Though this differs from the quantitative notion of generalization, it does refocus the consideration of the validity of the research. Stake (1978) is also clear in expressing the need for the researcher to be very thorough in the description of the case so there is greater understanding on the part of the reader to be able to make use of the case in relating to it and establishing the case for the natural generalization. These strategies also serve to answer the concern of consistency. Another strategy to assist with consistency is the dependability audit where there is also a dense description of all components of methodology so that the study could potentially be replicated. Yin (2003) decrees that it is imperative to have a case study protocol which contains the procedures and general rules of use to be followed. This protocol would be an outline of the research project that would clearly guide another researcher in using the same strategies. This study thoroughly outlines the processes used during this research. It also outlines the challenges and unexpected events (such as the participants not wanting to be interviewed alone). To answer the concern on neutrality, the strategy of reflexivity was performed, which is also termed the researcher’s bias. I reflected on my influence in the study and prior perceptions regarding the study as outlined in my subjectivity statement (Edmondson & Irby, 2008).

Subjectivity Statement

My epistemological point of view in regard to working on this study is from the perspective of constructivism and phenomenology. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) state that “researchers in the phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations” (p. 25). This not only embodies my approach to this study, but my attempt to make meaning in my life work. I have been engaged in a lifetime of reflecting upon and trying to learn from the situations of those around me. By exploring the literacy instructional leadership behaviors of those who have been successful at improving student achievement, insights can be gleaned that will be useful to others.

From the constructivist lens, the historical perspectives of the participants are an integral part of the understanding of the phenomena. I believe it is important to understand the historical perspective that shapes the researcher as well, so I have included this rather in depth view of what has shaped my history in light of the interest of literacy and students of poverty. Creswell and Clark (2011) state that with the form of a constructivist inquiry, “research is shaped from the bottom up—from individual perspectives to broad patterns, and ultimately, to broad understanding” (p. 40). I would like to add to this broad understanding usefulness in assisting others in their quest to be more effective in this endeavor of helping students be successful in reading and hence, in life.

I have had numerous experiences throughout my career of working with various types of under-privileged and privileged students. When I married a United States Marine in 1986, I

had the opportunity to move to different states and to be employed in a variety of positions. I have worked as a director of an all-Hispanic pre-school in Kansas City, Missouri, where I actually was told I was interviewed for the position because they thought I was Asian, and they needed a minority. My maiden name was Yoho and I am a white female, but they hired me anyway because I was a minority to them! When we moved to Hawaii, I had various jobs from working as a Head Start teacher in a local school serving native Hawaiians to serving as the director of a pre-school on a military base that served mostly officers' children. When we moved to North Carolina, I worked as a pre-school teacher in a private school for more affluent families and then joined the public school system as a pre-school teacher.

Over the next several years, I taught kindergarten and first grade in two different types of high poverty schools. I did not realize at the time that I was developing a passion for working with minority and at-risk students. In 1988, I was awarded a North Carolina Principal Fellows Scholarship and from there began what would be ten years of my "missionary" work at a large elementary school that had the highest percentages of everything except test scores: high poverty, high minority, high percentage of students with English as a second language, high teacher burn-out and turn-over. While I was there, I moved from intern to Assistant Principal to Principal in three years. It was during my time there that I truly began to understand that teachers needed to understand poverty to be able to reach these students.

It was this work that formed who I am today in terms of my devoted passion to help students of poverty "learn to read." This focus helped me to lead our school through the

trials of No Child Left Behind and the punitive measures of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Through working with my leadership team in trying to help our teachers understand poverty and utilize the best instructional practices for teaching students of poverty, we also very clearly learned through the research and first-hand experience that if we did not help our students to read in elementary school, their chances for literally “going to jail” dramatically increased. The statistics are staggering concerning the reading levels of prisoners and those who continue to live in poverty. We also personally dealt with situations daily of a student who had at least one parent incarcerated. We even had a student who wore a prison outfit to school on “career day.” We guessed that was a sick joke on the parents’ part, but we never quite recovered from that image. After ten years of devoting almost every waking minute to help my staff and these students and dreaming about them in my subconscious hours, I decided to take a lateral move to the central office as the elementary director so I could work on my doctorate. Being the intense type of administrator I was, I knew I could not give my full attention to both. By then, I felt that I had done everything I could do to help my school and it was time to spend quality time studying to see if there was anything else I could learn about helping students of poverty, their teachers and future administrators.

In working with our county principals in my current job, I have also realized that most of them are not even aware that they do not know enough about being a literary instructional leader. I had not realized these things either until I began working intensely with reading professional development in my previous school. This intensive reading training helped our staff realize that teaching reading really is “rocket science” and hardly any of us had more

than one college-level class in our teacher preparation programs. As such, my interest has turned from just helping students of poverty to target helping principals become literacy instructional leaders and studying that process.

Since my passion is very strong in regard to leadership and literacy, especially in assisting the students who are the most at-risk, this could be a very large bias with regard to this study. I will attempt to use my knowledge base and experience to help me to interpret the experiences of others that are revealed through the data collected in the research. I also know that as a qualitative researcher, I need to have safeguards in place such as triangulation of the data with many different people and backgrounds to interview. Therefore when doing the research I used interview data from the lead teachers, Title One teachers, literacy lab teacher, district coach, principals, an assistant principal and central office personnel. I also utilized peer review and had several peers who are professionals in the field review the data and analysis as a safeguard to try to ensure that the “voices in the field” are adequately represented and not overshadowed by my own personal experiences and biases. As a constructivist, I sought to allow the experiences of these administrators to be represented in a way that will hopefully add to the body of knowledge in the field and lead to a greater understanding of what it takes to truly be a literary instructional leader for those most at-risk.

Ethical Issues

According to Edmondson and Irby (2008), researchers are bound by ethical guidelines with the first being to “do no harm” be it physical or emotional (p. 55). By following the guidelines outlined by NCSU, an application was made to the Internal Review Board (IRB)

that gave assurances regarding handling of participants and data in this study. For example, the confidentiality of the participants and school sites are protected using pseudonyms. The IRB also asked the researcher to spell out potential benefits or risks that may occur to the participants as a result of the study. The potential benefit would be in sharing the cross-case analysis with the participants in order to celebrate successes within their district and perhaps shed some light on new strategies for increased achievement. Since this study has been conducted, it seems a benefit has potentially been gained in the participants feeling good about their schools in making such improvement in reading. It was very apparent that these participants had not been accustomed to hearing accolades due to the way their data had been reflected under the current guidelines of No Child Left Behind. There are no risks anticipated. Approval was received by the district for the participants to be involved with the study. Participants signed consent forms allowing me to use their information in the study.

Limitations of the Study

Because the concept of a case study is one in which a phenomenon is regarded in relationship to its context, it is imperative that there is a thorough description of the context involved. According to Yin (1993) this involves the need for multiple sources of evidence such as the interviews from multiple sources. This reveals the limitation with this study by the indication of the sheer amount of time it took to conduct the study and collect the essential evidence at three sites. The additional time was not only in collecting the data but also in analyzing and comparing the data from the multiple sources. Qualitative research is dependent on “thick, rich” description of the data and this could be reduced by the sheer

volume of data involved. Another time limit concern is in gaining permission and access to different sites. With each additional site, there was the need to allow time for responses from the districts to give permission to conduct research. Several months had lapsed in applying for permission in one district, only to be denied. Another district took several weeks to respond before denying access. With regard to the districts that did approve access, there was some coordination and time involved in traveling to a site that required multiple overnight accommodations.

Another limitation to this study is the lack of student input regarding how they have or have not been affected or influenced by their principals' instructional leadership behaviors. The voice of the student could provide valuable information and enhance the study; however, it is beyond the scope of this study and would be more difficult to obtain IRB approval. The other limitation in this study could be my personal biases as outlined in the subjectivity statement. Having been a principal in a school with similar demographics as the schools studied, it would be easy to superimpose my own experiences into the study. By stating my experiences clearly as a potential pitfall, it decreases the potential limitations. Yin (2003) considers case studies to be "one of the most challenging of all social science endeavors" (p. 1). He further elucidates how the researchers really need to have knowledge and experience to be able to conduct this type of qualitative research. One final daunting statement from Yin that proved valid is that "the demands of a case study on your intellect, ego and emotions are far greater than those of any other research strategy" (2003, p. 58).

Chapter Summary

This research was well-suited as a qualitative study as it reflected the views of the participants involved in seeking to explore how and why principals' literacy instructional leadership behaviors could impact reading achievement in their schools. The study used a multiple case study approach in an effort to achieve greater validity by having two cases for comparison of the data and results. The logic bringing the cases together should be considered "replication logic" with the repeated findings among the evidence at the various sites. This study involved interviewing district personnel, principals, coaches, Title One teachers and regular education teachers in order to glean the perceptions of these participants regarding the literacy instructional leadership behaviors of the principals.

A protocol for the case studies was established and followed so there was consistency among the different sites and a framework that can hopefully be replicated. The data was coded and analyzed for recurrent themes. Peer examination was utilized by other professionals in the field to get feedback on the data and themes that emerged. In the spirit of qualitative research, rich description was provided regarding the sites, participants, and analysis to allow others to understand the processes (or audit trail) and be able to follow the analysis of the researcher.

It is my hope that the results generated by this exploratory query will serve multiple purposes. First and foremost is the anticipation that it will provide a more explicit manner to define the term "literacy instructional leadership" and thus a way for others to study and understand how to replicate these effective skills or practices. It is also my expectation that it

will provide useful recommendations for institutions of higher education in their principal training programs and districts for their principal staff development. It also could potentially be a “springboard” for other research regarding this specific leadership trait. The intended goal is to assist principals as they strive to help raise the literacy levels of the students in their schools. According to Tierney and Dilley (2002), by stating that “the interview itself becomes a tool for educational reform” gives hope to the notion that the voices in the fields of these settings could give rise to others using the strategies to change educational opportunities for others (p. 460). This would not only assist schools of poverty to become more proficient in reading but assist society by raising the levels of literacy in our nation.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

This was a multiple case study of two principals who were leaders at high poverty schools which had shown growth in reading over a three-year period based on their North Carolina End-of-Grade reading scores. The purpose of this study was to identify the literacy instructional leadership characteristics of these principals. The study involved interviewing two assistant superintendents responsible for curriculum, one elementary director, one district coach (former principal), three principals, one assistant principal, one district coach who is assigned to a school, one literacy lab teacher, four Title One teachers, and five regular education teachers. Further involvement included reviewing email data responses from two other teachers. Based on the concerns expressed by the peer reviewers that they were having difficulty keeping the participants straight, Appendix E was added to assist with this. Other information gathered and utilized was from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, school and district websites, and data provided via email regarding the schools. The interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and notes were made as well during each interview. After the interviews, transcripts were made of the interviews by the researcher.

This chapter will be organized as follows: There will be a description of the districts and schools (utilizing observations, data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, district and school website information, and data provided from the schools); a description of the principals (demographic data and background data); the data from the aforementioned interviews and presentation of the cross-case analysis. The research question

posed in the formulation of this study was, “What does literacy instructional leadership look like of an elementary principal leading a large high poverty school that has shown consistent growth over a three year period?”

Case A: Principal Johnson from Apple County

The situation involving Ms. Johnson was a bit confusing but also wound up being rather convenient as it allowed additional data to be gathered. Ms. Johnson had been the principal of Globe Elementary School for the time period where they had increased growth in reading. She was transferred to Mars Elementary School this year. This school was also one of the original schools indicated on the data from the Center for Urban Affairs as having achieved growth during the same time period. By interviewing her at her current school and her previous school, I was able to gather data not only on her but on the former principal and practices from that school as well. The process however, began with the interviews with the district personnel.

Apple County District

Apple County is located in the western part of North Carolina, in the mountainous region. They serve 25,500 students in 42 schools. They have 23 elementary schools, with only one being non-Title One. Ms. Blakely, the assistant superintendent indicated that it used to be a predominately white, middle class area and now they have students coming from homes that represent 55 different languages, with a large Russian/Muldo population. She also believes that the district has a large mental health issue currently in the schools. They added two schools last year due to growth, including a combination 5th and 6th grade school. The

demographics of the Apple County District are as follows: Black: 6%, Hispanic: 12%, White: 76% and other: 6%. They have a very detailed report of their school system on their website. This website also notes that they have one of the highest percentages of nationally board certified teachers in the state.

District-level leadership for literacy.

The Central Office is set up on a hill outside of the city. It is an older building riddled with offices and workspaces throughout. Ms. Blakely had recommended we conduct the interview with Ms. Mitchell, the elementary director in attendance as well. Since they had just visited my district to learn about a dual language program I had started when I had been a principal at one of our elementary schools, we discussed that topic before we “formally” began the interview.

Ms. Blakely had formerly been the assistant principal at Mars Elementary and then a principal at another elementary school which became a National Blue Ribbon School and was selected as a N.C. Exemplary Reading Program award winner, which is a statewide recognition for outstanding literacy efforts in 2002. She had previously been the director of federal programs. Ms. Mitchell is currently the Elementary Director. According to Mr. Peters, currently the principal of Globe Elementary (who taught there while Ms. Mitchell was the assistant principal), Ms. Mitchell is one of the few people at her level of leadership who started as a teacher assistant and worked her way to teacher, to principal, and now the elementary director. Some of Ms. Mitchell’s roles include meeting with assistant principals to provide professional development and to meet with and supervise the district curriculum

coaches. Ms. Mitchell is currently doing a book study with the assistant principals using *Principals as Instructional Leaders*. Both of these participants were extremely knowledgeable about curriculum issues, both current and former.

When they were asked about the district's overall plan for reading, Ms. Blakely responded that "our goal is to have everyone consistent with 42 schools; we have preached K-12 initiatives. It has certainly taken a long time (and there is) more consistency in elementary." They have been working on the framework of balanced literacy with the components of everything a student needs to decode text and have comprehension. They are in the process of tweaking this based on the new standards. The district began their uniform approach with Pat Cunningham's Balanced Literacy Model and worked with a private consultant who made the model better suited to their system. Several of the programs that they use throughout the district include Words their Way, Foundations, and Fountas and Pinnell.

Schools within this district have the freedom to choose programs if it fits within the framework and it meets their needs. They began hiring district coaches in 2008 where a coach serves two schools for reading at the elementary level. The coaches provide the balanced literacy training every year for two full days for new teachers with follow-up at the school site. At the same time they started to use the coaches, the district went from 24% economically disadvantaged students to 54% and it was felt that it was critical to provide teacher support on working with what Ms. Blakely termed, "a different set of students."

When asked the question, “When you hire your administrators, do you hire them intentionally with any type of instructional background or training?” Ms. Blakely expressed a sense of dismay, as if it was a really stupid question and emphatically replied, “Absolutely (with emphasis).” She went on to elucidate that it was a rigorous interview process with scenarios presented to the candidates about how they would lead instruction, especially concerning literacy. They also asked the applicants what literacy would look like in their schools. The district uses a team process and scores the interviews with rubrics. Ms. Blakely said, “The superintendent has made that vision very important that (the role of the principal) is as an instructional leader.” She indicated that they had to hire nine principals last year due to retirement.

