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A Case Study of Principals' Knowledge of Early Childhood Literacy

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A CASE STUDY OF PRINCIPALS' KNOWLEDGE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD
LITERACY

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family whose love and encouragement means everything to me. I especially want to thank Jim, my husband and best friend, who has always believed in me. To my mom and dad, thank you for teaching me the importance of education and working hard. To my children Michelle, Elizabeth, Joseph, Jimmy, and Sarah, I give my deepest expression of love and appreciation for the encouragement that you gave me during my graduate programs. I encourage you to find your passions and follow your dreams as I have followed mine

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ABSTRACT

Nationally approximately 40 percent of third grade students do not read at grade
level. Principals play a critical role in providing leadership in the implementation of
Response to Intervention (RtI) to ensure that students not making adequate yearly
progress receive targeted instruction to address their deficiencies. The purpose of this
study is to explore the experience of five principals through an investigation of their
understanding of the reading process as it relates to the implementation of RtI in their
schools. I specifically wish to understand: What do principals know about early
childhood literacy and how do they use that knowledge to support early childhood
teachers? Sub questions relating to the central research question include: How do
principals perceive their educational background and experience have prepared them to
support early childhood teachers in making instructional reading decisions? How do
principals perceive their role in the RtI problem solving process used to determine
instructional strategies for early childhood students reading below grade level? How do
principals structure their own learning of early literacy within the context of their school?
How do teachers perceive the principal's support of the reading program? What do
teachers have to say about the educational background and experience of their principal
as those relate to the reading program and to the RtI process in their schools?

To address these questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with five
elementary school principals employed in a large, urban district in South Carolina. I used

a constructivist theory lens to identify patterns and themes. Additionally, this study seeks

to understand how principals structure support for themselves based on their educational

background and experience relating to the reading process of early childhood students. I

address implications for principals, superintendents, RtI teams, and future research.

Keywords: Response to Intervention, reading process, principal leadership, professional
learning communities, early childhood education, literacy

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Federal and state educational policy relating to student achievement has propelled us into an age of accountability and data analysis. Legislation relating to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 mandated that all students meet proficiency standards by the year 2014. Response to Intervention, or RtI, evolved from NCLB legislation of 2001 and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 2004 to address the needs of students who were not meeting proficient standards (Allington, 2008). The philosophy behind No Child Left Behind legislation was that all children can learn. However, nationally approximately 40 percent of students do not make adequate progress (Allington, 2008). NCLB and IDEA 2004 caused educators to reexamine how they support students to ensure they receive appropriate instruction and make adequate yearly progress (Allington, 2008; Allington, 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007a; Jennings, 2002).

Goals and Principles of RtI

The overarching goals for implementing RtI are to reduce the number of students identified for special education, to provide effective early intervention, and to provide professional development to teachers of lowest performing schools (American Institute for Research, 2002; Bradley, Danielson & Hallahan, 2002; Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly, & Vaughn, 2004). Principals play a critical role in providing leadership in the implementation of RtI. They promote a school climate that encourages data driven decisions to meet the needs of students (Allington, 2009; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hall,

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2008; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007, Zola, 2011). Most research relating to the role of principals describes general characteristics associated with effective leadership in schools However, given the legislative policies of NCLB (2001) and the reauthorization of IDEA (2004), principals' knowledge of literacy learning and the reading process in young children becomes increasingly relevant to effective implementation.

General education teachers face the challenge of teaching students with a diverse range of needs and abilities (Johnston, 2010). Struggling students may lack consistent targeted assistance, and over time their difficulties can become more debilitating. The framework of RtI evolved from the federal level to conceptualize the process of addressing the needs of all students (Allington, 2008; Allington, 2009; Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2007; Fuchs, Compton, Fuchs, Bryant, & Davis, 2007; Johnston, 2010). An emphasis on providing early intervention in the early childhood and primary years has gained national support because of the complexity of accelerating student progress (Allington, 2009; Hall, 2008; Johnston, 2010).

RtI has four core principles (Allington, 2009, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2007; Fuchs, et al., 2007; Hall, 2008). The first principle states that all students should receive effective core instruction delivered using research-based best practices. The model assumes that approximately 80% of students will make adequate progress when instructional delivery is consistent and implemented with fidelity (Hall, 2008). Where the percentage of students making adequate progress is considerably less than 80%, there are other additional variables that impact performance such as unaligned curriculum, ineffective instructional practices, or environmental variables (Hall, 2008).

The second principle of RtI is that students who experience difficulties receive research based interventions (Allington, 2008; Allington, 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Fuchs et al., 2007; Hall, 2008; Johnston, 2010). Student intervention plans are developed to target the individual needs of students (Fuchs& Fuchs, 2007; Fuchs et al., 2007). The interventions begin in the classroom and vary in duration, frequency, and intensity depending on the needs of the student.

The third principle involves analyzing interventions for effectiveness through frequent and predetermined progress monitoring (Allington, 2008; Allington, 2009; Fuchs& Fuchs, 2007; Fuchs et al., 2007; Hall, 2008; Johnston, 2010). Modifications to the intervention, such as adjusting the frequency and intensity of an intervention, can be implemented if the progress is insignificant (DiPerno & Glover, 2007; Fuchs et al., 2007).

Finally, the fourth principle of RtI involves a team approach (Hall, 2008; Johnston, 2010). Teachers, administrators, and other school staff work collaboratively in RtI teams to strategically address the needs of struggling students (Hall, 2008; Johnston, 2010). The responsibility of student achievement is embraced by the team and is not exclusively the responsibility of the primary classroom teacher.

The RtI team as part of the professional learning community (PLC) focuses on the needs of each individual student (DuFour, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Johnston, 2010). PLCs have a positive effect on the collective responsibility for student success and the increased understanding of content and curriculum standards (DuFour, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Johnston, 2010; Norwood, 2007). A problem-solving approach to determining strategies is utilized to focus the team on action that helps individual

students. Interdisciplinary teams at the school level enhance the collaboration with general education teachers to problem solve challenging situations encountered with students (Doerr, 2009; Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2009; Gregory & Kuzmich, 2007).

Principals play a critical role within the RtI team (Hall, 2008; Johnston; 2010). They are responsible for supporting and facilitating the RtI framework by promoting a climate that supports the practices that allow teachers to analyze data and reflect on teaching practices (Johnston, 2010). There is an abundance of research relating to the role of principals in supporting student achievement. Some educators believe that principals can be effective leaders if they have certain leadership characteristics, regardless of their educational background and experience.

During the 2009 school year, I had the opportunity to coordinate the development of my district's RtI framework. An initial component in the project was to build an awareness of RtI and determine the roles of principals and teachers in the process. I discovered through my interactions with principals and teachers that some principals were reluctant to discuss their personal knowledge of early childhood literacy. I began to question whether principals had the knowledge they needed related to early childhood development and literacy. However, it seemed to me that implementing the RtI process could be the mechanism needed to help drive principals and teachers towards a deeper understanding of what early childhood students need to learn to read.

Autobiographic background

I remember the first time I realized I could read. I was in my first grade classroom sitting at a table by myself. I picked up a new book that I had not seen before. I flipped through the first couple of pages to the beginning of the story. As I looked at the

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letters on the bottom of the page it was as if a light switch was flicked on, and in that very instance, I realized that the letters were words and I could read them! It is forty something years since that miraculous day, and I remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday. There was no turning back after that wondrous day that I discovered I was a reader, and I have been a voracious reader ever since.

I will probably never know how I came to be a reader that day because I do not remember all the other things that came before that day and after. Years later after spending my adulthood in the education field working to help children read and learn, I know that even in my personal journey to become a reader it wasn't as easy as switching a light on.

That initial joy of discovering I could read is at the heart of why I chose education for my lifetime career. I wanted to share the joy of learning with others and did so for several years as an elementary and early childhood teacher. In particular, I love to teach young children. Not only are they enthusiastic about learning and school, but they are sponges absorbing their learning experiences before my eyes.

In my own teaching experience I found that most students did well and made progress, but there were some who, regardless of what I did to support them, did not make the progress I wanted them to.

I left the classroom after several years of teaching first to assume the position of curriculum resource teacher in an elementary school. I enjoyed the opportunities this position provided to collaborate with other teachers in matters relating to teaching and learning. I eventually moved on to the district office in a consultant capacity to support programs relating to early childhood and intervention. This position also provided

opportunities for collaboration with teachers and administrators in areas relating to instruction and learning. At the same time that I assumed responsibilities at the district level, federal and state policy in the early 2000s caused a shift to a data driven focus in the early childhood arena. As I worked to develop the district framework of Response to Intervention I started asking myself questions about what principals need to know about the reading process so we could help struggling students learn to read. I wondered how principals without backgrounds in early childhood education facilitate the instructional decision making related to struggling readers. This was where my dissertation journey began.

Statement of Problem

An integral part of RtI is the collaborative team approach teachers and administrators utilize to strategically address the needs of struggling students. The challenge of student achievement is not just the problem of individual classroom teachers. RtI encourages the idea of a school team involving all stakeholders (Hall, 2008; Johnston, 2010). The team works together to solve problems and address strategically the needs of individual students. The role of the principal is paramount for ensuring that the team is effective and maintains the primary goal of improving students' achievement and welfare (Hall, 2008). However, an assumption is that principals and teachers have the training and expertise to understand why students are struggling and to generate instructional strategies and interventions to help students succeed. The educational background and experience of elementary principals is diverse, yet they are responsible for facilitating a complex Response to Intervention framework. Apparently, principals and teachers do not always have the skill set needed to address early childhood student

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achievement as depicted by the staggering number of 40% of elementary students reading below grade level by grade three (Allington, 2008). Teacher and principal leadership undoubtedly plays a role in facilitating the RtI process.

The role of principal leadership in supporting and promoting the RtI process is evident. Some educators believe that principals can be effective leaders if they have certain leadership characteristics, regardless of their educational background and experience. Many research studies explore the relationship of leadership characteristics to effective leadership and school improvement. However, there are very few research investigations relating to principal content knowledge in the area of literacy learning (Allington & Rigg, 1979; Block & Mangieri, 2003; Cawleti & Reavis, 1980; Hoewing, 2011; Sherrill, 2009; Stein & Nelson, 2003; Szabacsik, 2008; Thomson, 1988). Teaching reading to struggling readers can be a complex process that involves training in instructional and assessment practices (Allington, 2008; Allington 2009; Pinnell & Fountas, 2011). However, it is unclear whether having a repertoire of leadership skills without an understanding of the reading process is sufficient for a principal to support reading achievement in struggling readers. The focus of this study is to explore how principals who may or may not have a limited educational background relating to literacy learning navigate through the RtI framework in their quest to support the reading achievement of early childhood students.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this multi-case study is to explore the lived experience of five principals to better understand what principals know about the reading process for early childhood students as it relates to the implementation of RtI in their schools.

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Research Questions

To determine the process principals use to embark on their journey to support the literacy learning in early childhood students this qualitative phenomenological multi-case study focuses on the central research question: What do principals need to know about early literacy so they can support early childhood teachers? Sub questions relating to the central research question include:

1. How do principals perceive their educational background and experience have prepared them to support early childhood teachers in making instructional reading decisions?

2. How do principals perceive their role in the RtI problem solving process used to determine instructional strategies for early childhood students reading below grade level?

3. How do principals structure their own learning of early literacy within the context of their school?

4. How do teachers perceive the principal's support of the reading program?

5. What do teachers have to say about the educational background and experience of their principal as those relate to the reading program and to the RtI process in their schools?

Research Design

Case study allows the researcher to discover and understand the perspectives of the participants through direct observations and interviews (Patton, 2002). Qualitative case study research provides a holistic approach for the researcher to examine the experiences of the participants and gain understanding and meaning. Understanding the

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participants' perspectives requires a focus on the participants' experiences while requiring the researcher to set aside her own biases and ideas. The study provides insight into the different perspectives of the experiences of the participants and a forum for the participants to build an awareness of their viewpoints and assumptions (Creswell, 2005; Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002). An advantage of qualitative research is that the design of the investigation enables the researcher to enter the world of the participants and provide a vivid description of their experience (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009).

I used multi-case strategies and data collection processes to conduct an inquiry regarding the experiences of the participants (Glesne, 2006; Yin, 2009). Collected data were analyzed for connections, patterns and emerging themes (Creswell, 2005; Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 2007; Yin, 2009). The design of qualitative studies is non-linear and flexible dependent on the interconnections of the components of the study (Glesne, 2006). As the study progressed, the assumptions and beliefs driving the inquiry were evaluated and adjustments made (Maxwell, 2005). For this reason throughout the project literature was continuously examined to explore new ideas relating to the study to ensure a comprehensive and relevant examination of the subject was covered.

The research design for this study incorporates three types of data collection recommended for multi-case research: open-ended interviews with principals; direct observations of principals within the context of their school; and focus group interviews with early childhood teachers working with the principals involved in this study (Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). I conducted one comprehensive initial interview with

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each of the principals within their natural school context. I utilized maximum variation to select the principal participants for this study. The participants for this multi-case study were purposely selected because I was interested in how the principals represented several variables including gender, race, and generational changes. In this case study, I interviewed five elementary school principals employed in a large, urban district in South Carolina. The principals were observed within the context of their schools during RtI data team meetings. In addition, five focus groups comprised of teachers from each of the elementary schools were conducted to explore their perceptions of how their principal affects efforts to build his or her understanding of early childhood literacy. The principal participants assisted me in identifying the teachers who participated in the five focus group interviews. Therefore, the stories the teacher participants shared in this story were unique to them and do not necessarily represent the stories of all teachers in the schools involved in this study. Qualitative case study research was chosen for this study because of my personal experiences and my interest in the process principals undertake to build on their own knowledge base relating to early literacy.

Theoretical Framework

This multi-case study seeks to identify themes and patterns through a constructivist theory lens in an effort to understand what the principals know about early childhood literacy and how they use this knowledge to support early childhood teachers. Additionally, this study seeks to understand how the principals structure support for themselves based on their educational background and experience relating to the reading process of early childhood students.

This study is executed through the lens of the constructivism theoretical perspective. Constructivism examines how knowledge is built in individuals through meaning making and through the interactions of people sharing their experiences, ideas, and concepts (Dewey, 1963; Piaget, 1959; Schwandt, 2007; Vygotsky, 1962). The learning environment is critical in the constructivist perspective including the interactions between learner and content as well as the interactions between learners themselves. Meaningful interactive strategies between learners allow scaffolding of ideas and the construction of knowledge through language (Garmston & Wellman, 1994; Liu & Matthews, 2005; Vygotsky, 1962). A scaffolding of learning occurs as more experienced or knowledgeable individuals interact with less experienced or knowledgeable individuals. Since knowledge is constructed from an individual's personal experiences and interpretations of the environment, learners are constantly testing hypotheses to explain new situations through his or her social interactions (Vygotsky, 1962; Vygotsky et al., 1994).

The constructivist theory can be applied to the RtI team process where the school team works collaboratively to determine why a student is experiencing academic difficulties. The team interdisciplinary approach in RtI is an integral element that supports knowledge making. The RtI team is generally comprised of school staff representing various disciplinary areas of expertise (Hall, 2008; Johnston, 2010). A team typically includes the principal, curriculum resource teacher, guidance counselor, school psychologist, special education teacher, and various grade level teachers. Ideally the team members bring different personal perspectives and diverse ideas to the table. The purpose of the team is to solve problems and to develop (or construct) intervention plans

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for students experiencing academic or behavior difficulties (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; Hall, 2008; Johnston, 2010). Therefore, the structure of the team and how team members interact together is critically related to the outcome for these students. The principal has an important role in selecting the appropriate staff for the RtI team. In addition, the principal has the ongoing responsibility of supporting the team process so the team works cohesively and productively. Although decision making in the RtI team is shared among members, the principal needs knowledge of the reading process to ensure that decisions are child centered and increase student reading achievement.

Significance of the Study

Focusing a study through the constructivist theory lens is an opportunity to describe and share success stories. Understanding how a principal facilitates the RtI process contributes to the body of knowledge informing educators how to support struggling readers. The challenges schools face addressing the needs of their students are daunting ones that cannot be answered by one story and one situation. A research design that incorporates the constructivist theory in examining the role of a principal in the RtI team process reinforces the idea that all children should have the opportunity to reach their learning potential. The study provides a forum to consider the daunting challenges principals face with meeting the needs of students who have complex challenges to overcome. The research demonstrates the value of collaboration among educators to problem solve. It also explores the process principals undergo to build their knowledge of literacy learning. The goal of this study is to contribute to the body of knowledge informing educators how to support the professional development and training of principals in relation to literacy learning. This study was conducted as a multi-case

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inquiry to understand the experience of the principals' journey to support children with learning deficiencies. The format of this case study allows the exploration of the individuals' personal experiences within the context of RtI.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations and limitations set the parameters for qualitative research. The delimitations narrow the variables in the study while limitations identify potential weaknesses in a study (Gresne, 2006).

Delimitations

The research in this study is limited to the experiences of five principals in elementary schools in South Carolina. The participants are five principals from the same district who were selected purposefully for this project. The principals were selected for the project with the intent to have a maximum variation of representation regarding the demographics of the school (Title I, suburban, urban), principal gender, principal race, and principal years of experience. The findings in this phenomenological multi-case study will be determined from the personal perspectives of the five participants, and these may not be generalized to other populations.

Limitations

While this study strives to increase the understanding of how principals facilitate the implementation of RtI through the expansion of their knowledge of literacy learning there are limitations. This research is limited in that the five principal participants were determined by purposeful selection. The teachers who participated in each school focus group interview were purposely selected by their principals. Therefore, the stories the teachers shared were unique to them and can not be generalized to other teachers.

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Another potential limitation is my subjectivity. I am aware that my experiences as a teacher and consultant influenced the outcome of the study because of the questions I asked and my interpretations of the data. Also the selection of the participants, and the construction of the interview questions were influenced by my perspective. Additionally, there is an assumption that the participants answered questions truthfully; therefore, the purposeful selection of the participants of this study limits the application of the results of this study to other contexts.

The data collection and interpretation methods in a case study contain aspects that may be considered subjective (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005). This researcher worked with the principal and teacher participants in a consulting capacity relating to early childhood instructional practices. The interviews, observations, and focus groups were conducted, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by a single researcher. Therefore, the possibility of researcher bias or error is present in this study.

This researcher used various strategies to reduce error and bias including the triangulation of data, participant proofing of transcripts, and consultation with colleagues (Maxwell, 2005; Glesne, 2006). Participants had the option to participate in the study to minimize any conflict of interest. They were provided an opportunity to review transcripts for accuracy. While any findings of this study cannot necessarily be generalized to all groups of educators; hopefully, this project provides insight into possible applications to principals in other schools and situations.

The research questions are considered throughout the remaining chapters. Chapter two is a literature review that examines research on principals' knowledge of reading in the context of RtI and professional learning communities. Chapter three is a

presentation of the methods that were used to conduct the study. Chapter four provides

descriptions of the principals who participated in the study and an analysis of the patterns

and themes that emerged as a result of interviews, observations, and focus group

discussions. Chapter five summarizes the findings of the study, draws conclusions, and

provides suggestions for future research.

Definition of Terms

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 established an

  accountability system whereby each state determines the minimum student

  achievement levels students need to meet each year.

alphabetic principle: Understanding the concept that letters and combinations of letters

  represent individual phonemes in written words (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011).

differentiated instruction: A process of matching instruction to meet the needs of learners.

emergent (early) literacy: Literacy learning is an ongoing process that begins at birth and

  evolves when children are exposed to books, read to, encouraged to talk about

  stories and events, and given opportunities to explore books on their own

  (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

fluency: Ability to read text quickly, accurately, and expressively. Fluency provides a

  link between word recognition and comprehension (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011).

instructional leadership: School leaders create and sustain a climate for learning that puts

  students' learning first. The four roles of an instructional leader are "resource

  provider, instructional resource, communicator, and visible presence" (Marzano,

  Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p.18).

intervention: A modification in instructing a student in an area of learning or behavioral

difficulty to improve performance (Cortiella, 2011).

phonics: The study of the relationships between letters and the sounds they represent

(Pinnell & Fountas, 2011).

phonological awareness: The ability to understand that speech is composed of parts.

Children typically develop phonological awareness by understanding that

sentences consist of words, words consist of syllables, syllables consist of onsets

and rimes, and syllables can be further broken down to phonemes (Pinnell &

Fountas, 2011).

phonemic awareness: The ability to understand that sounds in spoken language work

together to make words (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011).

professional learning community: Leaders and teachers share a collective mission and

vision to seek answers to strengthen the learning of students. This is

accomplished through collective inquiry and collaboration (DuFour & Eaker,

1998).

progress monitoring: A scientifically based practice used to assess students' academic or

behavioral performance; evaluate the effectiveness of instructional strategies; or

monitor the implementation of interventions.

reading process: Children typically proceed through developmental steps as they learn to

read and construct meaning from text (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011).

response to intervention (RtI): A framework of providing high quality instruction and

intervention that includes differentiation to meet the individual needs of students;

monitoring progress frequently to make adjustments to instruction as needed; and

using data to make instructional decisions.

shared leadership: A situation where the leader shares the responsibility of decision

making with members of the organization (Hoy & Miskel, 2005).

struggling reader: A student who has not mastered the skills required to read fluently and

to comprehend text written at a level that one could reasonably expect a student of

that age to read independently (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011).

transformational leadership A leadership approach that causes change in individuals and

social systems where followers are converted to leaders and leaders are converted

into moral advocates (Marion, 2002).

vocabulary: The words an individual knows and understands in oral and written

language (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011).

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CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The following literature review is designed to navigate the reader through the multiple areas of this study. The review begins with a historical perspective of how Response to Intervention (RtI) evolved through public policy followed by an examination of the stages of reading development and best practices relating to the acquisition of reading and supporting struggling readers. Then the role of professional learning communities and reflective practice in supporting reading achievement in students is examined. Next, the review of literature relates a theoretical lens of leadership theories and research to characteristics of effective principals in relationship to reading acquisition in struggling readers. Finally, the literature review examines research relating to principal knowledge of the reading process, which sets the stage for the relevance of this study.

History of Response to Intervention (RtI)

Federal and state educational policy relating to student achievement has led us into an age of accountability and data analysis. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 led to several policies relating to equity in educational opportunities including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2000; Paradis, 2011) . ESEA was premised on the involvement of the federal government in public schools through allocations of federal funds in the form of Title I programs. These federal funds were intended to improve the educational opportunities of

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disadvantaged students through Title I and Head Start programs (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2000; ESEA, 1965, Public Law 89-10).

Additional legislation such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 also provided federal support for disadvantaged and disabled students (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2000). The federal focus through the 1980s and 1990s moved from issues of equity and access in education to outcomes and accountability (Paradis, 2011). Standard based curriculum and assessment directives became the focus of reform.

ESEA was reauthorized as Public Law 107-110, commonly known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2001) mandates that all students have access to a "fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards" (Sec. 101). Schools began efforts to implement programs and strategies to meet annual yearly progress (AYP) as mandated through NCLB (Allington, 2009; Jennings, 2002; NCLB, Public Law 107-110). In June 2012, the United States Department of Education (USDE) approved South Carolina's request for ESEA flexibility. The waiver allowed South Carolina to establish an alternative school accountability system that identifies schools using an A-F grading system based on proficiency in reading, mathematics, science, and history as well as graduation rate for high schools. To determine a school's grade, South Carolina determines whether individual subgroups meet achievement targets, the 95 percent assessment participation requirement, and graduation rate targets.

Reports such as the National Research Council's Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) and the Report of the National

Reading Panel, Teaching Children to Read (2000) advocated for research based instructional practices in the teaching of reading that included using data to drive instructional decisions. Instructional programs including Reading First were developed as the result of the National Reading Panel's report to apply scientifically research based instructional approaches to promote reading achievement and are considered a forerunner to Response to Intervention (Allington, 2009; Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009; Keane, 2010) . The *Learning Disability Summit* in 2002 brought researchers and practitioners together to discuss the problem of inadequate and ineffective instruction contributing to the over identification of minority and low income students having learning disabilities (American Institute for Research, 2002; Bradley, Danielson & Hallahan, 2002; Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly, & Vaughn, 2004).

Prior to the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (P. L. 108-446) 2004, learning disabilities were identified through an evaluation process that involved testing a student to determine a discrepancy between IQ and performance on academic assessments. The reauthorization of the IDEA (2004) provided schools with an alternative way of identifying special education eligibility that involved providing students with tiered interventions. The IDEA 2004 legislation, besides providing this measurement strategy to identify students with disabilities, also set the stage for providing appropriate instruction to struggling students to avoid future identification of learning disabilities (Johnston, 2010).

Viewing RtI as a means of preventing learning disability identification makes RtI an instructional process that targets "responsive teaching" and improved teaching and teacher capability (Johnston, 2010, p. 602). Thus, the RtI model evolved from No Child

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Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2001 and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 2004 to address the needs of students not meeting proficient standards (Allington, 2008; Paradis, 2011; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007).

The Rationale for RTI

The philosophy behind No Child Left Behind legislation is that all children can learn. The 2004 legislation set the goal for all students to meet proficient standards by 2014 (Allington, 2009; NCLB, 2001). Nationally, however, approximately 40 percent of students do not make adequate progress (Allington, 2008). NCLB and IDEA 2004 caused educators to reexamine how they support students who are not making adequate progress (Jennings, 2002).

The undergirding premise of RtI is that if all students receive appropriate instruction, they will make adequate yearly progress (Allington, 2008; Allington, 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). Therefore, the primary goals for implementing RtI are to reduce the number of students identified for special education, provide effective early intervention, and provide professional development to teachers of lowest performing schools.

RtI has four core principles (Allington, 2009; Hall, 2008). The first principle states that all students should receive effective core instruction delivered using research based best practices. The model assumes that approximately 80% of students will make adequate progress when instructional delivery is consistent and done with fidelity. Where the percentage of students making adequate progress is considerably less than 80%, there are other extraneous variables impacting performance such as unaligned

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curriculum, ineffective instructional practices, or environmental variables (Allington, 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007).

Allington (2010) maintains that instruction must match the reading level of the students versus placing students in the position of dealing with instructional materials that frustrate them. They need substantial time reading successfully to internalize a complex set of skills and strategies needed to develop into proficient readers (Johnston, 2010). Students should interact with materials they can read with 99% accuracy for the majority of the school day (Allington, 2010). Allington also advocates for schools to schedule an additional 30 to 45 minutes of reading instruction daily for struggling readers (2010). This is a challenge since approximately 75 percent of classroom teachers are not expert at teaching reading (Pianta, Belsky, Houts, & Morrison, 2007). Therefore, classroom instruction has to improve first before we can see the type of improvement in reading achievement we need.

