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An Investigation of Reading Instruction in Northeast Tennessee

A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

Karen Pierson Reach

December 2011

Dr. Eric Glover, Chair

Dr. Virginia Foley

Dr. Arnold Nyarambi

Dr. Pamela Scott

Keywords:

High Quality Reading Instruction, Reading, Pedagogy, Literacy, Instructional Strategies, Best Practices, Student Achievement

ABSTRACT

An Investigation of Reading Instruction in Northeast Tennessee

by

Karen Pierson Reach

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine specific prekindergarten- through 8th-grade reading programs, instructional best practices, academic interventions, and educational activities that are perceived as successful practices in four high achieving schools within the parameters of Northeast Tennessee. This study was accomplished through a protocol of open-ended interviews with 15 participants comprised of 4 school principals, 4 primary reading teachers, 4 intermediate reading teachers, 2 Title I reading specialists, and 1 district language arts coordinator.

Additionally, school-specific documentation and basal reading programs were reviewed to triangulate the findings of this investigation.

The findings from this study suggested that the educational perceptions among Title I and nonTitle I participants as well as the perceptions among school principals, reading teachers, and reading specialists were parallel. In general the participants' perceptions held in common were associated with frequent opportunities for classroom reading practice; the incorporation of self-selected literature; the appropriation of differentiated instruction; a blending of reading, writing, and grammar; strategic progress monitoring through formative assessment checkpoints; and the implications of summative assessment data.

Major recommendations from this study included the consideration of providing students with frequent and consistent classroom reading time; opportunities for frequent nonfiction reading assignments; the provision of self-selected literature; the appropriation of a blended approach to reading, writing, and grammar; and the implementation of differentiated instruction within the prekindergarten- through 8th-grade reading classroom.

DEDICATION

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight”

(Proverbs 3:5-6).

This study is dedicated ~

First and most significantly this work is dedicated to my Lord and Savior. It is through His strength that my dissertation journey is finally complete.

To school administrators, classroom teachers, and support staff members within the First Tennessee District who work diligently, collaboratively, and unselfishly in providing our students with high quality instruction.

To my husband David. He is truly my dearest friend and greatest confidant. His unwavering support and encouragement continue to uplift me every day. Without him I neither would have begun nor completed this dissertation journey.

To our son Chase. He is truly a blessing in our lives. His intelligence, creative spirit, and passion for life continue to amaze and inspire me.

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To the memory of my father Bobby Pierson. I am thankful to have been a part of his abbreviated life. Through his daily walk he taught me the importance of hard work, resourcefulness, and most importantly – Christian servanthood.

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I am truly blessed.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“So it is with children who learn to read fluently and well: They begin to take flight into whole new worlds as effortlessly as young birds take to the sky” ~ William James

(Literacy Company, 2011, n. p.).

While working in my curriculum office following the winter holiday I heard a soft knock upon my office door. Acknowledging the knock with my usual response, “It’s open--please come in,” I immediately looked up from my desk. Mary Katherine one of our struggling seventh-grade readers walked slowly toward me. She asked if I had time to talk with her and instinctively I smiled and said, “Absolutely; please have a seat.” Mary Katherine positioned herself carefully in the upholstered chair situated in front of my desk--a favorite spot for many of the teachers and students within our middle school. With a serious tone, Mary Katherine shared with me that she knew her present reading comprehension level was below seventh-grade expectations (I had talked with our struggling readers prior to the winter holiday). Mary Katherine continued by explaining that she understood the importance of her placement within a reading intervention group. Nevertheless Mary Katherine requested that she be placed in Spanish class instead of attending a reading intervention class during her designated related arts block. Mary Katherine was extremely respectful with her request; however, as I listened intently my heart began to break. My dilemma was multifaceted. Firstly, the provision of a balanced education in regard to both academic coursework and related arts’ experiences is central to everything that I believe. Secondly, as educational leaders we must consistently provide our

students with the necessary educational supports to ensure their academic success in all content areas. Thirdly, differentiated instruction through the processes of remediation or acceleration is paramount. I responded gently but candidly to Mary Katherine's poignant request. I validated the fact that related arts classes, Spanish included, are important parts of our educational curriculum. Nonetheless, I explained to Mary Katherine that strong reading comprehension is a critical component within the curriculum and at this particular time in seventh grade her reading comprehension was not as strong as it needed to be to ensure her academic success across all content areas. I could see the disappointment in Mary Katherine's eyes as I continued to rationalize and empathize with her. In sum, Mary Katherine would remain in a reading intervention group for the time being--knowing that her comprehension level would be consistently reassessed through strategic progress monitoring. As a result, when Mary Katherine's reading level reached grade level expectations she could then be assigned to Spanish or perhaps another related arts class. Thankfully while conferring with Mary Katherine, I realized that it might be possible for her to participate in a first period Spanish class that would not interfere with any other academic periods or her assigned reading intervention group. I explained to Mary Katherine that I would need to talk with our middle school principal and Spanish teacher before making any placement decisions. Not surprisingly Mary Katherine was thrilled with this possible solution and I knew in my heart that I had made the right educational decision with regard to a necessary reading intervention plan--as difficult as it was.

~

Serving as both a classroom teacher and curriculum specialist has affirmed my passion for reading education and academic excellence in every regard. It is with conviction that I believe in the greatness of our prekindergarten- through 12th-grade public school structures. I

believe that we (educators) have the opportunity to positively transform our students' lives at every educational level by providing high quality instruction. In *The Republic* Plato stated, "The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future life" (Internet Classics Archive, 1994, n. p.). With this spirit in mind it seems fitting that as educators we must be committed to high quality reading instruction as it directly impacts all content areas within the prekindergarten- through 12th-grade structure. This has been affirmed by the International Reading Association (2002):

There are few instructional tasks more important than teaching children to read. The consequences of low achievement in reading are costly both to individuals and [to] society. Low achievement in literacy correlates with high rates of school dropout, poverty, and underemployment... Policymakers, parents, administrators, and teachers seek the same end--to provide literacy instruction that is most likely to lead to high rates of achievement for all children. (p. 1)

Thus it is through high quality reading instruction and literacy opportunities delivered by teachers with a variety of instructional styles that our diverse student population will be empowered to experience academic success at the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels (Bond & Dykstra, 1966/1997; National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform, 2001).

Statement of the Problem

In this period of accountability reflected by *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* and *Race to the Top* policy specifications Tennessee's public school educators are charged with maintaining a balance between the establishment of a positive school climate and intensive political pressures to improve students' achievement. Within our educational community the current provisions of both *NCLB* and *Race to the Top* have aroused an array of emotions. Nevertheless, with these mandates in place, Tennessee's public school educators strive to meet and exceed the required

benchmarks. In March 2010 current efforts to revise *NCLB* were woven into a *Blueprint for Reform* by the Obama administration. The curricular portion of that document specifies the following:

As we ask states to raise their standards to prepare their students for college and the workplace, we will also be asking more from students, families, teachers, principals, and every level of the educational system... This means a new investment in improving teaching and learning in all content areas—from literacy to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics to history, civics, foreign languages, the arts, financial literacy, environmental education, and other subjects—and in providing accelerated learning opportunities to more students to make postsecondary success more attainable. (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a, p. 4)

With this political philosophy framing the era of educational reform, we (educators) realize that our instructional expertise and commitment to educational excellence serve as essential elements of public education. Multiple studies confirm that it is the teacher and his or her instructional expertise that significantly contributes to students' reading success within the classroom rather than a single curricular program or pedagogical approach (Allington & Johnston, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Duffy, 1997; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow 2001; Sanders, 1998; Taylor, Pearson, & Clark, 2000).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine specific prekindergarten- through eighth-grade reading programs, instructional best practices, academic interventions, and educational activities that are perceived as successful practices in four high achieving schools within the parameters of Northeast Tennessee. Central to the First Tennessee District of Northeast Tennessee (see Appendix A), the study's findings were gathered through the specifications of 15 open-ended interviews comprised of the following: four elementary school principals (specific to the PK – 8 configurations of K-4, PK-5, K-5, and K-8), four primary (K-2) reading teachers, four intermediate (3-8) reading teachers, two Title I reading teachers, and one

district language arts coordinator. School-specific documentation provided further insight as to the reading pedagogy and supporting academic programs associated with each school's structure.

Research Questions

In an effort to develop an understanding of the perceptions regarding effective reading pedagogies at the elementary and middle school levels within the First Tennessee District, this qualitative study focused on the following overarching research question: What do primary and intermediate reading teachers, reading specialists, school principals, and one district language arts coordinator in high achieving prekindergarten- through eighth-grade schools perceive as effective reading practices? The following more specific subquestions were addressed in this qualitative study:

1. How does a teacher's philosophy of education relate to a specific reading program or programs?
2. Why are particular reading programs and instructional strategies perceived as educational best practices?
3. What do reading teachers, reading specialists, and school principals perceive as effective *Response to Intervention (RtI)* practices?
4. Are there other academic or nonacademic activities perceived as contributing to student learning?

Significance of the Study

Current federal requirements through the provisions of *NCLB* clearly specify that individual schools must demonstrate "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) for all students through

implementation of state-specific standardized testing. According to *NCLB* specifications AYP measures must include separate statistical benchmarks for both reading and mathematics.

Additionally AYP requirements do not only apply to the total student population within an individual school but also to students in several identified subgroups:

1. economically disadvantaged students,
2. students from differing racial and ethnic groups,
3. students with disabilities, and
4. students with limited English proficiency.

Per current federal AYP regulations, at least 95% of a school's student population within each of the specified subgroups must meet or exceed the measurable annual objectives set by individual state departments of education. As noted by Kober (2004) the numbers of schools not making AYP can vary greatly from state to state for a variety of reasons:

1. A school might have a diverse student enrollment and, accordingly, could have missed the achievement targets for one or two major subgroups of students.
2. A school could have overall satisfactory test scores; however, the school could have failed to test 95% of the students in each major group.
3. A school could have raised achievement for struggling students but not enough to raise those students to the state's definition of "proficient" performance.
4. A school could have met the benchmark one year but missed new targets the following year as the state institutes additional tests in more grades and raises the achievement targets over time. (p. 15)

Further intensified by the recent awarding of *Race to Top* federal funding, Tennessee educators are faced with new state requirements in regard to a revised teacher and principal evaluation model scheduled for full implementation in July 2011 (Tennessee Department of Education, 2011). In light of these requirements, educators in Tennessee--particularly at the elementary and middle school levels---must continue to be vigilant with regard to the delivery of high quality reading instruction and related curricular programs in an effort to ensure successful

student achievement within their individual learning communities. It is my hope that the findings of this qualitative study might assist school districts in improving their prekindergarten-through eighth-grade reading instruction and related academic programs. Findings of this study might assist reading teachers in improving their instructional pedagogy and, in turn, positively impact students' achievement in reading and in multiple content areas. Further, findings of this study might assist school administrators in the reorganization of school-specific reading programs and related professional development within their respective schools.

Scope of the Study

This study was central to an investigation of the perceptions associated with high quality reading instruction within the parameters of Northeast Tennessee. Primary and intermediate reading teachers, reading specialists, school principals, and one district language arts coordinator were interviewed to understand specific prekindergarten- through eighth-grade reading programs, literacy interventions, instructional best practices, and educational activities that are perceived as effective practices in four high achieving schools within the First Tennessee District of Northeast Tennessee. To increase the validity of this qualitative study, documents including basal reading materials, school web sites, school newsletters, School Improvement Plans, as well as vision and mission statements were strategically reviewed and analyzed.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by the degree to which the participating teachers, reading specialists, principals, and language arts coordinator truthfully expressed their opinions and insights. Additionally, because of my curriculum specialist experiences within the educational

community I have been extremely conscientious in attempting to remove my personal biases in regard to any preconceived perceptions of high quality reading instruction and related academic programs. However, the possibility of these biases is still a limitation.

Delimitations of the Study

This study was delimited to four public school structures within the First Tennessee District of Northeast Tennessee. Results, therefore, might not be generalized to other populations or settings.

Definitions of Terms

1. Academic achievement: Academic achievement “is a cumulative function of current and prior family, community, and school experiences” (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005, p. 422).
2. Best practice: An educational best practice is central to “serious, thoughtful, informed, responsible, and state-of-the-art teaching” (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005, p. vi).
3. Differentiated instruction (DI): “Differentiated instruction is a process to teaching and learning for students of differing abilities in the same class” (Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2011, p. 3).
4. High achieving schools: For the purpose of this study, high achieving schools “consistently exhibit an unusually high academic achievement level given the student population they serve” (Perez & Socias, 2008, p. 114).
5. Literacy: Literacy is central to the cognitive processes of reading and writing. Sweet (2005) explained, "Literacy is a complex system of interrelated processes and [its]

- development draws upon social and emotional experiences as well as cognitive ability" (p. 272).
6. Learning community: A learning community is central to those stakeholders within a given school community who are dedicated to continuous school improvement and student achievement (National Staff Development Council, 2011).
 7. Pedagogy: Pedagogy is central to the art, craft, and science of teaching (General Teaching Council for England, 2010, n. p.).
 8. Response to intervention (RtI): "Response to intervention is a problem-solving process whose foundation is the provision of systematic, research-based instruction and interventions to struggling learners" (Casbarro, 2011, p. 1).
 9. Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS): For the purpose of this study, TVAAS is synonymous with the terms value-added and attainment. Specifically, "TVAAS is a statistical analysis of achievement data that reveals academic growth over time for students and groups of students such as those in a grade level or in a school" (Tennessee Department of Education, 2011b, p. 1).
 10. Universal design for learning (UDL): "UDL provides a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone--not a single, one-size-fits-all solution but rather flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs" (National Center on Universal Design for Learning, 2011, p. 1).

Overview of the Study

This study is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 includes an introduction to the topic, a statement of the problem, an overarching research question companioned with four supporting subquestions, the significance of the study, scope of the study, limitations, delimitations, and definitions of specific terms. A review of relevant literature is included in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 contains a description of the methods and procedures that were employed throughout the duration of this qualitative study. In Chapter 4, the data are categorized and presented through emergent themes that address each of the guiding research questions. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the findings, recommendations for practice, recommendations for further research, a conclusion, and closing thoughts.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

“Reading is essential to success in our society”

(Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 1).

This review of literature provides a succinct summary of research findings connected with educational accountability, literacy programming, and high quality instructional pedagogy. The literature review contains four sections. The first section provides an analysis specific to educational accountability and its explicit connections to the current accountability provisions of prekindergarten- through 12th-grade public school structures. This is followed by an historical overview of reading education. The third section provides a detailed synopsis of educational research with respect to high quality educational pedagogy, or best practices, linked with successful literacy instruction. Lastly, a summary of the information provided within this review of related literature is presented.

An Age of Educational Accountability

Student learning is essential for the success of any prekindergarten- through 12th-grade learning community. Multiple researchers have documented that successful learning occurs in communities characterized by the following factors:

1. strong instructional leadership (Davis & Thomas, 1989; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Terry, 1996),
2. consistent monitoring of student progress (Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Newman & Associates, 1996),

3. shared goals and professionalism (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Davis & Thomas, 1989),
4. parental involvement (Fullan & Stiegelbaur, 1991, Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Purkey & Smith, 1983), and
5. a positive and academically centered school climate (Hoy & Hannum, 1997; Rosenholtz, 1985).

Extending beyond these academic factors, Zhao (2009) suggested that the nonacademic elements within the school community provided an impetus for successful student learning:

What really matters, or what really helped the United States maintain its lead, may lie somewhere else, such as in the overall philosophical approach to education, the aggregation of all activities outside and inside the school, and how teachers and students treat one another. (pp. 45-46)

Reading Connections

Connected explicitly to academic achievement at all levels of the learning continuum a student's ability to read, comprehend, and synthesize information is critical to his or her success in prekindergarten through 12th grade. Successful readers must independently construct meaning from text, apply that information to build conceptual understanding across multiple content areas, and effectively communicate with others (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Braunger & Lewis, 2006). Consequently high quality literacy instruction is regarded as a major focal point in the context of public education. In particular, as we (educators) prepare today's students to succeed in a society characterized by the elements of increasingly complex globalization and technological advancements, high quality literacy instruction is a keystone within the academic program (Daggett, 2005; Friedman, 2005). Affirmed by ACT (2006) a student's reading skills serve as key predictors of academic achievement in both mathematics and science. Snow et al. (as cited in Institute of Education Sciences, 2008) suggested that the intensive economic complexities of the modern world require today's graduates "to have far more advanced literacy

skills than those required of any previous generation” (p. 4). As a result intensive pressures for public school students to perform well on state required academic assessments continue to resonate throughout the United States (Yeh, 2010; Zimmerman & Dibenedetto, 2008). The U.S. Department of Education (2010a) reported, “We must reward the success of schools that are making significant progress, ask for dramatic change in the lowest-performing schools, and address persistent gaps in student academic achievement and graduation rates” (p. 7).

Federal Requirements

Originating with the establishment of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* in 1965, the educational requirements of the federal government continue to focus on increased accountability measures. As specified by the U.S. Department of Education (2010a), “All students will be included in an accountability system that builds on college and career-ready standards, rewards progress and success, and requires rigorous interventions in the lowest-performing schools” (p. 5). Gambrell, Morrow, and Pressley (2007) explained:

The stakes are high, and the penalties for inadequate performance on these tests are great. Schools are directed to show Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on state assessments or face sanctions such as school takeover by the state or allowing parents to choose other schools, perhaps in other districts. (p. 12)

Conversely some scholars posited that the current accountability provisions have narrowed the prekindergarten- through 12th-grade curriculum in that teachers feel pressured to focus on a restrictive set of academic requirements as opposed to providing opportunities for classroom creativity and arts education (Eisner, 2000; Hanley, 2003; Mishook & Kornhaber, 2006; Pedulla, 2003).

Historical Perspectives of Educational Law

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

Following the tumultuous years associated with *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) and the passage of the *Civil Rights Act* in 1964, the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* of 1965 initiated a paradigm shift in the appropriation of federal funding for America's public schools in connection with equal educational opportunities for all students. It was through the establishment of Title I funding within the components of *ESEA* that supplemental assistance was provided for those schools serving a high percentage of economically and educationally disadvantaged students. Additional Title I divisions within *ESEA* provided federal funding appropriations for library resources, textbooks, and other instructional materials. According to the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (2001):

[Title I] funds were purposely distributed through state education agencies (SEAs) to avoid the perception that the federal government was intervening in the rights and obligations of states to provide public education and also to use the funds as leverage to upgrade the capabilities of SEAs themselves. (p. 1)

Although it has been often referenced as a “carrot and stick” mechanism, the *ESEA* not only provided increased federal funding for America's public schools but it also served as a powerful thrust in regard to school desegregation during a time of great change within the parameters of America's public education system (Webb, 2006).

Goals 2000: Educate America Act

With the passage of more than 4 decades several *ESEA* reauthorizations have occurred as a direct result of the changes associated with differing presidential administrations and their political perspectives regarding public education. Beginning with President Ronald Reagan's appointment of a National Commission on Excellence in Education, the 1983 release of *A Nation*

at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform ignited a sense of urgency toward improving the teaching and learning processes associated with America's public education system.

Conversely, Ansary (2007) expressed that *A Nation at Risk* "just called for more" in terms of increased curricular programming, the integration of higher-order thinking skills, more creative lessons, and an extended number of school days within the academic structure. Ansary (2007) explained that the document "had been commissioned by the Reagan White House so conservative republicans controlled its interpretations and uses" (p. 4).

In political response to Reagan's 1983 report Webb (2006) explained that three distinct waves of educational reforms subsequently emerged. The first wave (1982–1985) focused specifically on higher graduation requirements, standardized curriculum expectations, increased standardized testing for students, and increased certification requirements for teachers in addition to an increased emphasis on computer literacy, homework, and standards for student-athlete qualifications. The second wave of reforms (1986–1989) addressed elements associated with decentralization, site-based management, teacher empowerment, parental involvement, and school choice. The third wave of educational reforms (1988) centered on the governing policies surrounding children's services with an explicit focus on the collaborative processes between family and school (Webb, 2006).

Succeeding the third wave of educational reforms, Webb (2006) expressed that few changes had occurred within the parameters of America's public education system. Hence in response to perceptions regarding a lack of educational progress President George H. W. Bush orchestrated an educational summit during the fall of 1989. Chaired by Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton, the states' governors agreed that America's academic standards should be increased while simultaneously holding local schools accountable for student achievement. This led to the

groundwork for the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*. The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (1994) listed six educational goals generated within *Goals 2000*:

1. By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.
2. By the year 2000, the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90%.
3. By the year 2000, all students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter.
4. By the year 2000, United States' students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.
5. By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to complete in a global economy.
6. By the year 2000, every school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning. (p. 1)

President George H. W. Bush was unsuccessful in his pursuits to implement the aforementioned goals prior to leaving office after the 1992 election. As a result it was during President Bill Clinton's administration that *The Goals 2000: Educate America Act* was implemented in 1994 with the insertion of two additional specifications concerning teacher evaluation and increased parental participation (Webb, 2006). In accordance with these national benchmarks Goertz (2001) pointed out that the emphasis had shifted "from educational inputs to educational outputs and from procedural accountability to educational accountability" (p. 62).

The Improving America's Schools Act (IASA)

It was within the guiding parameters of the *Goals 2000 Act* that the first reauthorization of *ESEA* resulted in 1994: *Improving America's Schools Act (IASA)*. Stated clearly within the qualitative essentials of the *IASA's* opening specifications, the U.S. Department of Education (1995) underscored the importance of maintaining high academic standards for all students:

The *IASA* replaces the piecemeal structure of the old *ESEA*. The *ESEA* programs will now be integrated into a state's overall school improvement efforts focused around a core of challenging state standards. *ESEA* programs now promote the alignment of all education components--curriculum and instruction, professional development, school leadership, accountability, and school improvement--so that every aspect of the education system works together to ensure that all children can attain challenging standards. (p. 4)

With these increased expectations of accountability, America's schools were subjected to educational reform within the political arena. It was during the late 1990s that 20 states enacted legislation empowering an individual state to administer sanctions to poor performing schools within its jurisdiction; however, a limited number of sanctions actually took place because of this new authorization (Webb, 2006).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

Subsequent to the reauthorization of the *ESEA* through the specifications of the *IASA*, the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* was signed into law on January 8, 2002, by President George W. Bush. As currently enacted the law mandates that each year public schools must test all students in grades three through eight specific to the content areas of reading and mathematics. Additionally an individual school's test scores must be disaggregated by ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, and English proficiency in an effort to ensure that the academic needs of individual students are successfully addressed at the school level. Further, the law requires that all subgroups of students must be deemed as proficient by the academic year 2013-14. Schools that fail to demonstrate longitudinal student proficiency per subgroup or adequate yearly progress (AYP) are subjected to state sanctions (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Ravitch (2009) explained that following 1 year of unsuccessful proficiency within any disaggregated subgroup, failing schools must offer parents the opportunity to enroll in a more successful public school. In subsequent years of AYP deficiencies an unsuccessful school (a)

could be transformed into a charter school, (b) could have its entire staff dismissed, or (c) could be overtaken by its governing state department of education (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Differing Perspectives

By raising the bar for increased accountability measures, the components of the *No Child Left Behind Act* have sparked great controversy throughout the nation. Whereas some have argued that *NCLB* has narrowed the measures of student success (Fuhrman & Elmore, 2004; Popham, 2001), others have expressed that establishing high expectations for all students has had positive effects on learning and achievement measures particularly for students with disabilities (Johnson, Thurlow, & Stout, 2007). Ohanian (1999) pointed out that for struggling schools, the requirements of increased testing and uniformity could push students into dropping out of school and might possibly drive creative teachers out of the educational profession in greater numbers than ever before. Zhao (2009) acknowledged that high quality education must extend well beyond the parameters of high-stakes testing as educators prepare students to think critically and creatively:

In my thinking, education is much more than the memorization of prescribed skills and knowledge bits. And, education, to slightly modify John Dewey, is not (only) a preparation for life, education is (also) life itself. Furthermore, education is about helping each and every child to realize his or her potential, not molding them into economic working beings for a state. (p. 202)

A Blueprint for Educational Reform

With the Obama administration leading the current proposal regarding a reauthorization of the *ESEA* within the tenants of the *NCLB Act*, *A Blueprint for Reform* was released by the U.S.

Department of Education in March 2010. The following four key areas of concentration were outlined:

1. improving teacher and principal effectiveness to ensure that every classroom has a great teacher and every school has a great leader,
2. providing information to families to help them evaluate and improve their children's schools and to educators to help them improve their students' learning,
3. implementing college and career-ready standards and developing improved assessments aligned with those standards, and
4. improving students' learning and achievement in America's lowest performing schools by providing intensive support and effective interventions. (p. 3)

In addition, a restructuring of current AYP requirements has been a major discussion point within the Obama administration. As previously stated, schools must demonstrate AYP per the performance of multiple subgroups of students with respect to a single achievement test administered at the end of each academic school year. The current presidential administration has been considering the prospect of administering baseline achievement tests at the beginning of each academic year to be followed by subsequent achievement testing at the end of that academic year. In particular, sanctions would be targeted at schools that demonstrate the least amount of academic progress (Toch & Tyre, 2010). President Obama (as cited in Werner, 2011) recently stated that U.S. students should be required to take fewer standardized tests, and a school's academic performance should be measured in multiple ways as opposed to using only standardized test results. He specifically remarked:

One thing I never want to see happen is schools that are just teaching the test because then you're not learning about the world, you're not learning about different cultures, you're not learning about science, you're not learning about math. . . All you're learning about is how to fill out a little bubble on an exam and little tricks that you need to do in order to take a test and that's not going to make education interesting. (p. 1)

Race to the Top Educational Funding

Working in concert with the Obama administration's *Blueprint for Reform* through a strategic focus on more rigorous curriculum standards, the U. S. Department of Education (2009) initiated a national competition amongst the states entitled *Race to the Top* in an effort to foster even greater educational accountability measures throughout the nation. This initiative was founded upon the principles of systemic reforms in regard to comprehensive plans that change educational policies and practices aimed at improving outcomes for kindergarten- through 12th-grade students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a). U.S. Education Secretary Duncan (2009) announced that in order to win the race states must (a) have standards and tests that prepare students to succeed in college and careers, (b) recruit and reward excellent teachers and principals, (c) have data systems to track students' progress and to identify effective teachers, and (d) be able to identify their lowest-performing schools and take dramatic action to turn them around. As a side-note to this process Klein (2010) commented that the impact of the *Race to the Top* initiative remained unclear as to the accountability system at the heart of the *No Child Left Behind* edition of the *ESEA*.