This led to discussion about professional development for principals. She indicated that they do a two-day summer orientation and assign mentors to new principals. The elementary director meets with the new principals monthly and does a book talk or study or focuses on whatever issues the principals would like to have addressed. Ms. Blakely and the superintendent then meet with them quarterly. For all principals, they have one meeting a month with a focus on professional development that is a half-day training. Later in the discussion, they also reported using the strategy of discovering which principal is strongest in certain areas for leading discussion with their peers. Both Ms. Blakely and Ms. Mitchell felt that the administrators receive the training better that way. The principals had also participated in the same Common Core training as the teachers to prepare for that implementation.

The coaches also provide support with “walk-throughs” in their buildings. For example, one coach was doing a “guided reading” walk-through at a school on the day of the interview. Ms. Mitchell stated, “I think the walk-throughs are crucial. The schools that are doing the walk-throughs are seeing the benefits.” In regard to continued funding for the coaching positions, it was indicated that the superintendent would support keeping those positions and they were certain that the principals concurred. “Walk-throughs” are generally referring to short observations made in classrooms for a specific focus. In this county, the walk-throughs were opportunities for the administrators and the coaches to do observations to ensure that they were both noticing the same attributes of the lesson.

When the focus was directed back to the principal and her background in reading and how that could potentially have had an impact on reading scores, the answer was more that they did a couple of different things at Globe Elementary, making good use of their resources and staff. She went on to explain that they had a very experienced reading expert in the building who had done professional development and work on the Common Core outside of the district. She has a strong background in fluency instruction and has done some work with Tim Rasinski (they did not tell me that she actually had co-authored some books with him). They also explained a program that she and the principal established at the school where she could teach reading all day to students and the classroom teachers are required to be in the room to “experience” the lesson. It is a form of professional development for the teachers. They further explained what they called “multiple layers” of things that the school did such as a fluency “bootcamp” for students first thing in the morning and work with Reader’s

Theatre. Ms. Mitchell also asserted that the staff was very consistent at the school with a very low turnover rate.

In discussing the superintendent, Ms. Blakely mentioned that K-3 is one of his focuses and he has prioritized his budget around that (which she believed the state had as well). Ms. Mitchell expressed that he did a great job communicating that to everyone. In regard to dealing with the concern of the lower performance of the exceptional children, Ms. Blakely indicated that the teachers would now be required to attend the Reading Foundations training.

The topic of the paraprofessionals was mentioned in regard to the use of Title One funds in the elementary schools. Ms. Blakely said that the schools hire reading specialists and that the paraprofessionals do a guided reading once a day in every classroom. She considered that a “unique” model that they were considering how to improve. Ms. Blakely emphasized, “in most cases, you don’t know the teacher from the paraprofessional. They move the kids through the levels (of reading).”

Ms. Johnson in Mars Elementary School

After leaving the district office, I traveled to Mars Elementary School to interview Ms. Johnson and her teachers. Ms. Johnson has been employed in the Apple County District for 29 years. She has been a principal for twelve years and taught every grade from K-5. She has a Reading Certification in K-12. She is presently the principal at Mars Elementary, where she had also served as a teacher for ten years. She has seven children ranging in age from 13-27 years old. She was formerly the principal of Globe Elementary School. Both of these schools are on the list of schools which had shown consistent growth over a three year

period. The previous principal of Mars Elementary School retired last year. Mrs. Johnson presents herself in a professional manner.

Mars Elementary School is where Ms. Johnson presently works, which also was revealed by the data in the selection process. Since that principal retired as of June of last year, it was worth the time and effort to interview the teachers here as well as Ms. Johnson. Ms. Johnson has only been here one year, but the teachers spoke of what they had done previously (to make the growth in reading and how the other principal may have impacted that) as well as what is currently happening at their school. Again, the school has shown consistent growth in reading over a three-year period even though they may not have met their AYP. It was at this school where the teachers acted surprised the most that I was interested in their data as they had been under School of Choice consequences for not making their AYP in the past.

Mars Elementary School is located in a residential area outside of the city. It is an older school but very well kept and inviting. There was student work in the hallway and the reception staff was very friendly and welcoming.

Interview with Ms. Johnson and Teachers from Mars Elementary School

When I arrived at Mars Elementary School, it was Ms. Johnson who turned the process into a group interview as she called all the teachers to come to the conference room and the interviews were done together. The participants were the district coach assigned to her school, Ms. Brewer; two Title One teachers, Ms. Littleton and Ms. Creech; a first grade teacher, Ms. Jackson, and a fourth grade teacher, Ms. Hinton. All participants had a wide range of teaching experience from 3 to 30 years. Ms. Littleton actually expressed surprise

that I was there for something positive as they were a “Focus” school and had been in School of Improvement at one time. (Both negative penalties under the No Child Left Behind Act for Title One Schools who do not meet their guidelines). All parties were receptive and friendly from the beginning of the interview. They seemed very pleased that someone had recognized their school once the data that revealed the consistent reading growth was more clearly explained.

The literacy model.

When questioned about what they do as a district for literacy, Ms. Brewer explained about the Balanced Literacy Model and how they had started with Cunningham and broadened the initiative to include teacher directed instruction, guided reading, self-selected reading, writing, word (work), and home reading. She explained that they have a notebook about all the components. Teachers are trained on this model for two days in the summer as beginning teachers. Any teacher that is hired that is not a beginning teacher receives training at their school with their coach. The coaches have modified the notebook to make sure it covers all the components of the Common Core. Ms. Brewer referred to this as a “living document.”

Ms. Littleton indicated that this framework for literacy instruction has been in place in their district since 1999. When asked how she thinks that has made it through several different superintendents and not changed or been done away with, Ms. Littleton indicated,

I think because we are seeing success. We understand that it hits all the critical pieces of literacy that children need... and we have had people within the central office staff... even though the superintendents have changed, there have been people up there (it is

actually located on the top of a hill) that have had knowledge of the success.... thinking about the assistant superintendent, Ms. Blakely, the elementary director, Ms. Mitchell and the Title One director. I think the other thing that is really important is that the superintendents that they have hired have allowed the curriculum people to be the curriculum people and make those guiding decisions.

Ms. Brewer indicated that the curriculum people mentioned have come through in various positions with this Balanced Literacy and have seen the implementation at all levels and the successes with it (from classroom teachers up to their present positions). When questioned further about keeping the document a living document and if they would be adding informational text, Ms. Jackson indicated they felt like they were already strong in that regard because of the coach having kept them prepared and “ahead of the wave.” Ms. Brewer replied that they had used their Title One funds to purchase leveled libraries in each of the schools with the majority of the texts being of the informational genre. They have also been providing training for four years using the Comprehension Toolkit by Stephanie Harvey. Every single teacher has a kit. Ms. Hinton indicated that having these kits school-wide has assisted her as a fourth grade teacher because the students know the tools for comprehending and already know what to look for so she does not have to start from scratch teaching these things (meaning they teach the strategies in the other grades and come to her already knowledgeable about the vocabulary).

Ms. Hinton also pointed to the benefit of the entire county using the same reading strategies and framework to assist with the transiency they experience with students moving

around frequently due to the economy. The framework was further explained by detailing how the Title One teachers push-in (provide services) to the classrooms along with the Title One assistants so there are four adults in the room at one time (the Title One time). The regular classroom teacher works with the upper level students, the Title One teacher and assistant works with the lower groups. Then when the Title One teacher leaves, the teacher works with the lower groups (in essence, the lowest groups receive two guided reading lessons in a day).

This led to the discussion that the Title One teacher assistants or paraprofessionals actually receive a lot of training in how to conduct “guided reading” groups. Ms. Hinton expressed how helpful that was because they could use the proper language of the guided reading and write their lesson plans specifically so assistants could follow the plan easily. They indicated that sometimes the upper grades may need to “borrow” an assistant from the lower grades to make sure that there is an additional person in the classroom during that time. They were very clear that these assistants were used for guided reading groups and no other type of clerical or teacher assistant duties.

The structure of the literacy block is as follows: Teacher directed (whole group instruction on grade-level): 30 - 45 minutes; guided reading with Title One is two 30 minute blocks a day (so students get an hour per day of small group instruction in reading), and then read-aloud 15 minutes integrated somehow with a literacy focus and finally self-selected reading time. During that time, teachers are conferencing with their students individually. The word study block is separate.

Professional development.

Ms. Brewer also indicated the other component they have implemented system-wide is to deepen their knowledge capacity through Fountas and Pinnell and their “continuum of learning” because as an upper grades teacher herself,

when you’ve got a student in the upper grades who had such huge gaps in reading you didn’t always know where to close the gap. Now with the continuum we can look back and say... this is what he’s doing at this particular level ... this is what a reader should be doing and we can begin to work on... you know, isolating some of those skills and strategies.

(Later, it was clarified [by Ms. Rose, assistant principal] that when guided reading was begun, the principals participated in the full training with coaches, teachers and teacher assistants. Then the elementary director would observe at the schools.)

When specifically asked whether or not she felt that her training in reading as a specialist made any difference in her role as an administrator in helping her school to improve reading, Ms. Johnson was extremely humble and almost acted like it was no big deal. She said,

I have an extra degree but I think every administrator is very knowledgeable in curriculum. I mean you have to be or you are not a principal. That is just how that goes and we have as many training sessions as the teachers almost because if you don’t go into the classrooms knowing what you are looking for, how do you know whether or not they are doing it or that the kids are... that you are going to grow the readings that you need to

have...I mean regardless of what your degrees are you have to continuously stay up with what is going on (or) you will be outdated real quick.

Benchmark assessments.

As the questioning continued it led to discussing the type of assessments that are used at the school with students from running records, guided reading, lexile levels, DPI K-2 assessments, to Fountas and Pinnell benchmarking. It was very clear that there was a wealth of knowledge and comfort level in using the assessments tools to understand where the students were in regard to their reading level and where they needed to take them next. It was also reported that the parents and students are aware of their reading levels and what they need to do to progress to the next level. Ms. Hinton said, “They wanna move.” She also explained that as a focus school, they were one of the first schools to be implementing mClass Reading 3D this year. (Assessments for K-3 students in literacy completed with an Apple iPad computer.)

Even though this county has not fully embraced the concepts of RtI yet and are just beginning new training on it, they have the basic tenets in place. The coach shared that they have “at risk” indicators at each grade level so they can gauge where the students are at a given time. The principal also shared that they have to “document” for each child who did not pass their EOG and they promoted them anyway, why they felt like the promotion was justified. They actually do very few grade-level retentions. The coach also shared that they continue to document the growth and progress of the student through work samples.

Other programs.

Some of the other extra things that they have done to support reading include a grant they received last year to purchase books for their summer “pick a book” reading program and their book mobile which was just school-based but now is county-based. Ms. Johnson also mentioned the extra tutoring the teachers do in the mornings. It was explained that the former principal (now retired) had really emphasized the “sense of urgency” and established the morning tutoring. Ms. Johnson said that “when others are going around getting their morning coffee, many of these staff members are working with individual students or with a small group. They are really utilizing their instructional time like no other school I have ever seen.” Ms. Littleton also said that they have a volunteer program based out of a church, like a mentoring program. The YMCA also has a tutoring program that is free of charge after school four days a week for their struggling readers. They also realize students who have never had pre-k experiences need extra time so they have a “jump-start” program to help bridge the gap. They identify those students during kindergarten registration. They also continue to educate the parents about reading to their children from the time they are born.

Parent involvement.

The school also provides activities to involve the parents such as Family Reading Nights and Super Saturday. They have structured it so while the students are doing science experiments or that sort of thing that they have parent sessions on nutrition, etc. However, the parents reported to them that they preferred to do “the fun stuff that the kids” were doing.

They have also had a Community Night to celebrate their diversity by bringing in dishes from their native culture and having a talent show.

District level coaches.

Ms. Johnson praised the coaches in the district;

I think the most helpful thing as administrators that we have done is to put these coaches in place. There is sooooo much on my plate.... That if I don't have this person that I can go to and you have to develop a good rapport with your coach... your coach has worked on developing a good rapport with your teachers and that person is really instrumental. I even say to the superintendent... if you take away everything else... don't take away our coaches because they bridge that gap.

In regard to her position, the coach clarified that when she started this job she worked with four schools and was not able to get into focused staff development or supporting teachers. Then when the district used their ARRA (American Renewal and Recovery Act) money to hire more coaches so they had one per every two schools, the focus on the guided reading began in earnest. Ms. Littleton added that Brewer, the district coach, also helps to bridge the gap with the Title One teachers, regular teachers, and exceptional children teachers. She stated that "to help them be on the same page is really crucial." This conversation led to the principal sharing about the feeling that they all have ownership of the student's progress. She called it "bringing the right people to the table" by having the Title One teacher and the exceptional children teacher have a conversation about the child to make sure they aren't missing anything. The fourth grade teacher, Ms. Hinton, also indicated that there was a trust

that they had with the coach in being able to ask her for things that went beyond the concept of professional rapport. She shared an example of when she was struggling with the Common Core and text dependent questions and she could not even explain to the coach what she needed but just that she was struggling. The coach then went back to “mull it over” and came back with what the teacher needed. The teacher said she made it comfortable so she was not afraid to ask and be afraid the coach would think, “What is wrong with you?” There was a common agreement that this did not happen overnight – that it took time and a lot of training for the coaches. They went through an extensive coaching academy (led by the elementary and Title One directors).

Culture of high expectations.

Ms. Littleton indicated that the previous administrator made it clear that she had high expectations. She indicated that Ms. Johnson does that as well, but in a different way. She translates that expectation to the students so that they want to do a good job and move up levels and read “those harder books.” Ms. Jackson shared that they felt like they were doing a better job of expressing to the students of “how reading is so important and how they are going to need to be 21st Century ready.” In making the connection between the former administrator and Ms. Johnson, Ms. Hinton said that the “common thread ... (has) been the focus on what’s best for kids. It’s not that I want to make this job easier for teachers.... It’s more about what’s in the best interest for the children... That’s where we started a lot of our focus, in what’s best for children.”

Globe Elementary School

When I left Mars Elementary School, I drove to Globe Elementary School to meet the teachers for their interview. Globe Elementary School is a K-4 school presently as the 5th grade was pulled out to make a 5th - 6th grade combination school due to growth. There are currently approximately 650 students. Ms. Smith, the literacy lab teacher said that they were “a very supportive tight knit group of people” (meaning the school staff). Ms. French said that on their yearly survey their school had 98% of the staff agree that they were trusting of each other. The teachers also indicated that their school culture was about caring for each other. Their last three principals wanted them to take care of their own families as well. Ms. Johnson would say, “Family first. You never had a doubt that was what they cared about.” “Her expertise is relationships.” “Her goodbye party was a complete melt-down.”