The second principle of RtI is that students who experience difficulties receive research based interventions (Fuchs et al., 2007). Student intervention plans are developed to target individual needs of students. Interventions begin in the classroom and vary in duration, frequency, and intensity depending on the needs of the student (Allington, 2009; Fuchs et al., 2007). The third principle involves analyzing interventions for effectiveness through frequent and predetermined progress monitoring. Modifications to the intervention, such as adjusting the frequency and intensity of an intervention, can be implemented if the progress is insignificant (Alington, 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007).

Finally, the fourth principle of RtI involves a team approach (Allington, 2009; Buffum et al., 2009; Hall, 2008; Johnston, 2010). Teachers, administrators, and other school staff work collaboratively in RtI teams to strategically address the needs of struggling students. The responsibility for student achievement is embraced by a team and is not exclusively that of the primary classroom teacher (Allington, 2009; Hall, 2008).

The RtI team takes the idea of professional learning communities (PLC) and focuses on the needs of each individual student. PLCs have a positive effect on the collective responsibility for student success and the increased understanding of content and curriculum standards (Buffum et al; 2009; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008). The team determines strategies for individual students using a problem solving approach. Interdisciplinary teams at the school level enhance the collaboration with general education teachers by using problem solving strategies to address challenging instructional situations (Allington, 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Hord & Sommers, 2008).

RtI has the potential to ensure that all students receive appropriate instruction through a systematic approach to delivering instruction and intervention according to student needs (Allington, 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). The delivery of interventions in RtI involves five components, including student assessment and decision making, research-based interventions, tiered implementation, fidelity of implementation, and training of staff (Buffum et al., 2009; DiPeerna & Glover, 2007).

The implementation of RtI frameworks varies with some models using two tiers and others as many as six (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009). However, the most common framework reflects three tiers. The first level, sometimes referred to as the primary tier,

includes the core instructional program delivered by the general education teacher. Intervention in the classroom includes differentiation of instruction, accommodations to classroom environment and instruction, and problem solving to address the needs of students (Allington, 2008; Allington, 2009; DiPeerna & Glover, 2007). The underlying premise of the primary tier is that most students when presented with sound instructional experiences will be successful. Students experiencing difficulties in learning to read need knowledgeable and expert teachers (Allington, 2009; Archibald, 2006; Johnston, 2010). Johnston (2010) suggests that this can be accomplished through strategic and sustained professional development that builds on the capabilities of the teaching staff as a group.

However, some students will not make adequate progress and may require additional support at the next tier in RtI, sometimes referred to as Tier 2, or secondary prevention (Allington, 2008; Fuchs et al., 2007). At this level, targeted intervention is typically presented to students in a small group setting several times a week for a number of weeks (DiPerna & Glover, 2007). Students receiving intervention are progress monitored frequently to assess whether the student is responding to the intervention. If there is inadequate progress, the student may receive additional intervention at the next level called Tier 3 or tertiary prevention (DiPerna & Glover, 2007; Fuchs et al., 2007). In Tier 3 intervention occurs in an individual one-on-one setting, and the frequency and duration of the intervention are generally more intensive than at the previous two levels (DiPerna & Glover, 2007).

The instruction students receive in the classroom at Tier 1 needs to be grounded in research-based instructional practices and targeted to meet their individual needs (Fuchs et al., 2007; Pianta et al., 2007). Student assessment and decision making for RtI are

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handled through universal screenings of academic and behavioral performance to identify students who need targeted intervention.

Two primary approaches are used for student intervention: a standard protocol approach which involves following a predetermined procedure or an individualized approach where procedures are adapted to needs of individual students (Fuchs et al., 2007). A number of research studies have examined the effectiveness of standard protocol approaches and have typically found that students experience positive outcomes as a result of the interventions when they are presented in multiple intensive tiers of service (DiPerna & Glover, 2007; Johnston, 2010; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003). Schools in the beginning stages of implementing RtI are more likely to use a standard protocol method that provides a structured framework as a model. Over time the standard framework can evolve into a process that concentrates on differentiated and individualized interventions based on student needs (DiParna & Glover, 2007; Vaughn et al., 2003). Ultimately, students reading achievement is most likely to be impacted by the quality of instruction (National Institute of Child Health, 2000; Stephens, 2008).

Historically students who experienced academic difficulties were not identified for special services until they reached the upper elementary grades. Educators followed a "wait-to-fail" approach meaning that students had to fail repeatedly prior to receiving services (Allington, 2009; DiParna & Glover, 2007). Difficulties early childhood students experienced were dismissed as developmental and typically were not addressed beyond the general education classroom (Allington, 2008). The advantages of RtI include an earlier identification of students requiring intervention or special services. Fuchs,

Compton, Fuchs, Bryant, and Davis (2008) analyzed a large first-grade longitudinal field studies funded by the U.S. Department of Education to determine three questions regarding RtI's secondary level of intervention relating to reading including which students should participate in Tier 2, what instruction should be implemented to reduce reading disabilities, and how responsiveness and non-responsiveness should be defined (p. 413). Fuchs et al. (2008) stresses the importance of assessment in identification of students for intervention.

Traditionally assessments demonstrated what students knew and the assessor was a neutral participant who provided standardized directions. However, the role of assessment in RtI is to support "a process for understanding the differences within individual learners and their responsiveness to instruction" (Lidz & Gindis, 2003, p. 134). Therefore, assessment and instruction in the RtI framework are interconnected and interdependent (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Wren, 2011). Formative assessments such as the Dominie Writing and Reading Assessment Portfolio (DeFord, 2004) and the Developmental Reading Assessment, K-3 (DRA) (Beaver, 2006) provide information relating to the learning potential as well as information regarding a student's strengths and weaknesses; so, teachers can engage in an ongoing process of linking assessment with instruction and learning (Allington, 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Fuchs, 2008; Johnston, 2010; Lidz & Gindis, 2003; Wren, 2011).

Additionally, assessment can also provide information relating to individual learning styles and needs according to the cognitive development of a child (Lidz & Gindis, 2003; Wren, 2011). Assessment helps teachers identify those students who would benefit with early intervention (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). Data from assessments

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assist teachers in identifying the type and intensity of interventions needed (Allington, 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Fuchs et al., 2008; Johnston, 2010).

Another principle of RtI is that interventions must be implemented with fidelity and integrity (DiPerna & Glover, 2007). The integrity of intervention delivery is essential for continued student performance gains, and deviation in the procedures of intervention compromise outcomes (DiPerna & Glover, 2007, Johnston, 2010). The level of support provided to implement an intervention impacts the integrity of an intervention. Elliott and DiPerna (2001) suggest that some interventions do not fit well within the classroom procedures, therefore, the identification of specific support is needed to ensure the success of some interventions. Noell et al. (2005) in their study of two treatment programs identified three strategies that facilitated the positive implementation of interventions including weekly interviews between a consultant and the interventionist, interviews that focused on implementation of the intervention, and feedback analysis on the effectiveness of the intervention with specific students. Comprehensive and ongoing training and support of teachers are necessary to build the capacity for implementation of interventions (DiPerna & Glover, 2007; Johnston, 2010). The climate of the school needs to be such that stakeholders are open and motivated to change (Adelman & Taylor, 2003; Diperna & Glover, 2007). The implementation of programs involves "creating readiness, initial implementation, institutionalizing new approaches, and ongoing evolution and renewal" (Adelman & Taylor, 2003, p. 535). The leadership team of the school becomes the primary group to facilitate implementation and provide the necessary support to teachers and staff. Kratochwill, Volpianski, Clements, & Ball (2007) suggest a structure for instituting data teams in schools to meet regularly to analyze student data from

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universal screenings, identify students needing intervention, and make group decisions regarding the strategies and interventions to implement with groups of students. Schools using data teams tend to have more positive results in meeting their goals of providing interventions to struggling students (Kratochwill et al., 2007). Teachers who see the positive outcomes for their students are more readily accepting of new approaches of team data analysis and training on interventions (Kovaleski et al., 2007).

Reading Theory and Practice

Early literacy development is dependent on the physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language development of children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Epstein, Hobmann & Hobmann, 2011; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007). The physical development in young children undergoes rapid changes within a short amount of time and affects gross motor, fine motor, and sensory-perceptual development (Copple & Bredekamp 2009; Holmann & Weikart, 1985; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007). The interdependence of these developmental areas has implications for curriculum and instruction in early childhood classrooms. The physical health of young children is paramount for optimal learning. It is also important that teachers and administrators understand that young children are naturally active and require literacy experiences that involve active learning and physical movement (Copple & Bredekamp 2009; Epstein et al., 2011). The social-emotional skills children develop at the ages of 3 and 4 are critically important in influencing future school achievement. Therefore, the classroom environment needs to be supportive of children and encourage active engagement that includes asking questions and interacting with peers and teachers to problem solve and

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explore (Copple & Bredekamp 2009; Epstein et al., 2011; Holmann & Weikart, 1985; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory examines how the multiple contexts of children's lives impact their development and the reciprocal interaction between and among the various contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Holmann & Weikart, 1985). Context in relation to the ecological systems theory is the various social systems that influence a child's development either directly or indirectly. The most influential system is the microsystem which includes systems with which the child has direct contact such as parents, family, teachers, and friends (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). The next level is the mesosystem which is defined by the relationships that exist between and among the individuals or settings of the microsystems. Mesosystems involve interactions such as teacher-parent relationships or school-community partnerships (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). The next level is the exosystem. This includes settings in which the child does not directly interact such as the child's school district or the parent's workplace. The next level, macrosystem, includes society's culture, economics, and politics (Bronbenbrenner, 1976).

No Child Left Behind legislation is an example of a public policy relating to education and social policy that indirectly affects children from the macrosystem level. The ecological system theory illustrates the complexity of issues that potentially affect the literacy development of children within an RtI framework (Keane, 2010). The role of the teacher within the tiers of RtI along with his or her relationship with a child can be important influences in the child's literacy development. The strength of a child's mesosystem can be determined by the degree to which his microsystems interact with one

another. An example of this in the RtI framework is how the interactions of classroom teachers providing interventions in the various tiers can influence the degree of progress a student makes (Allington, 2009; Keane, 2010).

Oral language acquisition is the foundation for future literacy (Holmann & Weikart, 1985; Holmann & Weikart, 1985) Children begin acquiring language at birth and by the age of five or six most children have mastered many conventions of oral language (Holmann & Weikart, 1985). Children who are exposed to home environments that are abounding with language and support for literacy are more likely to be readers. Halliday (1973) identified seven functions of language that play a critical role in language acquisition and ultimately impact children's development of reading including instrumental, regulatory, interactional, personal, heuralistic, imaginative, and informative. The first stages of language development help the child satisfy basic needs while the last stages help the child interact and make meaning of the environment (Halliday, 1973). Children develop language through their interactions with other children and adults (Halliday, 1973; Holmann & Weikart, 1985; Pinnell, 1985; Vygotsky, 1962; Vygotsky, 1994). According to Vygotsky (1962, 1994) there is a "zone of proximal development" where the scaffolding of language occurs when a more experienced child or adult helps a less experienced child expand his or her thinking and understanding. However, language development can be thwarted by a number of variables including poverty and environment. Therefore, early childhood classrooms need to be language rich with print and oral language (Copple & Bredekamp 2009; Holmann & Weikart, 1985; Pinnell, 1985; Epstein et al., 2011). Strickland and Shanahan (2004) in a review of research on early literacy development identified the following skills and abilities as being associated

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with future reading achievement: "oral language (listening comprehension, oral language vocabulary); alphabetic code (alphabetic knowledge, phonological/phonemic awareness, invented spelling); and print knowledge/concepts (environmental print, concepts about print)" (p. 15).

"The Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read" (National Institute of Health (NIH) (2000) describes five components of instruction that should be part of a comprehensive literacy program: phonemic awareness instruction, phonics instruction, fluency instruction, vocabulary instruction, and comprehension instruction. The panel reported that explicit and direct instruction of the five components is essential for students to become strong readers and concluded that good teaching was the most important determining factor in future reading performance (Allington, 2009; NIH, 2000; Stephens 2008). Therefore, understanding the stages of reading development and the instructional practices that support those stages is critical (Allington, 2009; Booth & Rowsell, 2007). Children transition through stages starting in their first few years where reading is mimicked and approximated. Children begin to perceive themselves as readers as their reading skills begin emerging. In the next stage children are developing readers and read some text independently. Then children develop into fluent readers with increased sight vocabulary. Finally, children become independent readers, reading text silently and independently while self monitoring for meaning (Booth & Rowsell, 2007; Pinnell & Fountas, 2011).

The era of accountability propelled by NCLB legislation is evident by the emergence of early childhood curriculum standards and assessment in the late 90s (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007). The National Center on Education and the Economy

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(1998) generated a comprehensive document focusing on speaking and listening standards for preschool through the third grade. These standards focused on oral language development in authentic settings.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2005) first published standards for program licensure in 1994 to provide specific criteria to assure high quality early childhood programs. The five primary NAEYC standards are "promoting child development and learning; building family and community partnerships; observing, documenting and assessing; teaching and learning; and becoming a professional" (p. 6). Sub-Standard 4c Understanding Content Knowledge in Early Education calls for early childhood educators to focus curriculum on "research based understanding of your children's development and learning processes" (p. 39). NAEYC recognizes that children's first contact with content area material occurs in the early childhood classroom and, therefore, sets the groundwork for future understanding and success.

This focus on using scientifically based best practices has helped professionalize early childhood classrooms (Sherrill, 2009; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007). According to Sherrill (2009), best practices should address the following issues: integrating child play in literacy learning; "providing a print rich environment; encouraging linguistically and culturally responsive teaching; attending to prevention and intervention" (p. 43); providing differentiated instruction; delivering instruction in authentic situations; providing scaffolding to support various developmental levels; utilizing technology strategically and wisely; and integrating literature and literacy throughout instructional experiences. Early childhood teachers need an understanding of the language continuum

to support literacy development in their students (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011). Children need learning experiences that allow them to explore their environment to develop the language needed to read and write; the ability to engage in meaningful conversations with peers and adults; develop vocabulary; utilize language, reading and writing to build their cultural identify; perceive reading and writing as pleasurable; develop strategies to understand stories and text; draw on reading and writing for different purposes; use diverse print and non-print resources; develop concepts of print and an awareness of letters, sounds, and the relationship between letters and sounds (NAEYC, 2005, p. 41; Pinnell & Fountas, 2011).

Standards have also been developed at the state level. The South Carolina Department of Education's Good Start Grow Smart Early Learning Standards (2009) have been adapted from national standards and include guidelines for curriculum and instruction related to approaches to learning, social emotional development, language and literacy development, mathematical development, and physical development. They include a continuum of learning standards for three-year olds through five-year olds.

Professional Learning Communities

The skills required to implement an RtI framework is dependent on the knowledge and skills of the teachers and administrators implementing scientifically researched interventions, progress monitoring, and assessments (Kratochwill et al., 2007). Ongoing and sustained professional development is needed in supporting and sustaining school improvement through the implementation of an RtI framework (Kratochwill et al., 2007). NCLB Act of 2001 identifies the goal of improving the quality of instruction through professional development. The primary goal of RtI according to Fuchs and

Fuchs (2009) is to "prevent long-term and debilitating academic failure, is better served with a unified model that encourages a shared understanding among all school-based practitioners about intervention intensity, roles and responsibilities, and constructive and effective relationships between general and special education" (p. 41). A unified effort allows schools to organize resources and personnel optimally to execute RtI more efficiently and effectively.

Kratochwill et al. (2007) reported the findings of Porter, Garet, Desimone, Yoon and Bierman (2000) in a longitudinal study of the Eisenhower Professional Development Program. Professional development that was ongoing, embedded in the school environment, and involved teachers within the same school opposed to isolated workshops and trainings was more positively associated with improved student achievement. The need for professional development is highlighted by the inadequacies of pre-service training of educators. Many school districts look to school psychologists to conduct evaluations and implement interventions relating to student academic deficiencies, yet most psychologists lack training to conduct interventions and have limited knowledge of the reading process (Shernoff, Kratochwill & Stoiber, 2003) Most graduate programs do not prepare students in evidence-based prevention and intervention programs (Shernoff et al., 2003). The same is true for most teachers since their preservice training related to behavior analysis and or reading process is generally limited to one general undergraduate course. Even special education teachers have limited training relating to strategies to address behavioral and academic problems (Shernoff et al., 2003).

Principals dealing with today's challenges need to collaborate with individuals and groups to develop, implement, and sustain an instructional program that meets the needs of all students (Green, 2010). Principals need the capacity to make informed decisions relating to instructional programs through the use of data analysis; understanding the interrelationships within the organization; linking all stakeholders through relationships; and engaging in leadership best practices (Fullan, 2001, Green, 2010). Principals who exhibit self-confidence and high expectations for success are more likely to have teachers apply their knowledge and expertise towards solving problems (Leech & Fulton, 2003). Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2005) describe a model of supervision that allows principals to modify support that ranges from a directive approach to a collaborative and even to a non-directive approach depending on the developmental needs of the teacher. When these conditions are present in schools, teachers feel empowered to expand their knowledge and understanding, and consequently improve their practice. Teachers who perceive their principals as effective are more likely to rate highly their self-efficacy and collective efficacy (Farmer, 2010).

The image of the principal has shifted from an omnipotent person to a learner who works alongside of teachers to discuss instructional problems and seek solutions collaboratively. Learning within a professional learning community (PLC) is centered in collegial inquiry. The Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) (2003) defines a PLC as a team of teachers engaged in purposeful practice that is collaborative, ongoing, reflective, and results-oriented and employs an action-research cycle to inform instruction. A PLC has supportive leadership, common beliefs, values

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and vision; supportive learning and teaching conditions; and shared personal practices (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008).

Principals are the catalyst for PLCs through collaboration between teachers, parents and students. Principals promote PLCs by listening, questioning, observing, and encouraging conversations that focus on student performance (Buffum et al., 2009; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Sterr, 2011). Transforming a school into a PLC involves building a shared authentic mission that encompasses the idea that the purpose of the school is improved student achievement (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Sergiovanni, 2004). Staff collectively examines its core beliefs regarding student learning and asks critical questions such as: Do we really believe that all students can learn?, Do we take responsibility that all students can learn?, Do our actions reflect the belief that all students can learn? (DuFour &Eaker, 1998, pp. 58-60). Decisions in a PLC are purposeful, thoughtful, and collaborative (Hord & Sommers, 2008). The role of the principal in creating the conditions to develop and sustain a PLC is critical (Buffum et al., 2009; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Principals build consensus through a shared mission and vision and empower the teachers and staff by involving them in shared decision making. They provide teachers with the knowledge, resources, and professional development directly linked to the goal of student achievement (Booth & Rowell, 2007; Hall, 2008).

The establishment of PLCs facilitates a shift from traditional to holistic teaching. In holistic teaching, the role of the teacher is a facilitator who helps students learn by constructing meaning, "by bringing meaning to and taking meaning from their experiences" (Peterson, 1992, p. 6). Collaboration occurs between teachers and students,

between teachers and teachers, and between teachers and administrators as the PLC is developed and fostered (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Peterson, 1992). Conversation and dialogue are essential components of a learning community. Learning communities are safe places where stakeholders feel free to express their ideas and thoughts. Professional learning communities are mechanisms to improve student achievement through collective and sustained problem solving (Lai, McNaughton, Timperley, & Hsiao, 2009; York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Montie, 2001).

The benefits of the PLC include a reduction in feelings of isolation; increased commitment to a shared mission and vision; shared responsibility for student achievement; increased understanding of curriculum and instruction; increased teacher satisfaction and morale; changes in teacher implementation of instructional strategies; and a higher commitment to making and sustaining changes related to student achievement (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Sergiovanni, 2004). PLCs can impact the social, cognitive, emotional, physical, and reflective learning schemes (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Gregory & Kuzmich, 2007). PLC teams that support all five areas increase the chances of improved student achievement (Gregory & Kuzmich, 2007). The emotional aspect is especially critical as members of a PLC need to feel safe and supported especially if they are expected to try new approaches and take risks (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Gregory & Kuzmich, 2007).

A school PLC team moves through stages of forming, storming, norming, and performing (York-Barr et al., 2001). During the forming stage the interactions between members of the group tend to be tentative, polite and formal. Team members in the storming stage begin the process of problem solving and setting priorities as they

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articulate differences and conflicts. The team establishes priorities and roles for team members in the norming stage. Finally, during the performing stage the team works together cohesively, making shared decisions and demonstrating creativity (York-Barr et al., 2001).

However, an essential element for PLCs is extensive knowledge of student needs and instructional strategies (Allington, 2009). The teachers who control the learning environments of the various tiers in RtI need to be engaged in ongoing communication to ensure the effectiveness of interventions in relationship to literacy development in students (Keane, 2010). Tomlinson (1999) advises school leaders to keep the vision for meeting the needs of students clear and simple. She describes a cyclic model to support the use of differentiation to meet the diverse needs of students that starts with seeking input (staff development, small group inquiries, and study groups); developing sense-making (observations, peer debriefing, reflection, and goal setting); producing output and transfer to practice (classroom implementation through co-teaching and individual teaching); and receiving more input (peer coaching, process, outcome analysis, and student feedback) (p. 113). An ongoing comprehensive assessment system also needs to be embedded in the problem-solving cycle. A combination of student data that include descriptions of student learning with an analysis of patterns of teaching and learning provides the team with opportunities to test the hypothesis and make data-driven decisions (Stephen et al., 1986; Tomlinson, 1999).

Teacher Reflection

John Dewey is considered one of the original initiators of reflective practice in education although the work of earlier philosophers such as Plato, Socrates, and Buddha

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obviously contributed historically to reflective practice (Dewey, 1963; Marion, 2002; York-Barr et al., 2001). The 1986 Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy task force on teaching resulted in the current National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) (Lieberman & Miller, 2000). Proposition four of the NBPTS says that teachers "think systematically about their practice and learn from experience" and requires teachers to "critically examine their practice on a regular basis to deepen knowledge created by research as well as" knowledge that is created in the process of action and reflection on practice" (Lieberman & Miller, 2000, p. 49). York-Barr et al., (2001) define reflective practice as "an inquiry approach to teaching that involves a personal commitment to continuous learning and improvement" (p. 3).

Reflective practice involves building teachers' capacity in relationship to instruction (Lasley, 1992). The primary goal of reflection is to develop the most accurate and appropriate appraisal of a situation so decision making is productive and leads to improvement (Mays, 2009). Reflective thinking provides ongoing opportunities for teachers to learn; increases the number of perspectives present to help problem solve; increase application of new understandings to situations; enhances responsibility for learning and improvement; builds relationships and group efficacy; and serves as a link between theory and practice (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Lasley, 1992).

NCLB legislation brought a focus on quantitative accountability that seems to contrast with reflection because of the immeasurable subjective aspect of reflection. However, the process of analyzing reform efforts in the form of reflection is a key component of professional learning communities and has shown to increase the self efficacy in teachers and increase student achievement (Bright, 1996; Taylor, Peterson,

Pearson, & Rodriguez, 2002). Effective teachers make informed decisions that are the most appropriate for individual students based on reflection (Bright, 1996; Clay, 1991). As teachers are given the opportunity to reflect on their beliefs, experiences and practices to make instructional decisions their students are more successful in learning to read and write in the classroom (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Reflection helps practitioners develop a greater self awareness relating to teaching practices and, therefore, results in greater professional growth (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Reflection allows teachers to move beyond their own cultural perspective regarding the acquisition and development of reading and gain insight into the individual student perspectives, interests, and learning styles (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004).

Effective reading teachers engage in an ongoing examination of their teaching practices, try out new strategies, and constantly refine their practice. Gambrell and Mazzonie (1999) examined best practices of reading instruction and concluded that reflection is a vital component. Reflection involves being open to different points of view to extend thinking and develop new understandings (Ross & Gray, 2006). Teachers consider teacher reflection and professional development as influential practices to improve student test scores and their teaching (Risko et al., 2008).

Group reflections help teachers challenge and develop their personal ideas relating to teaching literacy; however, reflection must be guided by a knowledgeable facilitator (Risko et al., 2008). Duffy (2002) said that the most successful teachers of literacy handle the responsibility of accountability and reflection by "visioning" (p. 334). When teachers have a vision, they take responsibility for the instructional decisions

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needed to accomplish the goals related to student achievement (Duffy, 2002). Four characteristics in teacher visionaries include their ability to make decisions based on observations of students and related to their interests and needs; their impression of themselves as independent reflective thinkers; their strong self identity that allows them to be autonomous decision makers rather than followers; and their overwhelming passion for teaching that outweighs frustrations (Duffy, 2002).

Au (2002), in a study of the literacy learning in Hawaiian students, found a lack of understanding between the literacy learning cultures of students and teachers. The teachers who reflected on their literacy culture in relation to their students were more effective at adapting their teaching to meet individual learning styles in their students. Novice and inexperienced teachers benefit from scaffolding in reflective conversations as a mechanism to expand their knowledge base (Au, 2002; Risko et al., 2008; Vygotsky, 1962).

One type of scaffolding to help in the reflective process is cognitive coaching. Cognitive coaching facilitates the metacognitive processes through three types of reflection: the planning conversations, the reflecting conversation, and the problem solving conversation (Costa & Garmston, 2002; Sherrill, 2009). Coaches use different strategies to facilitate this metacognitive approach including acknowledging, paraphrasing, clarifying, and providing data and resources (Costa & Garmston, 2002). Trust is necessary in a coaching relationship and is built through rapport (Dufour, 1998; Hall, 2008; Sergiovanni, 2004). Costa and Garmston (2002) state that different levels of trust must be present in a coaching relationship including self-trust, trust between individuals, trust in the coaching relationship, and trust in the environment. The benefits

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of cognitive coaching are seen in the reflective process. Teachers through their reflective conversations examine, refine, and develop their thinking related to instructional decisions (Costa & Garmston, 2002; Risko et al., 2008). Cognitive skills influence how teachers think in four domains: preactive thought which is what the teacher thinks about as he or she plans instruction; interactive thinking which occurs simultaneously as the teacher teaches; reflective thought which occurs after the teaching as the teacher analyzes what happened during a lesson; and projective thinking that occurs as the teacher synthesizes what happened and plans for future teaching (Costa & Garmston, 2002, p. 150). Teachers differ in their thinking because of their background, training, and experience. Expert teachers have more knowledge, can integrate new knowledge readily into new situations, and, in general, can problem solve more efficiently and effectively than novice teachers (Costa & Garmston, 2002).