Taking advantage of the opportunity to *Race to the Top*, Tennessee and Delaware developed action plans in alignment with these requirements and were the first two U.S. states to be named as top recipients. Specifically, the state of Tennessee was awarded \$501 million in educational funding in August 2010. Subsequent to this recognition and currently referenced as a *First to the Top* recipient, the Tennessee Department of Education (2010a) identified five key areas of school improvement. The guiding components of its educational reform package were:

1. adopting higher standards and administering rigorous assessments to prepare students to succeed in college or the workplace;
2. building systems that use data to measure student growth and success in a way that helps teachers and principals improve instruction at the classroom level;

3. locating, retaining, and rewarding the most effective teachers and principals including significant investments in professional development;
4. turning around and transforming the lowest-performing schools; and
5. developing a unified strategy to strengthen science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education.

Accordingly, Former Tennessee Commissioner of Education Webb (as cited in Aarons, 2010) stated:

We have the opportunity to have the resources to make the change happen and the opportunity to change the expectations. We believe that is key to our success. We believe that if you take all of the technology out of the classroom... but you leave the highly effective teacher interacting with students, the students will grow. All those other things are great to have, but we know without a shadow of a doubt that we have to invest in great teachers. (p. 28)

Historical Account of Reading Education

Moving beyond the *McGuffey Readers* of the mid-19th century, it is without question that the pedagogical aspects of reading instruction have journeyed through a myriad of educational changes. Pearson (2000) explained that beginning with the work of Matthews during the early part of the 20th century, traditional reading instruction evolved from a words-to-letters approach (analytic phonics—whole to part) into a words-to-reading (sight word) approach. With the later becoming the accepted pedagogy associated with primary reading instruction during the early 1900s, subsequent years yielded the development of an alphabetic methodology that was aimed at helping students connect individual sounds with corresponding pictures. Following the development of this particular approach, Farnham (as cited in Pearson, 2000) designed a meaning-based methodology with respect to matching pictures in connection with the content of a given sentence (“There were five birds in the birdbath”). In regard to the intermediate levels of reading instruction, an emphasis upon comprehension, vocabulary development, and study skills

were central to the evolution of commercial-based reading programs in the form of basal readers, students' workbooks, accompanying teachers' editions, and standardized assessments during an elongated timeframe beginning in the 19th century and extending through the first 3 decades of the 20th century (Pearson, 2000).

A Balanced Instructional Approach

The words-to-reading model permeated throughout the United States from 1935 to 1965 as the predominant and accepted modality of reading instruction at the primary level; however, philosophical and pedagogical changes began to emerge as punctuated by the 1967 work of Chall in *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. Pearson (2000) paraphrased Chall's eight guiding principles:

1. The goals of reading from start to grade one should include comprehension, interpretation, and application as well as word recognition.
2. Instruction should begin with meaningful silent reading of stories that are grounded in children's experiences and interests.
3. After a corpus of sight words is learned (somewhere between 50 and 100), analytic phonics instruction should begin. Phonics should be regarded as one of many cueing systems including context and picture cues available to children to unlock new words.
4. Phonics instruction should be spread out over several years rather than concentrated in the early grades.
5. Phonics instruction should be contextualized rather than isolated from real words and texts.
6. The words in the early texts (grades one through three) should be carefully controlled for frequency of use and repeated often to ensure mastery.
7. Children should get off to a slow and easy start probably through a readiness program; those not judged to be ready for formal reading instruction should experience an even longer readiness period.
8. Children should be instructed in small groups. (pp. 159-160)

Related to Chall's (1967) recommendations were a separate series of studies conducted during the early 1960s by the Cooperative Research Branch of the United States Office of Education (as cited in Bond & Dykstra, 1966). The findings of those studies were documented in a detailed report entitled *The First Grade Studies*. Those particular research findings showed that (a) the classroom implementation of varying instructional methodologies such as phonics instruction or a word-family approach yielded equal or greater increases in first- and second-grade students' reading achievement in comparison to an isolated basal approach and (b) it was the classroom teacher who most significantly impacted an individual student's reading growth (Bond & Dykstra, 1966). Within this light, *The First Grade Studies* established that no single instructional methodology within the parameters of reading instruction was determined to be superior to another; nevertheless, the employment of a basal reading program was not a recommended instructional practice (Flippo, 1999; International Reading Association, 1999). Pearson (2000) explained that following the release of *The First Grade Studies* in 1966 and Chall's recommendations in 1967, commercial-based reading programs were expeditiously transformed. This transformation included an intensive integration of phonics instruction into grade one programming and the immediate restructure of the ever-famous *Dick and Jane* instructional selections. Pearson (2000) explained:

Equally significant, there was a change in content, at least in grade one. *Dick and Jane* and all their assorted pairs of competing cousins – Tom and Susan, Alice and Jerry, Jack and Janet – were retired from the first-grade curriculum and replaced by a wider array of stories and characters; by the early 1970s, more of the selections were adaptations of children's literature rather than stories written to conform to a vocabulary restriction or a readability formula. (p. 164)

Later affirmed by the 1975 release of *Toward a Literacy Society* sponsored by the National Institute of Education, Chall (as cited in Kim, 2008) proposed once again that a balanced

approach to literacy with respect to both phonics and comprehension skills was instructionally necessary if students were to become skilled readers.

The Elements of Mastery Learning

Following these transformations, a complete redesign of basal programming occurred at both the primary and intermediate grade levels. Based upon the research of Bloom (1981), the elements of mastery learning significantly affected this redesign process. Originating with the research of Carroll in 1963 (as cited in Levine, 1985), mastery learning involved breaking the complex components of a given concept into manageable units so that a student is positioned to achieve mastery based upon consistent practice opportunities. Carroll (as cited in Levine, 1985) explained that two distinct factors were connected with successful student learning: (a) perseverance of the student and (b) an opportunity to learn. Carroll pointed out that the first factor was controlled by the student; the second factor was central to the student's classroom experiences and access to necessary instructional tools (as cited in Levine, 1985). In alignment with Carroll's research, Bloom (1981) further extended the elements of mastery learning. He considered that the most important variable for learning was time. Bloom (1981) stated that it was unrealistic to expect all students to take the same amount of time to learn the same objectives. Thus, one's educational pathway must never become a competition with others. From Bloom's perspective, learning was an individualistic endeavor. It was for this reason Pearson (2000) asserted that the emergence of a reading skills management system central to mastery tests, additional workbook instructional exercises, accompanying worksheets, and curriculum-embedded assessment once again transformed the basal reading programs of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Literature-Based Instruction

Initiated in 1976 the federally funded *Center for the Study of Reading* confirmed the importance of teaching explicit reading comprehension strategies (Durkin, 1978; Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Raphael & Pearson, 1985). As a result basal reading programs at the elementary level were redesigned during the 1980s to reflect this pedagogical recommendation. According to Ogle (1986) the incorporation of KWL organizers (K representing what students already know, W representing what students want to learn, and L representing new knowledge that students acquire through reading), comprehension monitoring (Paris, Cross, & Lipson, 1984), and transactional strategies specific to the metacognitive processes of questioning, summarizing, clarifying, and predicting were central to the redesign of basal programming and reading instruction during this timeframe (Pressley et al., 1994).

According to Pearson (2000) additional instructional changes during the late 1980s emerged in response to the 1985 release of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* as authored by the Center for the Study of Reading. A renewed focal point regarding the importance of reading opportunities surfaced as the cornerstone of quality instruction in connection with a literature-based model at the elementary-school level. Specific to middle-schools, Atwell's 1987 publication *In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents* provided an impetus for the incorporation of reading workshop models in companionship with literature-based programs (Pearson, 2000).

The Whole Language Approach

In opposition to basal programming, Pearson (2004) expounded that the whole language approach of the late 1980s and early 1990s was central to a child-centered and constructivist

pedagogy associated with “the integrated curriculum movements popular in England, Australia, and New Zealand” (p. 217). Originating with the work of Brown, Smith, and Goodman, Pearson (2004) explained that from a whole language perspective, reading connections were perceived as a language process as opposed to a perceptual process. Hence, from a whole language perspective it was alleged that readers must construct meaning from text in an authentic and integrated context. Moreover, Pearson (2004) reported that it was during this era that “phonics, along with other skills, was backgrounded, and literature moved to center stage” (p. 218). For this reason whole language educators advocated that students must be immersed within quality children’s literature as they were empowered to read and make real-world connections. In this light, the following principles were regarded as the threshold of a whole language instructional model:

1. The function of oral and written language is to construct meaning (Altwerger, Edelsky, & Flores, 1987).
2. Speaking, listening, reading, and writing are learned best in authentic speech and literacy events centered within a social context (Newman, 1985).
3. The learner builds on his [or her] own prior knowledge and operates with his [or her] personal ever-developing hypotheses about how oral and written language operates (Smith, 1983).
4. Cognitive development depends on language development--just as language development depends on cognitive development (Wells, 1986).

Pearson (2000) noted:

Whole language owes its essential character and key principles to the insights of linguistics, psycholinguistics, cognitive psychology, sociolinguistics, and literary theory... It owes its remarkable--if brief--appearance in the national limelight of reading instruction to its committed leaders and a veritable army of committed teachers who instantiated it their classrooms each with his or her own unique signature. (p. 181)

The Reading Wars

By the late 1990s an abundance of conflicting perspectives regarding phonics instruction versus the whole language model emerged within the reading research community. As a result the International Reading Association (1997) developed a position statement in regard to the importance of phonics instruction within the primary curriculum:

1. The teaching of phonics is an important aspect of beginning reading instruction.
2. Classroom teachers in the primary grades value and teach phonics as part of their reading programs.
3. Phonics instruction, to be effective in promoting independence in reading, must be embedded in the context of a total reading-language arts program (pp. 3-4).

A report entitled *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* from the National Research Council (NRC) posited that a balanced literacy approach in terms of both phonics and comprehension instruction was indeed preferential and essential for the development of skillful readers (Snow et al., 1998).

National Reading Panel

Working in tandem with the National Research Council's recommendations, the National Reading Panel (2000) was charged with the task of researching the most effective ways to provide reading instruction. Serving as a tremendous catalyst within the parameters of the reading research community, the National Reading Panel (2000) released its findings in a report entitled *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read*. Central to its findings, the National Reading Panel initially identified approximately 100,000 research studies conducted after 1966 and 15,000 research studies conducted prior to 1966 (Carnine, Silbert, Kame'enui, & Tarver, 1997). Because of these findings, the National Reading Panel (2000)

concluded that five essential components were necessary for the proper development of an effective and strategic reading program. Allington (2006) summarized those components:

1. Development of phonemic awareness and phonics skills in kindergarten and first grade was supported by the research but systematic phonics was not effective for struggling readers in grades two through six.
2. Provision of regular consistent guided oral reading with a focus on fluency was important.
3. Silent reading was recommended for developing fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills (although the panel stated that the research reviewed had not adequately demonstrated the benefits of various incentive programs for increasing reading volume).
4. Direct teaching of comprehension strategies was recommended.
5. Provision of good comprehension strategy instruction is a complex activity. Thus, the panel recommended extensive, formal preparation in comprehension strategies [instruction] for all teachers. (p. 2)

Furthermore the National Reading Panel (2000) confirmed that the integration of computer technology into the instructional context was an effective resource for developing students' reading and writing skills. In addition to the identification of these instructional components, the National Reading Panel (2000) specified that providing reading teachers with appropriate professional development training served as an important component within the parameters of quality literacy instruction.

Reading First

Established to ensure that every student reads at grade level or above by the end of third grade, the *Reading First* grant program was instituted as an integral component of the *NCLB* Act in 2001. The *Reading First* initiative was developed in alignment with the scientifically-based research findings of the National Reading Panel. In accordance with these elements, the U.S. Department of Education (2009) summarized the purpose of *Reading First* as “assistance to

states and districts to establish scientifically-based reading programs for students enrolled in kindergarten through grade three” (p. 1).

Specific to individual state appropriations through *Reading First's* federal funding parameters, Tennessee received \$121,932, 264 in allocations beginning in 2002 and ending in 2008. In connection with these funding allocations, the Center for Research in Education Policy (2008) ascertained that Tennessee's *Reading First* teachers orchestrated “a wider variety of instructional orientations and materials than control teachers [did], including a greater use of both learning centers and small group instruction” (p. 2). Following these specifics, as communicated by a U.S. Department of Education consultant, *Reading First* funding was no longer appropriated for any state beyond the 2008 fiscal year (R. Fennell, personal communication, November 12, 2010).

Response to Intervention (RtI)

Response to Intervention emerged from the most recent reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) in connection with special education programs. Moreover, the guiding philosophy of *RtI* was strategically connected with the recommendations of the Tennessee Reading Panel that are in alignment with the National Reading Panel's 2000 report. Outlined in its 2005 report the Tennessee Department of Education specified that additional instructional support was critical to the success of struggling readers. Often referenced as a three-tier instructional model, the Tennessee Reading Panel (Tennessee Department of Education, 2005) clearly defined the specifics of these three successive levels:

- Tier I is comprised of three elements: (a) a core reading program based on scientific reading research, (b) benchmark testing of students to determine instructional needs at least three times per year (fall, winter, and spring), and (c) ongoing professional

development to provide teachers with the necessary tools to ensure every student receives quality reading instruction.

- Tier II is designed to meet the needs of those students where focused instruction with the classroom is not enough. These students require additional instruction to the time allotted for core reading instruction. Tier II gives the students an additional 30 minutes of intensive small-group reading instruction daily. The aim is to support and reinforce skills being taught by the classroom teacher.
- Tier III is designed for the small percentage of students who have received Tier II instruction and continue to show marked difficulty in acquiring necessary reading skills. These students require instruction that is more explicit, more intensive, and specifically meets their individual needs. In Tier III, an additional 30 minutes can be provided for the students. (p. 6)

Working in concert with the specifications of a Tier II or Tier III approach, the intent of *Response to Intervention* has been to reduce the number of students diagnosed with learning disabilities (Lyon et al., 2001). Furthermore, Denton, Vaughn, and Fletcher (2003) suggested that special education services might not be as intensive as needed in improving a struggling student's overall reading growth. These researchers have suggested that Tier II and III interventions might be more beneficial in accelerating a student's reading progress when coupled with special education support.

High Quality Educational Pedagogy

Raising the academic standards for all students in an age of increased accountability measures has been an expectation at both the national and state levels; therefore, teachers must be adept and prepared to deliver high quality instruction to ensure students' academic success. Recent research studies conducted in high achieving schools have shown that successful classrooms are characterized by motivated and confident teachers rather than by a single instructional program or methodology (Pressley, 2003; Pressley et al., 2001; Wharton-

McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998). In an educational document distributed during an Association for Supervision and Curriculum (ASCD) symposium, Wong (n. d.) stated:

Unsuccessful schools stress programs. They spend millions of dollars adopting programs... in constant pursuit of the quick fix on the white horse. Successful schools stress practice. They wisely invest in their teachers and the effectiveness of their teachers. They don't teach programs; they work at improving the pedagogical practices of their teachers. (Why some schools are successful, para. 2)

In alignment with these findings, additional researchers have confirmed that the individual teacher serves as the most powerful influence within the learning environment (Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Gambrell et al., 2007). This was further punctuated by the research of Wright, Horn, and Sanders (1997) who stated, "Effective teachers appear to be effective with students of all achievement levels, regardless of the level of heterogeneity in their classrooms" (p. 63).

Effective Literacy Pedagogy

The American Federation of Teachers stated in its 1999 publication *Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science: What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able to Do*, "The most fundamental responsibility of schools is teaching students to read" (p. 2). With this philosophy in mind, Robinson (2002) explained:

Reading education has often resembled a pendulum swinging from one extreme to another. What was learned in the past about the strengths and weaknesses of a particular approach or philosophy of reading is seemingly forgotten yet is often reinvented by succeeding generations of educators. Frequently what is considered new and innovative is often a reworking of ideas and methods of the past. (pp. 139-140)

Adams (1990) estimated that one in three children experience complexities in learning to read successfully. Additional researchers have documented that children who encounter difficulties in learning to read rarely catch up with their peers (Leech & Lentz, 1988; Neuman & Dickinson, 2001; Snow et al., 1998; Torgesen, 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). For this reason instilling a lifelong love for reading and creating literacy-rich classrooms is important for

reading-language teachers at all levels of the prekindergarten- through 12th-grade school structure.

Gambrell et al. (2007) stated that an effective literacy classroom must be centered within the following best practices:

1. creating a classroom culture that fosters literacy motivation;
2. teaching reading for authentic meaning-making literacy experiences: for pleasure, to be informed, and to perform a task;
3. providing students with scaffolded instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension to promote independent reading;
4. giving students plenty of time to read in class;
5. providing children with high quality literature across a wide range of genres;
6. using multiple texts to link and expand vocabulary and concepts;
7. building a whole-class community that emphasizes important concepts and builds upon prior knowledge;
8. balancing teacher-and student-led discussion of texts;
9. using technologies to link and expand concepts; and
10. using a variety of assessment techniques to inform instruction. (p. 19)

Echoing these best practices Duncan (2010) stated, “All teachers should encourage students to become lifelong readers” (p. 91) amidst the pressures and constraints of *NCLB*. According to recent national data, individuals considering themselves to be habitual readers were more likely to engage in healthier lifestyles as connected with physical exercise, volunteerism, and community-centered activities (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007).

Adolescent Literacy

Although an abundance of reading research and methodologies could be accumulated for educators who serve students at the primary levels of the teaching and learning continuum,

adolescent literacy recommendations were not as quantifiable (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). Nevertheless, the Institute of Education Sciences (2008) working in tandem with the U.S. Department of Education formulated a guidepost for improving adolescent literacy through effective classroom and intervention practices. Five instructional recommendations were offered for educators who serve students at the upper elementary, middle, and high school levels:

1. provide explicit vocabulary instruction,
2. provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction,
3. provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation,
4. increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning, and
5. make available intensive and individualized interventions for struggling readers that can be provided by trained specialists. (p. iii)

The Center on Instruction (2008) released a practice brief entitled *Effective Instruction for Adolescent Struggling Readers*. Its recommendations were synonymous with the previous findings formulated by the Institute of Education Sciences (2008). The Center on Instruction (2008) stated that instructional recommendations for older readers differed only slightly from those for younger readers. These were organized into categories consisting of (a) word study, (b) fluency, (c) vocabulary, (d) comprehension, and (e) motivation. The Center on Instruction (2008) maintained that phonics instruction was not included in the five categories because “for most older readers, instruction in advanced word study, or multisyllabic words, is a better use of time than instruction in the more foundational reading skills” (p. 3).

Classroom Instruction That Works

Central to the elements of successful student learning and achievement measures, the research findings of Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) have recently captured the attention

of many within the educational community. These particular findings suggested that nine instructional strategies are positively connected with successful student learning and achievement measures. Strategically presented in Marzano et al. (2001), the following instructional processes were found to be applicable within all content areas and grade levels:

1. identifying similarities and differences;
2. summarizing and note-taking;
3. reinforcing effort and providing recognition;
4. assigning homework and practice;
5. incorporating nonlinguistic representations;
6. providing cooperative learning opportunities;
7. setting objectives and providing feedback;
8. generating and testing hypotheses; and
9. using questions, cues, and advance organizers. (p. 7)

Brain-Based Learning

The components of brain-based learning serve as pertinent points of interest as teachers prepare for the delivery of high quality instruction within any content area and grade level. Jensen (1998) explained that the elements of trust, safety, and mutual respect should be intrinsically established before academic endeavors can take place at any educational level. Moreover, teachers and administrators must be intuitively connected to the factors of classroom environment and their direct emotional impact upon student learning. Wilmes, Harrington, Kohler-Evans, and Sumpter (2008) outlined five specific factors for consideration in this regard:

1. enhancing the visual environment,
2. using color and lighting appropriately,

3. being sensitive to sounds in the environment,
4. using music in classrooms, and
5. using the sense of smell (pp. 659-662).

Differentiated Instruction (DI)

Originating with Vygotsky's research (1978) in regard to an individual's level of readiness and zone of proximal development, additional researchers have discussed the importance of differentiated instruction within the classroom (Hall et al., 2011; Oaksford & Jones, 2001; Reis et al., 1998; Rose & Meyer, 2002; Tomlinson, 2001). Educators recognize that students are unique individuals and as a result each student has a unique acquisition for learning. Accordingly, a teacher may need to amend an instructional process or assignment for a student or group of students through the provisions of *DI* (e.g., small group work, student pairing, individual tutoring, scaffolding, etc.) to accommodate the instructional needs of his or her students (Tomlinson, 1999). Further underscored by Bowgren and Sever (2010):

...teachers must do whatever it takes to provide students with a chance for success. This means teachers give every learner whatever he or she needs before reaching, while reaching, and after reaching. Teachers change the nature of the learning to fit the needs of the learner. While the intent is for all students to learn the same content and standards, teachers will have to find the best path to that content for each particular learner. (p. 44)

Glass (2011) stated, "To ignore the fact that students--like all individuals--have various learning styles, interests, and levels of abilities is basically short-sighted and unfair to students" (n. p.).

In alignment with a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Hall et al. (2011) offered the following *DI* guideposts:

The model of differentiated instruction requires teachers to be flexible in their approach to teaching and adjust the curriculum and presentation of information to learners rather than expecting students to modify themselves for the curriculum. The intent of differentiating instruction is to maximize each student's growth and individual success by meeting each student where he or she is and assisting in the learning process. (p. 2-3)

Further qualifying these particulars, Hall et al. (2011) categorized three overarching components with regard to the implementation of *DI* at the classroom level: content, process, and products.

Those components are central to the following principles:

Content:

1. Classroom elements and materials are used to support instructional content.
2. Instructional tasks and objectives are aligned to learning goals.
3. Instruction is concept-focused in alignment with broad-based concepts as opposed to fixating on extraneous details.

Process:

1. Flexible grouping is consistently used and may vary from whole-class discussions followed by small group work or pairings of students.
2. Classroom organization benefits both students and teachers.

Products:

1. Initial and on-going assessment of student readiness and growth are essential indicators.
2. Students are actively engaged within the learning process.
3. Vary expectations and requirements for student responses. (pp.3-5)

Professional Development

Working in concert with the elements of educational best practices and classroom climate, professional development opportunities within the learning community serve as important vehicles for improving and sustaining teacher quality. Variation among those professional development opportunities can range from an array of activities such as professional reading, enrollment in college-level coursework, stand-alone workshops organized by schools or professional organizations, or an individualized mentoring or coaching model in which teachers

receive support and guidance from another educator (Gambrell et al., 2007). Fullan (2001) extended these particulars and pointed out, “Professional development is not about workshops and courses; rather, it is at its heart the development of habits and learning that are far more likely to be powerful if they present themselves day after day” (p. 253). This was echoed by Richardson (2008) who said, “Districts must provide time for educators to work, plan, and learn away from students so they’ll be prepared to provide the high quality instruction we want for all children” (p. 234). Richardson (2008) added, “I believe that children know when they are in the presence of a teacher who is a continuous and enthusiastic learner” (p. 234). In alignment with these guiding principles, the parameters of the *NCLB* Act specify that teachers must continuously participate in professional development training as connected to pedagogical and content-specific information (Baling & Evans, 2008). In addition, Berry, Daugherty, and Wieder (2010) noted that teacher collaboration was a key construct within the parameters of improved teacher quality. The authors explained:

Value-added gains are attributable to teachers who are more experienced and better-qualified, and who stay together as teams within their schools. Drawing on sophisticated analyses, the researchers found that peer learning among small groups of teachers seems to be the most powerful predictor of improved student achievement over time. (pp. 5-6)

Several educational authors (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Reed-Wright, 2009; Sparks, 1994; Wood & Killian, 1998) have suggested that school leaders consider the necessary subject-specific content, the contextual needs of the school, and the process factors associated with sustainability when developing appropriate professional development activities. Professional development should be aligned with specific instructional objectives that teachers are responsible for teaching. Additionally, professional development training should be in accord with the rhythm of the school (strategies that have worked successfully in one school may not necessarily apply to what is needed in another school). Finally, the sustainability processes associated with a

job-embedded coaching model have been cited as favorable professional development protocols as teachers and instructional coaches work collaboratively to improve teacher quality and enhance student achievement. In this spirit, Gambrell et al. (2007) stated:

There is a need for collegial work that requires programs of some duration and opportunities for feedback in which teachers think about and reflect on what they are learning and implementing in their classrooms. The importance of using student data to determine priorities and monitor progress is another essential element (p. 379).

