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Achievement Gap in Reading: A Study of School Practices and Effectual Results

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by

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Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based upon my own scholarly work at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree.

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"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5-6, New Living Translation).

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> If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly. (Romans 12:7-8, New Living Translation)

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Abstract

While it is important to recognize the economic background of students and home factors contributing to their achievement, the purpose of this study was to discover what best practices schools were implementing with low socioeconomic students to narrow the achievement gap in communication arts (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Gorski, 2013; Snell, 2003). The research design incorporated mixed-methods by employing data collected from surveys, interviews, and secondary data sources. A triangulation of data was used to increase the credibility and validity of the study (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Mills, 2014). For this study, the quantitative data were collected using a survey as well as Missouri Assessment Performance (MAP) scores. The qualitative data were collected through interviews. In addition to increasing the validity of the study, the benefits of using triangulation also included creating varied ways to understand and reveal the results of the study (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011; Mills, 2014). The results of this study indicated a blend of research-based best practices can make a positive impact in narrowing the achievement gap in students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the area of communication arts. The significance of this research is the results provide educators an outline of successful research-based instructional strategies to assist communication arts students.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Efforts to close the achievement gap in communication arts have improved in the past few years (Gorski, 2013; Payne, 2010). School districts that have demonstrated increased academic achievement in literacy have been gaining attention from others interested in duplicating the results. The Missouri Learning Standards have increased educators' awareness of continuing efforts to narrow the existing gap by outlining what students are expected to learn to be prepared for success in college and career (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MODESE], 2013).

Background of the Study

The learning standards are essential for ensuring students acquire necessary skills at all levels to think critically and to solve problems applicable to the real world (MODESE, 2013). In addition, the standards are conceived to be a critical tool providing consistent criteria for students in kindergarten through 12th grade (MODESE, 2013). Moreover, the standards focus on what educators should be teaching rather than how the standards should be taught. This allows schools the freedom to formulate their instruction by applying pedagogical techniques, teaching strategies, methods, and best practices. Incorporating a blend of best practices using a curriculum of choice to enhance instruction will help to meet the individual needs of each student, thus raising achievement (MODESE, 2013).

Rather than focusing on environmental issues associated with under-resourced learners, such as the amount of money families earn and the average level of parental education, educators have been turning their attention towards educational issues that can influence academic success (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Gorski, 2013;

Payne, 2010; Snell, 2003). Such factors include academic resources, rigorous curriculum aligned to standards and assessments, use of data to improve instruction and curriculum, and the need for interventions and differentiated and varied instruction (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Gorski, 2013; Payne, 2010; Snell, 2003). Educators committed to doing what is necessary to raise achievement of under-resourced students should consider implementing strategies and best practices aimed at promoting equality (Gorski, 2013; Payne, 2010). While expectations should remain high for students in all socioeconomic classes, teaching strategies and techniques should be engaging and literacy instruction must encourage a love for reading (Gorski, 2013).

Conceptual Framework of the Study

Educators across the United States have been impacted by Payne's (2010) concepts and her professional development opportunities directed at poverty theory (Bazata, 2013). These opportunities have positively impacted at-risk students falling behind academically (Bazata, 2013). Therefore, the foundation of this paper was viewed through the lens of Payne's framework for understanding children from poverty.

Cultural and environmental factors play a role in the achievement gap (Gorski, 2013; Payne, 2010; Snell, 2003). Low-income families frequently are without the educational, financial, and social supports that families from a higher socioeconomic status are often characterized as having (Gorski, 2013; Payne, 2010; Snell, 2003). Low-income families may also have inadequate or restricted availability to resources provided by their communities, which can delay school readiness and development (Payne, 2010; Snell, 2003). Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds may have parents without the necessary skills and resources to provide literacy-related learning activities to

enhance their child's achievement in language arts (Gorski, 2013). Having insufficient resources and inadequate availability to outside educational resources including a variety of technologies, sets this population apart from the onset, thereby creating inequality which can hinder a child's growth and development (Gorski, 2013). Therefore, students from low socioeconomic families enter school with a greater possibility of being unprepared than do students from families with a higher socioeconomic status (Payne, 2010; Snell, 2003).

Despite the fact that economic background will contribute to achievement, it is necessary to believe academic success can occur regardless of circumstances related to the child's socioeconomic background (Gorski, 2013; Payne, 2010; Schwartz, 2001; Snell, 2003). To help students from low socioeconomic backgrounds be more successful, schools can incorporate strategies to assist narrowing the achievement gap (Payne, 2010). One of these strategies is to make connections and build genuine relationships with students (Bazata, 2013).

Teachers need to reach out, communicate, listen, and discover what interests students (Bazata, 2013). Doing so will allow students to feel respected; a sense of trust will ensue thereby creating an environment conducive to learning (LaPoma & Kantor, 2013; Sadowski, 2013). These relationships will allow for mutual respect between teacher and student (Payne, 2010). When mutual respect has been established, students are more willing to take risks with their learning because they have a sense of security within the classroom community (LaPoma & Kantor, 2013).

Students from generational poverty often speak in what is referred to as *casual register* (Payne, 2010). This form of communication is one that is lacking rich vocabulary

and is a form of language often used between friends (Payne, 2010). Teachers need to recognize that this level of communication exists among students from poverty and help these students build their *formal register* (Payne, 2010). Because most assessments are conducted through the use of formal register, which is vocabulary used by professional and educational groups, students who learn this form of language will have the same test-taking advantages as their peers (Payne, 2010). In addition, schools must make it a priority to assess student progress and performance regularly and to have appropriate interventions in place for at-risk students (Payne, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

The problem explored through this study was how to reduce the achievement gap in communication arts for students from low-income families. Rather than blame students' lack of achievement solely on home and environmental factors, educators must understand the current educational systems and provide the absolute best opportunities for all learners to achieve regardless of their economic backgrounds (Gorski, 2013). In America, millions of students are lacking essential resources needed to become successful in school (Payne, 2010). These learners are at risk of failing unless teachers and administrators develop necessary interventions and strategies to help these children succeed (Payne, 2010).

Purpose of the Study

While it is important to recognize economic backgrounds of students and home factors contributing to their achievement, the purpose of this study was to discover what best practices schools are currently implementing with low socioeconomic students to narrow the achievement gap in communication arts (Darling-Hammond & Richardson,

2009; Snell, 2003). According to Crow (2010), development of a workable model to address the needs of these low socioeconomic students is possible. School districts can use this study to duplicate what has been effective. As stated by Snell (2003), if gaps in achievement are to be reduced, educators must not assume students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have little hope of success. Educators, who effectively instruct all students, will recognize successful growth and achievement regardless of economic background (Snell, 2003).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways does using a comprehensive literacy program affect Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) achievement in communication arts of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

2. What alternative resources are utilized to increase MAP achievement in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

3. What additional educational practices are perceived to narrow the achievement gap in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

Significance of the Study

This study resulted in data to answer the question of what best practices are working to reduce the achievement gap in communication arts of low socioeconomic students. As teachers and administrators struggle with the inability to narrow the achievement gap, additional research is needed (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). A study such as this will provide educators successful research-based instructional strategies proven effective when assisting students in the area of communication arts.

The findings of this study will offer teachers and administrators a framework of strategies and interventions to consider implementing in their school districts to reduce the achievement gap.

Definition of Key Terms

The following definitions are provided to understand various educational terms and practices connected with this study:

Adaptive diagnostic test. Adaptive diagnostic test refers to computerized adaptive testing, which provides diagnostic feedback to teachers, students, and parents (Cheng, 2009). The adaptive diagnostic test serves evaluative purposes as well as providing important information regarding each student's instructional requirements (Cheng, 2009). Testing stops when performance at a given level is shown to be the test taker's highest sustainable performance (Cheng, 2009). After completing the test, students obtain a profile, which details areas they have mastered as well as concepts and skills requiring remedial interventions (Cheng, 2009).

Free and reduced price meals. Free and reduced price meals refer to the sub-group of students from homes qualifying under federal guidelines for free or reduced-price food services as indicated in the guidelines of the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs (Child Nutrition Programs, 2013). According to the Federal Register, children in a household size of four with income not exceeding $30,615 would be eligible for free meals (Child Nutrition Programs, 2013). Children in a household size of four with income not exceeding $43,568 would be eligible for reduced-priced meals (Child Nutrition Programs, 2013).

Missouri Learning Standards. Missouri Learning Standards outline the information and abilities students in Missouri need to acquire (MODESE, 2013). These standards are specific to kindergarten through 12th grade level and provide educators and parents a framework for students' achievement and readiness in both college and vocational training (MODESE, 2013).

Professional Learning Communities (PLC). The concept of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) involves an educational development allowing teachers and administrators to explore and collaborate on instructional methods, then implement what they have learned (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Thomas, 2010). These efforts are used to improve effectiveness and outcomes of the entire learning community (DuFour et al., 2010).

Response to Intervention (RTI). Response to Intervention (RTI) measures how students respond to evidence-based instruction (Hoppey, Morewood, & Bolyard, 2010; Stecker, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2008). RTI is a multi-tiered intervention system aimed at prevention (Hoppey et al., 2010). This support involves successive levels of instruction utilized to provide academic reinforcement to students functioning significantly below peer levels (Hoppey et al., 2010; Stecker et al., 2008). RTI is a method offering research-based interventions and differentiated instruction so students' academic needs are addressed (Hoppey et al., 2010; Stecker et al., 2008). This practice integrates data developed to analyze students' educational success during a predetermined period of time to make educational decisions regarding interventions appropriate to individual students' needs (Hoppey et al., 2010; Stecker et al., 2008).

Limitations of the Study

The following were limitations in the study:

Instrument. The method for collecting data consisted of an online survey distributed to principals in elementary schools where fourth grade communication arts MAP scores in the sub-group of free and reduced price meals have shown improvement over a three-year period. This method of data collection was the quantitative piece. The qualitative portion of data collection entailed face-to-face interview questions directed toward principals in elementary schools where fourth grade communication arts MAP scores in the sub-group of free and reduced price meals has shown growth over a three-year period.

The collection of data from surveys was limited to the participants who chose to complete the survey. A response rate can be termed as the percentage of individuals choosing to respond and participate in the survey (Johnson & Wislar, 2012). Therefore, non-response and response bias must be considered as a limitation due to survey response rates trending downward over the past several years (Johnson & Wislar, 2012). In addition, survey and interview accuracy was dependent on the integrity of the participants. It is assumed all participants were truthful and thorough when responding to the survey statements and interview questions. Finally, while great care and organizational strategies were used throughout the analysis of transcribed qualitative data to discover open codes, axial codes, themes, and subthemes, data may not have always been consistently coded based on one's personal interpretation (Saldaña, 2013).

Sample. A cluster sample was used to select participants to complete surveys based on data collected from fourth grade communication arts MAP scores in the sub-

group of free and reduced price meals. The sample was achieved by selecting a preexisting group, called a cluster, and using the participants in the cluster for the sample (Bluman, 2011). The cluster group was formulated from the list of elementary schools meeting the criterion (continuous increases in the index scores for years 2011-2013) in the area of communication arts for the sub-group of free and reduced price meals.

Participants were individually chosen for interviews based on data collected from fourth grade communication arts MAP scores in the sub-group of free and reduced price meals. This convenience sampling consisted of administrators willing and available to participate at time of interviews (Bluman, 2011). Participants were expected to be truthful and thorough when responding to the survey statements and interview questions. Non-response bias and response bias were limitations to be considered for the purpose of this study. Non-response bias occurs when the researcher's expectation regarding a number of respondents to a survey are overestimated (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Nonresponse can be an issue due to unwilling participants' opinions likely differing from participants taking the time to respond (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Therefore, consideration to the prospective factors of non-response bias and response bias when conducting high-quality research using survey data should be considered (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

Secondary data. The collection of data from fourth grade communication arts MAP scores in the sub-group of free and reduced price meals may have been limited based on the accuracy of information parents provide in reference to their students qualifying for free and reduced price meals. Using secondary data was an important part of this study; however, this type of data is not error free (Patrick, 2010). Issues that may arise by using secondary data are validity problems, reliability of data and information,

and data source bias (Patrick, 2010). This data collection method was quantitative and required data analysis to determine which schools had shown growth over the three-year period.

Summary

Educators and administrators are unable to alter the home environments of children (Snell, 2003). However, this cannot prevent educators from working to strengthen instructional efforts for low socioeconomic students in the school community (Snell, 2003). Furthermore, while Missouri Learning Standards focus on what educators *should* be teaching by providing a framework geared toward student achievement and readiness in both college and vocational training, the standards do not dictate *how* students should be taught (MODESE, 2013). This affords teachers the opportunity to formulate and facilitate their instruction by applying pedagogical techniques, teaching strategies, and methods and best practices of their choice aimed at advancing student achievement (MODESE, 2013).

School efforts to narrow the academic achievement gap are continuing to advance. Educators realize the importance of utilizing academic resources and best practices to help students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to succeed (Snell, 2003). Actions taken by districts to enhance academic success are perceived as hopeful, due to promising strategies and extensive research (Schwartz, 2001). While it is important to recognize the economic background of the student and home factors contributing to achievement, the purpose of this study was to examine what schools are doing to differentiate the learning so that children from high poverty backgrounds can be ensured success (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Snell, 2003).

Despite the fact economic background will contribute to achievement, it is necessary to believe all academic success can occur regardless of circumstances related to the child's socioeconomic background (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Gorski, 2013; Schwartz, 2001; Snell, 2003). Generational poverty influences achievement; therefore, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds need direct instruction to help build necessary reasoning structures essential for learning (Payne, 2010). Furthermore, it is important to remember that students from impoverished backgrounds can achieve the same as their peers from families with a higher socioeconomic background if given necessary interventions (Payne, 2010).

In Chapter One, the main components of this study were introduced including background, conceptual framework of study, statement of problem, significance, and limitations. A review of literature aimed at specific best practices, interventions, and programs schools are implementing to help reduce the achievement gap in the area of communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds is discussed in Chapter Two. The methods and procedures applied in this study are described in Chapter Three. Presentation of data and an analysis of findings are detailed in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five, the conclusions and recommendations for further research are addressed.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Two philosophies associated with low socioeconomic learners have emerged. The first refers to external issues, such as the parent's level of education, main language spoken in the home, insufficient availability to resources within the community, and income (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Morrow, 2012; Schwartz, 2001; Snell, 2003). Disadvantaged students rarely have rich literacy opportunities due to limited literacy resources in the home (Morrow, 2012). This often impacts their vocabulary development leading to delayed literacy growth (Morrow, 2012).

Children raised in poverty often lack literacy opportunities due to parents focusing on day-to-day survival issues (Jalongo & Sobolak, 2010). Additionally, parents trying to make ends meet often have to sustain a number of jobs, making it difficult to provide meaningful experiences and to spend quality time with their children (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). Consequently, students from affluent or high socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to have an advantage due to a variety of literacy-related resources and experiences that prepare them for reading-related success before entering kindergarten (Kieffer, 2012). In the last four decades, not only has the income gap widened, the achievement gap among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds has increased (Duncan & Murnane, 2014).

Under-resourced children face many challenges, including a high risk for reading failure, due to the widening vocabulary gap in comparison to their peers being raised in working class families (Jalongo & Sobolak, 2010). By the time students enter high school, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are typically five years behind in literacy-related skills compared to those students from higher socioeconomic

backgrounds (Reardon, Valentino, & Shores, 2012). Students not having succeeded in school may have a much more difficult time securing a job, thereby running the risk of living in poverty, spending time in jail, and having a shorter life span (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2010). Literacy acquisition is vital for adults to experience success and advancement on a social and professional level (Reardon et al., 2012). In addition, without high-level literacy skills, adults seeking employment in many professions will be at a disadvantage in comparison to those able to read, write, speak, and listen at a high level of complexity (Reardon et al., 2012). This philosophy sets under-resourced students in a category in which it is nearly impossible to maintain academic proficiency as compared with their peers from families with a higher socioeconomic background (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Schwartz, 2001; Snell, 2003).

External issues related to literacy learning are known to provide obstacles for students resulting in a greater threat of entering kindergarten unprepared. According to Carey (2013), children from low income homes begin showing signs of development delays as early as 18 months in comparison to children from a more privileged background. By the time a child from a low socioeconomic background reaches the age of two, a six-month difference in developmental delays associated with language can occur (Carey, 2013).

According to Jalongo and Sobolak (2010), children from privileged backgrounds obtain three times more vocabulary experiences and opportunities than children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, children raised in homes where verbal interaction is lacking gain an average of two new words per day, whereas children growing up in homes where verbal engagement is high acquire an average of nine new

words each day (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). Moreover, Reutzel and Cooter (2013) suggested oral language is the basis for all knowledge, and students living in poverty are at risk for reading failure.

Despite those concerns, the second philosophy places value on economic background and external issues, which may contribute to lack of achievement, but combats that viewpoint by believing academic success can occur regardless of circumstances related to the child's socioeconomic background (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Gorski, 2013; Schwartz, 2001; Snell, 2003). Educators have an immense responsibility to ensure student success and achievement regardless of socioeconomic background. It is important for educators and school leaders to develop the mindset that children raised in poverty have the same capabilities to learn; they just need exposure to effective literacy instruction including vocabulary-rich discussions (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). According to Morrow (2012), providing meaningful classroom opportunities where vocabulary-rich discussions are encouraged, assists in vocabulary and language development. Successful students are graduating from high schools with the necessary skill-set to either continue education or to pursue a job opportunity and begin living a fulfilling life (Buffum et al., 2010).

Schools helping students from low socioeconomic backgrounds make academic gains have studied research-based strategies (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). Furthermore, they have embraced professional development, maintained high expectations, and incorporated academic standards (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). Utilizing research-based techniques equips educators with essential skills to reduce the complications and

difficulties students face regarding literacy in the areas of reading, writing, and achievement in other content areas (Jalongo & Sobolak, 2010).

State standards are required for all students, and most states, including Missouri, have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). In the state of Missouri, the CCSS are included under the umbrella of Missouri Learning Standards (MODESE, 2013). The CCSS provide consistency among states allowing educators opportunities to collaborate effectively regarding expectations and use of instructional strategies to help students attain those expectations (Sloan, 2010).

Traditionally, teachers create lesson plans and provide instruction to students in isolation, which does not allow for collaborative groups to share best practices necessary to help students make gains (Gardner & Powell, 2013). With the adoption of the CCSS, educators are improving their practice by embracing the common terminology to collaboratively plan effective, rigorous lessons for their students (Gardner & Powell, 2013). Many teachers are taking advantage of sharing instructional strategies and resources with the hope that students' achievement across the United States will increase (Doorey, 2014).

While state standards alone do not address external issues affecting achievement for students from poverty, the standards do provide a framework to guide educators as they work towards meeting the needs of each student (Sloan, 2010). Therefore, educators are now focusing on school-related factors, which include academic resources, rather than dwelling on a child's limited environmental resources (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Snell, 2003). Knowing children from impoverished backgrounds will have delays in development and learning reinforces the reality that schools must focus on how to make a

difference in the achievement gap (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). Regardless, use of academic resources, such as rigorous curriculum aligned to state standards and assessments, as well analyzing data to improve instruction and the core curriculum, are just some of the practices school leaders are implementing to serve children from high-poverty backgrounds (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Snell, 2003).

Additionally, achievement in children from low socioeconomic backgrounds will increase if educators utilize a research-based literacy program based on meaningful and purposeful instruction rather than a traditional approach (Kennedy, 2010). Furthermore, schools focused on making positive academic changes are ensuring the school climate is inclusive to diversity rather than exclusive (Ramburuth & Hartel, 2010). These types of environments value others' differences rather than placing importance on socioeconomic status (Ramburuth & Hartel, 2010). Members of a school community embracing the differences of others are more likely to learn from one another on a social and academic level (Ramburuth & Hartel, 2010).

According to Adler and Fisher (2001), inadequate progress in communication arts has a significant effect on all children. This lack of progress is particularly critical for students already at risk due to low socioeconomic status (Adler & Fisher, 2001; Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). Educators are recognizing the need for differentiated instruction and interventions to promote achievement (Adler & Fisher, 2001; Hoppey et al., 2010). Creating professional learning communities is another important component many school administrators are implementing to make gains on achievement (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009).

Professional Development

Professional development helps educators utilize effective instructional practices (Cunningham, 2007). Traditionally, professional development meant taking time away from school to attend a one-day workshop or seminar. However, professional development of this nature is not considered effective (DuFour, 2014). This type of professional development was not embedded in the school day for program planning, implementation, or management (Adler & Fisher, 2001). Instead, implementation became meaningless as new skills were taught in isolation (Adler & Fisher, 2001). Educators understand this type of professional development is ineffective, and therefore, not very beneficial (Adler & Fisher, 2001).

Instead, effective professional development should be structured so teachers continuously learn how to improve their craft. This type of teacher learning is achieved when implementing the professional learning community (PLC) model (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). According to Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009), educators collaborate to scrutinize their practice to create and apply stronger instructional procedures. This collaboration among teachers promotes discussion and an exchange of ideas necessary to achieve common goals allowing for further student success (DuFour, 2011). School leaders investing energy into creating a collaborative culture and climate do so by creating opportunities for educators to work together in teams so that knowledge can be shared to promote higher achievement (Berry, 2014). According to Farris-Berg (2014), collaboration is an expectation for educators, which includes working in teams to improve student success within the entire building rather than only focusing on the students in specific classrooms.

A PLC can increase teachers' knowledge regarding differentiated instruction and student learning styles as well as under-resourced students' needs (Hughes-Hassell & Brasfield, 2012). Furthermore, when a community of educators works together, and is willing to take risks and try new teaching strategies to improve their practice, student performance is likely to increase (Farris-Berg, 2014). When student achievement is on the rise, teachers having engaged in purposeful professional development often raise the rigor in their classrooms and increase the expectations for their students (Kennedy & Shiel, 2010).

While visiting six high-poverty schools outperforming other schools in their districts with lower levels of poverty, Cunningham (2007) noted professional development was ongoing in all six schools. In addition to seminars and other supports, teachers were coached while instructing students (Toll, 2009). Furthermore, demonstration lessons were taught in classrooms, and teachers collaborated in grade-level teams to provide support and prepare instructional plans (Cunningham, 2007).

Similarly, a two-year study consisting of embedding collaborative professional development in a high-poverty community in an attempt to raise literacy scores focused on utilizing a professional development facilitator to observe classroom practices, offer feedback, and demonstrate effective instructional techniques (Kennedy & Shiel, 2010). During the demonstrations, teachers were encouraged to note effectiveness of strategies including student engagement (Kennedy & Shiel, 2010). These observations and notations, along with purposeful discussions between teacher and facilitator, served to guide teachers in the development of new lessons (Kennedy & Shiel, 2010). The nature of these professional development opportunities helped to improve teacher effectiveness

and increase their confidence in the classroom (Kennedy & Shiel, 2010). In turn, teacher confidence led to motivating effective instruction, which created a classroom community filled with students ready and willing to learn (Kennedy & Shiel, 2010). At the end of the two-year period, student success was noted when comparing assessment data (Kennedy & Shiel, 2010). The gains in student achievement, brought on by the purposeful and consistent professional development, helped strengthen individual confidence and create a school environment with the goal of continued literacy improvement (Kennedy & Shiel, 2010).

Furthermore, Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) believed changes in practices and improvements in student learning occur when PLCs have necessary processes and structures in place. When educators are supported with effective, research-based professional development, they produce opportunities for students to achieve success in school and community (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). DuFour (2011) indicated the necessity for teachers to work together rather than in isolation. Traditionally, teachers work within the four walls of their classrooms, and the thought of working together is foreign (DuFour, 2011). According to DuFour (2011), it is essential school leaders and educators find ways to establish a collaborative environment within every aspect of the school community.

Allowing regular education teachers and special education teachers opportunities to share in the same professional development experiences provides all educators with a common framework and common language aimed at improving literacy instruction (Kennedy & Shiel, 2010). Teachers bound together in this way promote shared accountability among educators working toward a common goal by discussing, applying,

and evaluating best practices (Kennedy & Shiel, 2010). One way educators are capitalizing on the time allotted for professional development is by attending workshops designed to share ideas and collaborate with other educators to discover creative and unique ways schools are utilizing time allocated to improve professional practices (Swanson, 2014).

According to Guskey (2014), educators wanting to immerse themselves in effective professional development must first begin with the end in mind. To successfully achieve this type of planning, five essential steps are recommended (Guskey, 2014). The first step comprises analyzing assessment data to develop an understanding regarding the standards or specific learning outcomes educators wish students to master (Guskey, 2014). The second step entails making decisions regarding effective research-based practices to employ that will essentially help students make necessary gains (Guskey, 2014). Thirdly, before best practices are implemented, teachers need administrative support to ensure necessary resources are made available to successfully execute the practice (Guskey, 2014). The fourth step involves discussing the essential skills and knowledge needed to effectively apply the new practice (Guskey, 2014). The final step includes deciding what type of professional development experience would be most beneficial to gain the necessary skills and knowledge before implementation of research-based best practices (Guskey, 2014).

In an attempt to increase literacy scores on statewide exams, an elementary school in New York State participated in meaningful professional development opportunities to narrow the achievement gap in literacy (Zakierski & Siegel, 2010). After adjusting and expanding literacy schedules so that students had a two-hour literacy block, teachers

participated in a variety of professional development opportunities and interventions to improve instruction and promote student achievement (Zakierski & Siegel, 2010). The training opportunities were purposeful and aimed at the school's goal of closing the achievement gap in literacy. Professional development opportunities and interventions focused on analyzing assessment data; utilizing the literacy coach to model effective literacy instruction; providing a multitude of opportunities for parent involvement; and extending the hours of the library to accommodate students, parents, and teachers (Zakierski & Siegel, 2010). The results of implementing purposeful professional development where teachers are fully immersed in opportunities they believe can and will promote positive results are worth noting (Zakierski & Siegel, 2010). After one year of implementation, fourth grade student literacy scores increased 33%. After two years, 99% of students reached mastery level on end-of-year state assessments (Zakierski & Siegel, 2010).

There are sure to be obstacles in the efforts to improve teaching and learning through new initiatives, frameworks, and program adoptions due to noncommittal stakeholders (Perkins & Reese, 2014). Therefore, it is critical educators open their hearts and minds to understand the positive effects of professional development and to obtain the support they need to facilitate instruction to benefit students (Zakierski & Siegel, 2010). Moreover, establishing an organized professional development plan containing successive steps will help educators successfully incorporate new practices to support their students (Zakierski & Siegel, 2010). Teachers who participate in meaningful and relevant professional development are likely to engage in additional opportunities,

because they recognize the success these experiences have brought to their classrooms (Kennedy & Shiel, 2010).

Comprehensive Literacy

Educators have a huge responsibility not only to teach children to read but to teach them to read well. Teachers and school leaders have done a disservice to students in past years by allowing students to move through the grades without the ability to read. Students reaching adulthood who have not learned to read or who are poor readers are likely to be unhappy and unhealthy, leading unproductive lives (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). According to Reutzel and Cooter (2013):

> The inability to read has been listed as a health risk by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), an agency of the federal government. Designating reading disability or the inability to read as a national threat was based on the discovery of the many devastating and far-reaching effects that reading failure has on the quality of individuals' lives. (p. 7)

Being literate is essential when considering the success of one's personal and professional life (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013).

Implementation of a reading program that does not teach literacy skills in isolation, but instead focuses on authentic and purposeful teaching, is another method of instruction schools are putting into practice to raise achievement (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009). Comprehensive literacy-based programs provide students with a wide variety of materials that are meaningful to the students and are based on their ability levels (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). Howard (2012) suggested students exposed to literacy instruction encompassing worksheets, basal textbooks, and round-robin reading are being subjected

to learning experiences where student engagement is lacking and literacy instruction is not purposeful or meaningful. Instead, teachers need to approach literacy instruction with a solid knowledge base and a willingness to continually improve their practice by learning and applying research-based strategies (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013).

According to Duke (2013), it is essential to have a print-rich classroom with a variety of narrative and expository texts. Using this type of instruction versus a traditional basal textbook offers differentiation with instruction and allows students to grow based on their current instructional levels (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009). Having a variety of engaging, age-appropriate texts available for students and allowing students choice in text selection that is meaningful and relevant to their interests will promote an increase in reading achievement (Pinnell, 2012).

Traditional basal reading textbooks often include vocabulary and subject matter that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have little prior knowledge; therefore, the students have difficulty comprehending (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009). Using trade books in a comprehensive-based literacy program rather than traditional basal text books ensures students are choosing books on their individual reading levels and offers students a choice of subjects that match their interests (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009). Comprehensive literacy based-programs, according to Sanacore and Palumbo (2009), offer information at varied readability and comprehension levels in contrast to standard basal textbooks, which are typically written at a higher grade level, causing student difficulties in literacy and subsequent frustration and discouragement.

Using comprehensive literacy-based programs provides greater benefits than traditional textbooks, because they relate more effectively to students' abilities, interests,

and backgrounds (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009). Educators utilizing a comprehensive literacy program are continuously growing their own classroom libraries (Morrow, 2012). Teachers are expanding their libraries to include an extensive variety of texts on all levels, genres, and interests (Serafini, 2011). According to Morrow (2012), classroom teachers committed to providing print-rich classroom libraries, have students engaged in narrative and expository texts more often than students in classrooms without book collections. In addition, teachers are organizing their book collections and classrooms in ways that allow students easy access when choosing books as well as a comfortable area to enjoy the texts (Serafini, 2011). According to Kennedy (2010), a print-rich classroom environment where students self-select books of interest and participate in engaging and purposeful literacy opportunities contributes to their motivation and overall success.

As mentioned by Morrow (2012), strategies to increase students' motivation can help struggling students increase achievement. One experience to help with motivation is to offer students choice (Morrow, 2012). Offering choice in literacy activities, including the texts the students choose to read and topics they choose to write about, enables students to take ownership of their daily tasks, instilling confidence and empowering them to be good decision makers (Morrow, 2012). Another experience encompasses the idea of challenge (Morrow, 2012). Teachers have to find a balance between literacy tasks for each individual student that are not too easy or too difficult (Morrow, 2012). Students who are appropriately challenged will be engaged without being frustrated (Morrow, 2012). Motivation and confidence ensues when students realize, with the support of their teacher, they can master the task at hand (Morrow, 2012).