Ms. Blakely indicated that it was a “very challenging” school with a high population of exceptional children and “intensive intervention classes.” She also stated that this school was considered a “Focus” school by the state with the new Title One guidelines because their white students are so far above the performance of the exceptional children. She indicated her frustration with this by saying, “DUH.”

Interview with Title One lead teachers and the Literacy Lab teacher

The interview was conducted in the literacy lab teacher’s room, Ms. Smith. It began with the two Title One teachers, Ms. French and Ms. Jones, because Ms. Smith was not in the room yet. The teachers were very friendly throughout the conversation. Ms. Jones was a veteran teacher who has been at Globe Elementary School for 25 years. She began her career

as a certified exceptional children teacher and then taught 1st grade for 17 years and now is in her fourth year as a Title One reading teacher. She explained her role in having reading groups all day long (K-4), every 30 minutes, starting at 8:30 until 1:30. Then during the other time the Title One teachers prepare for parent involvement and staff development. They both do groups where they are in the classroom, but some they “pull out.” They see every student in the building every day, one way or another. Every child in the building (since they are now school-wide Title One) gets Title One time every day. They indicated that they use leveled books (school has a closet and Title One has one) and that the two of them work with the lowest performing students. Ms. Jones said, “Oh, how I would love to read on Level P, in my dreams...” When they go into the classroom, one of their assistants accompanies them. They will work with two groups and the assistant will work with two groups.

They both discussed their use of the Leveled Literacy Instruction (LLI) program from Fountas and Pinnell and how it is expensive and they like it “okay” but it is very scripted. They said they were trying to move away from it a little because they “resent it being so routine.” During the LLI time, they may pull three students from three different classrooms. They are the lowest achieving students. Training for this program involved two days per kit and there are four kits.

When the teachers were asked about their training in reading and how they developed those skills, Ms. Jones responded that there were not that many workshops when she was first in the system so she went back and got her Master’s Degree. She also indicated that she

likes to read professional literature or “anything that will help me be more successful teaching my students, that is what I look for.” She also said that her experience teaching first grade for so many years where they learned to read helped her a lot. Then she (nonchalantly) mentioned that she had her National Board Certification. Ironically enough, she said that she worked on the literacy part for two years as she did not pass that part on the written exam the first time around (she said she was freaked out by the timer) and then had to re-do it all the following year. Part of that process was not just reading the literature but also evaluating where the students are and how to help them (diagnosing the problem).

Ms. French indicated that now they have monthly meetings with the Title One office and have a lot of Title One workshops. Ms. French said that she has “ONLY” been there about 12 years. She began working at the school teaching remediation, then was an assistant teacher, and then obtained her degree and taught second grade. She has been a Title One reading teacher for about four years. She said that “our teachers will tell you that they think our assistants (Title One) know more than they do in reading a lot of times because they do receive a ton (of training).” They both went on to explain that at this school all of the teacher assistants are certified teachers (for one reason or another they did not want a regular classroom).

After this point in the discussion, Ms. Smith enters the room and shares that they were the only school in the county and possibly in the nation to have a “literacy classroom!” Ms. French said, “This is our ace in the hole” (referring to Ms. Smith). Ms. Smith told me that she previously co-authored with Tim Rasinski and they had written lots of books together.

She has been working really hard on the new standards. As she was explaining this, Ms. Jones said, “Told you she was our ace. Now that she is here, we are like (makes raspberries sound).” Ms. Smith replied that “it takes a village.” She also explained that she works for www.commoncore.org in Washington and had written part of the *The Common Core Curriculum Maps* books (www.commoncore.org).

She explained that the current principal at the time, Ms. Johnson (focus of this research), had said that she would like her to start a class where she taught the Common Core and the teachers could come and watch how it was done (so it was implemented last year) and they are still doing this for this year under the current administration. They agreed that there were certain things the students and teachers needed to feel comfortable with in the Common Core, so they got a head start. She said they started with parts of speech they would need to know. Prior to doing this, Ms. Smith had been a classroom teacher for 22 years. Ms. Jones filled in that Ms. Smith had been an assistant and then a kindergarten, fourth, and finally fifth grade teacher. She has also been at this school her entire career.

Ms. Smith explained her concern with the county’s current balanced literacy instruction in that it was too much focus on the instructional or independent levels of reading while the reading on the EOG is more complex. When asked if she thought the district would change that with the Common Core now, she said she hoped so, but felt like “they were the black sheep of the family.” She called Ms. Johnson their “fearless leader” who left them. She also called her a “spitfire, given the right context.” She felt that she encouraged her (as a teacher) to “go, go” with new ideas. She further explained that this attribute “empowers their teachers

to move out.” She turned at one point and asked the other teachers, “Are you guys comfortable with me talking like this?” (they nodded) and then she went on to explain the process the county went through with moving from the autonomy in schools to “everybody doing exactly the same thing at all times.”

She listed the names of some of the programs: Heinemann, Fountas and Pinnell, Lucy Calkins, and Investigations and said they must “pay salaries here” and “once we buy into it, we have to prove it works.” She then later explained that she felt that they needed to go through this “guided reading stage” because they needed to work with the students in small groups. But now they needed to use that format and scaffold complex text. She admitted to being a huge fan of Tim Shanahan. She was listening to a webinar conducted by Fisher and Frye that said, “It doesn’t matter what the complexity of the text so much as the quality of instruction.” She indicated that she felt like that was where “guided reading needed to morph to.”

When the questions were redirected specifically to the skills of Ms. Johnson as an instructional leader, Ms. Smith indicated that she felt like in the last year, “she (Ms. Johnson) was being squelched and stepped on just a little bit.” They indicated that the current principal, Mr. Peters, refers to himself as a ‘rule follower’ but Ms. French said that Ms. Johnson “is more in your face... and I am going to do it whether you like it or not cause I am the principal.” Then Ms. Jones says that she did not really want to leave first grade but Ms. Johnson put her in the Title One position. She revealed though “it was a good decision at the time for her and me personally and stuff so she made decisions because she thought it was in

our best interest or whatever and it might not have been popular at the county office and she might have gotten in trouble for it later, but she took it.”

At one point, Ms. Smith had referred to Ms. Johnson as “loosy goosy” but then later wanted to clear up that she did not want to “put a negative on her at all.” They all indicated that she empowered her teachers to be teacher leaders. Ms. French said, “She didn’t start anything” and Ms. Smith chimed in “yeah, but all she had to do was say... start the Lit Lab and I did it all.” So, Ms. Smith said that the literacy lab was Ms. Johnson’s idea and she was given the freedom to run with it. She said, “She speaks it and then it all comes together.” When asked about how she wanted the lessons done, Ms. Johnson told her, “I don’t know. You figure it out. I know you can do it. You just do what you intended when you wrote those maps (*The Common Core Curriculum Maps*), now I want you to do them.” Then they compared the current principal, Mr. Peters, to Ms. Johnson and Ms. French drew a box with her hands and said, “This is Mr. Peters- ‘square’ and this is Ms. Johnson- outside of the box.”

By the end of the conversation, Ms. Smith became reflective of some things while we had been talking. She indicated this by saying, “I am thinking in talking with you if you had some kind of balance it might be good (meaning between central input and autonomy at the school site).” She then went on to say that Ms. Johnson really “encouraged the good stuff” but “she made changes that weren’t popular sometimes. She split up a threesome that needed to be split up....she made hard decisions.” She indicated that it would often take Ms. Johnson a long time to make those difficult decisions and sometimes they would be “like when are you going to do something about that and then she would eventually.”

Parent involvement.

The teachers mentioned several things they had done to get parents involved. Recently they had a ‘poetry slam’ where all the kids performed poetry for their parents. They set the room up like a jazz club with mood lights on the stage and the students got dressed up. The goal was to “showcase” their focus on fluency. They discussed other things like open house and PIE (Parents in Education), bingo, a children’s author, Rosetta Stone (to teach the Hispanic parents English in the computer lab), and transition nights at the end of the year.

Interview with Mr. Peters, current principal of Globe Elementary School, and Ms. Rose, the Assistant Principal.

I went back to the school the following morning to interview Mr. Peters and he brought in Ms. Rose, the assistant principal as well. The interview was conducted in the principal’s office which was decorated with camouflage. I had explained some of the things that had been said and asked if they thought they could fill in the “holes” on some things. Mr. Peters indicated that Ms. Rose probably could because she had been here working under Ms. Johnson. Mr. Peters however, was able to make connections with things that had occurred through his child being at the school at the time and in his knowledge of the programs and current placement of staff.

The literacy lab teacher and other programs.

Ms. Rose immediately indicated that the credit for their reading success should go to the literacy lab teacher. She and Ms. Smith had both been 5th grade teachers together before Ms. Rose became the Assistant Principal. She said “the horn to be tooted is hers. It was her

leadership that was research-based and her ability to go outside of the box that did it.” She said that Ms. Smith had the ability (when she explained things) that built a “level of excitement” with the teachers that the administration could not do or touch. Ms. Rose reflected that back in 2008, they had started a program they called, “Sing, Read, Learn” and it focused on fluency and became a school-wide initiative. (Later we went down to talk to the literacy lab teacher again as she had emailed me to see if I would stop by, and Ms. Smith gave a lot of credit to Ms. Rose for helping to organize this data from this program – which she shared with me). Ms. Smith had earlier said that Ms. Rose could “organize cats.” This program involved each class having a focus song which the teachers wrote on the board and the students learned it by “singing it.” They presented their songs (which they said worked the same as Reader’s Theatre and like the current program called Poetry Slam). Ms. Rose stated that in the first and second years of the program, the Hispanic boys in second grade had the highest jump in fluency. Ms. Smith had started the initiative with her own grade level and then shared it with the other grade levels. The year following this implementation was split into thirds: Singing, poetry, and Reader’s Theatre. Then the third year they backed off on everything but poetry. Mr. Peters shared that his son was in the fourth grade when this began and still sings “Eating Goober Peas” to this day and he can tell the meaning behind the song.

Regarding the current literacy program, Ms. Rose clarified the district had started their consistency in reading with the Four Block Model, and added to it to make it a Balanced

Literacy Program. Then in 2007-2008, they added a huge push for continuity with the emphasis on guided reading.

Instructional leadership.

When asked about instructional leadership, Mr. Peters said that the superintendent told him, “I am not putting a middle school or high school person in that role (elementary principal). I am looking for elementary principals with elementary backgrounds.” He told the story of an assistant principal of a middle school who indicated that he would like to be the principal of an elementary school so they moved him to be an elementary assistant principal for three to four years (in order to get the experience).

Mr. Peters indicated that Ms. Johnson really “knew her teachers” and put them on the right types of teams – like literacy, math, and school improvement team which helped set them up nicely (meaning for him). He realized this when he arrived that they were the right people to be on those teams and he did not have to change anything.

Teacher turnover rate.

The teacher turnover rate is low, averaging 4% last year with two of those teachers on personal leave who want to return. Mr. Peters said he has not had to hire anyone since he has been in his current position and at his other school he would have 150-300 candidates for a single position. He indicated, “People do not want to leave.” “It is hard to get a job in this county.”

Teacher assistants.

When discussing the leadership from the central office, Mr. Peters indicated there were a lot more people now that understand elementary (curriculum) and reading instruction. The Title One teacher assistants receive a great deal of training on literacy instruction. He said there is “more training (for the assistants) on teaching reading than (for) regular classroom teachers.” He explained that the district used to pay the teacher assistants who wanted to go back to school to get their teaching degree. He would seek teachers (who had been Title One teacher assistants) when hiring because they had specialized training. He knew this first-hand because “his wife was one.” He clarified that they have five Title One teacher assistants in their school and they all have a teaching degree. They work five hours a day and do guided reading only. They do not have any other duties and they have a 30-minute planning period and work very closely with the Title One teachers.

Case B: Principal Trent from Beech County

When I contacted Mr. Giles to obtain permission to perform the research in Beech County, he informed me of Ms. Trent’s new role as the district lead coach. It was my intention to conduct both interviews separately, however, when I arrived, it was clear that both parties wanted to be together during the interview.

Beech County District

Beech County is a relatively small county located in rural North Carolina. All of their K-8 schools are Title One schools. This county serves 8,945 students in their 16 schools. The demographics are as follows: Black: 30%, Hispanic: 30%, and White: 40% (according to

www.greatschools.org). Mr. Giles indicated poverty is prevalent in their district and they are trying to create a culture where the students begin to adopt the belief that they can go to college through their Early College Pre-K -13 concept. He stated that “30% of our parents do not have a high school diploma” and that the “kids do not have the conversation at home.”

Interview with Assistant Superintendent Giles and Ms. Trent.

The interview was held in Mr. Giles office which was situated in the Central Office within the town limits. Mr. Giles explained his roles with the district which included Curriculum, Federal Programs, Exceptional Children Program, Testing and Accountability, Transportation, Maintenance, and Technology. Then he laughed and said, “basically I am over everything in the district besides HR (Human Resources) and Student Services.”

Ms. Trent’s current position is District Lead Achievement Coach (hired under funds from Race to the Top - RTTT) as of last year. She works with all schools on some district initiatives, including district-wide Early College, using data effectively, and transitioning to the Common Core. She is one of two and a half positions that are leads (former principals) and there are two coaches that came straight out of the classroom. The ‘leads’ provide the support primarily for the principals and the others are for the teachers. She formerly was a High School English teacher. Ms. Trent actually did an internship at Crater Elementary, and then was at a Middle School and before returning as the assistant principal in 2006. She indicates that reading has always been important to her, but “I had never taught anyone to read. There is a big difference.”

High expectations.

Ms. Trent explained that at Crater Elementary, there were already high expectations upon her arrival. She said that “those kids and those parents know that when you come to Crater Elementary, there is a certain expectation of how you are going to be and what the school expects.” There were however some morale issues with the teachers and she had to “love them up... the adults.” Mr. Giles said that she also had high expectations for her staff and balanced so they “felt comfortable going out on a limb to try new things.”

Professional development.

Ms. Trent provided the week-long training of Reading Foundations to her school and participated in the entire training with her K-2 teachers. This is a program endorsed/sponsored by the North Carolina State Improvement Project (www.ncsip.org). In regard to her lack of experience as an elementary teacher, she stated, “I had a lot of learning to do so whatever PD (professional development) my teachers went to, I went to.” She started out with this training for her exceptional children teachers but then it was so powerful that she provided it for all of her K-2 staff in 2007-2008. She stated that “you know it is five days of training and I sat through every minute of it. I felt like if it was important to me, it would be important to them. I felt like the things I did learn, I could have much better instructional conversations with teachers.”

When asked if they were using a specific program for phonics, Ms. Trent stated that they had not been using anything specifically other than the basal series which included leveled readers. She stated that they had been preaching that it was not about a particular program

but “really about the skills and how you can measure if they have gotten those skills and if they haven’t, what are you going to do about it.” They did build up a leveled reading section in their library as funds permitted.