The leadership role in reflective settings extends beyond the principal. Within the reflective process, everyone has the potential and right to work as a leader (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2001). Leading is a shared endeavor. The relationship between teachers and teachers and between teachers and principal involves shared leadership opportunities depending on the circumstances. York-Barr et al. (2001) cites Lambert (1998) who developed a model for encouraging the capacity of teachers as leaders. The model involves leadership that has "reciprocal learning processes that enable participants to construct and negotiate meanings leading to a shared purpose of schooling. Leadership is about learning that leads to constructive change" (Lambert, 1998, pp. 8-9). Schumaker and Sommers (2001) attribute successful principals with using shared leadership and transformational cultures.

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A key factor in school improvement reforms is shared leadership that involves both formal and informal leaders in the organization. This ensures that stakeholders with a broad perspective of the school are involved in the school improvement efforts (Dufour, 1998; Fullan, 2001; Schumaker & Sommers, 2001; Wahlstrom & Lewis, 2010). The composition of the team determines the representation of perspectives.

The Role of Leadership in RtI

The role of modern principals has changed from a managerial focus to a reflective, transformational style of leadership (Blase & Blase, 1999; Ediger, 2008). The principal role is complex with an overarching responsibility to provide leadership in supporting teachers to help struggling students. Principals guide teachers to use strategies that facilitate students using divergent kinds of thinking (Ediger, 2008). Principals must play a critical role within the RtI team. They are responsible for supporting and facilitating the RtI framework by promoting a climate that supports the practices that allow teachers to analyze data and reflect on teaching practices to address the needs of students (Allington, 2009; Hall, 2008; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007). Most research relating to the role of principals in supporting student achievement focuses on general characteristics associated with effective leadership in schools. The vision principals create in schools is critical to empower teachers and in turn influence student achievement (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007).

Many variables impact student achievement and certain principal leadership characteristics have different effects in different environments (Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1996). Variables such as school size, community type, student socio-economic status, and school level impact how principals perceive their jobs (Hallinger et al., 1996;

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Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982). Most researchers believe principals indirectly impact student learning through their interactions with teachers and by shaping features in the school organization (Hallinger et al., 1996; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Penlington, Kington, & Day, 2008; Ross & Gray, 2006).

Witziers, Bosker, Kruger, and Meta (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of 5 research studies in the United States, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Singapore to explore the association between principals and student achievement in secondary schools. Their analyses revealed an indirect effect between leadership and student achievement through the principals' influence on teachers' attitudes and practices which in turn may impact student achievement. Principals influence student learning by shaping the school climate and instructional organization.

Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, and Anderson (2010) in a large national study of teachers, principals, community, and state leaders provide a strong positive correlation between the indirect effect of educational leaders and student achievement. Ronnenberg (2000), in a case study examining the role of principals, identified practices that encourage reflection and learning among teachers including: maintaining a focus on student achievement; aligning school activities with the shared school vision; scheduling time for shared planning; encouraging study groups; providing professional development opportunities to expand ideas relating to teaching and learning; and developing a professional library with resources.

Day, Sammons, Hopkins, Leithwood, and Kington (2008) found that leaders of primary schools appear to have more effect directly and indirectly than leaders of secondary schools. Day et al., (2008) also found that the level of influence of leadership

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was greater in the earlier years of a leadership and then generally greater in disadvantaged schools. Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) found that the more leaders focused on teaching and learning the more likely they positively impacted student outcomes. Leithwood and Straus (2009) found that teacher leadership is the largest variable to impact student achievement in turnaround schools. Principals with content knowledge were more effective in affecting change. The most dramatic effects of leadership were found in low performing schools where leadership took a crisis stabilization mode to support recovery (Leithwood & Straus, 2009). However, this research did not reveal the extent of the principals' knowledge of literacy learning or how their knowledge was applied to their reform efforts.

The Standards for Advanced Programs in Educational Leadership (2002) provides guidance for key leadership characteristics including providing a clear vision for student learning, promoting a positive school culture, managing the school organization, and collaborating with parents and the community. Four common characteristics of effective leadership that correlate positively to student achievement include a positive school climate; a safe and well managed school; a vision relating to student learning; and high expectations for students and teachers (Cotton, 2003; Leithwood & Montgomery 1982; Sherrill, 2009; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004). A clear mission communicated by the principal impacts students' opportunity to learn and the teachers' expectations for student achievement (Hallinger et al., 1996). Waters et al. (2004) found that leadership in schools does matter in relationship to student achievement.

A principal's knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment was found to be important for student achievement (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Waters et al.,

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2004). Elementary school principals who are perceived by teachers as strong instructional leaders promote student achievement through their influence on instructional organization of their schools and their interactions with teachers (Hallinger et al., 1996). Principals need the following competencies to be effective leaders: visionary leadership, curriculum and instruction, assessment, reflection, unity of purpose, diversity, inquiry, collaboration, professional development, professionalism, instructional leadership, organizational management, and learning community (Farmer, 2010; Green, 2010;).

Five leadership practices of effective principals include "establishing goals and expectations, allocating resources strategically, planning coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum, promoting and participating in teacher learning and development, and ensuring an orderly and supportive environment" (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 635). Effective principals place the achievement and happiness of students first in their priorities (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Mackey, Pitcher, & Decman, 2006). They perceive themselves as instructional leaders whose job is to ensure that students have opportunities to have the best programs possible. These principals communicate explicitly about their short-term and long-term goals for students by creating a climate of continuous learning for adults that focuses on the academic success of all students by using multiple sources of data (Allington, 2010; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Mackey et al., 2006; Sebring & Bryk, 2000). Effective principals orient their relationship with teachers on the goal of improving the school program and student achievement. Effective principals actively involve themselves in the decisions regarding instructional strategies implemented in classrooms.

Successful principals encourage risk taking, initiative, and continual change (Fullan, 2001; Robinson et al., 2008) Another distinctive factor of effective principals is their effort to impact the integration of school programs vertically across grade levels to support a cumulative effect on student achievement (Fullan, 2001; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982). They build trust with staff through frequent informal interaction that supports teachers' instructional methods; they visit classrooms frequently to observe and provide feedback on instruction; and they use data to focus dialogue on improving instruction (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Mackey et al., 2006).

Professional development is strategic and comprehensive when it addresses teacher growth and reflection (Mackey et al., 2006). Principals strategically provide teachers with professional development opportunities to convey skill and knowledge in teaching strategies (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Leithwood & Jantzi 1999; Robinson et al., 2008).

Effective leaders are involved in the implementation of instructional programs including the professional development provided to teachers (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Robinson et al., 2008). Teachers have opportunities to observe and visit other teachers' classrooms; have unencumbered time to plan and collaborate with other teachers; and participate in inquiry-based, shared decision making to solve educational problems (Barth, 1986; Dufour, 2004; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Mackey et al., 2006; Marks & Printy, 2003).

Transformational, or shared leadership, is associated with continuous school improvement through increasing the capacity of stakeholders (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999;

Marks & Printy, 2003; Sergiovanni, 2004). Shared leadership redistributes power in a school and supports collegial relationships among teachers that are based on trust and support that lead to shared understandings and purpose that is essential to Response to Intervention (Harris, 2003). Leaders who use transformational styles inspire followers and, therefore, change the climate and culture of schools (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Murphy & Riggio, 2003; Strosberg, 2010)

One example of the impact of transformational leadership is illustrated in a qualitative study of two principals from two exemplary northeastern elementary schools in their implementation a school reform initiative called Literacy Collaborative (Ross & Gray, 2006). The principals built trust and encouraged teacher participation in decision making to build a collective responsibility for outcomes (Ross & Gray, 2006). Principals play an important role in cultivating an environment that encourages collaboration and commitment from the entire staff to ensure that learning takes place. Transformational leaders indirectly contribute to student achievement by influencing teacher commitment and beliefs about their collective capacity or efficacy by creating certain organizational conditions that support teaching and learning (Ross & Gray, 2006).

Effective instructional leaders support a climate of change by building collaborative, professional communities through five leadership tasks including curriculum development, group development, supporting teachers, professional development, and action research (Glickman et al., 2005). Furthermore, instructional leaders infuse collaboration, reflective inquiry, and collegial dialogue among teachers. Transformational leaders provide individual, cultural, and structural support to staff while creating a visionary idea of the school, communicating high expectations for student

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learning offering opportunities for collegial collaboration and dialogue, and building a collective school efficacy (Mulford, 2005). Principals with a transformational leadership style are likely to influence teacher beliefs positively about their collective abilities and on their commitment to the organizational goals and values (Ross & Gray, 2006).

Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in his or her capabilities to accomplish a set of actions (Bandura, 2000). Collective efficacy refers to the phenomenon of a group of teachers in a school perceiving the efforts of the group as a whole positively impacting students (Ross & Gray, 2006) A principal influences teacher self-assessments that contribute to efficacy by linking teacher actions to student outcomes (Ross & Gray, 2006). Leadership behaviors that shape teacher efficacy are "emphasizing accomplishment, giving frequent feedback, and promoting an academic emphasis in the school" (Ross & Gray, 2006, pp. 801-802). Principals who have transformational leadership styles contribute to higher collective teacher efficacy and teachers' commitment to the school mission; to the school as a professional community; and to involvement of the external community in setting school directions (Ross & Gray, 2006; Sergiovanni, 2004). This produces an environment that provides for basic human needs of support and trust so that teachers are willing to take risks and put student achievement first (Herzberg, 1966; Maslow, 1954).

Examples of Reading Initiatives

An example of a program that was based on providing intensive professional development and teacher reflection was the South Carolina Reading Initiative (SCRI). SCRI was a three year project focusing on staff development structured as school-based study groups that included groups of teachers and their principals (Stephens et al., 2007).

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Staff development was facilitated by consultants from local universities, the South Carolina State Department of Education, and school based literacy coaches. SCRI focused on three research-based findings relating to reading achievement including: "It is the teacher, not the method that makes the difference" (Stephens et al., 2007, p. 4); "effective professional development has specific characteristics ..... school wide and context specific; supported by the principals; long term…; collegial; based on current knowledge obtained through well-designed research; and adequately funded" (Stephens et al., 2007, pp. 6-7); and "in the field of language arts, there are well-established best practices" (Stephens et al., 2007, p. 8). The best practices used in SCRI were derived from the National Academy of Education report "Becoming a Nation of Readers" (1985) and include: reading aloud to students, providing time for independent reading, having readily available text for students, ensuring books available in classrooms are well written and matched to the children's reading levels; incorporating ample opportunities for writing; helping students develop alphabetic principle; promoting reading fluency; supporting students in making connections to prior experiences; and exposing students to explicit instruction in comprehension strategies (Stephens et al., 2007, pp. 8-9). An analysis of the effectiveness of SCRI indicates that the program impacted the beliefs and practices of participating teachers related to the reading instruction practice and their ability to support struggling students (Stephens et al., 2007).

Programs such as the University of Oregan's Literacy Leaders Institute: Creating the School Wide Literacy Plan provide comprehensive literacy training. School teams comprised of administrators and content area teachers learn to design school literacy plans collaboratively (Suzler, Wolfson, & Rabenburg, 2002). Participants learn key

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reading instructional strategies in a non-threatening, collaborative setting (Suzler et al., 2002). This type of professional development models for principals the important role they play in supporting the school wide programs by encouraging teachers to be risk takers, allowing time for professional development, allocating funds for support materials, and reinforcing the focus on literacy across content areas (Suzler et al., 2002).

Another program developed in Oregon called the Schoolwide Reading Improvement Model (SRIM) was a precursor to the Response to Intervention framework (Kameenui, Simmons, & Coyne, 2000). SRIM included the primary principles of RtI: core classroom instruction, ongoing assessment, and targeted interventions. Principals led school teams through problem solving meetings to analyze data to customize interventions to meet the changing needs of students (Kameenui et al., 2000). The interventions began no later than kindergarten and continued through third grade with focused attention on phonological awareness, alphabetic knowledge, and fluency (Kameenui et al., 2000).

The Data Analysis Framework for Instructional Decision Making (DAFIDM) is a tool developed at Miami University that uses a team approach to implement data driven decision making to improve student achievement (Mokhtari, Rosemary, & Edwards, 2007). DAFIDM used three types of data to improve reading achievement in a junior high setting including professional development data, classroom data, and reading performance data. Guiding questions relating to the data helped the teams use the data to develop goals and action steps related to improved student achievement (Mokhtari et al., 2006).

The Chicago School Reform Act in 1988 is an example of how policy can support student achievement (Sebring & Bryk, 2000). This effort led to increased principal autonomy in hiring practices and substantial funding to purchase resources for the low income students served by these schools (Sebring & Bryk, 2000). A primary assumption was that if local people have authority and resources they can solve local problems. Three common elements among the principals of successful Chicago schools were their leadership style, strategies, and the issues on which they focused. Successful principals promoted collaboration among teachers, facilitated a common focus on student learning, managed school processes efficiently, and motivated staff using a balance of support and pressure (Sebring & Bryk, 2000). The principals of the successful schools set high expectations for teaching and learning and encouraged teachers to experiment with new methods (Sebring & Bryk, 2000). These principals were highly visible and spent considerable time visiting classrooms. Strategies used by these principals include dealing with problems that could be readily solved, maintaining focus on improving student achievement, following a strategic plan for school improvement, and addressing problems (Sebring & Bryk, 2000).

Action research is a reflective framework principals can use to embed new instructional practice relating to teaching reading (Glickman et al., 2005). Individuals or groups of teachers use action research to raise awareness regarding the instructional needs of students (Butterfield, 2009). Action research allows teachers to feel in control and be responsible for their own teaching development while seeking support for areas of weakness. Teachers are more likely to support and implement programs in which they believe (Dartnow & Castelleno, 2000). Fullan (2001) suggests that teachers' receptivity

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to change depends on their participation and buy in to the change effort. Teachers involved in the change are more likely to take responsibility for the outcome of a program (Fullan, 2001). Effective leaders support teachers implementing reform programs and find ways to bring along resistant teachers, community members, and district administrators (Dartnow, Borman, & Stringfield, 2000).

Principal Knowledge of Reading Process and Instruction

Some educators believe that principals can be effective leaders if they have certain leadership characteristics regardless of their educational background and experience. Many research studies explore the relationship of leadership characteristics to effective leadership and school improvement. Considering that nationally almost 40% of students read at below grade level standards by grade three, principals and teachers may lack the skills and knowledge to promote school improvement initiatives related to early childhood reading achievement (Allington, 2008; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007; Szabacsik, 2008). As principals are ultimately responsible for the facilitation and implementation of RtI it is critical that teachers and administrators utilize a collaborative approach that strategically addresses the needs of struggling students (Hall, 2008). Principals need to be knowledgeable about the reading process and reading instruction (Stein & Nelson, 2003). Several states including South Carolina use evaluative tools such as the Program for Assisting, Developing, and Evaluating Principal Performance (PADEPP) to identify the strengths and weaknesses of principals (2010). An element of this tool is designing a professional development plan for individual principals. While this could be a vehicle for principals to become more knowledgeable regarding literacy learning in young children it is not required.

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Leaders identify problems and facilitate problem solving and decision making in schools. This process has to include understanding pedagogical content knowledge (Stein & Nelson, 2003). Three concepts that help an elementary school principal influence school reading programs and student test scores include a clear vision for reading instruction, the educational background of the principal, and the principal's role as an instructional leader (Mackey et al., 2006). The depth of subject matter knowledge seems to give administrators a significant advantage as effective instructional leaders (Stein & Nelson, 2003). Administrators need to understand the scope of subject knowledge students learn in the context of child development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007).

The professional development of administrators should include continued acquisition of subject matter knowledge (Stein & Nelson, 2003). Young children process and understand information through concrete construction of experiences which is different than older children who are more abstract thinkers (Stein & Nelson, 2003; Vygotsky, 1962; Vygotsky, 1994). Principals need to understand child development; what appropriate instruction for early childhood should look like; and the professional development teachers need to support student learning (Stein & Nelson, 2003). Yet, many elementary principals have secondary education certifications and limited early childhood training. Professional development for principals should help them transform their knowledge for the "purpose of leading" (Stein & Nelson, 2003, p. 445). Building leadership content knowledge is not usually part of district professional development plans (Stein & Nelson, 2003).

The research examining the relationship between principal knowledge of literacy and student achievement is limited and often inconclusive (Szabacsik, 2008). Sherrill (2009) in a study of elementary principals in California did not find a significant difference in the student reading achievement based on the principals' leadership style or knowledge of literacy development and instruction. However, there was a correlation between knowledge of literacy of principals at high poverty, high performing schools compared to that of principals at high poverty, low performing schools (Sherrill, 2009).

Mocek (2002) conducted a survey of teachers regarding their principals' reading leadership behaviors and found that principals who were rated high in their reading leadership behaviors had limited influence on student achievement. Principals were rated on their level of interest in teachers' reading instruction; knowledge of reading best practices; knowledge of stages of reading development; understanding of the reciprocal relationship of writing and reading; and understanding of acquisition of comprehension and vocabulary skills. Mocek (2002) ascertained that most principals had earned some type of graduate degree that provided a level of formal education and professional development that related to reading/literacy or, at the very least, provided a skill set to enable a school leader to support reading achievement.

Small and And (1982) in a study of 130 Chicago teachers found that elementary principals who were perceived as having high consideration and high initiating behavior had high rates of reading achievement by students in their schools. However, teachers frequently perceive principals as lacking the subject expertise to help them improve classroom practices (Cawelti & Reavis, 1980, Zola, 2011). Principals do not in general perceive their educational preparation as having a significant impact on instructional

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leadership (Thomson, 1988). Principals often perceive their leadership behaviors differently than how their teachers perceive the behaviors (Erlandson & Bifano, 1987, Zola, 2011). Leithwood and Montgomery in a literature review of educational research primarily from Canada and the United States (1982) found that only 50% of principals try to help classroom teachers improve classroom practices.

A fundamental reason for the number of students underachieving in the area of reading may be due to the ill preparedness of classroom teachers to teach reading (Block & Mangieri, 2003). Nationally teachers share unfamiliarity with specific literacy instructional strategies (Block & Mangieri, 2003). The typical undergraduate teaching program requires only having one or two undergraduate courses relating to literacy and reading (Block & Mangieri, 2003).

Most elementary principals have limited knowledge of reading instruction (Allington & Rigg, 1979). Ironically, few principals have experience teaching reading and many were not teachers at the elementary level prior to their principalship (Braught, 1977; Chance, 1991). The National Association of Elementary School Principals in 1979 surveyed principals and found that 18 percent had never taught in an elementary school (Braughton, 1989; Gervais, 1982). The National Center for Education Statistics (Battle, 2009) conducted an extensive survey in 2008 of over 89,000 public school principals to examine information relating to retention and mobility of principals. The survey revealed that 60 percent of the principals had obtained a master's degree, 29 percent of the principals had obtained an educational specialist degree, and 8 percent of the principals had some type of doctorate degree (Battle, 2009). Millitello, Gajda and Bowers (2009) in a study on the relationship of certification programs on principal preparation reported that

almost 94 percent of principals included in their study believed that they obtained more knowledge from on-the -job experiences than their preparation programs.

Most states do not require principals to have specific training in supervising and directing teaching (Braughton & Riley, 1983). This could be related to the assumption that pre-service teacher training in reading is adequate for principals. However, that idea is flawed as the pre-service training of teachers is typically limited to one or two undergraduate courses in literacy. Teacher knowledge of reading is more likely to impact student achievement directly than principal involvement and knowledge of reading does (Braughton, 1989; Rupley & Blair, 1977). However, a principal's general endorsement of innovative practice is less effective than specific demonstrations of knowledge and instruction and their specific assistance or advice relating to classroom instructional practice (Little, 1982). Therefore, a principal's direct involvement in the reading program is likely to impact student achievement (Gervais, 1982).

Combs (1982) explored how the leadership behaviors of principals related to student reading acquisition. This study showed that principals of high achieving schools differ significantly from principals in low performing schools in behaviors such as helping teachers solve classroom reading problems and providing classroom reading materials. Dandy (1982) examined the leadership behaviors in 134 high and low reading achievement schools in South Carolina and found that high achieving school principals communicate the school's reading philosophy to all stakeholders. Cox (1978) compared the level of involvement of principals in reading programs with their knowledge of reading and concluded that effective principals were more knowledgeable of reading than ineffective principals. He also identified specific principal behaviors associated with

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supervision of reading programs including helping teachers to identify and meet individual reading needs of students; organizing a comprehensive reading program; helping teachers with reading strategies and methods; assessing the reading program continuously; and understanding the different components of a balanced reading program (Cox, 1978, p. 33).

Principals often perceive themselves as knowledgeable about reading (Aldridge 1973; Laffey, 1980). Hoewing (2011) in a quantitative study of principals in Iowa found that principals tend to be less knowledgeable about reading processes. A national survey of approximately 1,200 elementary principals revealed that their top four sources of information relating to reading instruction included professional magazines, personal contact with reading professionals, newspaper articles, and magazines and newsletters relating to reading issues (Jacobson, Reutzel, & Hollingsworth, 1992). These principals rated college reading courses, college textbooks, articles in professional handbooks, research reports from agencies, and journal research reports as their five least used resources for reading information (Jacobson et al., 1992). Even teachers consider principals their best source of advice on reading instruction (Braughton, 1989; Calvert, 1975). A survey of 600 principals from North Carolina found that principal and teacher knowledge of reading was equal (Braughton; 1989; Calvert, 1975). These principals held the belief that they provide support for reading programs through priority to budget and provide teachers with opportunities to attend conferences. Half of the principals surveyed perceived themselves as capable of evaluating their reading staff (Braughton 1989; Calvert, 1975). Other studies indicate that principals lack the knowledge to develop and maintain quality reading programs (Jacobson et al., 1992; McNinch & Richmond

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1981). Principals tend to exhibit a strong desire to implement change relating to reading programs, but often limited change occurs (McNinch & Richmond, 1981). This could relate to the lack of understanding of the reading process (Allington & Rigg, 1979; Jacobson et al., 1992; McNinch & Richmond, 1981).

Additionally, most principals do not actively participate in planning or evaluating reading programs but rather defer direct responsibility to staff members they perceive as reading experts (Casey, 2003). Principals have different backgrounds related to literacy instruction that play out in the instructional role they exhibit (Mackey et al., 2006). Principals lacking literacy training depend on the expertise of other staff members who have more reading knowledge than themselves (Mackey et al., 2006). A lack of a literacy learning background results in inconsistent implementation of reading programs and instructional decisions that directly conflict with research-based best practices in literacy instruction (Mackey et al., 2006).

Principals who have backgrounds that include reading instruction training make decisions that reflect knowledge of reading instruction, and they tend to be more actively involved in decision making and implementation of literacy initiatives (Mackey et al., 2006). Typically, principals are not expected to know as much about literacy teaching and learning as reading specialists and coaches, but they need to know enough to make informed decisions related to literacy (Casey, 2003). Principals need knowledge to support decisions regarding purchasing literacy resources, supporting literacy professional development, conducting classroom observations, and assessing instructional practice.

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Examples of Ways Principals Effect School Reading Reform Programs

Struggling readers need a strong support system that spans beyond their reading classroom (Allington, 2009). A school wide literacy achievement plan is essential to ensure that all teachers understand they have a role in helping students learn to read (Allington, 2009; Hall, 2008). The skills principals need to provide an effective reading program, besides knowledge of the reading process, include organizing, planning, communicating, decision making, leading, and assessing curriculum and instructional practices (Rauch, 1983). Principals as instructional leaders play the primary role in the development and maintenance of a successful reading program (Hall, 2008; Rauch, 1983). Principals need to articulate the goals and objectives relating to reading achievement for their schools. Furthermore, principals must monitor and assess the extent to which teachers are implementing goals as well as assess the academic progress of students. The leadership behaviors set the tone for the building's learning environment (Hall, 2008; Rauch, 1983).

Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2007) suggest that principals set the tone for a supportive early childhood literacy program by promoting discussion with teachers. Conversations between teachers and the principal help develop a shared vision for literacy education. Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2007, p. 19) suggest using questions such as the following to promote effective communication with teachers:

> Who are our students? What special characteristics and qualities of our students need to be addressed? Who are we as a school faculty? Do we have a fairly consistent philosophy about literacy education and education in general? Does our literacy curriculum reflect cohesive and well-articulated planning? What steps can we take to develop an action plan to address any concerns we may have?

A drawback for many principals with limited backgrounds in literacy is their uncertainty on how to observe instruction appropriately in early childhood classrooms (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007). Principals in general lack understanding regarding exactly what they should look for in classrooms. Thomson (1988) suggests principal preparation should include internships to support development of necessary leadership behaviors to support student learning. Barth (1986) addresses the ineffectiveness of principal professional development. Principals take a variety of courses across paradigms and content areas to satisfy certification requirements that may not include literacy. Additionally, the professional development provided by districts and state departments of education is sporadic (Barth, 1986). Barth (1986) suggested a model for principal professional development with the following characteristics: 1) identify schools where student achievement exceeds predictions; 2) observe principals at those schools to identify principals' actions; 3) categorize those actions as advantageous behaviors; 4) design professional development to develop those traits in all principals; 5) involve successful principals in the program; and 6) watch students attain exceptional achievement.

Principal Certification and Professional Development

A step towards investigating the impact of principal certification and experience on student achievement includes looking at how the certification and experience of teachers impact student achievement. Teachers with more educational training produce higher student achievement (Darling, Hammond, Berry, & Thoreson, 2001). There is little research relating to teacher and principal certification in reading, but research of math certification indicates that students' math achievement is positively impacted by

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teachers with mathematics degrees (Darling et al., 2001). Students taught by more experienced math teachers typically achieve at higher rates (Darling et al., 2001).

Accountability in education requires significant changes in leadership. The role of a principal has shifted from a manager to a change agent (Knoeppel & Rinehart, 2008). Principals may not have the preparation to implement change in a time of standard-based reform. The Interstate School Leaders Education Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) developed the ISLLC standards for school leaders in 1996 (Kaplan, Owings, & Nunnery, 2005). The ISLLC standards are research based indicators that focus on effective leadership principles and dispositions. Principals trained with ISLLC are more likely to sustain school improvement efforts than their counterparts without ISLLC training (Kaplan et al., 2005; Knoeppel & Rinehart 2008). Now more than ever, principals need a comprehensive understanding of differentiation of instruction and instruction based on student ability.