Relevance and authenticity are combined to offer a third experience related to motivation (Morrow, 2012). According to Morrow (2012), students need classroom experiences and opportunities geared at making connections between the classroom and the real world. When students see the relevancy between what they are learning and how it applies to their lives outside the classroom, the learning becomes more meaningful, engaging, and authentic (Morrow, 2012).

A fourth experience used to promote motivation relies on social collaboration (Morrow, 2012). The interaction of students working together, with the guided support of their teacher, promotes student learning because children are more willing to take risks when their learning is shared among peers (Morrow, 2012). The final experience used to facilitate motivation among students is the concept of success (Morrow, 2012). The successful completion of a literacy task should be celebrated (Morrow, 2012). Teachers offering positive feedback and praise upon successful task completion will motivate students to move forward as they continue advancing their literacy skills (Morrow, 2012).

According to Fountas and Pinnell (2012), the framework within a comprehensive literacy program consists of several components, which are necessary and important to all teachers as they provide instruction to meet the needs of learners:

> [Each component] allows for a closer tailoring to individual strengths and needs….A comprehensive high-quality literacy effort includes guided reading instruction with small groups and leveled books, interactive read-aloud, literature discussion in small groups, readers' workshop with whole-group mini lessons, independent reading and individual conferences, and the use of mentor texts for

> writing workshop. Students learn in whole group, small group, and individual settings. (p. 281)

A part of this growth occurs in what is called guided reading small group instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Including this component within a literacy program has generated a critical shift regarding research-based literacy instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Within this model of reading instruction, students are placed in small groups according to ability, and leveled books are selected to scaffold and support learners at their levels of instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). This approach allows teachers to prepare lessons geared to the instructional level of each small group within the classroom (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Groups are formed based on assessment data to determine independent reading levels appropriate for small group instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).

Small group instruction enables students and teachers to think deeply about the text, share thoughts through meaningful discussions, and develop an ability to listen to and respect others' ideas (Pinnell, 2012). In addition, small group instruction allows students to socially interact with peers by participating in literature discussions where groups of children have conversations before, during, and after reading a text to make connections, listen and respect others' opinions, and think deeply through the text and beyond the text (Kennedy, 2010). Small group discussions are beneficial for all students, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, because students are learning strategies to advance comprehension skills and increase vocabulary knowledge (Sobolak, 2011).

When students are expected to participate in an interactive vocabulary learning activity targeting specific words, students are able to learn the words at a higher level (Sobolak, 2011). Students from low income families are coming to school with limited background knowledge and vocabulary needed to be successful readers and writers (Sobolak, 2011). While vocabulary ability differs among students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, it is critical teachers and school leaders utilize research-based best practices to increase students' speaking, listening, and reading vocabulary, because vocabulary development is fundamental to literacy success (Jalongo & Sobolak, 2010). Traditional methods of vocabulary instruction need to make way for instruction aimed at active engagement, involvement, and participation in order to make necessary gains in vocabulary knowledge (Sobolak, 2011).

Monitoring student progress by using a variety of assessment tools including running records ensures students are being taught at their instructional levels (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). As teachers develop expertise in their ability to observe and analyze data, small groups will continue to change according to consistent, systematic, and ongoing assessments (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Literacy teachers must be flexible when it comes to student groupings due to students making greater academic gains than others, which in effect, will cause small groups to be altered (Kennedy, 2010).

Teachers can utilize assessment data to help guide instruction and to promote student growth. Using observation data and anecdotal notes to determine which students are proficient in various reading strategies and which students need extra support and interventions allows teachers to inform their instruction on a daily basis (Kennedy, 2010). An effective literacy framework includes daily assessments that take place before, during,

and after instruction, allowing teachers to target specific learning goals for each individual student (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). Assessment analysis and planning are often completed collaboratively with a team of teachers to ensure efforts put in place to increase student achievement are data-driven (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013).

The idea behind the structure of guided reading within a comprehensive literacy program is students will be able to do more than simply call words (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Instead, they will be able to process all aspects of reading comprised of thinking within the text, thinking about the text, and thinking beyond the text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Through small group discussion of the text facilitated by the teacher, including thoughtful and purposeful teaching points, students will be able to construct meaning from text using all levels of thinking as well as higher-order thinking, such as synthesizing, analyzing, and critiquing (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). In addition to thinking deeply within the text, students are pushed to think deeply beyond the text, discussing possible inferences, making predictions, and constructing connections to other texts, to themselves, and to the world (Pinnell, 2012). The goal within this type of literacy framework is for students to take control of their learning to become independent, self-regulated learners who apply literacy strategies teachers have modeled for them in whole group, small group, and individual instruction (Kennedy, 2010).

Another component of a comprehensive literacy program includes designing purposeful literacy activities and opportunities for students to be engaged while their teacher meets with small groups for guided reading or literacy discussion (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). This can be achieved through focused and meaningful lessons where expectations are modeled and students are given opportunities to practice independency

within each literacy task that has been established (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). These types of activities do not typically include book reports and worksheets assigned after a book has been read (Serafini, 2011). Instead, the activities should be relevant and allow students opportunities to collaborate and share information, continue reading or begin a new book, as well as offer one another book selection advice (Serafini, 2011). This approach is created to help students become responsible for their own learning as well as accountable for their own behavior (Boushey & Moser, 2014).

Using this approach allows students to be independent learners while the teacher focuses on meeting the needs of each small group. However, it is essential teachers establish routines and procedures by teaching, modeling, and allowing students to practice the expectations from the start of the school year so that small group instruction can be effective (Bates, 2013). Furthermore, developing a classroom management plan conducive to literacy instruction includes organization of classroom supplies, designating portions of the classroom for literacy-related activities, promoting a positive classroom community by establishing a consistent literacy schedule, and utilizing research-based instructional strategies to increase achievement (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013).

In addition to the provision of varied texts within students' readability levels, this type of program often includes procuring a literacy coach to provide ongoing professional development (Toll, 2009). A literacy coach can offer support and training in a collaborative environment to educators as they acquire instructional strategies aimed at promoting students' literacy success (Toll, 2009). When teachers are allowed and encouraged to work together to improve their instructional practices, both literacy

teachers and students are part of an effective learning community where the level of engagement is high (Pinnell, 2012).

Furthermore, Cunningham (2007) suggested schools serving large numbers of under-resourced children should be focusing on methods of instruction including authentic reading and writing skills, a strong emphasis with regard to time on task, and consistency in building a strong core curriculum. When schools place emphasis on both reading and writing, ensuring consistent, daily blocks of time are spent in meaningful and structured literacy instruction, an increase in student achievement will transpire (Kennedy, 2010). Schools embracing a comprehensive literacy program understand the importance of evolving and improving literacy practices to facilitate engaging, purposeful instruction where students are active participants (Howard, 2012). Moreover, when schools utilize a comprehensive literacy framework, where reading and writing are authentically taught, children understand the importance of literacy and embrace a literate life for themselves as students and as future adults (Kennedy, 2010).

Adaptive Diagnostic Tests

Analysis of assessment data to improve instruction and track student growth is often utilized by districts. Standardized tests give educators assessment data at the beginning or end of the school year based on student performance over an entire year's worth of instruction (Airasian & Russell, 2012). This type of data, although beneficial for guiding instruction for the upcoming school year, does not allow educators to track growth and guide specific, individualized instruction throughout the course of a school year (Airasian & Russell, 2012).

Instead, many schools are adopting systems of adaptive diagnostic testing to affect student achievement (Olson, 2001; Shapiro & Gebhardt, 2012). This type of testing measures students' abilities by filtering the progression of test questions centered on a student's response (Shapiro & Gebhardt, 2012). The data collected from these assessments are used to pinpoint particular problem areas as well as strengths among individual students and are consistently given at specific times each year to track student performance and growth (Shapiro & Gebhardt, 2012). According to Gullo (2013), a current emphasis for educators is to provide assessments aimed at improving literacy curriculum and teaching through data analysis. Using data to drive instruction has become an essential focus of most districts in their endeavors to promote student achievement and proficiency (Gullo, 2013).

The Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) developed an adaptive diagnostic test which offers information regarding consistent student progress and mastery (Olson, 2001; Shaffer, 2015). Computer Adaptive Testing (CAT) is another form of adaptive diagnostic testing designed to measure individual student's ability levels (Shapiro & Gebhardt, 2012). The information gained from these types of tests appeal to school leaders wanting to use diagnostic data to drive instruction (Gullo, 2013; Shapiro & Gebhardt, 2012). Furthermore, these assessments provide extensive data on individual strengths and weaknesses of students and can have a major effect in the educational achievement of students (Olson, 2001; Shaffer, 2015).

Assessing students frequently through adaptive diagnostic tests allows teachers to examine data immediately and to develop instructional strategies geared towards individualized and small group instruction (Shapiro & Gebhardt, 2012). Using the data to

individualize instruction is effective due to the nature of the assessment adapting to students' ability levels (Shapiro & Gebhardt, 2012). In addition to immediate feedback, schools utilizing adaptive diagnostic tests can assess several students at once within a short period of time (Shapiro & Gebhardt, 2012).

In years past, the main uses of diagnostic assessments were to make comparisons of learning before and after units of study (Hockett & Doubet, 2014). Practicing educators are taking data analysis one step further by using the data to inform instruction based on individual student needs (Hockett & Doubet, 2014). According to Airasian and Russell (2012), assessment is a method of gathering, analyzing, and understanding information to assist teachers as they make classroom decisions to enhance instruction and student learning. Using universal screening data is a preventative measure, because the information gained from the diagnostic assessment gives teachers essential information regarding holes in student achievement (Buffum et al., 2010).

The results of a case study in a public elementary school in New York State suggested the provision of professional development to train teachers in proper data analysis helped educators to collaboratively formulate and share ideas to promote student achievement (Zakierski & Siegel, 2010). Educators understand the importance regarding the necessity for carefully analyzing and interpreting assessment data for the purpose of improved instruction and increased student achievement (Gullo, 2013). Therefore, school leaders are allowing teachers adequate time to analyze data together to discover areas of academic concern, plan strategies of interventions to improve achievement, and reflect on teaching practices to ensure instruction is critical to student success (Benjamin, 2014). According to Ralston (2013), when educators understand the power and usefulness

behind collecting data and use it to purposely drive instruction, they tend to feel more confident, focused, and encouraged.

According to Cunningham (2007), the use of diagnostic tests to strengthen and direct instruction should be commonly accepted as a vital tool when the end result is student success. Cunningham (2007) further added that every high-poverty school should make positive changes so teachers and administrators give purposeful assessments using a system to make sure assessments are utilized to guide instruction. In addition, Schwartz (2001) asserted the use of frequent evaluations that are thorough and suitable to monitor student progress and determine appropriate interventions should be used. Furthermore, assessments must serve as accountability tools for schools and provide support to ensure all students are achieving (Olson, 2001).

Through the collection, interpretation, and utilization of assessment data, school districts will be able to accomplish many educational goals and objectives (Gullo, 2013). According to Gullo (2013), the first of these goals consists of narrowing the achievement gap among students struggling academically and among under-resourced schools. Using assessment data to determine student and school needs will benefit schools trying to narrow the achievement gap (Gullo, 2013). In addition, data collection and analysis can increase teacher effectiveness (Gullo, 2013). As teachers intentionally dissect assessment data, they will be able to improve their practice by noting patterns where student learning was lacking (Gullo, 2013). Purposeful reflection and willingness to adapt and modify instructional strategies, as well as apply new strategies, will allow educators to effectively meet students' individual needs (Gullo, 2013).

Furthermore, making positive, proactive decisions to improve the quality of curriculum is another goal being met through the use of data analysis (Gullo, 2013). Districts are collectively interpreting data to discover effective and ineffective programs and practices to make positive changes, which will ultimately increase student achievement (Gullo, 2013). Finally, according to Gullo (2013), providing and explaining pertinent data information to parents will raise awareness regarding their child's ability and performance, which will increase parental involvement.

When schools are thoughtfully using assessment data to drive instruction, teachers will be able to develop and facilitate an instructional plan for each of their students' needs (Chappuis, 2014). Educators can use these supports to monitor academic progress by analyzing and comparing results utilizing a common measurement tool (Olson, 2001). This will allow progress to be shown over time, years, and grade levels to provide valuable data for students, families, and educators (Olson, 2001).

Differentiated Instruction

School leaders in districts showing success at narrowing the achievement gap have taken their assessment data and coupled it with research-based instruction to differentiate teaching so as to be more responsive to individual needs of all students. Schools with a diverse population are realizing the importance of differentiating instruction for all students to have an equal opportunity for success (Payne, 2013). In addition to core instruction, teachers are using interventions as a form of differentiating the instruction to provide layers of support to students struggling academically (Cooper, Robinson, Slansky, & Kiger, 2015). The goal of an intervention framework is to hinder or prevent literacy failure by intervening at the first sign of struggle (Cooper et al., 2015).

This type of modification is often referred to as Response to Intervention (RTI) (Cooper et al., 2015).

The implementation of RTI serves as a preventative intervention framework rather than a provision of interventions to repair existing literacy problems (Morrow, 2012). Within an RTI framework, children are given the extra interventions needed starting at a young age (Hoppey et al., 2010; Stecker et al., 2008). This allows for academic growth and has been effective in preventing or decreasing the influence of learning disabilities (Hoppey et al., 2010; Stecker et al., 2008). Interventions used are appropriate for the academic level of each student and offer cumulative stages of rigor to increase the degree of learning (Cooper et al., 2015).

The fundamental idea behind RTI is for schools to create necessary interventions for each student before the achievement gap widens to such a degree it becomes too difficult to make needed gains, and therefore, special education becomes the only consideration and result (Buffum et al., 2010). All students should be provided with effective interventions immediately after needs are recognized, and if effective RTI practices are applied, an immense number of students will avoid ever needing to be tested and placed in special education (Buffum et al., 2010). These early interventions allow struggling students to receive necessary evidence-based instructional supports to lessen the need for special education referral (Shepherd & Salembier, 2010). Schools utilizing this approach believe RTI is a plan geared for making a positive difference in the regular general education classroom, rather than a method used to refer struggling students for special education (Shepherd & Salembier, 2010). Therefore, the main objective of RTI is

to provide additional instruction and supports aimed to increase literacy achievement (Morrow, 2012).

School districts implementing an RTI framework should determine the number of levels of multi-tiered instruction and the length of instructional interventions, as well as the instructional approach used (Hoppey et al., 2010; Stecker et al., 2008). Typically, interventions in an RTI framework are provided in three tiers (Hoppey et al., 2010). This multi-tiered approach consists of diagnostic assessment, structuring interventions based on common and universal assessment findings, and continuously tracking student progress (Shepherd & Salembier, 2010). Oftentimes, this is illustrated in the shape of a pyramid where the base is considered Tier 1 (Buffum et al., 2010; Shepherd & Salembier, 2010).

Tier 1 consists of instruction delivered to all students no matter their ability (Benedict, Park, Brownell, Lauterbach, & Kiely, 2013). According to Buffum et al. (2010), Tier 1 instruction consists of powerful, explicit teaching focusing deeply on the most important standards and outcomes students need in order to be successful in the community of their classroom and in life. These essential learning outcomes would be established in a collaborative environment where teachers work together in teams to identify the most important learning goals for their students (Buffum et al., 2010). In addition, teachers utilize a research based curriculum and understand the significance of data analysis to plan purposeful instruction that is deliberate and focused (Shepherd & Salembier, 2010).

The middle portion of the pyramid is referred to as Tier 2 (Buffum et al., 2010; Shepherd & Salembier, 2010). Interventions within Tier 2 are generally focused on

students needing small group instruction as an additional layer of support within the classroom setting (Benedict et al., 2013). Students needing Tier 2 interventions are often identified through formative assessment techniques and common assessments created by grade-level teams (Buffum et al., 2010). The assessment data is used to identify skills with which students are struggling and informs teachers as they plan small group instruction specific to each skill yet to be mastered (Buffum et al., 2010).

The top of the pyramid represents Tier 3 (Buffum et al., 2010; Shepherd & Salembier, 2010). Students receiving Tier 3 instruction need intensive, focused interventions typically in very small groups or one-on-one (Benedict et al., 2013). Interventions of this nature are very intensive and oftentimes individualized due to the numerous needs of the student (Buffum et al., 2010). The difficulties associated with meeting the learning needs with students in Tier 3 interventions are complicated due to the diverse nature of the needs (Buffum et al., 2010). Therefore, it is recommended schools develop a team of educational experts to meet collaboratively to develop individualized, specific, and targeted interventions to meet the needs of students in Tier 3 (Buffum et al, 2010). While Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions offer instruction and interventions geared toward small group and individualized groupings, it is important to note these interventions do not take the place of Tier 1 (Buffum et al., 2010). Instead, Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions provide additional layers of support for struggling students (Buffum et al., 2010).

According to Cooper et al. (2015), an effective framework of intervention encompasses several essential components. For interventions to be successful and allow

student growth, Cooper et al. (2015) strongly recommended schools focus on the following key features:

- Instruction is very structured and fast paced.
- Instruction is delivered in addition to the core instruction.
- Texts used for instruction are sequenced in difficulty, moving from simple to more complex. Beginning texts may be created and more decodable. As soon as possible, students move to reading authentic texts.
- The teacher provides scaffolded instruction by providing extensive teacher modeling in the beginning, moving to student modeling and then to independence.
- Instruction is delivered as a one-on-one tutorial program or as a small instructional group comprised of five to seven students.
- Ongoing assessment and progress monitoring are a part of the instruction. This lets…[the teacher] continuously know whether the prescribed instruction for each student is really working.
- Acceleration intervention is taught by a highly qualified, certified teacher. (p. 350)

While all components are important and necessary when implementing RTI, the focus of the RTI framework is effective core instruction (Cooper et al., 2015).

One important aspect of effective differentiated instruction is when teachers recognize students' deficiencies and make necessary decisions to ensure diverse literacy needs of each and every student within the classroom are met (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Using an approach referred to as adaptive teaching, while differentiating instruction, is

often overlooked (Parsons, Dodman, & Burrowbridge, 2013). While planning is an integral part of effectively differentiating instruction, Parsons et al. (2013) suggested teachers develop their direct instruction time to use a variety of formative assessments aimed at adapting instruction based on student engagement, readiness, and learning styles. Being able to modify the facilitation of a lesson based on formative assessment feedback is essential and is what high quality teachers do to meet the varied needs of each and every student (Parsons et al., 2013).

School districts implementing the RTI framework should consider adopting scientifically-based comprehensive core curricula along with instructional delivery practices (Hoppey et al., 2010; Stecker et al., 2008). While whole group literacy instruction is recommended for daily mini lessons, to make certain each student continues to achieve at his or her ability, differentiated instruction must be implemented (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). According to Fountas and Pinnel (2012), differentiated instruction in the area of literacy can be achieved when all stakeholders of the school district are ready and willing to exert the necessary collaborative effort, resources, leadership, and training needed to be successful.

Schools implementing flexible grouping during literacy instruction allow teachers to meet with small groups of students based on literacy needs (Bates, 2013). These groups are continuously changing and evolving based on assessment data supporting students' strengths and weaknesses as well as student interests (Bates, 2013). Depending on ability level, teachers can also adjust their small group literacy instruction by meeting with some groups more often and at different time increments (Bates, 2013). Additionally, fidelity of instructional practices along with the provision for coaching or

teacher support should be an important consideration (Hoppey et al., 2010; Stecker et al., 2008).

Implementation of RTI takes a tremendous amount of effort. For this framework to be successful, it is essential to have supportive leadership (Shepherd & Salembier, 2010). Having a school administrator committed to improving student achievement by participating alongside teachers in professional development opportunities and providing direction and support to all stakeholders, allows teachers to better see the value of their investment as they embed this approach to teaching and learning within their classrooms (Shepherd & Salembier, 2010).

Many schools using the instructional tiers of the RTI framework have noted encouraging results (Benedict et al., 2013). These results were made possible by working together to create focused lessons within each intervention aimed at meeting the instructional needs of each student (Benedict et al., 2013). Teachers working in districts having effectively implemented RTI are using collaborative opportunities to share best practices, teaching strategies, and learning activities while using common language (Shepherd & Salembier, 2010). This collaborative effort has allowed regular education teachers and special education teachers quality time to work together for the purpose of improving student achievement (Shepherd & Salembier, 2010). Districts are learning that once RTI has successfully been implemented, interventions can be put into place to meet the requirements of all students, which in turn, will allow for the success of all learners (Hoppey et al., 2010; Stecker et al., 2008).

Summary

Schools adopting specific and individualized programs have made a difference in achievement (Adler & Fisher, 2001; Cunningham, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Hoppey et al., 2010; Schwartz, 2001; Stecker et al., 2008). However, these programs are often used in isolation of other practices. Although they offer guidance on how to increase success in low socioeconomic schools, the research is lacking to show a blend of practices being utilized to narrow the achievement gap.

Because this review of literature did not generate a sufficient amount of information detailing a blend of practices implemented that have made a difference in substantially narrowing the achievement gap, continued research in this area is essential. Adler and Fisher (2001) stressed the importance of continued research regarding early literacy instruction. Efforts to recognize relationships and additional components supporting early reading, as well as other programs helping promote literacy success in schools of high poverty, are necessary (Adler & Fisher, 2001). A need to close the achievement gap is forthcoming as schools are determined to discover the successful efforts being utilized to help high-poverty students succeed (Adler & Fisher, 2001).

Today's educators have been challenged to understand, acquire, and apply more knowledge and best practices than teachers in times past (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). To ensure student success, teachers must utilize the acquired knowledge to understand the processes of reading including word recognition, fluency, and comprehension, all the while ensuring the classroom climate is conducive to learning while utilizing best practices and assessment strategies aimed at student growth and achievement (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). This study focused on a combination of research-based practices educators

have implemented in order to determine whether or not the blend of these practices has been successful in closing the achievement gap in the area of communication arts.

A review of literature aimed at specific best practices, interventions, and programs schools are implementing to help reduce the achievement gap in the area of communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds was discussed in Chapter Two. The methods and procedures applied in this study are described in Chapter Three. Presentation of data and an analysis of findings are detailed in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five, the conclusions and recommendations for further research are addressed.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The methods used to address the problem of how to reduce the achievement gap in communication arts that is associated with children from families with low socioeconomic backgrounds when compared to more advantaged peers are detailed in this chapter. Rather than blame students' lack of achievement solely on home and environmental factors, understanding the importance of educational systems and providing the absolute best opportunities for all learners to achieve regardless of their economic backgrounds is essential (Gorski, 2013). In America, millions of students are lacking essential resources needed to become successful in school (Payne, 2010). These learners are at risk of failing unless teachers and administrators develop necessary interventions and strategies to help these children succeed (Payne, 2010).

This study resulted in the collection of data to determine what strategies, methods, and programs school districts are implementing to narrow the achievement gap. This information will be made available so that other districts can duplicate what has worked and embed those practices in place within their own systems. The subsequent research questions were reflected on throughout the study.

Problem and Purpose Overview

The problem explored through this study concerned the achievement gap in communication arts occurring with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. It is important to identify factors contributing to the gap in achievement are often related to the child's home and environmental conditions. However, it is equally essential educators recognize the significance of current educational practices and provide the absolute best opportunities for all learners to achieve regardless of their economic backgrounds

(Gorski, 2013). In America, millions of students are under-resourced, making it difficult to succeed in school (Payne, 2010). Teachers and administrators must develop necessary interventions and strategies to help these children succeed rather than risk students falling further behind (Payne, 2010).

Considering economic backgrounds and home factors contributing to student achievement is necessary. However, the purpose of this study was to discover best practices schools are implementing with students from poverty to narrow the achievement gap in communication arts (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Snell, 2003). According to Crow (2010), creating a framework to address the needs of under-resourced students is conceivable. School districts can use this study to duplicate what has been effective. According to Snell (2003), if achievement gaps are to be narrowed, teachers must not accept students from impoverished backgrounds have little hope of success. Instead, educators meeting the needs of all students, regardless of socioeconomic background, will accomplish academic achievement for all learners (Snell, 2003).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways does using a comprehensive literacy program affect Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) achievement in communication arts of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

2. What alternative literacy resources are utilized to increase MAP achievement in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

3. What additional educational practices are perceived to narrow the achievement gap in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

Methodology

This study was developed using a mixed-method design. Quantitative and qualitative methods were employed using surveys and interviews. Triangulation of data was used to increase the credibility and validity of the study. The quantitative data were collected using a survey. In addition, MAP data were analyzed and qualitative data were collected and studied through the use of interviews (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

Population and Sample

The population included elementary school districts located in Missouri that have shown academic improvement from the fourth grade MAP sub-group of free and reduced price meals over a three-year period. A cluster sample was used to select participants to complete surveys. A cluster sample was achieved by selecting a preexisting group, called a cluster, and using the participants in the cluster for the sample (Bluman, 2011). The cluster group was formulated from the list of elementary schools meeting the criterion (continuous increases in the index scores for years 2011-2013) in the area of communication arts for the sub-group of free and reduced price meals.

In addition, principals in the sample were contacted and asked to interview. This convenience sampling consisted of principals willing and available to participate at the time of interviews (Bluman, 2011). Interviews were conducted with four school principals who have experienced success over the past three years in narrowing the achievement gap in the area of fourth grade communication arts within the sub-group of free and reduced price meals.

Instrumentation

This research was conducted using a mixed-method design. Quantitative and qualitative methods were employed using surveys and interviews. This method offered the best design for the amount and kind of evidence obtained for this study. The research design involved use of multiple methods for gathering data. Both quantitative and qualitative data, as well as triangulation of data, were used to increase the credibility and validity of the study (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Mills, 2014). Methodological triangulation was specifically used, which involves the use of multiple qualitative and/or quantitative methods (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Guion et al., 2011; Mills, 2014).

The quantitative data were collected using a survey as well as MAP data. The qualitative data were collected through interviews. In addition to increasing the validity of the study, the benefits of using triangulation also included creating varied ways to understand and reveal the results (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Guion et al., 2011; Mills, 2014).

Achievement scores. According to the statistics of Missouri public schools from the Missouri School Directory, there were 1,236 elementary school buildings, with an additional 34 charter elementary schools, for a total of 1,270 elementary school buildings in 2012-2013 (MODESE, 2014a, p. 1). Data, including fourth grade elementary students' communication arts scores from the MAP sub-group of free and reduced price meals over a three-year period (2011, 2012, 2013), were collected from the MODESE (2014a) website by accessing the Missouri Comprehensive Data System. Additional data were accessed and filtered to indicate MAP Performance Index scores from the MODESE (2014a) website to determine how many elementary schools out of the 1,270 in the state of Missouri have shown continuous increase and improvement over a three-year-period

(2011, 2012, 2013) in the area of fourth grade communication arts within the sub-group of free and reduced meals. While a certain percentage of growth was not required for this study, continuous growth over the three-year period was pertinent (MODESE, 2014a).

Data were contained in a zipped file titled MAP District Disaggregate Final. The file contained years of MAP data that needed filtering to obtain MAP Performance Index Scores. After filtering by year, content area, grade level, and type, the data were sorted by the top 2%. Because the department had not added the calculation for MAP Performance Index (MPI) by grade level, the final step was to use the following calculation to obtain the necessary data ([% students scoring Below Basic x 1] + [% students scoring Basic x 3] + [% students scoring Proficient x 4] + [% students scoring Advanced x 5])*100 = MPI. After careful analysis, the data revealed 86 elementary school buildings out of a total of 1,270 elementary school buildings had shown continuous increase and improvement over the three-year period indicated in the area of fourth grade communication arts within the sub-group of free and reduced meals.

Interview. Interview questions were field tested by two doctoral students and eight professional educators including teachers, college professors, and administrators. In addition to interview questions, field test participants also received the research questions for this study. Field test participants were asked to view interview questions and offer suggestions for improvement based on specificity, relationship to research questions, and effectiveness in producing pertinent, open-ended responses from interviewees. Based on feedback, interview questions were revised to align more clearly with research questions and to provide better opportunities for open-ended responses. Questions used in the interviews were also viewed and critiqued by a committee member. Based on feedback,

suggestions, and recommendations, interview questions were revised to support research questions (see Appendix A).

After gathering quantitative data from the survey, school principals were individually selected based on a convenience sampling. Participants (elementary school principals) were recruited from public elementary schools in the state of Missouri that had shown growth (continuous increases in MAP Index scores) in the area of fourth grade communication arts over a three-year period (2011-2013) within the sub-group of free and reduced price meals. Secondary data including electronic mail addresses of building principals and physical addresses of the elementary schools were accessed from the Missouri school directory (MODESE, 2014a). Ten principals from the quantitative sample group were contacted via telephone by means of phone script (see Appendix B). Cover letters and consent forms were also used to contact participants and to invite them to participate in face-to-face interviews (see Appendices C & D). Participants were required to agree to the conditions of the interview through an informed consent form. Within the conditions of the interview, participants were guaranteed all information collected would remain in the possession of the investigator in a safe location and that each respondent's identity would remain anonymous.

Of the original invitees, four principals were willing to participate. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the convenience of the interviewees. The responses were authentic and in the spoken language of the interviewees. Interview questions were consistent and identical in wording but allowed for open-ended responses from participants so qualitative data could be collected (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The interviews were audio taped, with permission of the interviewees, and then transcribed. For

clarification, brackets [ ] were used to insert a word or phrase that better described or explained the educational jargon, acronym used, or to better explain the language used by the building principals. This did not change the intent of the responses. The transcripts were returned to the interviewees for review.

Survey. Survey statements were field tested by two doctoral students and eight professional educators including teachers, college professors, and administrators. In addition to survey statements, field test participants also received the research questions for this study. Field test participants were asked to view survey statements and offer suggestions for improvement based on survey construction, relationship to research questions, and effectiveness in producing pertinent, quantitative data. Based on feedback, survey statements were revised to align more clearly with research questions and to provide better opportunities for data collection. Statements used in the survey were also viewed and critiqued by a committee member. Based on feedback, suggestions, and recommendations, survey statements were revised to support research questions (see Appendix E).