Collaboration

Vince Lombardi once said, “Individual commitment to a group effort--that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work” (ThinkExist, 2011, n. p.). In parallel with Lombardi’s philosophy, educational researchers associated with the merits of collegial work have suggested that empowering teachers within a framework of collaboration is a hallmark of successful learning communities (DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Enderlin-Lampe, 1997; Zimmerman, 2006). Leech and Fulton (2008) explained:

In becoming purposeful communities, schools provide the structure necessary to develop a culture of empowerment, collegiality, and transformation. The leadership of the school community does not rely on power over others but on power through others to accomplish visions and goals. (p. 632)

Additionally, Lambert (2006) proposed that teachers who engage in collaborative practices might become more confident, organized, and self-responsible while using their collegial efforts to positively impact the learning community. Echoing these principles, Brown (2008) emphasized that creating a collaborative atmosphere within the educational workplace is central to the shared responsibility of identifying problems, proposing viable solutions, and working cooperatively in the creation of a strategic implementation plan.

Learning-Focused Model

The Learning-Focused instructional model as developed by Thompson (2010) is designed to increase student learning and school achievement measures within any kindergarten- through 12th-grade configuration. According to Innovative Schools (2009) Learning Focused is "a comprehensive, continuous school improvement model that promotes consistent learning and provides teachers with an understanding of exemplary, research-based instructional strategies" (p. 1). Originating with the work of Reeves (2000) thousands of students from across 228 schools were included in a study entitled the 90/90/90 Schools' Research. The 90/90/90 principle was specific to the following: More than 90% of the students were eligible for free- and reduced-priced meals, more than 90% of the students represented ethnic minorities, and more than 90% of the students had achieved high academic standards (Pate & Gibson, 2005). Reeves (2000) categorized the following commonalities among the 90/90/90 schools that were included within his research population:

- a consistent focus on academic achievement,
- clear curriculum choices,
- frequent assessment of student progress,
- multiple opportunities for improvement, and
- an emphasis on writing. (p. 2)

Building upon Reeves' (2000) work through the development of a Learning-Focused model, Thompson (2010) declared:

The association between family socioeconomic status and parent educational level is, therefore, an historical artifact, not an inevitability. In other words, socioeconomic status strongly influences patterns of achievement but does not have to be the determining factor. Stated another way, family is the most important influence on *where kids start*, but school is the most important influence on *where they finish*. (p. 19)

According to Thompson's 2010 instructional guide, *Leadership for Learning-Focused Schools*, a Learning-Focused model (a) connects exemplary practices to a research-base and (b) provides a planning framework that ensures teachers know where and when to use exemplary practices (p. 12). Additionally five research-based strategies were determined to be the powerhouse for increasing student learning and school achievement measures:

1. extension of thinking strategies,
2. summarization,
3. vocabulary in context,
4. advance organizers, and
5. nonverbal representations. (p. 12)

Summary

The provision of high quality literacy instruction in an increasingly complex age of educational accountability and globalization is an important element within the prekindergarten-through 12th-grade public school structure; particularly, as it impacts student learning within and outside of the school context. It is without question that today's students will continue to interact with their counterparts from a multitude of industrialized nations. Nevertheless, not only do educators desire that 21st century students receive a first class education but they also sincerely hope that their lives are filled with health and happiness. Hence, educators must be diligent in the delivery of high quality instructional methodologies with respect to reading and all academics as they fully prepare students for postsecondary success in an ever-changing and rapid-learning society. Accordingly, this chapter presented a review of literature focusing on the

elements of educational accountability, an historical overview of reading education, and a summarization of educational research linked with high quality literacy and academic pedagogy.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

“If we value the pursuit of knowledge, we must be free to follow wherever the search may lead us” ~ Adlai E. Stevenson, Jr. (Famous Quotes, 2011, n. p.).

Introduction

Gathering multiple sources of data through a qualitative research model could provide an understanding of reading-specific instructional best practices and curricular programs as implemented within Northeast Tennessee. Chapter 3 details the methods and procedures employed during an examination and exploration of four high achieving prekindergarten-through eighth-grade schools within the First Tennessee District (see Appendix A). The purpose of this study was to examine specific prekindergarten- through eighth-grade reading programs, instructional best practices, academic interventions, and educational activities that are perceived as successful practices in four high achieving schools within the parameters of Northeast Tennessee.

The Qualitative Process

Qualitative research has been defined and characterized differently by multiple researchers (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). As detailed in the second edition of their *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) presented the following definition of a qualitative design model:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. These practices... turn the world into a series of representations including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self... This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) stated, “The two [qualitative researcher and the research] are so intertwined that it becomes difficult to separate one from the other” throughout the research process (p. 4). Consequently, it is through the processes of qualitative research that a blending of both the researcher and the research itself simultaneously occurs.

A Grounded Theory Model

Captivated by the elements of qualitative research during my doctoral coursework at East Tennessee State University, I intrinsically gravitated toward a qualitative design during the prospectus phase of the research process. A grounded theory model seemed to provide the most appropriate methodology for this research. In particular grounded theory focuses on an examination of specific data collected from multiple sources followed by a detailed analysis of “naturally occurring” phenomenon within a specified context (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 23). It is through an analysis of these naturalist elements that the researcher relies upon the participants’ perspectives (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985) and, as a result, becomes completely immersed within the study (Gall et al., 1996). Creswell (2007) explained, “Grounded theory is a qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation [theory] of a process, action, or interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants” (p. 63). Strategically designed through the identification of four high-achieving schools within the First Tennessee District of Northeast Tennessee, this investigation focused explicitly on the

perceptions of reading teachers, reading specialists, school principals, and one district language arts coordinator in regard to high quality reading pedagogy and related curricular programs.

Purposeful Sample Selection

The initial phase of this study was orchestrated by an identification of the two highest achieving school systems within the First Tennessee District in regard to reading achievement.

The following criteria were considered:

1. Each selected school system quantifiably demonstrated a percentile increase of 4 points or greater as documented by the 2010 TVAAS State Summary Report with regard to reading achievement scores.
2. Each selected school system included at least two schools within its respective district as verified through 2010 Tennessee Report Card data.

Both the 2010 TVAAS State Summary Report and Tennessee Report Card data are available through the public portion of the Tennessee Department of Education's website; therefore, these particular data reports are not restricted. The TVAAS State Summary Report documents a school system's growth with regard to major academic content areas (reading, math, science, and social studies) as measured by annual Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) testing. The report clearly delineates a school system's academic growth per content area through the identification of 2005 baseline data in regard to a third-grade cohort of students and continues by formulating the academic growth of those particular students successively through eighth grade. According to the Tennessee Department of Education (2010b), "In very effective systems with stable demographics, the eighth-grade percentile is greater than [is] the third-grade percentile" (p. 1). Using both the 2010 TVAAS State Summary Report and Tennessee Report

Card data, Appendix B lists the 17 school districts comprising the First Tennessee District and details the following specifics: (a) each district's corresponding 2005 and 2010 reading achievement TCAP scores, (b) each district's total student enrollment, and (c) the number of schools within each district.

Following an identification of the two highest achieving school systems specific to reading achievement within the First Tennessee District, the data exploration of this study subsequently turned to a more in-depth review of 2010 Tennessee Report Card data. Initially I selected the two high achieving school districts within the 2010 Tennessee Report Card portal and continued by examining the individual reading achievement and TVAAS attainment scores for each school listed within the online database. Explicitly searching for prekindergarten-through eighth-grade schools awarded "A," "B," or "C" averages in both reading achievement and TVAAS attainment, I identified the two highest achieving schools within each school system through a comparison of the state's 2010 average scores with individual school data. With regard to 2010 TVAAS attainment scores, it is important to note that only those schools receiving "A," "B," or "C" averages in all academic subjects (reading, mathematics, science, and social studies) were considered during this phase of the qualitative study. Table 1 details the two schools identified within each school system:

Table 1

Reading Achievement and TVAAS Attainment Scores Per Selected School District

School	2010 Reading Achievement Grades	2010 State Score	2010 Academic Reading Growth (TVAAS Value Added)	2010 State Growth Standard
Johnson City:				
Towne Acres (K-5)	66 = A	49 = C	1.2 = B	0
Lake Ridge (PK-5)	63 = A	49 = C	0.6 = B	0
Washington County:				
Boones Creek (K-4)	55 = A	49 = C	6.9 = A	0
West View (K-8)	49 = C	49 = C	0.1 = C	0

Source: *2010 Tennessee Report Card: TCAP Reading Achievement and Value Added*

(Tennessee Department of Education, 2011d)

Economically Disadvantaged Connections

A number of researchers have suggested that school communities characterized by high poverty might struggle with student achievement as measured by standardized testing (Caldas & Bankston, 1997; Coleman, 1966; 1992; Chubb & Moe, 1997; Crane, 1991; Kahlenberg, 2001; Payne, 2005; Rumberger & Wilms, 1992). The appropriation of Title I federal funding for public schools serving economically disadvantaged families provides an important financial base through which instructional resources and support personnel can be secured (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Pellino (2007) explained, “The rise in the number of children in poverty has

contributed to making our nation’s classrooms more diverse than ever before. This, indeed, makes both teaching and learning more challenging” (p. 1229). Any U.S. school serving an economically disadvantaged student population of 40% or greater qualifies as a Title I school. Accordingly, a Title I school is entitled to operate a schoolwide program or a targeted assistance program that improves the overall instructional protocol for the entire school. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2010b), “Both schoolwide and targeted assistance programs must use instructional strategies based on scientifically-based research and implement parental involvement activities” ("Improving Basic Programs," para. 7). With these connections in mind, it seems fitting to note (as shown in Figure 1) the economically disadvantaged percentages of the four schools included within this qualitative study as reported within 2010 Tennessee Report Card data.

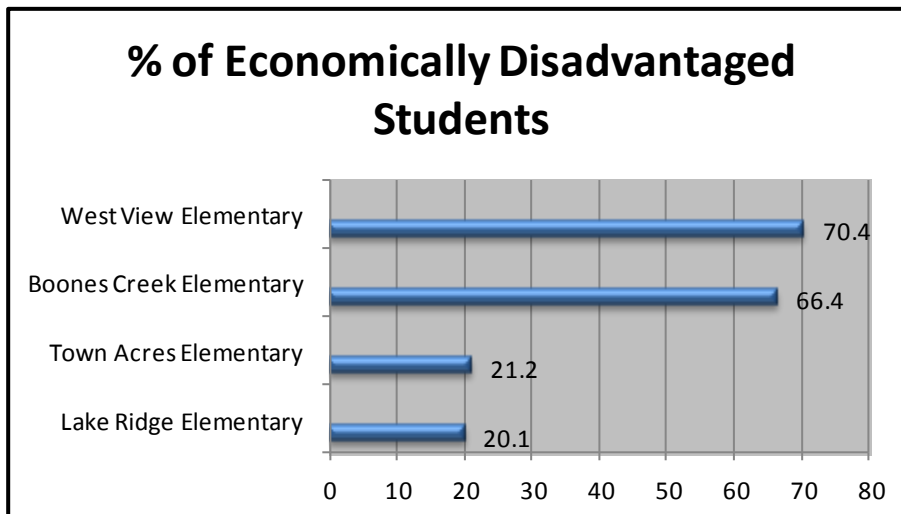


Figure 1. Percentage of Economically Disadvantaged Students Enrolled in Schools Included in the Study

Interview Data Collection Process

Following an identification of the four high achieving schools within the First Tennessee District, I moved forward with the interview portion of this qualitative research study. Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix C), I subsequently contacted individual directors of schools in writing. Each formal letter (see Appendix D) was central to a complete explanation of my qualitative research study and a request to conduct reading-specific interviews within the identified schools. Following permission granted in writing by each of the two directors of schools, I proceeded by contacting individual principals via e-mail (see Appendix E) to explain the details of the study and to schedule a time to interview four key stakeholders within each school structure. Those interviews were specific to:

1. the building principal,
2. a reading specialist or instructional coach (if applicable within each school),
3. a primary (K-2) reading-language arts teacher,
4. an intermediate (3-8) reading-language arts teacher, and
5. one district language arts coordinator.

The interviews were arranged at a convenient time and location for each participant. Each participant read and signed an informed consent document (see Appendix F) detailing the purpose of the study, the employed procedures, and any possible risks associated with this study. In addition, the participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Furthermore, to ensure confidentiality in every regard as required by Institutional Review Board (IRB), each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect his or her identity.

Washington County Schools' Interview Details

It is important to note that following written permission from Washington County's director of schools, I was asked to work collaboratively with the assistant director of schools in determining the specific interview participants for both Boones Creek and West View Elementary Schools. After speaking initially with the assistant director in a brief phone conversation, I subsequently received an electronic mail message specifying the suggested interview candidates for both Washington County schools. In alignment with these suggestions, I moved forward by contacting the Boones Creek and West View Elementary School principals.

Guiding Research Questions

Throughout the duration of this study, an overarching question served as the guiding focal point: What do primary and intermediate reading teachers, reading specialists, school principals, and one district language arts coordinator in high achieving prekindergarten- through eighth-grade schools perceive as effective reading practices? The following more specific subquestions were addressed:

1. How does a teacher's philosophy of education relate to a specific reading program or programs?
2. Why are particular reading programs and instructional strategies perceived as educational best practices?
3. What do reading teachers, reading specialists, and school principals perceive as effective Response to Intervention (RtI) practices?
4. Are there other academic or nonacademic activities perceived as contributing to student learning?

Interview Protocol

In alignment with these guiding questions, an interview protocol was constructed in an open-ended format (see Appendix G). Although the questions were developed to ensure consistency throughout the interview phase of this study (Hoepfl, 1997), there were no predetermined responses; therefore, I was at liberty to explore within additional areas of inquiry regarding reading instruction and related educational programs. The interview protocol was carefully constructed following an indepth review of literature specific to educational accountability and an historical review of reading education and high quality instructional pedagogy. Moreover, my educational background with respect to curriculum and instruction and multiple years of service in the public school structure served as a guiding compass during the emergence and development of the interview protocol. In totality, 15 interviews were conducted. The interviews consisted of face-to-face, one-to-one contact and took place at each respective school site--with the exception of two interviews that were conducted in a local restaurant because of the participants' summer scheduling preferences. In all situations a familiar interview environment allowed for the comfort and relaxation of the participants. The interviews were digitally recorded to maintain the accuracy of all responses and to maximize the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee. Throughout the interview phase of this qualitative study, I scripted personal notations during each interview and maintained a personal research journal. Table 2 details a school-specific listing of all interview participants and their corresponding years of educational experience. For confidentiality purposes a pseudonym was assigned to each interview participant.

Table 2

Interview Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Title	School	Years Experience
Dr. Campanella	Principal	School 1	22
Ms. Kitzmiller	Second-Grade Reading Teacher	School 1	20
Ms. Scarborough	Sixth- & Seventh-Grade Reading Teacher	School 1	8
Ms. Meadows	Title I Reading Teacher-Specialist	School 1	14
Ms. Chester	Principal	School 2	42
Ms. Viers	First-Grade Reading Teacher	School 2	37
Mr. Gillenwater	Fourth-Grade Reading Teacher	School 2	4.5
Ms. Pressley	Title I Reading Teacher-Specialist	School 2	8
Mr. McMurray	Principal	School 3	18.5
Ms. Thompson	Second-Grade Reading Teacher	School 3	4
Ms. Carmack	Fifth-Grade Reading Teacher	School 3	32
Mr. Shirah	Principal	School 4	41
Ms. Middleton	Second-Grade Reading Teacher	School 4	13
Ms. Wall	Third-Grade Reading Teacher	School 4	2.5
Ms. Copenhaver	District Language Arts Coordinator	District-specific	25

Data Recording, Analysis, and Interpretation

Reliability and Validity

Ensuring the reliability and validity of a qualitative study is important within the parameters of educational research. Joppe (as cited in Golafshani, 2003) noted that reliable research methodologies are specific to replication or “the extent to which results are consistent over time... and if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable” (Reliability section, para. 1). Strategically aligned with the parameters of reliability, Angen (2000) explained that validity is specific to “a judgment of the trustworthiness or goodness of a piece of research” (p. 387). With these specifics in mind I remained committed to the principles of both reliability and validity throughout the duration of this study.

Comparative Analysis

Central to the perceptions of key stakeholders within four high achieving schools as connected with the First Tennessee District, multiple sources of data were recorded, analyzed, and interpreted to ensure both the reliability and validity of this qualitative study. A constant comparative analysis and examination of the data sources (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) provided a rich understanding of the specific prekindergarten- through eighth-grade reading pedagogies and supporting educational programs that were successfully implemented in four high achieving schools logistically located within Northeast Tennessee. Throughout the duration of this research study the analytic process occurred through an immersion in the qualitative data as they were coded, sorted, and constantly compared. The metacognitive processes associated with qualitative research naturally evolved as similarities and disparities were intrinsically categorized

within my mind following the completion of each interview and corresponding review of school-specific documentation. Afterwards, a formal review of each interview transcript and school-specific document provided the necessary foundation for the development of the forthcoming theoretical framework. Similar qualitative findings yielded an emergence of themes in regard to the perceptions of high quality reading pedagogy, while dissimilar findings highlighted the distinctive qualities associated with each school structure.

Triangulation

Marshall and Rossman (2006) explained that qualitative research is designed to “tell a story” through a triangulated research model (“Managing, Analyzing, and Interpreting Data,” para. 5). As opposed to focusing on one data set only within a qualitative collection, triangulation provides an opportunity for researchers to compare and contrast emerging themes and dissimilarities through multiple data sources. Eisner (1991) stated that qualitative researchers must “seek a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility [which] allows us to feel confident about our observations, interpretations, and conclusions” (p. 110). In this light qualitative findings “serve to validate and illuminate each other as well as to provide more complete descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation” (Morine-Dershimer, 1983, p. 5).

Document Review

To triangulate the findings of this study beyond the interview protocol, I explored an array of educational documents related to each of the aforementioned schools. Specifically, basal reading programs, school web sites, school newsletters, School Improvement Plans, as well as vision and mission statements were reviewed in an effort to glean a detailed understanding of

each learning community. A document review guide (see Appendix H) and school-specific basal reading program documentation (see Appendix I) were strategically employed for the purpose of accurately recording the emerging themes and dissimilar findings associated with this qualitative research process.

Peer Debriefers and External Auditing

To further affirm the reliability and validity of this study and to avoid researcher bias, two highly respected educational colleagues and mentors Ms. Jennifer Rouse and Dr. Ramona Williams served as independent peer debriefers throughout the duration of this research process (see Appendix J). At multiple points throughout the research study Ms. Rouse and Dr. Williams examined my literature review and triangulated data collection and corresponding data analysis to verify that my interpretations were plausible. Moreover, in an effort to ensure the overall credibility of this study, Dr. Dixie Bowen, another highly respected educational colleague and mentor, served as an external auditor (see Appendix K) adding to the trustworthiness of this study.

Interview Data

Two IRB certified transcriptionists assisted in transcribing all interviews. Following the completion of each transcription, the transcriptionist electronically forwarded the transcribed notes to me. Those notes were stored electronically and confidentially within my personal external hard drive. Through the parameters of member checking (Ratcliff, 1995), individualized interview transcriptions were electronically forwarded to each interviewee for the purpose of ensuring accuracy of the transcription. If corrections were necessary I completed

those accordingly. Immediately following verification from each interviewee, I hand coded and analyzed each interview transcription. With this process in motion, emerging themes and dissimilarities naturally evolved within the data collection. Hence, I developed categorizations of similarities and differences regarding the perceptions of reading-specific programs, instructional best practices, and other related activities as connected with successful student learning and reading achievement measures.

Researcher Biases

Working professionally as both a classroom teacher as well as a curriculum specialist within the arena of prekindergarten- through 12th-grade public education has been a most rewarding experience. Nevertheless, my experiences could foster an unintentional bias toward particular instructional strategies and academic programs. In an effort to ensure that my personal biases remained absent from this qualitative research study, collaborative consultations with my peer debriefers occurred at multiple points throughout the duration of this project. Additionally, final confirmation by an external auditor affirmed that my personal biases were absent from these research findings.

Summary

Chapter 3 provided a description of the methodology and procedures employed throughout this qualitative research study. The investigation included interviews with four elementary school principals (specific to the configurations of K-4, K-5, PK-5, and K-8), four primary (K-2) reading teachers, four intermediate (3-8) reading teachers, two Title I reading specialists, and one district language arts coordinator. In addition, this investigation included an

examination of school-specific documentation as related to the educational programs within each selected school. Connected explicitly with the guiding research questions of this study, Chapter 4 presents the qualitative findings that were discovered.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS

“No matter how much instruction students receive in how to decode vocabulary, improve comprehension, or increase fluency, if they seldom apply what they have learned in the context of real reading experiences, they will fail to improve as much as they could”

(Miller, 2009, p. 25).

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine specific prekindergarten- through eighth-grade reading programs, instructional best practices, academic interventions, and educational activities that are perceived as successful practices in four high achieving schools within the parameters of Northeast Tennessee. Specifically, it was my intent to develop an understanding of the similar and varying perspectives among prekindergarten- through eighth-grade school principals, reading teachers, and reading specialists currently serving within the school districts of Johnson City and Washington County, Tennessee. Additionally this investigation provided me with a greater understanding of the perceptions among the Title I and nonTitle I participants included in this study.

Participating Schools

As reported in Chapter 3 following a strategic review of 2010 TVAAS and Tennessee Report Card data, four high achieving schools within the First Tennessee District were selected for this qualitative study. Alphabetized by district, those schools were:

- Johnson City Schools
 - Lake Ridge Elementary School, PK-5
 - Towne Acres Elementary School, K-5

- Washington County Schools
 - Boones Creek Elementary School, K-4
 - West View Elementary School, K-8

Boones Creek and West View Elementary Schools (representing Washington County Schools) are Title I schools; Lake Ridge and Towne Acres Elementary Schools (representing Johnson City Schools) are nonTitle I schools.

Towne Acres Elementary School (K-5)

With a 2009-2010 enrollment of 464 students, Towne Acres’s student population was specific to the following demographics as provided through Tennessee’s online report card portal (Tennessee Department of Education, 2011e):

- African-American: 2.8%
- Asian/Pacific-Islander: 4.6%
- Hispanic: 1.5%
- Native American/Alaskan: 0
- White: 91.1%
- economically disadvantaged: 21.2%

As communicated through the school’s website, the following statements serve as the guiding philosophy at Towne Acres Elementary:

School Philosophy:

We at Towne Acres believe that education is the mutual responsibility of school, home, and community and that it is an ongoing, life-long process. Towne Acres School believes that the school effectively meets community expectations through interaction and communication with each parent. We believe that an atmosphere of mutual respect, concern, and achievement will result in preparation for further education and for students becoming responsible, productive members of an ever-changing, complex society.

Vision Statement:

The process of learning will result in encouraging, nurturing, motivating, and empowering students and adults to be productive life-long learners and to contribute positively to society.

Mission Statement:

Towne Acres will prepare students to be proficient in math, science, language arts-reading, social studies and written and oral communications as well as physical fitness, visual and performing arts and technology. Students will be provided with the academic, social, and cultural skills necessary to become productive citizens.

Comprised of kindergarten through grade five, Towne Acres Elementary School serves as one of eight elementary structures within the Johnson City, Tennessee district. The entire teaching staff has been identified as highly qualified per *NCLB* specifications. With respect to student discipline, two students were suspended during the 2009-2010 school year (Tennessee Department of Education, 2011e). Because Towne Acres Elementary is not identified as a Title I structure, the school is not served by a system-wide literacy coach.

According to Towne Acres's 2010 School Improvement Plan (Component 1a), the median family income of Towne Acres's parent population is approximately \$50,000 per year. Further specified within that particular document, the following academic goals are stated (Component 3):

1. Reading-Language Arts: Students will make at least a 0.0 gain (at least one year's growth) in grades 4 and 5 for value-added in reading-language arts using the TVAAS section of the TCAP achievement test for the 2010-2011 school year. (p. 48)
2. Mathematics: Students will make at least a 0.0 gain (at least one year's growth) in grades 4 and 5 for value-added in math using the TVAAS section of the TCAP achievement test for the 2010-2011 school year. (p. 50)

3. Science: Students in each quintile and subgroup will make at least a 0.0 gain (at least one year's growth) in grades 4 and 5 for value-added in science using the TVAAS section of the TCAP achievement test for the 2010-2011 school year. (p. 52)

Corresponding implementation steps within the school improvement plan include:

1. Teachers in K-2 will use M-Class Palm Pilots to assess literacy growth. (p. 49)
2. Teachers will communicate progress in reading achievement to parents on a weekly basis. (p. 49)
3. Students in grades K-5 will solve logic problems on a daily basis as an integral part of the math program. (p. 50)
4. Teachers will communicate math progress to parents on a weekly basis using assignment books, work samples, folders, and e-mail. (p. 50)
5. Students will use concrete models of scientific concepts to better understand grade level scientific 'big ideas.' (p. 52)
6. Teachers will use parent and community volunteers to share their expertise in areas that are relevant to the grade level science curriculum. (p. 53)

Lake Ridge Elementary School (PK-5)

With a 2009-2010 enrollment of 513 students, Lake Ridge's student population was specific to the following demographics as provided through Tennessee's 2010 online report card portal (Tennessee Department of Education, 2011e):

- African-American: 3.3%
- Asian/Pacific-Islander: 3.7%
- Hispanic: 4.1%
- Native American/Alaskan: 0.6%
- White: 88.3%

- economically disadvantaged: 20.1%

As communicated through the school's website, the following statements serve as the guiding philosophy at Lake Ridge Elementary:

Vision Statement:

The vision of Lake Ridge School is that our students will possess the educational foundations necessary to succeed at the next level in their education and discover his/her own unique passions that promote life-long learning.

Mission Statement:

The mission statement of Lake Ridge School is to be a learning community characterized by creativity, inquiry, and personal responsibility; our students will demonstrate academic proficiency as measured by local, state, and national standards.