In regard to the professional development for administrators, Mr. Giles indicated they realized they needed to really work on the instructional leadership for their principals and have restricted the “administrative part” of their meetings to 10%, with professional development for the remainder. It has been realized they have some “really good managers.” The monthly meetings with the assistant principals are now all professional development. In regard to the roll-out of the Common Core and professional development, Ms. Trent continues to “role-model” for teachers and principals by attending the sessions by NCDPI and their local RESA (Regional Educational School Authority). They are also currently training the principals in the district to be the ones to provide the staff development to their teachers in an effort to “grow them” as instructional leaders. The district coaches create all the presentation materials and instruct the principals in leading as the “trainers.” When asked who made that decision, both Mr. Giles and Ms. Trent laughed and said it was a collective decision with Mr. Giles commenting, “We have good shared leadership in this county.”

Another piece of the PLC’s is a new monthly visit with teachers in small groups by the district coaches with the expectation that the principals and/or assistant principals sitting in on the sessions and “leading a session before the day is out.” Since the funding technically ends for these coaches in July, they are building up their sustainability, trying to “teach them how to be instructional leaders.”

Use of Title One funds.

A Reading Recovery teacher was hired as a part time tutor with a K-2 focus and the amount she worked depended on the budget year. Other retired teachers were also hired for 3rd-5th grades as tutors. They also utilized the funds to reduce class size with three to four teaching positions.

PLC's.

The structure Ms. Trent used for PLC's was to meet with her grade level chairs and then they met with the rest of their grade levels. She also had a leadership team and each grade level had a representative. The use of data notebooks for students and meeting as a PLC has been at this elementary school prior to Ms. Trent's arrival, but she continued this trend of "meeting together and planning and discussing kids."

When reflecting on the success from the year with the highest growth, she said the school board had also wanted to know what they had done to make these gains in reading. She had a difficult time putting it into words for them also. Ms. Trent said she told them also:

you can't just rattle... well, we did this program and it cured all.... There is no (one cure). We had teachers who taught their heart out... small groups Pulling them this 10 minutes and that 10 minutes any time they could. Kids reading to any available grownup that was walking down the hall. 5 extra minutes... whether it was a custodian or a bus driver or a parent or a high school tutor. Just those kids reading out loud to somebody. So nothing that we can just say... Yep, that is what we did and every other district in America can do it and have the same results.

Mr. Giles chimed in that the leadership style of Ms. Trent fit in with the needs of the teachers. He stated, "I think Ms. Trent has done a good job in that capacity and why she is in her current position." He explained that it was hard to "quantify" but it was the relationship piece. "Some (of the teachers) need the proverbial kick in the pants, some need the 'atta boy' type." Mr. Giles also summed it up as Ms. Trent's willingness to admit that she didn't know everything and her collaborative leadership style helped them. She also knew the strengths of her teachers and put them in the right places. Ms. Trent said she uses the "politically correct term of 'strategic staffing' to place the right people in the right places." When asked if the teachers were accepting of those moves, Mr. Giles said that they all were not but Ms. Trent had the "fortitude to move forward with it." Ms. Trent indicated that you could not put all of your strongest teachers in the "tested grades" (3rd-5th) because she understands the importance of first grade (where you typically learn to read). She was hesitant to say that any grade level was more important than another, however, "if you are not reading on grade level by the time you leave second grade... you have a battle ahead... but first grade is where it takes off so those first grade reading teachers were probably the strongest teachers in the school and that was on purpose."

Benchmarking/promotion/retention.

When they were questioned about whether or not the district had strong benchmarking for promotion and retention in K-2, they indicated that they really did not at the district level, but they did at Crater Elementary School. If they were going to retain, they would usually do it in first grade. The district's promotion standards were utilized to "made a rubric for every

teacher and every child.” They used the data on the rubrics for certain skills, then looked at the student prior to making a decision. Ms. Trent also said, “teacher gut plays a part in it of course as well, but that can’t be all there is.”

Crater Elementary School

Crater Elementary school has approximately 700 students, with the poverty rate being 70-75%. The demographics at the school are one-third each White, Hispanic, and Black. They were one of four schools in the county that made AYP in 2011-2012, with 25 target goals. They are located in rural North Carolina and most of the parents of the children of the school work in local poultry farms.

Ms. Trent states that when she arrived in Crater Elementary in 2006, the reading proficiency was at 84%, so she “inherited some really good things.” She states that the number one thing about the school is “wonderful teachers that you know most are home grown and I am not sure what research says about that but there certainly is a vested interest. They (teachers) went to school there. Their children go to school there.” In the 2007-2008 school year the reading test changed and the reading scores went from 84% to 48%. Ms. Trent said they “had to pick themselves up off the floor.... It was a big blow to our teachers who take it very, very personally and very, very seriously.”

Even though she indicated that she would tell her teachers all the time what a wonderful place it was, she was not sure how many of them believed her because for most of them, that was their only place of employment. They did not have anything to compare it to. “So I would try to just tell them over and over again how special they were and what a special

place we had.” She said of her student body, “we didn’t have cream of the crop kids all of the time. Title One, some low socio-economic trailer parks right around” (indicating that they really did a phenomenal job dealing with a lot of difficult challenges with their students).

Interview with Ms. Little, Current Principal of Crater Elementary School

After I interviewed the assistant superintendent, Mr. Giles and the district coach, Ms. Trent, I traveled about another 25 miles to Crater Elementary School in order to interview Ms. Little, the current principal. She is the only participant who allowed me to interview her alone. This was a type of courtesy interview as she is the current principal and I needed to speak with her teachers about Ms. Trent and felt like it would be inappropriate not to interview her as well. When asked about the transition between schools, she indicated that it “happens in the summer and that is pretty much it. The staff is sitting and waiting to see who they are going to get. I came in and started looking at the data.” Most of the information from this interview was not relative as it focused on what she has done as a principal since she has been here over the last year. She could not give any pertinent information regarding what had previously happened during the years of the growth in reading.

Benchmark data.

Ms. Little actually shared that this school was part of the original pilot that used the Reading 3D for their K-3 assessments.

Interview with First Grade teachers; Ms. Newsome, Ms. Wood and Ms. Piper

Ms. Little had wanted me to interview her teachers when they were on their planning periods and said she would schedule another time for me to meet with them. It took two

more weeks to get this scheduled. As we went to the classroom for the interview, Ms. Newsome explained that she and Ms. Wood were cousins. She immediately indicated “I think it is really all about the teachers” (that they had been talking about it since I had asked to come for an interview). Ms. Newsome explained that her husband was the chairman of the Board of Education. When I asked about the new superintendent (who has been here for two years) she indicated they (she and her husband) had a personal relationship with him and the “board said he is the best ever and is all about the kids and he fights tooth and nail for them.” Ms. Wood added it was really Mr. Giles though who was big into the curriculum.

High expectations.

Ms. Newsome immediately began to talk about how they have discussed time and time again (about teachers), “Are you going to teach what you are expected to teach.... Are you going to go above and beyond? You have to teach what is expected but then you know always look and make sure you are challenging those children. You expect them to know that stuff. I have high expectations.” Ms. Wood indicated that it all goes back to holding the students accountable for what you taught.

Both teachers shared they had worked with Ms. Trent for about four or five years. Ms. Wood has been here for 14 years and Ms. Newsome for ten, but has been teaching for 17 years. Ms. Newsome has been teaching first grade her entire career but Ms. Wood has taught second grade and been in some upper grades as well. Ms. Wood has her National Board Certification. Ms. Newsome is particularly expressive and talks very fast. Ms. Newsome

even said, “See this is how I am different from Ms. Wood, I get excited and am crazy!” Ms. Wood on the other hand talks in a more “matter of fact” tone.

Reading Foundations.

When asked about the Reading Foundation training for K-2 teachers, they seemed to have a difficult time remembering it at first. Then Ms. Newsome said, “To be honest with you those are things that we already knew and did. It was a good reminder of those things like phonics and the new teachers needed it.” Ms. Wood commented that when she started teaching 2nd grade, she did not know how to teach reading or to do running records (assessment process where the student reads to you and you record the reading level). She said, “It is nice to know what you are expected to know.” Then they brought up the fact that teachers do not learn to “teach reading in school” (college).

Reading 3D.

Both teachers said that they had learned a lot with the implementation of this assessment program that they piloted with the state two and a half years ago which pulls in more non-fiction with their reading assessments. Prior to using this assessment the students did not show as much growth. As a result of the new curriculum, they also used more resources than just their basal reader. Ms. Newsome said that “before they didn’t really teach the non-fiction features. They have to know it. Can’t just hold it up and say, this is the table of contents.” Both teachers said that they use a lot of their own money to purchase additional materials and spend a lot of time looking things up on the internet. They like to use the websites: www.teacherpayteachers.com and www.pinterest.com.

Ms. Wood indicated that Reading 3D really does drive the instruction. She uses a Nobi (computer) device to record the data and it gives immediate feedback and is helpful in creating small groups. Ms. Newsome said they work together to talk about the data and this is part of their PLC's (which they have been doing for about five years). Ms. Wood said that they had always talked about it before but now they meet three to four times a week and utilize the time to discuss what is going on with the students.

At this time, Ms. Piper, another first grade teacher entered the room and joined us. She actually said very little during the entire interview. I was not expecting anyone else to join us so I was surprised but carried on with the rest of the interview while she was with us.

Data.

When the conversation was directed again to data, Ms. Wood said that they had always had a principal who "paid attention to data." They even mentioned the principal prior to Ms. Trent and said that they would meet with her individually about it (but upon reflection they have not done that with the new principal, Ms. Little). They indicated that at this time, they have 29 readers with only 40% proficient (indicating their familiarity and usage of the data). They use data notebooks with the students and in the past it was all about the student data, but now during PLC's teacher data is compared. Ms. Newsome also indicated that they use "student data notebooks." County promotion standards are also used. Ms. Wood indicated that they have a high poverty rate, but also more than half of her class this year is Hispanic. When discussing their PLC's and how they work, they indicated that Ms. Trent will come out sometimes to meet about their data (in her current role).

Reading instruction structure.

Ms. Wood explained the structure of their teams and how they work with a team of three and divide the students into high, medium, and low reading groups. They added an additional teacher this year so they have to work with the others in teams of two (now they have seven) but they indicated that they do not have the time to do the reading as well. They do have an extra remediation time for 30 minutes in the morning.

When asked about the other grade levels and if they teach in small groups, Ms. Wood articulated that when she was in 2nd grade, she was the only one who used that pedagogy. They said that K-1 does but not the rest. Ms. Newsome also told me that she uses strategies from the book, *The Daily 5*, but when she read it, she realized that she had always had the framework. Ms. Piper laughed and told her then she should have written it and gotten the money. She also indicated that they use Readers and Writers' Workshop, but not as the result of a mandate. They indicated that they thought the teachers here were willing to do their own research. Ms. Wood said that both the former principal and Ms. Trent "looked for teachers who would go the extra mile and they had a reputation for being a good school."

Other resources.

Ms. Newsome extolled the virtues of the program Letterland. She said that they begin to use this in kindergarten and continue it in first grade. She told the story of a Hispanic student who said he had an 'e' and an 'r' and knew they said /er/ and when she asked him how, he said because "Red Robot is the elephant stealer." (He had remembered the rules from last

year!) Ms. Newsome also said that they do “cheers” when a student shares the rules with others. Ms. Piper said “they will remember that better since a peer said it.”

Teacher assistants.

When asked what duties the teacher assistants performed in the classroom, they said that it took three days to administer the TRC (running record) portion of the Reading 3D and that while the teachers were doing the assessments, the teacher assistants taught the class. In general, on a regular basis, the assistants monitor and listen to students read and they work with them in small groups. They work one-on-one with students as they are reading and record their progress daily. The teachers have the higher students read with a “buddy” but the ones on a lower reading level work with an adult (such as the assistants).

Other professional development and resources.

Ms. Newsome said that Ms. Trent made sure that they attended the Reading Conference in North Carolina and it was the “best ever” and “I will pay for it myself this year if I have to.” Even though they had indicated that they spent a lot of their own money, they did say that Ms. Trent had purchased Burst (reading materials through Reading 3D). Ms. Newsome said, “She got on board and did it. She found the money. She understood that K-2 is just as important.”

Other concerns.

At the end of the interview, Ms. Wood stood up and shared her concerns for the future as she did not know how much longer she could hold on (teaching) and certainly not for another 16 years. She has four children and spends a lot of the weekend writing lesson plans and

doing things for school and her own children were suffering “while I do all of this for my (school) children whose own parents don’t really care. I love them but...” Ms. Newsome said her husband wanted her to go back to school but she did not want to get her Master’s Degree in Education nor work on National Boards like Ms. Wood. She was thinking about nursing as she had a cousin who had done that and was earning \$40 per hour.

Emailed Interview Data from Ms. Fisher and Ms. Lebo

Ms. Fisher is a second grade teacher who agreed to answer the interview questions via email since she had been out with a sick child. After several email communications, it is apparent that Ms. Fisher is a teacher-leader. She was selected by Ms. Trent to be the trainer for the implementation of the Reading 3D assessment tool. She states how she feels about her philosophy for teaching reading, “Reading is an important subject area. It is the foundation for all other subject areas. I have always had a passion for reading and teaching the art of reading.” When asked about her beliefs about literacy instructional leadership, she responded, “I believe it is crucial to have in a school. There needs to be someone who is knowledgeable (able) of the literacy curriculum and available to guide teachers in preparing reading instruction in the classroom.” When asked about anything else she would like to share, she stated, “Our school works well together. Everyone knows that it takes the ENTIRE (her emphasis) school to succeed and that test scores are earned because of skills learned from kindergarten to fifth grade.”

Ms. Lebo, a fourth grade teacher, clarified in her communication that they do a Balanced Literacy with at least 30 minutes of sustained silent reading within their 90 minute block of

reading instruction. Ms. Lebo also added that they use Accelerated Reader and Successmaker (as an online tool to practice reading skills) when asked about what other things they do to assist students to become more proficient in reading. She also added that on her grade level, they also have well-planned, targeted skill-specific mini-lessons and use a “novel notebook” that students use to give written responses to what they have read. When asked about the specific behaviors of the principal in regard to his/her role as the literacy instructional leader, she wrote, “positive, supportive of reading-based incentives, actively contacts team leaders to have literacy plans for each grade level.” She also wrote that she felt that the principal’s role was “accountability.” When asked what else she had to share that contributed to the growth of their school’s success she added, “hard-working, committed teachers is part of 4th grades’ success.”

Analysis of Key Findings

Creating a table (Appendix F) of the findings from the interviews was beneficial in isolating the factors that were directly related to the behaviors and traits of the principals and the environment or supporting elements that also could have contributed to the success of the school in reading improvement. Utilizing a table format also allowed a visual representation of the impact for the two cases, being the principals, but the other retired principal mentioned as well.