From the list of elementary schools meeting the criterion (continuous increases in index scores for years 2011-2013, in the area of communication arts, for the sub-group of free and reduced price meals), the names of building principals (sample group) and electronic mail addresses were obtained from the Missouri School Directory (MODESE, 2014a). An online Likert scale survey was sent via electronic mail to the sample group of principals meeting the criterion. Elementary school principals were emailed the survey web address if MAP data from their school had shown proven success in narrowing the

achievement gap in the area of fourth grade communication arts within the sub-group of free and reduced price meals over a three-year period.

Participants were asked to take part in the survey, which was made available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for a 15-day period. Cover letters and consent forms were provided, and participants were required to agree to the conditions of the survey through the informed consent form (see Appendices F & G) prior to entering the survey portion of the website. Within the conditions of the survey, participants were guaranteed all information collected would remain in the possession of the investigator in a safe location and that each respondent's identity would remain anonymous. Of the 86 surveys sent, a total of 27 were returned over a 15-day period.

Data Analysis

Of importance to this study were the independent variables which included various programs and practices districts have implemented to narrow the achievement gap with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the area of communication arts. Independent variables included the following: comprehensive literacy programs, RTI, adaptive diagnostic tests, professional learning communities, as well as additional practices perceived to narrow the achievement gap. The dependent variable was the communication MAP index scores of the sub-group of free and reduced price meals. Once both quantitative and qualitative data were obtained, an assortment of figures and tables were completed to show the blend of programs and research-based best practices school districts have in place and the progress or lack of progress in narrowing the achievement gap in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Quantitative. Quantitative data, including fourth grade elementary students' communication arts scores from the MAP sub-group of free and reduced price meals over a three-year period (2011, 2012, 2013) were collected from the MODESE (2014a) website. In addition, data were retrieved and filtered to indicate MAP Performance Index scores from the MODESE (2014a) website to determine how many elementary schools out of the 1,270 in the state of Missouri had shown continuous increase and improvement over a three-year period (2011, 2012, 2013). While a certain percentage of growth was not required for this study, continuous growth over the three-year period indicated was important.

The additional data were available through the MODESE (2014a) website by accessing the Missouri Comprehensive Data System. An analysis of MAP index scores from school districts with successive increases in the free or reduced price meals sub-group over the three-year period indicated were examined. The outcomes were used to conclude which school districts made gains in narrowing the achievement gap in the area of fourth grade communication arts. After careful examination, the data revealed 86 elementary school buildings out of a total of 1,270 elementary school buildings had shown continuous increase and improvement over the three-year period indicated.

Then, from the list of elementary schools meeting the criterion of continuous increases in the index scores for years 2011-2013, the names of the building principals (sample group) and electronic mail addresses were obtained from the Missouri School Directory (MODESE 2014a). Quantitative data were analyzed using the results from an online survey, which was sent via electronic mail to the sample group of 86 principals. Each principal received an email containing a cover letter and informed consent

documentation with assurances of confidentiality that all information collected would remain in the possession of the investigator in a safe location and that each respondent's identity would remain anonymous.

The online survey consisted of closed-ended statements developed from the study's research questions. The survey was arranged using a Likert scale to measure attitudes of participants. Surveys containing fixed-choice response formats in a five-point scale allowed the researcher to analyze and measure the respondents' attitudes or opinions (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Likert Scale, 2015). The advantage of using a Likert scale is the researcher did not expect a simple yes or no answer from the respondent (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Instead, using a Likert scale allowed for varying degrees of opinion (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Likert Scale, 2015).

Using the mode enabled the researcher to simplify and examine the results of the survey. Descriptive statistics were used to organize, summarize, and present the data (Bluman, 2011). Once the quantitative data were obtained, data were examined and studied without difficulty (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Using descriptive statistics in this manner helped to visually represent all the data in a simplified and more manageable summary or form (Bluman, 2011).

Qualitative. For the qualitative portion of this study, 10 building administrators from the quantitative survey sample group were individually selected to participate in an interview. Four principals were willing to participate, and the face-to-face interviews took place at the convenience of the interviewees. The interviews were audio taped, with permission of the interviewees, and then transcribed. Afterwards, the interviewees received a copy of the transcript for review. Interviewees were assured the information

collected would remain in the possession of the investigator in a safe location and their identity would not be revealed in any publication or presentation that may result from this study. The principal's responses were authentic and in the spoken language of the interviewees at the time of the interview.

Data were analyzed using open and axial coding techniques to identify trends and themes (Creswell, 2013). During the transcription process, various themes and trends began to emerge. Reading and analyzing the transcribed data several times allowed for the creation of open codes based on reoccurring themes and patterns (Gallicano, 2013). The techniques used to code the qualitative data consisted of analyzing the repetition of words and phrases and the context for which they were used, as well as using different colored highlighters to dissect the transcriptions, finding relationships and patterns to open code, which developed into recognizable categories, and finally merged into major themes and subthemes through the use of axial coding (Gallicano, 2013). Thus, categorizing the relationships and connections identified within the open codes led to the creation of axial codes or major themes (Gallicano, 2013). Once data were analyzed, an assortment of tables and figures were completed, and interview data were organized into six major themes supported by building principal data.

Reliability and Validity

In order to test the reliability and validity of the survey and interview questions, a field test was administered to 10 people to gain feedback on survey construction and quality of both survey and interview questions. Testing for reliability and validity are essential with both qualitative and quantitative research when designing a study (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Using triangulation of data including achievement scores, surveys, and

interviews helped to validate the study as the researcher explored a variety of information to form trends and themes that were noted and categorized (Creswell, 2013; Fraenkel et al., 2012; Mills, 2014).

Ethical Considerations

The participants in this study were assured anonymity; therefore, no information was collected or retained regarding the respondents' identities. Informed consent forms were made available to all direct participants before research was conducted. In addition, the records of this study were kept strictly confidential. There were no known or anticipated risks to participants in this study, and deception was not used. Furthermore, no information about sensitive topics was gathered.

Participants were guaranteed all paper records collected would be stored in a protected location until completion of the project and then destroyed and that each respondent's identity would remain anonymous. Moreover, participants were guaranteed that all audio/video recordings collected would be erased after completion of the project. Finally, participants were guaranteed that all electronic data would be retained indefinitely in a secure location.

Summary

Described in Chapter Three were the methods and procedures used to collect necessary qualitative and quantitative data required to determine which school districts have had success in narrowing the achievement gap in the area of fourth grade communication arts within the sub-group of free and reduced meals. The intention for the research was stated in the introduction, followed by research questions to reflect on throughout the study. Presentation of data and an analysis of findings are detailed in

Chapter Four. In Chapter Five, the conclusions and recommendations for further research are addressed.

Chapter Four: Data Presentation and Analysis

Introduction

This study was conducted to explore best practices currently implemented in elementary schools across Missouri to help reduce the achievement gap in communication arts of low socioeconomic students. Based on the data collected, a study such as this is significant, because it may allow educators an outline of successful research-based instructional strategies proven to be effective when assisting students in the area of communication arts. The outcome of this study may allow teachers and administrators a framework of strategies and interventions to consider implementing in their school districts to help reduce the achievement gap.

This study was conducted using a mixed-method design. Quantitative and qualitative methods were utilized by collecting data from the MODESE (2014a) website. This method offered the best design based on the quantity and type of evidence obtained for this study. This study involved multiple methods for gathering quantitative and qualitative data (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Mills, 2014). Additionally, triangulation of data was used to increase the credibility and validity of the study (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Mills, 2014).

Quantitative data for each district were analyzed from existing MAP data available from the Annual Performance Report (APR) provided by the MODESE (2014a) website. The MAP index scores were analyzed for districts with successive increases in the free or reduced price meals sub-group. These results were applied to determine districts having success specifically in the category of fourth grade communication arts.

From the list of elementary schools meeting the criterion of continuous increases in the index scores for years 2011-2013, in the area of communication arts, for the sub-group of free and reduced price meals, the names of the building principals from the sample group and electronic mail addresses were obtained from the Missouri School Directory. An online survey was sent via electronic mail to the sample group of principals meeting the criterion. Each principal received an email containing a cover letter and informed consent documentation with assurances of confidentiality.

The online survey consisted of closed-ended statements based from the study's research questions. The survey was arranged using a Likert scale to measure attitudes of participants. Surveys containing fixed-choice response formats in a five-point scale allowed the researcher to analyze and measure the respondents' attitudes or opinions (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Likert Scale, 2015). Using this approach for the study helped to create figures and tables to display the data.

For the qualitative portion of this study, 10 principals, from the sample group, were individually selected to participate in an interview. Of the original invitees, four principals were willing to participate. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at the convenience of the interviewees. Interviews were audio taped, with permission of the interviewees, and then transcribed. Data were analyzed using open and axial coding techniques to identify trends and themes (Creswell, 2013).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways does using a comprehensive literacy program affect Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) achievement in communication arts of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

2. What alternative literacy resources are utilized to increase MAP achievement in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

3. What additional educational practices are perceived to narrow the achievement gap in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

Organization of the Chapter

A summary of the data collected is contained in this chapter. The data are organized within three phases. Phase I consists of quantitative data for each district, analyzed from existing MAP data available from the APR provided by the MODESE website (2014a). Phase II contains results from an online survey, which was sent via electronic mail to the sample group of principals meeting the criterion of continuous increase in the index scores for years 2011-2013, in the area of communication arts, for the sub-group of free and reduced price meals. Finally, Phase III includes the analyzed results from the interviews. Using triangulation of data, both quantitative and qualitative, from all three phases provides validity and reliability to support major themes and findings (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Mills, 2014).

Phase I

Data collection from the MODESE. According to the 2012-2013 statistics of Missouri Public Schools from the Missouri School Directory, there were 1,236

elementary school buildings, with an additional 34 charter elementary schools, for a total of 1,270 elementary school buildings (MODESE, 2014a, p. 1). Then, additional data were accessed and filtered to indicate the MAP Performance Index scores to determine how many elementary schools out of the 1,270 in the state of Missouri have shown continuous increase and improvement over a three-year period (2011, 2012, 2013) in the area of fourth grade communication arts within the sub-group of free and reduced meals (MODESE, 2014a). After careful analysis, 86 elementary school buildings out of a total of 1,270 elementary school buildings had shown continuous increase and improvement over the three-year period.

Phase II

Surveys. Names and electronic mail addresses of building principals from the list of elementary schools meeting the criterion were obtained from the Missouri School Directory (MODESE 2014a). An online survey was sent via email to the sample group of principals. Of the 86 surveys sent, a total of 27 were returned over a 15-day period. The following figures indicate survey participants' responses based on statements posed. In some instances, participants skipped statements, and those results are reflected in the figures.

The survey was arranged using a five-point Likert scale in order to analyze and measure attitudes and opinions of respondents (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Likert Scale, 2015). In an attempt to analyze survey data collected, descriptive statistics were used to organize, summarize, and present the data (Bluman, 2011).

Survey statement 1: *Our literacy program has positively affected MAP achievement of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in communication arts.* The survey sample was comprised of 27 respondents. The mode, or most frequent response, was (4). Therefore, the sentiment among most respondents was their literacy program *moderately affected* MAP achievement of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in communication arts (see Figure 1).

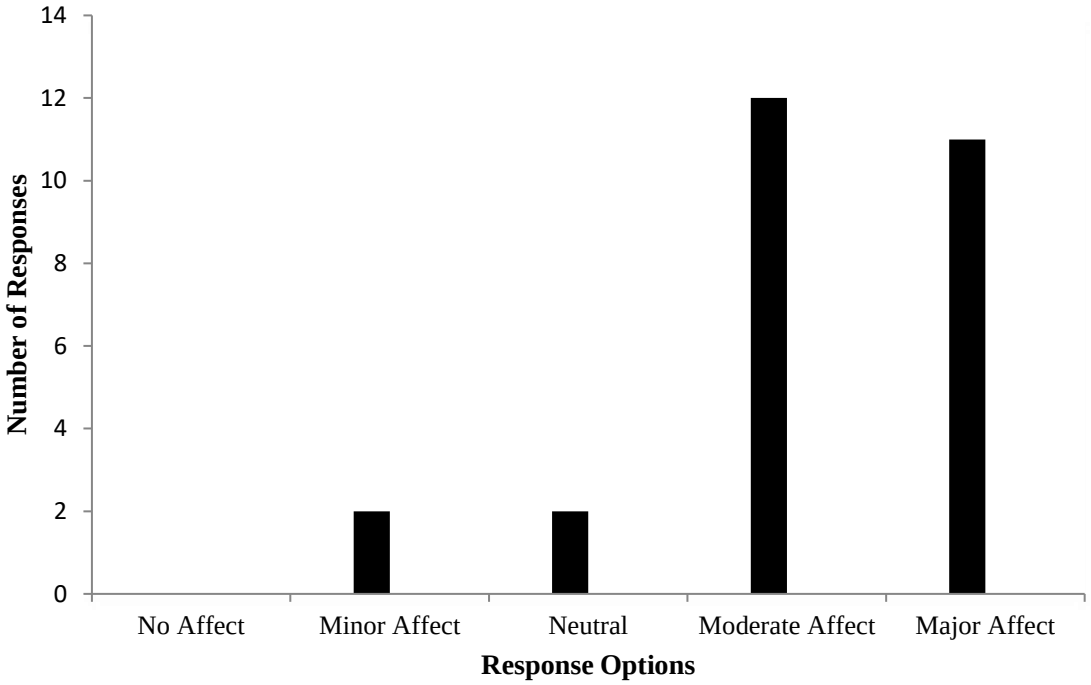

Figure 1. Survey results statement 1.

Survey statement 2: *Our school utilizes a comprehensive literacy program/model (i.e. Partnerships in Comprehensive Literacy, etc.) to guide literacy instruction*. The survey sample was comprised of 27 respondents. The mode, or most frequent response, was (5). Therefore, respondents *frequently* use a comprehensive literacy program/model (e.g. Partnerships in Comprehensive Literacy, etc.) to guide literacy instruction (see Figure

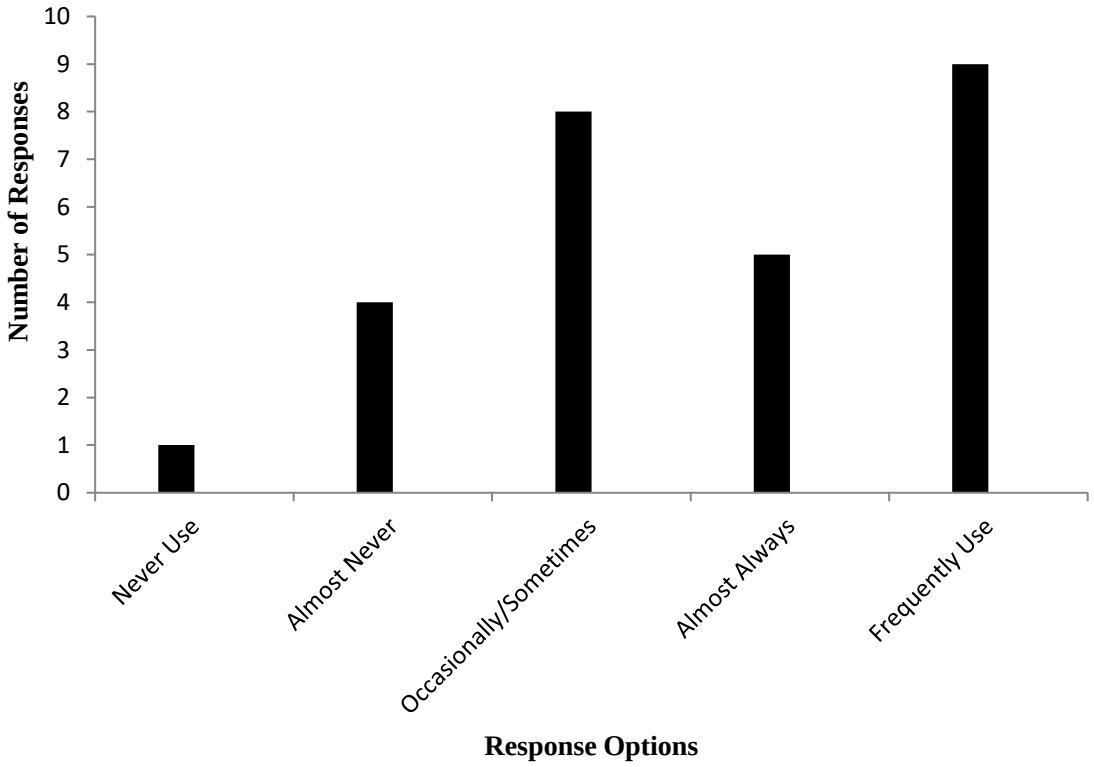

Figure 2. Survey results statement 2.

Survey statement 3: *Our school utilizes a literacy coach.* The survey sample was comprised of 27 respondents. The most frequent response option was (5). Therefore, the mode indicated the average sentiment among respondents is their school *frequently* utilizes a literacy coach (see Figure 3).

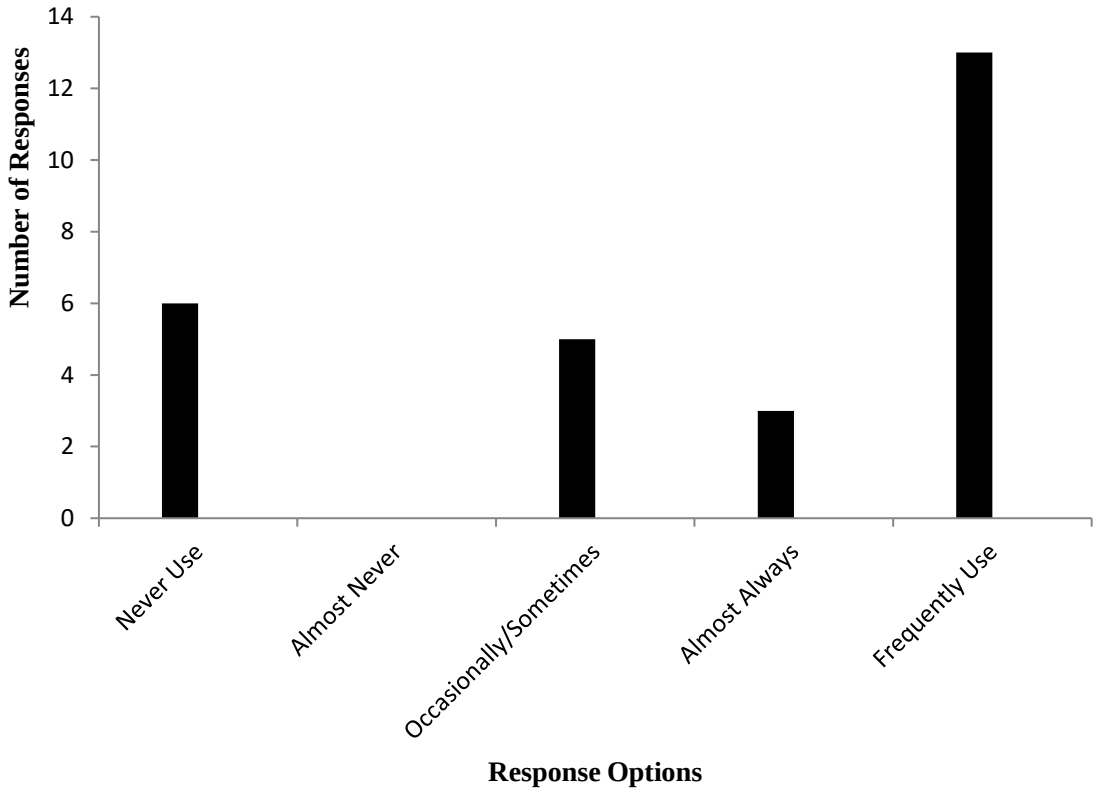

Figure 3. Survey results statement 3.

Survey statement 4: *The quality of coaching is effective.* The survey sample was comprised of 25 respondents. The most frequent response option was (5). Therefore, the mode indicated the sentiment among respondents is the quality of coaching is *frequently* effective (see Figure 4).

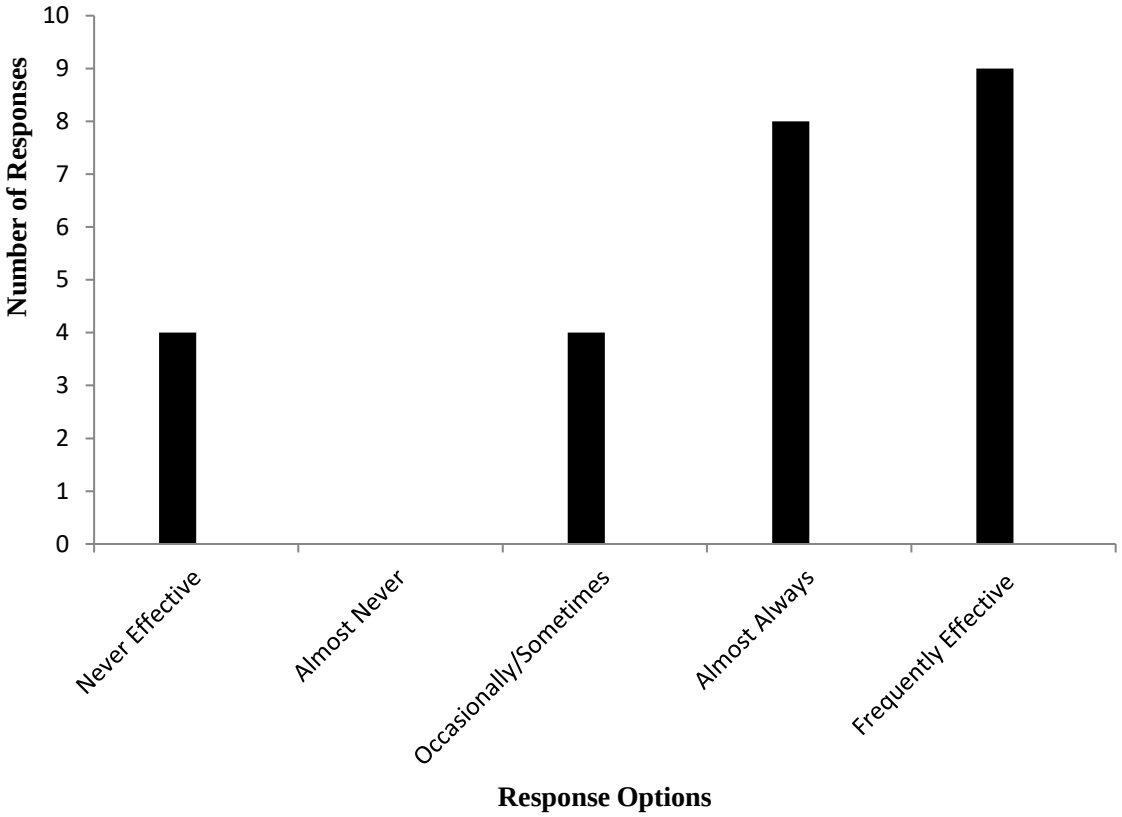

Figure 4. Survey results statement 4.

Survey statement 5: *Our school provides ongoing literacy training/professional development.* The survey sample was comprised of 27 respondents. The most frequent response option was (5). Therefore, the mode indicated the sentiment among respondents is their school *frequently* provides ongoing literacy training/professional development (see Figure 5).

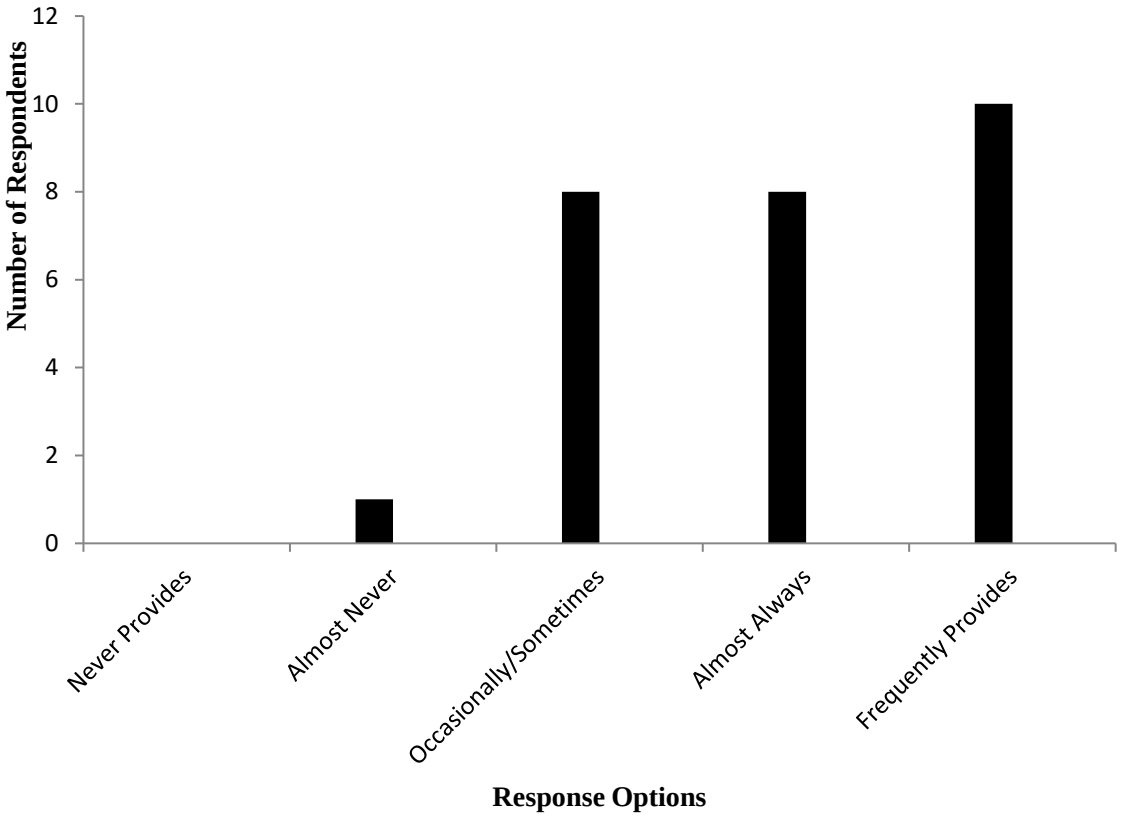

Figure 5. Survey results statement 5.

Survey statement 6: *The quality of the literacy training/professional development is effective.* The survey sample was comprised of 26 respondents. The most frequent response option was (5). Therefore, the mode indicated the sentiment among respondents is the quality of literacy training/professional development is *frequently* effective (see Figure 6).

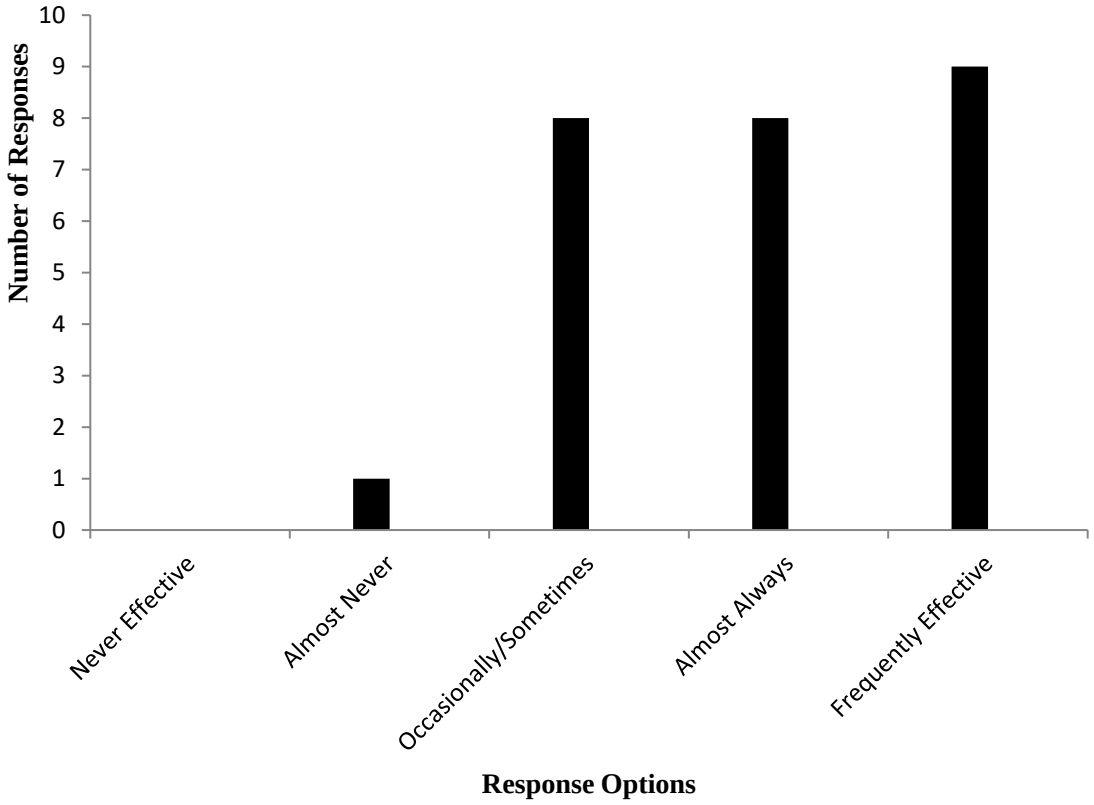

Figure 6. Survey results statement 6.

Survey statement 7: *Our school utilizes an established Response to Intervention (RTI) program to differentiate literacy instruction.* The survey sample was comprised of 27 respondents. The most frequent response option was (5). Therefore, the mode indicated the sentiment among respondents is their school *frequently* utilizes an established Response to Intervention (RTI) program to differentiate literacy instruction (see Figure 7).