Comprised of prekindergarten through grade five, Lake Ridge Elementary School serves as one of eight elementary structures within the Johnson City district. All teachers have been identified as highly qualified per *NCLB* specifications. With respect to student discipline, 2010 Tennessee Report Card data did not provide those specifications within its online portal; however, as listed within Lake Ridge's 2010 School Improvement Plan (Component 1a), 91 students were referred to the principal for disciplinary reasons during the 2009-2010 school year. Additionally reported within that documentation, 76.6% of Lake Ridge's parent population has an annual income that exceeds \$50,000; of those parents, 45% have an annual income that exceeds \$100,000.

Because Lake Ridge is not identified as a Title I school, it is not supported by a system-wide literacy coach due to the complexities of ARRA (The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act) funding; however, Lake Ridge teachers do receive additional math support from a system-wide math coach. The principal further explained that each school within the Johnson City district receives additional academic support through the design of a system-wide curriculum council. The curriculum council is comprised of teachers representing each school within the

district. Council members receive training with regard to curriculum and instruction, meet regularly at the district office, and serve for a 2-year term. Accordingly, curriculum council teachers provide additional academic support as they collaborate with their school-specific colleagues.

With respect to the school's academic focus, the following academic goals are specified within Lake Ridge's 2010 School Improvement Plan (Component 3):

1. All fifth grade students to achieve at least 0.0 gain (at least one year's growth) in reading-language arts and math. (p. 63)
2. To close the proficiency gap between our students and the socioeconomically disadvantaged subpopulation as well as students with disabilities. (p. 66)

Corresponding implementation steps with the school improvement plan include the following:

1. Teachers will participate in differentiated instruction workshops. (p. 65)
2. Teachers will practice math inclusion to better serve the needs of math resource students. (p. 64)
3. Students with reading disabilities will receive increased instruction in the Lindamood-Bell Reading program. (p. 66)
4. Teachers will communicate assessment results and student progress to all stakeholders. (p. 67)

Boones Creek Elementary School (K-4)

With a 2009-2010 enrollment of 441 students, Boones Creek's student population was specific to the following demographics as provided through Tennessee's 2010 online report card portal (Tennessee Department of Education, 2011e):

- African-American: 2.6%
- Asian/Pacific-Islander: 0.4%
- Hispanic: 3.2%
- Native American/Alaskan: 0.2%
- White: 93.6%
- economically disadvantaged: 66.4%

As communicated through the school's website, the following statements serve as the guiding philosophy at Boones Creek Elementary:

Vision Statement:

Our vision is to see that every child excels educationally and socially in order for them [sic] to meet their own needs successfully.

Mission Statement:

The mission of Boones Creek Elementary is to educate all students to achieve their best in order to meet their potential in an ever-changing world.

Comprised of kindergarten through grade four, Boones Creek Elementary School serves as 1 of 10 elementary structures within the Washington County, Tennessee district. In addition to the school principal, Boones Creek Elementary is supported by one assistant principal who shares her work time with Boones Creek Middle School. Specific to the instructional staff as reported through 2010 report card data, the entire teaching staff has been identified as highly qualified per *NCLB* specifications. With respect to student discipline 17 students were suspended during the 2009-2010 school year. As detailed within Boones Creek's 2010 School Improvement Plan (Component 1a) the average annual income of its parent population ranged from \$31,000 to \$51,000. Additionally included within the school improvement plan Title I specifics as perceived by Boones Creek parents and teachers were summarized as follows:

Parents' Perceptions:

The findings of the Title I Parent Needs Assessment Survey revealed that the Title I reading services be continued in grades 1-4. It was recommended that reading should be

the subject area provided by the Title I program... If funds are available, Title I math would definitely help at-risk students attain grade level performance as well. (p. 11)

Teachers' Perceptions:

The findings of the Federal Programs – Professional Needs Assessment Survey showed that reading should be the primary subject provided in the Title I program... If funds are available, Title I math should also be provided. (p. 11)

Further, academic goal setting was specified within the school improvement plan (Component 3) as communicated through two strategic goals:

1. Our goal is that 93% of students tested in grades 3-4 will reach the proficient or above proficient level in mathematics on the criterion-referenced test portion of the TCAP test during the 2010-2011 school year. (p. 79)
2. Our goal is that 94% of students tested in grades 3-4 will reach the proficient or above proficient level in reading-language arts on the criterion-referenced portion of the TCAP test during the 2010-2011 school year. (p. 83)

Corresponding implementation steps with the school's improvement plan include the following:

- 1 Students in grades 1-4 will participate in weekly basic facts drills (Fun Fact Fridays) in order to increase math skills. (p. 79)
- 2 Students will apply and develop skills in the areas of effective problem solving, research, critical thinking, and objective reasoning in order to increase math skills. (p. 80)
- 3 Teachers will use a variety of methods and materials to teach reading and language arts skills including reading-language arts textbooks and workbooks. (p. 83)
- 4 Students will use graphic organizers to improve writing and reading abilities. (p. 84)

West View Elementary School (K-8)

With a 2009-2010 enrollment of 462 students, West View's student population was specific to the following demographics as provided through Tennessee's 2010 online report card portal (Tennessee Department of Education, 2011e):

- African-American: 1.3%
- Asian/Pacific-Islander: 0.2%
- Hispanic: 1.9%
- Native American/Alaskan: 0
- White: 96.5%
- Economically Disadvantaged: 70.4%

As communicated through the school's website, the following statements serve as the guiding philosophy at West View Elementary:

Vision Statement:

Our vision is to develop lifelong learners who strive for excellence.

Mission Statement:

In a rapidly changing world, our mission at West View School is to provide all students with the tools needed to achieve their maximum potential academically and socially.

Comprised of kindergarten through grade eight, West View Elementary School serves as 1 of 10 elementary structures within the Washington County, Tennessee district. In addition to the school principal, West View is served by a full-time assistant principal. All West View teachers have been identified as highly qualified per *NCLB* specifications. With respect to student discipline, 12 students were suspended during the 2009-2010 school year. As provided by the school principal, West View's 2007-2008 School Improvement Plan (Component 3) specified the following academic goals:

- 1 Our goal is to increase our language arts-reading 3-year average of proficient and advanced students by one percentage point by the end of the 2008-2009 year. (p. 37)

- 2 Our goal is to increase our mathematics 3-year average of proficient and advanced students by one percentage point by the end of the 2008-2009 school year. (p. 38)
- 3 Our goal is to improve state writing assessment mean scores for all grade levels by one tenth of one percentage point by the end of the 2008-2009 school year. (p. 39)

Corresponding implementation steps with the school improvement plan include the following:

- 1 Unit reading assessments will be conducted in grades K-6. (p. 37)
- 2 K-1 teachers will use Fountas and Pinnell Phonics. (p. 37)
- 3 Students in grades 1-8 will complete weekly math drills. (p. 38)
- 4 K-8 students will use PLATO courseware. (p. 38)
- 5 K-8 students will complete school-wide practice writing prompts on a regular basis.
(p. 39)
- 6 K-8 teachers will use required academic vocabulary lists. (p. 39)

It should be noted that the median income for West View Elementary School's parent population was not provided within the school improvement documentation as electronically communicated by the school principal.

Selection of Participants

The participants selected for this study were prekindergarten- through eighth-grade principals, reading teachers, reading specialists, and one district language arts coordinator employed within the First Tennessee District of Northeast Tennessee. In particular each participant served as an educational professional within one of four high achieving schools specific to the school districts of Johnson City and Washington County, Tennessee. The

participants' professional experiences ranged from fewer than 5 years to greater than 40 years.

The following is a list of the participants' positions in regard to the selected school districts:

- 1 four school principals--one each from a K-4 school, a K-5 school, a PK-5 school, and a K-8 school;
- 2 four primary (K-2) reading teachers;
- 3 four intermediate (3-8) reading teachers;
- 4 two Title I reading specialists; and
- 5 one district language arts coordinator.

A pseudonym was assigned to each of the interview participants to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. A complete listing of all interview participants is provided within Chapter 3 (See Table 2). In alignment with IRB protocol all interview statements shared by the participants are personal commentaries that have been electronically verified and used with their written permission.

The Interview Process

Structured interviews using open-ended questions were conducted with prekindergarten-through eighth-grade school principals, reading teachers, and reading specialists. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by two IRB-approved transcriptionists. Interview appointments were scheduled at the convenience of the interviewees. Fifteen interviews were conducted during the spring of 2011. These interviews consisted of face-to-face, one-to-one contact and took place at each respective school site with the exception of two interviews that were conducted in local restaurants (as requested by the participants). As such a familiar interview environment allowed for the comfort and relaxation of the participants. Each interview

session began with an overview of my qualitative study and an explanation of the IRB consent form. An introduction to the digital recorder was established along with the assurance of confidentiality through a discussion of the data collection process and forthcoming transcription. Additionally each participant was informed that he or she would receive an electronic copy of the interview transcript through my secure electronic messaging system. With this process in motion individual participants would have the opportunity to respond to the validity of the transcription and insert additional comments as needed.

Emerging Themes and Countering Perspectives

Following the completion of each interview I transferred the digital recording to a personal flash-drive. When the interviews for a specific school were completed, I personally delivered the flash-drive to one of my transcriptionists. In turn my transcriptionists completed the interview transcriptions and electronically forwarded those transcripts to my secure electronic messaging account. Afterwards I electronically forwarded each transcript to individual participants for verification purposes. Upon receiving verification from each participant, I repeatedly read and analyzed the individual transcripts. While also reviewing my personal notations and school-specific documentation, I began to code the qualitative data and develop categorizations of similarities and differences among the participants' responses and corresponding reading programs. This sequential process provided rich and descriptive information in regard to prekindergarten- through eighth- grade reading instruction.

Research Questions

The following overarching research question served as the guiding compass of this investigation: What do primary and intermediate reading teachers, reading specialists, school principals, and one district language arts coordinator in high achieving prekindergarten- through eighth-grade schools perceive as effective reading practices? The following more specific subquestions were addressed:

1. How does a teacher's philosophy of education relate to a specific reading program or programs?
2. Why are particular reading programs and instructional strategies perceived as educational best practices?
3. What do reading teachers, reading specialists, and school principals perceive as effective Response to Intervention (RtI) practices?
4. Are there other academic or nonacademic activities perceived as contributing to student learning?

In response to these questions, the qualitative data were collected, analyzed, and categorized as follows: school principals' educational philosophies, reading teachers and reading specialists' educational philosophies, educational best practices as connected with reading instruction, formative assessment data as connected with reading instruction, summative assessment data, *RtI* strategies, and supporting academic and nonacademic activities within the learning community.

School Principals' Educational Philosophies

With one exception, Title I and nonTitle I school principals did not provide a formal title to describe their educational philosophies; rather, they expressed their opinions in regard to the importance of reading instruction at all grade levels.

Principal Companella described his philosophy as “experiential.” He explained that many of his students have not had experiences with “written literature” because of their “socioeconomic status.” He explained:

[The students] don't have as many books as I would have had growing up or my children had in the home. So we want to have a large number of books in the classroom giving them access to reading, encouraging them to do that, and that's probably just a direct correlation to my overall arching philosophy in education because in my teaching I also wanted as much hands on. I wanted the kids to experience it and not just in theory. We can talk about reading all day but until you actually do it, they're not [going to] get it.

Principal Chester shared that her educational and reading philosophies are parallel. She stated, “Reading is the most important thing that any child can learn and any parent can be sure that their child has a good background with, especially before the third-grade year.” She went on to say:

After working in Title I and seeing my own child progress through school, I know that there has to be a love for books and authors and reading. The teacher has to demonstrate that for the little ones to really have that same love for books and to be lifelong learners. Without reading, it's hard to teach anything.

Principal McMurray expressed that a “natural approach” to reading in the early grades is important. He explained:

We want them to learn to read and to love to read. So, we do not push very hard in kindergarten for them to know how to read... We'd love for all of our children to be reading in kindergarten, but it's not something that we look at and take pride in saying, all of our children read by Christmas... I've heard that before, but what we want them to do is understand decoding, how to decode, and how to comprehend.

Continuing with a discussion of these natural connections, Principal McMurray stressed the importance of writing as an integrated component within the reading curriculum--beginning in kindergarten.

Principal McMurray also shared his beliefs concerning the use of nonfiction reading selections. He stated, "We use a lot of nonfiction beginning in kindergarten because we feel like it builds their vocabulary." He continued by using an example:

A lot of times I'll have a teacher come up and say, "Well, this child just didn't grow this much." I'll say, "Does this child read a lot of nonfiction?" "Well, no..." . . . That's why. They need to be encouraged and required to do a lot of nonfiction reading.

Similarly, Principal Companella emphasized his philosophy in connection with nonfiction reading selections by saying, "Teachers have told me for a long time that nonfiction was a problem. They didn't have enough nonfiction." As a solution, he appropriated school funds for grade level purchases of *Scholastic* and *National Geographic* magazines. He explained that teachers shared those subscriptions as a means to "get more [nonfiction] literature in the classroom."

Principal Shirah shared his educational philosophy with a connection between the home environment and school success, "I love it when parents come to me and they tell me that they've been reading to their child since they were in the womb because I really believe that there's something to that." Continuing with a discussion of the benefits associated with reading and learning, Principal Shirah commented, "It seems, even as long as I've been reading, I can learn things. I think that's true for any adult or child."

Reading Teachers' and Reading Specialists' Educational Philosophies

Reading teachers and reading specialists did not provide philosophical titles to describe their educational philosophies. With more specificity both Title I and nonTitle I teachers discussed the importance of reading instruction as an integrated process.

Ms. Scarborough an intermediate reading teacher discussed the “integrated” processes associated with reading and writing, “I really think that reading needs to be taught holistically and that it needs to be integrated into the whole language arts program. The reading and writing go hand in hand.” Additionally, “Literature-rich classrooms are extremely important and children see reading as an authentic activity instead of just something that you do at school.”

Ms. Scarborough noted:

I think that being a reader myself is important, and I would not ask my kids to do something that I wouldn't do. And so, being a lifelong reader is something that I can bring to the classroom and encourage my students to become readers also.

Ms. Thompson a primary reading teacher emphasized her beliefs regarding the integration of reading and writing into the language arts curriculum--particularly with nonfiction selections. She stated, “It's a real blending--my reading instruction--blending language arts and reading constantly throughout the day.” Ms. Thompson went on to explain:

We do research reports... We read from the textbooks. We learn text features. We learn how to use these text features... Then I pull up some research on the computer, or I'll get books from the library. I will put my high kids with my lower kids, give them graphic organizers and I will let them write little mini research projects together.

Ms. Viers shared her beliefs about teaching reading as an integrated process within the first grade classroom. She stated, “My belief is you've got to excite the children. They've got to want to read and enjoy reading. I guess that's the way I try to integrate it with my children.” She continued by stating, “Reading is not just a textbook or a basal series. . . it's more than that.”

Ms. Copenhaver, a district language arts coordinator, described her philosophy in connection with a “gradual release of responsibility” (task completion shifts gradually over time from the teacher to the student):

I guess the term balanced literacy comes to mind. I think there needs to be a balance between teaching reading and writing and helping kids connect those two. . . . Just providing them lots of opportunities to practice both. I believe that teachers need to do a lot of modeling. We’ve been trying to push that for the last 3 years. Like any system, we have teachers who tend to make assignments rather than teach. We’ve been really working on that and the gradual release of responsibility. . . . what I do, we do, you do.

Ms. Carmack explained that helping fifth-grade students to build a strong comprehension “base” balanced with a love of reading lies at the heart of her reading philosophy and that “reading affects every subject area that the students encounter.”

Mr. Gillenwater explained that he strives to capitalize on “student interests” in fourth grade. He explained, “So many students are quickly turned off by reading if they’re not interested in it.” Mr. Gillenwater further commented:

It’s not one of those things where you learn this skill, this skill, this skill and you’re an excellent reader. It’s something that takes practice over time, and if you’re not interested in it, you’re not going to practice what you need to be practicing.

Ms. Wall discussed the creation of a safe, respectful, and engaging classroom. She shared that students “need to feel they can make a mistake or they can feel free to ask a question and not be afraid.”

Ms. Meadows, a Title I reading specialist, emphasized “comprehension strategies” and consistent reading practice opportunities within the classroom:

I want to work with [my students] on comprehension strategies, rather than just specific skills and give them a toolbox that they can use across the curriculum no matter what they’re reading. . . . I’m teaching them strategies. . . . I think they need lots of time in the classroom to practice that and to get better at it, because I tell them it’s just like a sport. If you are on the baseball team, you have to practice to get better. And if you’re not doing a good job at reading, you have to practice that just like any other thing. . . .

Similarly emphasizing reading “practice” opportunities, Ms. Pressley stated, “We can’t depend upon [the students] being able to get that practice at home. If I don’t see them reading it in my classroom in front of me, I can’t assume that they’re getting to practice reading.” She continued, “I feel it’s my responsibility to make sure that they have time to read. The more they read, the better they’re going to get.”

Ms Kitzmiller discussed building a student’s “confidence” in second grade:

I want to just give them confidence and have the books available for them. I’ve seen so many that are just so unsure of being able to read. They can, but you’ve got to pull it out of them, and when they see that, oh, this little book here, I can read this. They really want to. You can see them open up and try.

Ms. Thompson shared her philosophy in connection with Tennessee’s rigorous reading curriculum. She commented that allowing second-grade students to make “mistakes” and “learning from those mistakes” are critical milestones within her classroom:

I’m incredibly pushy. From Day 1, I tell my students I am not the easy teacher. Of course, I’m very loving, and I try to create an environment based on brain-based methods... where my room is set up and it’s comfortable and beautiful, and very child friendly... I set the precedence that no matter who is next to you--you don’t share your test scores. If you see your test scores, you don’t compare yourself.

Ms. Thompson continued:

We work really hard the first 9 weeks getting comfortable with each other, so that when [the students] make a mistake, we celebrate it. We discuss it. We figure out where the mistake was, and then they learn from their mistakes... And no matter what level that child is at, I am going to push them rigorously, and they are going to make mistakes. I’m going to make sure they make mistakes. [My students] can only learn outside of their comfort zone.

Additionally Ms. Thompson emphasized that academic vocabulary instruction is important and has served as a major contributor to her students’ reading success. She noted, “My children know how to use it” and apply it in the “context” of a sentence.

Ms. Middleton acknowledged that using a mixture of instructional strategies is beneficial at all grade levels. She explained, “As teachers, we need to have many tricks in our bag... So I

really think that you need a lot of different tools in your arsenal to be able to work with your [students] effectively and visualize their instruction.”

Educational Best Practices as Connected With Reading Instruction

Throughout the interview phase of this qualitative study, school principals, reading teachers, and reading specialists shared their perceptions in regard to educational best practices as connected with reading instruction. The participants’ responses underscored the value of using a variety of instructional resources and educational best practices--or a blended approach for reading instruction. Interestingly, the responses from nonTitle I and Title I school participants echoed one another.

NonTitle I School Principals

From Principal Shirah’s perspective, it is not an individual reading program or instructional strategy that generates student success within the classroom; conversely, it is a combination of educational best practices and reading programs that impact the learning process. He stated, “If someone were to say to me, why do you have these scores? I can’t put my finger on any one or two things that do that. It’s a combination of a lot of different things.”

He continued by stating:

[Our teachers] use parts of the basal. They use novel studies. They use journaling. *Children’s Progress* is an excellent program we’re piloting this year. That gives them information on not only where the children are, but also what to do for them in the future. Of course, obviously, we use Internet-based materials. I don’t think I can tell you that I have a single teacher in this building who does any one thing, who just uses the basal, or just uses novels... And to me that’s a great strength in my staff--that they’re able to--and creative enough--intuitively enough to be able to reach out there and first see what the issue is and find the solution for that child.

Principal Shirah also discussed the importance of differentiated instruction. He commented, “There has to be differentiation of instruction. You have to be able to reach all of the students and make it interesting and challenging to all of them.”

Principal McMurray expressed his perspective as he discussed lesson planning at the primary level. He added, “The lesson needs to be well thought out and well planned. In the lower grades, especially, I think there needs to be a lot of interaction between the teacher and the student based on what was planned.” Continuing, Principal McMurray shared his perspective regarding small group instruction within the primary grades:

I don’t want to see a student sitting and working on something and struggling through that at that age. They’re just not ready for that type of independent work... I would like to see a group of students--ability grouped in the classroom--pulled over to a table and worked with for an extended period with the teacher, so the reading period lasts about 90 minutes.

Adding to the discussion, Principal McMurray shared his thoughts about using *Accelerated Reader* in the intermediate grades. He stated, “We don’t do pep rallies for it. We don’t have rewards so much. We did a little bit this year in fourth grade at the very end. If children met their goals, we had just a very small classroom celebration.” Continuing with a discussion of specific reading programs, Principal McMurray said:

We use the *Lindamood-Bell* reading program in special education, in kindergarten classes, and also in some before and after school programs for Tier 2 and Tier 3. We rely heavily on the basal in lower grades for that Tier 2 training. Teachers will use a basal that they have used in years past. We’ll send those home. [In] kindergarten and first grade, every child has a plastic bag that goes home each night. They’re required to do a certain number of minutes of reading and the parent signs off on that in kindergarten, first, and second grade.

Additionally Principal McMurray discussed the use of “visible” instructional tools and then noted, “Now as far as the instruction goes, I like to see students have things that are visible--visual for them whether it’s thinking maps so they look at them and have to think how does this interact with this?” He shared his perceptions of the *Learning Focused* instructional model by

saying, “It’s just a series of best practices.” Noting that the employment of “essential questions” within that model is of great visual benefit, Principal McMurray stated:

The child can look at it and go, "By the time I’m done with this week or this day, we’re going to understand... how molecules interact to create elements... we’re going to learn this today." It’s magic.

Title I School Principals

Principal Campanella began with a discussion of educational best practices as connected with professional development training:

Norma Kinsey--an instructor at Western Carolina--she worked with our teachers every summer. The Title I funds were used to pay her and for a number of years, those teachers received college credit hours from Western Carolina because she would come over and teach courses... So when she would come and visit a school, at first she would come and meet with us [school principals] an hour before the teachers would come and she would take us through a classroom, and she would talk about the organization of the classroom, "These are things that I’ve taught. Am I seeing these on the walls?" If we’re talking about word walls, "Can you see it? Is this teacher using it?" Being rich in print, having books separated by authors or by topics.

He added, “The teachers were trained on those and so we should expect that return on our investment.” Principal Campanella continued by discussing the merits of teacher modeling. He commented, “There’s a sequence to what we should see in terms of reading and it’s simply titled a *Gradual Release of Responsibility*.” He provided an example:

I should see interactive reading very early on in the school year. Shared reading can take place... after that and it can happen in the same day. But it’s the teacher modeling and now the teachers working with the students as they’re reading to the same end--and then guided reading--and then independent. That’s where we want to get our kids. Now this is going to reveal itself differently in every grade level.

Discussing a blending of instructional resources within the reading classroom, Principal Campanella went on to say, “We’ve got a wide variety... However, the teachers have a great deal of resources with the basal. But it’s just that, it’s just a resource.” He continued by sharing, “Teachers have a lot of autonomy. How is it that they want to teach this skill? And it will vary.”

Principal Chester expressed a similar perspective in regard to a blended approach for reading instruction by saying, “We have a basal reader, but it’s just a resource.” Moreover she discussed her school-specific *Accelerated Reader* program:

We have a yearly goal every year that we set. Then if they reach their goals, I have to do whatever it is I promised to do. This year I was *Fancy Nancy*. I had to dress up like *Fancy Nancy*.

Smiling she added, “Last year, it was *Kiss a Pig*. I had to kiss a pig.” Additionally, Principal Chester expressed her opinions with regard to the daily interactions between teachers and students:

The teacher’s desk should be a bookcase. In other words, it’s a piece of furniture that’s hardly ever used for anyone to sit at or near. It needs to be pushed back up against the wall and dust needs to be gathered on it. [My teachers] get tickled when I say it, but it’s true. They’ve got to be out there among the children working with them, talking to them, seeing what’s going on, interacting with them at all times, walking around. It’s okay to sit if you’ve got a chair that rolls. You know, roll it with you and you move to another place... You’ve got to be interacting with the students all the time.

Principal Chester continued with a connection to her Title I learning community, “You need to know what’s going on, especially with this population.” She went on to say:

A lot of parents of the children who come from the low socioeconomic background home, the parents do not interact and talk to them and explain things, so you’ve got to be constantly explaining why you’re doing certain things. That’s real important.

Principal Chester also expressed that a theatrical approach to instruction can serve as a powerful motivator for students, “You almost have to have an acting degree to be able to keep the attention, and you’ve got to learn how to do that.” She concluded by saying, “Many of the students are used to being entertained. You’ve got to use different teaching methods, strategies, lots of hands-on activities.”

NonTitle I Reading Teachers

Offering a second grade perspective, Ms. Thompson discussed “academic vocabulary” instruction:

I definitely think stress your academic vocabulary. I have two journals: a math journal and a writing journal. I break down every vocabulary word for them... Of course, they are 7 [year olds], so I understand you have to start low and bring them up to it. So we will define it. And then I will give them cute examples.

She provided a recent example:

For instance, helping verbs. It was so cute--this year girls were into Justin Bieber, and so I was like "Okay, well, we know verbs are action but there are the helping verbs." And they're like, "Well, what's that?" I said, "Forms of be, forms of have." And these are, the kids are like, "What?" I'm like, "Forms of be. You didn't know forms of boring, you never notice it. It's just a form of boring, but it's called a form of be." And so I explained it to them. I was like, "Okay, Justin Bieber is your action star. He's your verb; but who does his hair? He doesn't do his hair. He has a helping verb. That little helping verb does his hair." All of a sudden now, they're like, "Oh, a helping verb. Oh, that's right. They do Justin Bieber's hair. A helping verb, that's it, right?" Am, are, and we go through it, and buddy, I break it down and they get it. They just get it. You find cute ways of doing it.