Most literature relating to leadership background and scholarship deals with content knowledge as a generic variable (Burch & Spillane, 2003). Limited research has been conducted on the relationship of leadership knowledge of content relating to literacy; however, it is recognized that leadership practice and leader's content matter perspectives have a reciprocal relation (Burch & Spillane, 2003). Literacy is a subject that impacts all disciplines; therefore, leaders are more likely to use a participatory approach to teaching literacy. This causes leaders to identify the experts within their staffs and distribute leadership responsibilities. Relating to literacy reform, administrators use colleagues, master teachers, and resources such as curriculum guides

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and district policy mandates to direct their literacy leadership strategies (Burch & Spillane, 2003).

Role of Principal in School Improvement

The primary routes to principalship include classic route, teacher leader route, and school leader route (McGough, 2003). The classic route for principalship is teacher to assistant principal to principal. The teacher leader route is less traditional and includes some type of decision making relationship within a teacher role. The teacher leader positions tend to be "quasi" leaders such as a curriculum specialist or coordinator (McGough, 2003, p. 453). These positions generally require specialization and experience. The last route is the school leader route which includes those who were school leaders or principals in a private school and moved into the public arena.

Under No Child Left Behind legislation, schools and districts that do not meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for two or more consecutive years are required to implement school improvement plans (Phelps, 2009). The plan includes offering transfers to other schools, supplemental educational services, replacement of school staff, and sometimes district reorganization. States have developed accountability plans to oversee these requirements. Value of the accountability programs as both indicators of school performance and incentives for school improvement depends on the following characteristics: must be understood by stakeholders including the policymakers, practitioners, and the general public; must be grounded with research based strategies; and must be monitored by departments of education (Hall, 2008; Phelps, 2009). This process illustrates a valid and reliable state accountability system to identify effective

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schools and districts in a comprehensive, understandable, and practical way (Phelps, 2009).

Literacy typically is a primary focus for elementary principals. Therefore, these principals need a comprehensive knowledge of literacy learning for appropriate instructional support to occur. Typically principals have limited literacy content education. Most administrative preparation programs focus on leadership and managerial skills. However, principals can develop their content knowledge base of literacy by participating in professional development and consequently increase the likelihood of informed literacy decisions (Szabacsik, 2008). School leaders need to understand how children learn to read and how teachers can optimize that learning (Szabacsik, 2008). Teachers and school leaders need to understand literacy content so that purposeful conversations centered on student learning can occur. Leaders need command of subject matter if they are to improve teachers' practices (Szabacsik, 2008).

However, principals often focus on superficial levels of teacher performance such as classroom environment, behavior management, and lesson plans. Administrators with deeper understanding of literacy learning are more likely to focus on the concepts presented in a lesson and on the level of comprehension of those concepts by students (Szabacsik, 2008). School leaders need to understand that reading and writing are reciprocal processes (Clay, 1993). Students need to develop extensive vocabularies through authentic language experiences that begin in early childhood (Szabacsik, 2008). School leaders need to recognize and support research based practices in literacy including using high quality literature; having a balanced program that incorporates comprehension, word study, and phonics; providing opportunities for reading and writing

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in whole group, small group, and independent settings; and incorporating an ongoing system for assessing student progress (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011). Two challenges in teaching reading consist of understanding how children develop comprehension strategies and identifying instructional strategies that support the development of comprehension strategies (Szabacsik, 2008). Principals impact literacy achievement through their actions to impact schools and classrooms (Hallinger, 1996). Effective principals clearly set goals for literacy and provide the necessary support to ensure teachers have what they need to meet school goals for student achievement.

Principal Knowledge of Literacy Learning and the Present Study

The role of the principal is significant in improving student literacy achievement. The literature review revealed characteristics of effective principals who support school improvement reforms focusing on literacy including:

1. Professional learning communities

2. Teacher reflection.

3. Focus on teaching and learning

4. Knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment

5. Goal setting

6. Strategic resourcing

7. Provides professional development

8. Supports school improvement.

However, it is unclear whether these characteristics are sufficient for supporting teachers' efforts to meet the complex needs of emergent readers. This study will examine how the educational background of principals prepares them for leading literacy initiatives in

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early childhood environments. Furthermore, this study can help delineate the content principals need to be effective literacy leaders and possibly help develop a model for principal professional development.

The presentation of the methods utilized in this study follows in chapter three. Chapter four provides descriptions of the principals who participated in the study and an analysis of the patterns and themes that emerged as a result of interviews, observations, and focus group discussions. Chapter five summarizes the findings of the study, draws conclusions, and provides suggestions for future research.

<center>**CHAPTER III**</center>

<center>**METHODOLOGY**</center>

Introduction

Chapter Three explains the purpose of the study along with the research questions. It also focuses on the study design, the purposeful selection of participants, and the collection of data. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the data analysis and the study's limitations.

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of five principals' journeys to understand the literacy learning in underachieving early childhood students as it relates to the implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI) in their school. This multi-case study seeks to identify themes and patterns through a constructivist theory lens in an effort to understand what the principals perceive as important to know about how young children learn to read. In addition, I was interested in their decision making related to developing targeted interventions to meet the needs of struggling readers. Furthermore, this study investigates how these principals structure support for themselves based on their educational background and experience relating to the reading process of early childhood students. In this chapter, I present decisions about methodological design and the theoretical stance on which the study is based. In addition, information regarding the selection of participants, my relationship with the participants, data collection, and data analysis are described.

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Study Design and Rationale

The design of qualitative studies is non-linear and flexible dependent on the interconnections of the components of the study (Glesne, 2006). As the study progresses, it was necessary to reevaluate the assumptions and beliefs driving the inquiry and make adjustments based on what the researcher learns (Maxwell, 2005). For this reason, throughout the project literature was continuously examined to explore new ideas relating to the study to ensure a comprehensive and relevant examination of the subject was covered. Additionally, although I initially planned to conduct one comprehensive interview with each of the principals, follow-up interviews occurred to clarify information. This characteristic of qualitative research is advantageous in circumstances where the objective is to examine the perspectives of individuals (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005).

Using qualitative methods for this investigation enabled the researcher to enter the world of the participants and provide a vivid description of their experience (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005). The type of design used to answer the research questions of this study was a case study. Qualitative methods allow the exploration of the participants' experiences within the context of RtI where the focus is to promote the achievement of underachieving students. The study provides insight into the different perspectives of the experiences and a forum for the participants to build an awareness of their viewpoints and assumptions.

Theoretical Framework

This study was executed through the constructivism theoretical perspective. The constructivist theory explains the process of building knowledge through the interactions

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of people sharing their experiences, ideas, and concepts (Crotty, 2003; Dewey, 1963; Liu & Matthews, 2005; Piaget, 1959; Schwandt, 2007; Vygotsky, 1962; Vygotsky, 1994). An individual's knowledge is continually processed or constructed internally through shared communication, perceptions, and actions with other people and the environment. Constructing knowledge is an active process; therefore, the learning environment is critical in the constructivist perspective including the interactions between learner and content as well as the interactions between learners (Crotty, 1998; Piaget, 1959; Vygotsky, 1962; Vygotsky, 1994). Language allows the interactive scaffolding of ideas among learners leading to the construction of knowledge (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 2007; Vygotsky, 1962; Vygotsky, 1994). The constructivist theory also emphasizes the learner's perspective and the role personal background plays in processing information (Crotty, 1998; Liu et al., 2005; Schwandt, 2007). Since knowledge is constructed from an individual's personal experiences and interpretations of the environment, learners are constantly testing hypotheses to understand and explain new situations (Vygotsky, 1962; Vygotsky, 1994).

The constructivist theory is applied to the RtI team process where the school team works collaboratively to determine why a student is experiencing academic difficulties. The RtI team is generally comprised of school staff representing various areas of expertise (Hall, 2008; Johnston, 2010). The team members bring different personal perspectives and diverse ideas to the table. The purpose of the team is to problem solve and develop (or construct) intervention plans for students experiencing academic or behavior difficulties (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; Hall, 2008; Johnston, 2010). Therefore, the structure of the team and the ways team members interact together are directly related to

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the outcome for these students. The principal has an important role in selecting the appropriate staff for the RtI team and providing ongoing support so the team works cohesively and productively. Related to this study, I was interested in how principals construct their own knowledge involving the reading process and literacy learning in early childhood students.

Participant Selection

This study was designed to explore the approaches and challenges leaders encounter in supporting literacy learning in early childhood students within the context of implementing an RtI framework. I interviewed and conducted observations of five principals from elementary schools located in a central South Carolina school district. This school district started implementation of a RtI framework as part of its district improvement plan in the summer of 2009. According to the district report card published by the South Carolina Department of Education (2010), the district serves approximately 24,000 students of which 74% are African American; 18%, White; and 8%, Other. Of these students, over 68% qualify for free and reduced price lunch. Almost 25% of all third graders in the district did not meet proficiency standards on the state mandated English Language assessment in 2010. The district met 31 out of 33 Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) objectives in 2010. The two objective areas the district did not meet were in Disabled English Language Arts and Disabled Mathematics. There are 28 elementary schools in the district, of which 13 met the AYP objectives in 2011.

I received approval for my study from the University of South Carolina's IRB in August 2012 and the district's Research Committee in September 2012 (see Appendix A and B). The chairperson of the district's Research Committee assisted me in the selection

of the participants for the study. The selection of participants for this study was purposeful and intentional versus random sampling because I wanted to explore the specific perspectives and views of principals who have expressed interest to me in developing their knowledge of early childhood literacy in the context of implementing RtI. While the scope of the study is relatively small in regard to the number of participants, it was important to me that the participants were representative of different variables. Therefore, in selecting participants, I attempted to use maximum variation by considering the numbers of years experienced as a principal, the gender, and the race of the principals. Pseudonyms were assigned to principals, schools, and teachers to assure the anonymity of the participants. Table 3.1 presents the principals' background data.

The one man and four women participants were from the state of South Carolina and all serve as elementary school principals in the same school district. Three principals represent Title I schools with high levels of poverty. The other two principals lead schools with unique challenges including a high transient student population. The backgrounds of the participating principals are diverse. Two principals have early childhood backgrounds, one principal has a middle school science background, one started his career in the field of school psychology and the fifth principal majored in student personnel. The years of experience the participants had as elementary school principals ranged from one year to sixteen years. However, despite the participants' representing different variables, the small number included in the study does not warrant generalization of the results to other populations of principals.

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Table 3.1

Principals and Their Background Data

School	Principal	Gender	Race	Years Experience as Elementary Principal	Years at Current School	Area of Initial Certification
Bayview	Susan	Female	Caucasian	11	11	Early Childhood
Elkorn	Michael	Male	African American	12	2	School Psychology
Sudbury	Anita	Female	African American	7	6	Student Personnel
Baker	Karen	Female	African American	16	14	Early Childhood
Brookline	Patty	Female	African American	1	1	Secondary Science

A recruitment letter was sent to principals requesting them to participate in the study (Appendix C). A recruitment letter was also sent to teachers at each school requesting them to participate in the focus group interviews (Appendix D). The recruitment letters stated that participation in the study was voluntary and confidential. Additionally, participants were offered the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

Researcher Role

I was the Early Childhood and Response to Intervention Coordinator in my school district. I coordinated support to elementary schools in the implementation of the district's guidelines for RtI. I was, therefore, one of the front line change agents for the district initiative to implement RtI. This included supporting the implementation of the

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RtI team process to problem solve and identify strategies and interventions to support struggling students. I was motivated to understand the story the participants of this project will share. My personal stake in caring about the outcomes for students in our schools, coupled with my responsibility for supporting schools in implementing the RtI team processes, oriented my subjectivity to the outcomes of the project.

I was, however, aware that my personal biases, such as that associated with my role as the RtI Coordinator and my interactions with principals, impacted what I believed principals know and do not know in relation to literacy. I began this study with assumptions that elementary principals have limited knowledge of early childhood best practice and early childhood development. I also had an assumption that principals, whose primary teaching experiences have been with upper elementary or secondary level students, lack knowledge about emerging literacy. Furthermore, I believed that having a comprehensive understanding of early childhood and the reading process was essential for principals if they are to support struggling early childhood students. Recognizing and keeping my personal biases in check were essential to ensure that the study was implemented in a trustworthy and open manner.

I had a professional relationship with the participants in the study. I worked with the teachers and principals in providing information and training relating to early childhood instructional practices and RtI guidelines. Principals and teachers have solicited my support on a number of occasions and most recently have demonstrated an interest in expanding their implementation of RtI. My previous interactions with the participants allowed me to establish rapport and trust. They have invited me to be part of their team; so, I accessed this study as an insider. This was beneficial in gathering

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information for the project. To minimize conflict and bias of the participants, they had

the option to participate, or not, in the study. They had the opportunity to review

transcripts for accuracy. I kept the identity of the participants confidential by assigning

pseudonyms for the names of schools, principals, teachers, and students included in the

study to provide confidentiality. Participants had the opportunity to review transcriptions

and summaries throughout the study and request that certain information be withheld. It

was possible that harmful practices might be revealed through the discussions of the

academic difficulties of students. Although this did not occur, every effort would have

been made to pass this information on to the appropriate person while trying to maintain

the integrity and confidentiality of the study. This study did not pose any risk to any

student because all discussion of students was confidential.

Reliability and validity was further addressed in the study through the

triangulation of multiple sources of data and member checking. Validity is strengthened

in this type of research design by insuring that observations and interviews are thorough

and prolonged to the point where there is assurance that the complete story has been

captured (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005). Furthermore, validity is increased by allowing

participants to review data to verify accuracy of representation (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell,

2005).

Data Collection Methods

The data collection methods for this research study involved using semi-

structured interviews using open ended questions with the research participants,

conducting observations of team meetings, conducting focus groups with teachers, and

reviewing school artifacts such as meeting minutes, student intervention plans, student

assessment data. The purpose of interviews in qualitative research is to describe the meanings of central themes related to the perspectives of the participants and to tell their story (Kvale, 1996). The interviews were open ended to allow participants to answer the questions freely and allow the researcher the opportunity to ask follow-up questions to clarify and expand answers when necessary (Glesne, 2006). Some of the interview questions for the principals included: What is you educational background? What instructional components should be included in the reading instruction in your early childhood classrooms? What do data tell you about the needs of your early childhood teachers? What is your role in supporting teachers relating to teaching reading? What do you need to know more about relating to teaching reading? The interview guides and consent forms for the principal interviews and the teacher focus group interviews are found in Appendix E and Appendix F.

Each of the interviews was audio recorded with the permission of the participants. The audio recordings were subsequently transcribed and reviewed for accuracy by the researcher. The participants had the opportunity to review and provide feedback regarding the accuracy of the transcriptions. The researcher also met with participants to review and discuss the transcriptions. Additional questions were asked during these follow-up interviews, and shared information was added to the transcriptions in the margins.

Observations of RtI meetings were conducted to provide contextual information discussed in the interviews and to describe environmental factors related to the study. Focus groups comprised of early childhood teachers who work with the principals were conducted to gain their perspective of their principal's knowledge of early literacy. The

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combination of data collection methods supports and informs the researcher in regard to the research questions. Each method provided information that explains, connects, or corroborates data gathered through one of the other formats providing a means of triangulation. Field notes were compiled after each interview and observation to document any insights, questions, patterns, and reflections I noticed.

Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis of data is an ongoing process in qualitative research that starts with the transcription of interviews. The transcriptions undergo an initial coding that is repeated and reviewed after subsequent interviews are conducted. Triangulation is used to compare the information gleaned from the interviews with the field notes of observations and the examination of school artifacts. The codes are cross checked with the field notes and analyzed for patterns and themes. Collaboration with a cohort of fellow doctoral graduate students provided an additional opportunity for peer review of the data and discussion concerning further investigation and questioning. This cohort of graduate students was formed originally from structured discussions in leadership classes that continued outside the classroom. Eventually the analysis of the data led to descriptive summaries.

Limitations

Qualitative designed studies have inherent limitations including narrow generalization because of the small sampling size (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005). This study is limited to the experiences of five elementary principals from one school district located in central South Carolina. The teachers who participated in the focus group interviews were selected by their principals and therefore, their stories are unique to them

and do not necessarily represent the stories of all teachers. The study was conducted over a short period of time of several months. Furthermore, the participants represent principals who have established positive learning communities in their schools. Therefore, while the study serves to share the personal perspectives of the principals who participate in the study, it is not possible to generalize the results of this study to larger populations of principals.

The data collection and interpretation methods in a case study contain aspects that may be considered subjective (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005). The researcher worked with the principals and teacher participants in a consulting capacity relating to early childhood instructional practices. The interviews, observations, and focus groups were conducted, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by a single researcher. Therefore, the possibility of researcher bias or error was present in this study. I used various strategies to reduce error and bias including the triangulation of data; participant proofing of transcripts; and consultation with colleagues (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005). Participants had the option to participate in the study to minimize any conflict of interest. They also were provided an opportunity to review transcripts for accuracy. Consequently, while any findings of this study cannot necessarily be generalized to all groups of educators; hopefully, this project will provide insight into possible applications to other schools and situations.

The research questions are considered through the remaining chapters. Chapter four provides descriptions of the principals who participated in the study and an analysis of the patterns and themes that emerged as a result of interviews, observations, and focus group discussions. Chapter five summarizes the findings of the study, draws conclusions,

and provides suggestions for future research as well as implications for principals, RtI

teams, and oppressed students.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter includes a description of the participants, the data collection methods, and the selection process for the study. Also included in this chapter are the research questions of the study. Next is a review of the findings, a presentation of the results and an explanation of how the results were evaluated in order to answer the research questions. A description of the themes that emerged from the analysis of the data is then presented. The final part of the chapter includes a summation of the results.

Introduction

I explored the experiences of five principals who were on a journey to understand the reading process in underachieving early childhood students as it relates to the implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI) in their schools. The selection of five principals was purposeful because I was interested in the principals' representing several variables including their gender, race, and years of experience as a principal. Pseudonyms were assigned to principals, schools, and teachers to assure the anonymity of the participants. Table 1 in chapter three presented the principals' background data.

The one man and four women participants were from the state of South Carolina and all serve as elementary school principals in the same school district. Three principals represent Title I schools with high levels of poverty. The other two principals lead

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schools with unique challenges including a high transient student population. The

backgrounds of the participating principals are diverse. Two principals have early

childhood backgrounds, one principal has a middle school science background, one

started his career in the field of school psychology, and the fifth principal majored in

student personnel. The years of experience the participants had as elementary school

principals ranged from one year to sixteen years. Table 4.1 presents school demographic

data. Table 4.2 presents student demographic data.

Table 4.1

School Demographic Data

School	Student (n)	Free & Reduced Priced Lunch	Title I	2012 Report Card Growth Rating	ESEA/Federal Accountability Rating System	ESEA Overall Grade
Bayview	643	80.19%	No	Below Average	97.2	A
Elkorn	379	87.79%	No	Good	88.4	B
Sudbury	244	98.03%	Yes	Excellent	95.0	A
Baker	257	100%	Yes	Average	96.3	A
Brookline	423	93.53%	Yes	At-Risk	42.9	F

Table 4.2

Student Demographics FY 2011 45 Day ADM

School Name	Number of Students	Race Percent (%)		
		Black	White	Other
Bayview	591	81	11	7
Elkorn	336	88	8	4
Sudbury	204	85	5	10
Baker	226	94	2	4
Brookline	362	95	<1	5

       To determine the process principals use on their journey to support the literacy learning in early childhood students, this qualitative multi-case study focused on the central research question: What do principals need to know about early childhood literacy and how do they use that knowledge to support early childhood teachers? Sub questions relating to the central research question include:

1. How do principals perceive their educational background and experience have prepared them to support early childhood teachers in making instructional reading decisions?

2. How do principals perceive their role in the RtI problem solving process used to determine instructional strategies for early childhood students reading below grade level?

3. How do principals structure their own learning of early literacy within the context of their school?

4. How do teachers perceive the principal's support of the reading program?

5. What do teachers have to say about the educational background and experience of their principal as those relate to the reading program and to the RtI process in their schools?

This chapter takes one into the lived experiences of five principals who participated in this study. This chapter will present, in the participants own words, how these principals perceive their knowledge of early childhood literacy and their strategies to support teachers in their instructional decision making in relationship to implementing RtI. This chapter is organized into two sections: Stories of Principals and Recurring Themes. Each participant's story is organized in three parts: principal interview, teacher focus group interview, and observation of school RtI data team meeting.

Stories of Principals

Susan

Susan was the principal of Bayview Elementary, which was a large school serving 643 students in prekindergarten through fifth grades. It was located in a suburban, rural area of central South Carolina. The school was in a neighborhood with predominantly single-family and multi-family residences. The racial demographics of the school included approximately 81 percent African American, 11 percent Caucasian, and 7

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percent other students. The percent of students receiving free or reduced price lunch at Bayview in the 2011 school year made up approximately 80 percent of the population.

Susan had been the principal of Bayview for 11 years. She was a middle aged, Caucasian. Her original certification in North Carolina was in early childhood, and she began her teaching career at the first grade. Susan concurrently received master's degrees in early childhood and elementary school education. Eventually her family relocated to South Carolina, and she spent ten years teaching sixth grade in a middle school. During that time she attended graduate school to obtain principal certification. Susan worked as an assistant principal at the elementary level for four years prior to moving to Bayview as the principal eleven years ago.

Susan reflected on her experience going through an early childhood teacher preparatory program. That experience taught her about the developmental stages through which young children progress. Susan believed that the focus on preparing teachers now is "more academic now than then." Susan understood that each child has a unique way of learning. She thought principals need to understand "how those literacy skills develop in the child and understand that every child isn't going to learn in the exact same way." Susan believed that teachers need to differentiate instruction by "getting into leveled text and literacy groups for children leveled where their particular skill set is and what their individual needs are." Susan perceived one of her challenges has been motivating teachers to move away from large group instruction and use small literacy groups to teach reading. Although they were initially resistant to changing their practice, she was relentless in setting her expectations that small group instruction is the key to students

making progress. Susan believed young children need a basic understanding of what

reading is and need authentic experiences to understand the importance of reading.

> Children need to understand concepts of print, big books, what a book is, how to
> hold it, how to go through a book correctly. They need experiences as to why
> reading is important. I always tell parents, 'You are going down the road. Let
> them read. You know there are going to be signs that they can read. … [children]
> are familiar with McDonalds, Burger King. Put a cereal box in front of them.'
> You would be surprised all the things to read on a cereal box.

Susan encouraged her teachers to know their students so they can determine

students' individual needs. Children's temperaments, developmental levels, and learning

styles should be considered when making instructional decisions. Yet, teachers need to

monitor the progress of their students and understand that they will learn at different

rates.

> We encourage teachers to really begin to look at the kids as individuals and really
> see where the whole child is. Sometimes a child doesn't necessarily test well. At
> least with Dominie [Reading and Writing Assessment administered three times a
> year to early childhood students]. It is individually administered one on one. But
> at the beginning of the year they're [students] shy. They aren't going to give you
> everything they know because they still don't know this first grade teacher yet. So
> you really have to develop a trust factor with your children before you really are
> going to see what's going on. I just had a conference this morning on a
> kindergarten child with the parents and child's teacher. The child was on a 1 level
> on Dominie… at the beginning of the year. But she [teacher] reevaluated him
> yesterday and the student has made a lot of progress. And it's because, number
> one she's a good teacher, but the other part is that the child is not mature and
> ready to learn. But it's also he's a very shy child and he might not have given her
> everything he had at the beginning of the year. So you have to keep an open mind
> and not put kids in categories.

Another challenge that Susan had at Bayview included an increase in the student

population over the last few years. Susan noted that the school serves almost 700

students and that, "we are a real high percent, high transition school and we are 78

percent free and reduced lunch. And we have grown. We were like 38 percent free and

reduced lunch when I came and now we are 78 percent free and reduced." Bayview also

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served a large special education population that included two classrooms for developmentally delayed 3 and 4 year olds, a classroom for emotionally handicapped children, and a classroom for learning disabled children.

Susan perceived the rate of student poverty to be a daunting challenge for Bayview because the school did not receive Title I funds. However, she was persistent in fighting for the resources the school needed to support student learning.

> We receive no help whatsoever. If you look at the number of children at my school who qualify for free and reduced lunch its 350 to 400 students. And yet those 350-400 students get nothing. But you go to smaller schools that have a higher percentage of students, but they have fewer students than me. Yet those schools get Title I money and I get nothing. … I don't know. I beg. I plead. You know I do anything I can to get help for the kids.

Susan explained how RtI was structured at Bayview as two separate tracks. One track focused on behavior and the other on academics. The RtI team and the Student Intervention Team (SIT) at Bayview are interdisciplinary teams representing different teachers and disciplines. Her assistant principal handled the behavior problems using a progressive behavior system that developed specific interventions for students before behaviors got out of hand. Susan's curriculum resource teacher (CRT), Charlie, handled the academic problems. Students not responding to behavior or academic interventions are referred to the Student Intervention Team (SIT) which was facilitated by the guidance counselor. The size of Bayview and the large number of students needing support necessitated this delegation of responsibilities.

> We are setting up a two tier thing. We have [started], instead of running all our behavior kids through SIT, we have an RtI team that they [students] go to first. The RTI team tries to solve the problems and it is a defined team. You have a behavior problem you go to the RTI team, which is kind of incorporated with the PBIS [Problem Behavior Intervention Support] team. And they look at what is going on with the child. … trends, where the behavior is happening, how it's effecting the academics, what kind of interventions we can put in, do we need to

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put in a behavior intervention plan. It is all done in the RTI team. If it is truly academic, and the RtI team can't do anything, then we move it to SIT

Susan's rationale for delegating the academic support to her CRT was based on Charlie's training as a Reading Recovery teacher. Susan said, "She truly understands how readers grow and develop and when I need to know something about reading I go to her. And she really is strong in literacy."

Susan also appreciated Charlie's tenacity for ensuring that teachers are equipped with resources and training they need to support their students. When Susan had questions about the reading process or a student's progress in reading, she consulted with Charlie. The key to the success they had in moving struggling early childhood students to grade level was the team work between the school leadership and the grade level teams of teachers.

> Charlie takes care of the academic side. She has the responsibility of meeting with the grade level teams. I am there most of the time too. We talk about academics, and small group, and whatever. We look at the lesson plans. We talk with the teachers and look at the data. …That is where we look at where they [teachers] are on the pacing guides, what they need from us, what is it that we need to work on and improve. It's really a two sided discussion. They bring concerns and we kind of iron things out.

RtI was a relatively new term, but according to Susan, the process of looking at student data and providing interventions has been in place at Bayview for a long time.

> Yeah, I think it probably is because we have been doing it [RtI] for so long. We have been doing it for ten years. So it's not something that you know is new. For us it's just been going on for so long. You know, looking at the data, seeing what the students need, and making sure they get the appropriate instruction.

Susan expected her teachers to communicate and document student concerns with parents. Initially teachers were resistant and avoided sharing concerns with parents.