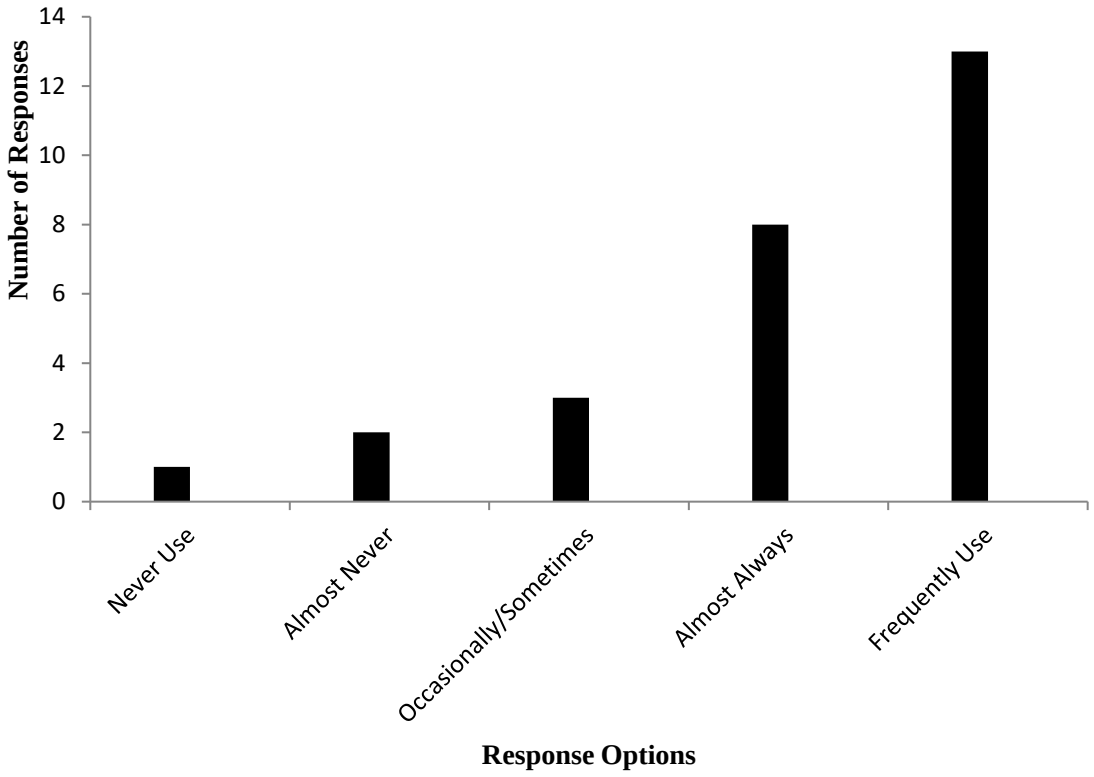

Figure 7. Survey results statement 7.

Survey statement 8: *Our school provides ongoing Response to Intervention (RTI) training/professional development.* The survey sample was comprised of 26 respondents. The most frequent response option was (3).Therefore, the mode indicated the sentiment among respondents is their school *occasionally/sometimes* provides ongoing RTI training/professional development (see Figure 8).

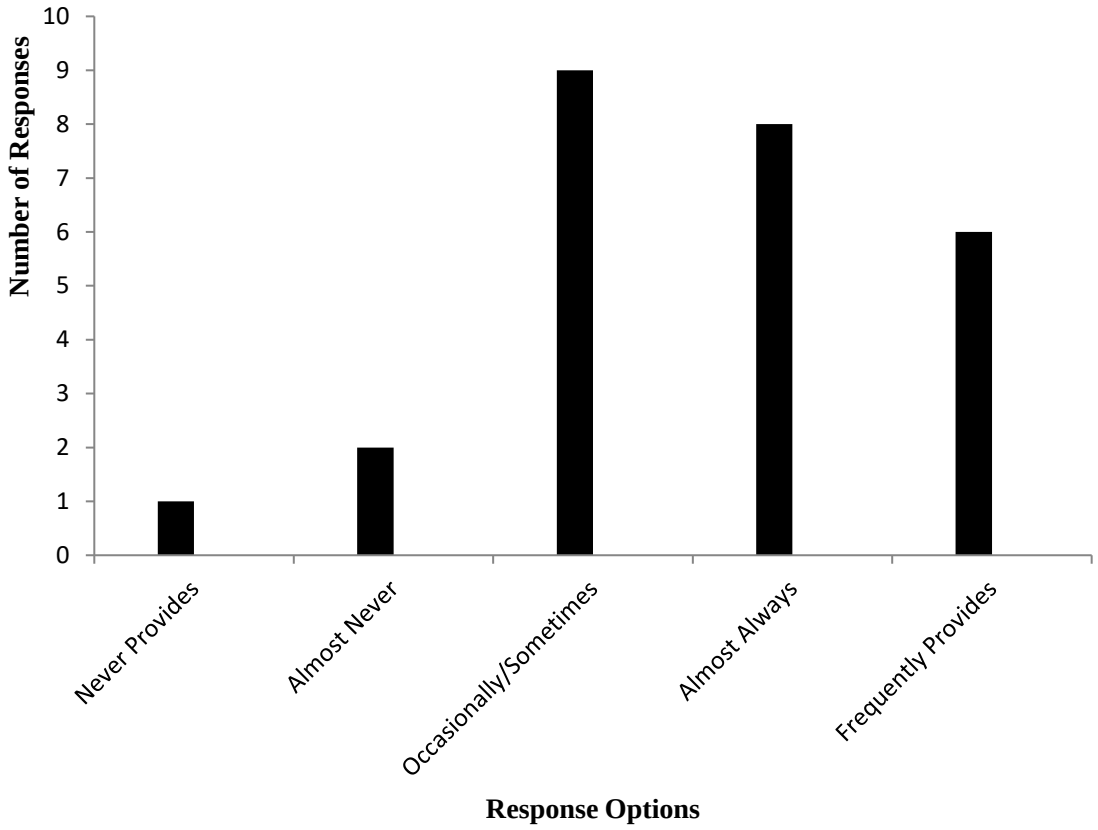

Figure 8. Survey results statement 8.

Survey statement 9: *Our school incorporates data-driven assessments such as adaptive diagnostic or predictive tests (NWEA, AimsWeb, Acuity) to guide literacy instruction.* The survey sample was comprised of 26 respondents. The most frequent response option was (5). Therefore, the mode indicated the sentiment among respondents is their school *frequently* incorporates data-driven assessments to guide literacy instruction (see Figure 9).

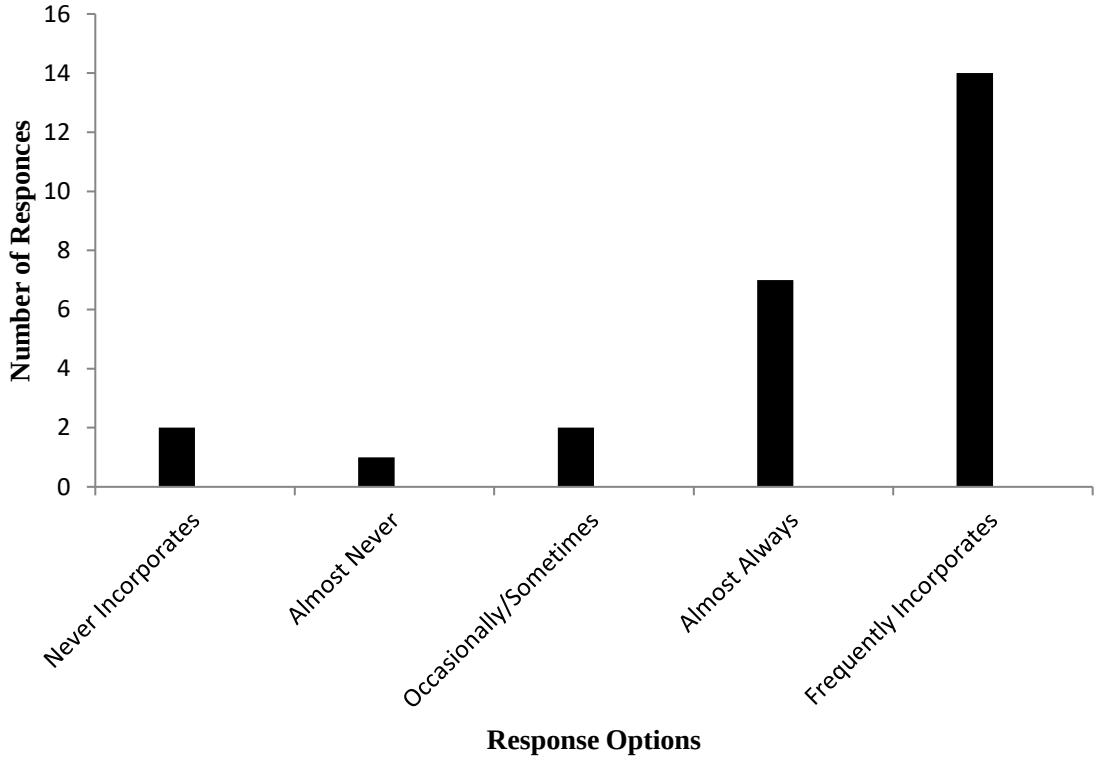

Figure 9. Survey results statement 9.

Survey statement 10: *Our school provides ongoing training/professional development to help interpret and use the data these assessments provide to guide literacy instruction.* The survey sample was comprised of 27 respondents. The most frequent response option was (3). Therefore, the mode indicated the sentiment among respondents is their school *occasionally/sometimes* provides ongoing training/professional development to interpret and use the data to guide literacy instruction (see Figure 10).

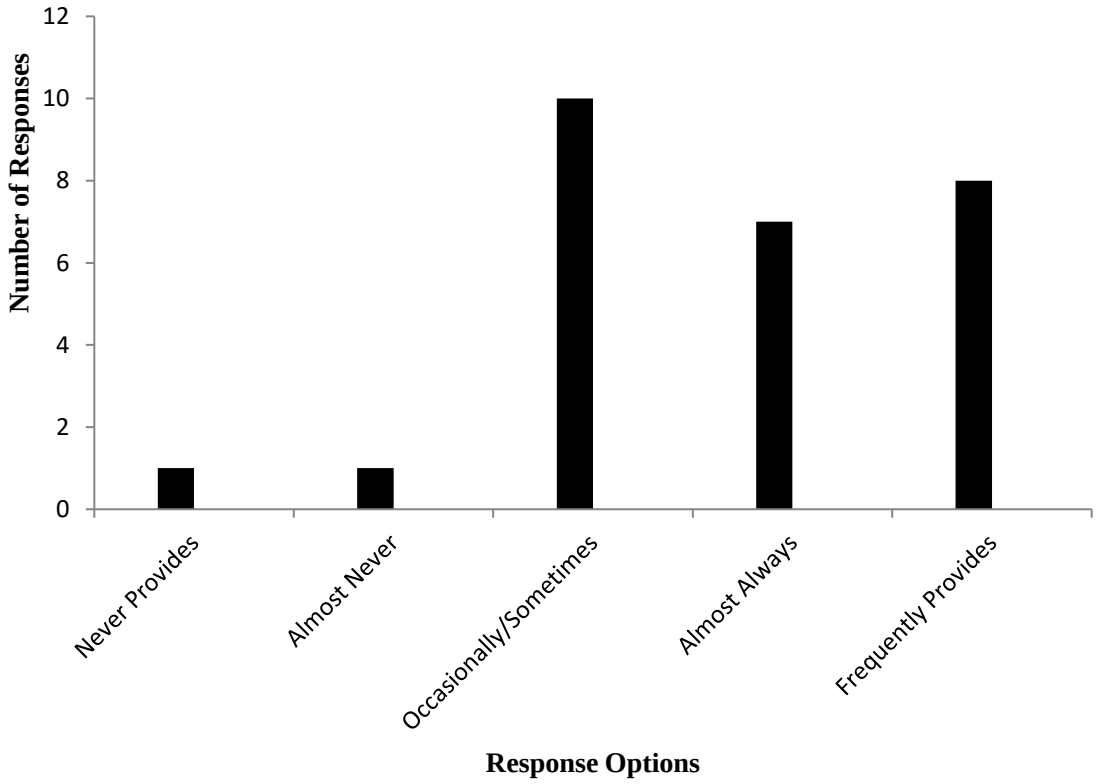

Figure 10. Survey results statement 10.

Survey statement 11: *Our school participates in Professional Learning Community collaborations.* The survey sample was comprised of 27 respondents. The most frequent response option was (5). Therefore, the mode indicated the sentiment among respondents is their school *frequently* participates in Professional Learning Community collaborations (see Figure 11).

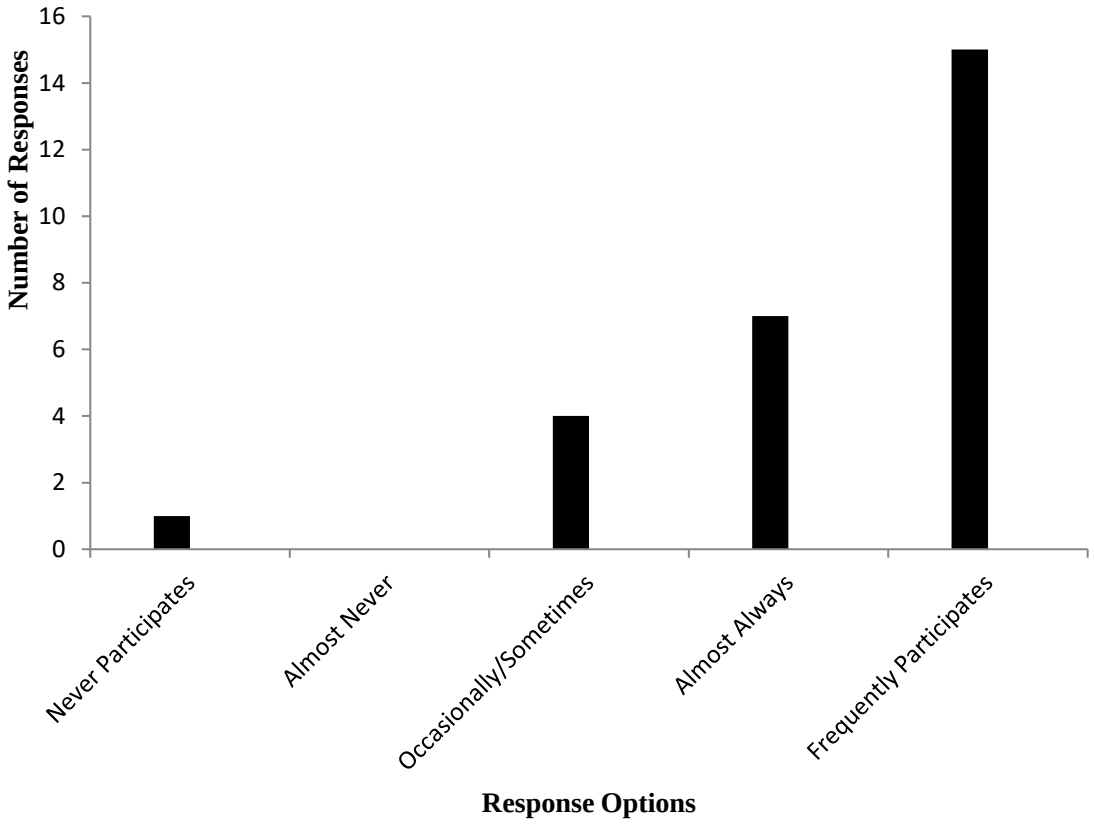

Figure 11. Survey results statement 11.

Survey statement 12: *Our school provides ongoing training/professional development to increase teachers' knowledge regarding under-resourced students' needs.* The survey sample was comprised of 27 respondents. The most frequent response option was (4). Therefore, the mode indicated the sentiment among respondents is their school *almost always* provides ongoing training/professional development to increase teachers' knowledge of under-resourced students' needs (see Figure 12).

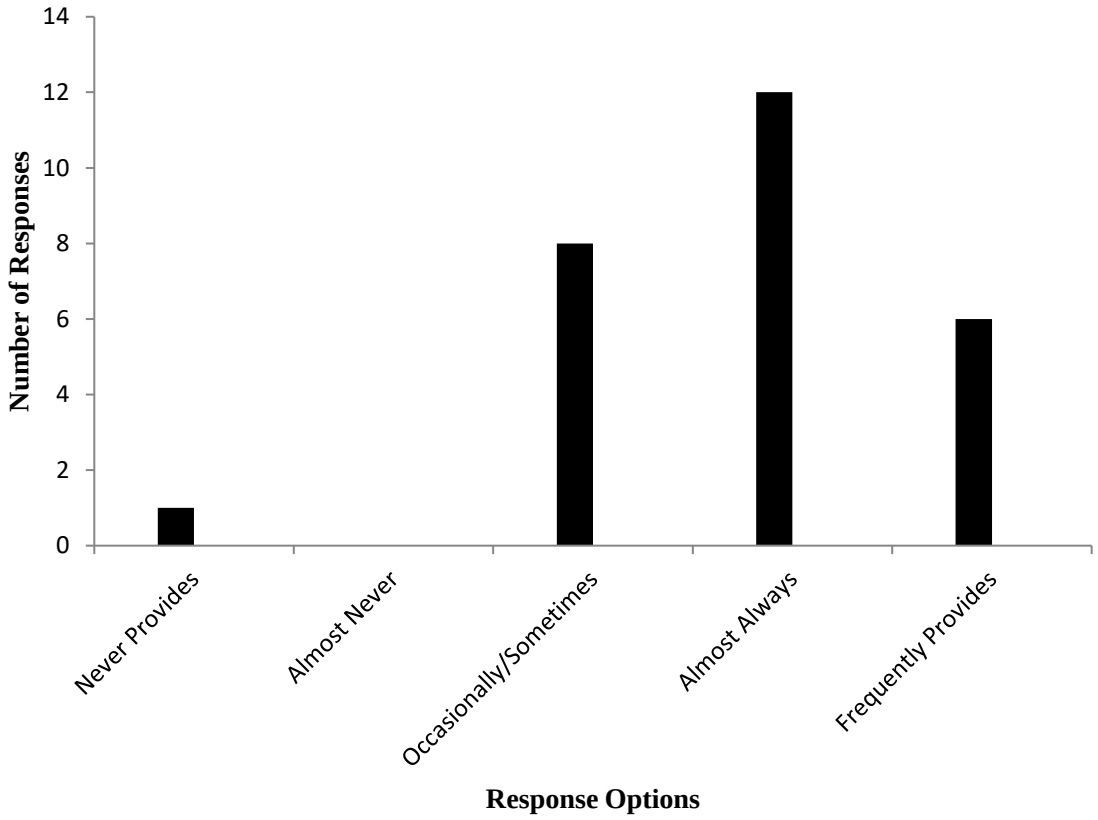

Figure 12. Survey results statement 12.

Figure 13 represents the mode per statement. Using the mode helps to simplify and examine the results of the survey. Using descriptive statistics allows for a visual representation of the data in a simplified and more manageable summary or form (Bluman, 2011).

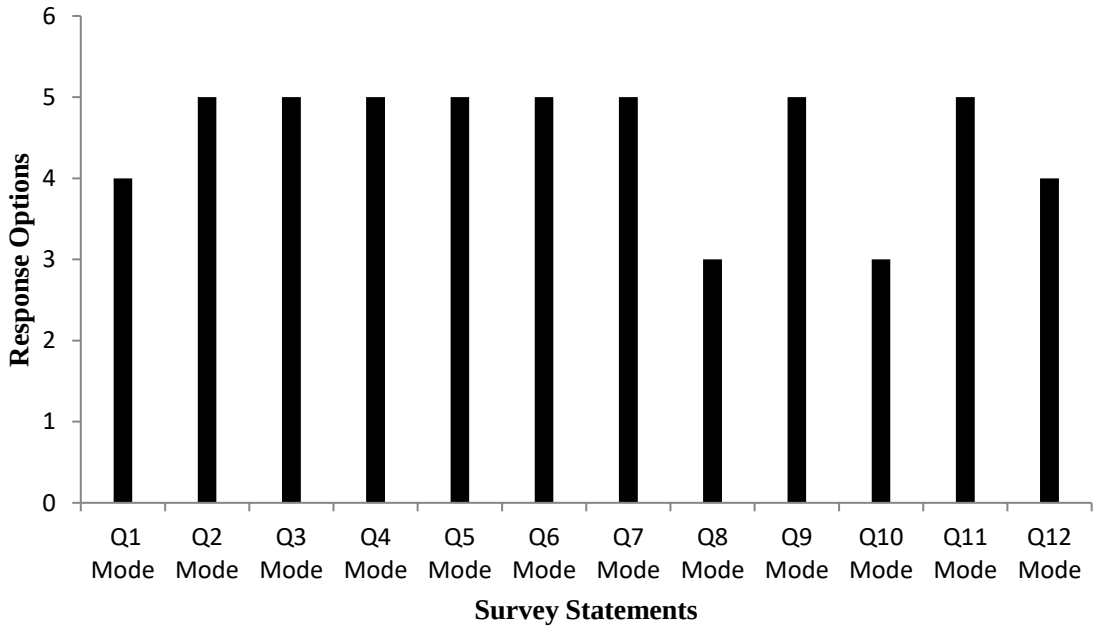

Figure 13. Mode per questions 1-12.

Mode. The following results were ascertained based on the mode:

Analysis of data using the mode revealed respondents were actively utilizing a comprehensive literacy program they believe has affected fourth grade MAP scores in the area of communication arts within the sub-group of free and reduced meals. In addition, the mode revealed respondents were utilizing a literacy coach, data-driven assessments, RTI, and Professional Learning Communities. Moreover, the mode revealed respondents provide effective professional development and training in the area of literacy, Professional Learning Communities, and training to increase teachers' knowledge regarding under-resourced students' needs. The mode indicated less favorable response

rates regarding professional development opportunities in the areas of RTI and data-driven assessments.

The results of the survey reveal a combination of research-based best practices are being used by the 27 survey respondents. The utilization of these practices has helped to increase achievement in students from poverty. In addition, building principals indicated the results of these practices and professional development opportunities associated with these practices have been effective.

Phase III

Interviews. For the qualitative portion of this study, 10 principals from the quantitative sample group were individually selected to participate in an interview. Of the original invitees, four principals were willing to participate. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the convenience of the interviewees. The interviews were audio taped, with permission of the interviewee, and then transcribed. The responses were authentic and in the spoken language of the interviewees. Therefore, responses noted in this study are genuine and oftentimes informal due to the casual state of the principals at the time of the interviews. For clarification, brackets [ ] were used to insert a word or phrase that better describes or explains the educational jargon, acronyms or language used by the building principals. In addition, the building principals interviewed were noted in parentheses for confidentiality and anonymity of the interviewees.

Interview data were analyzed using open and axial coding techniques to identify connections and relationships by categorizing segments of data into trends and themes (Creswell, 2013; Gallicano, 2013). Various trends and themes initially began to emerge through the transcription process (Creswell, 2013). In addition, through multiple readings

and thorough dissection of transcribed data, open codes were created by focusing on repetition of words and phrases (Gallicano, 2013). The relationships and patterns noted in the open codes developed into recognizable categories and finally merged into major themes and subthemes through the use of axial coding (Gallicano, 2013).

The demographic characteristics of the four elementary schools participating in this study are shown in Table 1. Consideration of enrollment, percentage of students eligible for free and reduced priced meals, staffing ratio, and average years of experience provided key statistics and comparable data among the four elementary schools represented in this portion of the study.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Four Elementary Schools 2011-2013

School and Enrollment	Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Price Meals	Staffing Ratios: Students to Classroom Teachers	Staffing Ratios: Students to Administrators	Average Years of Experience: Professional Staff
A/552	57.2%	18	552	9.7
B/453	34.8%	18	453	13.0
C/592	53.4%	18	296	12.0
D/498	39.1%	20	498	12.0

Shown in Table 2 are the fourth grade communication arts index scores from the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) within the sub-group of free and reduced priced meals over a three-year period from the four elementary schools represented in this portion of the study. The four elementary school buildings represented had shown continuous increase and improvement over the three-year period.

Table 2

Missouri Assessment Program Fourth Grade Communication Arts (MAP) Results for Free and Reduced Price Meals Sub-group

School	Year	Index Score
A	2011	341.8
A	2012	350.8
A	2013	364.6
B	2011	302.0
B	2012	321.9
B	2013	329.4
C	2011	324.0
C	2012	330.6
C	2013	340.2
D	2011	309.0
D	2012	316.9
D	2013	322.0

Represented in Table 3 are the notations made for each building principal participant for this portion of the study. When using direct quotes from transcribed interviews, the following notations were used for confidentiality and anonymity of the interviewees.

Table 3

Notations Used for Building Principals in Cooperating Districts

Notation	Participant
BP1	Building Principal, District 1
BP2	Building Principal, District 2
BP3	Building Principal, District 3
BP4	Building Principal, District 4

The process used to transition from axial coding, where connections and relationships among categories and subcategories were merged and major themes were created, is shown in Figure 14. Through methodical examination of interview data, open coding led to axial coding where relationships and connections became more focused, allowing axial codes to emerge based on a narrowing of relationships which ultimately led to the development of six major themes (Rabinovich & Kacen, 2010). Presented is a sample of axial codes disseminated from the interview data and the development of major themes commencing from the four building principals' interviews. It is important to note that while great care was taken to divide interview data into specific major themes, the results tend to overlap. Therefore, in some instances, what might appear under one theme could have easily been incorporated into the crux of resulting themes.

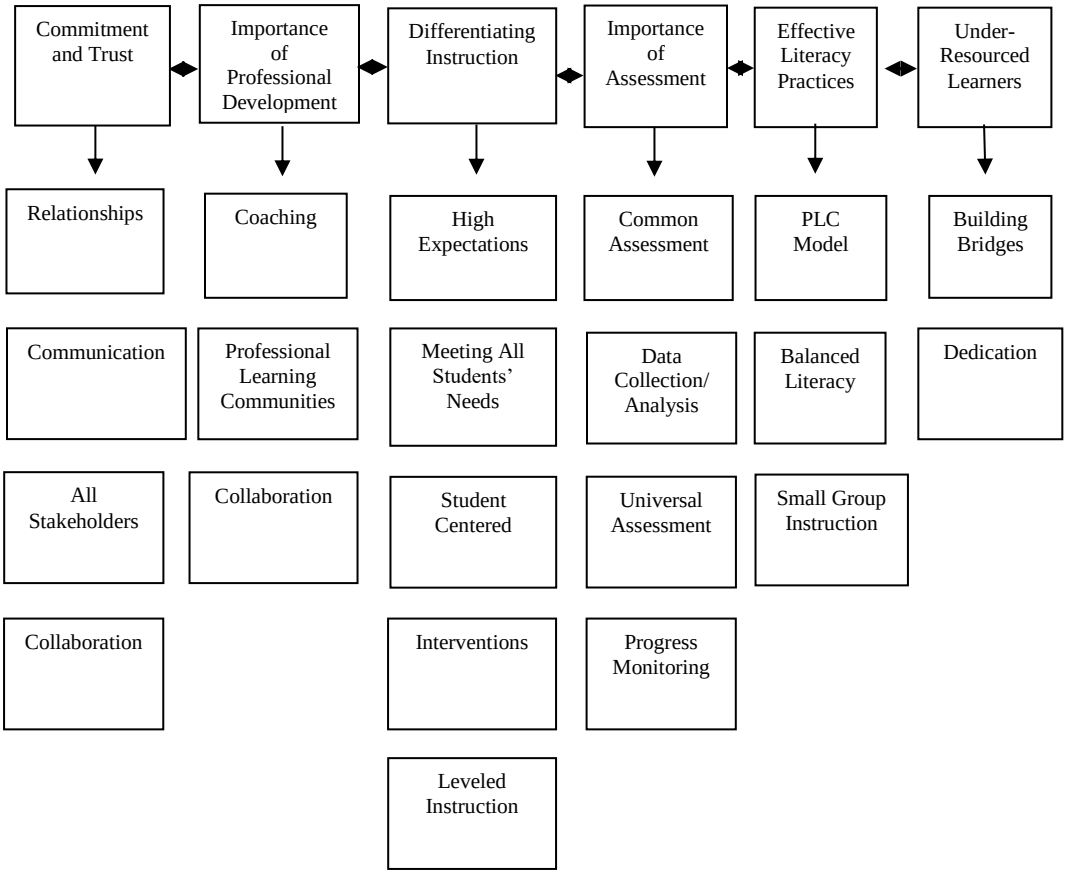

Figure 14. Sample of axial codes from interview data and major themes.

Descriptive matrix. Shown in Tables 4-7 are an arrangement of six major themes organized in a descriptive matrix, which emerged based on data collected from four building principal interviews. Data displayed in the table are only a sample used to support the major themes. Additional data from the interviews were used to support the major themes.

Table 4

Descriptive Matrix: Major Themes Supported by Building Principal Data (BP1)

Commitment and Trust	Importance of Professional Development	Differentiating Instruction	Importance of Assessment	Effective Literacy Practices	Under-Resourced Learners
At the end of the day, every teacher involved wants these students to grow. This whole process takes commitment and time.	We are a PLC [Professional Learning Community] school, and so we certainly participate in those learning communities. We have a release time every day on Friday, and so our teachers get an hour of collaboration every Friday afternoon.	If there is one thing that has helped our scores [MAP scores] a lot, it would be ( ) Time [intervention] because in this building every student in the building gets an intervention. All students are strategically divided into groups so every student is getting what they need whether they are gifted or struggling.	The literacy coach continually looks at data to see if we are doing what is necessary to meet the goal(s) we have established and making decisions (long term) to decide what does this look like next year for our students as they advance to fourth grade.	So, we have small group instruction which includes a mini lesson, and we have guided practice and independent practice where the teacher pulls small groups of students to her desk where they do more conferencing if it's writing or have small group reading instruction on leveled text for reading.	This is a time spent to have discussions about students we still have major concerns. For example, it could be academic concerns such as literacy but it could also be concerns regarding our population of students that are under - resourced. This is a time to collaborate and discuss interventions in place and interventions that we might possibly implement.