In addition, Ms. Thompson offered her perspective in regard to basal readers. She said, “I use a basal. I'm glad to have a basal. I use textbooks because my personal philosophy is when you go to high school, you better know how to use a textbook.” Continuing with a connection to nonfiction literature, Ms. Thompson commented, "They [students] always have a nonfiction book.” She continued by discussing the incorporation of *Accelerated Reader*:

Of course, we have *Accelerated Reader (AR)* time. If [the students] finish early with their stuff, they read *AR*. I require them to read 20 minutes every night and fill out a blue book and have their parents to let them come in and use the *AR* system. I don't keep a grade on that because I'm second grade. I'm trying to get them used to the pattern of *AR*, which is its own separate skill.

Ms. Thompson added to this discussion by saying, “I use STAR reading to guide my instruction of their ability levels. However, I do not limit [the students] from trying because I do realize that some children may not test well on that.” She went on to explain:

And if they want to try to read a higher level and they find success in it, I will continue to let them read that. Now, if they are not finding success in it, that is not a valuable lesson for them, I will tell them they cannot do it and I will find them something more suited for them. But I do not ever tell children they cannot read the books that they want to. They can try and they can sit with their parents and read any book they want.

From an intermediate perspective, Ms. Carmack discussed her connections with a *Learning Focused* instructional model in fifth grade, “I like to begin units--begin concepts with activating strategies where [the students] share prior knowledge because I think they really find it relevant that way.” She explained that by using summarization techniques at the end of each lesson a teacher can easily determine how well a student is progressing. Ms. Carmack expounded:

I love to, after I’ve had a lesson, I really like to take the time to have summarizing strategies so that I can see--you know, they can go out the door and go, “Wow, man! I can say that’s a great lesson. I did a good job.” And if they can’t answer that summarizing question, I go, “Excuse me, wait, you did not get it.”

With a smile, she added, “That’s kind of a Jesus meeting for me there. It’s like, Uh-oh! Back-up! Not!” Ms. Carmack further commented, “[The students] get a unit plan at the beginning of the 9 weeks that their parents can see and that has all of the objectives that will be covered for the 9 weeks, the standard objectives.” She then discussed her blended approach for reading instruction within the fifth-grade classroom:

We use several different components. I use a vocabulary study that is skill-based, and we do that weekly. We use *Accelerated Reader* for their independent reading. They have goals that are set individually. It’s monitored constantly--individually. They have to conference with me. That’s one of the main ways I individualize. And then the rest of the reading program is done in conjunction with our *Six Traits Writing* program because I’m also responsible for the writing test in fifth grade.

Sharing her experiences as a third-grade reading teacher, Ms. Wall explained that “visual cues” are important as students begin to process what they are reading as a “script rolling in their heads.” She stressed the importance of helping students to select books aligned with their personal interests:

I feel as they get older you have to show them how to find your inner motivation, find your own interests, find that book you like; don't just read the first chapter and then be like, "Oh, I'm tired of this." That's when I try to motivate my students in third grade, "Read the entire chapter book. Don't just read a few chapters and then put it down."

Ms. Wall continued by stating:

So when [the students] were choosing books out of my library, I would label the books that were about animals and I would say, "If you like to read about animals, this is where you need to choose your book from" because if they choose a book about Einstein or scientists, they might not. . . if that's not your interest, then you're not going to appreciate that book, and you're not going to want to finish it.

Ms. Middleton, a second-grade reading teacher, began her discussion by emphasizing differentiated instruction:

I feel like a really good teacher differentiates his or her instruction in all subjects, just to be able to meet the kids. They use the data they've got on children when they first get there and then they tailor their program for children based on where they are. And sometimes with differentiation, a teacher who does it effectively, just because a kid is in the low reading group, doesn't mean they'll be in the low math group. It could be your high math student, so you kind of have to look at it--you have to look at that one child in all subjects.

She extended her thoughts by commenting, "In order to differentiate your instruction for all subjects, you need a lot of tricks in your bag and it's not that one set of programs is going to fit everybody."

Title I Reading Teachers

Ms. Scarborough stated that providing students with frequent "fluency practice with poems or readers' theatre is helpful." She also commented that creating "word walls" and focusing on "word study" strategies are beneficial for intermediate grade students. Ms. Scarborough additionally shared her perspective in regard to "self-selected" books at the sixth- and seventh-grade levels:

I have not used the basal this year. Basically I use novels in my classroom, a lot of self-selected books. I think that choice is a very powerful thing for middle schoolers--if they

have a choice in what they read. My goal is to make sure that that they are reading books that are just right for them. So we spend a lot of time making sure that they are capable of choosing books that are just right for them.

She went on to explain that she does not use a “whole class” novel approach in her classroom; rather, students are engaged in “literature circles” and “self-selected literature.” Ms. Scarborough continued:

Most of the time,[the students] are reading self-selected books probably 80% of the time. During their independent reading time, they are reading self-selected books. The other 20%, they’re probably reading a literature circle book, which means they’re in a small group setting.

Ms. Kitzmiller shared her perspective with regard to small instructional groups in second grade: “I think small group is important.” She added, “Read aloud--I try every day. Some days we don’t make it, but every day we read.” Additionally, Ms. Kitzmiller discussed a blending of instructional resources:

Treasures - I think it’s been one of the best reading series that we’ve had in a long time. Some of the stories are too hard, I think. I think they’re very good stories, but they seem a little difficult for the kids to read, at least most of them. AR? I may be one of the few, but I love AR--especially at the lower grades.

She qualified her perspective by adding, “Because some [students] are from homes that probably don’t have any books in them.

Echoing a similar perspective, Ms. Viers emphasized the importance of differentiated instruction in first grade. She explained, “Not all children learn in the same way.” She continued by saying:

Small groups. Giving the children a chance to work independently as well as whole group. A lot of partner work. I think they enjoy working with someone and feeling a little more comfortable, I think, especially in first grade where they’re still a little scared and uncertain that they can work with other people. I guess that goes back to my reading workshop approach where I’ll teach a lesson and then give them a chance to work on it independently and then call them back over and work with small groups or individuals that need a certain boost.

Adding to the discussion, Ms. Viers stated, “You just can’t teach to the whole.” Ms.

Viers also discussed her use of a blended instructional approach:

I have thousands of books around the room and so we spend time letting them choose books, teaching them how to choose books on their level. They have a reading basket and they fill that each week with 8 to 10 books on their level. They have independent reading time, and during that time I can pull strategy groups or guided reading groups. They have a time they read with a partner. We can do reading responses--just many, many different strategies.

Mr. Gillenwater noted the merits of “teacher modeling” in fourth grade:

Students don’t know when they’re learning to read, they don’t know what a good reader does. It’s just like in writing; they do not know the best practices that a good writer uses. They write a paper, they’re finished with it, they think, “Okay, I’m through.” They read through a book, they make no meaning out of it, but they’ve read it, they’re through. They think they did a good job. The teacher needs to model those thoughts that are going through your head.

He continued with a discussion of teacher-student interaction during independent reading time, “It’s easy to act; but if you’re individually interacting with the child, [he or she] can’t hide from you.” Adding to our discussion, Mr. Gillenwater shared his methodology for helping students make authentic connections with their reading selections:

You need QAR, question, answer, and response. [The students] need to understand those relationships--how some things you get from a text, are not--do not come directly from the text. You don’t necessarily pick up a book and read it and know everything the author’s talking about. You have to put some of those personal experiences with that, so they need to understand that the author and those--the author and me questions--those on my own questions. I can take this text and relate it to my life. I think those are some key things that you need to include in your program.

Reading Specialists

Ms. Pressley emphasized that direct instruction and teacher modeling are very important within the reading classroom, “Direct instruction. . . mini lessons. . . modeling. I don’t think you can model enough.” She added, “You have to take the time to lay that groundwork. If you do, it will pay off.”

Noting the value of ongoing reading practice and visual cues, Ms. Pressley referenced an instructional chart on display in her classroom:

When we're doing the independent reading where we're trying to teach them how to read independently, the big I is for independent. We have the student at the top. We have the teacher. What should it look like? What should it sound like? We talk about it as a group, and this is a collaborative effort to make this final end product that we use all the time. But it's also a reminder because after they've learned the skill, I can put [the chart] up. But when we're getting this together, we model the good and we model the bad... "Oh, I shouldn't be talking right now. I should be reading." I let them try to take some ownership and responsibility for it.

Ms. Meadows discussed "differentiated instruction" and "chunking" her instructional time in the Title I classroom and clarified, "I think you have to do differentiated instruction. I think that's a must. I think if you're not doing that you're doing a disservice to the students that you have because they're not all on the same level by far." She continued by sharing her perspective as to chunking a reading lesson:

I think you have to chunk that up into little bits of time, and it's not completely teacher-driven classroom. That I'm not up in front of the class for 110 minutes spouting out information to them, that we're interacting with each other, that there's lots of movement. There's lots of chunking, lots of transitions, lots of opportunity for them to move around the room, lots of me knowing my students and what they need and if they cannot sit in that chair then they don't have to sit in that chair as long as they're doing what my expectation of them is.

Ms. Meadows discussed her perspective in regard to establishing high expectations by remarking, "Your students have to know what your expectations are and you cannot waiver from that." Pausing, she continued:

You have to be very firm with them [students] but at the same time build that classroom community so that they feel comfortable in there and create that risk-taking environment so that they're okay with saying what their thoughts are and what their opinions are.

Offering a district perspective, Ms. Copenhaver stressed the merits of "teacher read-alouds" within the classroom:

I think teacher read-alouds are really important because, well first of all, they're modeling what a good, fluent reader does. When they combine that with think-alouds

too, they kind of unlock the secrets to comprehension. I can't think of a better way to teach than for the teacher to read aloud.

She continued by discussing differentiated instruction:

. . . Also to provide time for shared reading where the students actually have a copy of the text and share in the reading in some way. And they've got to provide time then for the small group differentiation and having those kids read texts on their level and actually teaching them just the components of reading with comprehension always in the forefront. I think that's the most important thing.

During our interview session, Ms. Copenhaver pointed out that intermediate teachers from across the district were currently participating in a differentiated instruction training session hosted by a visiting reading specialist:

The workshop that's going on today is for sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade teachers. It's Dr. Beverly Tiner, who has written a book on small group differentiated reading instruction. That's her whole focus. She's done a great job. She's worked at all grade levels. This is her last one. This is her fourth workshop--today with the upper grades. She's hitting it right on the head. She talks about the importance of whole group instruction and doing the modeling and all that. But then you've got to also provide time to work with those, with every level, the struggling readers and the gifted ones. They all need some specific instruction.

She added that intermediate students also enjoy teacher read-alouds and shared, "We were talking this morning about sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students who love to be read to also, and they gain a lot from teacher read-alouds."

Formative Assessment as Connected With Reading Instruction

When prompted with a question regarding formative assessment as connected with reading instruction, all participants responded favorably.

School Principals' Perspectives

Principal McMurray discussed the usefulness of several varying formative assessment tools at the primary and intermediate grade levels:

We do benchmark assessments, second [grade] through fifth every 9 weeks. We also start out the year doing a STAR Reading test, which I do think is valuable information. We do that with every first [grade] through fifth and kindergarteners when they can take the test--it's usually January with them.

He continued by saying, "I don't know if your system's similar--but the second-grade test is a little bit easier, probably, for the children to manage than is the third through fifth." Adding to this discussion, Principal McMurray stated:

The kindergarten and first grade--we do *Dibels* and we do *Pearson Children's Progress* three times a year. When we look at that we want to see growth... if you have a child that's in the low--they're below grade level, below where they need to be, we will monitor those children more often. I can't say that we do it every week formally but the test, depending on the teacher, they will do progress monitoring... depending on the teacher, every week to every month. The ones that don't do it every week will tell you, "Well, I do other assessments; I do those summarizing. I summarize; I ask questions. I listen when they're reading to me in the small group and I realize whether they're growing or not." And I think there's a lot of truth to that. But that's also what we use to place children in pullout group, which is very, very small.

He continued, "We prefer to keep them [students] in the classroom as much as possible, even special education students. We want to keep them in the classroom as much as possible with that regular education classroom teacher."

Sharing his perspective with regard to benchmark testing as developed through Pearson Education's online assessment bank, Principal McMurray pointed out:

Pearson is tough. It's harder than the *TCAP* probably. I know that Kingsport and Bristol are using it and I think that they're finding some of the same things. There are teachers, not here, but there are teachers in the systems that are critical of it but one of the things that I do on the benchmark when we're using it as a formative assessment-- because you can look at it also as a summative for 9 weeks--it's both. But when you're looking at that, you're saying, "Okay, this many of my students totally get it; this group doesn't." It does help you, as a teacher, as a grade level, to set up instruction. They're saying, "Okay, we totally missed the ball."

Principal McMurray further commented:

We all know that each class is a little different. And when I set the classes up, I try to set them up heterogeneously as much as possible. But occasionally you'll get two or three more children who struggle in one class. And I look at that and I look at every individual child--not as the teacher's class and go, "How come this class is not moving?" I look and

I go, "Oh, these three are still struggling. These 15 are moving. What are we going to do to help these three?" And then the teacher needs to give that [sic] data back to me in a--if they send me something, usually, different teachers will do that-- they'll say, "Well they look pretty good. I'll say, "Okay, I need you to tell me who did well, who didn't, what are we going to do to help the ones who did not do well?"

In connection with differentiated instruction, Principal McMurray added, "For the ones who did real well, what are you going to do to challenge them? Because that part gets left out sometimes. What are you going to do to challenge those high flyers?" He continued by sharing that he requires teachers to submit an electronic data report every 9 weeks. Linking this process with professional growth, Principal McMurray explained:

I'm not the expert; [the teachers] are in the classroom. I do know that I want you to know that I know your data. I want this part to improve. What are you going to do? And then they go back and they might even sweat about it a little bit at night and go, "Okay;" but you know what? Then they go and use professional behaviors; they go talk to their team and they'll say, "Okay, I've got to bear my soul here. We really fell down in this area of language." What did you do? You did great. And then they share.

He added to this point by saying, "And then [the teachers] grow. And it develops that and they have to be unafraid."

Principal Shirah remarked that formative assessment serves as an integral component within the learning process:

I think you have to do formative and all different kinds--but there's definitely a place for formative assessment in all grade levels. And there again, it's trying to find that balance between how much assessment, what kind of assessment, as opposed to--I'm sure you hear this also--when am I going to have time to teach? All I do is assess anymore. Sometimes it feels that way. The key to that is to be able to slip that assessment in and make it a learning process as well.

He continued the discussion by remarking:

It's pretty much up to [the teachers'] discretion. Typically. . . again, I want them to feel like I trust them. So they know that if they have a concern about any kind of assessment they've done, the door's open. Let's talk about it. The data are there for them to use in how to better teach those students individually. I can pretty much tell. . . again, 98% of our teachers are right on target. We have a couple who are learning more and more each year. I do trust them. I review what they've done and what they're doing. I feel

comfortable with it. It's not necessary for me to micromanage every little thing that they're doing.

Principal Campanella shared his school-specific success with formative assessment as provided through *Discovery Education*:

This year, the system purchased--it was formerly called *Think-Link*--It's now *Discovery Education Assessment [DEA]*. And we're starting to use that. . . well, we used it. We did three tests this year--the initial test for just placement in essence. And then monitoring in January and again in March. And what's come out of that has, really was something the teachers already knew, but didn't know how to use it in that system or on a computer-based method. So after the first test, teachers kind of got their feet wet. How do we get it? How do we arrange getting all these kids tested? Do we do it with the few computers in our classroom? Do we take the kids to the computer lab? How can we work this out? So, teachers got that under their belt. The next time around, they felt really good about it. Yeah, I know how to do it. We can get this done.

He continued by describing the benefits of grade-level collaboration:

So about February, we do grade-level meetings on a pretty regular basis. And so I bring first-grade teachers together, for instance, and then we talk about what, what do we see in the DEA? Well, the first thing we look at--and actually we did it in the fall--we looked at what skills did those kids not do very well. So we talk about them and find that maybe these are skills that they hadn't been taught. Well this is the first test, but it gave us a basis then for teaching. What do these, what does this child need? What does this group of kids need? The next thing that we looked--and your study's touching on this--was growth, and that's the next thing that we looked at. So in February we sit down in grade-level meetings, and we look at where those kids...did you know that it's showing a growth chart here? Well the teachers were quite pleased. They saw the growth from this preliminary test and got excited.

Principal Campanella went on to say:

I'm a firm believer that when we give something to the teachers to do, we train them well, and take something away... we can't ask the teachers to do more than what they're doing. If we can help by making what they do more efficient, then I think it's an administrative task that will benefit."

Additionally, Principal Campanella discussed several school system requirements specific to individual student portfolios:

We have some system requirements. One of those is an ongoing review folder. And it's more of making sure teachers do it. I guess some of them might take it as punitive. That's not the intent. It's just to make sure that they're progressing. So an ongoing review folder. . . actually a cardstock folder. It has unit testing and it's a place to record.

He continued by pointing out that writing samples are an integral part of a student's review folder:

Students do writing. We've spent a lot of time on writing instruction. It evolved into the reading. But writing samples, research, is required by the state curriculum and so students' research--whatever the level is--those things are placed in there. Those are put in the permanent file... but there's a formative assessment piece that starts when we come to school, when we start the school, and I ask each of the teachers to go and pull the permanent record for all the children that they're going to have in their classroom so they can review that material. How did the student do last year? What does the writing look like? Is it. . . are they ready for your grade level? Is this a child you're going to be concerned about to start with?

Similarly, Principal Chester noted the benefits of formative assessment in connection with *Discovery Education Assessment*:

DEA. That's a new thing. And [the teachers are] really learning how to use those. When they first took the test, they were astonished. They thought, oh, they're all doing so poorly. They begin to look at those skills that they needed to focus on and that really helped. The tests, the *DEA* tests, are *NAEP* [National Assessment of Educational Progress]-like, so they look like the actual tests they're going to be taking. So that's good.

She continued with a discussion of *Accelerated Reader* data:

We look and see how much they've read. And I look at those. All the teachers, every 9 weeks, they give me their growth rate. If there's a child having trouble, I'll go to the teacher and talk to them about the child, and I talk to the child sometimes.

Principal Chester then stated, "I look at all [the students'] report cards. I look at every report card." She elaborated:

If there's a child I need to talk to, I pull them [sic] out, and I pull out the ones that are doing real well too so they can't see a trend. . . why I'm talking to somebody. I don't want them to think that I'm just talking to the ones in trouble... So I do both. The ones that do really well, I talk to them and praise them. The ones having trouble, we try to talk about why they're having trouble.

Reading Teachers' Perspectives

Ms. Viers described formative assessment with respect to her first-grade classroom:

We have weekly testing that *Treasures* developed that's formatted after the TCAP test. Each unit is 5 weeks and then at the end of that unit, there's a unit test and a writing sample that they do. That's done six times a year. Then at the end of the year we do--it's a different *Treasures* test--called benchmark. And the weekly and all the testing really includes not just multiple choice, but short answer, and developing a sentence.

Likewise, Ms. Kitzmiller discussed the use of formative assessment in her second-grade classroom:

We give the TCAP Weekly, which is from the *Treasures*, and it's a cold read. I do not give a selection test. And parents are like, "Well, why do they need to read the story?" And I'm like, "Because they need to read the story. They just need that practice." With the TCAP Weekly, it has a cold read and then whatever skill we've been doing, it'll have questions about that from that story, and then it will also have a question where they have to write an answer. And then it also does the language--whatever we've talked about in language. It will have questions from that and then it has the phonics. So everything that we've done all week is on that test.

Mr. Gillenwater also noted the benefits of formative assessment at the fourth-grade level:

This year we've been, I think, blessed to have been given *Discovery Education Assessments* and we've utilized a lot of classroom-made [practice modules]. The benchmark exams are okay but we utilized a lot of classroom-made probes to identify those areas of need for the students so we'll utilize that and cross reference with the state standards to determine what the students need... We use those probes and then we reference that with the state's standards and make our plan of action from there.

Ms. Carmack offered her thoughts in regard to *Pearson Benchmarking* at the fifth-grade level:

I do like to know how we are doing as compared to the rest of the system on benchmark tests because they are given all over the system. They've gotten pretty standardized now. We're giving them on the same day and that sort of thing. I really love the breakdown of the vertical bar graphs so that I can see just a quick glance, number 13 is really low or, wow, man, they got that. And then I love to drill down and see which ones got it because that helps me understand who's getting it and who's not. But that's been one of the best.

She noted the difficulty level of the benchmark tests by acknowledging, "I have a healthy fear of them. Yes. I make sure I'm ready." She then added, "I also use STAR that's done with *Accelerated Reader* [and] I do tons of teacher-made tests."

Specific to grades six and seven, Ms. Scarborough remarked, “Every day we do some type of formative assessment. Then we assess a certain amount of skills every week. Definitely, every day we do some type of formative assessment.” She added, “It could be just teacher observation in a small group setting, just to make sure they’re on the right track, especially if it’s early in the week if they’re just practicing.”

Ms. Meadows shared her perspective of formative assessment as a Title I reading teacher:

I think it needs to be with any student, but specifically with mine that have those lowest scores. I need to be able to look at and see exactly what issues they’re having, compare it with other scores that I’ve seen from them and see. . . are they showing any growth in this area? Do I really need some one-on-one time with them? Do I really need to do some more work and see why they are not getting this specific skill? So I think it’s really, I mean--it needs to be a part of every classroom, but I think especially with those struggling learners, it has to be a part of their reading instruction.

Ms. Middleton offered her thoughts regarding formative assessment by describing “anecdotal” reading notes within the second-grade classroom:

I have a conferencing notebook that I keep with me, it’s like my Bible, and I keep that with me when I am conferencing in small groups. I’ve got a section in there to talk about what we’re working on with the small groups, what kind of notes or things I notice that day with the small group, and where we need to go from there. Our next target, so to speak. Within that same three-ring binder, I also have individual students in there. And so if I’m working with that student one on one, let’s say I’ve got a kid that needs help on fluency, then I’ll pull him aside during that silent reading time, and I’ll work with him a little bit on that. But then if I see I’ve got five kids who are needing help on fluency, then I’ll just go ahead and form a small group based on that.

Adding to this discussion, Ms. Middleton said:

I keep that with me all the time and it’s constantly changing, constantly changing notes about those kids. So, I think a lot of times when you hear the word anecdotal note, you think there’s, it’s just kind of loose, so to speak, and for lack of a better term, but there’s so much power in that anecdotal note. Because when you sit with a kid and read with them one on one, or you sit with them and are reading with them in a small group, you get to know that kid so much deeper because you can really probe and see exactly which skills they have and which ones they don’t and then you can guide your instruction after that.

Summative Assessment Data

When questioned about the usefulness of summative assessment data, interview participants affirmed the importance of standardized testing as linked with *TCAP* data and shared several connections with respect to formative assessment data.

NonTitle I School Principals

Principal Shirah commented that summative assessment data could sometimes seem “disheartening.” He explained:

[Summative assessment data] has been very useful and it’s been very disturbing even to the point of being disheartening with some folks over the last few years. For instance in our Value-Added--that’s our biggest challenge here. We have a lower socioeconomic population, subpopulation here. What that means is that 80% of our kids that come in here have been to museums. They’ve traveled all over the world. They’ve been read to. Their parents are professional people: doctors, lawyers, and Indian chiefs. It’s a job to challenge them. You get a child that’s reading in the 99th percentile already, where are you going to go with them? I’m in that situation.

Principal Shirah went on to say:

I contend if you have somebody in the 50th or 60th percentile, it’s a little bit easier to see growth on standardized testing especially. According to the *TVAAS* formula, supposedly, you can make growth. We keep hammering away at it. When you do those quartiles and show teachers or do them with them--they’ve started doing them themselves now--and they see that their less-ability students are doing okay, their medium-scoring students are doing okay, but their higher-scoring students are below where they should be--that’s very discouraging sometimes to teachers. But it also lets you know, hey, I need to kick it up a notch for these kids so that they’re growing so that they can.

Principal McMurray shared his perspective regarding summative data in terms of *TCAP* data results:

I think it’s usually never a surprise; if you’ve done your work, you’ve done your formative assessment and you know your data; when you take the *TCAP* and get the summative assessment or summative data back, there’s no surprise. Very rarely am I surprised. I think that it’s important because it’s one of those things that allows us to pull everybody together on a common vision, common goals.

He shared a recent connection:

I had a conversation; it was interesting. I mentioned Awards Day this morning with parents that it is, in some ways, a shame, that we only have one incentive, maybe two. You could have [one test] in the fall, maybe one in the spring, but I said--I realize that sometimes parents probably think that we put too much emphasis on one test. The fact is we are. . . our reputation is based on one day, one test, per subject. And that's a big deal.

Pausing, Principal McMurray went on to say, "Our reputation is all we have. It's more important than how much we're paid. That's what allows us--one of things it does is bring joy to what we do." With a smile, he continued:

I think most of us went into this to serve and to help children and a lot of times for very patriotic reasons. I think that--I'm okay with it. I think you have to figure out what is. . . as a principal you have to figure out "Okay, if I have 90% of my children who are in poverty, then I know Value-Added needs to be a huge focus for us." But still with that, how do you improve Value-Added. To me, you improve achievement first. You have to figure out ways to improve achievement. And then they grow.

Principal McMurray added with a chuckle, "You know if I was in a school where our test scores were awful, I would probably say, I hated [TCAP]."

Title I School Principals

Principal Chester shared her perspective:

Oh dear. You eat, sleep, and drink it. Actually, eat, sleep, drink, and that's about it once you get your data back. Especially third and fourth. We also test first and second. We pay for our tests on that. I'm not real sure it's as valuable in first grade. And I'm not real sure it's as valuable in first and second as third and fourth, but you just have to eat, drink, and sleep with it. That's the truth. Every day you're adjusting what you're going to teach the next day accordingly.