> We are making the teachers responsible. We had to plant a seed. Every time they write on the sheet [parent communication log] they have to make contact with the parent. And they have to tell the parent. We were having lots of problems with teachers completing referrals and expecting us to call the parents. Well we weren't there. We didn't see the misbehavior. We didn't know what the concern

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was so we couldn't answer questions. The teacher was there. So we aren't making contact with the parents; the teachers are.

Susan visited early childhood classrooms to monitor instruction and gauge what support teachers need. She checked the pacing of the lessons and whether teachers were using leveled books in small group instruction.

> I am looking.... when the children are in centers that they are doing something constructive. Because while you are running a small group, the other children have to be involved in meaningful activities. If you are a teacher who has a true program in place, your children are going to know. When I go into a classroom I am going to be able to tell if your children are used to centers and small group activities. Whether they are at a computer doing Breakthrough to Literacy activities, or they are in a listening center with books.… and do the children when they are in the listening center, do they know which books they need to be using? Do they have assigned books? And what are you [teacher] doing with the children in the small group that you are working with? I look at your lesson plans. Do you have a plan for each of those small groups? .…So all of those things are just clues. And how many times do you go to our leveled book room? Because we have a wealth of materials.

Susan described the challenge of students not coming to school ready to learn because parents lack an understanding of how they can support learning.

> A lot of it is a lack of exposure, a lack of experience. You know parents don't understand what they need to do at home to help their children. And it's not that they don't want to. They don't know how ..... Like the mother I met with, and the teacher, about her child. She wants to help her child. But she has no clue what to do. So we were giving her suggestions. He can count but he doesn't know his numbers 4 and 5. He can do 1, 2, 3. I pulled out some index cards and wrote 4 and 5 on them and said, 'Ok you have an index card with the numbers. Have him take beans, or Cheerios, or something. And tell him to put the right number on the card. These are concrete things he can do at home. Once he gets that do 6 or 10.' But this will help him. Cary [teacher] suggested this. She said, 'Get a notebook and keep it in the car. And have him write in it when he's in the car. And it doesn't matter what he writes. He can draw. He can write letters, play a game, it's his notebook. He can find letters on billboards and write the letters in the notebook. That's just his way of recording what he sees when he is in the car. And it is his notebook and nobody chooses [what goes in that] notebook but him.'

Susan focused on building community and optimizing the leadership potential in her staff. When she had a challenge she sought assistance from her staff.

You have to get people to buy into it. If you don't get them to buy into it, and help take ownership, then you meet with a lot of resistance. But if it is teachers coming from other teachers, or teachers going to other teachers. It's a whole lot more acceptable than me coming across as a dictator. Plus I have a lot leadership out here in this school. Why not tap into it and let them use it. It makes them feel worthwhile too. Most of the time it is just one student at a time based on where that child is on the matrix…. You know teachers are already showing leadership in those team meetings. And there's Jody. She's a fourth grade teacher….and she really wants to move forward and be a district consultant eventually. So we sat down and developed a leadership plan. And figured out these are the things you need to put in place to get the skills you need to move forward. I have had a bunch of principal interns to move through here. I try to talk to people and find out what they want to do. You know when we sit down with their evaluations I ask, 'What is it that you really want to do? Where you want to go in the next three years, and what can we do to help you get there?'

Understanding the Common Core Standards was the focus for professional development for Susan and her teachers. Susan appreciated that as the instructional leader in the school it was essential that she knew and understood the expectations of the new standards.

Learning Common Core, it's new to me too. And I mean I would like more time to just go through the stuff. I know kindergarten had it last year, but it's a lot of new stuff. And we're moving into first and second grade this year. Second grade really didn't know ahead of time so it's been a shock. We didn't know either but we are going to get through it together .... When we have our team meetings we talk about it and I try to help them cope with some of those frustrations.

Bayview Elementary Teacher Focus Group Interview

I met with two second grade teachers, Stephanie and Terry, from Bayview Elementary to discuss their perceptions of Susan, their principal's knowledge of the reading process in early childhood students, and how she supported their efforts to help struggling students. They both reinforced their belief that children learn at different rates and come to school with a range of skills. Stephanie said, "A lot of them are not at a second grade level. A lot of the children come to us at a pre-primer level." She felt that principals need an understanding of child development so that during classroom

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observations they could appreciate why some students required instruction to be differentiated to meet their individual needs.

> If a principal comes in for an observation, and thinks that the instruction is relating to a certain standard, it will be at all kinds of different levels. Because I have to work with the students at the level they are. They need to understand that the kids are going to be working on different things.

They concurred with Susan's concerns about the lack of school readiness in their students. The teachers faced the challenge of teaching grade-level standards when some of their students lacked foundational reading skills. Terry said, "A lot of our kids are below grade level. Some don't have all of their letters and sounds." Stephanie agreed, "I have a lot of kids at the kindergarten level. They haven't had a lot of experiences with reading. They don't have a foundation."

Stephanie had worked previously at a Title I school in the district. Susan, in our interview, had mentioned her concern that Bayview did not receive the same financial support as Title I schools despite the fact that they served many students of poverty. I asked Stephanie if she had noticed a difference in the amount of resources at Bayview in comparison with her formal Title I school. She agreed that it was easier to secure resources at her Title I school; however, she had a lot of resources at Bayview she could use with her students. Terry agreed that Bayview had ample resources.

> I feel like that Susan listens to what we say we need and gets the resources we ask for. Also the resources are really organized…Like she got the position to help us with intervention. She asked us what we really needed. And we said we need an interventionist to pull the kids. She got us that and I know it wasn't easy. She had to talk to people and write letters and keep asking for it. But she got it.

The teachers provided interventions during a designated period each day. This time was in addition to the regular reading. An interventionist pulled some of the struggling readers during this time. Stephanie said that during this time the teachers

looked at "how the kids are doing, looking at data and then providing the instruction they need you know by differentiating the instruction, giving them the extra help they need to make progress."

The teachers described what they thought the principal was looking for when she visited their classroom during observations. Stephanie indicated that she looked for "lesson plans, what the kids are doing, small group, actively engaged. You know that the work that they are doing is purposeful. That they are talking about the work." Terry said, "Word wall, small groups, what they are working on in centers, children talking about work, standards posted. That the work matches what the standards posted say." I asked Stephanie what Susan expected to see in lesson plans relating to RtI intervention. She explained, "Mostly she is looking to see how the children are going to be engaged and that the instruction is going to actively involve them. If they don't reflect that she will email them back to you. She does! And she will ask you to fix them."

The teachers recognized that Susan provided support to them and delegated leadership tasks among her staff. They saw Susan as an inclusive leader with an open door and willingness to talk with teachers.

> You know she is always there for you. If I ever need to talk to her she says, 'Come on in to my office. Do I need to close the door?' You can talk to her about anything. And she understands what we are doing with the kids and really listens to you when you talk to her. She wants to know about problems.

The teachers generally went to Charlie (CRT) with issues related to reading and struggling readers, but they also relied on their grade level team to make instructional decisions. However, they believed Susan understood a lot about reading; and, so they did not hesitate to discuss concerns they had about their students with Susan.

I think Charlie shares a lot of what we talk about and what we are working on. Susan comes in the room and I feel like she knows what is going on. Yeah, you know in grade level, we will talk about everything and we will share what we are doing, our concerns, and figure out what we can do. We talk all the time in grade level. That's really where we figure things out.… but mostly we go to each other. I talk to the interventionist a lot. I tell her what I am doing and what I am seeing with the children they are working with. They tell me. We share a lot.

The teachers saw Susan as a persistent and passionate advocate in implementing RtI and ensuring the needs of her teachers and students were met. Susanwas a caring and compassionate person.

She will do anything for the teachers and the students. She always has time for you. I know that she is really busy but she always has time for me. If I ask her if I can talk to her she always stops what she is doing right then and talks to me. She really cares about the students… She is very passionate and will go out of her way to be welcoming. She makes it clear that the most important thing is the kids and she fights for what they need. She's very caring.

Observation of Bayview RtI Data Meeting

I observed a second grade team level data meeting attended by five second grade teachers, the school reading teacher, a special education resource teacher, Charlie the curriculum resource teacher (CRT), and Susan the principal. They met in Charlie's office around a circular table full of teacher resource books and their class reading notebooks. Charlie facilitated the meeting which focused on the reading instructional decisions teachers needed to make for the remainder of the fall semester. She noted that the next administration of Dominie (Reading and Writing Assessment) was approaching. Charlie wanted the teachers to plan strategically to avoid the impact on time spent with guided reading groups. Susan reiterated Charlie's statements, but deferred to her throughout the meeting. Charlie reminded the teachers about the importance of teaching

students at their instructional level and using the daily data they gathered through taking running records and anecdotal notes.

> It's our goal to get all of them to grade level and whatever support we need to give them we need to do it. The more you spend with data and really understand what the number means and what the instructional implication it needs.

Susan told the teachers she appreciated their efforts to use the materials in the book rooms and she encouraged them to continue to optimize their time by integrating science and social studies content whenever it was feasible. Charlie reinforced the notion and provided details to the direction.

> I want to make sure that you take advantage of the leveled book room. I know you checked out a lot [of books]. I'm talking about what I see in the classrooms. They need to be reading in the instructional right place. That's something we really, really need to be connected to and understand that's where the power is. .… Don't forget the readers theatre sets. They go up to a level F. There is something for everyone that would help them build confidence. I'd really love to see some of the big books [in your classroom]. Some of the kids in your room could really benefit from reading those and sharing with each other. Another thing you are involved in is the unit of study on poetry. It's important to include those activities into the literacy centers. It will help your emergent readers developing their phonological awareness.

Charlie distributed a sheet to the teachers that included a list of leveled materials in the school book room and several teacher resources she wanted the teachers to reference as they planned instruction. Among the resources listed were The Continuum of Literacy (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011) and The Next Steps in Guided Reading (Richardson, 2009). Charlie advised the teachers to refer to the books to refresh their ideas on how to support the various levels of readers in their classrooms from emergent readers to transitional readers.

The group discussed concerns they had for individual students in the classrooms. Some students still did not have command of the alphabet. The teachers

shared strategies they used to address this issue through activities in their guided reading groups and literacy centers. Charlie again referenced the teacher resources, opening one book to show the teachers some alphabet activities.

> All right if they don't have 40 alphabet letters you need to go back and do some of these alphabet activities with them.… So they can get control on the alphabet.… Let me see you use this. You get to another place in the book and it will give you the high frequency words at each level. Teach them in the guided reading groups when you get that level. If you have kids having trouble with the early high frequency words, teach those first. Those are the words that come up more often. If they don't have control you have to get them in control. If you aren't using sound boxes you need to start using them. They need to understand the concept of symbols and sounds. Even if they are pushing the word me with pennies and saying, 'mmmm eeeeeee.' That is powerful so that they can make the connection between letters and sounds.

Susan asked the teachers if they had talked to the parents and what the outcome of those conversations had been. One teacher indicated that she sent work home to address the concerns and the parent was receptive to help. The other teacher was having problems connecting with the parent. She had left messages and sent notes home, but the parent was not responsive. Susan asked the teacher to talk with her after the meeting so they could determine next steps and possibly schedule an SIT meeting.

Susan thanked the teachers for their hard work. Charlie ended the meeting by reviewing the expectation that teachers strategically plan their guided reading groups.

> Remember I am not concerned with what the children don't know but what they do know. That's the most important so you know where they are. If you can do running records just one or two a week. Some are going to hit a wall and some are going to be ready to go within the same group. Next time.…we will focus on how children cross check and problem solve as they read…. make note of the kinds of things that hang up your children so we can talk about it.

Descriptive Summary

Susan's background in early childhood provided a strong foundation to understanding the development of young children. She understood that young children

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need experiences with language in their environment to build early literacy skills. Susan had many challenges as the leader of a large, growing school that served many early childhood students entering school without readiness skills. She organized the efforts for the school by delegating leadership responsibilities to her leadership team and various teachers. Susan recognized the importance of monitoring instruction and of the progress of her students. Therefore, visiting classrooms frequently and constantly communicating with her teachers kept her in touch with the needs of her students. Susan delegated much of the responsibility for the reading instruction to Charlie (CRT). However, she still remained actively involved in the instructional decisions Charlie and teachers made. The teachers at Bayview respected Susan's leadership and her knowledge of the needs of their students. They perceived Susan as supportive of the teachers and an advocate for the needs of all students.

Michael

Michael was principal at Elkorn Elementary School, which was a suburban school located in the central part of South Carolina. The school was in a neighborhood of predominantly single family and multi-family residences. Approximately 379 students were served in Elkorn Elementary in prekindergarten through fifth grade. Almost 89 percent of students qualified for free or reduced price lunch; however, the school did not receive Title I funding. There were approximately 88 percent African American, 8 percent Caucasian, and 4 percent Other students in attendance at Elkorn Elementary.

Michael was an African American in his fifties. Michael had twelve years of experience as a principal. Ten of these years were spent at another school in the same district. Michael transformed his previous school to the highest performing Title I school

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in South Carolina prior to his transfer to Elkorn Elementary School two years ago. According to the South Carolina Department of Education report card (2010), Elkorn was the poorest performing school in South Carolina. After two years under Michael's leadership, there were notable gains in student achievement on the state test, Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (PASS), leading the school to achieve Good on the state report card rating on growth and an overall grade of B for 2012.

Michael was initially certified in school psychology and he worked for two years in a private school for severely emotionally disturbed children in southern Florida. He also taught special education for a year and a half in the public schools in Florida. He moved to Columbia, South Carolina, and obtained his doctorate in school psychology. Michael practiced as a school psychologist for 15 years before working on a degree in school administration. He was an assistant principal for 3 years. This was his 13th year as a principal. He believed his background in school psychology has impacted his interactions with his staff. He used some of his counselor strategies as he worked with teachers and parents. In addition, the psychology background provided him an understanding of "what's developmentally appropriate and what's not and the effects of doing things that are developmentally inappropriate for children."

Michael recognized that he had limited knowledge of early childhood education; however, he had set a personal goal to build his knowledge base. He actively participated in the professional development offered to his teachers to reinforce to them the value of the training.

> I sit in on the professional development I provide to my teachers. Of course I know that was an area I needed to strengthen [early childhood]. So I would sit in on the professional development along with the teachers. For one, I want to move my own professional development forward. Not only with early childhood, but

with elementary as well. Because the bottom line is teachers really won't respect you as a learning leader unless they know you know about curriculum. So they have to know that you know about curriculum. So that is important to me to validate my leadership one, and then two, that it makes me more effective with teachers who need support with what they are doing to get better.... It's about modeling as well. We have a substantial amount of PD [professional development] for ELA [English Language Arts]. And it takes place during planning periods. And so for teachers to value that it helps for them to see that me doing that [attending professional development] because they know I have a lot to do as principal. I have an array of things to do as principal but I make time to take part in the PD. It makes it a lot tougher for a teacher to say, 'I don't have time for that because I have this, and this to do.' Because I know we all have responsibilities.

Michael saw school readiness as Elkorn's biggest challenge in regard to the early childhood students. Poverty played a role in the lack of school readiness and parental involvement. Teachers had the challenge of addressing diverse abilities and needs within the same classroom.

One of the things I have seen is that our teachers are challenged to move the students forward that come to them. Say for instance, children coming to K4 and K5 may not know the difference between a number and a letter. You know they have been exposed to very, very little. At my previous school it may have been just a more an issue of poverty. Here, poverty plays a role in it. It may be hard for a parent who has two jobs to actually sit down with the child during their formative years. Those first few years of life, and do the alphabet things, watch Barney and those kind of shows that have some educational flavor to them. And sit down with the children and have conversations with them as they are watching. So the challenge is that in the same class, you have the child who doesn't know the difference between a number and a letter, and in that same class you have some independent reading skills. And you have a large number somewhere in between the two extremes. So the challenge is to get the teacher to believe that she can meet the needs of all the children in the classroom. And in fact move those children forward so by third grade they are positioned to do well on end of the year testing.

Michael's focus was on changing the culture of the school so teachers could believe they could over overcome these obstacles. He was passionate in his belief that it was their moral responsibility to believe in the children and provide the best learning environment possible to ensure children were literate and meeting their potential.

We look at data. And it's not uncommon for me to ask them to look at data and challenge teachers to think about [the question] 'Would you want your child in this class?' .…And the answer is no. So then what is it that we are going to do about it to make it the kind of class that you would, 'Oh yeah, I would put my kid in this class.'.… Initially we try to foster a school culture that supports this notion that poverty, and family dynamics, and these kinds of things, really are not determining factors in the case of whether a child learns or not. Are they a factor? Absolutely. Can they change the course of a child's learning curve if we allow them to? Sure. So we have to bring to the table that this child has all these challenges, there is no question about that. But I have this child for 7 and ½ hours a day, five days a week, 180 days in the calendar year. So certainly having a child for most of his waking hours for 180 days, surely I can affect some change in children. So it's developing a school culture that I call a 'Can Do Attitude.' We don't discount the challenges, we acknowledge them, but we also have the 'Can Do Attitude.' And I frame it often within a piece that we really have a moral responsibility to do this. Because as I say often to my faculty we all know what's going to happen to these children as adults if they are not literate. There is no doubt in anyone's mind in this room what is going to happen. So we have a moral responsibility to do, to bring to the table the tools and the skills we have, to make sure this child is literate.

Michael visited his early childhood classrooms frequently to determine how teachers optimize the physical environment to support learning. He analyzed the amount of blank wall space and the materials children had access to. He also monitored what the adults were doing in the classroom and how the children were engaged in learning.

If I see too much bare wall space, it might tell me that we need to do something about this classroom environment. Because the environment carries a significant amount of weight in terms of the learning process.…We look to see if basic things are there. So in kindergarten is there a housekeeping station in the classroom? Are the materials on a shelf and easily assessable to the children? That says something to us…. Then I also look at what the teachers and the instructional assistant are doing. Are either one of them sitting behind a desk, or sitting at a table and just monitoring behavior, or are they facilitating learning? Do I see these adults engaged with children? Do I see a teacher sitting at a kidney shaped table with a small group of children, with an instructional assistant over here with a small group of children? Or are just children at a free for all going for it?.… I look at how much dialogue there is between the teacher and the students. Is the teacher doing all the talking, or much of the talking, or are the children engaged in dialogue with teacher? Then I look at materials again for a different reason. Materials, are they first of all, appropriate for the age group? And…. second are they being used appropriately? Then interestingly enough, for in terms of developmentally appropriate activities, of course you know we have Breakthrough to Literacy for our young learners. And of course we monitor the

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usage because learners can't become proficient unless they actually use the technology. So that's important. But at the other end of the spectrum are computers being used appropriately to keep a child busy while I am working with this group of students? We want them engaged with appropriate activities for the children. So is the software developmentally appropriate, or is it some type of game to keep the child busy while I work with these over here, …. and they don't come over here? We look at many dimensions of the classroom environment to see if all of those actual pieces are supporting the learning.

Michael explained how RtI worked in his school by referring to a framed picture on the wall in the conference room we were sitting in. It was a picture of a propeller spinning with the words "RtI – The Elkorn Way" displayed in the middle. RtI was a cyclic process involving analyzing student data, planning instruction for individual students, monitoring the progress of the students, and adjusting the instruction as needed. Intervention is structured through small group instruction based on weekly assessment results. Michael monitored the implementation of RtI by visiting classrooms frequently. He visited each classroom at least once a day, sometimes several times a day if necessary. He met with the teachers each Friday to review student progress and make strategic instructional strategies. He also met individually with teachers if they needed individualized support.

> The consistent thing is, schools that make, that effect growth in children, learning year after, year after, year after, the consistent theme that runs across schools, is that schools, particularly teachers, know where students are academically. … There is no reason for us to not know where every student is academically in reading, math and writing.… So what works for us here is for us to know where each student is academically.… Dominie informs teachers where this student is in with reading. So we use that data to form groups and bring intervention to bear on children based on where they are. And teachers are expected to demonstrate that knowledge.

Michael met with his teachers by grade level every Friday to analyze assessment data and determine the next steps for interventions.

First, we look at the assessment and ask, 'Was it appropriate for your learning goals …. And what are our next steps for these students who did not score well? What are your plans for those students? And what are you going to do with the students who scored A's?'….Once we have that assessment data we match intervention to where the children are.

The weekly RtI meetings occurred by grade level during planning periods.

Typically Michael facilitated the meetings because he did not believe in delegating the task.

I do it because as the learning leader in the building, there are just some things you don't delegate. And leading the curriculum just is not one of the things you delegate. I know some principals delegate that to their curriculum resource teacher and in high school to their assistant principal for curriculum. But for me I don't do that. I would much rather delegate other things than that because that is the heart of what we do as school.

The team decided on the strategies to intervene with the students. Michael was more directive if the team came to an impasse.

Much of my role is to facilitate. You bring together a grade level team and it is amazing how a teacher will say, 'Well, what I do in a case like this is a b c d.' That happens a lot. Other times I have been in every classroom a number of times. And I have done learning walks at other schools. Of course I do my own professional development. So I can bring something to the table myself. So I can say for this group of children what I am asking you to try is this and then we will talk about it next week.

Michael's plan for his early childhood teachers' professional development focus was to continue to make them better at using the small group strategy as a tool to help struggling learners. After three years the skills varied across the building, but overall he saw the practice emerging.

So the challenge is to get better at it…. Now that we have some sophistication at it, how do we continue to get better at doing it? Part of it is management, these four or five children I am working with, what do I do with the other 15 or 16 children that are out there? How do I manage it? The other part is how do I plan for all these different groups going on at the same time? That takes practice and continual opportunities for learning to get better.

Michael believed his teachers thought he was "engaged, very interested, perhaps passionate about children learning, especially the early childhood students." He had awareness of best practices and what should happen in the classroom. He could talk intelligently and engaged in discussion about best practices and what needed to be done. He admitted that his teachers would say "He asks for too much, he's too demanding. He asks a lot of us and its just work, work, work."

His motivation derived from his belief that he had a moral responsibility to help his students learn. He explained that another dimension to his career was his role of minister at a church located in the poorest section of the city. In this capacity he saw many young adults who had made poor decisions and were in trouble. He saw that the root of their problems often connected to their lack of literacy.

> Most of the young men, who get in trouble with the law, they are not dim minded people. In many cases they are very intelligent people. But the literacy is not very good. And so their opportunity for employment, it's not wide. It's not wide for anyone, anymore now. But for people who are basically illiterate, or [who have] limited literacy skills…. they are going to make a decision that there are things that I need and want in life. And they are going to try to get them. And they don't have the literacy to get the job they need, that will pay the income, to get those things. They are going to do something illegal. And they are going to get caught and go to jail. And it is just tremendously cheaper to do something in K4 and K5 than it is when they are 18, 19, and 20. And keep them locked up for a number of years. If you look at just the dollars and cents. It doesn't make sense. And then when you go out to the prison system, you see just a sea of young black men. People, most people who are educated, they don't break into people's houses. And they don't walk up to somebody at a mall, and pull a gun, and say, 'Give me your car.' Most people who have strong literacy skills don't do that. They don't. So I just feel a strong responsibility.

There was a sense of urgency to helping the children in the early childhood years. Because Michael believed that by the time they got to the fourth or fifth grade they became so angry and so deficient in their reading and mathematics skills that it was almost too late to impact their progress.

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You see by the time they get to third grade you see them going in that direction. If you don't turn the corner on it, it's almost like you know what is going to happen to them. That's why I say to the teachers we have to do this because we can't have any throw away people. And there's no place in the work place for somebody who doesn't have literacy skills.

Michael believed that if instruction was appropriate and you engaged parents, it was possible for all students to reach their potential. The key was to be strategic and to have consistent leadership. He also believed that building a strong team with quality teachers was critical for success. Finding the right teachers and providing ongoing professional development to allow them to develop into experts in their content was one of Michael's top priorities.

> Some teachers there [at his former school] really did not need to be in teaching. They really didn't and I am not being mean spirited or anything like that. They just didn't need to be in teaching. And so we were able to persuade them to do something else. Then most of that faculty down there, over the 10 years, I recruited them. Many of them I recruited right out of college and I was blessed to make some good hires. And I exposed them to that professional development, year after year, after year, after year, set expectations year after year, after year, after year. This is the way we do it here at this school.… But if you get good hires and it doesn't matter if they are fresh out of school. You pair them with an exemplary, experienced teacher and give them the professional development year after year – 'Well, we're tired of it.' 'Yeah, well but you don't know it until you are able to do it at the level we need you to do it.' So we have that professional development year, after year, after year. When you do that it becomes almost second nature with teachers.

Elkorn Elementary Teacher Focus Group Interview

Two kindergarten teachers at Elkorn Elementary, Mimi and Harriet, sat down to talk to me about their perceptions of Michael's knowledge and support of the reading process in early childhood students. Both teachers were adamant that principals need to understand child development so that their expectations of teachers can be reasonable and appropriate. They saw Michael as very understanding of the various developmental stages of the students they served. He was very oriented towards intentional teaching and

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focusing on learning goals. Harriet thought it was essential that principals understand that children grow in different developmental stages and at different rates. In particular she thought principals must understand the developmental stages of reading and writing.

> They need to know the different stages, or phases, the little ones are going through in order to get them where they need to go in the older grades.… [the principal needs to be] aware how a child develops and it is in different stages. And we are going to accomplish it…. I think that it is very important that they acknowledge and understand that. And so the things they ask us to do …. we can't jump from one stage to the next without doing certain things to help them get to where they need to be. You can't skip all these stages and expect them to do well. Some kids come to us with certain experiences and some of them don't.

Mimi noted that instruction and expectations needed to be different in the early childhood grades in comparison to the upper grades.

> It's not the same as third, fourth and fifth grade. Yes, they have the same components but at a different level. Just like at any grade. They are coming in at all different levels and it is very dependent on the child as to how they progress.

The teachers saw the student transience at Elkorn Elementary School as an obstacle to student learning. Harriet thought that the implementation of common core standards would bring some standardization to the instruction children receive in other districts. They also agreed with Michael that involving parents in the educational process was a challenge for them. Many of their children entered kindergarten lacking experiences with literacy. In addition, these teachers observed that many children they served were delayed in their language and social interactions with peers. They believed that they address these issues in the classroom, but that there was not enough time during the day to overcome the problems students were having. They really needed the parents to support learning at home.

> They [parents] don't understand the processes. And they have this misconception of what school is about, or is not about. And when they don't know, and then all this new stuff is coming along, and they are assuming, but

when they don't come to meet with you to understand…. It's like a chain that's not ending ....I can see a difference in the kids whose parents work with them and the ones that don't. And even if they don't understand, and they will ask you about it, you can work together. We have to work together to get them where they need to get to.... You can only have so many small groups and individual work considering all the other stuff you have to do. It has to be a partnership.