Table 5

Descriptive Matrix: Major Themes Supported by Building Principal Data (BP2)

Commitment and Trust	Importance of Professional Development	Differentiating Instruction	Importance of Assessment	Effective Literacy Practices	Under-Resourced Learners
We have a process with our data team meetings. These are held periodically throughout the year. Anyone can refer a student. It might be a parent who might have concerns. It could be any of the teachers. During these meetings, we sit down, we dig a little deeper.	We do an annual needs assessment of our staff and that's really what we use to build our professional development for the following school year.	We are looking at all the sub-groups. What kinds of things can we do across the board to help all of our students [succeed].	We also do a pretty comprehensive review each year looking at the assessment data from the MAP test. That is one thing we have done for quite a while, and we go into the data and we drill down the district level to the individual buildings to the grade levels to the teacher and to the individual students. We do that and kind of look for trends in terms of is there a standard or two that we need to target because we are not performing well there. What are the things we do really well to identify our strengths and what areas do we need to continue to grow in?	This year, we just made a transition to a program called "Journeys" which is a comprehensive ELA program which has everything in one place. It's the reading, language, spelling, grammar, [and] everything is in one program.	We also utilize a co-teaching model. We have a special education teacher assigned to each grade level, and they spend pretty much an entire day there. Not all of our lower socioeconomic students are IEP students, but there is some cross over…some overlap, so they are getting another layer of support throughout the day in all areas.

Table 6

Descriptive Matrix: Major Themes Supported by Building Principal Data (BP3)

Commitment and Trust	Importance of Professional Development	Differentiating Instruction	Importance of Assessment	Effective Literacy Practices	Under-Resourced Learners
However, I have found that in this building, we have extreme professionals where they are not opposed to meeting after school as grade levels or as data teams where they take the time to plan. It would be more the norm to see teachers here at 6:00 [p.m.] than what it would be to see teachers leave at 3:15 [p.m.].	We are absolutely dedicated as an administrative team within our district to provide a day of professional development each month with the exception of two, December and May.	We saw that RTI [Response to Intervention] was one of those ideas through educational reform that was going to positively benefit students. It was really going to focus in on and give an individual education plan for every kid in the building…not just the ones who had special needs. Our building developed the mindset of how could this be wrong.	After implementing RTI [Response to Intervention], we became aware of the need for CFA [common formative assessments] so teachers began creating these in each grade level for ELA [English Language Arts] and math. Students that are not proficient at the end of each unit are not left behind. We use the data to hone in on those students still struggling and create power lessons for small group instruction.	We use balanced literacy, several components to it, leveled readers where students are reading on their level, naturally trying to make a progression towards reading on their grade level.	You saw the [MAP] results yourself. In fourth grade, we've got it on. Some of that [success] are the instructors in the grade level, a fantastic group of educators with the mindset of how do we change our instruction to meet the needs of our kids.

Table 7

Descriptive Matrix: Major Themes Supported by Building Principal Data (BP4)

Commitment and Trust	Importance of Professional Development	Differentiating Instruction	Importance of Assessment	Effective Literacy Practices	Under-Resourced Learners
PLC [Professional Learning Community) has been a big focus for our school the last three to four years. We get out an hour early on Friday's, which may not be the best day of the week to be able to focus, but we do the best we can. It's been an awesome thing! The collaborating and coming together has been so helpful in the development of common formative assessments to use with the students.	If teachers ever have a desire to attend a professional development opportunity, we almost always allow our teachers to attend.	In addition, the teachers have been working really hard in the classroom to meet the needs of all their students through small group instruction. The reading interventionist is providing another layer of support for those struggling.	RTI [Response to Intervention] groups were formed based on data collected in the classroom based on their common formative assessments. The groups varied in size, according to the needs of the students.	We are moving towards the literacy model versus whole class literacy instruction, which is what we have done in the past. Our focus is on grouping our students for literature instruction, so we can focus on the instructional level of our students.	I feel like with our reading intervention teacher pulling out our students that are struggling in literacy, it has really helped [our lower socioeconomic students]. The groups are really small, sometimes just two students, so the instruction is focused on their level, and she has really been able to help them grow.

Major themes. The following major themes emerged:

Commitment and trust. Through the process of examining qualitative data with open and axial coding, one of the first major themes to emerge was commitment and trust. The four building principals interviewed revealed the significance of commitment and trust, involving the importance of relationships with all stakeholders (building principals, teachers, staff, students, and parents) having a vested interest in each student. In addition, interviews revealed the benefits of a collaborative environment when a positive culture and climate exists within the school. With regard to commitment and trust, BP1 stated:

> What we have been able to do with our [intervention] time is very unique. It is not an easy process to sell, and so building climate and culture had to be at the utmost for teachers to buy in to this process because it takes a lot of trust from colleague to colleague. Knowing that another teacher is going to take your student that you know is struggling, and I'm going to bless you and release it, let you have it. [Meanwhile], I'm going to take kids [from other classrooms], and all the while we are all hoping that each teacher is doing what they say they are doing in order to meet the needs of all our students. At the end of the day, every teacher involved wants these students to grow. This whole process takes commitment and time.

This same principal later revealed the importance of building a trusting environment within the school building so that when new initiatives or programs are being implemented, faculty and staff will work together to do what is necessary for student success. According to BP1:

> It [Response to Intervention] involves additional planning and in the beginning this was a hard sell. However, I can say, when I was hired in this district, it was

> very evident that the rewards outweighed anything in the process of getting this started that was a difficulty or hardship because our students excelled and grew. You see it when your MAP scores come back every year, and you wonder, how did that happen? You question, how did this building in our district do better that that building because we are all doing RTI [Response to Intervention], but we all use it a little bit differently. For [our] building, the process we adopted was the key to success.

According to BP3, the cultural shift in mindset involving the importance of collaboration within the school environment involves commitment and dedication. BP3 said:

> PLCs [Professional Learning Communities] and the mindset behind it create a collaborative nature in your building. We are no longer a building full of one-room school houses. It used to be if we had five teachers in a grade level, nobody talked. Everybody was their own teacher, and you had some good and some bad and some indifferent, but nobody learned from each other. So, we had all these resources in one grade level that nobody shared because they didn't know it was okay to do so, or maybe it's because they didn't know how to. Anyone that has been in education for very long has identified a teacher that was weak, but we lacked in doing anything holistically to try and help them. When we as a building came together and decided we needed to dedicate ourselves to the mission and vision of our building. These are the things we are going to guarantee for all our kids. All of it has to do with adult behaviors. We decided as a building that we are

> not only going to be trained, but we are going to commit to the training we receive.

A similar statement involving the importance of collaboration was made by BP4:

> PLC has been a big focus for our school the last three to four years. We get out an hour early on Fridays, which may not be the best day of the week to be able to focus, but we do the best we can. It's been an awesome thing! The collaborating and coming together has been so helpful in the development of common formative assessments to use with the students.

In addition, BP1 made this statement regarding collaboration and communication, both important factors when building a community of commitment and trust:

> [During Problem Solving Team Meetings], there is a lot of collaboration going on where others are trying to help the classroom teacher to come up with ideas for the struggling student. To follow up with that, typically our assistant principal, who is also on the RTI committee, will follow up with the classroom teacher within two to three weeks to see how the new strategies are going, what are the things you have tried so far, because there are times when you get sidetracked and forget to implement the strategies. So, that brings it back to the forefront where teachers are asked to look at what they tried, and that extends the conversation where teachers can meet again about that student with the assistant principal. His goal is to check in with them every so often.

When discussing the importance of trust, BP1 stated, "Yes, there must be a sense of trust [between the literacy coach and the teachers], because it's really hard to take

constructive criticism with someone you don't know. So, that relationship piece is essential." BP1 later added:

> New teachers also have a building mentor within the grade level that is also a great resource when it comes to interpreting the data and then using the data to help guide instruction. This is, again, where trust has to factor in. It can be awkward otherwise to look at and share how your students performed with your colleague across the hall, so we are always working towards gaining the mindset regarding what is best for our students rather than worrying about what others will think of our students' performance.

With regard to professional commitment and the amount of time committed educators devote to the teaching profession, BP3 stated:

> I have found that in this building, we have extreme professionals. They are not opposed to meeting after school as grade levels or as data teams where they take the time to plan. It would be more the norm to see teachers here at 6:00 [p.m.] than what it would be to see teachers leave at 3:15.

In reference to being committed educators, never giving up, and always being willing to collaborate and discuss how to best meet the needs of each student, BP2 offered this statement:

> We have a process with our data team meetings. These are held periodically throughout the year. Anyone can refer a student. It might be a parent who might have concerns. It could be any of the teachers. During these meetings, we sit down, we dig a little deeper.

Summary of commitment and trust. Relationships are essential to learning. According to Payne (2010), when effort is not made to form relationships and make connections with students, no substantial learning will transpire. All four interview participants were of the same mindset regarding commitment and trust. Interview data revealed similar beliefs among the four principals suggesting when all stakeholders are committed to building relationships with one another through collaboration and communication, mutual respect and trust ensues.

According to Payne (2010), school connectedness emerges within buildings where concern and commitment regarding the learning process is a priority. In addition, showing an equitable amount of care for each individual student to ensure he or she feels safe and has a sense of belonging is just as essential (Payne, 2010). Students attending schools in an environment where they feel connected, cared for, nurtured, trusted, and safe are more likely to experience academic success (Payne, 2010). In addition, effective relationships between students and teachers help to alleviate classroom management issues, because students will be more likely to accept the teacher's procedures and expectations, which in turn, allows for higher engagement within the instructional process (Marzano, 2011).

Payne (2010) maintained schools honing in on this commitment are likely to have students more motivated to learn as well as improved school and classroom attendance. According to BP1, the commitment to build relationships with students and parents extends beyond the school day. The school's devotion to under-resourced students is evidenced by this statement from BP1:

> This summer, our campus is going to the ( ) area to bring donated books to kids in that community for students to check out. Because they are donated, we are not really concerned if they are returned. Our goal is to get books into the hands of students that lack this resource in the home. In addition, our goal is just to create a stronger connection with members of this community, which happens to be an area where many of our students that are in the sub-group of free and reduced meals happen to live. This is not a school sanctioned activity. We are going to buy some cookies and punch, and teachers are putting together a shared reading experience similar to what we would do here at school and then give them an opportunity to look through books and take books home. We have scheduled to do this three times over the summer as a way to get more literacy into their hands. It's a way for us to meet parents, see our students' faces, reach out to the community, and hopefully build a bridge.

Importance of professional development. The second major theme to emerge during the coding process was the importance of professional development. Professional development opportunities are prevalent in schools across the nation. However, for teachers to gain from these opportunities, they must be meaningful and relevant to the content and subject matter with opportunities for application (DuFour, 2011).

In addition, if schools could plan these opportunities so faculty and staff are organized into collaborative groups based on commonalities, such as grade level taught or common subjects, teams would be able to apply what was learned, reconvene to offer feedback and suggestions, then return to the classroom to continue improving their instruction. (DuFour, 2011). According to DuFour (2011), teams of educators

purposefully working together will assist one another with developing supports and interventions for struggling students in order to promote student achievement. Teachers and school leaders with this mindset work collaboratively in groups to accomplish mutual objectives and concentrate on a commitment of instructional improvement based on a results-oriented philosophy (DuFour, 2011).

The interview data suggested a similar mindset regarding the importance of professional development and the implementation of PLCs within their buildings. Another major shift in a PLC's way of thinking places the attention on student learning versus the traditional emphasis predominantly on teaching (DuFour et al., 2010). The interview participants had strong like-minded convictions when discussing their approaches to ensuring professional development opportunities were applicable to the needs of educators and students. This approach helped to safeguard the professional development offered was effective. BP3 shared these thoughts:

> We are a professional learning community school building. This will be our fifth year of that which the primary focus of a professional learning community is, one to become a collaborative culture within our building but, two, focusing on student learning. Not what we as teachers give to the teachers…not the information I present, but a shift in that it is student centered and as teachers, we are responsible for every student mastering the objectives we have set forth before us.

BP3 later added:

> We aren't going to dig our feet in the sand; we're not going to continue teaching from a Basal just because they are easy. We no longer want weak and mediocre

> teachers that want to teach from a textbook just because it's easier. What we have found in this building is that the majority jumped in with both feet, were willing to do whatever they needed and were committed to the PLC process. Those that did not have buy-in were easily identified. What has happened is teachers began encouraging other teachers to do what is right. If some were not doing what the building said they were going to do, they were called out. Confrontation is hard sometimes for folks, but my thought is, if it's not good enough for my five kids, it's not good enough for any of the six hundred we have in this building. As I started making this more personal and explaining my thought process, the teachers in this building, most of which have children of their own, began asking themselves the same question. Would I have wanted that child in "my" class today or in someone else's class? That is a pretty powerful statement; pretty powerful thought process once you got people on board. Everything we do as far as the PLC process involves collaboration. How do we get better? How do we change what we do? Albert Einstein said the definition of insanity is doing the same thing time after time and expecting a different result. How many years did we do the same thing as educators and expect something to change? We now know we have to do something differently. The shift for us was as far as literacy instruction. How do we get kids to love reading? How do we get them to enjoy it? How do we make sure that we are holding students accountable and that they are holding themselves accountable for their learning?

As noted in the major theme regarding commitment and trust, BP3 further stated:

> PLCs and the mindset behind it create a collaborative nature in your building. We are no longer a building full of one room school houses. It used to be if we had five teachers in a grade level, nobody talked. Everybody was their own teacher and you had some good and some bad and some indifferent but nobody learned from each other. So, we had all these resources in one grade level that nobody shared because they didn't know it was okay to do so or maybe it's because they didn't know how to. Anyone that has been in education for very long has identified a teacher that was weak but we lacked in doing anything holistically to try and help them. When we as a building came together and decided we needed to dedicate ourselves to the mission and vision of our building. These are the things we are going to guarantee for all our kids. All of it has to do with adult behaviors. We decided as a building that we are not only going to be trained but we are going to commit to the training we receive.

BP1 discussed the importance of matching the needs of the building with the professional development opportunities being offered:

> We are a PLC school, and so we certainly participate in those learning communities. We have a release time every day on Friday, and so our teachers get an hour of collaboration every Friday afternoon. We, as administrators, tend to decide what that's going to look like in each building, and we each have our own autonomy, as we feel like we know what we each need to accomplish for our own buildings.

With regard to the importance of working in collaborative groups during professional development opportunities, BP2 stated:

> A great deal of collaboration goes into these data team meetings. We have a district psych examiner that is also usually part of these meetings to give us another perspective of the data. Sometimes one of our process coordinators will attend as well to provide additional input…whether it's instructional recommendations or the recommendation to move forward with testing.

BP2 later mentioned the type of collaborative committee work taking place in the building, which serves as a form of significant and meaningful professional development:

> We have never gone through formal PLC training, but we do have standing committees in our building. One of them is instruction and achievement, and so that group of teachers is often looking at the big picture in terms of things we are doing in our building instructionally and with curriculum. Every teacher in our building also serves on a committee called IAC, which stands for Instructional Advisory Committee in an assigned content area. There is a department chair for each of those areas, and they meet regularly throughout the year as well. That is considered more of a district level committee, and our building level committee supports that as well. This past year, with the implementation of a new literacy curriculum, the IAC was a very active committee. They were very involved in the reviewing of the resources and trying to identify what our needs were and aligning the right resources with the needs for our school. So, that is the way our structure works. Like I said, every certified teacher is on a curricular committee that typically meets monthly but could meet more often depending on what content area they are assigned to and whether or now it is a review year for that curriculum cycle.

In addition, BP1 discussed the importance of using professional development time allotted for meetings to collaborate regarding meaningful issues and ways to improve best practices:

> Within the PLC time, a variety of things are discussed and collaborated on. For example, our teachers have met regarding literacy one Friday each month and then once a week; grade level teachers have a morning meeting with the literacy coach before school to discuss literacy practices, strategies, etc.

In a similar response, BP1 later stated:

> In addition, PLC Fridays are also a time to meet regarding specific students who are struggling academically or behaviorally. These are students teachers have collected data on for the PST [Problem Solving Team], and it allows the grade level and special area teachers a time to discuss what is working and what is not working in order to help them grow. Oftentimes, these are students from the lower socioeconomic status, free and reduced meals sub-group.

Furthermore, BP3 made this statement:

> We have a great PLC leadership team within the building. We meet once a week, and then those teachers go back to the different grade levels and special education areas to disseminate the information shared and discussed to allow feedback on how we need to focus and shift our way of thinking as a whole. We have learned you get a lot of work done when you have a lot of people involved. Nobody has to do that much. We really took a team approach.

Recognizing the importance of team collaboration involving common plan time for teachers, BP2 added:

> We used to have common plan time for teachers in each grade level until we opened a second elementary school. The scheduling now does not allow for that, but teachers always have plan time with two others in their grade level. We have six teachers currently per grade level. Teachers also meet before and after school on their own time to have common plan time for thirty minutes or so to cover planning issues that they were not able to work through during the school day.

Common plan time was also discussed by BP4: "For the most part, our grade level teachers also have common plan time to work together and collaborate throughout the week."

When building principals discussed the amount and type of professional development opportunities available, a commonality among the four participants included the importance of purposeful and meaningful activities to help faculty grow in their profession. In addition, a major focus was placed on not only providing opportunities to learn a variety of teaching strategies, pedagogical techniques, and research-based best practices, but taking the time to apply these strategies, techniques, and practices in the classroom to meet the needs of their students.

Moreover, districts are cognizant regarding professional development needs of faculty and staff. Importance of professional development opportunities are oftentimes based on developmental needs of faculty and staff. According to DuFour et al. (2010), best practices within a PLC are pursued by collaborative groups seeking to improve their profession. Opportunities to stay current and to invest time learning about and implementing research-based best practices are discovered through book studies, conferences, workshops, and visiting other school districts having shown academic or

behavioral success (DuFour et al., 2010). Regarding the focus of professional development opportunities, BP2 stated:

> They [professional development opportunities] vary from year to year. This year, probably a little bit more because we implemented the new [literacy] system. So, with the purchase of those resources came some professional development early on. We do an annual needs assessment of our staff, and that's really what we use to build our professional development for the following school year. Sometimes the results are that, as a staff, we find an area we feel we need to spend more time on in comparison to other areas. Overall, I would say it varies from year to year. This year, our focus has been on literacy more so than the past two or three years just because of the implementation of a new curriculum.

In addition, BP3 mentioned:

> Right now, we have shifted to giving teachers what they feel they need as far as support with literacy instruction. Every classroom teacher in this building went to at least one professional development training this year, which would have been about seven hours.

Later, BP3 remarked:

> Initially, when we adopted the balanced literacy approach, it was about a three-year professional development that was pretty intense. Teachers took part in a week long training, which was followed up by two years of coaching where we had an outside literacy coach come once per month and spend the day in our building and oftentimes would come back once a week to provide intensive coaching for grade levels that needed it.

Furthermore, BP4 commented:

> We have teachers on different levels [regarding literacy training]. Several teachers have gone to Arkansas for the PCL [Partnerships in Comprehensive Literacy] training. Several teachers took part in a training that was held here. The training was provided by a literacy coach where she supported the teachers by coaching them regarding centers and small group instruction.

In addition, BP4 further stated:

> If teachers ever have a desire to attend a professional development opportunity, we almost always allow our teachers to attend. We are also a PLC school, so every Friday we get out an hour early, and a lot of that time this last year was spent on formative assessments with regard to literacy.

Professional development can be varied and can encompass an assortment of opportunities including conferences, seminars, workshops, and PLCs. In addition, districts are embracing the concept of instructional coaches. Many schools using a comprehensive literacy model are implementing literacy coaches to aid with literacy instruction through ongoing professional development (Kissel, Mraz, Algozzine, & Stover, 2011). Literacy coaches support classroom teachers by helping them to recognize and improve upon their strengths as well as learn new practices to improve literacy instruction (Kissel et al., 2011).

The role of a coach should be to assist and support teachers rather than to evaluate them, as teachers seek to advance their practice through self-assessment and reflection (Kissel et al., 2011). Working side-by-side with classroom teachers in a collaborative atmosphere allows relationships between coaches and teachers to develop, which helps

establish trust (Kissel et al., 2011). Once positive relationships are established, critical conversations can ensue, which ensures constructive feedback can be received resulting in student growth and achievement (Kissel et al., 2011).

According to Goodwin (2014), teachers oftentimes transfer approximately 95% of information gained from their literacy coach on to their students. Generous gains in achievement have been noted in schools implementing a variety of strategies geared to improve literacy when training was facilitated by coaches. With regard to literacy coaches, BP1 stated:

> Throughout the day, though, teachers are generally on a rotation with the literacy coach to do side-by-side coaching that would also be within the contracted school day to gain professional development, which can be up to an hour or so every single day.

Later, BP1 remarked:

> In addition, her [literacy coach] role is to not only help our early career teachers but all teachers. She comes into the classroom and does side-by-side coaching with teachers, and so it's nothing at all to see her working with a teacher by going into the classroom, teaching a specific lesson, and then have a conversation about the lesson. Later, she goes back into the classroom and watches the teacher teach a mini lesson. More conversation takes place. This is a professional learning tool utilized with coaching side-by-side with the classroom teacher.

In addition, BP1 further commented:

> I know she [literacy coach] handed me a stack of data from the entire year that details how each teacher can continue to help his/her students grow. Looking at

> this data allows us to have some wonderful conversation points with our teachers and helps me out a ton, because I don't have to go hunt and peck and find that because she already has that at her fingertips and has already established relationships in order to have side-by-side conversations with our teachers.

Furthermore, BP1 discussed another important aspect of coaching:

> I would say with our book room right now we have tons of texts/titles in each of our different areas, and the literacy coach really has an innate knowledge of what texts would benefit the various populations of students. For example, this set would work great for boys; I think this would really hook them. Or, this set of texts would work well with this unit of study the fourth graders are currently working on in science. The difficulty is oftentimes being able to find a text on his level that doesn't look like a first or second grade text from the cover. The book needs to be age appropriate for these students to feel successful. There is a social aspect to reading, and we want to be cognizant and aware of our students' feelings. She is able to mesh the appropriate text to meet the Common Core State Standards and the developmental needs of each student.

Likewise, BP2 mentioned the role of the literacy coach:

> First and foremost, her [literacy coach] role is to do that, coach; it is to observe, to teach, to support our teachers. I think it becomes more important the earlier the teacher is in her career as part of that induction process. We always talk at the beginning of the year how important it is to coach teachers that are in their first or second year. I ask the coach to spend a fair amount of time early to do some

> observations, conferencing, and modeling. So there is definitely that component to her job, which is very important and that is her primary responsibility.

Moreover, BP1 also revealed the role of the literacy coach:

> We do have one [literacy coach], and her role is to wear a multitude of hats. Primarily, her job is to make sure we are implementing the reader's and writer's workshop model with fidelity as well as assisting teachers in their implementation; providing the teachers with what they may need, recommending good texts to go with each small group. She has a vast knowledge of texts and what would work really great for this population. Teachers may go to her saying they have a problem with a particular kiddo, and she provides resources to keep them [the students] involved and engaged. So, she is a sound board for all of our teachers.

Although this administrator does not currently have a literacy coach in place, BP4 recognized the importance of the coach's role:

> We do not currently have a literacy coach, but it is in the works to get one. This next year, we plan on using a retired coach from Springfield as a consultant to come in and help us at different levels.

As mentioned earlier, a combination of professional development opportunities based on faculty and staff needs is essential. Teachers afforded the opportunity to keep abreast of research-based best practices are more likely to successfully implement these practices in order to meet the needs of their students (DuFour, 2014). Some of these opportunities are unique, while others are more commonplace. Regarding these opportunities, BP1 stated:

> There are several teachers that will attend the literacy conference in ( ) at ( ) University. This conference is put on by ( ) Public Schools. Several attend that every year, because there are speakers who are nationally renowned literacy experts. In addition to that, teachers will have call–ins with the University of Arkansas, Little Rock, where the PCL [Partnerships in Comprehensive Literacy] is housed. Dr. Dorn or Carla Soffos will dial in and we will do conference chats with them throughout the school year as well as in the summer.

Another professional development opportunity was mentioned by BP3:

> We are also involved in the Collaborative Work Grant; a grant provided by DESE which offers us a monetary fund as long as we work with their consultants. That consultant comes once each month. It started as a full day of training, seven hours. We had to decide on two research-based instructional practices involving ELA [English Language Arts] to implement and implement well within our building. For our own measure, we decided to select reciprocal teaching where we needed to develop ways to provide formative and informative feedback to students. This year alone, teachers have had close to 100 hours of professional development to enhance their literacy instruction.

The importance of professional development specific to the adaptive diagnostic assessment implemented was mentioned by BP4:

> With Acuity, they [faculty] had some training at the beginning of the year, and that was it, so I feel like one of our plans for the upcoming year is to get our teachers more training so they can feel better about it and utilize it more.

A similar comment regarding the necessary training involving the choice of adaptive diagnostic testing was mentioned by BP2, “The first three or four years as we were working to get a[n RTI] process in place and understand and familiarize ourselves with the AimsWeb system and how to read the graphs, we provided quite a bit more training.” The importance of providing professional development training to faculty and staff concerning the RTI process was further mentioned by BP2:

> I think the training [to help interpret data] varies depending on the role of the individual. The classroom teachers probably do not get as much training in that area in comparison to our interventionists who are doing the progress monitoring, but our reading teachers and our special education teachers are pretty well versed now in that area. Upfront, when we have new teachers, they spend more time with our literacy coach than they will in following years. They will just follow up with her if they have questions or if they need a second opinion of the data. I’d say early in their career, teachers receive 5-6 hours of training over the course of the year and less each year once they get more comfortable with the data themselves.

BP1 further discussed the importance of RTI training by stating:

> At the beginning of the year we have all of our back-to-school meetings, and so what we’ve tried to do is have a section of that time, about an hour and a half, where we sit down and go over our RTI process. We really look at that and define it. We bring it back up about a month after school has started, because honestly most people forget what was discussed in the few days before school begins due to being overwhelmed. So, in September, we re-introduce the RTI process, and before our first PST [Problem Solving Team] meeting we will have yet another

> refresher course of what this process looks like during a PLC Friday. We want each teacher to understand how to fill out the forms and explain the things teachers have to have before they inquire about getting a yellow folder for one of their students. And so, what we have found is that by taking the teachers through that process is a process in and of itself. We have discovered re-teaching is necessary. Therefore, we try to review the process every couple of months. We want our teachers to review what was discussed during the Problem Solving Team meeting. We want them to have critical conversations regarding these students. Ultimately, we want to refresh the process once a quarter.

The importance of RTI training occurring on a monthly basis to aid in the development of Common Formative Assessments was discussed by BP3:

> We started off slowly, Tier 1 RTI within the classroom; what can we do to positively influence students' learning by creating CFAs [Common Formative Assessments] per grade level. We wanted to become consistent per grade level as to what we deem proficient, because we have five classrooms per grade level. We were discovering if teacher A thinks this is proficient, and teacher C thinks something much less is proficient, then we have a big gap in what we are asking of our kids. That was really step number one, which involved monthly training.

Using professional development to create Common Formative Assessments was also of importance to BP4:

> Through our PLC training, our teachers were trained on how to create common assessments. We've had a consultant come out to do all day trainings when it

comes to assessments and collection of data and how to utilize the data. The focus this next year will be to provide time for them to grade them together.

In addition, BP4 also commented on RTI training, "Through our PLC training, it talked a lot about RTI. We have talked about it, and we have implemented pieces of it."

Summary of importance of professional development. Today's effective professional development takes on a different approach in comparison to the traditional method. According to DuFour (2014), today's professional development opportunities provide educators with ongoing, collaborative training of research-based practices. Due to the nature of training, teachers are essentially working together to implement best practices, while tracking progress of their students to ensure growth and achievement as well as warrant positive results (DuFour, 2014).

Traditionally, districts would provide training that might or might not relate to the needs of the faculty and staff, not to mention the needs of the students (DuFour, 2014). This type of training often occurred outside school, and implementation was left up to the teacher (DuFour, 2014). The goal, according to DuFour (2011), is to emphasize the importance of student learning through a collaborative team approach. Student success and gains in achievement have been the result of schools embracing this type of professional development model (DuFour et al., 2010). Using a collaborative team approach, supported by building administrators, to participate in consistent professional development where the focus is on meeting students' academic needs has been proven to be effective (DuFour et al., 2010).

Differentiating instruction. Meeting the needs of all students is critical if the ultimate goal is to close the achievement gap associated with literacy. Differentiating

instruction was the third major theme to emerge from the interview data. According to Dorn and Soffos (2012), schools must first take a close look at the program in place to determine if the structure allows for interventions to be embedded within high-quality classroom instruction rather than substituted for high-quality classroom instruction (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). When building principals discussed interventions being implemented in their buildings, a shared consensus emerged concerning the importance of meeting each student where he or she is and incorporating interventions to establish growth.

This shift in thinking allows for teachers to meet the diverse literacy needs of all students by incorporating rigorous whole group, small group, and individual instruction within the framework of a comprehensive literacy program (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). This type of literacy structure allows for teachers to provide scaffolding and layered supports to meet the literacy needs of each student (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). Concerning meeting the needs of all students, BP1 stated:

> Let's see, well, I would definitely say with our current literacy implementation, we are meeting kid's needs. I am going to give an example. We may give a mini lesson on punctuation, but then when we have our small groups, everybody is brought together regardless of the socioeconomic status. They are brought together on leveled groups, so they are having their needs met much more personally.

Echoing the importance of small group instruction, BP4 made the following comment, "In addition, the teachers have been working really hard in the classroom to meet the needs of all their students through small group instruction. The reading interventionist is providing another layer of support for those struggling." Later, BP4

stated, “Using formative assessments, re-teaching the students that need it, working at their level, just putting all the pieces together has helped [with student achievement].” This like-mindedness regarding meeting the needs of all students in all sub-groups continued as mentioned by BP2, “We are looking at all the sub-groups. What kinds of things can we do across the board to help all of our students [succeed].”

The level of rigor associated with the literacy framework used within the school, as well as the expectation that all students can succeed was discussed by BP2:

> I think, across the board, in talking with all our grade level teachers and observing in the classrooms, it seems like the rigor [of our literacy program] is definitely stronger than it was before, very high expectations for all our students.