Principal Companella offered a similar response; however, he commented that summative assessment does not necessarily drive his teachers' instruction:

I try to help the teachers not to stress over it. Our first goal is to help that child. If we do it well, then the scores are going to show. If we don't do it well, the scores are going to show. But, we look at the data, but they're not informing our instruction. It's summative data. It's simply a mark of where those kids are on that day. Yes, we emphasize it greatly. We talk about it for the whole school year. We all take a deep breath when it's over, but it does not drive our instruction.

NonTitle I Reading Teachers

Ms. Carmack commented that she believes summative assessment data may correlate with a student's independent reading at the fifth-grade level, "I mean you have to have [summative assessment data]. You just do. I mean it's what drives me." She continued by sharing:

When [Principal X] gets bored, he'll call me to talk about test data. I don't know what it is. I've always been that way. Since the *California Achievement Test*, I've always been like, intrigued with the whole thing. Plus, it just gives you good, concrete... It may be a one day, one time test but overall if you try to look at it overall and not stress unduly over one student who didn't do what you wanted him or her to do that one day or two or four, that's just what gets you. I want to know that every child is successful. I feel that they are. I'll tell you, though, so much success, to me, can be tied to the amount of independent reading they do. You can look at it almost every time and tell. You can correlate.

Offering a second grade perspective, Ms. Middleton said that she views summative assessment data as a "team effort":

Well, I have been in primary for so long, so it is helpful to me...I'm feeding kids that go into third grade who are testing, and I feed kids who go into fourth grade who are testing, and I feed kids who go into fifth grade... We have to look at it as a K-5 because the foundation has to start somewhere. So I do think about it, but I don't think I'm thinking about it as much as those fourth and fifth grade teachers are. And I do look at what the kids need. We have to look at where the scores were low at our school and where we need to improve, well that's where K-2 teachers have to beef up their instruction in that area too. I think it's a team effort.

Ms. Thompson said she considers second-grade benchmark data results as summative assessment data. She explained:

I love [summative assessment data], love them, love them. I love them. I'm so tired of whiny teachers. I want those benchmark data. I want to know where I didn't make it as a teacher. The whole reason I asked Booster Club for all those sets of stuff is my second benchmark, my class average was like an 86, which is good considering you have random level readers, but I'm like, I can do better.

Ms. Thompson continued:

And if you don't have your summative, how can you really drive your instruction? The formative is great. The summative proves that you were paying attention with your

formative. And that summative really pushes you forward if you're a reflective practitioner for your next year. You set your goals.

Title I Reading Teachers

Ms. Copenhaver, a language arts coordinator, offered her thoughts from a system-wide perspective, "Summative assessment data better be useful. We sure look at them a lot." She then commented:

I think we need to keep in mind that it's one picture of one day out of the school year. You have to use it to guide. At the beginning of the year, I think it gives teachers a good idea of where the kids are at the beginning of the year, where they were in May. And gives you some kind of information as to where to start. With all the new accountability and with the new teacher evaluations coming, it's becoming more, I hate to use the word stress, but it's more stress for teachers than ever. It can make or break them. They can have their job or not now. I mean, really. It's going to be part of how they're evaluated. It's important.

She added to this discussion:

It gives you an overall picture, I think, of that child. It shouldn't be the only thing you look at. There needs to be some other assessment. Our *DEA* testing, I think, is really helpful to the teachers who are using that as a summative as well as formative, like I said. I think the summative part of it--they've seen progress this year, a lot of teachers, and they love the reports. All the color, and it shows you. . . you see a lot of green when there's improvement. I think it's helping them to focus more on the standards and just seeing how they can help the kids. There's a lot of resources on there that they can use. It has to guide your instruction.

Mr. Gillenwater described the usefulness of *TCAP* data at the fourth-grade level:

Yes [summative assessment data points] are useful. We spend a lot of time; we chomp at the bit at the beginning of the school year waiting for the data to come in. The four of us in fourth grade are very close. We do a lot of team teaching. Mr. Robinson (a pseudonym) is really good with teaching those text features of fables and those type skills so we let him take care of that. I tend to gravitate over towards the logic section in teaching inferences. So, we play off of each other's skills when we sit down and look at the *TCAP* data; we are able to look at each of those sections and say, "Okay, Jim (pseudonym) you taught this over here. Here's what the data are showing." And he'll immediately go and start looking for resources to improve on things that the previous year shows we're weak in.

Mr. Gillenwater went on to say:

But once we've utilized the data--from our previous tests, our previous scores--we kind of push those to the side; we're finished with them. Then we pull in our current students' third-grade *TCAP* data and we look at those students and we are able to see where those students need to, need extra practice in. . . where those students need to be buffed up in. We go back to the data on a regular basis throughout the school year. Not necessarily that we'll dwell on it, but we'll go back just to refresh our memory: "Okay, [Student X] was over here at the beginning of the year so we need to make sure he's making progress there in that area." So we do utilize the data throughout the year, they're just not emphasized. Once we're familiar with that initial set of data, then we just kind of reference back to it a little along the way.

Ms. Meadows shared her perspective as a Title I reading teacher: "I think [summative assessment data points] are useful. I think--not on a day-to-day basis--I think formative is much more valuable but you have to know what they've done for the year."

Response to Intervention (RtI) Practices

Throughout the interview phase of this study, school principals, reading teachers, and reading specialists shared instructional strategies in alignment with *RtI* specifications; however, the acronym *RtI* or the phrase *Response to Intervention* was not always mentioned. When prompted with a follow-up question in regard to assisting struggling readers, the interview participants discussed shared a variety of reading intervention strategies and programs.

NonTitle I School Principals

Principal Shirah discussed the successes associated with a Lindamood-Bell Reading program:

We have five or six teachers--maybe more than that. . . five or six teachers that have been trained on the Lindamood-Bell program that Mountain View has done. So I sent several teachers there to get that, and they use that with those students to help them get going. That's a very successful program.

He continued by explaining how this particular intervention is used at his school:

There's two or three different ways that we do it. Our resource teacher has also been trained, and she provides assistance. I don't like to pull out anymore than I have to. In some cases it's necessary but I like her in the classrooms helping as much as possible. Secondly, the way our classrooms are designed. . . they're not all like the multi-age pod all open, that's one example. But in the other classrooms, there are two rooms that are connected. So if there's two first grades, they do some switching of students, and one of those teachers may be trained and one may not be trained, so they can switch off some kids and meet their needs that way.

Principal McMurray discussed the importance of working with both struggling readers and advanced readers: “[The teachers] pull those groups every day... I do require the teachers to pull them every week and check them and read with them.” He continued by sharing a recent success story regarding a primary-school student who had worked through the Lindamood-Bell Reading program under the guidance of an educational assistant:

She does a great job. She had one little boy who I thought he was going to end up in special ed. but he went to her for Lindamood-Bell. He's fine. He's above grade level. Going into second grade--he's second grade, eighth month right now. Couldn't believe it. Now he's a great success story, but if he hadn't had that intervention, I don't think he would be where he is. But it's how he understands the sounds now. He can decode anything. And now we'll work on comprehension.

Title I School Principals

Previously serving as a Title I reading teacher prior to the principalship, Principal Chester discussed her school's protocol in regard to assisting struggling readers:

We have resource that's pull out. And she has a full-time aide who's a certified teacher but would rather be an aide--gets along well with children. She's young. This is our 4th year with her. They use the *Wilson Reading Series* to teach them how to read. They're very successful with the *Wilson Reading* in the resource room. Title I reading has all kinds of resources that they buy extra. They use various materials. But the *Wilson Reading Series* is what they use in our resource rooms where children are 2 years or more behind.

She went on to say:

I've got all the severely handicapped students in my school too in Grades K-4. They're all in my school. They bring them here. You've got some children who are on portfolios with IQs less than 70, some that almost literally can't even write, to be on a portfolio.

We've got some that they have special seating for testing, things like that. But our Title and special ed. teachers all have materials that have worked well with those types of students. They're trained in that. They have to be.

Principal Chester additionally discussed the use of Pupil Learning Plans (PLPs) at her school, "Each child has a plan. I decided after we had our SACS visit 10 years ago. . . I decided we'd better. . . I could see that the test scores were going to be very, very important. . . and they are." She continued by explaining:

With *No Child Left Behind*, we need to make sure every child is growing and showing growth. So we do the Pupil Learning Plan where you show the strengths and weaknesses of each child. The best way in the world to find out what each child knows, and you can also group your children in differentiated-type instruction. You can group them according to that plan.

Principal Campanella explained his involvement with struggling readers, "I like it when a teacher comes to me and says, "I'm worried about so and so." As much as I'm able, I try to get involved with that kid." He shared a recent experience:

But I remember two children this year--Gracie (pseudonym) and I can't remember the other child's name--but I wanted to help too. So, there's several things that happen. The teachers say they're thinking about retaining a child, well, I want to go hear them read. I want to see what they can do. But with those two children, for instance, I could go to the classroom: "What book are you reading? Read to me. Tuesday afternoon I want you to bring your book fair book and come and read to me." Or, just little things, you know, I might find a book that I think they like and I'll have them read it, take it home, read it with their parents, and come back and read to me. My bookshelf is pretty packed, I guess. I enjoy reading myself but I also go and read to the classes. I'm not sure where I picked that up but it helped me to go and know the kids. It helped me to model to our teachers.

NonTitle I Reading Teachers

Ms. Carmack described her "struggle" with reading intervention at the fifth-grade level, "I struggle with that. I struggle with it because a lot of times struggling readers do not have situations at home where there's reinforcement or encouragement. Not punishment, but encouragement to read." She conveyed:

So I try to help [the students] find books that are appropriate for them, that are high interest, that are not in fifth grade, *Junie B. Jones* or something like that. Something that they can still be proud of what they're reading. We have Ms. Walters (a pseudonym) who is our resource teacher. She does in-class, she comes in and assists me 30 minutes a day with. . . really with everyone; we try to really target the students and do a lot of reinforcement.

She then added with a sigh, "That differentiation is the hardest thing for me because I want the success."

Although she did not title her approach as *RtI*, Ms. Thompson discussed the process for working with struggling readers in second grade:

I break up into little groups. I do center time. We sit together whole group to look at the pictures to try to predict the story based on a picture walk. Then we'll listen to it on tape and then in the afternoon then we'll start with centers. Because, of course, I have to work different skills with different groups. The decoding group? They just need extra decoding practice.

She added to our discussion by sharing her protocol for pairing learning partners within the classroom:

When we're doing independent work, I'll will pair them up with higher level students. But I will train my higher level students. I don't just sit there. I tell them, "You're not allowed to read it to them. They must read it to you, and you're allowed to remind them of the rules." I train that high group specifically. And it's very good for the high group because now they're learning their rules of language arts a lot better so that if I'm not with them at least they're getting that. And then, of course, during whole group situations they're all around me. I will specifically walk to those children and monitor and make sure that they're okay.

Ms. Copenhaver shared her perspective in connection with system-wide professional development initiatives:

Wow! We do have Title I teachers who do a great job and special ed. of course. I think a lot of professional development has focused on that. A lot of teachers go to the Title I conference in Gatlinburg annually, and there's just so many good things there for them to bring back and share with other teachers. I think Washington County. . . I think one of our real assets is the professional development that we provide. We try to bring in people we've brought in for several years so that everybody kind of has the same understanding.

She provided several recent examples:

Like one of our people is Marsha Tate, *Worksheets Don't Grow Dendrites*, and we love her. She comes every fall and she repeats that workshop for people who haven't had it or new teachers coming in so that we're kind of all on the same page. One of our people is Dr. Rick Duvall. He's done a lot with comprehension strategies and fluency and *QAR* [*Question-Answer Relationships*]. He's got a lot of different topics. Word walls--he's done a lot on word walls. Every classroom is expected to have word walls. Language arts, math, science, and social studies. Even our PE teachers and music have gotten on the bandwagon.

Ms. Meadows, a Title I reading teacher, discussed the importance of building relationships with her students:

I have to know them. I have to know their interests. I cannot just say you need to be reading more. You need to be reading more. I have to know what's out there for them. I have to know what they like so that I can match them up with those books. And I have to know different levels of books so that it might be a topic they like. If it's a little harder than what they're testing at for their reading level they might be able to read it because it's something they're interested in. But I think that's so important for struggling readers. I have to make that personal connection with them and let them know that I'm there to help them.

After pausing momentarily she went on to say:

My only purpose in that classroom is to help them get stronger and be stronger readers, stronger writers, and learn to find books on their own. So I think that's probably the biggest part of what I do to help them as struggling readers because they have to have that exposure to books.

Ms. Pressley shared her protocol for working with struggling readers within the Title I reading classroom:

I pull them out but that doesn't mean it always works. I start real basic especially with my first graders because I don't know how they come in. We start with touch and read. I teach them how to track so that they can get the association of print to word. I have some very low level books. They may just have one sentence. They may have rebus pictures in them. One of the best resources I've got for some of my low folks is that *Treasures* reading series - it had an ELL set with it. What made it ELL is in the place where the regular books had words, the ELL books had pictures. So that can help some of the struggling readers if there's a picture there. You just have to keep repeating and you go over the same books or you find books with the same words and you keep going over them and over them and over them.

Continuing, she shared her perspective in regard to the work of Donalyn Miller and pointed out, “That’s where I like what Donalyn Miller says in *The Book Whisperer*. You have to give them a chance to practice. The more they practice, the better they’re going to get.”

Title I Reading Teachers

From an intermediate perspective Ms. Scarborough provided a connection with student conferencing and Personal Learning Plans (PLPs):

Well I do a lot of small group instruction already in my classrooms and conferencing also. So if it’s reading or writing, if there’s a couple of students who really just are struggling in a small group setting, we’ll probably even do a one-on-one conference with them or just kind of keep touching base with them. But we have PLPs also, Personal Learning Plans, and we set goals at the very beginning of the year for them, and we just kind of monitor more closely to make sure that they continue to grow in reading.

She went on to explain the “team” process for identifying Title I reading students at her school:

We do that as a team. We identify students at the beginning of the year based on their beginning of the year benchmark test. We do an assessment the very first week of school. We take the lowest scores and we kind of initially target those children to make sure that they are not going to continue to fall behind. We create those as a team.

Mr. Gillenwater noted that having a Title I reading program is of great benefit to struggling readers, “I think that’s one of our strong suits at [our school].” He continued by explaining:

When it comes time for reading, those four, five, or six students in my class who are struggling readers, they leave my room and they have a small setting with a Title 1 instructor and that’s where they receive their reading instruction for the reading portion of the class.

Ms. Viers shared her “reading workshop approach” for working with struggling readers in the first grade classroom:

Of course, we have the Title I program. I guess just being able to use that reading workshop approach where you can teach children without them knowing I'm in this group or I'm in this group. You can call over individuals or one or two. You can vary the groups enough that you're meeting their needs. Parent volunteers who can come in and read with children. In the past. . . one year I buddied up with Mr. Gillenwater (pseudonym) whom you're going to talk to next, and his fourth graders came in and read. They had a buddy they read with. Just partner reading.

She continued by sharing a connection to individualized instruction:

I try to have at least 25 to 30 minutes each day where they're actually reading from their book baskets. I set up book nooks around the room and they're numbered. Each week they rotate around the room so they actually go to the floor with pillows or whatever and have a chance just to relax and read. During that time I can work with individuals.

Supporting Academic and Nonacademic School Programs

It was insightful to glean an understanding of the participants' perceptions regarding the supporting programs and collaborative practices within individual learning communities. The following summarization describes some of the similarities and distinctions between the nonTitle I and Title I school communities.

NonTitle I School Principals

Principal Shirah discussed EduCare, an after-school program provided for students within the Johnson City district:

During the school year we are maxed out. . . 125 students in that program after school. And they have a snack and they have a homework club. They have a cooking club and they have a craft club. They do lots of different kinds of things but they're all very well planned out. The person in charge has a master's degree in education--our director. Most of our employees in that program want to be teachers--college students wanting to work part-time [who are] majoring in education, so it's very educationally themed and oriented.

He also emphasized the implications of physical fitness and wellness:

We have really tried to emphasize fitness and exercise... The PTA put in the field up behind the school, a track. It's a third of a mile track. There's some steps right here at the back of the building, so teachers will take their kids out and do a 10-minute power walk to get their blood circulating, to get their brain working. I just think it's been proven over and over and over again how much exercise is connected to learning as well as hydration, so we allow water bottles.

He continued by discussing a "system-wide health assessment" that was completed 2 years ago:

[Our school] came out scoring the highest on physical fitness as far as BMIs [Body Mass Index] and obesity and all that kind of stuff. We can't take complete credit for that because, obviously, our parents. . . These are the kids who are involved in soccer and dance and ballet, so they're active kids to start with. But having all the children and the faculty and the parents knowing that fitness is paramount to good academics, I think is helpful.

Principal Shirah also shared his perspective regarding a syndicated program entitled *Girls on the Run*:

We have several teachers who are runners. Those girls really look up to the *Girls on the Run* coaches. They're young, athletic, have good self esteem, and so forth. And to me, that has to help learning. It's a health, fitness, and self-esteem building program. How to believe in themselves. It goes much deeper than just running. They do a couple of races. I think it's either a 12- or 16-week program. They take like 15 girls at a time and in each class or group... it's a nationally syndicated program.

Noting the benefits associated with parental involvement within the learning community, Principal Shirah commented:

We have a lot of parents. . . either stay-at-home moms or [others who] have jobs that they can leave, and they will come in and tutor those children during school hours because that's the time you have with many children like that--just during school hours. That's the only time you have to reach them. So they do everything they can to provide extra time and attention. There's no need in this kid sitting in a math class and not getting anything out of it as opposed to working with a mom over in the corner who's working on his level and he's getting a lot out of it. Like I say, we're fortunate enough.

With a smile, he cited a recent example:

About a couple of years ago a mom was back here running off papers or something for a teacher, and I was back there doing something. I just happened to ask her, "What did you do before you became a stay-at-home mom?" They had like three children or something.

She said, "I was an engineer with NASA." She's got the brains. Let's give her the work to do.

Principal McMurray provided information about several supporting academic programs.

Beginning with a discussion of the *Learning-Focused* model, he explained:

I think the *Learning-Focused* strategies are really having a positive impact on the upper grades. And it's trickled into the lower grades some because they realize, seeing the new evaluation model coming, you're not going to be a four or five unless you're doing a lesson plan that's very much like a *Learning-Focused* lesson plan. It's going to have to have all those components for summarizing, for reviewing, for breaking your lesson into different groups, and for staying on task--that's a funny one--don't bird walk.

Continuing, Principal McMurray discussed his perspective with regard to daily science instruction:

We have a science day and we really push science here at [our school] all the way into kindergarten. We have science projects. We have a science fair that is very, very well participated in especially in the upper grades. But children in kindergarten and first grade also participate in science. I require some science instruction in those lower grades. I talk to some principals who say, "We don't have time to teach science." I say, "How do you not have time to teach science?" It's because of the vocabulary and the background knowledge the children have to have to progress.

In addition Principal McMurray shared a connection with the Beta Club at Science Hill

High School:

We do have after school tutoring, but it's mainly for second grade through fifth. It's very limited. We bring in the BETA Club from Science Hill High School. They will work with children in first grade after school, individual children in the teacher's room. The teachers supervise it. I think that's a nice program. It does help for the children. The high school students at Science Hill are required to get a certain number of hours for community service. It's one of the ways they can do it. They're dismissed from school about 30 minutes before we are--or even a little bit more, and sometimes they'll come in and go ahead and start working with the child. . . class dismisses. The parent picks the child up at about 4, so they've already gotten an extra hour of instruction with that person and the teacher's doing her work. It's set up by the teacher through the BETA Club sponsor.

He also discussed an academic booster club specific to his school:

We're able actually to do an enrichment program after school. I wasn't able to use extended contract money, but I was able to use money through our Booster Club to fund a contract for a certified teacher that does not work here because, as you know, extended

contract money. . . you can't use it for enrichment right now. We use our Booster Club. We have an academic Booster Club. We do not do fundraising. They take donations and I think that's real positive.

Principal McMurray continued with a discussion of "time on task" within his school structure by pointing out, "Our time on task is valuable. It's just one of those things. We just don't waste time. I never, ever hear of a teacher showing a movie or taking children out to the playground for extra recess." Moreover he added:

And I tell the related arts teachers, "If you have time for that, is your job really that important?" So they don't do it because you can work yourself out of a job. Parents talk: "Well, all my child does in music class is watch videos." That gets back to the school board and they start doing cuts. You need to teach. That being said too, the related arts teachers are really good about helping support the instruction in the room, the classroom. Especially our art teacher, our PE teacher, and our librarian. Very good. They go to the teachers. They know the standards, and they go in and try to help and figure out what kind of help on each grade level.

Offering a connection to Tennessee's new teacher evaluation model, Principal McMurray went on to say:

Whenever [the Related Arts' teachers] found out that 35% of their evaluation was going to be based on somebody else's TVAAS scores too. . . that was a huge change, which was interesting to me. I knew they already did it some, but then when I announced that, people sat up in their chairs a little straighter. And the next day I had fourth- and fifth-grade teachers coming and saying, "The art teacher asked me how I can help with tessellations or how I can help teach when she's teaching painting." She said, "I'll have some early American history. I'm going to change what I'm teaching." The accountability model, the state, it's bothering some people, but I think it's going to be uncomfortable for me too. But the thing is, I think it will help people continue to focus and I think. . . sometimes when we have people say, it's taking away my creativity, I think what they really meant was it's taking away my ability to do what I want to do, instead of my creativity.

Title I School Principals

Principal Chester began with a discussion of after school tutoring:

We tutor here. We tutor third and fourth grade after school math and reading. This SACC program [an after-school childcare program also referenced as The Bear Club] has tutoring with the caretakers if the child wants that. They don't insist because they're

there, you know, they've been to school all day. But they have tutoring in our SACC program until six o'clock. These caretakers are going to be teachers. They're in college and they're working here in the afternoons. So those students. . . they're very academically oriented.

With respect to a nonacademic program, Principal Chester discussed an on-campus physician's office:

I've got a doctor's office on campus. He's a behavior specialist--a pediatric behavior specialist. He's a pediatrician plus a behavior specialist. I also have all of the severely emotionally disturbed students, K-4, in Washington County. They've got certifying conditions: bipolar, schizophrenia. And now the county just pays for. . . he has free lights, water. He doesn't have to pay anything to stay there. He takes our students and anybody else that wants to come there. . . as a pediatrician.

She went on to say that "dental sealants" are also provided through Tennessee's grant funding.

And we do the sealants in our building. They come here and do them--the dental sealants on children's teeth--if the parent wants to. All they have to do is sign that they want it done and make arrangements. [The dental team] comes for about three days. They do all the sealants on all the children who want that.

Principal Chester added to this discussion:

We do body mass index and send that home to the parents. We do a complete health screening and let them know if there's anything that needs to be looked into or a problem like vision and hearing. We do that. And we take them to the dentist on a school bus twice a month. . . anybody who needs that [who] has a certain income.

Additionally, Principal Chester commented that she requires each teacher to ride the school bus "one time within the first 3 weeks of school." She remarked, "That's part of parent involvement." She said:

[The teachers] pick the bus. Most of them ride #34, for instance. They ride the bus and they go on the run with the bus driver and they get to see where the children live. That's the big eye opener. Because until you've talked about . . . hill top and the Ghost Riders. . . they don't really know. . . because they've never been in some of the homes. Unbelievable. . . newspapers for curtains on the windows. . . pitiful.

Principal Chester continued with a discussion of her school's clothing closet:

We've got containers, labeled, with lids on them with sizes of clothes for children anytime they need it. The mother can come in and she can pick out what she wants. It doesn't have to be just that day. It can be if they need clothes of any kind, during the winter months, coats, and other things. We keep them all the time. Parents send them to us. When they outgrow them we tell them to send them. We've got. . . at the beginning of year a certain week that everybody brings things. The PTO boxes those and puts them in those containers by sizes. Shoes, coats. . . those are the things that we need the most--boots, shoes, coats, food.

In addition, Principal Chester discussed the "food pantry" located in her building:

We've got a food pantry. We clean it out the last week of school. We get rid of the food because some of it's out of date or going to go. So we send it to needy families the ones that we know or the guidance counselor knows. She calls and has the parents come pick it up in boxes. So we clean it out and start all over. Things like washing powder, stuff like that. . . just everything.

Principal Campanella noted that the nonacademic endeavors within his school might not necessarily be a program but rather an initiative. He explained:

Not so much programs. . . but we try at every avenue to encourage parent participation. We open up our Book Fair to get as many teachers or parents in as we can possibly get. So that they can see what the kids like.

He continued by sharing a strategy for making home-school connections during IEP meetings:

We meet in this room fairly often for IEP meetings or something like that. Invariably I end up asking the parents, "What are they doing this summer? When did you take them to the library? Where are they going next?"

Moreover, Principal Campanella discussed the process for providing students with nonfiction magazine subscriptions:

[We] try to encourage [the parents] to get books in their kids' hands. We had some Title I funds this year. Actually it's a one-time shot. They said you have X number of dollars and how are you going to use it? I know some other principals had bought pencils and paper, and I thought it's gone. What's going to come of that? We bought subscriptions to *Ranger Rick* and *Scholastic* and we had those mailed to the kids. So, for a couple of years they'll get those mailed to their house.