Mimi really believed that the lack of school readiness inhibits the progress students can make in her class. Many students have not had a school experience prior to entering Elkorn.

It could be academically that they don't know the alphabet, the letters, and the sounds, as far as reading goes. Some of them don't know how to hold a pencil. Some are still learning how to write their name…. and some don't know how to maintain attention for a certain period of time.

The teachers agreed that Michael expects them to establish positive relationships with parents. Mimi said weekly communication logs were sent home and that she was required to call parents if she had concerns with behavior or academics. Harriet had noticed that many of the parents have their own personal challenges making it even more complicated in regard to supporting their children. However, Harriet stressed that Michael had the expectation, that regardless of the situation, teachers were to make every effort to establish a positive partnership with parents.

He also understands that these parents will come at you from all kinds of directions, but sometimes you have to step back. They think totally differently than you. So you may have to assure them in some other way…. to constantly talk to them, or give them resources to help them.... And he said these particular parents may think that you don't care about that child. Or their thinking may be at entirely different levels from what you are thinking. So you have to break it down and meet individually and sit down and let them know first that you are concerned about their child.

When Michael visited their classrooms, the teachers thought he was looking at whether the children were actively engaged in their classrooms in standard based activities. Michael visited their classrooms frequently, and it was not uncommon for him

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to talk to children and ask them to explain what they were learning. Mimi also said that Michael looked at the materials being used to support the instruction. He expected to see small group instruction and students working in independent centers.

> What are we doing in the small group time? Are the students engaged? Are they engaged with what we are doing in small groups with them? Are they engaged in the independent centers? He is big on small group instruction.

Next we talked about the structure of RtI at Elkorn and how Michael supported struggling readers. They said that meeting every week to discuss assessments and student progress was new to them this year. The previous year only the upper grades had met that frequently. They were included this year because Michael said that everyone needed to be involved in student progress. Each week they brought samples of work from their students and discussed it as a group. They discussed the work collaboratively, and if there were concerns about a student, they would determine what strategies or interventions they needed to try.

> We've been meeting with him and discussing the different issues we are seeing or having with the reading and writing. And he's asked us what can he do to help us to get the children where they need to be…. or he might give some suggestions.

Michael supported struggling readers by diligently ensuring that the teachers had the tools they needed for instruction. In addition, he placed a lot of attention on professional development. The teachers were involved in ongoing training in the areas of literacy and mathematics.

> We have a lot of professional development so that we can be constantly learning, so we know the best things the best methods for instruction so the kids are getting to where they need to be. He's trying to equip us with as many tools as possible.

Harriet said, "I personally think that he is about the business of every child learning." Michael believed every child could learn. The teachers had the responsibility to spark that motivation in the child and help them believe they could learn.

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He already understands nothing is easy, but it's about how we go about getting there. And he doesn't play when it comes to a being about the business of children period. You are here to do what you are supposed to do for children.

Observation of Elkorn RtI Team Meeting

I observed Michael facilitating a RtI meeting with two pre-kindergarten teachers and three kindergarten teachers. Each teacher shared samples of student writing that depicted different ability levels. Michael led the meeting by asking probing questions related to the learning objectives of the student work they examined as well as what support teachers had in place to help students who experienced difficulties.

Michael asked teachers repeatedly to share the learning goal in relationship to the student work they examined. Amanda shared, "The wording will be wrong, but it was about you know the print, they can tell a story and dictate the words. I don't know the wording [of the standard]." Michael reassured her that the important thing was that students understood the concept being taught.

> At this point I prefer what you are saying. You could say 2.2 [identifying a standard] but that doesn't mean anything at this point. The most important point is that we know that the children understand that there is a connection between the print word and what they are saying.

Teachers shared their observations of the students and their concerns. The group discussed and shared strategies. Michael asked teachers to give examples of the instructional strategies they were using to help the students. The teachers also asked questions of one another and gave suggestions about strategies they found helpful. Michael facilitated the conversation and tried to understand the range of abilities demonstrated in the students' work.

> I was about to say that this one had more details here, but the child seems to
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> have in this one … some emerging ability to create words here. So there seems

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to be two different things here. There is the sense of story and a logical progression of a plot in that one and this one is catching on more. This one here, that it is more about the letters.

Woven throughout the discussion were Michael's expectations of the teachers including monitoring the progress of students, making appropriate instructional decisions based on data, and communicating to parents the progress of their students and specific strategies they could use to reinforce learning. The lack of parental support was reiterated by Michael throughout the meeting such as when he asked, "Are we having conversations with those parents? It's very important to have that communication and start it early."

One of the pre-kindergarten teachers reinforced the positive impact parental involvement can have on student progress.

> I want to say something about that child's parent. That's why we really need to get those parents involved. Because I know that even though he has his moments, and I had his little brother, mom works with them at home on what we do. That is the difference between having the parent support and not.

Michael also made several connections between the instruction in the early childhood grades and the future impact it would have on learning in the upper grades. The conversation shifted to the importance of vocabulary. A teacher shared how they were studying shapes in kindergarten such as hexagons and rhombuses. Michael explained the importance of building vocabulary in the early childhood students.

> Please continue to do that. Let me explain why. I get to see the range of grade levels here. There are children in fifth grade that would see a rhombus and call it a diamond. So you at K and K4 using that vocabulary is helping the children when they get to fourth and fifth grade calling these geometric figures by their correct name. Because they are used to identifying a rhombus by diamond, and then they don't see diamond, but see rhombus in the text because the vocabulary is different.

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At another point in the conversation, Michael held up a handful of student work and again reiterated the importance of building a foundation of skills in the early childhood grades.

> That points out why we do this. Because if that child, that is in fourth grade, had had the experience that these children are having in PreK [four year old kindergarten] and kindergarten, at least that child would be able to string together a logical sequence. That's one of the reasons we do this kind of thing. Because we don't want this child, and this child, and this child, getting to fourth grade and writing off topic, and there isn't a logical progression of ideas. It is wonderful what these kids can do when they are given proper instruction and guidance. For the ones that haven't got the logical progression of ideas yet let's look at what are you planning to do with them in the next week or so. I am very encouraged by this.

Michael ended the conversation thanking the teachers for sharing and expressing his feeling of encouragement that their efforts were making a difference for the students.

Descriptive Summary

Michael was an instructional leader and he actively participated in the teachers' professional development. Michael's background as a school psychologist provided him with an understanding of early childhood development. He understood the importance of providing a language-rich classroom environment where the adults facilitate active learning opportunities for students. Michael saw school readiness and the lack of parental involvement as obstacles for his students. However, he organized support for his teachers so they could focus on overcoming the challenges and help students learn. Part of his strategy was to challenge his teachers to really understand the needs of each individual child. He perpetuated his "Can Do Attitude" that transcends from the teachers to the students. Michael was driven by his "moral responsibility" to provide the

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instructional opportunities for his students so they would meet their potential as successful citizens in the future.

Anita

Anita was the principal of Sudbury Elementary, which was a small Title I, urban school located in central South Carolina. The school was located in a neighborhood comprised of small, dilapidated single and multi-family residences. Sudbury served approximately 244 students in prekindergarten through fifth grade. Approximately 98 percent of the students qualified for free or reduced price lunch. The racial demographics of the student population included 85 percent African Americans, 5 percent Caucasian, and 10 percent Other. The school had made continuous improvement in student achievement on the state assessment PASS over the last few years. The school earned an Excellent rating in growth and a grade of A on the 2012 state report card. The school was recognized as a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence in the Fall of 2012.

Anita was an African American in her early forties. She had served as a principal at Sudbury Elementary for the past six years, and was perceived by her peers in the district as an energetic and inspiring leader. She received her initial degree in student personnel, and her first teaching experience was as a computer technology instructor in middle school. It was during this experience that she discovered her true passion to help children learn to read which would set the stage for her career as a principal.

> I eventually ended up in middle school teaching computer. That was really good because that is probably when I started thinking about reading. And you know it was amazing. It was at that point, seeing the kids there, and in high school. And they were several years behind. And I saw that there wasn't anything in place to help them. That they couldn't catch up. It didn't matter what you did. There wasn't anything there to help them and it was a terrible feeling. You would do everything you knew to do, but it was really not effective. That's when I got my passion for reading.

Anita realized that her middle school students were not reading and it was probably too late for them to ever learn. That was a pivotal moment for Anita to start thinking about the importance of reading.

> I could see how these students were failing and it was because they had difficulties reading. They would come to me, and be so deficient in so many areas. But it was the reading that was the real problem and it was really difficult.

She recalled a young man in middle school who was not doing well and the principal expected her to fail him. She did not want to fail him, but there was nothing she could do to help him.

> I really did not like it all. It was very frustrating. Well you know it was years later, at this school, there were these two girls, and they were having trouble with reading too. And this guy came one day to pick them up from school. And it was that same guy – from middle school. You know the one that couldn't read and I wasn't able to help. He was their father. And they had the same problem. They couldn't read.

Anita was very frustrated realizing that the children were significantly below grade level and there was nothing available to assist them. She said, "So that is where my passion comes from. I just want to figure out what kids need and give them what they need so they can succeed."

Anita attended graduate school and became certified in school leadership. She claimed that her knowledge of the reading process and how reading should be taught was learned, not from her college training, but through "on the job training." Her first experience as an assistant principal was at a high poverty, urban Title I elementary school in central South Carolina. After a year, she moved to an affluent elementary school as an assistant principal. Her first experience as an interim principal was at the same high poverty school where she had previously served as assistant principal. The school was a participant in the South Carolina Reading First Initiative (SCRI). Anita credited her

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experience with the Reading First initiative as being paramount in how she leads in her

current position.

> I really learned about reading .… It was a Reading First school and it was awesome. Reading First, yep (nods) that was something really special. It was a wonderful, wonderful thing with the reading. The training, the professional development, the conversations. We were always talking about the kids and data. You know I really didn't understand about reading before that. I mean, I knew some about comprehension, but not really what comprehension meant. Reflection and talking about what is going on in the school. You know and looking at the data.

An important component of Reading First was the ongoing, reflective

conversations teachers had regarding reading data and determining the instructional needs

of their students.

> Fantastic. It was incredible – just the ongoing training and support. The conversations we would have about reading. There's nothing like it. And it happened all the time. We were always talking. There was this one lady, Susi Long, [university professor]…. anyway, she would stop you in the hall, and ask you a question. And you would just talk about the kids and the data. Yeah the data was really good. Reading First was different from anything else I have ever experienced. There was data and constantly looking at how the kids were doing. For the first time I really started to understand what phonemic awareness was, what phonological .…was, what comprehension was. That it was more than kids being able to read. I mean the kids could read, but I saw that they needed …. to comprehend what they were reading. Before that I don't think I realized how important comprehension was. It was awesome.

Anita saw the need for principals to know more about teaching reading to early

childhood students so they could support teachers.

> Yeah, I really think that principals need training on reading. They need to understand how children learn to read, and its not just young children, but all children. They need to know that it is more than phonemic awareness and comprehension. … Principals need to receive training on the components of reading, and what instructional strategies are effective. Principals need to know what to look for. You know when they go in classrooms they need to know what strategies are effective. You know teachers need training on how to teach reading. And principals need training so they understand what teachers need to be doing to teach reading. Yeah, they need to know what to look for.

Again, Anita reiterated that her educational background and training did not prepare her for teaching students to read.

> Everything I learn here is on the job. Seriously, nothing in school prepared me regarding students learning to read. And that is pretty bad. We as principals need support and training. I mean we may not necessarily need to know all the ins and outs of actually teaching reading but we have to know enough to guide our teachers. But you know the key is knowing your children. You really have to understand your children and see what difficulties they are experiencing.

Anita looked at every student assessment students took. Each Friday the teachers gave her all of their assessments.

> I can look at these and understand what the problems are. I can see if it is a problem with the instruction or a problem with the learning. And I talk to my students and ask them what they need. They know. When I talk to them and say 'What happened here? Why are you answering it like this?' They can tell me exactly what is going on. My children will tell me they don't understand something. That is my expectation.

Anita faced a number of challenges at the school in meeting the needs of her students. Initially she had to change the perceptions teachers had of the students' abilities and raise the teachers' expectations.

> When I came here there was this perception with the teachers. It wasn't just the Caucasian teachers. It was the African American [teachers] too, everyone. It was pretty bad. And it was really tough. All of them, they thought our students didn't have the vocabulary. That they couldn't do well. That was their [teachers'] perception and it was wrong. I had to work with that and change it. You know things were different. Things had changed in the community. The school has changed from primarily white to mostly African American. You know when I first got here there were a lot of teachers that had been in those primary classrooms for like 20 years. And they were doing things the way they had been doing things for that long and they thought they were doing good. They didn't know anything different. They thought that our kids were very talented and that if they taught the way that they always had that the students would do well. I had to change that.… It was about the expectations.

Anita accomplished this by putting "a face on the problem and get them to start thinking about every single child." She saw that teachers looked at the children as if they

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were all the same. She said, "You see I am not satisfied if any of the students are not successful. I expect all of my students to be successful. They just need the right instructional strategies."

Anita spoke about the challenges she encountered implementing the Reading First strategies. Initially she met with considerable resistance from teachers because the instructional practices involved a lot of work.

> Well you know, at first, yeah, even I had reluctance to it. I just didn't know. I didn't know if it would work and it was a lot of work. It was so different from anything I had experienced. And the teachers were resistant to it. But you know I never let on about my reluctance. I knew I couldn't let them see that I didn't believe in it, I couldn't give them an excuse. I didn't talk to them about that. I said to myself that maybe it would be good for kids and it was. So I hid how I felt from them. So we stuck with it and it was fantastic. We just learned so much and the students learned so much and it was then that I said this is good.

Anita used many of the strategies from Reading First at Sudbury Elementary including the ongoing professional development and study groups with teachers. Data also were at the center of all of their decisions. She shared, "I've tried to use my Title I support to get consultants in to train the teachers. All of us are always talking about the data and what the kids are doing and what they need."

The obstacle Anita perceived they had in meeting the needs of students related to school readiness and the lack of parental involvement..

> You know a big problem for us is that our students are not coming to us ready. And I tell my teachers that this is something we have to do something about. We can't just say our children aren't ready and move on. We have to look at what is it that they need and we need to give it to them. And it is not just the teachers it's the parents. I expect my teachers to work with the parents with strategies. Talk to them and tell them the things they need to work on with their children.

Anita was also concerned about the mobility of students throughout the district. Students came and went to Sudbury, and teachers had to accommodate and modify instruction to meet the challenges these students brought to school.

> We have a lot of transience and these kids are not ready. It is a real problem for us at this school. They might be with you for three days and then they move to another school. And they are not ready. And this is a problem we have to address. The district really needs to look at that. We have to have some kind of structure in the district to support this.

A lack of vocabulary was a common problem for students at Sudbury. Anita believed that her students did not have the necessary vocabulary they needed to be strong readers.

> It's tied to their comprehension. They don't understand what they are reading. It is very complicated. They don't get the meaning of it all and when they answer questions they don't answer them with the vocabulary they need to. It is a big disadvantage.

The implementation of RtI at Sudbury Elementary involved a designated period in the school master schedule called the Power Hour. Teachers used this time to pull students in small groups to provide targeted instruction. Interventionists assisted the teachers by pulling additional small groups during this time period. Anita and her leadership team helped teachers determine the instructional strategies to focus on during the interventions.

> We do it for the teachers. We look at the assessments and we come up with the strategies the teachers need to focus on with the students. The teachers are responsible for documenting the instructional strategies they use and how the students are progressing. And we help them with that. The leadership team looks at the data and determines what weaknesses the students have and what skills or strategies the teachers need to focus on with their students. And it changes. The groups don't stay the same. We are always looking at the data and if we see the students are not doing well we change things. They might be put in a different group or the teachers might have to try something else.

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Anita went on to explain that the intervention groups were fluid and changed according to the needs of students. She was adamant that, if something was not working, then they changed the approach.

> I don't want us to keep doing something if it isn't working. So it has to be flexible and they know that we are always looking at how the kids are doing and trying to figure out what we need to do differently so the kids will be successful. Ok it is everyone. All students are involved. They all have something to work on and everyone in the school is involved.

Anita was satisfied with the RtI process at Sudbury. "It works great. The teachers appreciate us helping them. We talk. My teachers know that I will say anything and they can say anything they think." She enjoyed a close, interactive relationship with her teachers. They were comfortable talking with her about challenges and asked for help when they needed it. The teachers saw RtI as an ongoing conversation about student progress.

> We are always talking with each other. I am in the classroom talking to the students. I am always asking questions. My teachers can talk to me about anything anytime. We talk to each other and people say what they think. They know it is ok to tell me anything and so when we make a decision we really are all talking about it and they feel a part of it.

Communication was important to Anita and her teachers. She constantly talked with teachers and asked a lot of questions.

> I am never satisfied. I am always asking a question. I always want to learn something, understand something, so I might ask a question. I put it out there so that everyone can think about it. The teachers. The students. No one is an expert but we are all experts in a sense. So I like to pose questions I might say, "What do you think about so and so?.... Just to get teachers thinking. That way we are always growing.

Anita was still trying to figure out what to look for when she visited early childhood classrooms. She was interested in looking at what the children were engaged in within the classroom and whether they were interacting with leveled text.

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That is something I really need help with. I go into classrooms and really what I look for is the student engagement. You know. What are the kids doing and how are they engaged in the learning? I see a lot of large group instruction especially in kindergarten. And you have the teacher asking questions. And one or two kids are responding. And there are four kids doing something. I don't know tying their shoes or something. And I ask myself, "What are the kids doing?".… Yeah, the leveled books with the small groups. And the students are more engaged and it's more concrete. I like what I see with them.

Anita supported her early childhood teachers through professional development provided by outside consultants funded through Title I. Teachers attended day-long workshops and returned to school to practice strategies they learned through the professional development. Anita believed in the modeling approach where, for example, a consultant might demonstrate a particular strategy and then teachers had an opportunity to try out the strategy in their own classroom. Anita did a lot of personal research through exploration on the web and reading books related to reading instruction. If she encountered challenging situations regarding the reading progress of students she consulted with one of the district literacy specialists.

I go to them and I seek support. When I need help I ask for it. I'm not afraid to ask for things. If I see somebody with something and it's good, then I want it for my school, and I ask for it. If we have problems I ask for support. For instance, I am really concerned about the transience. The movement of students within our district and the kids are not ready. We need to do something about that as a district to figure out how to help those students. There's only so much we can do here at the school because the problem is beyond us.

Anita believed her early childhood teachers perceived her as being very committed and very interested in the reading instruction. They knew that she was very involved and asked a lot of questions. Anita did not see herself as a reading expert.

I am still figuring it out. I think that the thing is that my teachers know that I expect students to have the best instructional strategies and my job is to help them figure out what that means. We all have something to contribute to it so in a sense we are all experts.

Sudbury Elementary Teacher Focus Group Interview

I met with one first grade and one second grade teacher from Sudbury Elementary to discuss their perceptions of Anita's knowledge of the reading process and her support of RtI. Josephine, the first grade teacher had taught at Sudbury for five years. Michelle, the second grade teacher, was in her third year at Sudbury. Both teachers shared that principals need to know the instructional strategies they use and the rationale behind what they did on a day-to-day basis. They also felt that it was important for principals to have experience teaching in the early childhood grades and be knowledgeable of the realm of different strategies to use with young children. Josephine said, "Because I find a lot of times they don't really know what we do and sometimes they come in and they are shell shocked about why are you doing that … and why we do it."

Michelle believed that principals should participate in the same training teachers attend. She saw disconnect between what she was told to do in professional development and her principal's interpretation of student data. Principals typically attended a different track of professional development from the teachers and received different information from the teachers.

> I also think that the workshops where they give us strategies to use with our reading groups they are not there. They are usually at a separate meeting. So we have to explain to them why we are doing certain things.

The teachers also saw disconnect between how the principals looked at data and related the data to what actually occurred in the classroom.

> Well they [students] might have scored this on Dominie, but I've already seen this much improvement. And the testing data isn't telling them [principals] everything that I'm seeing. A lot of times they are 'we have to get this kid on grade level' and I'm like, this kid came to me on a kindergarten level and now

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I've already moved him this far. I've seen the progress and sitting in the room you see the strategies they are using and the books they are reading.

The teachers believed the obstacles that hindered student progress included a lack of parental support and the transience of the student population. Most of their students did not have someone at home to read with them, and many parents had misunderstandings regarding reading skills.

> They will say, 'My child can read.' They [parents] are focusing on the fluency part and they don't have the other strategies that they could help them [students] with. They are just saying, 'My kid can read so why is she making that grade in your class?' So we have to break it down for them and say, 'Here's some strategies you can try. Such as you can read a part and they can read a part.' So I'd say that is definitely a challenge for us.

Josephine explained that her struggling students required a modified curriculum. She adjusted the level of assignments to match with the reading level of her students.

> I gave them [students] less words. Just three words and I told them when they come in tomorrow they better be able to read those words. But like Michelle said they aren't getting the necessary support at home. They'll say, 'Nobody would read with me.' or 'Nobody helped me with my homework.' We try to overlook those things. But it's like we are beating our heads against the wall trying to help those kids making sure they will succeed and be successful. The biggest barrier is if they haven't been read to at home and they aren't getting that example at home to better themselves and be successful.

Students transferred in to their classrooms at Sudbury from all over the state and neighboring states. Michelle believed that transitioning to the Common Core standards would alleviate some of the issues associated with students transferring in and out of schools. However, these students had other challenges associated with moving frequently.

> We have kids coming in here with no reading ability. And it's like you are in second grade and on your way to third grade. And how am I to adjust so that you can progress and at least make gains. I think that this is another issue that

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they transfer in and out. Just for them it's got to be a huge thing. Just the transition and getting used to the environment. So it's not only a challenge for us but for them too. The intimidation factor and getting used to the teacher.

There was a focus this year on the writing instruction. Anita looked for evidence of student writing when she visited classrooms. She also expected teachers to articulate the learning goals for their lessons.

> She wants to see it [learning goals] all the time. She wants to see proof that we are writing. We will say look in their notebook. She will say, 'No I need to see evidence. I need to see the students doing it. I need to see work posted. I need to see the anchor charts you are using to help them. What are you doing in your small groups, your lesson plans?" And she will stop you in the hall and expect you to pull it right out. And if you are 'uh, ugh.' She will say, 'You need to go back and reassess that data and be able to really explain to me where they are, how we are going to move them, and what's the next step.'

Josephine thought that Anita was interested in seeing small group instruction which was an integral part of their implementation of RtI.

> She's looking for small groups. When she comes in there she doesn't want to see you whole grouping it all the time. So definitely having the small groups going, knowing your students, knowing where they are, and how to meet their needs. And that child who is not getting it what are you doing to make sure he gets it?

The teachers explained that RtI occurred during their regular classroom instruction, as well as a designated period of time each day called the Power Hour, to focus on the concepts students had missed on their classroom assessments or that they noticed through class observations. They shared that what made their school unique in relation to RtI was that the staff and principal were in constant communication regarding concerns they had with students. The conversations were not limited to data team meetings and involved collaboration across grade levels.

> She always has us share things. That's always a part of our Monday meetings where she will have one of us share with the group something we have been doing. Anita is very data driven and differentiation is a focus. She will grab me in the hall and ask me 'How is this going and how is this going?' Or she will

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tell me to get with second grade to find out about something the kids are not getting, to talk to them about what we did, and what we know works with the students.

The teachers believed that Sudbury was a dynamic school because of the commitment and energy Anita expounded as a leader. She encouraged her staff to tackle challenges persistently and to problem solve in creative and innovative ways.

> Anita is an excellent leader. She gives us leeway, but you better be right. Don't come to her half cocked because she's not going to back you and support you. She gives you a lot of support, and there is a lot of pressure, and she does it because she wants us to be the best we can. She wants to make sure we are doing what we are supposed to do in the classroom. Because it's her that they are going to look at in the end. She puts it on her and makes us accountable. But like I said, a lot of time we might not like it. We may gripe. We may complain. But it's for the big picture. The big purpose is for the children to make sure that we are doing what we are supposed to be doing. And if we are we shouldn't have a problem.… I really do I think she has a heart for the children and wants them to succeed and that is evident with all the successes we have. … AYP year, after year, after year, and now National Blue Ribbon certified.

Anita valued each individual child at her school and made an effort to know every child by name.

> She knows their names. She knows their family. She knows how they are doing academically, behaviorally. This is only my second school and you never saw that principal. But here.... You hear her heels clacking and you know she's coming. She's never in that office. The only reason that she's in that office is if there is an emergency. Or something that she absolutely has to get done for the district.

Anita also knew her teachers and supported their professional needs. She customized professional development to match the needs and interests of teachers.

> If she feels like you need some assistance she will do everything she can. She will say, 'I'm not trying to insult you. I'm inviting consultants to come over to strengthen you.' When I came over my second year I really had not had a positive experience my first year. I really felt weak as a teacher. I asked myself, 'Is this going to be a good career for me? Did I make a good decision?' From the moment I walked in the door she said, 'I got you.' She pushed me, supported me. I'm not tooting my own horn, but I've had people visit my classroom. I've been told in district walkthroughs I have the best small groups

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they've seen. I've worked on Common Core curriculum. We have done presentations. I owe it to her because I don't think I would have gotten to where I am now in that short period of time. And it's only been five years, but it feels like seven or eight years. She has done so much to make sure I'm the best I could be and I feel confident as a teacher.… She is very supportive.

Observation of Sudbury RtI Data Meeting

I observed an RtI team meeting between Anita, the principal, and two second grade teachers, Michelle and Jane. Anita started the meeting by sharing with the teachers the results of the third grade fall Measures of Academic Performance (MAP) scores. She stated her pleasure in observing that many of their former students did exceptionally well, and she credited the contribution of the teachers' efforts from the previous year. She asked the teachers to make an effort to encourage their former students when they saw them. Anita also asked the teachers for input on a couple of third graders who were not making significant progress. She and teachers shared information about the students' strengths and weaknesses. An example of this was when Jane said, "Destin has great parental support, but he does have trouble keeping attention. You really have to remind him and pull him back in…. With him he needs to have challenging work that he has to work hard at." Michelle suggested, "Maybe after school would be good for him."

They then turned the conversation to the progress of their current students. They discussed the fall Dominie scores and their concerns about several students performing significantly below grade level. Anita asked the teachers to compare the Dominie data with their ongoing classroom assessments. Michelle noted a definite correlation between the Dominie data and what she observed during classroom instruction.