The importance of student engagement and protecting instructional time so literacy instruction does not get interrupted was stated by BP2:

> From the instructional standpoint we try to be very consistent when it comes to the delivery of our content. We allow adequate time for instruction, so we have parameters we try to follow in the content areas to make sure everybody’s schedule is fairly consistent. We do everything we can to protect instructional time. We have a hand full of assemblies each year, but we have very little. Along those lines, we just do everything we can to keep our students engaged as much as we can.

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a process widely used to help avert delays in literacy. RTI is a layered, tiered approach used to provide interventions through small group instruction based on diverse literacy needs of students (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). According to Dorn and Soffos (2012), RTI is based on four ideologies which include the

following: choosing the most suitable intervention to meet students' needs; aligning interventions with best practices used during whole group, small group, and individual instruction; consistently checking student growth using progress monitoring; and collaborating with intervention teams to make decisions for continued success based on collected data. Discussing the implementation of RTI and the research-based benefits this approach could have with each and every student, BP3 said:

> Really, it was a progression towards Response to Intervention within this building. It started three years ago through the PLC process. We saw that RTI was one of those ideas through educational reform that was going to positively benefit students. It was really going to focus in on and give an individual education plan for every kid in the building, not just the ones who had special needs. Our building developed the mindset of how could this be wrong.

In addition, BP3 stated:

> If you were to say this child has a problem with reading, yes, that is a big red flag. Unfortunately, it doesn't tell you how to fix it. So, we really tried to hone in on the specific problem, and then, what are some strategies for intervention. That's where we are at now. We have gone to that measure where we are compiling a data base to include all our strategies for intervention. We know what we should be doing. We know how to assess and find out what's wrong. This next year, we will work on compiling those resources so that they are readily accessible for all our teachers.

The RTI process was mentioned as being successful with differentiating instruction for all students as asserted by BP2:

> I think another key to student success is our early intervention, the RTI process, where we identify struggling learners early and intervene quickly. We are not just concentrating on the free and reduced sub-group, but all sub-groups, so I think that has been an essential part and important part of our progress.

To further explain the RTI process currently in place, BP2 stated:

> We follow the intervention pyramid, so we look at the foundation of that pyramid as our curriculum, and then the next tier would be small group interventions. As we climb the pyramid, we either increase the time or the frequency of the intervention. At the point of the pyramid is special education, which is the highest level of intervention we have for students. So that's the process we have in place for students.

Moreover, the importance of the RTI process along with the success being experienced was additionally explained by BP2:

> I think it [RTI] has had a very positive impact [on MAP achievement]. I sit in those data team meetings and see the progress that some of the students make. It's pretty impressive, and so I do think when you can identify the deficiency area, implement the proper intervention and allow enough time, you can start to see the gains. I say that, and then there are always those scenarios where we just continue to search. We have tried multiple interventions. We have allowed more time. We have switched interventionists. We have done pretty much everything we can think of, and they don't make the gains you would like to see. However, I think across the board, we are pleased with the progress most of our students make, and it is nice to go to those meetings when we can release students from their

> interventions, because they have made the gains and they have made the progress needed. Across the board, it's been really good. We have a team in place that meets after the AimsWeb [adaptive diagnostic test] assessments [three times each year]. These are grade level team meetings where we race through and look at every student's data. That is a meeting that I attend along with the grade level teachers, the reading teachers, and special education teacher that works with that particular grade level. The literacy coach facilitates these meetings. We get into a room where we pull everything up on the board, and we just scroll through to look at all the student data. During these meetings, we sit down, we dig a little deeper, and we take a closer look at the data. We will look at the history we have on each student from previous years to see what interventions have been in place. From that meeting, we typically make one of two decisions. It's either we continue an intervention, or we will refer them for further testing with the special education department.

To further explain the types and levels of intervention being used, BP2 later remarked:

> All students are involved including those that are at or above grade level. Those students will have more extension type activities, so our library media specialist might place students into research groups. Those students have opportunities to do things that will enrich their learning and extend their learning opportunities. We also have reading recovery, which is used as an intervention for our first grade students. This is a more intensive intervention as well. Some students are receiving multiple layers of intervention; their daily intervention plus reading

> recovery. Some students will also receive an intervention from a reading specialist, and they might also be pulled for small group with their special education teacher. They could essentially receive multiple layers.

A similar RTI process being utilized was described by BP4:

> Like I said, we are focusing on leveling our students to meet their instructional needs. We also have a reading intervention teacher that pushes into the classroom to do small group instruction as well. The interventionist also pulls out the most struggling students. I don't know that I would consider our building as doing all the components of the RTI model, but we do a lot of it in a lot of different ways.

Later, BP4 stated:

> We have a reading intervention teacher, and she goes into a lot of the classrooms and works with the regular classroom teacher during the literacy block. The kids that are really struggling and are below grade level will be pulled out of the classroom, and she will spend an extra 30 minutes working with them. We try to hit all the different levels as best as we can.

In addition to classroom interventions, a built-in school wide intervention time was discussed by BP4:

> We also have what we call an intervention time [response to intervention] for each grade level. This is a 25-minute time period, where students are grouped and travel to different teachers for specific interventions aimed at their instructional level. These groups meet Monday through Friday.

Additionally, BP4 discussed the importance of collaboration and data collection to modify or adjust interventions by stating, "Teachers use the PLC time to collect the

data from this intervention time and focus in on what each student needs so that interventions can be adjusted as needed." The RTI process currently being used was described in detail by BP1:

> We do have RTI, and we are knee deep in it, I would say. I actually have an RTI committee in this building that specifically looks at any student who is not showing progress and success in the classroom at a normal pace. We assign a yellow folder to each of these students. It really means nothing. It's just the color of the folder, but we have a yellow folder on them, and we start to look at specific interventions the teacher has done. What are the symptoms we are seeing? When is that occurring; is it every day that the child seems to be struggling? Is it just that they don't like math. Is it behavior? We go through a litany list of questions. We will have our classroom teachers meet with a person in their grade level and the counselor who is part of that RTI committee, and we meet every four weeks on each child in question. We schedule the whole day to meet on each student in question, and the meeting time is about 20-25 minutes where we discuss. In addition to the RTI committee, we try to have everyone with a vested interest in that child join the meeting. This could be special area teachers, the nurse, etc. Our goal is to brainstorm as many things as we can to help each child. If it is literacy related, we discuss if they are in a small group. Are we pulling them out for an additional layer of support in the focus room? What are we doing to provide for that child to differentiate his instruction? The PST [Problem Solving Team] meeting is where we can dissect what differentiation has taken place, what are some other possibilities we can put in place to see a different avenue. There are

> times when the classroom teacher is frustrated and does not know what to do, and it's hard to think outside that box.

Regarding the importance of data analysis within the RTI framework, BP1 later stated:

> We use the data from our NWEA [adaptive diagnostic test] a lot. It is certainly something we can always encourage our teachers to use more as far as using it as a tool to guide daily instruction. Specifically, we are using this assessment in conjunction with the RTI model. Each student's score is analyzed, and it allows the RTI team to sort students into intervention groups so that each student's needs are being met.

Additionally, BP1 commented on the built-in school wide daily intervention time:

> We have something in our building called ( ) Time. At the onset of the school year, the RTI committee spends a full day sorting cards that have NWEA [adaptive diagnostic test] data for each student from their fall test scores. Students are essentially divided into groups depending on their need. Gifted students, regardless of socioeconomic status, along with other gifted students that have scored in the same range will be grouped and placed with a teacher to be challenged for 40 minutes each day. This would be considered a large group. Students almost on grade level are placed in groups according to RTI standards. This particular group would be around 15 in number, and we call that group our bubble group. Students a year-and-a-half to two-years behind are placed in an intensive small group consisting of three to five students. These are oftentimes our low socioeconomic students, and we specifically do reading interventions. Students that are considered Tier 2 or Tier 3 are automatically being pulled for a

> small group during ( ) Time and during another part of the school day where they attend an intervention in what we call the Focus Room.

Furthermore, BP1 added:

> With ( ) Time, what we are able to do is essentially all specials stop; instruction in all classrooms stops. Everyone stops in the building, and we have our students in every grade level proceed to their intervention teacher. Every teacher is on deck, and we simultaneously meet for 40-45 minutes of instruction at the same time each day, Monday through Thursday. After ( ) Time, they are dismissed to go back to their [homeroom] classroom where they pack their bags and go home.

Concerning student success and achievement associated with RTI, BP1 stated:

> If there is one thing that has helped our scores [MAP scores] a lot, it would be ( ) Time, because in this building every student in the building gets an intervention. All students are strategically divided into groups, so every student is getting what they need whether they are gifted or struggling.

The detailed description regarding building wide implementation of RTI was described by BP3:

> So, our first year of RTI implementation was three years ago. The first year of implementation was a transitional year. I'd be lying if I didn't say there was a step backwards that year between the shift of administration and leadership changes. Last year, we had 100% RTI Tier I implementation within the classroom. That was a new concept. Teachers were asked to change the way they do business to impact the success of their students and to improve student achievement. It used to be the old adage of thinking, what are these kids not doing? Why aren't they

> learning? I presented the information, and they should have learned it. That cultural change within the building was hard at times. Having building wide RTI and seeing the gains in our students has helped. We are getting the teachers the resources both on the material side as well as the training side.

Later, BP3 made these remarks regarding the necessary training in order to successfully implement RTI.

> The next year, we implemented building wide RTI. This involved touring several other buildings across the state that had RTI in place and had implemented it very well. This team consisted of a classroom teacher from each grade level. We knew other schools had been successful, and we wanted to see what it looked like. What do we need to imitate that in our building? How do we take what they are doing and make it fit our demographic of students and teaching staff? Lots of planning went into that.

In addition, BP3 further discussed the RTI process within their school:

> This [RTI] is very applicable to our school. My personal opinion is that if schools aren't implementing RTI, they need to be. We have a three-tiered system of RTI. We have RTI within the classroom where we consistently progress monitor students. Teachers monitor progress toward students' specific learning goals. For Tier II intervention, we have two Title I reading interventionists, one Title I math specialist, plus a Title I math aid traveling throughout the building and serving each grade level roughly one hour each day. We select the students with the highest need and serve as many as we can. That usually ends up being 20-25% of each grade level that gets served by those teachers. We also have a daily 30-

> minute common RTI time for our students. Every staff member in the building is a part of that. We have data teams at all grade levels where we incorporate our special area teachers such as art, music, and P.E. and library. We have our special education teachers involved in RTI as well as our ESL/ELL teachers along with several floating paraprofessionals that relieve a little bit of the strain on our SPED staff. They don't necessarily provide minutes of instruction but do provide support. We progress monitor every other week, so about every 10 days on a data cycle. It depends on the grade level what goals we are working on. English Language Arts has been our focus this year. This has been our first year implementing a building wide RTI. Finally, Tier III is where students receive special education services. Anything that is Tier III more than likely entails students leaving the classroom for individual instruction. We also have a teacher support team (TST process) to recommend those students for special education. We usually ask for four to six weeks' worth of data from classroom teachers supporting interventions that have been tried in the classroom and the success or failure rate of those interventions. The biggest reason we collect this data is we want to make certain we are always putting students in the least restrictive environment. We don't want to put students in special education classes until we have exhausted all efforts to get them on or close to grade level through interventions.

The use of data to form RTI small groups was of importance and noted by BP3:

> We formed our small groups for RTI by using data from the DIBELS assessment to discover the holes in our students' learning. What pieces are they missing when

it comes to phonics, fluency, and comprehension? Students needing the highest level of intervention will be in the smallest group possible.

Summary of differentiating instruction. Differentiating instruction allows teachers to meet the needs of all students. Having a literacy program in place which embraces whole group, small group, and individual quality instruction enables the classroom teacher to apply interventions to support struggling learners (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). According to Dorn and Soffos (2012), it is extremely important to work together in a collaborative school environment where the vision encompasses a common purpose which is to meet the literacy needs of all students. It takes a team approach to effectively deliver high-quality instruction, all the while providing scaffolding and support aimed at prescribing data-based interventions gauged to promote achievement at all levels (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). Fountas and Pinnell (2012) found it takes a combination of hard work, administrative support, and a collaborative effort to equip a school with necessary resources to provide essential differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all learners.

Importance of assessment. High-quality educators are assessing their students all day, every day, using a variety of assessment tools. The importance of assessment was the fourth major theme to emerge from interview data. Assessment in a literacy classroom can be in the form of diagnostic, formative, or summative assessments (Airasian & Russell, 2012). Effective teachers are aware of their students' needs by utilizing a variety of assessment techniques in order to serve their students (Airasian & Russell, 2012). According to Dorn and Soffos (2012), reliable and valid decisions must be made based on consciously observing literacy behaviors. Being aware of students' lack of understanding or lack of engagement through observation enables teachers to

redirect their instruction (Airasian & Russell, 2012). If necessary, modifications and accommodations are made to meet the diverse literacy needs of each student (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). This type of assessment is oftentimes referred to as authentic assessment (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Educators using authentic assessment do not take time away from instruction, because while students continue practicing literacy skills, teachers systematically and simultaneously collect data (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).

Many districts are utilizing adaptive diagnostic tests to determine the skill set of each individual student. These types of tests are either currently being used or on the verge of being implemented by the principals interviewed. According to information gathered from the interviews, using this type of diagnostic assessment allows teachers to customize their daily literacy instruction by grouping students into appropriate levels for small group instruction. Once students are placed into groups, teachers often assess using progress monitoring to determine the student's achievement or lack of achievement related to differentiated instructional strategies (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). Related to adaptive diagnostic testing, BP2 stated:

> First of all, we use AimsWeb as an assessment and data management system. We do three essential assessments each year; one at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end of the year. Based on those results, we assign students to appropriate [intervention] groups.

Later, BP2 remarked:

> We do the universal assessments through AimsWeb, so we test student three times each year. It is kind of like a funnel because from there, we screen down, and based on that data, we determine and identify who needs interventions, and

> from there we take a closer look to see which areas the student has deficiencies, and from there determine what the intervention should be, and we assign the groups and let time play its part. We regroup in between those assessment periods as needed, and then we do the whole process again in the winter and spring.

Additionally, BP2 commented on the effectiveness of progress monitoring and how information gathered from those assessments helps direct instruction and guide specific interventions:

> In between those universal assessments (AimsWeb) we do progress monitoring for our students assigned to small group interventions weekly. We monitor their data to determine whether or not we feel the intervention is being effective. Sometimes we have to call a time-out and regroup and maybe switch up the intervention. It's a very systematic approach, which I think has been very beneficial to all our students. It is a process, and we do follow it. It took us a while to put it in place, but I feel it is now solid. The interventions take place during ( ) Time, which is their intervention time. It is 25-30 minutes each day, Monday through Friday. Each grade level uses a different time period, so that way we can utilize the reading specialist and the special education teachers and interventionists for every grade level, so we can maximize the level and number of interventions to support each student. So, that's how it is laid out.

Recognizing the importance of analyzing data from additional assessments, including the MAP test in order to inform instruction, was also mentioned by BP2:

> We also do pretty comprehensive review each year looking at the assessment data from the MAP test. That is one thing we have done for quite a while, and we go

> into the data, and we drill down the district level, to the individual buildings, to the grade levels, to the teacher, and to the individual students. We do that and kind of look for trends in terms of is there a standard or two that we need to target, because we are not performing well there. What are the things we do really well to identify our strengths, and what areas do we need to continue to grow in? That is a pretty in-depth process, and it is led by our chairs in each of the grade levels. From that review of the data, we then make informed decisions about instructional practices, revisions, or changes that we need to make for the upcoming year.

Although currently not implemented, BP3 discussed the optimism and expectation of what may transpire after the adoption of an adaptive diagnostic test:

> Next year we have hopes through the adoption of the Evaluate Software that we will be able to incorporate both a math and an ELA Smart Goal for our building. We plan to use the monthly data gathered for the Evaluate Software to help us form our Tier II small groups for RTI. This will be one of our Smart Goals for the year. This data is broken down by strand, according to Common Core State Standards. Through my research, I have noted that students scoring 75% or better by January or February had a 90% chance of scoring proficient or advanced on the MAP test. It's exciting to think that every month we can look at the data and know which kids we need to focus on and what strands we need to hit harder with our instruction.

Due to not currently having an adaptive diagnostic test in place, BP3 made this comment regarding the type of predictive assessment(s) currently used to monitor progress and collect data:

> We also use DRA's [Developmental Reading Assessment] and DIBELS Assessments throughout the year, which allow us to see any red flags with our kids. These assessments help us to measure the growth of our students and to monitor their progress. I think it is great to see the gains of kids. We need to continually work on ways to change our instruction to reach all levels of learners and affect student achievement. I don't know if I necessarily agree with the standards that they [DIBELS] set for their different areas of proficiency, but we have met that challenge. Seventy-five percent of our students are considered to be at benchmark at the end of this year. We started at less than 30%. We have seen 45% worth of gain in nine months. It's good!

Additionally, BP3 later remarked:

> We formed our small groups for RTI by using [data] from the DIBELS Assessment to discover the holes in our students' learning; what pieces are they missing when it comes to phonics, fluency, and comprehension? Students needing the highest level of intervention will be in the smallest group possible.

In reference to the effectiveness of their adaptive diagnostic test, BP1 stated:

> For our fourth grade students, we use MAP data and NWEA [adaptive diagnostic test] scores to get our groups [Response to Intervention groups] started. The NWEA scores are more current, so that helps guide our grouping. After a few weeks in, we have been known to make changes in our grouping due to students'

> performance or lack of performance, so adjustments are sometimes necessary. If the classroom teacher feels a student has been placed inappropriately, she communicates with the RTI facilitator to make sure proper paperwork is together before any movement takes place. Adjustments can be made throughout the semester depending on the need of the student and the guidelines set forth through RTI. We typically stop our [intervention] time about two weeks before Christmas break ensuring that all assessments have been taken, and we will have students take the NWEA again. When students return in January, we will sort the cards again, re-do all the groups, and start again for the second semester. I feel like we have a pretty good handle on placing students in groups.

Furthermore, BP1 provided additional information regarding the way their school's adaptive diagnostic test is used:

> We use NWEA in that manner to really divide students out into small groups, bubble groups, and large groups. In addition to that, when we do our middle of the year testing, we use the NWEA data to start thinking about how we are going to prep for MAP. When we re-shuffle our ( ) time groups, our lessons also re-shuffle. Students who are still in small intervention groups, still struggling to read on grade level will continue to have very focused reading instruction because they clearly need that more than anything else. Students in bubble groups will start receiving MAP prep instruction and test taking strategies during ( ) Time. Bubble groups will still receive some targeted literacy lessons as well. The large ( ) Time groups will focus on MAP strategies, pacing, and things of that nature. They will

> still receive literacy instruction, but it will be focused so as to help students succeed when taking the MAP test.

Moreover, BP1 provided more information regarding MAP prep by stating:

> We use a book called Skill Bridge during second semester with some bubble groups and large groups to help with MAP prep during ( ) Time. This resource helps our students with test-taking strategies, and we do frame it to take place during ( ) Time. It allows our third and fourth grade students to familiarize themselves with the test format. It is not something that everybody does. We still preserve very focused, intensive literacy instruction with our small groups during intervention time. We realize MAP prep is useful with a certain population of our students…but even with that population, we reserve ( ) Time for MAP prep versus classroom instruction time. We want to preserve the time in the classroom to continue teaching standards.

Regarding the effectiveness of NWEA data analysis to measure student growth and drive instruction, BP1 later added:

> Teachers also use the NWEA scores to look specifically at certain areas for individual students to see what their deficits are in and to help guide their instruction based on those deficits. The data also allows teachers to see the growth made from one strand to another as the students take the assessment again at mid-year and end of year. It is a great tool to measure students' growth. Ultimately, the NWEA data is driving their instruction as well as all the interventions. We also use students' NWEA scores in both math and literacy to place students [visually] on an assessment data wall in the literacy book room. Each student is assigned a

> number and has a card with their NWEA scores written on the card. Teachers then use their scores to place each card on the assessment wall under the following categories: below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced.

Concerning their first year adoption of an adaptive diagnostic test, BP4 was very transparent regarding the learning curve associated with this tool:

> We do have Acuity [adaptive diagnostic test]. This is our first year for this type of assessment. We had used something different in years past, so it was a struggle to make the change. I don't feel like our teachers really had a grasp of what all they could use it for. They retrieved the data from it, and they could see how their kids did, but they did not delve in and use it as one of our biggest data pieces. The benchmarks with the Acuity have been helpful and will be more helpful this year, since teachers now know more about it and are able to use it better.

Later, BP4 discussed the type of assessments being utilized effectively:

> Instead, they [teachers] use common formative assessments to track student progress. We are part of the OSC (Office of Special Education) project through DESE, so our teachers are keeping track of their data from the formative assessment to the final assessment, and we are plugging it all in and seeing the improvement. The goal is to close the achievement gap. The students that did not show improvement are placed in groups where teachers are re-teaching the material. Our focus has been more on these types of common assessments in the classroom to help guide our instruction.

Additional information regarding Common Formative Assessments was mentioned by BP4. BP4 stated, "[RTI] Groups were formed based on data collected in

the classroom based on their common formative assessments. The groups varied in size according to the needs of the students." The importance of common formative assessments was also emphasized by BP3:

> After implementing RTI, we became aware of the need for CFA [common formative assessments] so teachers began creating these in each grade level for ELA [English Language Arts] and math. Students that are not proficient at the end of each unit are not left behind. We use the data to hone in on those students still struggling and create power lessons for small group instruction.

The literacy coach is an integral figure when it comes to data collection and analysis according to the following statements. BP1 reported:

> The literacy coach also has that global view of the building, more so than what a classroom teacher would. She sees all teachers first of all, and so, it's really easy, I think, for teachers, to get kind of stuck in, 'here's my world' but the literacy coach can see the perspective as, here is the school as a whole. For example, she may be able to look at fourth grade as a whole and see what is working well but also realize that the grade level needs to beef up the non-fiction. Here's what I've seen from third grade writing scores as a whole and by looking at the data, make some decisions on a longitudinal time frame and really see some areas that are really great, things we need to continue doing as well as areas we need to work on.

Later, BP1 stated:

> The literacy coach continually looks at data to see if we are doing what is necessary to meet the goal[s] we have established and making decisions [long

> term] to decide what does this look like next year for our students as they advance to fourth grade. That way, we have apples-to-apples comparison. The data piece she is able to bring to the table is invaluable.

Additionally, BP1 further added:

> Having her [literacy coach] in the building has really helped with those MAP scores. At the ( ) building, we had second through fourth grade and we really had the fortunate ability to look at our second graders and where they were at with their NWEA scores and start to see where were some areas kids had a hole in their learning and try to fill up [those holes with] that Swiss cheese approach. In addition, with MAP starting with our third grade students, we looked at MAP scores. Our literacy coach has been an integral part in helping me and the teachers look at the data so that we can discover what, long term, is an area we need to focus on.

When it comes to the importance of assessment and data collection, BP2 discussed the role of the literacy coach in this capacity:

> The literacy coach also has a lot of responsibilities with our RTI process in terms of setting the schedule for the assessments, managing the data in the AimsWeb system, helping to assign students to their intervention groups, making sure the interventions are being implemented, and reviewing the data on an ongoing basis. In addition, she leads our data team meetings as well.

Concerning the type and amount of data analysis and training, BP1 shared:

> As far as a district wide training, typically we will usually have one day in the summer where we will have our teachers get together and say, here's our math

> data, here's our literacy data, and we revisit what our goals are for the upcoming school year. We are continuing to realign our curriculum so that it is Common Core aligned.

Later, BP1 commented:

> When the building first started this process [using NWEA], a great deal of time was spent in training teachers how to interpret and use the data. The literacy coach will continue to train teachers as needed during morning meetings especially with our early career teachers who have never seen this approach before. She will sit side-by-side with our new teachers and have one-on-one discussions as they analyze and interpret the data together. She will coach them on how to use the data to guide and drive their instruction over a period of several weeks. She also coaches them to know what to look for to see if your instruction worked. Real time data is beneficial if used properly. We want to know if what we are doing in the classroom is working and making a difference.

Based on training with regard to data collection and analysis, BP3 shared the following:

> Every professional development day last year and the upcoming year will have a consultant from the Collaborative Work Grant. They may spend a portion of the time discussing what intervention piece we should be using or what instructional strategies we should be using. The entire building will be trained on the data collection piece and data dissemination piece and what that should look like. Teachers will learn how to generate the data and how to track the data. Half the day is dedicated to data team time where our groups get together and they start

> progress monitoring their kids. They take each kid, monitor their progress, decide where they are at, where they need to be, and how are we going to get them there. Every week, teachers spend one day during their plan time for the data team meeting where teachers collaborate to discuss working interventions and brainstorm new ideas that might meet the needs of their students. This is a common plan time among grade level teachers. Once monthly, the entire data team meets to collaborate. This often takes place during PLC time. This allows everyone on the data team to be informed including specials teachers, art, music, P.E., and special education teachers. Next year, as part of the Collaborative Work Grant, we have some specific requirements that are put out by the state explaining what we have to do in regard to the special area teachers. This initiative states that all specials staff and all certified instructional staff are included on regular education CDTs [Collaborative Data Teams]. This means, I have to find a way each month to allow them to be involved in a data team meeting during the school day. I can accomplish this by hiring two to three substitute teachers to rotate throughout the day. Because it is stated this has to be done during the school day, substitute teachers will be needed.

In addition, BP3 later added:

> I have also contacted ( ) who is a consultant from the University of Missouri, Columbia. She has been coming to us for three years now providing eight days' worth of training every single year for our staff on RTI interventions specifically. We started off with the data team piece. What's it look like, what's it sound like? This allowed our data team to focus on what we felt was most important. We then

focused on our assessment pieces. We had to decide which universal assessments would benefit our students and hone in on where the deficiency lies within the realm of literacy.

Summary of importance of assessment. Assessment drives instruction. The interview data reveal a common pattern among the four principals concerning the ongoing importance of using a variety of assessments to develop and facilitate instruction based on the needs of each student. Utilizing effective assessment techniques, both formal and informal, allows teachers to study advancements in students' literacy development (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). Using a variety of assessments will help determine students' achievement levels in both a valid and reliable manner (Airaisian & Russell, 2010).

According to Dorn and Soffos (2012), analyzing data from a diverse selection of assessments will provide a clear indication of the student's cognitive ability including his or her level of thinking and ability to solve problems. Effective teachers are able to use ongoing observation techniques to collect evidence and assess a student's literacy progression, as well as to inform the pace of their instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Collecting and analyzing a variety of assessment data is a continuous, reflective process and should always be linked to instruction, because it helps to form and shape the facilitation of daily lessons (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).

Effective literacy practices. When discussing effective literacy practices in today's education circles, there seems to be a plethora of terminology used to describe a comprehensive literacy model. Some refer to their literacy program as balanced literacy, while others state they use the workshop model (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). Some have

shortened it even further and simply call their literacy framework *the* model (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). Others use the term, Partnerships in Comprehensive Literacy (PCL) (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). Regardless of the name attached to the program or framework, effective literacy practices tend to have several components in common, all of which were reflected in the interview data. Thus, effective literacy practices was the fifth major theme to emerge in this study.

Typically, this approach to literacy instruction includes necessary components which, when incorporated, support students as they become self-regulated learners (Dorn & Soffos, 2005). One such component is a daily whole-group mini lesson where teachers gather students for 10 to 15 minutes of direct instruction (Dorn & Soffos, 2005). Another component consists of small group instruction where students are typically placed into groups based on their ability levels (Dorn & Soffos, 2005).

During small group instruction, the teacher, depending on the ability of students, either facilitates a guided reading lesson or participates in a literature discussion group (Dorn & Soffos, 2005). While the teacher is meeting with small groups or attending to individual or small group conferences, students are provided time to practice reading or writing either individually or with peers (Dorn & Soffos, 2005). The literacy block typically ends with a time to share (Dorn & Soffos, 2005). Students gather again in a whole group setting to discuss what they have completed (Dorn & Soffos, 2005).

To implement a comprehensive literacy program successfully, teachers must use a variety of measures to assess students within each component (Dorn & Soffos, 2005). In addition, for this framework to be effective, teachers must have a management system in place (Boushey & Moser, 2014). One such management system has been coined the

Daily Five (Boushey & Moser, 2014). The Daily Five consists of daily, purposeful literacy tasks students complete while the teacher meets with small groups to provide explicit instruction and interventions (Boushey & Moser, 2014). The structure of the Daily Five, if implemented correctly, will allow learners to develop lifelong literacy habits (Boushey & Moser, 2014). When discussing the literacy program currently in place, BP1 stated:

> So, the literacy program we use is with the PCL model [Partnerships in Comprehensive Literacy] and we use the workshop approach for reading and for writing. So, we have small group instruction which includes a mini lesson, and we have guided practice and independent practice where the teacher pulls small groups of students to her desk where they do more conferencing if it's writing or have small group reading instruction on leveled text for reading.

Later, BP1 provided additional information regarding the components of the literacy program:

> We also have comprehension focus groups. This is something our district-wide literacy coach has been able to focus on and teach other interventionists in the district how to facilitate in each building. In addition, teachers are pulling students to take running records. The literacy coach is making sure the book room has the resources needed for teachers to facilitate various assessments and progress monitoring ensuring that everything is systemic across the board. Teachers and interventionists giving Tier 2 and Tier 3 students additional layers of support throughout the day will often use Guided Reading and the strategies associated

> with that. Another program we have implemented is called Guided Writing, and many of our teachers utilized this program alongside Guided Reading.

Regarding the literacy program currently utilized and the components included, BP4 commented:

> We had a big change this last year. Our fourth and fifth grade teachers are now using the literacy model where students are in groups and they have centers. Several teachers were trained in supporting classrooms through literacy this last year, which consists of a writing block, a reading block, and centers. Students are also placed in [leveled] groups. We have also ordered a bunch of literature books all at different levels to support the needs of our students.

In addition, BP4 stated:

> We are moving towards the literacy model versus whole class literacy instruction, which is what we have done in the past. Our focus is on grouping our students for literature instruction so we can focus on the instructional level or our students.