Adding to these discussion points, Principal Campanella articulated his thoughts in regard to working with families of poverty:

Rita Pearson [an associate of Ruby Payne] has been coming to our school system to help us understand what we're dealing with. How different it is from our mindset. And there's little things. Things that you wouldn't think about. A teacher will be frustrated that a child will not be able to have paper and pencil because they didn't have any money. But yet the parent will spend their paycheck on a birthday party. That's out of my realm of thinking. Much more conservative than that. What I grew up with--that we temper those things. In that poverty, it's all about the relationship. Another thing is children are possessions in poverty. We wonder--why do they keep having kids? That's one thing they can say they have.

Moreover, Principal Campanella stressed the importance of building relationships within the classroom:

With that being said, I think that's probably the biggest thing and something that I talk about often--building relationships in that classroom. That has to be first thing. If you don't do that, then those kids will not respect you. They don't know you. This coming year I've got a little book by Tara Brown. Tara has 80 suggestions that she gives to teachers. Try this. Do this. A lot of them are focused on relationships. This year... there'll be a quote every month or every week in the bulletin to remind teachers.

Pausing for a moment, he added: "Let [the students] look behind your curtain sometimes. Don't be so aloof."

NonTitle I Reading Teachers

Ms. Thompson discussed the academic strengths of a *Learning-Focused* instructional model:

Learning-Focused is a wonderful program and I do think that it is holding the teachers accountable for trying to think of questions students can answer that are higher-order thinking questions... You have to be able to take your low kids and move them to the middle, your middle kids and move them up, and then your high kids you need to just make sure that they're creating and thinking. So, *Learning Focused* helps with that because you have to think about the way a child would answer this question and it should be an open-ended question and it does force you to focus on the academic vocabulary and the standards--of course, standards-based is the way to go.

Ms. Carmack offered her perspective regarding parental involvement:

Parental support. We are so blessed. We are spoiled rotten. We have parental support. Some would say it's a little over the top sometimes. The other part of that is we're pretty spoiled. All we have to do is go to other schools to get a reality check.

She added to these comments, "It's got to be the school, and it's got to be the parents.

And when one thing's left out, the other suffers."

Ms. Wall discussed the *America Reads* tutoring program as provided by East Tennessee State University:

We have an *America Reads* tutor who comes and you can ask her to come read with a child of yours. We don't get to tell them what to read with them, but I always preface or visit with. . . this is what this child is struggling with, because it takes a while to learn what their strengths and weaknesses are and to get to know them. So I always meet with them before and say, "Hey, do you think you can work on comprehension this week? Or can you work on vocabulary? Or letter sounds?" Especially with my ESL students--my English language learners, I've really used [the] *America Reads* tutor as an advantage this year because [she] was Hispanic and she could speak Spanish.

Providing a recent example, Ms. Wall explained:

So I had a little girl in my class who's ESL and it was just wonderful for her to be able to have that peer that could identify with her. And she was an ETSU student and she would come and read with her once a week and she would eat her lunch in here and that was just a good time that they could meet and talk and read and utilize the time well. It's hard to find time to pull them out of what they already need to be learning. So anytime I wanted extra reinforcement in a certain area I would say, "Hey, could you come during your lunch time?" because they would love--you know they eat their lunch in 5 minutes anyway--they would love to have somebody eat with them and converse with them during lunch. It's like a reward.

Title I Reading Teachers

Ms. Viers explained that students are not required to bring any school supplies. Those are furnished through PTO and individual teachers. She said:

Physically, we don't require them to bring any materials of any kind, so there's no diversity in saying, "Oh, this child doesn't have needed supplies." We furnish those and we're able to supply them with books that they can take home so they always have that opportunity to read at home. It's not that no one will take them to the library or no one will purchase a book. We do that baggie book take home program so that they can. And basically, they take care of the books. Very few are lost or torn up, destroyed. [The teachers] try to teach, do a big, big lesson, and make a big deal of saying, "Oh, the books are so precious, and we're going to take care of them," and we do that in August when school starts. Have them, hopefully, encourage the parent to show that they're reading

something of their own interest and that the child can see them reading so that it's a lifelong thing.

Ms. Viers continued with a discussion of bringing parents into the classroom as guest readers. She referred to those parents as "secret readers" and explained the process:

Parents gave five clues about themselves. Then, I would give a different clue. Then it would build up so by the time I gave the last clue, their own child should know that it was them. They came in and ... they read a book to the children. Most of them brought a little activity or something that went along with the book. I was really impressed. Some of them were teachers. They just really enjoyed it and the kids looked forward to having their mom come in or their dad.

Ms. Kitzmiller focused on the recent organization of her school's science lab:

It came about toward the end of the year, so I've not had a chance to use it yet, but I know the fourth grade has used it a lot. And that would give them hands-on. Because science and social studies. . . those are kind of the hardest ones to get in. . . Coming from teaching kindergarten, you had to do all your little units anyway. So, I'm kind of used to pulling, and most of the time with science and social studies. If our story's about the ocean or whatever, then we'll do a unit on the ocean. And, the science lab then we could use that to further investigate, I guess you might say.

She continued by pointing out that the school's PTO provides school supplies for each classroom, "Pencils, paper, supplies. . . if they need it and more than not, everybody needs it."

Ms. Kitzmiller went on to share a recent connection with her Title I population:

I remember last year one that, he was one of my little quiet, not very confident readers. I don't know, just bringing over and saying, "Read this to me, or let me read this page." And just giving them your time I guess, too. Just showing them that, hey, it's okay here. Because we don't know what they go home to. It's not just the free and reduced lunch, it's everything. It's hard. . . If they need something, I've got extra paper, pencils, crayons, scissors. So, I'm not like, "Okay, you can't do this because you don't have. . ." It's there. It's for everybody. So that they're not just singled out saying, "Okay, yeah, here's yours."

Mr. Gillenwater discussed the benefits of an after-school tutoring program:

At our building level every year we have a third- and fourth-grade tutoring session and that starts in the fall of the year and it's, it kind of gets beefed up towards TCAP time. Where at the fall of the year there are two teachers who are on career ladder and they do a tutoring program for third and fourth graders one day a week. One day is third grade and one day is fourth grade, and those students go in and they receive reading tutoring, language arts tutoring, and math tutoring during that 2-hour block.

He went on to say:

Then as we get closer to TCAP time, myself and the other fourth-grade teacher--we're not career ladder, but we volunteer to go in and spend that 2 hours, 2 days a week with those students and it gives us a little bit more leniency with groupings of students during that time. We're able to work with smaller groups and really able to focus in on those areas that they are in need of, those areas they need to strengthen. So I think that positively impacts; I think that's unique to our school.

Additionally, Mr. Gillenwater shared that he often provides school supplies and reading selections through his personal funds:

I have done everything from providing all the school supplies that child needs in order to come to school and, I've done everything from that to this child is struggling; his parent can't get him to the book store to get a book or won't take him to the library, and I've gone and found books and purchased books that that child is interested in. They've come up to the computer and said, "Yeah that looks great, I want it." So I get it in there. I'll do anything that I need to do. And like I said, that changes from student to student and year to year. But I mean, whatever it takes for that student to be happy at school, then we'll do it.

Sharing a similar perspective in terms of providing whatever is needed, Ms. Scarborough discussed her "classroom library":

I provide; I have a very large classroom library and [the students are] welcome to borrow those books at any time. And, you know, they sign them out. They're welcome to keep them as long as they'd like. So I do provide a lot of those things for them. I provide notebooks for them. I provide their writer's notebooks for them. I provide paper and pencil if they need it, so, you know, when they come into my classroom, the only thing that I need from them is their interaction and their willingness to learn.

Ms. Pressley commented on the summer reading programs offered within the East Tennessee region:

I think that some of the reading programs that some of the libraries sponsor during the summer do help. Now, I'm not really aware of . . . during the school year of any kind of reading program that supports the children. If the parents aren't reading with them at home, I don't know of any church-based. I mean they go whenever their church night is, Wednesday night. A lot of these kids don't. But that's it.

Summarization of Reading-Specific Programs and Supporting Academic Strategies

Table 3 provides a summarization of the findings related to the individual schools included within this prekindergarten- through eighth-grade investigation.

Table 3

Reading-Specific Programs and Supporting Academic Strategies Per Selected School

Programs/Strategies	Towne Acres K-5	Lake Ridge PK-5	Boones Creek K-4	West View K-8
Basal Reading Series	K-5 Houghton-Mifflin Reading	K-5 Houghton Mifflin Reading	K-4 Treasures by Macmillan - McGraw Hill	K-5 Treasures by Macmillan – McGraw Hill 6-8 Elements of Literature by Holt
Blending the Basal with Additional Reading Resources	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Standards-based Instruction	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Leveled Readers	No	Yes	Yes	No
Novel Studies	No – Grade 2 Yes - Grade 5	Yes – Grades 2/3	No – Grade 1 Yes – Grade 4	No – Grade 2 Grades 5/6/7: No whole class novel studies; yes - small group literature circles
Accelerated Reader	Yes - All grades	No	Yes – All Grades	Yes – All Grades
Lindamood-Bell Intervention Reading	Yes	Yes	No	No
Learning Focused Model	Yes	No	No	No
Self-selected Books	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nonfiction titles	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Differentiated Instruction	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Small group reading	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Formative Assessment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH, AND CONCLUSION

“Reading is the fundamental skill upon which all formal education depends. . . Any child who doesn’t learn to read early and well will not easily master other skills and knowledge, and is unlikely to ever flourish in school or in life” (Moats, 2010, n. p.).

Introduction

Tennessee’s recently enacted teacher evaluation system, the *Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model (TEAM)* is bringing an intense focus on instruction. The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (2011) stated: “*TEAM* will shed light on educator practices and relevant student outcomes while also facilitating a process for analysis and continuous improvement” (p. 1). As initially presented in Chapter 2, *A Blueprint for Reform* released by the U.S. Department of Education in March 2010 appears to be aligned with the *TEAM* model. The following four key areas of concentration were outlined in that federal documentation:

1. improving teacher and principal effectiveness to ensure that every classroom has a great teacher and every school has a great leader;
2. providing information to families to help them evaluate and improve their children’s schools, and to educators to help them improve their students’ learning;
3. implementing college and career-ready standards and developing improved assessments aligned with those standards; and
4. improving students’ learning and achievement in America’s lowest performing schools. (p. 3)

President Obama (as cited in Webley, 2011) recently announced that waivers will be granted to states that are currently struggling under *NCLB* mandates. He stated, “This does not

mean that states will be able to lower their standards or escape accountability from the White House” (p. 38). The federal government’s solution is three-fold: (a) states must adopt the Common Core curriculum, (b) states must appropriate plans to reform their lowest-performing schools, and (c) states must develop a “rigorous” system of teacher and principal evaluation systems. With these points in mind, reform in Tennessee and throughout the United States continues to surface as a major focus within the educational community. In working daily at the middle school level, my perception is that teachers' and principals' stress levels have significantly escalated as a result of increased standardized testing measures. Providing the necessary instructional support, professional development opportunities, and encouragement for teachers and staff members serves as one of my most important administrative responsibilities.

With the aforementioned points guiding my daily walk as an instructional leader, I am very interested in the provision of high quality literacy instruction as it impacts all content areas within the prekindergarten- through eighth-grade curriculum. As presented in Chapter 2, a number of researchers have suggested that a student’s reading comprehension significantly impacts the learning process (Miller, 2009; Moats, 2010; Zemelman et al., 2005). Therefore, I am hopeful that my investigative findings will provide fellow educators with a greater understanding of the many successes associated with high-performing schools within the First Tennessee District.

Summary of Findings

My investigation began with an overarching research question: What do primary and intermediate reading teachers, reading specialists, school principals, and one district language

arts coordinator in high achieving prekindergarten- through eighth-grade schools perceive as effective reading practices? The following more specific subquestions were addressed:

1. How does a teacher's philosophy of education relate to a specific reading program or programs?
2. Why are particular reading programs and instructional strategies perceived as educational best practices?
3. What do reading teachers, reading specialists, and school principals perceive as effective *Response to Intervention (RtI)* practices?
4. Are there other academic or nonacademic activities perceived as contributing to student learning?

A discussion of findings in each of these areas follows. It is interesting to note that the perceptions among reading teachers, reading specialists, and school principals were parallel. Whereas differing perspectives emerged throughout my investigation, the perceptions among Title I and nonTitle I participants often echoed one another.

Personal Educational Philosophies

The data collected through structured open-ended interviews revealed the participants' perspectives in regard to their individual beliefs. While the participants did not necessarily use formal terms to reference educational philosophies, four dominant themes related to reading instruction recurred among all participants. Those themes were (a) providing students with reading practice within the classroom, (b) providing students with self-selected literature beyond a basal reading program, (c) providing students with frequent exposure to nonfiction reading selections, and (d) modeling a passion for reading. A Title I principal emphasized that reading is

the “most important thing” that a student will ever need to learn. Moreover, when questioned about their educational philosophies as linked with reading instruction, both Title I and nonTitle I reading teachers stressed the importance of explicitly teaching reading comprehension strategies. Interestingly, 10 reading teachers and 2 school principals pointed out that creating literature-rich classrooms characterized by an integrated language arts model is helpful for teaching students to read. A district language arts’ coordinator who serves mostly Title I schools discussed an integrated language arts model in terms of “balanced literacy” as teachers strategically blend the processes of reading, writing, and grammar into the classroom.

There were several differences in the comments expressed by Title I and nonTitle I participants. For example, one nonTitle I reading teacher discussed the importance of building a safe and respectful classroom community in which students feel secure to “make mistakes” and, thereby, are positioned to successfully learn from those mistakes. Secondly, a nonTitle I school principal shared his perspective in terms of a “natural approach” to reading instruction, whereas a Title I principal termed his philosophy for teaching reading as “experiential.” In addition, both nonTitle I principals affirmed the importance of early reading experiences in the home environment. One of those principals noted that he could easily identify students who had been immersed in early reading experiences as he said he strongly believes those early experiences directly impact school success. Whereas one Title I principal discussed linkages to early reading experiences in the home, both Title I principals discussed the importance of providing parents with frequent parent involvement opportunities.

Perspectives Related to Best Practices in Teaching Reading

Educational researchers have suggested that student success is directly linked with effective teachers who skillfully employ appropriate instructional pedagogies within the classroom (Bond & Dykstra, 1966; Gambrell et al., 2007). Wong (n. d.) stated:

Unsuccessful schools stress programs. They spend millions of dollars adopting programs... in constant pursuit of the quick fix on the white horse. Successful schools stress practice. They wisely invest in their teachers and the effectiveness of their teachers. They don't teach programs... they work at improving the pedagogical practices of their teachers. (Why some schools are successful, para. 2)

Further, a report by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (2011) stated, "Teachers are the most important school-related factor impacting student achievement gains" (p. 82).

Title I and nonTitle I participants shared a variety of statements in regard to best practices associated with successful reading instruction. A teacher's "blending" of instructional strategies in teaching reading was expressed as a very important practice among those serving in both Title I and nonTitle I schools. School principals, reading teachers, and reading specialists stressed it was not a single program or strategy that yielded student success in reading. Conversely it is through a "blending" of instructional resources that students can learn and grow as successful readers. Serving in a nonTitle I school, Principal Shirah succinctly stated:

I can't put my finger on any one or two things...It's a combination of a lot of different things. And a combination of a lot of creativity from our faculty and staff...that they're able to reach out there and first, see what the issue is and find the solution for that child.

Differentiated Instruction (DI) emerged as a major theme within this category. Each of the Title I and nonTitle I participants stressed the importance of providing students with reading selections that are instructionally appropriate. The use of a basal reading program in terms of a one-size-fits-all program was never mentioned. One nonTitle I teacher framed this process at the primary level, "In order to differentiate your instruction for all subjects, you need a lot of tricks in your bag and it's not that one set of programs is going to fit everybody." From a Title I

teacher's perspective it is through a small group configuration or "reading workshop approach" that primary students are provided with instructional support as they learn to read. Offering similar perspectives, each of the five intermediate teachers indicated that it is through the provision of "self-selected books" that students are motivated and successfully learn to comprehend and grow as independent readers. With one Title I school as the exception, intermediate reading teachers explained that they sometimes incorporate "whole group" novel studies into the reading classroom. Further, four of the five intermediate reading teachers explained that a blending of *Accelerated Reader* and self-selected literature enabled them to provide students with a variety of literature selections that are aligned with their students' individual reading levels.

Not all of the views expressed were universally shared by participants. One Title I reading teacher discussed the incorporation of "literature circles" at the intermediate level. Although the other four intermediate reading teachers discussed "self-selected literature," they did not discuss the use of literature circles within the classroom. One primary reading teacher discussed the benefits associated with "academic vocabulary" (i.e. content vocabulary lists per grade level) as provided by the state department of education. Additionally Title I participants mentioned the importance of professional development training and they often referenced specific trainers and authors in connection with their understanding of high quality reading instruction. Examples included the work of Lucy Calkins, Norma Kinsey, and Donalyn Miller. Conversely, none of the nonTitle I participants discussed specific training consultants; however, one nonTitle I principal mentioned that professional development funding at the district level had been greatly reduced in recent years. He did point out that one teacher from each school within the district is selected to serve as member of the district's "curriculum council" on a yearly basis.

As such the curriculum council teacher is provided with additional professional development training at the district level; this in turn can be shared at the school level.

Three of the four schools included in this investigation integrated *Accelerated Reader (AR)* into the reading classroom; however, not all participants held favorable opinions of an *AR* program. Two Title I principals and one nonTitle I principal expressed a favorable opinion of this particular program. Eight of the 10 reading teachers discussed a “blending” of *AR* with their respective basal reading programs. One primary reading teacher from a nonTitle I school commented, “We don’t believe in it [*AR*].” On the other hand, an intermediate reading teacher within that same school commented that she did observe students' success with *AR* during her internship at a neighboring Title I school.

Three nonTitle I participants in one particular school discussed the merits associated with a *Learning-Focused* instructional model. Specific comments concerning the use of essential questions and summarization strategies resonated among the three participants. A school principal framed his perspective by saying, “It’s just a series of best practices.” Moreover an intermediate reading teacher discussed the benefits associated with *Learning-Focused* “notebooks” as teachers develop instructional units in alignment with state standards.

Formative Assessment as Connected With Reading Instruction

Gambrell et al. (2007) noted that teachers should consider using “a variety of assessment techniques to inform instruction” (p. 19). Mirroring this perspective Hall et al. (2011) declared that teachers should conduct “on-going assessment of student readiness and growth” (p. 5).

Monitoring student learning throughout the academic year seems to be an important process within the reading teacher’s classroom. Most participants did not seem to view

formative assessment as an educational best practice; however, each participant discussed the importance of conducting strategic progress monitoring throughout the academic year. Noting that formative assessment can be time consuming in terms of administering a written assessment and analyzing the corresponding data results, a nonTitle I principal commented, “The key to that is to be able to slip that assessment in and make it a learning process as well.” My perception of that statement is the principal believes that teachers should skillfully analyze formative data results and use them accordingly to differentiate instruction within the reading classroom.

NonTitle I school participants discussed the implementation of a variety of formative assessment tools. School principals as well as the primary reading teachers included in this study discussed *Dibels* testing, *Children’s Progress*, and *Pearson Benchmarking*. School principals as well as the intermediate reading teachers discussed *STAR* testing and *Pearson Benchmarking*. *Children’s Progress* testing is required at the district level for students in kindergarten and grade one; benchmark testing is required at the district level for students in grades two through eight. Each of these participants noted the rigorous design of the benchmark questions as formulated by *Pearson Education*. One intermediate teacher stated that she has “a healthy fear” of these rigorous assessments; however, she said that benchmark testing “is a beneficial formative assessment tool.” One primary reading teacher in the same school noted, “That data helps [sic] me know the trends. Where are the pitfalls, and how can I teach it better?”

Participants in one nonTitle I school commented that the *STAR* testing is an integral component within their formative assessment program. They explained that teachers in grades kindergarten through five administer *STAR* testing three times during the academic year: fall, winter, and spring. One principal related that all kindergarten- through fifth-grade teachers must submit reports to his office every 9 weeks based upon their formative assessment data. The

principal then summarizes those findings and provides a detailed report to the director of schools.

In addition to weekly and unit reading tests as required at the district level, both of the Title I schools included within this study administer *STAR* testing at three points during the academic school year: fall, winter, and spring. These participants consider *STAR* testing to be a helpful formative assessment tool; however, it is not a district requirement. Each Title I participant noted the benefits of using *Discovery Education Assessment (DEA)* as a formative assessment tool. *DEA* testing became a district requirement during the 2010-11 academic year. One Title I principal discussed his protocol for the discussion of *DEA* data during grade level meetings. The other Title I principal discussed the use of Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) as an anecdotal running record. Specifically all teachers within that particular school are required to maintain a current PLP for every kindergarten- through fourth-grade student. The principal also noted that PLPs are discussed during grade level meetings throughout the academic year.

One Title I principal mentioned that she works collaboratively with teachers, parents, and school counselors in providing the necessary support for struggling students. The principal discussed a procedure for reviewing student report cards each 9 weeks. In addition to a daily "walk-thru," the principal said she also visits each kindergarten- through fourth-grade classroom at the end of every grading period. During those visits the principal praises students for their academic progress while reminding them that she will also be conducting several individual principal-student conferences. As a result the principal has opportunities to meet with both successful and struggling students.

Summative Assessment Data for Reading

Previous *NCLB* requirements specify that individual schools are required to demonstrate “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) based upon standardized test results. In Tennessee the standardized testing requirements are specific to annual TCAP testing through which AYP data are calculated. Tennessee’s newly enacted evaluation model places an even greater emphasis on TVAAS data. According to the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (2011), “Value-added assessment is a method for measuring the contribution of teachers or schools to the growth in their students’ academic achievement during a school year” (p. 84). Because Tennessee’s department of education has partnered with NIET through its most recent training of Tennessee principals during the summer of 2011, TVAAS data have been further thrust into the limelight of educational reform. In Tennessee, annual TVAAS scores will now count as 35%-50% of both teacher and principal evaluations. The remaining 50% of those evaluations will be based upon qualitative data collected during observations within the school structure (Tennessee Department of Education, 2011f).

All Title I and nonTitle I participants affirmed that summative assessment data points such as TCAP data are important; however, almost every participant noted the stress level associated with annual TCAP testing. One intermediate reading teacher in a nonTitle I school became tearful as she discussed her most recent TCAP data results. I instinctively stopped my digital recorder during our interview session to offer encouragement to this particular teacher. On a more positive note, a nonTitle I principal commented that if teachers have successfully used their formative assessment data throughout the academic year, summative data “should never be a surprise.” A Title I principal commented that educators “eat, sleep, and breathe” with respect to TCAP data. Furthermore, a language arts coordinator stated, “We better be using it [TCAP

data]!” She qualified that statement by saying, “It can make or break [the teachers]. They can have their jobs or not...It’s important.”

Only one nonTitle I principal differed in his opinion of summative assessment data in terms of TCAP. He said he does not believe that TCAP results should drive instruction within the classroom. He explained his reasoning by saying, “I take it [TCAP] with a grain of salt. I really do. I try to help the teachers not to stress over it. Our first goal is to help that child. If we do it well, then the scores are going to show.”

Response to Intervention (RtI) Practices

The provision of additional support for struggling readers is considered an important component within the reading classroom. The Tennessee Reading Panel (Tennessee Department of Education, 2005) defined a three-tiered *RtI* instructional model:

- Tier I contains three elements: (a) a core reading program based on scientific reading research, (b) benchmark testing of students to determine instructional needs at least three times per year (fall, winter, and spring), and (c) ongoing professional development to provide teachers with the necessary tools to ensure every student receives quality reading instruction.
- Tier II is designed to meet the needs of those students where focused instruction with the classroom is not enough. These students require additional instruction to the time allotted for core reading instruction. Tier II gives the students an additional 30 minutes of intensive small-group reading instruction daily. The aim is to support and reinforce skills being taught by the classroom teacher.
- Tier III is designed for the small percentage of students who have received Tier II instruction and continue to show marked difficulty in acquiring necessary reading skills. These students require instruction that is more explicit, more intensive, and specifically meets their individual needs. In Tier III, an additional 30 minutes can be provided for the students. (p. 6)

When prompted with a question concerning a school’s protocol for working with struggling readers, “small group instruction” emerged as the predominant theme among all Title I and nonTitle I participants. A Title I principal shared his perspective, “*RtI* came into place

about 3 years ago, give or take. And when that happened, it was in perfect alignment with what we were already doing.” Each Title I participant discussed his or her school-specific protocol for working with struggling readers. Both Title I schools included in this study use a “replacement model” in the intermediate grades [a pull-out reading program whereby students work with a Title I reading specialist instead of the regular reading teacher]. Conversely, primary students in these Title I schools are “pulled” for small group instruction during a portion of the regular reading period. Primary reading teachers are responsible for the grades of their students; however, each student’s reading growth is consistently monitored throughout the academic year by classroom reading teachers and the Title I reading specialist.

In the nonTitle I schools included in this study, the *Lindamood Bell* reading series emerged as a dominant theme. One nonTitle I school has an educational assistant who has been extensively trained in the delivery of *Lindamood Bell*. As a result, students can be pulled from the classroom to receive additional reading instruction through a *Lindamood-Bell* protocol. In the other nonTitle I school, a team of reading teachers have been officially trained in regard to *Lindamood-Bell* and are available to work with struggling readers as needed. The principal explained that teachers must adjust their instructional schedules to facilitate this process.