The statement made by Ms. Johnson, reflecting on things that had contributed to their growth, helps reveal there is not one simple “answer” to creating a successful reading

program for at-risk students. She opined that the school board had wanted to know (in 2009 when there was a huge jump in growth in reading) what they had done. She stated, “You can’t just rattle... well, we did this program and it cured all.” She further clarified that the individual teachers had just taught their hearts out and how the entire school community pulled together to read to students whenever they could (including their custodians).

Ms. Trent indicated that it was very difficult to identify just what it was overall that caused the improvement. This obscurity in identifying exactly what caused the change is reflected in all of the interviews. The first grade teachers expressed that they felt that it was all about the teachers that caused the change (which indicates that teachers may not be able to see things through the lens of the administrator). The assistant principal said that the great gains were attributable to the literacy lab teacher. The principals utilized “shared leadership” from the district support to empowering their teachers and staff and even custodians to be part of the solution to the problems they were facing. Perhaps because this was firmly embedded as a part of the culture of the schools, the participants had a difficult time identifying specific traits or behaviors of the principal. There was also not “one huge change” that occurred at these schools but all things wove together to be part of the picture of success, including the parent involvement pieces. The principals still exhibited many of the traits of associated with McRel’s top seven behaviors for second order change even though it was more of a broader perspective (Marzano et al., 2005).

One trait that both principals exhibited was a sense of humility. They attributed little or no credit to themselves. Ms. Johnson, when asked specifically if she felt her background

with a Reading Certification could have been responsible for her strength in instructional leadership for reading, was reticent to accept any credit. She expressed, “I have an extra degree but I think every administrator is very knowledgeable in curriculum.” It was also very apparent that Ms. Trent was very humble in the manner in which she gave credit for the things that she inherited at the school. Both described their schools as wonderful places.

Supporting Elements

Regardless of the commonality of the humbleness the principals exhibited, two other emerging concepts occurred repeatedly throughout the interviews that were note-worthy. These two things are not traits that the principals themselves exhibited or activities they performed. However, they could be items that potentially contribute to the overall picture of success. Of primary note is the low staff turnover rate. This was mentioned in both districts. Both of these districts have staff members who have been at their respective schools their entire careers. Ms. Trent also reflected on the fact that not only do they have a low staff turnover rate, but at her school, there was a commitment to the success of the school because those teachers had attended the same institution themselves and now their children attend the school. In Apple County District, they had to replace nine principals last year (mainly due to retirement) and only one was from outside the district (however, upon further investigation, she was originally from the area and had moved away). These schools are truly community schools with a high level of commitment from the staff.

The second outstanding common feature was the district support for instructional leadership. One story was shared by Mr. Peters regarding a middle school assistant principal

who told the superintendent he wanted to be a principal of an elementary school.

Consequently he was placed at an elementary school for four to five years as an assistant principal so he could get the experience before placement as a principal. Mr. Peters recalled the superintendent told him, “I am not putting a middle school or high school person in that role (elementary principal). I am looking for elementary principals with elementary backgrounds.” Mr. Giles from Beech County indicated that the current superintendent (who has been there for two years) has realized the importance of instructional leadership and focused on it. He indicated that they knew they had a lot of good “managers” and have structured their training for the Common Core so the principals deliver all professional development themselves as a step in moving toward improved instructional leadership. Part of this also involved utilizing the Race to the Top (RTTT) funds to hire district coaches (which is the position that Ms. Trent holds). These coaches are to “coach” the principals on being instructional leaders. Ms. Trent was placed in that position because of her skills in this area.

Not only are the superintendents aware of the need and are intentional in their placement of principals, but the assistant superintendents in charge of curriculum in the district also exhibited strong curriculum knowledge. Ms. Blakely had been the principal of a Blue Ribbon School and her school was recognized statewide for outstanding literacy efforts in 2002. In talking with both of the assistant superintendents, they were able to move the conversation easily between prior curriculum issues to our present challenges with all of the curriculum in North Carolina changing along with the accountability model. They were able

to fully participate in the conversation ranging from RtI to the mClass Reading 3D. Apple County District fully utilized a “coach” model with one coach for every two schools who answered to the elementary director and provided staff development, instructional modeling, teacher support (finding resources and materials), and “walk-throughs” or observations. This process, along with a consistent district reading program has been in place since 2008. In the last few years, Beech County District has utilized coaches for principals and coaches for teachers with the specific intention to develop instructional leaders and effectively implement the new curriculum.

Principal Backgrounds

Both of the principals in this study were veteran administrators and teachers. Ms. Johnson has been in the education field for 29 years and Ms. Trent for 19 years. Ms. Johnson taught every grade level in elementary school and actually worked at Globe Elementary School as a teacher for ten years. She has a Reading Certification for K-12 which also reflects her additional training in reading. Ms. Trent was a former high school English teacher and as such firmly subscribed to the notion that reading has always been important to her. By bringing the five day training of Reading Foundations provided through the North Carolina State Improvement Project to her school and actively participating, she learned about “teaching reading” and all the essential components recommended by research and the International Reading Association.

Major Themes

In analyzing the interview data, it was necessary to separate the things that were traits of the principals for literacy instructional leadership, other administrative skills, and supporting elements. The “themes” which emerged from the data were sometimes difficult to categorize as there was much overlap in these characteristics. Therefore, in revising the conceptual framework, the model was changed to have the “themes” represented as gears as they are interlocking and each impacts the other one (see Figure 2). The literacy instructional leader is the driveshaft that is the driving force for these themes and keeps them in rotation. All of these themes or gears are dependent on the other for the machine to move forward or for there to be “reading achievement for students.” One of the largest gears is the PLC/RtI structure because it also encompasses so much of the structure and the culture of the school (the way we do business).

The other important element that is part of the driveshaft of literacy instructional leadership is the focus on students. This was mentioned throughout the interviews in regard to both principals as well as former principals of the schools. Ms. Hinton verbalized this concept as inherent traits in both Ms. Johnson and the former principal. The teacher explained, “That’s where we started a lot of our focus, in what’s best for children.” It was further explained by Ms. Johnson that when teachers had been resistant to staff development and the changes that they were being asked to make in the classrooms, they were initially reluctant to implement the changes, however, once they saw the results they were getting, they “came to the understanding that this is what’s best for kids.” In relating what is now

expected out of the new curriculum standards, Mr. Giles and Ms. Trent indicated it has been difficult on the teachers with hard work, “We have been asked to do a lot but it is the right thing for kids.” In Ms. Trent’s situation, even though it was not explicitly stated by her teachers, they did indicate that they appreciated the fact that “she understood that K-2 is just as important” and supported what they do with teacher placement and materials.

PLC/RtI Structure

Both of these principals used the vocabulary of PLC’s and then also effectively discussed the essential components, not by trying to describe what a PLC is, but in identifying activities they regularly performed at the schools. Ms. Trent now even goes to the schools in her current position to lead PLC’s and to review data with the teachers and principals. Part of her position is to “role-model” to principals how to lead an effective PLC and what it entails. Buffum et al. (2009) have described how PLC’s and the RtI structure are essentially one and the same. He elucidates the process for schools that already have an effective PLC process, that the implementation of RtI will simply dove-tail perfectly with this and not seem like a separate entity or “one more thing to do.” The basic tenets of PLC’s involve the administration and teachers working together analyzing data to determine if the instruction is being effective and if not, what to do about it. The key elements are “working together” and coming up with a plan for success for the students.

In concise terms, RtI involves much of the same processes. The formal implementation of RtI requires utilizing a “universal screener” for initial identification of students based on a test with national “norms” to identify if the student is falling within national parameters

based on certain skills. It also involves the administration and teachers working in unison to analyze what actions are required if the students are at-risk or not meeting the existing standards. Both of these principals used these strategies at their schools by working together with their teachers and looking at benchmark standards for their students. Even though Ms. Trent's school district did not have strong benchmark standards, they formulated their own at school to monitor students. They also used student notebooks to track students' progress. While the Apple County District had more district level processes and support in place, the same type of processes were in place at Crater Elementary school under the direction of Ms. Trent.

Relationships

Part of an effective structure of a Professional Learning Community is the development of productive relationships. Relationships are very clearly a recurrent theme throughout all of the interviews. Sometimes it was very explicitly stated about the principals such as when Mr. Giles was talking about how Ms. Trent had to help her teachers when their reading scores first fell in 2008 because of the changes in the standard for proficiency in reading. Ms. Trent said that she had to "love them and support them because they beat themselves up. I just had a really good strong rapport." Then Mr. Giles responded, "I think what you had as a principal, you had that balance with high expectations but was able to couch that in a way with the staff where they felt comfortable going out on a limb to try new things." In other words, she had relationships with them but also was not afraid to do the difficult things she had to do for the sake of the school (such as moving some great teachers to first grade). Part

of the relationship building was that she also allowed them to try new things that increased the comfort level amid the angst of change.

Ms. Johnson discussed her relationship with the district coach and how helpful she is to all of the teachers by performing classroom observations and keeping them abreast of the new curriculum. All agreed that this type of relationship building did not happen overnight which resulted in the feeling of trust of someone in that position. Ms. Johnson role modeled respect for that position as she relayed her comments to the superintendent about keeping those positions, stating, “If you take away everything else don’t take away our coaches because they bridge that gap.” The literacy lab teacher, Ms. Smith indicated that she thought Ms. Johnson was moved to Mars school this year because the central office felt like that school could use “some nurture and some relational things.” Ms. French said that “her staff meetings at the beginning of the year she always said something touching to make you cry or think about. When you think about that kid you want to strangle, she always made you think about it (think about something else positive).” Ms. Smith indicated that even the retired principal had made their school feel like home. She stated that Ms. Johnson’s “expertise is relationships.” She went on to explain that whenever an employee had a sick child, she would always emphasize the need to take care of his/her family first. She stated that “her goodbye party was a complete meltdown.”

Both principals were also described as supporting the teachers, whether it was purchasing additional materials like Letterland and Burst for Ms. Trent or supporting innovative programs, such as Ms. Smith’s position of literacy lab teacher. Ms. Smith had also

previously come up with a program called “Sing, Read, and Learn” in 2008 when she was a fifth grade teacher. Ms. Johnson supported her in sharing this with her grade level and other grade levels and the program caught on as a school initiative that involved working on fluency. The skill of fluency is a research-based component recognized by the International Reading Association as essential in reading improvement.

Shared Leadership/Teacher Empowerment

Both principals had positive working relationships with their districts and were spoken of highly by their assistant superintendents. One had even been given a promotion within the last year because of her skills in working with PLC’s at her school. Ms. Trent was brought to the district to emulate some of these same skills on a district level and to role model how to run PLC’s for other principals. Mr. Giles even said that they had strong “shared leadership” in the district when asked who had made certain decisions.

This sense of shared leadership was also reflected with what the principals put in place at their school levels. By working within a PLC framework of having professional conversations about students, analyzing the data and working together to find solutions, the principals were making it clear that it was not just about them, but they were all in the process together to help students. Ms. Lebo made this clear in her email communication about the entire staff working together to succeed. When Ms. French was giving Ms. Smith praises about her work, Ms. Smith turned it back again to giving credit to all of them by stating, “it takes a village.”

Another important aspect of the relationship building was empowering teachers. Ms. Smith said that the entire idea of the Literacy Lab was Ms. Johnson's, nonetheless she empowered her to take it and run with it. When Ms. Smith asked Ms. Johnson how to do her lessons, she told her to figure it out based on the ideas in her head when she wrote the curriculum map materials. She also indicated that Ms. Johnson was really good at encouraging the "good stuff" that teachers were doing. Recognizing the things that were good and really encouraging those things was a strength. While she was able to deal with the difficult things (such as moving all of the kindergarten assistants) that part would sometimes take her a while to do but she was really good at the encouragement. Likewise, Ms. Trent was also recognized for empowering her teachers as well. She chose one teacher specifically to be the school trainer for the K-3 assessment program, mClass Reading 3D. In the email communication with this teacher, it is very apparent that she is organized and focused on this mission and that in performing this task as trainer for the school, she feels she has become a better teacher.

Effective Resource Use and Intestinal Fortitude

While it is a commonly held belief that resources are generally considered programs and materials, people can be the greatest resource. Utilizing funds to create unique positions, reduce class sizes, or hire tutors should be considered resources. One of the first things mentioned about Ms. Trent by her supervisor, Mr. Giles, was effective placement of her teachers (being resources). He mentioned that she had done quite a bit of movement with her teachers to put them where they could provide the greatest benefit. Ms Trent termed this

“strategic staffing” to have the right people in the right places. When asked whether the placements were well received, they indicated that it was not always immediately embraced, but Mr. Giles said that she had the “fortitude to move forward with it.” Interestingly enough, Ms. Johnson also moved some of her teachers around as well. The Title One teacher, Ms. Jones, had said they she had talked to her about moving and it was good for both of them. The literacy lab teacher, Ms. Smith, indicated that Ms. Johnson broke up a trio of teachers who were working together and it had a positive impact. Ms. Trent also used some of her funds to hire tutors for the students, and for materials that the teachers liked such as Burst and Letterland. She also provided funding for the teachers to attend the North Carolina Reading Conference which one teacher liked so well she said that she would pay for it herself this year if the current principal chose not to send them.

Ms. Johnson and Ms. Trent both purchased books for a leveled library (which is a library that has books that are identified with levels of difficulty for student reading ability). Ms. Johnson’s staff indicated that they felt “ahead of the wave” because the coach had worked with them in building up their informational text leveled libraries. The new Common Core curriculum places a greater emphasis on comprehension of informational text for students. The new assessments are expected to have approximately 50% of the assessments on informational texts versus literary texts. In addition to these resources, Ms. Johnson also hired tutors for the lower grades. In past years she also had the lower grade teachers partnering with the upper grade teachers to provide tutoring. She said, “The thought there was then the kids who were really struggling the most, the lower grade teacher would be able

to offer some strategies and ideas from staff development that maybe a 3-5 teacher may not have been a part of.” (The upper grade teachers generally have not had specific training regarding phonemic awareness and phonics but a student struggling in reading may still need instruction in these areas.) In regard to providing other materials, each teacher had been supplied with a Heinemann reading comprehension toolkit. The teachers indicated that this really helped them as the teacher assistants also utilized the information when working in small groups with students on specific skills.

Professional Development

The staff development utilized by these principals was of greater intensity than the “once and done” or “sit and get” varieties. Not only did they provide staff development, they were engaged in the process themselves as learners. Ms. Johnson said, “We are all growing, myself included in how does this look differently now? How does it look different than last year?” She was referring specifically to learning the Common Core curriculum. She also later indicated when asked about her reading certification (and making light of it), “I mean regardless of what your degrees are you have to continuously stay up with what is going on (or) you will be outdated real quick.”