A description of the current literacy program being used was described by BP3:

> We use balanced literacy, several components to it, [including] leveled readers, where students are reading on their level naturally trying to make a progression to where students are working toward reading on their grade level, [and] literacy groups within the classroom, [where there] could be three to four literacy groups going on in the same classroom where students are reading three to four different short stories at the same time. The teacher's role is to maintain the facilitation of the groups, keeping up with all the texts that the students are reading and keeping up with the pace of the students. The teacher takes on a facilitating role in that

> they don't lead the instruction; they don't lead the discussion. That's student led, and as students progress through the grade levels they become much more capable of being able to lead that part of it. It really leads to in-depth questioning, greater understanding of stories, and really creates a greater love for reading.

Later, BP3 commented on the success associated with the literacy program being utilized:

> So, we have created a child base of students that enjoy reading, they've become fluent readers, so now they are able to apply that on their standardized tests where they can read the question and apply the knowledge that they have. Whereas before, we felt we were treading water with students that knew the information, and they knew the answer if we [orally] asked them the question. If a student had to read the question, they didn't understand it. So, if they couldn't comprehend the question, they couldn't apply the knowledge. We feel like we are now to a point where students can apply their knowledge, because they can better understand what is being asked of them.

Related to the success of the program, BP3 made these additional comments:

> This was where the balanced literacy approach created readers; kids that love to read…especially in those super sub-groups; low socioeconomic groups where kids don't always have the resources to read at a recreational pace at home. Parents don't read to kids at bedtime, they don't do reading for enjoyment on the weekend, so we had to create a culture within our students that they wanted to read and enjoyed reading. In turn, that makes fluent readers.

In addition, BP3 described some of the components embedded in their program:

> Teachers have set up literacy stations within that block of time. Teachers will have small groups working on literacy discussion over their selected reading, another station might be where students go to the special education teacher to receive very specific phonics instruction, and another group of students might be working more independently at their Daily Five independent and purposeful activities. All classroom teachers have been trained with the Daily Five, and all implement this structure within their reading block.

Concerning the current literacy program being used, BP2 described the transitional year associated with the comprehensive model recently adopted:

> This year we are in our first year of a transition. In the past, we have followed the Arkansas Model (PCL) Partnerships in Comprehensive Literacy or balanced literacy. This was a model we followed for about eight years. All of our teachers were trained in Arkansas. In addition, some training from the Arkansas staff took place here in balanced literacy and the workshop model. However, this year, we just made a transition to a program called Journeys, which is a comprehensive ELA [English Language Arts] program, which has everything in one place. It's the reading, language, spelling, grammar; everything is in one program. So, it was a little bit of an adjustment for us, but this is year one. It does follow the workshop model. There are opportunities for teachers to pull guided reading groups. However, there is probably not as much time for this as before. There is definitely more teacher directed instruction than there was before in the workshop model. You know, in that model you built students up so they had larger blocks of independent reading time, and there is probably less of that in our current

program, but I think there is more rigor to it and it is definitely more teacher directed instruction.

Summary of effective literacy practices. Effective literacy instruction has taken on a new meaning in recent years. The principals interviewed are embracing literacy practices aimed at providing instruction based on the needs of their students. Administrators indicate the importance of using assessment data to evaluate students' literacy strengths and weaknesses. Analyzing data allows teachers to prepare appropriate daily whole-group, mini lessons based on student needs (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Interview responses suggested that although beneficial, whole group instruction is just one component to an effective literacy program.

Teachers realize in order to meet the needs of their diverse students, they must differentiate the instruction and offer interventions through guided reading groups, literature discussion groups, and individual conferences (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Additionally, high-quality literacy instruction includes daily, purposeful practice in both reading and writing. For practice to be effective, teachers must have a management system embedded in their literacy block. Principals described the importance of a management system embedded within the literacy framework, which allows teachers opportunities to provide leveled instruction. Providing and training students to complete daily literacy tasks allows the teacher to use the entire literacy time allotted to facilitate small group instruction, individual conferences, as well as utilize a variety of assessment techniques to check students' understanding and track growth (Boushey & Moser, 2012).

Implementing high quality, effective literacy programs takes a great deal of time and effort. For these programs to be successful and for students to make gains in

achievement, districts need to provide necessary training through professional development opportunities and through the use of literacy coaches (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Administrator's responses indicated a shared belief concerning the role of the literacy coach as it relates to improved teaching practice and student success. Developing a team of collaborative individuals willing do what is necessary for each individual student will ultimately lead to positive results (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).

Under-resourced learners. Differences in achievement between students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and those from wealthier backgrounds are significant. The sixth major theme, under-resourced learners, was revealed during the coding process involved in analyzing qualitative data. Poverty continues to be a contributing factor when considering the achievement gap of this nation's children (Payne, 2010). Unfortunately, the gap in achievement between under-resourced learners and children from wealthier families is increasing (Tavernise, 2012). Some would argue because this is such a multifaceted issue, finding a solution to the problem is nearly impossible (Tavernise, 2012). According to Payne (2010), the solution to this nationwide problem does exist; educators must make a conscious effort to create and maintain relationships with students and parents from poverty, because the most substantial motivator for these individuals is relationships. As mentioned previously in commitment and trust, BP1 shared the following regarding the significance of relationships involving under-resourced learners:

> This summer, our campus is going to the ( ) area to bring donated books to kids in that community for students to check out. Because they are donated, we are not really concerned if they are returned. Our goal is to get books into the hands of students that lack this resource in the home. In addition, our goal is just to create a

> stronger connection with members of this community, which happens to be an area where many of our students that are in the sub-group of free and reduced meals happens to live. This is not a school sanctioned activity. We are going to buy some cookies and punch, and teachers are putting together a shared reading experience similar to what we would do here at school and then give them an opportunity to look through books and take books home. We have scheduled to do this three times over the summer as a way to get more literacy into their hands. It's a way for us to meet parents, see our students' faces, reach out to the community, and hopefully build a bridge.

Later, BP1 described another way the district is meeting the needs of their under-resourced students:

> Likewise, we also have set up a summer school site that is going to be located at one of the local motels in order to serve our population of students that are either homeless or living in motels. The teachers will meet with students who live in the surrounding motels. They will gather in the lobby of one of the motels. Our food service staff will be bringing breakfast to them in Styrofoam containers every day. These are a couple of ways the district is able to reach out to our low socioeconomic families. We want to build a sense of trust with these families, because most of the parents of these students did not have a very positive school experience to begin with, and now they are sending us their babies, so there is already a lack of trust right off the get go. Depending on what the kid has seen the night before at home or what has happened over the weekend affects how he/she will perform at school the next day. For the district to come up with creative ways

> to reach out to this population and to build a bridge is magnificent. I am super excited about these endeavors.

Principal responses indicated many students are struggling academically because they lack resources necessary to be successful and to make academic gains. Schools are recognizing this problem and educators are providing essential strategies and supports to both students and parents as they learn to develop necessary resources needed in order to succeed (Payne, 2010). Regarding the commitment to provide necessary resources to students from low socioeconomic families, BP1 stated:

> We also send home backpacks of food for this population. Our social work office will work with these families and pay for vision tests and eye glasses. When the glasses break, we have the resources to get them repaired. The social work office also helps with clothing needs and shoes. In addition, the teachers in this building have a huge heart for kids and will ask for funding to purchase snacks as well as toiletry items and t-shirts, anything to help them feel loved and give them a few things to boost their confidence. In turn, we feel this helps them to become more successful academically.

In a similar comment, BP1 also stated:

> I would say with our at-risk population who are free and reduced lunch, there are often times when I walk into the classroom and the kids, three or four of them will be gathered around their teacher having small group instruction, and they will have a snack that they are eating at the time. And it could be that lunch is in an hour and they did have breakfast at school, but when you lack the other resources, if that's what's going to keep you going and keep you motivated, we can buy as

> many peanut butter crackers as we need to. I have seen some of that (care) come a long way, but specifically, I know using leveled instruction and meeting their needs has an impact, regardless of lack of resources at home.

In addition, BP1 later mentioned:

> The other thing I would say to that is with our instruction we are very fortunate to also have some different programs like, A to Z Readers and things like that, which we send home. We make a bunch of copies that we can legally do, and we send those home to the kids so they have texts to read at home. Hopefully, they will bring those back and swap them out, but our goal is just to provide the texts to those who don't have print at home.

Principal responses suggested their goal is to do whatever is needed to close the achievement gap. According to interview data, a key factor to making this happen is developing a collaborative environment within the school. Creating a community of like-minded individuals, working as a team to make a difference, oftentimes leads to academic gains. A comment regarding collaborative efforts necessary to meet the needs of each and every student was made by BP1:

> In addition, PLC Fridays are also a time to meet regarding specific students who are struggling academically or behaviorally. These are students teachers have collected data on for the PST [Problem Solving Team] and it allows the grade level and special area teachers a time to discuss what is working and what is not working in order to help them grow. Oftentimes, these are students from the lower socioeconomic status, free and reduced meals sub-group.

Continuing the discussion regarding the effectiveness of a collaborative environment in order to develop interventions for under-resourced students, BP1 later remarked:

> We try to be very diligent with our collaborative time on that Friday [during PLC time]. We want to use our time constructively. We generally use one Friday each month to look specifically at grade level RTI needs. This is a time spent to have discussions about students we still have major concerns. For example, it could be academic concerns such as literacy but it could also be concerns regarding our population of students that are under-resourced. This is a time to collaborate and discuss interventions in place and interventions that we might possibly implement. This is a time for grade levels to meet, but also a time to pull special area teachers, someone from the kitchen staff, the school nurse, and possibly the counselor, into our collaborative time to brainstorm ways to meet the needs of our students. We discuss the possible reasons why their reading scores have tanked. Are they homeless? Are they hungry? Are we noticing some inappropriate behaviors? It allows a time for a group of adults that have a vested interest in a particular child to look at all the pieces of the puzzle, the patterns, and try to determine what is going on, but more importantly, how we can help. This is a very purposeful time and is used very intentionally.

When describing the reasons why under-resourced students are showing continuous growth, BP3 stated:

> You saw the [MAP] results yourself. In fourth grade, we've got it going on. Some of that [success] are the instructors in the grade level, a fantastic group of

> educators with the mindset of how do we change our instruction to meet the needs of our kids.

In addition to building relationships and understanding the importance of collaboration, principal responses showcased the need to refine their instructional strategies and provide necessary interventions to differentiate instruction and customize the learning for each student. One such effective practice making a difference in student achievement was discussed by BP4:

> One of the main [practices utilized that has been effective in narrowing the achievement gap with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the area of communication arts/literacy] is our literature program. Using the Partnerships in Comprehensive Literacy has turned our literacy program around, because we are now focusing on meeting the needs of all our students. Using formative assessments, re-teaching the students that need it, working at their level…just putting all the pieces together has helped [narrow the achievement gap with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds].

Additionally, BP4 commented on another effective practice helping under-resourced learners:

> I feel like with our reading intervention teacher pulling out our students that are struggling in literacy, it has really helped [our lower socioeconomic students]. The groups are really small, sometimes just two students, so the instruction is focused on their level and she has really been able to help them grow.

Later, BP4 mentioned the importance of tutoring as a way to customize the learning for struggling students:

> We do a lot of tutoring. A lot of our teachers spend time tutoring before and after school. Tutoring is almost always one-on-one, so they can focus on what the students' needs are. We use the data collected to determine our lowest students, our students struggling the most, to make decisions on who needs tutoring. Unfortunately, transportation can be an issue, and we haven't been able to make it happen.

When discussing best practices used to increase student achievement, BP3 declared:

> I'm excited to see our MAP results this year. There are a lot of different things going on this building to increase student achievement in hopes of closing the achievement gap. I just don't know how any of it could be a bad thing. When you think of the combination of PLC's [Professional Learning Communities], RTI [Response to Intervention], Balanced Literacy; everything we do is working toward the same common goal.

Later, BP3 added:

> More often, those are the kids [under-resourced learners] that don't read very well, so we had to find a way to get those kids engaged and excited about reading and learn to love it for recreational habit rather than something that they have to do.

Concerning another practice seemingly helping under-resourced students succeed, BP1 remarked:

> Another program used is called Guided Reading Plus for our students really struggling with reading. For example, a fourth grade student that is two-plus grade levels behind will be pulled for guided reading plus. The difficulty is oftentimes

> being able to find a text on his level that doesn't look like a first or second grade text from the cover. The book needs to be age appropriate for these students to feel successful. There is a social aspect to reading, and we want to be cognizant and aware of our students' feelings.

In response to how the literacy coach has effected MAP achievement of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the area of literacy, BP2 stated:

> I do think the whole process that I mentioned before with the universal assessments, ongoing review of the progress monitoring data to see how students are progressing, the adjusting of interventions that we use, and taking note if they are or are not being effective with certain students. Those are all important roles that the literacy coach plays, and so from that standpoint, I would say it is pretty significant.

With regard to meeting the needs of at-risk students, BP1 mentioned the significant role of the literacy coach as a best practice:

> The literacy coach had the knowledge and skill set to communicate with the teacher and the students, because my literacy coach still meets with students and does small group instruction. She doesn't just do teacher to teacher coaching. This gives her the credibility needed so that as she meets with teachers she is able to provide them with resources she has used with students as well as suggest a variety of teaching strategies to help with all groups of students including the lower socioeconomic students. Her philosophy is if something doesn't work, that's ok; I've got many other tools in my tool belt we can try. Students and

teachers alike certainly see her as a resource. She has been able to help this at-risk population in a deep and meaningful way.

Summary of under-resourced learners. Interview responses from school leaders revealed educators are accessing a variety of tools necessary to make a positive difference in narrowing the achievement gap. Many students are coming to school unprepared academically and under-resourced. They regularly come to school hungry, tired, ill, dirty, and lacking appropriate clothing.

In addition, these students frequently bring undesirable behaviors with them to school. Because of these environmental factors, educators are facing monumental challenges when it comes to narrowing the achievement gap. Some believe it is a nearly impossible task due to the outside issues over which teachers and school principals have very little control. Others, including the principals interviewed, believe there is hope; hope these students can and will succeed. Educators with this mindset are willing to do what is necessary to make positive changes in order to impact the success of their students.

Summary

A mixed-method design, using both quantitative and qualitative data, was used to complete this study. Triangulation occurred through use of data from MODESE, a survey, and face-to-face interviews. Quantitative data for each district were analyzed after gathering existing MAP data available from the Annual Performance Report (APR) provided by the MODESE (2014a) website. Analysis of these data determined which districts in the state of Missouri obtained continuous increases in index scores of students

in the free or reduced price meals sub-group over a three-year period. Acquiring this information was a necessary step to determine the specific population for this study.

According to the results of the survey, schools are almost always using a blend of research-based best practices. In addition, building principals indicated the results of these practices and professional development opportunities associated with these practices have been effective. Interviews were conducted with four willing principal participants. The qualitative data collected through four face-to-face interviews were an essential portion of this study.

Once interviews were conducted and transcribed, six major themes began to emerge based on the process of open and axial coding. These major themes included the following: (1) commitment and trust, (2) importance of professional development, (3) differentiating instruction, (4) importance of assessment, (5) effective literacy practices, and (6) under-resourced learners. While these themes can stand alone, it is important to note many statements made by the four building principals could easily overlap due to the connectedness of the themes. Chapter Five will include conclusions, discussion, and suggestions for further research.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to discover what best practices schools are implementing with low socioeconomic students to narrow the achievement gap, in communication arts (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Snell, 2003). According to Crow (2010), development of a workable model to address the needs of these low socioeconomic students is possible. School districts will be able to use the results of this study to duplicate what has been found effective in other districts.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways does using a comprehensive literacy program affect Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) achievement in communication arts of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

2. What alternative literacy resources are utilized to increase MAP achievement in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

3. What additional educational practices are perceived to narrow the achievement gap in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

The conceptual framework of this study suggests a paradigm shift in thinking. Cultural and environmental factors, including lack of resources, contribute to the achievement gap (Gorski, 2013; Snell, 2003). This leaves students from low-income families at a greater risk for being unprepared upon entering school in comparison to students from families with a higher socioeconomic status (Snell, 2003). While some would believe the economic and environmental factors associated with children from poverty have too great an impact for schools to make a positive difference in narrowing

the achievement gap, others believe these students can achieve academic success (Duncan & Murnane, 2014).

Thus, the shift in thinking takes place, allowing educators to believe students can be successful regardless of economic background (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Gorski, 2013; Schwartz, 2001; Snell, 2003). For this to happen, school leaders and educators must develop and apply strategies to help students from poverty make significant academic gains. According to Payne (2010), one essential strategy is to discover ways to connect with students in order to build sincere relationships. A genuine relationship between student and teacher leads to mutual respect, which allows significant learning to occur (Payne, 2010).

In the review of literature, several research-based practices were discussed. The discussion of these practices revealed the importance and success of each practice in isolation. The literature did not disclose schools deliberately utilizing a blend of best practices in order to narrow the achievement gap in communication arts of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The review of literature reflected the significance of the following educational practices to help increase achievement in all students including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds through professional development, comprehensive literacy, adaptive diagnostic tests, and differentiated instruction. As mentioned, these practices were viewed effective; however, the literature did not clearly reveal a combination of best practices used to narrow the achievement gap.

The importance of schools providing purposeful professional development was apparent in the review of literature. Intentional professional development helps educators learn how to apply effective instructional practices in the classroom (Cunningham, 2007).

Schools providing teachers with effective professional development, including the implementation of the PLC model, allows educators to take part in training and to consistently spend time in collaborative teams to gather ideas and analyze their practice, apply new strategies, collect data, and use the data to drive their instruction to become stronger educators, allowing for further student success (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; DuFour, 2014). Hughes-Hassell and Brasfield (2012) asserted PLCs better prepare teachers to meet the needs of all students, including students from poverty, by differentiating the instruction and taking into account varying student learning styles.

Additionally, using a comprehensive literacy program was deemed beneficial in the review of literature. Districts utilizing a comprehensive literacy program believe in the importance of educating students based on current instructional level (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009). While traditional reading programs focus on teaching skills in isolation, a comprehensive literacy program places emphasis on authentic and meaningful instruction, thereby meeting students' needs through differentiation (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009).

A traditional literacy program uses basal reading textbooks, many of which contain vocabulary and subject matter students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have very little interest in or prior knowledge of, which makes comprehension a difficult task (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009). Using a wide variety of material that is appealing and relevant to students' interests in a comprehensive literacy-based program will provide significant benefits to students in comparison to a traditional program, because students are choosing books on their levels that are engaging and that match their interests (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009). Moreover, a comprehensive literacy program includes a

variety of components, all of which work together seamlessly to allow for whole group instruction, small group guided instruction, as well as individual instruction and conferencing (Dorn & Soffos, 2005).

Educators embracing literacy programs organized in this manner provide students with purposeful, structured literacy tasks (Boushey & Moser, 2014). It takes time to establish procedures and expectations for these literacy tasks to be effective, but once students understand the importance of the framework, they become self-regulated learners (Boushey & Moser, 2014). Another component many schools embrace as they transition to a comprehensive based literacy program is attaining a literacy coach to work with teachers side-by-side, providing professional development experiences (Toll, 2009). Literacy coaches train and support educators by modeling best practices so teachers can take what they have learned and apply these new strategies in their classrooms to boost students' success in literacy (Toll, 2009).

Another practice discussed in the review of literature is the use of adaptive diagnostic tests. Districts are utilizing these predictive tests to assess students and to track growth throughout the school year (Shapiro & Gebhardt, 2012). Data gained from these assessments provide educators with diagnostic information to see where their students are excelling and struggling (Shapiro & Gebhardt, 2012). Analysis of these data allows teachers to develop strategies and lessons aimed at providing customized small group and individualized instruction to affect student achievement (Olson, 2001; Shapiro & Gebhardt, 2012).

There are many adaptive diagnostic tests available for districts to implement. Each offers a plethora of data, which can aid in determining individual strengths and

weaknesses of students to deliver effective instruction (Olson, 2001; Shapiro & Gebhardt, 2012). Furthermore, according to Cunningham (2007), districts having large percentages of under-resourced students should have an assessment system in place where teachers and school leaders are using the diagnostic data to inform instruction. Likewise, schools using assessment data as an accountability tool to drive instruction are more likely to see an increase in student growth and achievement (Olson, 2001).

The final practice discussed in the review of literature was differentiated instruction. Using assessment data to determine students' levels of achievement allows educators to group students based on academic needs to provide specific interventions (Cooper et al., 2015). These interventions allow teachers to be more receptive to meeting the individual needs of their students (Cooper et al., 2015).

This research-based practice is commonly referred to as Response to Intervention (RTI) (Cooper et al., 2015). Districts adopting an RTI framework have seen positive academic results in the prevention of learning disabilities due to providing students with intensive interventions from a very young age (Stecker et al., 2008). Recognizing students' diverse literacy needs and meeting those needs through differentiated, small group instruction takes a team of educators and school leaders willing to do what is necessary to make a difference (Fountas & Pinnel, 2012; Hoppey et al., 2010; Payne, 2013; Stecker et al., 2008).

Summary of the Findings

Analysis of quantitative data included MAP Performance Index scores from the MODESE (2014a) website. Data collected were used to determine how many elementary schools out of the 1,270 in the state of Missouri had shown continuous increase and improvement over a three-year period (2011, 2012, 2013) in the area of fourth grade communication arts within the sub-group of free and reduced meals. The data revealed 86 elementary school buildings, out of a total of 1,270 elementary school buildings, had shown continuous increase and improvement over the three-year period indicated. From the list of 86 elementary schools meeting the criterion, the names of the building principals (sample group) and electronic mail addresses were obtained from the Missouri School Directory (MODESE, 2014a).

An online survey was sent by means of electronic mail to the sample group of principals meeting the criterion. Of the 86 surveys sent, a total of 27 were returned over a 15-day period. Quantitative survey data were analyzed, and tables and figures were created to indicate the results based on statements posed. In some instances, statements were skipped, and those results were reflected in the figures.

For the qualitative portion of this study, 10 principals from the quantitative sample group were individually selected to participate in an interview. Of the original invitees, four principals were willing to participate. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the convenience of the interviewees. The interviews were audio taped, with permission of the interviewees, and then transcribed. The responses were authentic and in the spoken language of the interviewees. Interview data were analyzed using open and axial coding methods to categorize trends and themes (Creswell, 2013). Based on the

careful analysis of all data collected, responses to the research questions were determined.

Research question 1. *In what ways does using a comprehensive literacy program affect MAP achievement in communication arts of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?*

Using data collected from the survey was helpful in determining a basic understanding of whether or not the use of a comprehensive literacy program affects MAP achievement in communication arts of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Survey statements 1-6 were formulated with the intent to gather information regarding the effectiveness or lack thereof regarding school districts' implementation of a comprehensive literacy program. To better comprehend the data, the mode was used to help simplify and examine the results of the survey. Using descriptive statistics allows for a visual representation of the data in a simplified and more manageable summary or form (Bluman, 2011). The mode per statements 1-6 is shown in Figure 15.

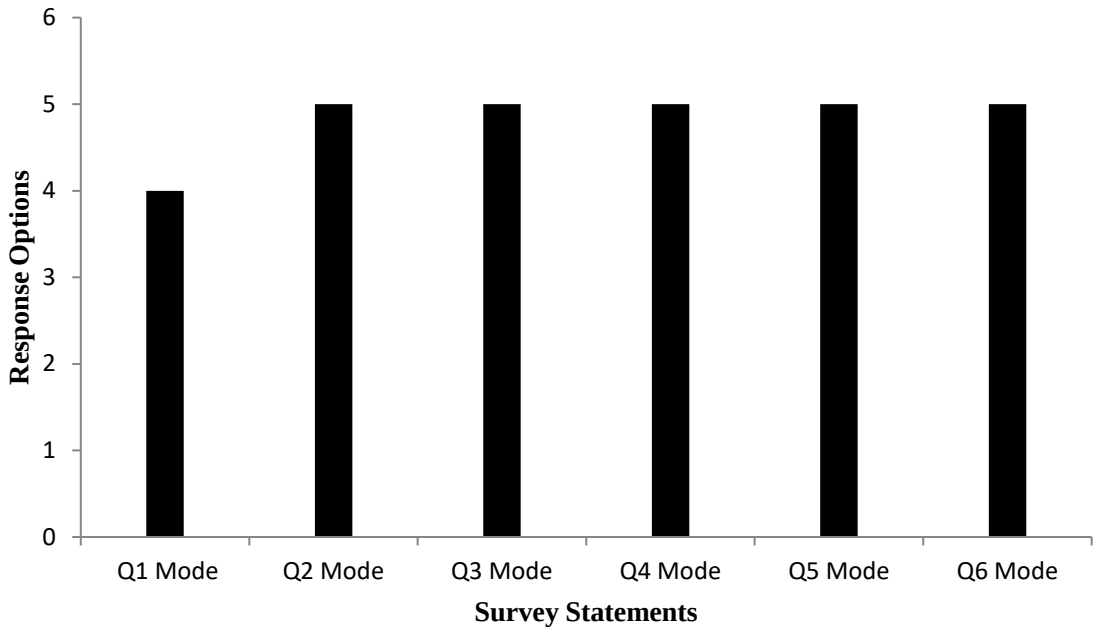

Figure 15. Mode per statements 1-6.

The results of the survey revealed a combination of research-based best practices are used by the 27 survey respondents. The utilization of these practices has helped to increase achievement in students from poverty. In addition, building principals indicated the results of these practices and professional development opportunities associated with these practices have been effective.

Based on analysis of data using the mode, the survey data for statements 1-6 indicated districts utilizing a comprehensive literacy program believe the implementation and use of this type of program has moderately affected MAP achievement of students from a low socioeconomic background. In addition, principals responding to the survey indicated they frequently use a comprehensive literacy program as well as a literacy coach. Moreover, respondents frequently feel the quality of coaching is effective. Finally, building principals responding believe their schools frequently provide ongoing literacy training/professional development and the quality of the literacy training/professional

development is frequently effective. The survey alone does not reveal specific ways using a comprehensive literacy program affects MAP achievement in communication arts of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. However, the data indicate districts having a comprehensive literacy program in place, including a literacy coach and proper professional development, does positively impact MAP achievement.

The analysis of interview data provided more detailed information regarding how districts are specifically using a comprehensive literacy program to affect MAP achievement in communication arts of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Rather than continue using a traditional approach to literacy instruction, which oftentimes focuses on teaching to the middle, districts utilizing a comprehensive literacy program are making gains in narrowing the achievement gap. The structure of the program allows for differentiated instruction, which meets the needs of all students including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Effective literacy teachers utilizing a comprehensive literacy approach are able to use assessment data to help inform their instruction and respond to the precise needs of their students (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). Providing texts on students' instructional level that appeal to their interests, along with leveled small-group instruction aimed at meeting the needs of each student, has been an effective and successful approach in helping every child succeed (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). According to Reutzel and Cooter (2013), teachers using a literacy program, which includes a workable framework comprised of daily concentrated, small group literacy instruction including student-selected, appropriately-leveled texts of interest to students, is essential when meeting the diverse needs of all learners (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013).

In addition, teachers utilizing a literacy model such as this must maintain classroom organization and management by providing students with a variety of literacy learning opportunities, where purposeful, independent practice of previously-taught strategies are provided through literacy centers or stations (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). While students are independently engaged at literacy centers, the teacher can focus on small group instruction or one-on-one literacy conferences (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). As mentioned in Chapter Four, BP3 stated:

> This was where the balanced literacy approach created readers; kids that love to read…especially in those super sub-groups; low socioeconomic groups where kids don't always have the resources to read at a recreational pace at home. Parents don't read to kids at bedtime, they don't do reading for enjoyment on the weekend, so we had to create a culture within our students that they wanted to read and enjoyed reading. In turn, that makes fluent readers.

A similar comment was made by BP4:

> One of the main [practices utilized that has been effective in narrowing the achievement gap with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the area of communication arts/literacy] is our literature program. Using the Partnerships in Comprehensive Literacy has turned our literacy program around, because we are now focusing on meeting the needs of all our students. Using formative assessments, re-teaching the students that need it, working at their level…just putting all the pieces together has helped [narrow the achievement gap with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds].

Later, BP4 added:

> I feel like with our reading intervention teacher pulling out our students that are struggling in literacy, it has really helped [our lower socioeconomic students]. The groups are really small, sometimes just two students, so the instruction is focused on their level and she has really been able to help them grow.

With regard to lack of literacy resources, BP1 mentioned:

> The other thing I would say to that is with our instruction we are very fortunate to also have some different programs, like A to Z Readers and things like that, which we send home. We make a bunch of copies that we can legally do, and we send those home to the kids so they have texts to read at home. Hopefully, they will bring those back and swap them out, but our goal is just to provide the texts to those who don't have print at home.

Additionally, BP1 stated:

> Let's see, well, I would definitely say with our current literacy implementation, we are meeting kid's needs. I am going to give an example. We may give a mini lesson on punctuation, but then when we have our small groups, everybody is brought together regardless of the socioeconomic status. They are brought together on leveled groups, so they are having their needs met much more personally.

Research question 2. *What alternative literacy resources are utilized to increase MAP achievement in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?*

Using data collected from the survey was helpful in determining what alternative literacy resources are being utilized. Survey statements 7-10 were formulated with the intent to gather information regarding alternative literacy resources used and their effectiveness to increase MAP achievement in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Figure 16 represents the mode per statements 7-10 (see Appendix E).