Supporting Academic and Nonacademic School Programs

The resonating themes within this category were (a) parent involvement, (b) after-school tutoring, and (c) science instruction. Each Title I and nonTitle I participant mentioned that providing parent involvement opportunities at the school level was important. Nine of the 15 participants stated that after-school tutoring is a helpful strategy for moving students academically forward. One Title I teacher brought out the importance of hands-on science

experiences and added that a science lab had been recently established in her school. One nonTitle I principal commented that science instruction must serve as an integral part of the elementary curriculum. Less dominant themes included the following:

Title I Schools:

1. building relationships with students,
2. understanding the effects of poverty,
3. providing access to nonfiction reading selections within the home through magazine subscriptions purchased through Title I funding,
4. providing students with school supplies through PTO funding,
5. inviting parents to serve as “secret readers” [guest readers] in the primary classroom,
6. providing an on-campus physician (who also serves as a behavioral specialist) through grant funding,
7. providing students with free dental screenings through grant funding,
8. requiring teachers to ride on their students’ respective bus routes at the beginning of each school year,
9. providing after-school tutoring services,
10. providing food and clothing to needy families through a clothing and food pantry, and
11. supporting the local libraries in their provision of summer reading programs.

NonTitle I Schools:

1. providing students with opportunities for physical exercise,

2. providing girls with an opportunity to participate in an after-school running program entitled *Girls on the Run*,
3. providing a weekly program for gifted students,
4. including Science Hill High School's Beta Club students as an integral part of an after-school tutoring program,
5. establishing an Academic Booster Club as a subcommittee within the school's PTO,
6. including ETSU's *American Reads* tutors as a support for struggling readers,
7. including parent involvement with the learning community,
8. maintaining a consistent commitment to "time on task" within the academic classroom, and
9. being committed to Tennessee's new evaluation model.

Recommendations for Practice

The data collected for this study revealed the perceptions of reading teachers, reading specialists, school principals, and one district language arts coordinator in four successful schools within the parameters of Northeast Tennessee. These perceptions have provided me with a greater understanding of literacy instruction and have led me to the following points for consideration:

Instruction

Teachers and principals might consider the importance of providing students with:

1. reading practice on a consistent and frequent basis;

2. frequent nonfiction reading assignments;
3. a blending of reading, writing, and grammar skills;
4. a blending of basal reading programs with additional literary resources and programs;
5. opportunities to engage with self-selected literature;
6. differentiated instruction through the provision of small group and individual work as needed; and
7. a respectful and literature-rich reading classroom.

Support

Teachers and principals might consider investigating support programs such as *Accelerated Reader (AR)*, *Lindamood-Bell*, and *Learning-Focused*. Moreover, teachers and principals might also consider the following: (a) professional development opportunities for reading teachers, (b) collaborative practices for working consistently with parents, (c) opportunities to promote physical wellness within the school community, and (d) after-school tutoring programs.

Assessment

Teachers and principals might consider monitoring students' reading growth through formative assessment measures such as *STAR* testing, *DEA* testing, or benchmark testing at multiple points throughout the academic year. Teachers might consider a strategic review of student-specific summative assessment data such as TCAP data on an annual basis. In addition,

teachers might consider maintaining anecdotal records for individual students as an effective means for monitoring reading growth.

Recommendations for Further Research

Recommendations for further research include an investigation of reading instruction pertaining to prekindergarten- through eighth-grade schools in Tennessee that are located beyond the parameters of the First Tennessee District. It might be helpful to develop a better understanding of the perceptions associated with successful school principals, reading teachers, and reading specialists outside of Northeast Tennessee in comparison to the findings of this qualitative study. In addition, studies of this nature could provide a deeper analysis of the similarities and differences found within and among schools serving higher and lower socioeconomic students.

A second recommendation for further research might be to examine the impact of Tennessee's newly implemented teacher evaluation model on classroom instruction and student achievement. Such an examination might verify or discount teachers' and principals' fear of this evaluation system and its impact on student learning and annual achievement measures.

Finally, perhaps a similar prekindergarten- through eighth-grade investigation specific to mathematics could be conducted with respect to high performing school systems within the First Tennessee District. It might prove useful to develop a deeper understanding of the pedagogical findings associated with mathematics in successful school districts serving higher and lower socioeconomic students.

Conclusion

Wordsworth (Goodreads, 2011) once said, “What we have loved, others will love. And we will teach them how” (n. p.) This statement represents my passion for high quality literacy instruction as we prepare our students to learn and grow as successful readers and writers. As such I believe that the provision of high quality literacy instruction is perhaps one the most important tasks that prekindergarten- through eighth-grade educators can provide. Combining our knowledge of high quality instruction in addition to providing students opportunities for reading practice; incorporating self-selected literature; appropriating differentiated instruction; blending the processes of reading, writing, and grammar; monitoring through formative assessment checkpoints; reviewing summative assessment data; and appropriating the necessary support programs will hopefully create successful readers and writers who will come to love reading and flourish because of it.

Closing Thoughts

An Inspirational Poem by Christopher Logue

(University of Minnesota Duluth, 2011, p. 1).

The teacher
said to the students:
“Come to the edge.”
They replied: “We might fall.”
The teacher again said:
“Come to the edge.”
And they responded:
“It’s too high.”
“Come to the edge,”
the teacher demanded.

And they came,
and the teacher pushed
them and they
flew.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

The First Tennessee District (Northeast Tennessee School Systems)

- 1) Bristol City
- 2) Carter County
- 3) Cocke County
- 4) Elizabethton City
- 5) Greene County
- 6) Greeneville City
- 7) Hamblen County
- 8) Hancock County
- 9) Hawkins County
- 10) Johnson City
- 11) Johnson County
- 12) Kingsport City
- 13) Newport City
- 14) Rogersville City
- 15) Sullivan County
- 16) Unicoi County
- 17) Washington County

APPENDIX B

2010 Reading Achievement Growth Scores for the First Tennessee District

School District	2005 Score	2010 Score	Growth	2010 Enrollment	# of Schools in District
Rogersville City	60	76	16	665	1
Newport City	56	70	14	751	1
Johnson City	63	67	4	7,230	10
Washington County	53	62	9	9,055	16
Kingsport City	56	62	6	6,296	12
Greeneville City	63	59	-4	2,636	7
Elizabethton City	60	56	-4	2,128	6
Bristol	63	56	-7	3,781	7
Greene County	49	54	5	7,057	16
Sullivan County	53	54	1	11,245	28
Johnson County	39	49	10	2,181	7
Hamblen County	53	49	-4	9,641	18
Unicoi County	56	49	-7	2,510	6
Cocke County	42	46	4	4,729	12
Carter County	46	46	0	5,645	17
Hawkins County	53	44	-9	7,482	17
Hancock County	49	37	-12	1,016	2

Source: 2010 TVAAS State Summary Report: TCAP Reading (Tennessee Department of Education, 2011c)

APPENDIX C

IRB Approval Verification

East Tennessee State University Office for the Protection of Human Research Subjects
Box 70565, Johnson City, Tennessee 37614-1707
Phone: (423) 439-6053 Fax: (423) 439-6060

IRB APPROVAL – Initial Expedited Review

May 24, 2011

Ms. Karen Reach
Bristol TN City Schools
815 Edgemont Ave Bristol, TN 37620

Re: An Investigation of Reading Instruction in Northeast Tennessee
IRB#: c0511.4s

The following items were reviewed and approved by an expedited process:

- New Protocol submission (xForm - no conflict identified); Resume; Letters to Director of Schools; Document Review Guide; Interview Protocol; Informed Consent Form (Spring 2011); Permission from Johnson City and Washington County Schools

On **May 19, 2011**, a final approval was granted for a period not to exceed 12 months and will expire on **May 18, 2012**. The expedited approval of the study will be reported to the convened board on the next agenda.

The following enclosed stamped, approved Informed Consent Documents have been stamped with the approval and expiration date and these documents must be copied and provided to each participant prior to participant enrollment:

- Informed Consent Form (Spring 2011 stamped approved 05/19/11)

Federal regulations require that the original copy of the participant's consent be maintained in the principal investigator's files and that a copy is given to the subject at the time of consent.

Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks to Subjects or Others must be reported to the IRB (and VA R&D if applicable) within 10 working days.

Proposed changes in approved research cannot be initiated without IRB review and approval. The only exception to this rule is that a change can be made prior to IRB approval when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the research subjects [21 CFR 56.108 (a)(4)].

In such a case, the IRB must be promptly informed of the change following its implementation (within 10 working days) on Form 109 (www.etsu.edu/irb). The IRB will review the change to determine that it is consistent with ensuring the subject's continued welfare.

Sincerely,
Chris Ayres, Chair
ETSU Campus IRB

Cc: Eric Glover, PhD

APPENDIX D

Letters to Directors of Schools

Karen Reach
330 Charlton Court
Bluff City, Tennessee 37618
reachk@btcs.org

April 24, 2011

Dr. Richard Bales
Director of Schools
Johnson City Schools
100 East Maple Street
Johnson City, Tennessee 37601

Dear Dr. Bales:

I am currently a doctoral student in the department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at East Tennessee State University. Consequently, I am conducting a qualitative research study central to the perceptions of high quality instructional pedagogy and academic programs as connected with successful reading achievement. Following a strategic analysis of 2010 Tennessee Report Card data and the 2010 TVAAS State Summary Report within the online public portal of the Tennessee Department of Education, I have identified your school system as a high achieving district within the parameters of the First Tennessee District. Accordingly, I have identified two schools within your district as models of academic excellence - particularly in regard to outstanding reading achievement and attainment data: Towne Acres Elementary and Lake Ridge Elementary (See Table at end). It is important to mention that there are several schools within your district with outstanding reading achievement and attainment data; however, my research study is limited to only four schools within Northeast Tennessee.

With your permission, I would like to conduct four confidential interviews in each of the previously named schools (an interview with the school principal, reading specialist, one primary reading teacher, and one intermediate reading teacher). Moreover, I would like to examine any pertinent school-specific documentation (school websites, newsletters, School Improvement Plans, formative assessment reading data, etc.) and related basal reading specifics that further qualify the academic excellence of each school structure.

In order to ensure anonymity, the participant schools, principals, teachers, and reading specialists will not be referenced in the study. When my project is complete, you will receive a copy of my research conclusions as an affirmation of the excellent instructional pedagogies and academic programs that are being successfully implemented within the First Tennessee District. Further, it is my hope that these qualitative findings will be of great benefit to schools that continue to struggle with reading achievement in an age of increased accountability measures.

Thank you in advance for your willingness to permit me in expanding the knowledge base related to high quality instructional pedagogy and supporting curricular programs. If you should have any questions or concerns, we can discuss those at your convenience. You may contact me by phone at 423.652.9578 (office), 423.538.0818 (home), or email at reachk@btcs.org.

Please notify me of your permission to conduct four confidential interviews at each of the aforementioned schools by returning this letter with your signature. For your convenience, I have enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope.

I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Karen P. Reach
 Curriculum Specialist and Testing/Data Analyst
 George W. Vance Middle School
 Bristol, Tennessee

Reading Achievement and TVAAS Attainment Scores Per Johnson City Schools

School	2010 Reading Achievement Grades	2010 State Score	2010 Academic Reading Growth (TVAAS Value Added)	2010 State Growth Standard
Johnson City: Towne Acres (K-5)	66 = A	49 = C	1.2 = B	0
Lake Ridge (PK-5)	63 = A	49 = C	0.6 = B	0

Approval Signature of Dr. Richard Bales _____

Date _____

Karen Reach
330 Charlton Court
Bluff City, Tennessee 37618
reachk@btcs.org

April 24, 2011

Mr. Ronald Dykes
Director of Schools
Washington County Schools
405 West College Street
Jonesborough, Tennessee 37659

Dear Mr. Dykes:

I am currently a doctoral student in the department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at East Tennessee State University. Consequently, I am conducting a qualitative research study central to the perceptions of high quality instructional pedagogy and academic programs as connected with successful reading achievement. Following a strategic analysis of 2010 Tennessee Report Card data and the 2010 TVAAS State Summary Report within the online public portal of the Tennessee Department of Education, I have identified your school system as a high achieving district within the parameters of the First Tennessee District. Accordingly, I have identified two schools within your district as models of academic excellence - particularly in regard to outstanding reading achievement and attainment data: Boones Creek Elementary School and West View Elementary School (See Table at end).

With your permission, I would like to conduct four confidential interviews in each of the previously named schools (an interview with the school principal, reading specialist or instructional coach, one primary reading teacher, and one intermediate reading teacher). Moreover, I would like to examine any pertinent school-specific documentation (school websites, newsletters, School Improvement Plans, formative assessment reading data, etc.) and related basal reading specifics that further qualify the academic excellence of each school structure.

In order to ensure anonymity, the participant schools, principals, teachers, and reading specialists will not be referenced in the study. When my project is complete, you will receive a copy of my research conclusions as an affirmation of the excellent instructional pedagogies and academic programs that are being successfully implemented within the First Tennessee District. Further, it is my hope that these qualitative findings will be of great benefit to schools that continue to struggle with reading achievement and related curricular programs in an age of increased accountability measures.

Thank you in advance for your willingness to permit me in expanding the knowledge base related to high quality instructional pedagogy and supporting curricular programs. If you should

have any questions or concerns, we can discuss those at your convenience. You may contact me by phone at 423.652.9578 (office), 423.538.0818 (home), or email at reachk@btcs.org.

Please notify me of your permission to conduct four confidential interviews at each of the aforementioned schools by returning this letter with your signature. For your convenience, I have enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope.

I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Karen P. Reach
 Curriculum Specialist and Testing/Data Analyst
 George W. Vance Middle School
 Bristol, Tennessee

Reading Achievement and TVAAS Attainment Scores Per Washington County, TN Schools

School	2010 Reading Achievement Grades	2010 State Score	2010 Academic Reading Growth (TVAAS Value Added)	2010 State Growth Standard
Washington County:				
Boones Creek (K-4)	55 = A	49 = C	6.9 = A	0
West View (K-8)	49 = C	49 = C	0.1 = C	0

Approval Signature of Mr. Ronald Dykes _____

Date _____

APPENDIX E

E-mail Message to Individual Principals

To: Principal XXX
Date: May 8, 2011
Re: Research Study Request

Dear Principal XXX,

I am a doctoral student in the department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at East Tennessee State University. Consequently, I am conducting a qualitative research study central to high quality educational pedagogy and academic programming as connected with successful reading achievement in Northeast Tennessee. Following a strategic analysis of 2010 Tennessee Report Card data and the State Summary Report within the online public portal of the Tennessee Department of Education, I have identified your school system as a high achieving district within the parameters of the First Tennessee District. Accordingly, I have identified your school as a model of academic excellence - particularly in regard to outstanding reading achievement and attainment data. Your director of schools, Dr. XXX, has granted approval for me to conduct my qualitative research at your respective school site.

Within the next several days, I will be calling to request a confidential interview with you in regard to the instructional pedagogies and literacy programs that are being successfully implemented in your school structure. Additionally, I would like to conduct a confidential interview with a primary reading teacher and an intermediate reading teacher employed in your school. Moreover, if your teachers work collaboratively with a reading specialist or instructional coach, I would also like to conduct a confidential interview with that particular literacy team member.

Each participant will receive a transcribed copy of the interview to verify accuracy of its content. A pseudonym will be given to each participant to ensure confidentiality of the information shared within this study. When my project is complete, you will receive a copy of my research conclusions in an effort to make a contribution to your learning community.

Thank you in advance for your willingness to contribute to the knowledge base with regard to high quality literacy pedagogy and related academic programs.

Sincerely,

Karen P. Reach
Curriculum Specialist and Testing/Data Analyst
George W. Vance Middle School
Bristol, Tennessee

APPENDIX F

Informed Consent Form

Spring 2011

Please read carefully the following Informed Consent specifics and sign this form if you fully give your permission to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this Informed Consent for your personal records.

Researcher: Karen Reach

Graduate Student, Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

423.652.9578 (office), 423.538.0818 (home), or 423.534.9778 (personal cell)

Dissertation Title: An Investigation of Reading Instruction in Northeast Tennessee

Purpose of Study: To examine the perceptions of reading teachers, reading specialists, and school principals with regard to specific prekindergarten- through eighth-grade reading programs, instructional best practices, academic interventions, and educational activities that are perceived as successful practices in four high achieving schools within the parameters of Northeast Tennessee.

Request for Participation: The researcher requests your voluntary participation in this study. Your participation is strictly voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Additionally, you have the right to withdraw your words from this study at any time.

Research Method: The researcher will interview specific employees of Johnson City Schools (specifically Towne Acres Elementary and Lake Ridge Elementary Schools) and Washington County Schools (specifically Boones Creek Elementary and West View Elementary Schools) currently serving as principals, reading specialists, instructional coaches, and reading teachers. The researcher will ask the interviewees questions related to reading-specific instructional best practices and prekindergarten – eighth-grade literacy programming. Furthermore, the researcher will review related school-specific documentation. Data collected from the interviews and document review process will be used to develop a theoretical framework summarizing the perceptions of reading-specific instructional pedagogies and related literacy programming associated with successful student achievement in Northeast Tennessee.

Duration of Research Participation: You will participate in one individual interview during the spring of 2011 that will last approximately 45 – 60 minutes.

Confidentiality: Your name will not be used on the digital recording, on the final printed transcript, or in the final research report. Only the researcher will know of your participation in this study. The digital tape and corresponding transcripts will be secured during and following

the data analysis of this study; these items will be secured in the researcher's home office for five years per IRB guidelines.

Method of Recording Interview: The researcher will digitally record your interview to ensure complete accuracy of your responses. The digital recording will be secured during and following the data analysis of this study. The recordings will be secured in the researcher's home office for five years per IRB guidelines.

Right of Refusal: You may refuse to participate in this study at any time.

Right to Withdraw: You may withdraw from this study at any time. You may withdraw your words from this study at any time.

Feedback and Benefits: You will receive a copy of the study's research conclusions to review. The benefit of your participation in this study is to share with colleagues and policymakers your beliefs with regard to high quality instructional pedagogies, or best practices, which are explicitly connected with successful reading achievement in grades prekindergarten through eight.

Copy of Consent: You will receive a copy of this Informed Consent for your personal records.

Permission to Quote: Your words may be used in the final research report to clarify or further explain a component of the theoretical framework. The researcher will not identify the source of the quote. In addition, the researcher will take precautions to ensure that there are no identifiers within the body of the quote.

Signature of Voluntary Participant

Date of Participation

Signature of Researcher

APPENDIX G

Interview Protocol

~ For K-8 Reading Teachers, Reading Specialists, and School Principals

Interview Preface

Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in my research study. As an educational researcher, it will be most insightful for me to glean an understanding of your perceptions regarding reading-specific “best practices” and related programs that have been successfully implemented in your school.

~

- 1) Would you please share with me your current position (reading teacher, reading specialist, instructional coach, or principal), and how many years you have served in this position?
- 2) How many years have you been involved in the field of education?
- 3) From your perspective, what is your philosophy with regard to reading instruction and how does that compare with your personal educational philosophy?
- 4) What reading programs are currently being implemented in your school?
- 5) How do you perceive these particular programs?
- 6) Are there elements of those programs that you find helpful, or elements that you would like to improve?
- 7) What types of instructional strategies, or best practices, do you believe are important for teachers to employ within the classroom?
- 8) What specific reading objectives are being taught at your grade level?
- 9) How are those reading objectives being taught?
- 10) Is formative assessment a part of your reading program?
- 11) How do you view summative assessment data, such as TCAP data, and is that data useful?
- 12) How do you help struggling readers?
- 13) Are there other programs within your building or community that you believe are successfully affecting student learning?

14) Can you talk about your recent professional development experiences?

15) Are there students in your class from poor families?

16) If so, what kinds of things are you doing in your classroom to help those particular students?

~

Additional Questions for Title I Educators (specifically Washington County Schools)

a) Do you know the free- and reduced-price meal program percentages for your school?

b) How is Title I budgetary planning conducted in your school?

APPENDIX H

Document Review Guide

Document Description:

School Site: _____ / School System: _____

Source: _____

Publication Date: _____

Review Date: _____

Notes:	Researcher's Comments:

APPENDIX I

School-Specific Basal Reading Program Documentation

Basal Reading Program Title:

School Site: _____ / School System: _____

Source: _____

Publication Date: _____

Review Date: _____

Notes:	Researcher's Comments:

APPENDIX J

Letters From Peer Debriefers

October 4, 2011

Karen P. Reach
Liberty Bell Middle School
1318 Pactolas Road
Johnson City, TN 37601

Dear Mrs. Reach,

Congratulations on completing the research portion of your study, *An Investigation of Reading Instruction in Northeast Tennessee*. After my review, it is clear that your research has been managed with intense organization and professionalism.

Your interview questions were exceptionally thorough and relevant to your research topic. I was impressed with your data collection; it is apparent that you took great care to ensure reliability, balance, and validity. As a central office supervisor and former principal and teacher, I found your research to be interesting and pertinent, and I am certain it will be a resource to any educator who desires to enhance student learning and reading instruction in their school. Your research is detailed and adherent to the procedures of a qualitative research study.

I would also like to take this opportunity to congratulate on your new, administrative position with Johnson City Schools. I have no doubt that you are a positive addition to their staff. I appreciate the opportunity to review a study of this relevance and caliber. Best wishes as you continue your doctoral program and your professional career.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Rouse
Supervisor, Federal Programs and Assessment
Bristol Tennessee City Schools

October 4, 2011

Karen P. Reach
Liberty Bell Middle School
1318 Pactolas Road
Johnson City, TN 37601

To Whom it May Concern:

The purpose of this correspondence is to verify that I served as a peer reviewer for Ms. Karen Reach while she completed the requirements for the Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership at East Tennessee State University. In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, she completed a dissertation, *An Investigation of Reading Instruction in Northeast Tennessee*.

On multiple occasions during her research, we discussed the process, progress, and procedures of her study. Karen's research focused on various instructional best practices, academic interventions, and educational activities that have been successfully implemented in four high achieving schools in Northeast Tennessee. The conclusions and recommendations were based on a review of literature and were supported by data.

Karen's focus and attention to detail were present throughout her research. The recommendations and findings of her research should provide beneficial strategies to other prekindergarten- through eighth-grade reading educators.

It was an honor to serve as a peer reviewer.

Sincerely,

Ramona Williams, Ed.D.
Vice Provost for Enrollment Services
East Tennessee State University

APPENDIX K

Letter From External Auditor

September 28, 2011

Karen P. Reach
Liberty Bell Middle School
1318 Pactolas Road
Johnson City, TN 37601

Dear Mrs. Reach,

I hope this letter finds you well-adjusted and successful in your new administrative position. I would like to congratulate and commend you on your hard work in completing your data collection for your research project, *An Investigation of Reading Instruction in Northeast Tennessee*. After reviewing your materials and after meeting with you to discuss your research objectives in detail, it is obvious that your work is reliable and complete. It also is apparent that this research project is valid and verifiable, and I have seen evidence that this study was conducted in an ethical and professional manner.

This was an interesting topic for me because at the current time we are examining strategies within Bristol Tennessee City Schools to improve reading instruction and facilitate stronger language arts and reading achievement. Your open-ended interview questions were concise and clear in their objectives for this study. The review of the literature was very detailed and thorough and tied in appropriately with your presentation of data. As your auditor, I took time to review your transcriptions and field notes which were conducted with principals, reading teachers, and a language arts coordinator. I discovered that your findings were organized and followed the procedures of a qualitative research study. I found your interviews very interesting and relevant to your study as well as to today's educators' concerns of reading instruction and paradigms.

I also want to take this opportunity to congratulate you on your new position with Johnson City Schools. I wish you all the best! With your personal and professional qualities, I am confident you will find much success as you complete your doctoral work and continue your work in the field of education. It has been a privilege to be involved with your research and dissertation process. Thank you for your diligent commitment to integrity, professionalism, and student learning.

Sincerely,

Dixie C. Bowen, Ed.D.
Supervisor of Elementary Education
Bristol Tennessee City Schools

VITA

KAREN PIERSON REACH

Personal Data: Date of Birth: April 7, 1963
Place of Birth: Bristol, Tennessee
Marital Status: Married

Education: Bristol, Tennessee Public Schools;
 1969 – 1975
Sullivan County, Tennessee Public Schools;
 1975 - 1981
King College, Bristol, Tennessee
 1981-1982
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee:
 Elementary Education, B.S.
 1982 - 1985
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City Tennessee:
 School Leadership, M. Ed.
 2005 - 2006
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee;
 Educational Leadership, Ed. D.;
 Cognate Study: Special Education
 2011

Professional
Experience: Second Grade Summer School Math Teacher, Holston View Elementary;
 Bristol, Tennessee, Summer 1985
Second Grade Teacher, Avoca Elementary School;
 Bristol, Tennessee, 1985-1992
Sixth Grade Teacher, Avoca Elementary School;
 Bristol, Tennessee, 1992-2000
Second Grade Teacher, Avoca Elementary School;
 Bristol, Tennessee, 2000-2003
Third Grade Teacher, Avoca Elementary School;
 Bristol, Tennessee, 2003-2005
Curriculum Consultant, Bristol Tennessee City Schools;
 Bristol, Tennessee, 2005-2007.

Professional
Experience
Continued:

Lead Curriculum Specialist, Bristol Tennessee City Schools;
Bristol, Tennessee, 2007-2010

Curriculum Specialist and Testing/Data Analyst, George W. Vance
Middle School; Bristol, Tennessee, 2010-June 2011

Assistant Principal, Liberty Bell Middle School; Johnson City, Tennessee,
July 2011-Present.

Awards:

2011:
25 Years of Service Recognition, Bristol Tennessee City Schools

2005:
Kappa Delta Pi Honor Society, East Tennessee State University Chapter

2005:
Gamma Beta Phi Honor Society, East Tennessee State University Chapter

2002:
Life Member, Avoca Elementary School PTA

1999 and 1997:
National League of Junior Cotillions - Best Mannered Teacher

1992:
Teacher of the Year, Avoca Elementary

Professional
Member-
ships

2006-Present
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

1991-Present
Alpha Delta Kappa Honor Society for Teachers

1992-1996
Junior League of Bristol

1982-1985
Kappa Delta Sorority, East Tennessee State University – Gamma Delta Chapter