Ms. Blakely, her assistant superintendent, also indicated that they have changed the structure of their principal meetings not only to get more staff development into the meetings, but to cover these topics first before they start addressing other issues (meaning while the principals were more alert). The district staff, coaches and principal leaders provide training such as book studies. When they have a big district initiative like the full

scale implementation of guided reading, the principals attend the full training during the summer with the teachers. They get the “full” training and not a watered down version. Also of significant import is the system in place for the coaches to do optional “walk-throughs” (or classroom observations) with the principals. Ms. Mitchell, the elementary director, explained this process and said that they have follow-up conversations after the observations. She said, “I think the walk-throughs are crucial. The schools that are doing the walk-throughs are seeing the benefits.” Ms. Johnson is taking advantage of this opportunity with her coach. When she processes with her coach she says, “This is what I saw... did I see the right thing? Did I look for the right thing? What else should I be doing differently?” She said that it helps her to really understand what she is looking for in the classroom. Ms. Trent also brought research-based staff development to her school with Reading Foundations. Accordingly, she revealed she needed to learn it as well as she had never taught reading and she “sat through every minute of it and learned so much.” She stated that “I felt like if it was important to me, it would be important to them. I felt like the things I did learn, I could have much better instructional conversations with teachers.”

Both principals also had training for their teacher assistants and used them in an instructional capacity. In Ms. Trent’s school, the assistants were trained to listen to students read and work with the students in small groups. In Ms. Johnson’s case, there was a district system in place, especially for the Title One assistants. They were specifically trained to teach guided reading groups. Ms. Johnson supported this in her school. Mr. Peters said often you could not tell the difference between the teachers and the teacher assistants with respect

to providing instruction. It was common practice in their district to hire the Title One trained teacher assistants as teachers upon completion of their degree as they were very well trained and valuable assets.

Another important distinction with their professional development was the indisputable fact that they were using research-based programs and products. The Reading Foundations that was used by Ms. Trent is extremely research-based and helps teachers to develop the capacity for the practices associated with the recommendations from the International Reading Association. It explains why students struggle with reading based on brain research and what teachers can do about it. It is an in-depth training that often goes beyond what is taught in traditional classes in institutions of higher education for teaching reading.

In Ms. Johnson's district, they have delved deeply into guided reading as endorsed by Fountas and Pinnell which is also research-based. They also implemented writing training (reading and writing are considered to be inter-connected in the learning process) with Lucy Calkins. The programs at Globe Elementary supported by Ms. Johnson were based on Tim Rasinski's work on fluency. The literacy lab teacher, Ms. Smith also participated in some of his research with fluency in the innovative program of "Sing, Read and Learn."

High Expectations

The concept of holding high expectations is reported in two areas with these principals. It is viewed as something that they have for their teachers and also for the students. It could also be stated as something that they have for themselves as leaders. It was specifically referenced that the former principal (now retired) at Mars Elementary had high expectations

for the students but Ms. Smith noted that Ms. Johnson was able to express these high expectations even better than the former administrator.

Ms. Trent and her former teachers also expressed that they had high expectations for the students. The first grade teachers indicated that they held the students accountable for what they had taught them. Even the teachers expressed high expectations for their own peers. Ms. Newsome said, “Are you going to teach what you are expected to teach? You have to be a teacher that... Are you going to go above and beyond? You have to teach what is expected but then you know always look and make sure you are challenging those children. You expect them to know that stuff. I have high expectations.”

One other important item to note is that the high expectations were coupled with training the students on where they were academically and what they needed to do to grow. When discussing whether or not they use reading leveling on texts in the library, they indicated that they did not, because “we wanted it to be purely for enjoyment, high interest. But the information they know about where they are in guided reading transfers over to SSR (self-selected reading) so the children know their independent reading level as well. They know their range but they have been taught to decide if the book is just right for their reading” (per the coach at Mars Elementary). Then Ms. Hinton also indicated that “they know what it is keeping (them) on that level at that point... and what they need to go to the next one. When they go to SSR they know the questions they need to get to the next one. They ‘wanna’ move.” So the students are not only empowered to improve, they are intrinsically motivated to increase their level of texts (indicating reading improvement). Likewise, the idea of high

expectations is coupled with a sense of urgency. At Mars Elementary, this was established by the former principal but continues even without a directive from the current administrator. Ms. Johnson however is amazed because she explained how the teachers are working one on one with students in the mornings before school officially starts, “when most people are going around getting their coffee.”

Summary

Chapter Four is a compilation of the data in this multiple case qualitative study of two principals and their instructional leadership behaviors or traits working in large, high poverty schools that showed reading growth in a three year period based on the End of Grade data as reported by the State of North Carolina. Since one of these principals is also currently at another school that was also identified by the data as showing growth in a similar setting (large, Title One elementary school) the information from the teachers and coach in that school is valid to be used for identifying traits from the former principal as well (now retired).

The research question was, “What does literacy instructional leadership look like of an elementary principal leading a large high poverty school that has shown consistent growth over a three-year period?” Interviews were conducted in two counties that are located in different regions in North Carolina and serve different types of populations. Two assistant superintendents and the elementary director were interviewed who had knowledge of the schools and principals. The two principals who were the focus of the research were interviewed. Two additional principals were interviewed since they are now at the present

schools as a courtesy and to identify if they could shed any light on the traits of the former principals. Interviews were also conducted with an assistant principal and a district coach. A literacy lab teacher, four Title One teachers, and five other teachers also participated in the interview process. Two teachers were not available and offered to provide their comments via email. The information was used from the www.ncschoolreportcard.org database from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to confirm the data for reading proficiency and growth and the names of the current principal. By creating a table with the emergent themes, the data became more visible for analysis. While there is much interconnectedness throughout every aspect of a school environment and the multiple roles of each of the players, themes did emerge that could be attributed to the traits of the principals.

Chapter Five will provide a summary of the study, discussion of key findings in relation to the research, and implications for future research, policy and practice.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Implications

Increased pressure over the last decade from federal legislation regarding student accountability only adds to the already difficult role of administrators of public schools. As clearly stated by Militello, Rallis and Goldring (2009), “The charge for change falls on school principals; they are the ones expected to generate strategic solutions and lead day to day implementation” (p. 16). Principals who lead Title One schools have even greater demands as sanctions have focused more attention on the proficiency of their students. The subjects that are assessed across the nation currently are reading and math. The impact of these assessments on schools also highlights the problem within our nation of our poorest students’ lack of academic performance. The impact of a deficiency in literacy skills not only affects students in school, but throughout their lives. As previously stated, and according to Buffum, Mattos, and Weber (2009), poor literacy skills greatly impact dropout rates and the statistics are not favorable for dropouts. As indicated in chapter two, poor literacy impacts health, income, length of time on public assistance, and the potential for incarceration. Therefore, the principal of a large elementary school with a high population of students of poverty confronts a great moral challenge in assisting students to gain the essential elements of reading (when it is the most crucial) for success not only in school, but also throughout their entire lives.

The research associated with this study indicates that indeed, principals have been acknowledged as having an impact on student achievement; however, the specifics regarding

their instructional leadership directly related to reading are very new and as yet to be reported with assured specificity. Using Marzano's (2005) meta-analysis, Waters and Cameron (2007) identify a "statistically significant (effect size) between school level leadership and student achievement of .25" which they interpret as definitively answering the question of whether or not leadership makes a difference (p. 3). Exactly what they do to make that difference is less thoroughly defined and examined in the research.

There are standards in place to identify the qualities of leadership such as those listed in these types of studies as well as those used by universities such as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders which focus on broad categories, including: Vision, Culture, Safety, Families and Community, Ethics, and Political, Social, and Economic Contexts within the school. However, it is recognized that these standards also lack specificity with respect to identifying behaviors or skills to emulate for student success.

With regard to Literacy Instructional Leadership, there is even less guidance and direction. Termed by Murphy (2004) the "second generation of instructional leadership," researchers are now looking at specific subjects in regard to instructional leadership. Since the research is not nearly as prevalent in this area, this study adds to the body of research regarding the traits, characteristics, and attributes of principals successful in improving reading achievement over a three-year period in large, high poverty schools. This study is a qualitative multiple case analysis of two principals that seeks to provide more detailed information regarding the types of traits or characteristics these principals have or the types

of activities they employ with the hope of helping future administrators and the institutions that assist them in leading the charge for improvement in reading and literacy for our nation's poorest children.

In interviewing central office staff, the principals, an assistant principal, a coach, Title One teachers, a literacy lab teacher and regular classroom teachers, themes emerged that offer insight and support to other studies focusing on this same topic. These themes are creating a PLC/RtI structure, relationships, shared leadership and teacher empowerment, effective resource use with intestinal fortitude, professional development, and high expectations. Along with these themes, environmental conditions are also important elements of consideration such as the backgrounds of the principals, low staff turnover rates, and the support of the district through vision and programs. The conceptual framework was revised to better reflect these themes and these environmental conditions. The themes are then analyzed in light of the current literature. The trait of humility was also noted to be relevant for both cases, which has not been promulgated in previous research. Limitations of the study are outlined in order to have a realistic view of the data. Implications for practice are considered which include potential recommendations for districts as well as institutions of higher education. Considerations for future research are examined in light of what was revealed through this research of principal traits and behaviors.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Extant Research

The literature review for this study began with the emphasis of the importance of literacy in our society and consequently the negative impact illiteracy has on one's future. The

principals in this study obviously understood the relevance of the connection between lifelong success and reading achievement. It is a trait that is most likely more apparent for principals who serve at-risk students in large Title One schools. Both principals in this study were tuned in to focus on the students and the need for them to obtain reading skills early. They were aware of the challenges in their communities as a result of poverty. Ms. Trent specifically placed some of her best teachers in the first grade classrooms so the students would have the best chances to learn to read. Even though she had not ever taught someone to read herself, because of the training she received through Reading Foundations, she learned the importance of obtaining these skills early. Jenson (2009) indicates that the awareness by principals of the enormity of the problem of obtaining those skills early and the consequences of failure are critical in a school's success.

Another area that is confirmed by the research in regard to these two principals is their background knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy. Both of these principals are veteran teachers and administrators who have additional training in reading. They also discussed on-going professional development they are involved in and discussed current educational issues. While Edmunds et al. (2007) indicate this is an area that needs further investigation, the principals' background and training in reading and the positive relationship with the reading improvement in their respective schools is reinforced by this study. The study by Mackey et al. (2006) also concurs which compares the principal with the strong reading background and his 20% growth in reading achievement to the principal without the background who did not even try to learn the curriculum (whose scores dropped). Cotton

and Savard's (1980) conclusion is that this content and pedagogy knowledge is so important, it should be considered in the hiring process. This practice is exactly what was done in Apple County District with Ms. Johnson. Even though it was not indicated that this was done in her case, Ms. Trent took it upon herself to learn the curriculum along with ensuring that her teachers understood the research behind reading achievement and had the tools for implementation. This was also emphasized in the literature by Marzano et al. (2005) as one of the top seven attributes listed specifically as knowledge of curriculum, instruction (pedagogy) and assessment practices.

In attempting to isolate the components of leadership that demonstrate a relationship to academic achievement, I must concur with Heck (1992) that the "relationship is more complex than originally thought" (p. 21). Just as a principal has many roles and responsibilities that pertain to the general running of the school, there are actually many traits and responsibilities for impacting student achievement, and particularly reading achievement. This research focus on a specific curriculum in relationship to instructional leadership has been termed the second-generation work on instructional leadership (Murphy, 2004).

In analyzing the data pertaining to the principals, it is clear that the participants themselves often had to reflect deeply on the things that could have made a difference in their reading improvement. It was difficult for them to sort out things that they could clearly identify as directly attributable to the principal's traits. The analysis involved going beyond the "words" to look for the deeper meaning of how the principal was involved and or supported the information. For example, when the teachers would discuss their use of

materials and trying out new things, an analysis would reveal that it was the principal's relationship of trust with them and her willingness to allow them to try new things that led to her support of them. The humility of the principals in this study also led to a need to dig deeper within the context of the interviews since they did not "toot their own horns" and it was very apparent that they were more comfortable giving others the credit for success.

By analyzing the data through the lens of the components listed in the literature review based on Booth and Roswell's (2007) Nine Areas of Content Knowledge, the data from this multiple case analysis revealed much alignment. There is also alignment with the seven responsibilities outlined by Marzano et al. (2005, p. 120) in the exploration of the topic of second order change which again are: flexibility; monitoring and evaluating; change agent (challenging the status quo); knowledge of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment; intellectual stimulation; ideals and beliefs; and optimizer. The distinct difference with these responsibilities however, is that they are not around one primary change but the overall change and processes put in place by these principals. By placing the data in the revised Conceptual Framework (Figure 2), there is a clear presentation of the instructional leader being the driveshaft that turns the gears of the traits needed for reading achievement and life success for students. This model shows the interaction of the gears and the inter-relatedness of each trait.