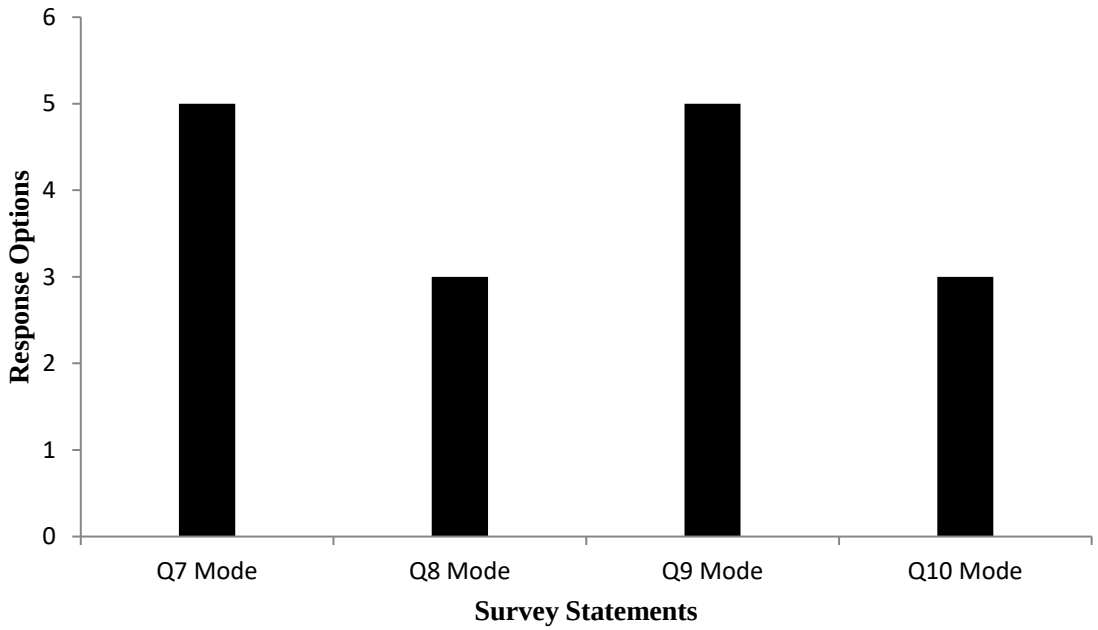

Figure 16. Mode per statements 7-10.

Principals responding to the survey indicated they frequently differentiate instruction by using RTI as well as frequently incorporate data-driven assessments, such as adaptive diagnostic tests to guide literacy instruction. However, respondents indicated their districts only occasionally or sometimes provide RTI training and support through professional development opportunities. In addition, respondents occasionally or sometimes provide ongoing professional development to help interpret and use the data these assessments provide to guide literacy instruction. The survey alone does not reveal

specific ways alternative literacy resources are used to positively affect MAP achievement in communication arts of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, careful analysis of interview data is helpful in revealing effectiveness regarding implementation of alternative literacy resources and their positive affect on MAP achievement.

Effective educators are using assessment data to drive whole-group instruction as well as formulate interventions during small-group instruction to meet the diverse needs of each student though differentiation. According to Airasian and Russell (2012), classroom assessment is a continuous process consisting of gathering, combining, and understanding data to make decisions that will ultimately benefit each student.

Using evidence from assessment data can help identify students with learning difficulties so instruction can be modified, interventions can be put in place, and accommodations can be made to support each student's learning needs (Airasian & Russell, 2012). Using a tiered approach to provide evidence-based interventions allows teachers to integrate high-quality instruction necessary to positively affect each students' literacy knowledge (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). This framework, also referred to as RTI, enables literacy teachers to use assessment data as a tool to inform their instruction so that students are responsive to the varied interventions aimed at student growth and achievement (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). Concerning the importance of assessment data with regard to RTI, BP2 made this comment:

> We do the universal assessments through AimsWeb, so we test student three times each year. It is kind of like a funnel, because from there, we screen down and based on that data, we determine and identify who needs interventions, and

> from there we take a closer look to see which areas the student has deficiencies, and from there determine what the intervention should be, and we assign the groups and let time play its part. We regroup in between those assessment periods as needed, and then we do the whole process again in the winter and spring.

Additionally, BP2 commented:

> In between those universal assessments (AimsWeb) we do progress monitoring for our students assigned to small group interventions weekly. We monitor their data to determine whether or not we feel the intervention is being effective. Sometimes we have to call a time out and regroup and maybe switch up the intervention. It's a very systematic approach, which I think has been very beneficial to all our students. It is a process, and we do follow it. It took us a while to put it in place, but I feel it is now solid. The interventions take place during ( ) Time, which is their intervention time. It is 25-30 minutes each day, Monday through Friday. Each grade level uses a different time period, so that way we can utilize the reading specialist and the special education teachers and interventionists for every grade level, so we can maximize the level and number of interventions to support each student. So, that's how it is laid out.

The benefits associated with RTI were mentioned by BP3:

> Really, it was a progression towards Response to Intervention within this building. It started three years ago through the PLC process. We saw that RTI was one of those ideas through educational reform that was going to positively benefit students. It was really going to focus in on and give an individual education plan

> for every kid in the building, not just the ones who had special needs. Our building developed the mindset of how could this be wrong.

Later, BP3 stated:

> We formed our small groups for RTI by using [data] from the DIBELS Assessment to discover the holes in our students' learning; what pieces are they missing when it comes to phonics, fluency, and comprehension? Students needing the highest level of intervention will be in the smallest group possible.

When discussing a built-in school-wide intervention time BP4 commented:

> We also have what we call an intervention time [response to intervention] for each grade level. This is a 25-minute time period, where students are grouped and travel to different teachers for specific interventions aimed at their instructional level. These groups meet Monday through Friday.

Additionally, BP4 discussed the importance of collaboration and data collection to modify or adjust interventions. BP4 stated, "Teachers use the PLC time to collect the data from this intervention time and focus in on what each student needs so that interventions can be adjusted as needed."

Regarding the importance of data analysis, BP1 stated:

> We use the data from our NWEA [adaptive diagnostic test] a lot. It is certainly something we can always encourage our teachers to use more as far as using it as a tool to guide daily instruction. Specifically, we are using this assessment in conjunction with the RTI model. Each student's score is analyzed, and it allows the RTI team to sort students into intervention groups so that each student's needs are being met.

Concerning student success and achievement associated with RTI, BP1 further mentioned:

> If there is one thing that has helped our scores [MAP scores] a lot, it would be ( ) Time, because in this building, every student in the building gets an intervention. All students are strategically divided into groups so every student is getting what they need whether they are gifted or struggling.

Research question 3. *What additional educational practices are perceived to narrow the achievement gap in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?*

Using data collected from the survey was somewhat helpful in determining additional educational practices perceived to narrow the achievement gap in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (see Figure 17). Survey questions 11-12 were formulated with the intent to gather information regarding additional educational practices used and their effectiveness to increase MAP achievement in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

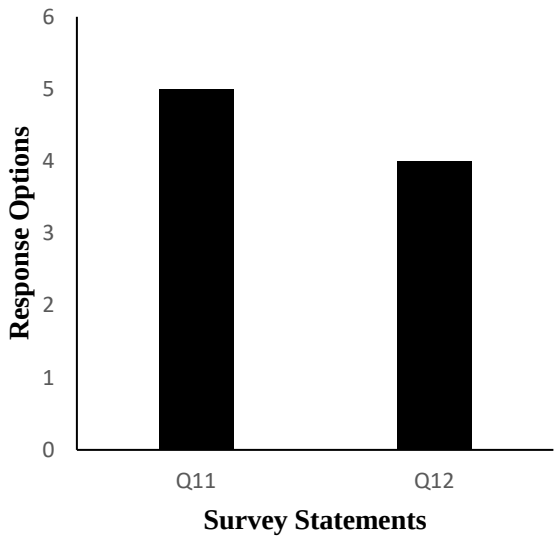

Figure 17. Mode per statements (11-12).

Principals responding to the survey indicated their school frequently participates in PLC collaborations. In addition, respondents almost always provide ongoing training/professional development to increase teachers' knowledge regarding under-resourced students' needs. The survey alone does not reveal a variety of best practices or ways PLC collaborations are used to positively affect MAP achievement in communication arts of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, the survey alone does not specifically describe the types of training used to increase teachers' knowledge regarding under-resourced students' needs. Therefore, analysis of interview data is helpful in revealing effectiveness regarding PLCs and professional development opportunities provided to assist teachers and offer awareness and knowledge concerning the implementation of best practices.

Teacher collaboration is a proven research-based best practice. Schools implementing PLCs are seeing positive results in student achievement. According to DuFour et al. (2010), teachers working together to evaluate reflectively and to improve

their practice through the collaborative nature of PLCs leads to improved student achievement. As mentioned in Chapter Four, BP3 stated:

> I'm excited to see our MAP results this year. There are a lot of different things going on this building to increase student achievement in hopes of closing the achievement gap. I just don't know how any of it could be a bad thing. When you think of the combination of PLCs [Professional Learning Communities], RTI [Response to Intervention], Balanced Literacy; everything we do is working toward the same common goal.

Later, BP3 further added:

> We have a great PLC leadership team within the building. We meet once a week, and then those teachers go back to the different grade levels and special education areas to disseminate the information shared and discussed to allow feedback on how we need to focus and shift our way of thinking as a whole. We have learned you get a lot of work done when you have a lot of people involved. Nobody has to do that much. We really took a team approach.

Regarding how the collaborative time is used during PLCs, BP1 replied:

> In addition, PLC Fridays are also a time to meet regarding specific students who are struggling academically or behaviorally. These are students teachers have collected data on for the PST [Problem Solving Team] and it allows the grade level and special area teachers a time to discuss what is working and what is not working in order to help them grow. Oftentimes, these are students from the lower socioeconomic status, free and reduced meals sub-group.

In addition, BP1 later stated:

> We try to be very diligent with our collaborative time on that Friday [during PLC time]. We want to use our time constructively. We generally use one Friday each month to look specifically at grade level RTI needs. This is a time spent to have discussions about students we still have major concerns. For example, it could be academic concerns such as literacy but it could also be concerns regarding our population of students that are under-resourced. This is a time to collaborate and discuss interventions in place and interventions that we might possibly implement. This is a time for grade levels to meet, but also a time to pull special area teachers, someone from the kitchen staff, the school nurse, and possibly the counselor into our collaborative time to brainstorm ways to meet the needs of our students. We discuss the possible reasons why their reading scores have tanked. Are they homeless? Are they hungry? Are we noticing some inappropriate behaviors? It allows a time for a group of adults that have a vested interest in a particular child to look at all the pieces of the puzzle, the patterns, and try to determine what is going on, but more importantly, how we can help. This is a very purposeful time and is used very intentionally.

Current research-based best practices to improve instruction and increase student achievement are only effective if necessary and adequate training are provided. Purposeful and meaningful professional development opportunities are based on the needs of students, faculty, and staff. Building leaders and educators are continuously evaluating their curriculum and programs. If an area of weakness is discovered, plans are made to seek professional development opportunities to grow as educators in order to meet individual needs of students. According to building principals speaking on this

topic, opportunities for growth as an educator are abundant, especially in the area of literacy.

As stated by BP2:

> They [professional development opportunities] vary from year to year. This year, probably a little bit more because we implemented the new [literacy] system. So, with the purchase of those resources came some professional development early on. We do an annual needs assessment of our staff and that's really what we use to build our professional development for the following school year. Sometimes the results are that, as a staff, we find an area we feel we need to spend more time on in comparison to other areas. Overall, I would say it varies from year to year. This year, our focus has been on literacy more so than the past two or three years just because of the implementation of a new curriculum.

Furthermore, BP3 mentioned:

> Right now, we have shifted to giving teachers what they feel they need as far as support with literacy instruction. Every classroom teacher in this building went to at least one professional development training this year, which would have been about seven hours.

Additionally, BP3 discussed an opportunity his faculty has been involved in:

> We are also involved in the Collaborative Work Grant; a grant provided by DESE which offers us a monetary fund as long as we work with their consultants. That consultant comes once each month. It started as a full day of training, seven hours. We had to decide on two research-based instructional practices involving ELA [English Language Arts] to implement and implement well within our

> building. For our own measure, we decided to select reciprocal teaching where we needed to develop ways to provide formative and informative feedback to students. This year alone, teachers have had close to 100 hours of professional development to enhance their literacy instruction.

With regard to additional best practices worthy of consideration, a few principals mentioned the importance of collaborative book studies within their building. BP4 had this to say about a recent book study:

> We did this book study this last year where the focus was on providing feedback with our students. Feedback is of major importance but must be done appropriately. It really helps students succeed. We used some of our PLC time to incorporate this book study with all our teachers. Our instructional strategy we focused for the year was feedback. It really made a difference with the teachers. Learning how to provide appropriate oral and written feedback can really make a difference with our students.

Moreover, BP1 had this to say regarding book studies:

> We are looking at purchasing a book to use for next year, which will give us guidance regarding how to utilize the data from NWEA to better help our students and their individual needs.

Another best practice discussed was using a co-teaching model. BP2 made this comment regarding co-teaching:

> We also utilize a co-teaching model. We have a special education teacher assigned to each grade level, and they spend pretty much an entire day there. Not all of our lower socioeconomic students are IEP students, but there is some cross

over, some overlap, so they are getting another layer of support throughout the day in all areas.

Co-teaching was further discussed by BP3:

> We also practice class-within-a-class environment so every student in this building will be in the classroom 80% of the time or more. Very few students will be pulled from the classroom. Instead, we are sending resources to that room to offer instruction. That often benefits all students rather than just the one needing the extra help or support. It basically provides students in need with an additional layer of support. This is called centers-based instruction, sometimes referred to as co-teaching. This is where a special education teacher pushes into a regular education classroom. Oftentimes, this occurs during a reading block.

Utilizing every resource available and modeling what other schools have successfully and effectively implemented describes this last statement made by BP3:

> We are a part of the GAP initiative. GAP is not an acronym. It was initially given that name because the focus of the initiative is to close the achievement "gap" in the three super sub-groups: free and reduced meals, ESL, and SPED. It is now called the MODESE Collaborative Work Grant. We joined this initiative two years ago and will continue for our third and final year. It took a three-year commitment. The GAP initiative's focus is for schools to focus their instruction on research-based instructional practices that lead to student achievement and gains. Research-based is the big piece of it. It's identifying what is out there that is working. We don't want to reinvent the wheel. We want to know who's doing great things and how can we get that in our building. Joining this initiative has

> helped to guide our PLC collaborations. It is given us a focus each semester on areas we can improve. It's exciting to know that the initiative's topics are things that we already do, but we can always do things better. Every year, I think the GAP initiative is just going to focus our efforts on providing intense instructional strategies to remediate student learning at the classroom level. Every kid deserves that piece of having an individual education plan.

Recommendations

The results of this study revealed a blend of specific best practices having a positive effect in narrowing the achievement gap in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. However, research-based best practices are always evolving and changing. New practices are continuously being researched and applied. A study such as this should take place periodically to discover what best practices schools are currently implementing to make a difference. It would be worthwhile for others to devote time and energy discovering the combination of practices promoting higher achievement among our students from poverty.

Further studies may also include what districts are doing to build relationships with the lower socioeconomic population. The importance of building relationships among students and families from poverty was a common thread among all four principals interviewed. As mentioned by Payne (2010), the solution to this nationwide problem does exist; we must make a conscious effort to create and maintain relationships with students and parents from poverty because the most substantial motivator for these individuals is relationships. In order to build and maintain relationships, as well as create a school climate welcoming to all socioeconomic classes, it appears educators and school

leaders are applying servant leadership principles in their approach to teaching (Hays, 2008). One principal in particular was very vocal regarding the types of purposeful activities organized to create relationships with low socioeconomic families. BP1 was passionate when speaking on this topic as noted in the following statement:

> This summer, our campus is going to the ( ) area to bring donated books to kids in that community for students to check out. Because they are donated, we are not really concerned if they are returned. Our goal is to get books into the hands of students that lack this resource in the home. In addition, our goal is just to create a stronger connection with members of this community, which happens to be an area where many of our students that are in the sub-group of free and reduced meals happens to live. This is not a school sanctioned activity. We are going to buy some cookies and punch, and teachers are putting together a shared reading experience similar to what we would do here at school and then give them an opportunity to look through books and take books home. We have scheduled to do this three times over the summer as a way to get more literacy into their hands. It's a way for us to meet parents, see our students' faces, reach out to the community, and hopefully build a bridge.

Later, BP1 made the following comment:

> Likewise, we also have set up a summer school site that is going to be located at one of the local motels in order to serve our population of students that are either homeless or living in motels. The teachers will meet with students who live in the surrounding motels. They will gather in the lobby of one of the motels. Our food service staff will be bringing breakfast to them in Styrofoam containers every day.

> These are a couple of ways the district is able to reach out to our low socioeconomic families. We want to build a sense of trust with these families because most of the parents of these students did not have a very positive school experience to begin with and now they are sending us their babies, so there is already a lack of trust right off the get go. Depending on what the kid has seen the night before at home or what has happened over the weekend affects how he/she will perform at school the next day. For the district to come up with creative ways to reach out to this population and to build a bridge is magnificent. I am super excited about these endeavors.

Regarding under-resourced students, BP1 stated:

> We also send home backpacks of food for this population. Our social work office will work with these families and pay for vision tests and eye glasses. When the glasses break, we have the resources to get them repaired. The social work office also helps with clothing needs and shoes. In addition, the teachers in this building have a huge heart for kids and will ask for funding to purchase snacks as well as toiletry items and t-shirts, anything to help them feel loved and give them a few things to boost their confidence. In turn, we feel this helps them to become more successful academically.

Additionally, BP1 further stated:

> I would say with our at-risk population who are free and reduced lunch, there are often times when I walk into the classroom and the kids, three or four of them, will be gathered around their teacher having small group instruction, and they will have a snack that they are eating at the time. And it could be that lunch is in an

> hour, and they did have breakfast at school, but when you lack the other resources, if that's what's going to keep you going and keep you motivated, we can buy as many peanut butter crackers as we need to. I have seen some of that [care] come a long way, but specifically, I know using leveled instruction and meeting their needs has an impact, regardless of lack of resources at home.

Based on accounts made by principals, it appears various types of relationship-building strategies should be further studied. Collecting data to discover if a correlation exists between applying servant teaching principles and achievement of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds would be valuable. Perhaps this study could include interviews of school leaders, teachers, under-resourced parents, and their children who have shown significant growth in school districts practicing servant leadership. According to Hays (2008), the application of servant leadership principles and values in one's approach to teaching can have a strong influence on the learning experience for both student and teacher. Implementing servant leadership characteristics could assist educators in building relationships by showing others kindness and compassion (Hays, 2008). Teachers who are compassionate tend to understand their purpose, establish connected relationships, practice solid values, and lead with the heart (Hays, 2008). Rather than teacher-centered, servant teaching maintains a student-centered approach (Hays, 2008).

Hays also espoused the benefits of servant leadership include greater engagement and increased independence, which will further advance students' abilities, attitudes, and understanding that go beyond the classroom. As mentioned by Crippen (2010), educators must become students of our students. Teachers must observe and listen carefully to their

students so that they may come to know them and establish caring relationships with them. According to LaPoma and Kantor (2013), successful teaching depends first on the love and respect teachers have for their students and the tact with which they approach students. Before entering this profession, teachers should carefully examine the reasons why they chose education as a career, and according to Angelou (2013), if one is called to teach, one will not only care about the profession as a whole, but about each child cared for along the way.

Based on principal interviews, a final recommendation to be considered would consist of studying the existing relationships among positive school culture and climate and academic achievement in students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. All four interviewees were passionate regarding this topic. They exclaimed their desire to be the type of school leader who never gives up on students in their buildings. They discussed the importance of school climate and culture and the collaborative nature that will only occur if a positive climate exists within the school building. They emphasized when all are committed to the success of each student, the result is a feeling of trust which allows for a safe and nurturing environment to exist. According to Payne (2010), relational learning is characterized by mutual respect regarding all stakeholders. Under-resourced students need to be taught what it means to mutually respect others (Payne, 2010). Within this teaching process, students will discover mutual respect is reciprocated and must be earned (Payne, 2010). In addition, Payne (2010) suggested the school building needs to represent a learning environment that is emotionally, verbally, and physically safe before relational learning can take place.

Perhaps a qualitative study could help determine the qualities and characteristics a school leader needs to achieve and maintain a positive climate and culture that would result in academic success with students from poverty. According to Henderson (2013), schools promoting positive culture and climate have made academic gains, especially with their at-risk students. Discovering the characteristics necessary to be an effective school leader may be hard to measure but the results would be worthwhile.

Summary

The results of this study indicated a blend of research-based best practices can make a positive impact in narrowing the achievement gap in students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the area of communication arts. Interestingly, the four principals interviewed had similar thoughts and opinions regarding the significance of best practices utilized within their districts. Each building principal discussed the importance of incorporating best practices, such as teaching communication arts using a comprehensive literacy model, providing a literacy coach to further enhance teachers' literacy skills and instruction, implementing RTI to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all students, providing effective professional development including PLCs to purposefully collaborate while learning new strategies to improve instruction, and utilizing assessment data gathered from adaptive diagnostic tests to inform instruction.

While each practice can effectively stand alone, one revelation indirectly revealed by each principal was the importance of blending best practices. The interviews indicated, while each practice could be successfully used in isolation, the way in which best practices were embedded within each school exposed a significant overlap and connection; so much so, it was oftentimes difficult to distinguish a separation among

them. This integration of best practices rooted within each school presented a true blend of practices combined in such a way school leaders could hardly discuss one without conversing about the others. Consequently, the combination of these blended practices displayed a tremendous commitment to the education profession but more importantly a commitment to each and every student regardless of socioeconomic status.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Building Principals

1. What type of literacy program/model does your school currently utilize?

2. Describe how you feel your current literacy program has affected MAP achievement of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the area of communication arts/literacy.

3. Explain the role of your literacy coach. (If applicable)

4. How do you feel having a literacy coach has affected MAP achievement of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the area of communication arts/literacy?

5. Describe the amount and type of literacy training/professional development your teachers take part in each year.

6. Explain how your school utilizes Response to Intervention (RTI) with regard to differentiating literacy instruction. (If applicable)

7. Describe the amount and type of RTI training your teachers take part in each year.

8. How do you feel RTI has affected MAP achievement of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the area of communication arts/literacy?

9. Explain how your school utilizes data-driven assessments such as adaptive diagnostic or predictive tests (NWEA, AimsWeb, Acuity) to guide literacy instruction.

10. Describe the amount and type of training/professional development your teachers take part in each year to help interpret and use the data these assessments provide to guide literacy instruction.

11. Explain how your school utilizes Professional Learning Communities (PLC) with regard to improving literacy instruction and/or meeting the needs of under-resourced students. (If applicable)

12. What alternative literacy resources are utilized in your school to positively affect MAP achievement of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the area of communication arts/literacy?

13. What additional practices are utilized in your school that you feel has been effective in narrowing the achievement gap with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the area of communication arts/literacy?

Appendix B

Phone Script

Face-to-Face Interviews

Hello _____:

I am a graduate student seeking my Doctoral degree in Instructional Leadership at Lindenwood University.

The purpose of this phone call is to set up an interview to discover what best educational practices schools are currently implementing with low socioeconomic students to narrow the achievement gap in communication arts

You were selected to participate in this study because your school has shown growth (continuous increases in MAP Index scores) in the area of fourth grade communication arts over the past three years (2011-2013) within the sub-group of free and reduced price meals.

The interview will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. Your responses will be completely anonymous.

I would like to set up an interview date today. What date(s) would be convenient for you?

Thank you for taking the time to assist me in this research.

Appendix C

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

Lindenwood University

School of Education
209 S. Kingshighway
St. Charles, Missouri 63301

Interview

"Achievement Gap in Reading: A Study of School Practices and Effectual Results"

Principal Investigator: Tina Brown
Telephone: 417-[redacted] E-mail: [redacted]

Participant:_____Contact info:_____

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Tina Brown under the guidance of Dr. Patricia Conner. The purpose of this study is to discover what best educational practices schools are currently implementing with low socioeconomic students to narrow the achievement gap in communication arts.

2. Your participation will involve: a face-to-face or telephone interview. Location of interviews will be at participant's place of employment. The interviews will be conducted face-to-face or via telephone at the convenience of the interviewee. The interviews will be audio taped, with permission of the interviewee, and then transcribed. Then, the transcript will be returned to the interviewee for review.

I give my permission for the interview to be audio taped. _____.
Participant's initials

The amount of time involved in your participation should average 30 minutes.

Approximately 4-10 participants will be involved in this research.

3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.
4. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study. The possible benefits to you from participating in this research are that data collected throughout this study could serve as a tool participants could use for future improvements, which may enhance student achievement.
5. Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

6. We will do whatever is necessary to protect your privacy. As part of this effort, your identity will not be revealed in any publication or presentation that may result from this study and the information collected will remain in the possession of the investigator in a safe location.

7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Tina Brown, 417-[redacted] or the Supervising Faculty, Dr. Patricia Conner, 501-[redacted]. You may also ask questions of or state concerns regarding your participation to the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (IRB) through contacting Dr. Jann Weitzel, Vice President for Academic Affairs, at 636-949-4846.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

_____	_____	_____
Participant's Signature	Participant's Printed Name	Date
_____	_____	_____
Signature of Principal Investigator	Investigator Printed Name	Date

Appendix D

Cover Letter

Interview

Dear _____:

I am a graduate student seeking my Doctoral degree in Instructional Leadership at Lindenwood University.

The purpose of this study is to discover what best educational practices schools are currently implementing with low socioeconomic students to narrow the achievement gap, in communication arts

You were selected to participate in this study because of your knowledge and/or experience in the area of this research.

The interview will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. Your responses will be completely anonymous.

Thank you for taking the time to assist me in this research.

Tina Brown
Doctoral Student

Appendix E

Survey Statements

1. I feel our literacy program has positively affected MAP achievement of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in communication arts.
No Effect *Minor Effect* *Neutral* *Moderate Effect* *Major Effect*

2. Our school utilizes a comprehensive literacy program/model (i.e. Partnerships in Comprehensive Literacy, etc.) to guide literacy instruction.
Never Use *Almost Never* *Occasionally/Sometimes* *Almost Always* *Frequently Use*

3. Our school utilizes a literacy coach.
Never Use *Almost Never* *Occasionally/Sometimes* *Almost Always* *Frequently Use*

4. The quality of coaching is effective.
Never Effective *Almost Never* *Occasionally/Sometimes* *Almost Always* *Frequently Effective*

5. Our school provides ongoing literacy training/professional development.
Never Provides *Almost Never* *Occasionally/Sometimes* *Almost Always* *Frequently Provides*

6. The quality of the literacy training/professional development is effective.
Never Effective *Almost Never* *Occasionally/Sometimes* *Almost Always* *Frequently Effective*

7. Our school utilizes an established Response to Intervention (RTI) program to differentiate literacy instruction.
Never Use *Almost Never* *Occasionally/Sometimes* *Almost Always* *Frequently Use*

8. Our school provides ongoing Response to Intervention (RTI) training/professional development.
Never Provides *Almost Never* *Occasionally/Sometimes* *Almost Always* *Frequently Provides*

9. Our school incorporates data-driven assessments, such as adaptive diagnostic or predictive tests (NWEA, AimsWeb, Acuity) to guide literacy instruction.
Never Incorporates *Almost Never* *Occasionally/Sometimes* *Almost Always* *Frequently Incorporates*

10. Our school provides ongoing training/professional development to help interpret and use the data these assessments provide to guide literacy instruction.
Never Provides *Almost Never* *Occasionally/Sometimes* *Almost Always* *Frequently Provides*

11. Our school participates in Professional Learning Community collaborations.
Never Participates *Almost Never* *Occasionally/Sometimes* *Almost Always* *Frequently Participates*

12. Our school provides ongoing training/professional development to increase teachers' knowledge regarding under-resourced students' needs.
Never Provides *Almost Never* *Occasionally/Sometimes* *Almost Always* *Frequently Provides*

Appendix F

Cover Letter

Online Survey

Dear _____:

I am a graduate student seeking my Doctoral degree in Instructional Leadership at Lindenwood University.

The purpose of this survey is to discover the best practices schools are currently implementing to narrow the achievement gap in the student sub-group of free and reduced price meals in the area of communication arts.

You were selected to participate in this study because of your knowledge and/or experience in the area of this research.

The survey will take approximately10 minutes to complete. Your responses will be completely anonymous.

Completion of this survey indicates voluntary consent to participate in this study.

Thank you for taking the time to assist me in this research.

Tina Brown
Doctoral Student

Appendix G

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

Lindenwood University

School of Education
209 S. Kingshighway
St. Charles, Missouri 63301

Survey

"Achievement Gap in Reading: A Study of School Practices and Effectual Results"

Principal Investigator: Tina Brown
Telephone: 417-[redacted] E-mail: [redacted]

Participant:_____Contact info:_____

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Tina Brown under the guidance of Dr. Patricia Conner. The purpose of this study is to discover what best educational practices schools are currently implementing with low socioeconomic students to narrow the achievement gap, in communication arts.

2. a) Your participation will involve: completion of an online survey, which will be sent via email. The online survey will consist of closed-ended statements based from the study's research questions. The survey will be arranged in a Likert Scale in order to measure attitudes of participants.

   b) The amount of time involved in your participation should average 10 minutes.

   Approximately 75-100 participants will be involved in this research.

3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.
4. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study. The possible benefits to you from participating in this research are that data collected throughout this study could serve as a tool participants could use for future improvements, which may enhance student achievement.
5. Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to respond to any statements that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

6. We will do whatever is necessary to protect your privacy. As part of this effort, your identity will not be revealed in any publication or presentation that may result from

this study, and the information collected will remain in the possession of the investigator in a safe location.

7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Tina Brown, 417-[redacted] or the Supervising Faculty, Dr. Patricia Conner, 501-[redacted]. You may also ask questions of or state concerns regarding your participation to the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (IRB) through contacting Dr. Jann Weitzel, Vice President for Academic Affairs at 636-949-4846.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I may retain a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

Consent to participate in this study is acknowledged by completing the survey.

<Hyperlink to survey>

Vita

Tina Brown serves as an associate professor in the education department at College of the Ozarks. She currently teaches methods courses in the areas of math, literacy, and assessment. In addition, she supervises student teachers each semester. Prior to her current position, Ms. Brown was a public school elementary teacher for 21 years.

Educational studies have resulted in a Bachelor of Science Degree in Education from Missouri State University (1990) including certification in four areas; Elementary Education, Library Media Specialist, Middle School Language Arts, and Middle School Social Studies. She also has a Master of Arts Degree in Administration through Lindenwood University (2009).