> What I am seeing is that they are a very active group…And when I pull them based on the data from Dominie and MAP … I am really using comprehension

skills, drawing conclusions, making inferences, and I can see that they are very successful with that. Main idea is definitely a weakness across the board, a struggle across all tiers. So I know that is something I am going to continue to focus on in small group. They can tell you what they are reading, but when it comes down to identifying the one sentence that tells the main idea they want to pull all the details. They are so descriptive and give me so much information. I try and say, 'Just give me the main thing.' They can summarize, no problem. But pulling out that main idea piece and connecting what they are reading to their writing.... I even see in SuccessMaker, they will say, 'This is summarizing or this is main idea.' So I know they are making connections. Even in social studies and science they are making connections with reading across the board.

Throughout my observation of the RtI team meeting, Anita gave suggestions

and set expectations for future instruction. She asked the teachers to focus on building

vocabulary through the use of informational text.

Continue to get the children to talk about and converse about the learning. I see in both of your rooms that your students are comfortable to have the conversations about the learning. The two of you when you look at your intervention block start to bring in the following things. Let's list five areas we need to focus on for all students to be successful. First of all, we are going to have a longer math block because you are going to integrate social studies into reading. So we know that informational text is one area we are struggling with across the school. Literacy text we do well and the kids know how to comprehend with the literacy text but the informational text is something we need to work on. One area we need to focus on is to build on the student vocabulary….

Anita also brought up parental involvement and instructed the teachers to share

specific reading strategies during parent conferences.

You have to explain to parents the difference between reading words and reading for meaning. Parents are saying this child can read. But asking the parents to share with you the things the children are reading to them, have them summarize things for you.

Finally, Anita reminded the teachers to make their students accountable by

structuring the learning in ways where the students assess their own progress. She

recommended the teachers use reading response journals that require students to answer

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questions about the text they read independently. The meeting ended with the teachers agreeing to focus on using informational text to build vocabulary and writing skills.

Descriptive summary

Anita's path to becoming an elementary school principal started with her experience teaching computer skills in middle school. There she identified her passion for helping children learn to read. Although she did not receive a formal background in early childhood or teaching reading, she was actively involved in the implementation of a Reading First initiative. That experience provided a background in the components of reading and developmentally appropriate practice for early childhood education. She also developed strategies for promoting reflection and collaborative practices with teachers. Anita believed that principals need training in early childhood and reading so that they know what to look for in early childhood classrooms and how they can support instruction. She worked with her teachers to understand the needs of every student at her school through constant dialogue and examination of student data. Her expectation was that all students at her school would be successful.

Karen

Karen was the principal of Baker Elementary, which was a small Title I school located in a high poverty, high crime area of a central South Carolina city. Baker Elementary, unlike the other schools in this study, did not have a problem with transiency. The student population was relatively stable and the class size stayed around 22 or 23. Adjacent to the school was a new federally funded, low income housing development under construction. The school anticipated growth in its student population from this new housing project. The school currently served 257 students in

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prekindergarten through fifth grade. One hundred percent of the student population received free and reduced price lunch. Approximately 94 percent African American, 5 percent Caucasian, and 10 percent Other students were served at Baker Elementary. Despite the high level of poverty, Baker Elementary had met federal and state accountability Adequate Yearly Progress for six consecutive years. The school made Average growth and earned an A on the 2012 state report card.

Karen was an African American in her early fifties. She had spent fourteen out of sixteen years as principal at Baker Elementary. Her career began with an associate degree in early childhood education. She originally wanted to run her own day care. She spent a couple of years working in local day care centers and decided she would pursue a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. After graduation she taught sixth to eighth grade reading and math in the low country of South Carolina. Over the years she taught 2nd through 5th grades and eventually returned to college for a master's degree in elementary education. Eventually, she became involved in her district's leadership program. She participated in a year-long internship shadowing an elementary principal.

> I got paid as a teacher, but I did everything that the principal did. The whole, entire year…. I learned so much from her because I was there the whole year. They say it's hard to do it now and it's too expensive but I think it's the best experience you can have.

Karen's pre-service training involved a lot of practicum experiences that prepared her for teaching.

> My student teaching experience was wonderful. But I started before the students did. My first day with Mrs. West, she was setting up the classroom. And she was getting ready to retire. So she said, 'I'm going to get you ready so you can have my job.' So I went through setting up the classroom. And so the children came into the classroom and thought there were two teachers.

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Karen's teaching experiences always centered on helping struggling readers. She remembered helping a struggling student, Alfie, during her first teaching experience working with sixth through eighth graders.

> I tutored a boy Alfie. Alfie was in the 6th or 7th grade and he could not read. He could do math like a wiz. But Alfie could not read. Alfie would not talk to you either. So that was part of the problem. You have to talk. He was very, very shy. Teachers didn't realize Alfie didn't read. He would blend into the wall. You would not know he was in the room because he's not going to talk. He's going to laugh with the group. So I tutored Alfie the whole year for an hour every day. …And at the end of the year Alfie could read.… And I was like I am so excited I've taught someone how to read!

According to Karen, principals need to know about the reading process to support their early childhood students.

> You know it's not a cookie cutter way that you teach children to read. You have to look at individual children. Some of them catch on quickly, some of them don't. I honestly think you can't be a principal without being a teacher. Even though some people do it. You've got to [teach]. It's so easy to get something and say, 'Do it like this.' And you know on paper it might look good, but it's not necessarily going to be what happens. So you need experience with the little ones and how to get them motivated and how to get the little light to go on.

Principals also need to understand that the instruction needs to be differentiated to meet the individual needs of students. Karen said that even in her early years as a classroom teacher she recognized the need for small group instruction based on the needs and abilities of students. Teachers also need to monitor their students' progress.

> I had 3 or 4 reading groups without someone telling me that's what I had to do. You know, these are the ones that kind of get it, these are the ones that don't, and these are the ones that can just go on, and the reading groups just change. So we were already doing the differentiated instruction without any one calling it . Because I know 'Christine come over here because you didn't do very well on the paper that I checked.' The paper that I checked myself. I didn't let anyone else check my papers. I can't let you check my papers cause I need to do it myself so I know where they are so when I get to something I know little Barbara needs something and I can give a little help. So I know I need to walk around and help her out. So that is stuff that you really don't learn from a book but you learn from experience.

Karen emphasized that teachers also have to understand their students' other needs. She recognized that many of her impoverished students needed food, clothes and sometimes shelter. It was difficult for children to concentrate on learning when their basic needs had not been met. Many of her students had limited life experiences and came to Baker without basic readiness skills. Many parents also lacked literacy skills. Karen recognized that to get parental involvement, sometimes she had to help the parents first.

> You can be in the classroom and get them [students] exposed. … But they go home and if you don't have follow-up it's not going to work. We had more [parent involvement] when Ms. Lock [parent educator] would pull some of the parents. 'Let me show you how to do this.' We have Books and Breakfast [parent meeting to teach skills to read books to children] but it's not as frequent as it used to be. So we would pull parents. We would teach parents how to read. You know you have to know how to read in order to help your child. So if you have to sneak in the back door, nobody will know you can't read. And Ms. Lock will teach you… We've gone even where the bus is coming [for a field trip] and while you are waiting, the parents are going to have some index cards. 'You are going to be writing words and putting them in a ziplock bag. And you are going to go home, and you are going to review the words with your child. We are going to give you some activities to work with your child so that the children can be reviewing these words.' … So we are going to start with the parents.

Many of the parents were younger and lacked general parenting skills. They did not understand the value of language development and talking with their children. Karen understood that young children learn through their interactions with their environment. She encouraged parents to look for spontaneous opportunities to teach their children.

> And you know there are so many opportunities to teach the children. When you are driving, 'What is that? What kind of sound does that make? What color is that car?' They [parents] just don't do it. We [parents] are too busy listening to music. You know we go to the grocery store. There are just so many opportunities to learn there as a game they [students] don't even know they are learning. That are natural. Like answer me in complete sentences. Just think if you can talk in complete sentence it's going to help you write in complete sentences. You have to go back to the basics with the parents.

Karen had high expectations for her students and parents. She communicated these expectations and held them accountable. She described an interaction with a kindergarten parent who was having trouble building independence in her child.

> It amazes me though how some of the children come to us. I mean some of them come with nicknames and they don't even know their real name. 'Come on mama, what's his name?' 'Pouchy.' 'Pouchy, is that your real name? What's his real name? That's what we call him. Well, you need to start calling him by his real name. He's not going to write Pouchy. He needs to know his real name. His name is Edward and he's never going to learn that if you keep calling him Pouchy.' We try and do those kinds of things with the parents.

Baker had a poverty index of 100 percent. Yet, the school had consistently met federal accountability guidelines over the last six years. Karen was tenacious in her efforts to ensure that poverty did not inhibit student learning.

> So my philosophy is, and I try to talk to teachers about it, I hear the superintendent say, 'They [parents] send us who they have. They don't decide the smart child goes here. They send us who they have.' We have a clothes closet. So you come to me and your shoes are torn up. I get you some shoes. I don't want to hear you don't have a pencil and paper. 'Get you some paper and pencil.' Because really and truly children don't have jobs so when they leave home, they can't make mama and daddy buy paper. We need to address the needs they have. Then let's move on so you can learn. You know there are days that if you are worried about mom and dad fussing at home. You know we are going to be put out. You know we need to do those things. We are kind of like a family here. I had a parent come in here this morning. She said, 'My child has been coming in for the last two weeks tardy. And I want you to know I just got enough money to get my lights turned back on. You know I am looking like this because I'm trying to make sure that their clothes are washed.' And I said, 'Do you need washing powder? We will get you some washing powder if that will help you.' Because if you are upset and crying all the time, they [students] aren't going to want to leave you. We can't take care of everything, but we try to have some resources so we can take care of some things.

Karen had fostered partnerships with a church in the community. The church donated clothes and shoes. Other businesses donated school supplies such as paper, pencils, and backpacks. Karen found whatever she could to help her families. The help was given in a private manner because Karen respected her families' dignity.

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I will sneak it to you if you don't want anyone to know you don't have something. I put paper and pencils in the teachers' boxes so they will have it somewhere in their rooms. You know some of things, in order for you to learn, need to be moved out of the way. Then when you are in the classroom we expect you to do your very best. If you need help we expect you to ask for help.

The help did not end with material things. The students at Baker knew that if they

needed help academically they just had to ask.

You know I had some students last week, you know SuccessMaker [computer program], you know we work for 80 [percent]. You know that 70 isn't good enough, we work for 80 or above. So I asked these two little 5th grader girls, 'Why the 40?' And they are 5th graders and they started crying. I told them stop all that crying and tell me what you missed. 'Long division. I don't know what to do.' 'What do you need to do?' 'Can I come to your office in the morning?' 'You can come to my office every morning and I will help you.' Ms. Gray, the secretary, anybody will help. But you need to know what you need help with, and truly if you see a child doing homework and you are fussing, 'Why are they doing it now?' Does it matter that they are doing it now or does it matter that they are getting it done? It matters that it is getting done… We are trying to teach the children how to help each other. So let them help each other if they are sitting in the hallway before school. You just have to get them where they are and get them where we want them to be.

Karen also made home visits on her way home to build relationships with parents.

Many of the parents avoided coming into the school, and some did not have

transportation to get to school.

I will stop by your mama's house, or your mama's job, and say, 'This is what I need.' I do positive home visits and I do negative home visits…Behavior stuff, I do good phone calls. I just go by. If I go down Duke [street] to go somewhere, I am probably going to be late. Because if I see a mama outside, they're waving, 'Come here.' and 'How's so and so doing?' I ride the bus if I have to. I'd drive the bus if they would let me, but they won't. You know just so some of those problems won't, you know, get out of hand. I have an open door policy. If you need to talk to me just come talk to me. I expect for you to learn. Everyone needs to know where they are at.

Karen expected her students to know their own needs in regard to learning

objectives. Even the students in prekindergarten needed to know what they were

learning.

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I'm learning to write my name or the alphabet. It's ok to ask for help. It's ok to ask about something you don't know because you're going to learn it. You know they [students] really all know. By 1ˢᵗ grade 2ⁿᵈ grade they can kind of tell you … When we do SuccessMaker or MAP and we put you in a group, why did we put you in that group? 'Because I need help with so and so.' And you need to know that. If you don't know where you are you don't know where you're going.

Karen knew her students because of her visits to their classrooms. She was

cognizant of how the children were engaged in the classroom instruction. She wanted to

see her teachers monitoring the students' progress during instruction and making

adjustments to accommodate their learning needs.

I look to see if the students know where they are. The teachers can teach to the ceiling. But if the students don't know what they're doing then you know it's not going to do any good. They need to pay attention, They need to know what they are doing. It's hard for some of us to let it be student driven. They [teachers] think if they say, 'Yes ma'am, no ma'am.' that's it but it isn't. …The teachers need to be taking notes so they know what they need to change. I think lesson plans are great to guide you for the week but they might not be what you do today…So you just have to make those adjustments in your lesson plans. You just don't do it because it is written there.

Karen explained that this philosophy complements the school's RtI plan. The

teachers identified the students needing intervention using Dominie and MAP to place

them initially in Tier 1, 2, or 3; however, the groups were flexible and changed according

to students' progress.

I kind of think you can be in Tier 1 in something today with a concept and then you can be in Tier 3 for the next one [concept]. So I expect the teachers to make those kinds of adjustments and document why you think the student needs to move. Now I just don't think you stay in Tier 1 forever. You might and that's where you need to stay if you do, but if not then you have to move. But you may move as you do different things. …They [teachers] have to differentiate instruction when they do small groups. … But as a teacher you need to know where they [students] are every day. Dominie results can tell you what happened that day. You need to know if they know the ABCs and so forth. But you need to know when the light goes off and it's time to move on to something else with this particular child. And not the next time you do [administer] Dominie.

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Teachers monitored the progress of interventions in their classrooms using checklists and keeping anecdotal records in a notebook. Karen saw RtI as a fluid process in which the students moved between tiers depending on their needs. Intervention was integrated throughout the day. Classroom teachers provided the majority of the interventions through small group or one-on-one instruction. A partnership with the Foster Grandparent program provided classroom teachers with an extra person every day for at least 3 to 4 hours to help read with students. The Midlands Reading Consortium, through the United Way, provided tutors once a week to read and play learning games with the early childhood students.

Decisions relating to RtI and intervention were primarily the responsibility of the classroom teachers. Karen facilitated grade level data meetings every Tuesday.

> So every Tuesday, you [teacher] know that if you have a problem, this is the time to bring it to the table. I did a lot of vertical articulation last year and I need to get back to that in faculty meetings. We haven't done it too much, but they do it on their own. First grade might go to kindergarten and say, 'This is what I see. What do you think about this?' We have student intervention teams that meet on Tuesday to see what else you might need.

Karen did not see herself as an expert in reading. When she needed to know something about reading and her early childhood students, she talked to her teachers.

> You know we share so much together. I don't know if I have an expert that I go to every time. But I may go to you and ask, 'What do you do in your room for this?' So you can have a discussion and you have to decide if that is going to help your children. Kindergarten plans together. First [grade] plans together. By the time they [teachers] come to me they have already asked the teacher from last year, 'What did you do?' So before they come to talk to me they have already done a lot of that already. … My staff has been with me so long and it's part of the process. … You know teaching is like your personality too. I can go in there and say, 'I really like the way Ms. Mosely did that.' But if it isn't in your personality to do it like that it isn't going to work for you. So you have to figure out how to go from A to B. I don't care how you do it as long as they all get to B. So I give them the flexibility to do that.

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Karen shared that her teachers knew that "I want them to do whatever it takes so the children will learn." She expected them to be engaged with the students and to be aware of their progress and needs. She also promoted life-long learning with her teachers.

> I always tell them there's always something new to learn. There's always something new that's going to come out. Just because you've been in for 30 years doesn't mean that you're not going to do it. Because we all have to learn. I think a lot of the stuff that comes out has a new name. But if you look into to it you've probably already been doing some of it and you just need to tweak it. Like Common Core, it's going to be different for us but we need to do it. … as a teacher you are a continual learner. You can't stop learning yourself. Even me.

Baker Elementary Teacher Focus Group Interview

The focus group at Baker Elementary was comprised of a prekindergarten teacher, Elizabeth, and two kindergarten teachers, Joelle and Jimae. I started the conversation by asking them what they thought principals need to know about early childhood literacy. They stated the importance of principals being aware of what the district was expecting teachers to implement. They perceived a lack of communication between the district and principals in regard to what students in kindergarten should be expected to do in relation to reading.

> They [principals] need to know everything we need to know. So that if they are coming in to observe during that time block, they know exactly what is the beginning stages. And the beginning stages in prek are going to be different from kindergarten and the other grades. And district expectations, so there isn't a gap between what the district is saying we have to be and what the in house administrator is expecting.

I asked the group to tell me what Karen expects to see in their classrooms related to early childhood literacy and teaching reading. They told me that having word walls and student work displayed was important. Jimae thought that Karen was more interested in watching the children and understanding what they were doing in the

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classroom. She said that when Karen visited her room she was "interacting with the kids to make sure they know what they are doing and know exactly what they are doing."

I asked them what obstacles their students had related to learning. They said that the overwhelming need their students had was for more parental support. Also they found that many of their parents did not have the skills needed to support their children's reading progress. Elizabeth said, "I have some that just struggle helping the little ones. You know their skills are not up to par so that kind of shields them from coming out for the fear that you will discover I don't know how." Joelle found that home visits were very eye opening in learning about the needs of her students and their families. She said, "Even though the poverty is really high. … I think a lot of times they just don't know what to do to help." Jimae expanded on the needs of their students and explained:

> I think you really don't know what the kids are going through when they leave us. Maybe it's a safe haven here with us. Mom might be out all night or on drugs. A lot of them are young parents. And you have an uncle today and that's the boyfriend and that might change another day. So a lot of changes.

Karen had expectations that teachers had frequent communication with the parents. If they had a problem with a student, she expected the teachers to make contact with the parents within 24 hours. Joelle said, "She wants us to develop relationships with our parents. Communication for good things as well as things you need some assistance with or have concerns with."

The teachers described Baker Elementary's RtI process and how Karen supported the reading progress in their struggling students. They relied on each other to discuss concerns they have with student progress. Occasionally they consulted with their curriculum resource teacher. In general they did not feel a need to ask Karen for her assistance in making instructional decisions. Karen had brought in extra classroom

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support through the Foster Grandparent program and the Midlands Reading Consortium (MRC). Generally the foster grandparents worked with small groups or monitored students working in centers while the teachers provided interventions to students in the classroom. Tutors from MRC pulled students out of the classroom to read or review sight words with the students. Karen also provided ongoing professional development using outside consultants who worked with the teachers on specific instructional strategies for which they had indicated they needed assistance.

The teachers described Karen's leadership style. They told me she was very focused on the well being of the students and believed that all of their students could be successful. Jimae said, "She is a kind person, caring, concerned of the well being of the students and the teachers." Elizabeth said, "She is always making sure you are doing what you are supposed to be doing and if not you will get a note. She has high expectations for everyone whether you are a teacher or a student." Joelle said, "She puts the students first. She definitely puts the students first. Totally."

Observation of Baker RtI Data Meeting

I observed an RtI data team meeting between Karen, the principal, and Elizabeth, the prekindergarten teacher, along with Joelle and Jimae, two kindergarten teachers. The meeting coincided with the time for the first report card and parent conferences. The teachers had collaborated to construct a checklist of basic knowledge they administered to their students. Karen asked the teachers to share information on their students from the checklist. The teachers reported using the information from the checklist to form their small groups. Karen asked the teachers if the information from the checklist was correlating to what their other assessments told them about their students.

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The kindergarten teachers used the Dominie Reading and Writing Assessment and the prekindergarten teacher used the Early Literacy Student Assessment (ELSA) as universal screening assessments to determine the literacy needs of their students. The teachers felt that the information from these assessments was pretty consistent, but that some children seemed to perform better in some situations over others. Elizabeth said, "For the most part but there are some that I know they don't know the letters and I think they are just lucky and pick the right ones. There are some that are able to do the letters with me it does reflect on the checklist." Karen wondered, "It's something about the transferring to another situation they haven't internalized. Or some of it is that it's one on one and there are no distractions."

They discussed sharing the results of the checklists with parents during conferences. Karen asked the teachers to describe the specific strategies they were going to share with parents. Elizabeth said that they were having the students lead the conferences and that they would show the parents several activities that could be easily executed at home.

Next, Karen asked the teachers about the progress of specific children. The two kindergarten teachers each had two children from a set of quadruplets. The group discussed some concerns regarding the lack of language with two of the children and the lack of social interactions with other children in the classroom. Karen asked the teachers to tell her about their strategies to increase the children's communication in the classroom. Joelle shared her concerns.

> I noticed that I have to teach them how to think. A lot is done for them and so they don't do a lot of independent thinking. They don't compare, they don't contrast, they don't think. They sort of randomly say things. Even in our conversations in the classroom you can tell they are not really thinking not

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really using their meta cognition. So I have to teach them how to think and how to break things down instead of just randomly answering things.

Karen told Joelle to look at ways to give the children specific responsibilities in the classroom that could give them opportunities to think and solve problems. They agreed to monitor the progress and discuss this again at their next meeting.

Descriptive summary

Karen's background in early childhood and teaching experience across grade levels have made her feel prepared to support her early childhood students learning to read. Many of her teaching experiences centered on supporting struggling readers. She saw RtI as a natural process of differentiating and adjusting instruction to meet students' needs. Karen's leadership had helped her school defy many odds considering the high poverty of the student population and the many challenges her students had. Karen believed it was her school's job to support her students and their families in any way it can so that the children could focus on learning. Karen expected her teachers and students to monitor their progress and ask for help whenever needed.

Patty

Patty was the principal of Brookline Elementary, which was a large urban school located in a crime riddled section of a large city in South Carolina. This Title I school served approximately 423 students in prekindergarten through fifth grade. Approximately 95 percent African American, <1 percent Caucasian, and 5 percent Other students were enrolled at Brookline Elementary. The school had struggled over the past several years in regard to meeting Adequate Yearly Progress and was designated as being At Risk and received an F on the 2012 South Carolina State Report Card.

Patty was a young, African American in her thirties. She was in her second year as a principal at Brookline Elementary. She served for two years as the assistant principal at Brookline. Her original certification was in middle school science. Patty taught science in various middle schools for over ten years before transitioning into leadership roles. She was currently enrolled in a doctoral program for educational administration. Patty realized she had an interest in the earlier grades; and so, she pursued an internship in an elementary school to gain experience in early childhood and elementary areas.

Patty recognized that she had limited training in the area of early childhood. She had consciously made an effort to participate in early childhood professional development such as the Dominie Assessment training provided to her new teachers and a state department workshop on phonological awareness.

> I did the Dominie assessment training because it was a new assessment tool for me. And understanding how to teach reading, and how children learn to read was for me a curious thing for me because of my science background. One of the things I see now is, that I would have been a better teacher then if I knew the things I do now about reading. Even more so now that I see how important the reading is because I did teach (science) as an isolated subject and didn't take into consideration the integration of reading.

These trainings had given Patty a general understanding of the reading process in early childhood. She also credited her former principal as helping her learn about the needs of early childhood students.

> We did school walkthroughs and she would do what we try to do with our teachers. You know, meta cognition and kind of show me 'This is my thinking when I see this.' 'This is what I see' …She was a great resource because I could see her thinking and get her explanation of what and why she did the things she did in the building. I wouldn't have ever realized how important it was for children to understand the front of a book and how print is organized. And I never realized how important that was for children, and how purposeful you have to be with some of those things.
> Patty connected her background in Science to early childhood because of the

common sense of inquiry found in both.

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Because I love how early childhood is set up where they [students] have the opportunities to explore areas.… Because I think we still have people who believe that a classroom has to be sitting there quiet. And you have the teacher who is doing all the work and the children are not. And I see in early childhood and especially in prek, that they have more opportunities to explore so they can process more of their thinking. And I think it builds better students for us, so they can understand the knowledge they are taking in.

Patty looked for the district's instructional frameworks and best practices when she observed in early childhood classrooms. She also looked at what the students were doing and listened to what the teacher was saying and explaining. Patty wanted her teachers to take the time to ask students comprehension questions about what they were reading and check for understanding. She looked for teacher modeling of the writing process during writing instruction. Patty stressed the importance of building independent learners.

…If they are writing with students, if they are modeling first, or just leaving them to their own devices. But making sure they are taking time to guide, and also making sure they taking the time to release the student to do some of that independent time. And one thing I have noticed with our group [teachers], we hold on to them [students] a little too long.… That might be my middle school side talking to me because I have never, with even with my own children. I don't believe in spoon feeding. I am really 'kiss.' I've been doing discipline for years and I am a no nonsense person approach and when I first started here it was the crying, and they were like, 'Ms. P you need tissue in your office.' And I was like, 'Excuse me, I don't think so. I don't do tissue because I don't do crying.'…Cause that is me and so the spoon feeding we have to stop that and really release them so they can do. Because they will rise to any occasion if we let them and show them we have high expectations.
School readiness was one of the biggest obstacles they dealt with at Brookline Elementary. Patty was grateful for having three pre-kindergarten classrooms so she could serve more four year olds at her school.

Starting in prek most of our students haven't been in any kind of program or school setting and so … Today I met with prek as a whole group to do the RTI process to identify some of the trouble spots. And one of the things they said is that they have a lot more students who have no idea about school, who don't know what to do socially, or what school is all about. They also have quite a large

amount of students who don't recognize letters, don't know what letters are, and they are seeing more of that in the past.

She was surprised by the high level of transiency in her student population. She did some research on her student body last year and found that over 100 students had left and come back to Brookline at least once in their elementary school years.

> Then we have some who start here and then they go to School A, School B, School C [neighboring] and they come back to us. So those kids who I am thinking are new to the school, and they tell me, 'Oh no they were here in kindergarten.' So they come back in full circle.

The student mobility presented frustrations for the teachers. They worked hard to move the students academically. Students who left and then came back often regressed academically.

> You know just when you think you have progress, they are gone and then at some point they come back, and they have digressed. And so you are having to go back and get them caught up. And then you have those who didn't come here, and you have to work with them. We are in the business of helping children and if I can find a way to help a child we will do it.

The RtI process was new to Brookline Elementary. Patty shared that prior to implementing RtI only the leadership team would look at data. She decided that the first step for implementing RtI was to have the teachers involved in analyzing their data with the leadership team. Once a month the teachers met with Patty and the leadership team. The teachers brought samples of student work and their data notebooks. The teachers shared their observations and any concerns they had with their students. Patty identified some generic interventions the teachers could implement right away through their small group instruction, the after-school program, and opportunities with MRC. Next she told them "You are coming back in 3 to 4 weeks and they would have to bring data and student work."