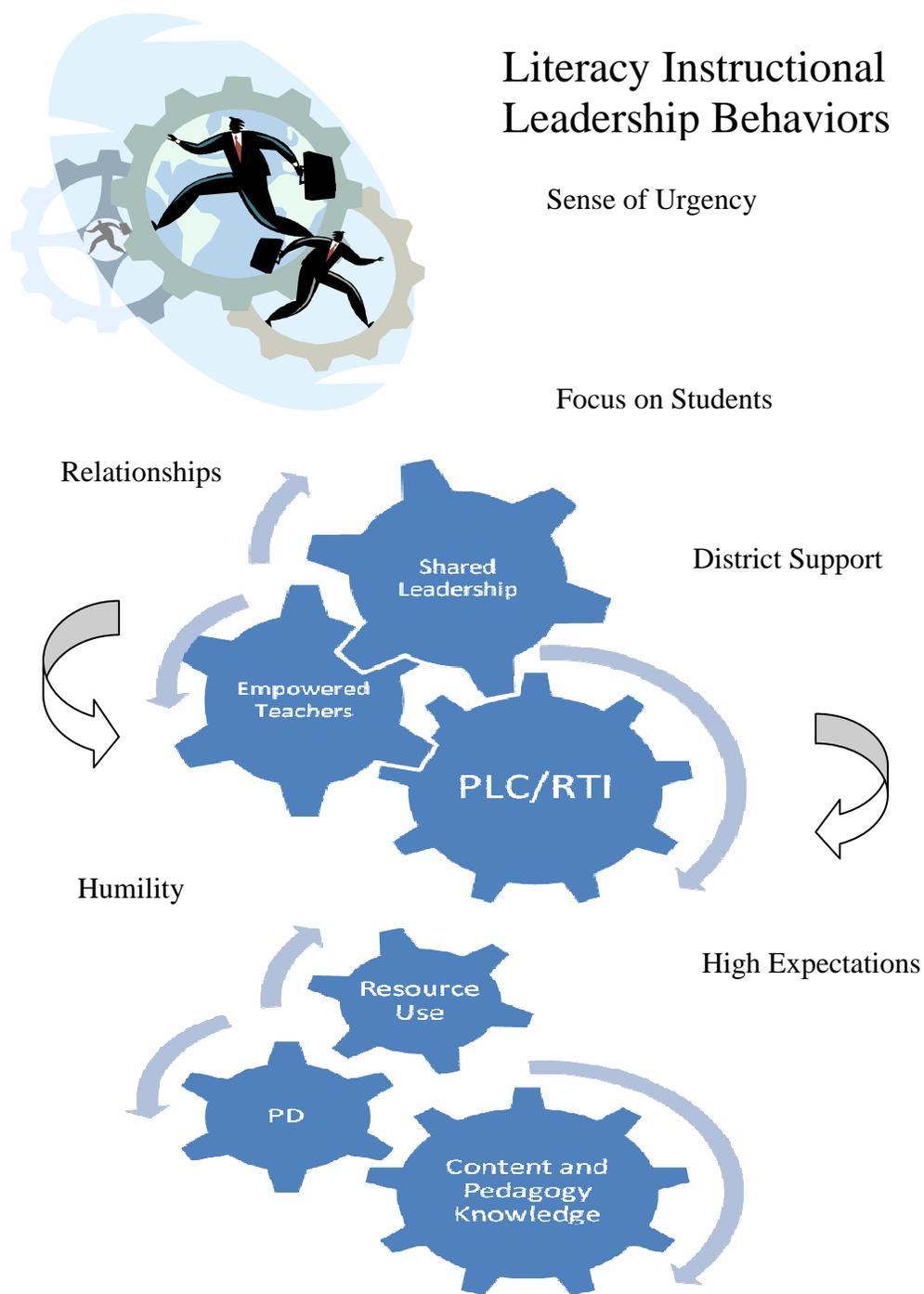


Figure 2: Revised Conceptual Framework

PLC's/RtI Structure

According to Powell (2007), using frequent assessment data and analyzing that data to guide instruction was one of the essential components attributed to the success of a high poverty school in North Carolina. This is an essential component of PLC's and RtI alike. Both principals in this study were data savvy and accustomed to speaking with their teachers regarding the students and their performance. Even though they may not have been utilizing a strict RtI or PLC model, they incorporated the essential elements into their leadership behaviors and practices. Based on the study of the principal in Virginia (Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010), establishing benchmark assessments was one of the first things she did as a "turnaround" principal to assess not only where the students were, but where the teachers were in their expertise as well. She utilized this data to have meaningful conversations with her teachers. These traits are also mentioned as part of Marzano's top seven for second order change (Marzano et al., 2005) in regard to the principal having content knowledge and knowledge of assessment practices.

Both Ms. Trent and Ms. Johnson spoke about making effective use of data to have purposeful conversations with their teachers as well. The way this interlocks with the other gear of professional development is that Ms. Trent realized that she needed training in beginning reading to help her to have those meaningful talks with her teachers. Ms. Johnson utilized her coach to keep her current on the new standards and to assist her in knowing what to look for in the classroom for implementation. Ms. Johnson was also very effective in

making sure that the teachers knew she was part of this learning process, creating a sense of “we are in this together” concept.

The Newton-Conover City Schools (Stegall & Linton, 2012) also credit the PLC framework for their success within their district. They share that their weekly collaborative team meetings assist in building the sense of community within the schools and break down the traditional barriers of isolationism for teachers. Their comments about their school working together as a “collaborative force” is also clearly reflected in the schools under the direction of Ms. Johnson and Ms. Trent (Stegall & Linton, 2012, p. 65). Wahlstrom & Louis (2008) also highlight the use of the structure of PLC’s in relation to improved instruction and student achievement. What they highlight is also reflected with the cases of this research and that is when the school community functions properly within the PLC framework, the elements (support, shared values, common focus on learning, collaboration, shared practices and reflective dialogue) are so “deeply embedded that teachers are often not aware of them” (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008, p. 463). Within this research, the participants all had a difficult time identifying specific factors that contributed to their success. However, by analyzing their conversations and having content knowledge myself to know if they knew what they were talking about, these traits of the principals creating these environments became more clear.

Relationships

Another gear in this model is relationships. Throughout the literature, this is explained as important in different ways. It is listed specifically in regard to school culture as having a

“mediated effect” which Hallenger and Heck (1998) felt could not be measured directly but is still seen to have an impact on achievement. Relationships were mentioned throughout all the interviews with the participants. Sometimes, the terminology was used directly and other times it was inferred but it was very clear that the relationships formed over time allowed these principals to make changes that teachers were able to embrace by providing the needed support and encouragement. This encouragement was expressly used by Ms. Trent when reading scores first fell because of the measurement change in reading and then to encourage her teachers to try new things. Ms. Johnson was also very supportive of her teachers trying new ideas as well. Perhaps it is best summarized by the statement that a huge part of this culture building involved “accountability pressures within the context of strong relationships and engagement of teachers in planning and problem solving” and assisted teachers in developing a belief that “this is possible!” (Brown, et al., 2011, p. vii-viii). This would be a perfect description of what Ms. Johnson and Ms. Trent did. They established those relationships of trust that allowed them to ask the teachers to stretch themselves for the benefit of the students. The element of trust was mentioned by Ms. French when she explained that on their school survey, their school had a 98% rating in this area. With Ms. Johnson’s current school the staff also mentioned the “trust” that they had in the coaches in providing assistance without making the teachers feel incompetent. Wahstrom & Louis (2008) point out many studies where trust was embedded as a key component in the relationships with teachers and principals that allowed more collective decision making to occur within safe environments.

Shared Leadership and Teacher Empowerment

While not specifically used within the original conceptual framework except within the scope of being a part of the workings of effective PLC's, it is apparent through the data revealed in this study that shared leadership and teacher empowerment are important aspects of the success of these principals in leading schools that have shown growth in reading. The shared leadership for these principals is not only something that they create in their school environments, but is part of the culture of the districts where they are employed. Ms. Johnson has strong support from a knowledgeable superintendent and central office personnel. This support is also connected very closely at the school level with the district coaches that support two schools. Ms. Trent likewise has support from the vision of the superintendent and an assistant superintendent knowledgeable about curriculum, a realistic view of their district and the components needed to embrace change and growth.

Robinson et al. (2008) posit that it is the principals that create the environmental conditions within the school through establishment of the framework and culture etc. that allow the teachers to be empowered to have a more direct impact on student achievement. The principal is "key" therefore in establishing this climate within their schools to empower teachers to take leadership roles and to have shared ownership of the responsibility of the academic success of the students. The statement by Miletello et al. (2009) is a perfect analogy for this in these schools: "Principals do not have to be the sole superhero, although they may in fact develop and lead a legion of superheros" (p. 21). As clearly revealed through the literature and this research, there are many roles and responsibilities of the

principalship even when drilled down to the context of instructional leadership. When the principal is able to empower teachers and share the leadership with regard to instructional leadership, then there are “more hands on deck” to help support each other with the goal of increasing reading achievement.

Stegall and Linton (2012) outline the success of a district’s approach to shared leadership in North Carolina. They state that “Creating a structure that empowers teachers builds buy-in, a sense of transparency and collective efficacy. This belief in the power to reach school goals can carry over into the entire school culture” (Stegall & Linton, 2012, p. 63). The assistant superintendent that wrote this article understood the need for this shared leadership to be from the district to the principal and to the school. They identify that as teachers can feel secluded in their classrooms, administrators can feel isolated as the head of the school and there is a great need for all to be working together.

Perhaps the best way to see the behavior as that of the “optimizer” as explained by Marzano et al., (2005) is in the way that Ms. Johnson empowered her teachers to do innovative things, specifically, Ms. Smith and her creative programs with fluency and then later, the literacy lab. She also had many other innovative programs that the Title One teachers led for parents and brought the community in through the use of the mobile library and tutoring program. Militello et al. (2009) summarizes this trait of “optimizer” as the one that “inspires and leads new and challenging innovations” (p. 20).

Resource Use with Intestinal Fortitude

Another interlocking gear is the effective use of resources, both materials and personnel. Robinson et al. (2008) indicate that leaders where schools performed about expectations were able to provide appropriate resources to their staff with clarity around the educational goals. Intestinal fortitude was added to this component because it was often mentioned by several participants that both principals made changes with the school personnel that were often not welcomed at first. The principals were described with clear terms such as having “fortitude” and being a “fearless leader.” They continued on their courses of action because they felt like it was in the best interests of the students. The Title One teacher indicated that Ms. Johnson had talked her into a move that wound up being in everyone’s best interest even though she was not initially enthused. Mr. Peters indicated that Ms. Johnson really knew her teachers because when he took the position as principal, he realized she had placed these teachers strategically on certain committees that suited them very well. Ms. Trent even called what she did “strategic staffing” as she moved key teachers where she felt she needed them to be. These traits did not stand out within the context of the literature review on literacy instructional leadership; however, they did surface as important with this study. There is one component of note within Marzano’s top seven that stands out and which Militello et al. terms “the ability to be comfortable with dissent” when there is a need to change something (Marzano et al., 2005; Militello et al., 2009). The intestinal fortitude part was of particular interest because it is also not something that is generally discussed as

having importance in the principalship. This could be a key component distinguishing this research.

Professional Development

Wepner, Strickland, and Feeley (2002), Bickel et al. (2005), and Murphy (2004) all are in agreement about the principals' involvement with professional development using an effective model with reading which involves not only current research-based practices, but also in classroom observations and consequential discussions. Both Ms. Trent and Ms. Johnson were very involved, staying current with curriculum issues from the district level training and with implementation at their respective schools. Ms. Johnson specifically worked with the district coach to assist with this strategy. Use of a coach (Bickel, Garnier, Matsumura, & Sartoris, 2009; Fletcher et. al, 2011; Nelson & Stein, 2003; Steckel, 2009) is recommended in much of the literature as well in assisting principals with these duties specifically associated with working with teachers on curriculum. There is concurrence that the principal must clearly take the lead but coaches are seen as valuable assets. Even though Ms. Trent did not have a coach to assist her, it is clear that the district saw the value in this as they utilized their RTTT monies to have district coaches (Ms. Trent's current position).

High Expectations

Generally referenced in the literature in the realm of the "culture" of the school, high expectations was a trait expressly stated by the participants. It is noted by both Stollenwerk (2009) and Fletcher et al. (2011) that core values and clear expectations in reading need to be established and supported by the principal. This culture of "high expectations" is also an

interlocking gear with relationships and the entire realm of instructional leadership. As previously noted Ms. Johnson and Ms. Trent both had high expectations of their staff and their students. They had worked to establish relationships and an environment where it was safe to this. They made it seem reasonable and possible as they were part of the process through the PLC/RtI format of meeting regularly with teachers to review students' current progress and improvement of instructional practices.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study involved the element of reviewing practices that had occurred as far back as 2008. While participants could recall some of the practices that had occurred beginning during that time, it did take some reflection and checking of dates.

The other limitation that could also be seen as a benefit (depending on how it is viewed) is my background with a degree in early childhood and elementary education, my role as a principal at a very similar type of school, and my current position as the elementary director in a school district. I have also taken the necessary steps to be recognized by the state of North Carolina as being a trainer for Reading Foundations. Because of my background and current knowledge about curriculum it enabled me to have a more complete understanding of the curriculum components discussed. My experiences, however, may also be a type of bias as I am very familiar with these topics. Since my roles had been similar I found that I had to continuously redirect our conversation back to the principals and their traits at the time of the growth in reading achievement versus the issues that we all currently face in North Carolina with new curriculum, teacher evaluation and assessment standards.

Recommendations for Practice

From this study, many conclusions can be made in relationship to the practices of principals and their traits associated with literacy instructional leadership. Institutions of higher education can consider these themes in relation to their leadership programs for principals. The difficulty, as expressed through the literature and this study, is in “isolating” these traits in order to study them in regard to replicable practices or habits. The realization that these traits are viewed as gears in a machine would be helpful in viewing the interconnectedness of the traits. The expertise in curriculum is not currently a class or expectation in most institutions for administrative licensure. However, it is clear from this research that the knowledge of the curriculum and pedagogy allowed the principals to have better conversations with their teachers and to “know what they were looking for” in the classrooms. Also, fully understanding the potential power behind the ability to lead in a PLC/RtI structure could also be part of a class in the administrative degree program. This structure was recurrent throughout this study and in all of the current research directly related to literacy instructional leadership. Again, the components are in all of the current studies, even if the terminology is not specifically used. There are also national standards for professional development for adults that could assist new principals in providing effective staff development that includes components of follow-up with classroom observations and discussions. Educational practices have tended to be the “once and done” variety that has no impact in actually changing instructional practices which lead to improved student achievement.

These concepts could also be utilized by districts in their professional development with administrators. Not all districts hire with the same focus as these districts for curriculum knowledge and instructional leadership. If a principal is lacking in these areas, the district could set up staff development to try to “catch the principals” up. Ms. Trent realized her need to learn about “teaching students to read” and brought experts in to her school to build her capacity in this area as well as her teachers. Professional development in districts could also focus on these themes as well to continue to support principals in their literacy instructional leadership such as leading PLC’s and RtI, using resources effectively, establishing effective relationships, and having high expectations for all students. Role-modeling of these concepts by central office staff from the directors to the superintendent would also prove beneficial as it did with these districts. Districts would also need to be cognizant of the need to support principals when they do make difficult personnel decisions such as moving teachers to different grade levels.

An unintended finding of this research is the impact of the support of the superintendent and the district for the development of the principal and the schools involved. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) explore the ways that the districts can impact building level leadership which includes the organizational structure around PLC’s and effective management of the instructional program. However, they explicitly state that “the efficacy of school leaders, it would seem, arises less from direction and inspiration and more from the aligned and supportive nature of their working conditions” (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008, p. 521). Clearly

the two principals involved in this case study had support from their districts which added to their confidence level and support.

The practice of utilizing and understanding materials and programs that are truly research-based would also benefit principals. While this is an oft over-used term, “research-based” should be thoroughly understood. Keeping current as indicated by Ms. Trent in the practices is also important to principals and districts. With the implementation of all new standards in North Carolina along with new assessments, principals must search out new ways to assist teachers in these times of change. Teachers also need support and encouragement when it comes to fully understanding the new part of their evaluation tool which links them directly to student achievement on Standard Six. Not only do principals need to have the background knowledge in the basic tenets of reading and how students learn to read, they must understand concepts that are the foundation of the Common Core for Language Arts such as text complexity and how to scaffold instruction for students. They need to assist teachers in understanding how to use data appropriately to assist students in enhancing their reading achievement goals.

One final recommendation for practice would be what Militello et al. (2009) explained regarding the principal developing a “legion” of superheroes within the school by utilizing shared leadership and empowering teachers to be creative and innovative in seeking solutions to their problems. All of the research clearly identifies that principals are important but the expectations for them to be able to “single-handedly” perform all of the components

necessary for student achievement are overwhelming. They need to lead and support the work of collaboration among all of the stakeholders within the school.

Recommendations for Further Study

While this study was able to identify recurrent themes among two principals who have experienced success with growth in reading over time, there is still room to assist principals and institutions that train them (districts and institutions of higher education) to be able to have more “concrete examples” of what to do and how to do it. Since this topic with this amount of specificity related to literacy is rather new, this study does add to the body of research. It would be beneficial to initiate quantitative research on these specific skills which could indicate whether or not these themes consistently appear with other successful administrators in regard to literacy. Additional qualitative studies could continue to provide specifics on the “what to do” and “how to do it” aspects of leading a school to improvement in literacy. Since it is clear from the study that effective practices for professional development go beyond the “workshop”, principals would also benefit from coaches who could observe and monitor their practices and give constructive and timely feedback. As reflected in the district coach model with the trusting relationship in seeking assistance that is not punitive, it would need to be the same for the principal. While this is the new role for Ms. Trent, it is not as developed as having a one-on-one focus with each principal. However, this could be the beginnings of a new model for the principalship.

This research also brought to light the support from the district and superintendents which could also be a topic for further research. The Apple County District had many things in

place that provided uniformity throughout which sometimes made it difficult to isolate whether it was the principal or the district initiative, especially with the use of the coach model. The coach model itself is worthy of additional research. The coach was given much credit in this research in the Apple County District. Ms. Trent was hired to be a “district coach” for administrators based on her successes. These support systems for administrators may further assist in meeting the needs at the school in literacy leadership. However, when RttT money runs out next year, it is likely that many districts will eliminate instructional coaches. More research is needed to assess the effectiveness of such coaches, including a thorough cost/benefit analysis of their utility in school improvement.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to analyze the traits and behaviors of two principals of large, high-poverty schools who have shown growth over a three-year period in reading on the North Carolina End of Grade test. A multiple case study approach was used to assist with identifying the variables involved with the environment. It fell in line with Stake’s (1978) description to help us understand the experiences of those studied and to increase our own conviction of the practices. Since it was also exploratory, it sought to reveal practices that may not have been otherwise considered or considered in depth. This also happened with this study. Twenty-one people were participants in the study. Nineteen of the twenty-one people communicated in person and two communicated via email. The interviews were tape-recorded and the recordings were transcribed by the researcher. The transcriptions were then analyzed and the two cases (the principals) were compared to identify recurrent themes. The

information was then processed in light of the current research regarding literacy instructional leadership. Even though it is now generally agreed upon within the literature that the principal can impact student achievement, there is less agreement or information about how this is actually done. Principals are seen as having many roles but the role of instructional leader is now accepted as the role that would influence that of the instructional practices at the school which would impact student test scores. Through the analysis of this data, it is apparent that the same challenges that researchers have had in “isolating” specific traits, characteristics, or behaviors of principals that impact student achievement are also reflected again. Therefore, the conceptual framework utilizing the gear visual helps with the representation of the data. All traits, behaviors, and activities are dependent on one another and work together. As with the failed case in New Zealand (Timperley, 2006), if just one component is enforced or implemented at a school without the principal’s understanding and commitment to reading growth visible in all areas, it is not likely to net the desired results.

While most of the concepts identified are supported by the current research, there are two areas that are not really focused on that are specific, identifiable traits. Those are traits of humility and intestinal fortitude (especially in regard to human resources). While it would be difficult to “teach” these traits, it would be possible for them to be discussed and identified in others. It would also be recommended for a “coach” model to be used with the principalship so new administrators could set up these frameworks such as the PLC/RtI structure and effective professional development, but in relation to meeting with an “expert” in the field to process the current environment and challenges. Once principals graduate from an institution

with their administrative license and obtain the role of principal, they are often left on their own to “sink or swim.” On-going support could be provided by the district as a way to maintain these skills and problem-solve when issues arise. As with the model of the district coach, this would need to be embedded within a trusting relationship that would ensure no “punitive” measures resulted from the training.

While not an initial focus through the research, the data revealed that the concepts of the shared leadership not only with the district but also within the school was a vital part of the makeup of the work of these principals. This shared leadership was embedded among the culture of the school and incorporated within the structure of the Professional Learning Community. The work done by the principals was collaborative with teachers and assistants as well. Part of this shared leadership was also teacher empowerment to try new programs and ideas within the school. By having the relationships of trust and support teachers were able to take their knowledge and utilize it to develop innovation and to share that with their peers.

This study has added to the body of work on the second generation of instructional leadership by focusing on reading. It reinforces many of the acceptable practices that have already been espoused. It also brings to light some additional areas that are related that could be helpful to principals such as that of effective staff development that truly changes behaviors of teachers in the classrooms and the use of coaches. Further research could also be conducted on the importance of district support and focus and on the backgrounds of principals. While the study has helped to define some specific behaviors in regard to what

administrators can do to support reading growth in their schools, additional research is needed with specific regard to reading. With teachers and administrators now having the “growth of students” component added to their evaluation, this is even more relevant today. The indisputable gift of teaching children of poverty to read should continue to outweigh the importance of test scores and evaluation standards. Being an administrator of schools where this is occurring is worthy of continued research in order to assist others in this noble endeavor. “The actions of a principal who is a literacy leader will always speak louder than words” (Cobb, 2005, p. 473).

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Search Results

Proquest Dissertations and Theses Search 3/27/11 **Used through NC State library**

First Search

- Advanced Search
- Full Text
- Last 2 years
- English only
- Doctoral Only
- Terms: Elementary Principals and Reading Achievement in all fields and text
- Results: 11,287

Second Search

- Same as above, but added NC State University
- Results: 0

Third Search

- Same as above but changed terms to: “principal literacy instructional leadership” and “reading achievement”
- Results: 0

Fourth Search

- Same as above but removed NC State University
- Results: 0

Fifth Search

- Same as above but removed the word literacy from the term
- Results: 48 Skimmed over these and some appear relevant.

ERIC Database Search Through NCSU 2/4/12

First Search: Literacy Instructional Leadership (searched in All Text)

- Advanced search, peer reviewed, all education levels, all intended audience, all journals, all publication types, no date restrictions: Yielded 88 hits.

Second Search: Instructional Leadership and Literacy (same as above)

- Yielded 65 hits.

Third Search: Instructional Leadership (same as above)

- Yielded 2,006 hits.

Fourth Search: Instructional Leadership and Reading Achievement (same as above)

- Yielded 36 hits.

**Fifth Search: Instructional Leadership and Reading Achievement and High Poverty
(same as above)**

- Yielded 0 hits.

Sixth Search: Instructional Leadership and High Poverty (same as above)

- Yielded 14 hits.

**Seventh Search: Instructional Leadership and Literacy and High Poverty Schools
(same as above)**

- Yielded 1 hit.

Eighth Search: Elementary Principals and Reading Achievement (same as above)

- Yielded 4 hits.

ERIC Database Search**2/5/12****First Search: Elementary Principals, Instructional Leadership and High Poverty
Schools**

- Searched text in abstract, peer reviewed, full text
- Yielded 0 hits.

Second Search: Same but changed to all text

- Yielded 2 hits.

Third Search: Elementary Principals, Reading Achievement, and High Poverty Schools

- Searched text in all text, peer reviewed, full text
- Yielded 1 hit.

Fourth Search: Elementary Principals, Literacy Instructional Leadership and High Poverty (same as above).

- Yielded 0 hits.

Descriptive ERIC Search on Literacy Instructional Leadership

2/5/12

- All text, peer reviewed, full text
- Yielded 56 hits.
- Upon review of the articles, the topics included focused primarily on the following:
 - Technology Leadership: 14
 - Globalization: 1
 - Social Justice: 1
 - Moral Literacy: 5
 - Assessments: 2
 - STEM, Math: 3

- Secondary: 3
- Special Education: 1
- Coaching: 4
- Media Specialist: 1
- Segregation, Minority Educators: 2
- Financial Literacy, business model: 2
- Focus on Teachers or Teachers as Leaders: 8
- Specific focus on literacy and leadership: 7

Descriptive ERIC Database search on: Instructional Leadership and High Poverty

- Full text, peer review
- Yielded 11 hits.
- Upon review of the articles, the topics included focused primarily on the following:
 - Cultural, race relations, social action: 3
 - Math and/or science: 2
 - Gifted: 1
 - Charter school: 1
 - Coaching: 1
 - Troops to Teachers: 1
 - One article was the same as the above search on Instructional Leadership and poverty schools

- Another article was on the professionalism of instructional leaders in the U.S.

Descriptive ERIC Database Search on:

Elementary Principals and Reading Achievement

2/5/12

- Peer review, full text
- Yielded 32 hits.
- Upon review of the articles, the topics included focused primarily on the following:
 - Technology: 2
 - Assessments: 4
 - Principal Turnover: 1
 - Media Centers: 1
 - National Board Certified Teachers: 1
 - Creative Pedagogy, art, single gender classroom, evidence-based inquiry: 3
 - Looping: 1
 - Adolescent Literature: 2
 - Behavior: 1
 - Specific reading strategies: 3
 - The Condition of Education Report: 2
 - Comparison of the US Schools to 8 other countries: 1
 - State Studies on schools in transition: 2
 - Value-added school effects: 1

- Developing staff to work collaboratively: 1
- Instructional Leadership related to reading: 6

Appendix B: Interview Questions for Principals

1. What would you say has caused your school to have an increase in proficiency and growth in its reading achievement?
2. Tell me about the reading curriculum and pedagogy for reading instruction utilized in your school. When was it adopted and how was this adoption decided upon?
3. Describe any county support services in reading.
4. What do you do to help your struggling readers?
5. How do you monitor the reading program?
6. In what ways do you provide support for reading?
7. How do you feel that principals view their role in leading literacy instruction?
8. Have you received any specific training in leadership for literacy instruction? If so, what?
9. What are your beliefs about literacy instructional leadership?
10. Why have you chosen to focus on literacy in your school?
11. What is your role in the literacy instruction at your school, if any?
12. What does literacy instructional leadership look like?
13. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about that has contributed to your school's success that we have not already discussed?

**Appendix C: Interview Questions for Lead Teacher/ Curriculum Coach and
Teachers**

1. How long have you worked with the current principal?
2. Has anything happened since you have been here that has helped you become a more competent reading teacher?
3. What is your philosophy in regard to teaching reading? Has it changed since you have been teaching?
4. What do you think your school is doing to help students become more proficient in reading?
5. Why do you think your school has been consistent in showing growth over the last three years in regard to reading?
6. What specifically would you consider to be behaviors of the principal in regard to his/her role as literacy instructional leader?
7. What are your beliefs about literacy instructional leadership?
8. What is the principal's role in literacy instruction, if any?
9. What is your role in literacy instruction?
10. Has your county done anything for your school to assist you with your reading scores in the last three years?
11. Is there anything else that would help me to understand your school's success that I didn't ask about?

Appendix D: Interview Questions for District Personnel

1. What activities are you primarily involved in with the district?
2. What has the district done to improve reading scores in the district?
3. What has the district done to improve reading scores specifically in School X?
4. What can you tell me about your knowledge of the principal in School X and what he has done to improve reading scores?
5. Is this similar or different than other principals in your district?
6. What are your beliefs about literacy instructional leadership?
7. What does leadership for literacy instruction look like?
8. Are there any special programs for principals who may not have a thorough understanding of literacy instruction?

Appendix E: Participant List

Apple County School District

Name of Participant	Role of Participant
Mrs. Blakely	Assistant Superintendent
Ms. Mitchell	Elementary Director
Ms. Brewer	District Coach Assigned to Mars Elementary

Name of School	Name of Participant	Role of Participant
Mars Elementary	Ms. Johnson	Current Principal
	Ms. Jackson	First Grade Teacher
	Ms. Hinton	Fourth Grade Teacher
	Ms. Littleton	Title One Teacher
	Ms. Creech	Title One Teacher
Globe Elementary School	Mr. Peters	Current Principal
	Ms. Johnson	Former Principal
	Ms. Rose	Assistant Principal
	Ms. French	Title One Teacher
	Ms. Jones	Title One Teacher
	Ms. Smith	Literacy Lab Teacher

Beech County District

Participant	Role
Mr. Giles	Assistant Superintendent
Ms. Trent	District Lead Coach

Name of School	Participant	Role
Crater Elementary	Ms. Little	Current Principal
	Ms. Trent	Former Principal
	Ms. Newsome	First Grade Teacher
	Ms. Wood	First Grade Teacher
	Ms. Piper	First Grade Teacher
	Ms. Fisher	Second Grade Teacher (emailed)
	Ms. Lebo	Fourth Grade Teacher (emailed)

Appendix F: Traits of the Principals

Traits	Case A: Ms. Johnson	Case B: Ms. Trent	Other Retired Principal
Background	Veteran Teacher: Every grade K-5 (10 years at Globe Elementary) Veteran Administrator: 12 years Overall Experience: 29 years	Veteran Teacher: High School English Teacher Currently District Lead Achievement Coach	Veteran
Content Reading Knowledge	Strong	Strong	
Special Training	Reading Certification: K-12	Reading Foundations	
District Expectations/Support	Strong Curriculum Knowledge	Strong Curriculum Knowledge	
	District Coaches	District Lead Coaches (present)	
	Superintendent Support	Superintendent Support	
	District Reading Expectations		
	Intentional Hiring/Placement		
Professional Development	Participates fully with teachers	Leads as district coach	
	District level model includes monthly PD for administrators, assigning mentors for new principals District PD provided by coaches with classroom observations done jointly with principals	Established Reading Foundations (5 days for teachers)	
		Sent teachers to	

		NC Reading Conference	
	Title One Teacher Assistants well trained in guided reading to lead their own small groups	Teacher Assistants trained to assist with small groups, monitor reading	
	Is current on curriculum changes	Is current on curriculum changes	
Develops Relationships	School Survey said 98% trust factor at school	Yes, as reported by district	Made it feel like "home"
Knows teachers	As reported by new principal because of teacher placement on teams	As reported by district administrator, teachers placed as leaders or in specific grades	
Not afraid to make difficult decisions-like moving people	Yes-indicated by other teachers	Yes-indicated by district leader	
Utilizes PLC framework-Leads teachers in using data to guide instruction (meeting together, planning, discussing students)	Yes	Yes	
Shared Leadership	Yes, district, teachers, teacher assistants	Yes, district, teachers, teacher assistants and even custodians (helped with reading)	
Empowered Teachers	Yes	Yes	
Utilizes RtI framework-leads	Yes	Yes	

teachers in using data to identify areas of needs for individual students			
Utilizes research-based practices within the school for reading	Yes- many levels, Full scale guided reading program, Special Literacy Lab Program, Fluency Program, small group instruction, time	Yes- Evidence: Leveled books, time, Letterland, Burst Reading for mClass Reading 3D, small group instruction	
Low teacher turnover rates: indicating commitment and satisfaction to the school/district	Yes	Yes	
Communicates High Expectations to teachers/students/parents	Yes, as indicated by the teachers	Yes, as indicated by the teachers	Yes- Common Transition Thread
Humble	Would not indicate she felt like anything special	Admits to not knowing everything, like teaching a student to read	
Whatever it takes attitude	Yes		
Focus on the students	Yes		Yes
Sense of Urgency	Yes	Yes	Yes