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Patty said she could look at student work and determine whether it really was a

student problem or a teacher problem.

> I wanted to see if what they [teachers] were saying was a problem was really
> showing up in the student work. I didn't offer any specific interventions because
> we were still at Tier I. And so the next thing we gave them was another sheet …
> On the sheet it said areas of concern. And that's what they had to list for each
> student. And then in the next column the intervention or support they were giving
> to support that student. And in the last column what they were going to use to
> progress monitor. And I told them that what I would expect in 3 to 4 weeks is that
> you would have this completed for all of the students you were concerned about
> today.

Patty said she was seeing a problem with writing across the grade levels because

the teachers were not teaching the writing process. She had made writing a focus for the

year and teachers participated in writing professional development provided by an

outside consultant who visited the school on a regular basis. She believed that once

instruction was aligned to best practices the students would make progress.

> We have some great kids. They are just sponges. They just can't wait. They really
> can't wait.. You saw that with Prince and Princess this summer. They are really
> just waiting for you to give them what it is that they need. And we just need to
> make sure that we are engaging them. And that is our other issue is that we make
> sure we are engaging our students consistently. Because we go for periods of time
> when we are on it and then we get lax. And that's another area we know we need
> to work on. I've seen more this year with people being a little bit more purposeful
> with what they are doing.
> Patty had found it helpful to visit other schools and talk with her principal

colleagues to see how they were implementing RtI. Also, Patty was still trying to

establish procedures at Brookline and develop a rapport and trust with teachers. Teachers

were still apprehensive about what Patty's expectations were.

> Visiting other places is important because we really need to see it in action.
> Because we read so much that sometimes it gets a little confusing and the lines
> are getting a little gray and there isn't really clear at times. We tried to do things
> [professional development] in large group. But I go back and do things in small
> groups. Because in my whole group PD [professional development] they don't
> ask questions because everyone is scared that they look like they don't know
> things. …They expected me to tell them about their data. They expected me to

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talk about their data. And I was like, 'No, this is your data. Why am I going to talk about your data? You tell me what happened here!' … They really were not understanding the whole process. And they were scared to ask questions. 'If I don't know and I ask a question is that going to get me in trouble? That's an evaluation of me.' I said, 'No you have to ask questions.' If I don't ask questions I don't find out about things. I don't look at it like, 'Oh she doesn't know about that.'I say, 'Oh she needs support with that.'

Patty was still working on defining her role as principal. She wanted the teachers

to see her as a support to their work.

People forget the role of the principal. Yeah, I'm the leader. And yes I have to do this, and that. But my real role is support. And I can't support you in the things you need unless you ask questions and let me know the areas you need support in. Patty recognized that the issue with her teachers was that she had not established

trust with them. She avoided making a lot of changes during her first year as principal,

but she was ready to move the teachers forward.

They don't trust. We did [read] some *Dysfunction of the Team.* You know reading the book. And they came to me and said, 'You need to stop.' And I said, 'Well if you are uncomfortable we are doing the right thing. Because the only way we will change things is if we push ourselves away from what we were doing.' I think my first year I couldn't change a lot of things because we were at a place where we talk about first order change and second order change. I didn't think we were where we needed to change a lot of things. We were doing a lot of things we needed to. We were going in the right direction. We just needed to tweak some things. I prioritized the things that needed tweaking immediately. Some of those things did not go well that's when you get some of the push back last year. What was really important is that they saw that the leadership team was really about the children.

When Patty needed to learn something about reading or had a question related to

the progress of a student in reading, she usually consulted with her reading teacher or her

CRT. She also did a lot of personal research. When she was uncomfortable about

something or felt she needed information, she was not uncomfortable about searching for

answers.

If I am uncomfortable about something I am going to ask a question about it. I don't have a problem if I don't know I am not afraid to ask. I think it is more of a disservice to sit there and wait. For example that process we went through

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with that kindergarten student testing her and assessing to see if she was ready for the next grade level, and making sure that all the pieces were there, and so that was valuable for me. Being a part of that is key for me that I am part of those kinds of decisions.

Patty thought her teachers appreciated that she invited their input into decisions.

> I would say I do like their input, to share, because I am not an expert in every area. Everyone has an area of expertise. The other side of me is I am a policy and procedure kind of person. Cause I don't like to get into trouble. So that is the part they have learned about me in the four years. I would say, 'We are supposed to do such, and such, and such.' And they would say, 'Well we haven't been doing.'… I would say, 'This isn't what the district says and the district says we have to do this way and this and this.' So … I think they know my background is science, but because of the questions she asks they think well she knows more than she says she does.

Brookline Elementary Teacher Focus Group Interview

A first grade teacher, Lily, and two second grade teachers, Sarah and Katie, met with me to discuss their perceptions of their principal's knowledge of early childhood literacy and her support of RtI at Brookline Elementary. I asked them what principals need to know about the reading process and early childhood students. Lily suggested that because Patty had middle school experience it would be helpful if Patty understood the development of younger children.

> You know how we have some of those general education classes about the child and the early childhood development ages. I think they [principals] need that kind of background. And then one of the reading classes I took for my master's degree. We worked with children at the different levels. And what was expected, and what wasn't, and if they reached this level push them. But some of the stuff that they want us to push they were not ready for. I think they need some of that information. …They [principals] have expectations of where they want them [students] to be. And sometimes it isn't really realistic that they are going to go from a kindergarten level to a second grade almost third grade level. There's only so much that can be done when they are that far behind. It should be more about the growth they make.

Katie agreed and added that principals need to understand the background of the children and their literacy skills when they enter school.

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[Principals need] to be familiar with the curriculum that we use. They are in charge of the whole school. But it would be great if she was familiar with our curriculum. And she probably is. But a little bit more with us doing common core and everything different this year.

Lily had experienced more student mobility this year in comparison to previous years. Katie noted that her children did not come to school with the readiness skills they needed. Also she felt that they had limited life experiences.

Our children don't have a lot of reading literacy experiences at home, like going to the library. A lot of the kids actually don't have books in the home. …Sometimes I give the assignment to read for twenty minutes at night and they will say to me, 'I don't have any books at home. Can I take a book home?' And I give them a book to bring home.

Sarah recognized the same challenge and had started making up book bags with leveled text that she sent home with her students each day.

I've had parents come up to me this year and thank me for sending the books. And it's also [about] getting the parents involved because the kids are really excited that they have books that they can read. And they ask their parents to read with them. There are still the ones who say no one will read with them, mom is busy, dad is working. 'No one will read with me.' So we have to get the parents involved.

When Patty visited classrooms, she looked for word walls, anchor charts, small group instruction, and children actively engaged in centers. These best practices were expectations the teachers saw as part of the purpose of RtI which was to focus on the needs of students who were not making enough progress.

RtI is a time set aside to work with the students who are struggling. I pull them in small groups, and work with them while the others are working by themselves in centers. One day, like its Thursday, so I work with a small group in math, and another day it might be reading. And as the days go on if I see that a student doesn't get something I address it then. And I keep my data notebook.

Sarah and Katie said the upper grades focused on RtI last year, but that they had started to implement it in second grade that school year. RtI was providing their students who were experiencing difficulties additional instruction in small groups.

> What I'm hoping for is that we would catch our kids quicker. We have so many kids who are not doing well. Most of the year has gone by before we have a SIT and discuss interventions for the children. So I am hoping that RtI will mean that we will catch the kids earlier.

The teachers explained the process of how decisions were made to help their struggling students. Katie and Sarah relied on the special education resource teacher and the school reading teacher for ideas.

> We work closely together because she [resource teacher] serves two of my boys. She and I have developed a relationship. And I can go to her and say, 'They are struggling with this.' And she will give me a website or a book. I will research it and look for answers. And look up to see how I can tweak things for my kids. All my low kids go to Ms. Emily [reading teacher]. So we talk about what's working and we can talk about what we are doing. Much of what we are doing is similar. So we look at it and change it a little. So they [students] can take what they are working on in my room and apply the same strategies in her room.

The teachers saw Patty as still learning about early childhood and the reading process; therefore, they rarely consulted with her regarding instructional steps to take with their struggling readers. They thought she had a good understanding for what to look for in the classroom environment relating to reading instruction, but she still was learning about specific instructional strategies. However, the teachers felt like Patty was very supportive of the teachers and wanted to ensure that they had what they needed to teach their students. Patty ensured the teachers had the materials they needed for instruction.

> She is very direct and she tells you what her expectations are. She is very specific about what she wants. If she comes in, and she is doing an observation, and she sees something that needs to be changed, it's not like she comes in, and

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says, 'You did horrible and you need to change this.' She is like, 'You did wonderful with this and next time you might want to consider doing this.' And she will get you the resources you need to do it. She is very supportive in everything that she does. Anything she thinks we need. Or she comes to the classroom, and sees we need something. She gets it for us or is willing to get it for us. And she will say, 'I will make sure I get it for you.' So the support system is good.

Observation of Brookline RtI Data Meeting

I observed Patty during one of her RtI meetings with first and second grade teachers. First, she met with one of the first grade teachers Lily and one of the district literacy specialists, Alice. Patty reminded Lily that her intervention was small group instruction and her progress monitoring was running records. Lily shared the progress of the students in regard to comprehension. Her primary concern with her students was their misbehaviors and lack of attention. Patty asked her to share if her foster grandmother was providing assistance with the behavior and progress of her students, and Lily lamented that the foster grandmother only worked with one of her students. Patty shared that she had a meeting with the coordinator of the Foster Grandparents to clarify the scope of their support. She said, "They are actually supposed to be gathering data on the kids they work with; so, I am going to get some things straight with them so we can get consistency with their support." Patty told Lily that her issues with student behavior related to her having so many boys in the classroom. She instructed Lily to refer two of her students to the guidance counselor and to sign up for SIT meetings for two other students. She asked Lily to make an appointment to meet with her after school so they could identify strategies to work with boys. Then Lily and Alice shared some ideas for adjusting Lily's guided reading groups to allow her to meet with struggling readers more frequently each week. Patty agreed to allow them to adjust the schedule.

Next, two other first grade teachers, Claire and Nicola, came in to share their data with Patty. Claire said that two of her students had been referred to attend after school. One was attending the program, but the other student was unable to start because the parent had not returned the permission slip. Patty revealed that the family was leaving Brookline to move to another elementary school. Nicola said, "I feel sadness. We talked to the girls' teachers; they are definitely different than the boys. They can handle the moves but not the boys." Claire agreed, "I can tell they have moved around so much, and their quietness, they just slide under the radar. They are just there long enough, and then they move." Patty explained some background about the family and told the teachers to continue to support the children as if they were staying at Brookline.

> The story is this summer the way we inherited them. It was something about Tupper Elementary [former school in the district]. … Something happened at Niceville Elementary [another former school in the district] too. She [mother] got special permission for them to attend here. She liked what happened in summer school.… So I approved it and allowed them to come. Mom does work a lot. She has a job that doesn't allow her to interact much with school. Grandma drops them off, picks them up, and then comes back because the two older girls go to the after-school. She was fighting to get the others into after school and they just made it. But now it looks like they are leaving. It's a matter of consistency. Mom really seems dedicated to them. She's just trying to make sure their basic needs are met. We will work with her and make sure certain things are available ..... They might be moving, but let's continue to work with them as if they are staying.

Patty directed the teachers to continue what they were doing in their small groups and to push using leveled text. The teachers agreed but commented on the difficulty of getting their children to read at home.

> I've been pulling books from A to Z [website] at their levels to send home each day. Otherwise if I send other books they don't come back. I'm asking for them back. And a lot of them are bringing them back. But at least they have books to read.

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Next the second grade teachers, Sarah, Katie, and Lucy, joined the meeting and shared one at a time the progress of the students they were concerned about. Many of their students had made minimal progress but the teachers were having problems with tardiness and attendance. Parents were avoiding the teachers' phone calls and notes. Several of the second grade students they discussed were still at a pre-primer level in October and lacked alphabet letter and sound recognition. Sarah shared concerns about Cam a student with language delays who had problems processing and executing directions.

> Cam comes every day tardy. And when he gets here, I hate to say this, but it's like his head is in the clouds. And he just looks at you. 'Cam do you understand?' And he doesn't give any verbal that he understands. And he just sits there and mimics what the other kids do even if it isn't right. And I don't know if he has other things going on because when we are in small group he just daydreams. And I ask him questions. He can't tell me what I said. And I ask the kids to repeat what I said and he still doesn't get it. And I have the kids paired up. And I have him with someone who is stronger ability wise. And he still does not get it. I told mom he is just not getting assignments done. Even one-on-one. It takes him a long time. I have to read questions again and it takes him a long time to complete anything.

Patty asked what was in this student's permanent record and told the teacher to arrange a parent conference and to let her know if they had problems getting a response from the mother.

> So we need to focus on him quickly. We need to arrange a conference with mom. And so I will try to do that and get it arranged. It might be that we need to go ahead and push to SIT because we have a tardiness issue at both ends. And then there's also a concern with the academics too.

The teachers told Patty they were overwhelmed with so many of their students below grade level and they didn't know how to impact all of them effectively. Patty tried to reassure them by instructing them to focus on the students needing the most help and to send leveled materials home with the remainder of their students.

OK, this is what you are going to have to do. When you look at your kids you are going to have to prioritize as to which ones will benefit first. And then maybe doing something else for the rest like the leveled text. We have a lot of leveled materials. And maybe see Emily [reading teacher] with the backpacks and monitor their progress using those. … Well you know there is another thing that is going to happen with ELA. I just got approved for a reading interventionist. So we are looking for that person now. So it may very well be that she might be able to pick up some of your kids with that. But in the meantime offer the leveled text with them and send them [leveled text] home. And prioritize the kids.

Descriptive Summary

Patty had a background in secondary science and experience teaching in middle schools. She recognized that she had a lot to learn in regard to early childhood development and the reading process. Patty understood that young children construct their understanding of concepts through hands-on exploration. She was new in her position as principal at Brookline and was working to establish a trusting and collaborative teaching staff. Her ideas regarding RtI and intervention were evolving based on her participation in district trainings and visits to schools. The number of students needing intervention was overwhelming Patty and her teachers. Her teachers recognized that Patty's knowledge about the early childhood curriculum and best practices related to reading instruction was emerging. They perceived her as supportive and caring about the progress of the students.

Lived Experiences, Recurring Themes

The participating principals' stories revealed their perception of their role in promoting the reading progress in early childhood students. Each story described the principals' knowledge of early childhood development, their approaches to support the academic achievement in their early childhood students, and the ways they encouraged

teachers to collaborate in spite of the obstacles they faced. The stories were created through a triangulation of coding transcripts from principal interviews, teacher focus group interviews, and observations of RtI data meetings. The data were organized into categories which reflect the questions that directed the research:

What do principals know about early childhood literacy and how do they use that knowledge to support early childhood teachers? Sub questions relating to the central research question include:

1. How do principals perceive their educational background and experience has prepared them to support early childhood teachers in making instructional reading decisions?

2. How do principals structure their own learning of early literacy within the context of their school?

3. How do principals perceive their role in the RtI problem solving process used to determine instructional strategies for early childhood students reading below grade level?

4. How do teachers perceive the principal's support of the reading program?

5. What do teachers have to say about the educational background and experience of their principal as those relate to the reading program and to the RtI process in their schools?

The stories describe the lived experiences. Details from coding of the transcripts support the recurring themes. There were 1,927 coded remarks of both words and phrases relating to 94 processes and activities revealing a total of 7 themes. The total coded remarks were derived from 907 coded remarks from principal interviews; 355 coded remarks from

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teacher focus group interviews; and 665 coded remarks from RtI data meeting observations. The complete record of coded remarks for all 94 processes is presented in Appendix G.

Research Questions One: Principal's Journey to Decision Making Related to Early Childhood Students Learning to Read

The first question concerned the principals' perceptions of how their educational background and experience prepared them to support decisions relating to early childhood students' reading progress. The theme *on-the-job training* emerged from the principal interviews as depicted by 57 (6%) of the coded remarks. This theme helped set the stage for how the principals feel their experiences prepared them to support early childhood students.

Each principal started his educational career from a different vantage point. Two principals received their initial certification in early childhood; one principal was initially certified in student personnel; one principal was first certified in secondary science; and one principal was initially certified in school psychology. All principals interviewed believed that their on-the-job experiences were relevant in building their understanding of early childhood students. Several processes contributed to the theme *on-the-job training* which was indicated by 57 (6%) coded remarks including: teaching experience with 16 (2%) coded remarks; teacher evaluations with 13 (1%) coded remarks; and classroom observations with 20 (2%) coded remarks. Classroom observations provided these principals with critical information regarding the needs of their students and the instructional delivery by teachers.

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Research Question Two: Principal's Learning of Early Literacy

The second research question examined how the principals structured their own learning of early childhood literacy. The theme, *reading process and best practices* emerged from the principal interviews. The processes contributing to this theme included: early childhood development as indicated by 39 (4%) of the coded remarks; professional development as indicated by 33 (4%) of the coded remarks; and reading components and best practices accounted for 93 (10%) of the coded remarks.

The early childhood development process reflects the awareness these principals expressed regarding the holistic development of young children. Associated with this is their articulation of the stages of the reading process in early childhood students. Principals participating in district early childhood training accounted for 11 (1%) of the coded remarks. The principals articulating information relating to the continuum of child development was reflected in 12 (1%) coded remarks, and knowledge of the reading process accounted for 16 (2%) coded remarks.

The principals saw ongoing professional development, as depicted by 16 (2%) coded remarks, as critical for improving student achievement. Three principals shared that they participated in early childhood professional development, as depicted by 15 (2%) coded remarks.

Principals spoke about their theory of how young children learn to read in the context of providing a learning environment that optimized instructional best practices as indicated by 16 (2%) coded remarks. They recognized the importance of structuring learning through small group instruction as indicated by 12 (1%) coded remarks. The principals were also aware of the components of reading: comprehension was reflected in

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10 (1%) coded remarks, alphabet knowledge in 7 (1%) coded remarks, writing by 11 (1%) coded remarks, and vocabulary by 8 (1%) coded remarks.

Research Question Three: Principal Role in the RtI Problem Solving Process

Research question three focused on how principals perceived their role in the RtI problem solving process used to determine instructional strategies for early childhood students reading below grade level. Five themes emerged from the principal interviews relating to the principal role in supporting students:

1. *Data focused on student needs*

2. *Challenges*

3. *Collaboration and teaming*

4. *Leadership characteristics*

5. *Resources to support learning*

Data focused on student needs as indicated by 186 (20%) of the coded remarks; *collaboration and teaming* was indicated by 149 (17%) of the coded remarks; *challenges*, by 119 (13%) of the coded remarks; *leadership characteristics*, by 152 (14%) of the coded remarks; and *resources to support learning*, by 79 (9%) of the coded remarks.

Included in the theme, *data focused on student needs*, was the principals' concern regarding understanding data as indicated by 33 (2%) of the coded remarks, the needs of students as depicted by 74 (4%) of the coded remarks, engaging students as shown by 15 (1%) of the coded remarks, and providing interventions to struggling students as indicated by 26 (1%) of the coded remarks. Principals noted that the role of data in the early childhood grades provided them with a mechanism to discuss the needs of their students with teachers. Additionally, data from the early childhood grades are used by

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the principals to articulate the need for collaboration across grade levels in order to ensure students are successful throughout the elementary grades.

The principals encountered many challenges in their efforts to support the progress of the early childhood students. Sixteen processes accounted for the theme, *challenge*, as indicated by 119 (13%) of the coded remarks including: transience with 7 (1%) coded remarks, parental involvement with 19 (2%) coded remarks, school readiness with 12 (1%) coded remarks, self esteem with 18 (2%) coded remarks, change with 17(2%) coded remarks, and size of class or school with 11 (1%) coded remarks.

Principals structured their support for implementing plans for student achievement through *collaboration and teaming* as indicated by 149 (17%) of the coded remarks from principal interviews. Principals fostered team work and distributed leadership responsibilities among staff as depicted by these processes: team as indicated by 20 (2%) coded remarks, shared leadership as indicated by 20 (2%) of the coded remarks, roles of principal and teacher as indicated by 11 (1%) of the coded remarks, collaboration as indicated by 29 (3%) of the coded remarks, decisions as indicated by 20 (2%) of the coded remarks, questioning by 21 (2%) of the coded remarks, and intentional teaching as indicated by 11 (1%) of the coded remarks.

Several processes contributed to the theme *leadership characteristics*, including communication as indicated by 43 (5%) of coded remarks, expectations as indicated by 32 (3%) of coded remarks, trust as indicated by 17 (2%) of coded remarks, moral responsibility as indicated by 12 (1%) of coded remarks, perseverance as indicated by 10 (1%) of coded remarks, and beliefs as indicated by 9 (1%) of coded remarks. Principals perceived communication as an integral component of their schools. This includes

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interactive communication between all stakeholders. The idea of trust emerged throughout the interviews as principals explained the processes they have to implement programs and support student achievement. All principals spoke of the importance of articulating expectations to teachers, parents, and students.

Twelve processes contributed to the theme *resources to support student learning*, including support teachers as indicated by 18 (2%) of coded remarks, support school as indicated by 14 (1%) of coded remarks, reading materials as indicated by 13 (1%) of coded remarks, and people resources as indicated by 11 (1%) of coded remarks. Principals perceived their role in supporting teachers and students in the RtI process as related to the acquisition of resources.

Research Question Four: Teachers' Perceptions of Principal Support

Research question four examined how teachers perceive the principal's support of the reading program. The five themes associated with research question three also emerged from the teacher focus interviews. *Data focused on student needs* was indicated by 74 (21%) of the coded remarks, *challenges* by 57 (16%) of the coded remarks, *leadership characteristics* by 46 (13%) of the coded remarks, *collaboration and teaming* was indicated by 37 (10.5%) of the coded remarks, and *resources to support learning* by 37 (10%) of the coded remarks.

Teachers shared their principals' focus on understanding data as depicted by 74 (21%) coded remarks during focus group interviews and 161 (24%) coded remarks during RtI data meeting observations. Identifying interventions to help struggling students was noted in 10 (3%) coded remarks during teacher focus interviews and 30 (4%) coded remarks from RtI data meeting observations. Teacher and principal

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conversations about concerns accounted for 7 (2%) coded remarks during teacher focus interviews and 22 (3%) coded remarks during RtI data meeting observations. Teachers and principals strategized together during RtI data meetings to determine ways to support students as depicted by the process, reading strategies, indicated by 33 (5%) coded remarks during RtI data meeting observations.

Communication, according to the teacher focus group interviews as depicted by 14 (4%) coded remarks, was a critical *leadership characteristic* that teachers thought principals need to support student achievement. Associated with this was the teachers' perception of their principals' expectations of them as noted by the process, expectations, that was indicated by 10 (3%) coded remarks in the teacher focus group interviews and by 16 (2%) coded remarks from the RtI data meeting observations.

The teachers perceived the same challenges as their principals. The theme, *challenge*, accounted for 57 (16%) of the coded remarks from the teacher focus group interviews and 98 (15%) of the coded remarks from the RtI data meeting observations. Teachers also shared the difficulty to involve parents in supporting student progress as depicted by 10 (3%) coded remarks from the teacher focus group interviews and 32 (5%) coded remarks from the RtI data meeting observations. The challenge related to the mobility of the student population as indicated by 6 (2%) coded remarks from the teacher interviews and 9 (1%) coded remarks from the RtI data meeting observations. Time was a challenge that emerged from the teacher interviews as indicated by 5 (1%) coded remarks and 11 (2%) coded remarks from the RtI data meeting observations.

Research Question Five: Teachers' Perceptions of Their Principal's Knowledge of the Reading Process in Early Childhood Students

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The fifth question examined the teachers' perceptions of how their principals' educational background and experience prepared them to support early childhood reading. The theme associated with research question one, *on-the-job training,* emerged from the teacher focus group interviews as indicated by 15 (4%) of the coded remarks. The theme associated with research question two, *reading process and best practices* emerged from the teacher focus group interviews as indicated by 89 (25%) of coded remarks.

Most teachers were unaware of their principal's background and area of certification. Teachers' perceptions of what their principal knew about early childhood development and the reading process in young students were reflected through how their principals interact with them during classroom observations, one-on-one conversations, and team meetings. The predominant processes related to the theme, *reading process and best practices,* were groups as indicated by 15 (4%) coded remarks from the teacher focus group interviews and 24 (4%) coded remarks from the RtI data meetings, alphabet knowledge as depicted by 7 (2%) coded remarks from teacher interviews and 18 (3%) coded remarks from the data meetings, and 26 (4%) coded remarks from the data meetings, and writing as indicated by 4 (1%) coded remarks from teacher interviews and 36 (5%) coded remarks from the RtI data meeting observations.

The RtI data meeting observations were also analyzed to examine how the themes identified above compared to the principal and focus group interviews. Five predominant themes emerged during the observations: *data focused on student needs* as indicated by 161 (24%) of the coded remarks, *resources to support instruction* as indicated by 81 (12%) of the coded remarks, *challenges* as indicated by 98 (15%) of the coded remarks,

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and *reading process and best practices* as indicated by 219 (33%) of the coded remarks.

The coding by themes across the three types of data collections is presented in Table 4.3.

The complete record of coded remarks for all 94 processes is presented in Appendix G.

Table 4.3

Coding by Themes Across Data Collection

Themes	Principal Inter-view Codes	%	Focus Group Codes	%	RtI Data Meet-ing Codes	%	Total No. Codes	Total %
Reading process and best practices	165	18	89	25	219	33	473	25
Data focused on student needs	186	20	74	21	161	24	421	22
Challenges	119	13	57	16	98	15	274	14
Collaboration and teaming	149	17	37	10.5	82	13	268	13
Leadership characteris-tics	152	17	46	13	21	3	236	12
Resources to support learning	79	9	37	10.5	81	12	197	10
On-the-job training	57	6	15	4	3	<1	75	4
Total	907	100	355	100	665	100	1,927	100

Summary

In summary, interviews with five principals, five focus group interviews with

teachers, and five RtI data meeting observations revealed 7 major themes:

1. *Reading process and best practices*

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2. *Data focused on student needs*

3. *Challenges*

4. *Collaboration and teaming*

5. *Leadership characteristics*

6. *Resources to support learning*

7. *On-the-job training*

Interviews with principals revealed that their *on-the-job training* was the process that has prepared them to support early childhood teachers in making instructional reading decisions. Furthermore the principals disclosed that they support their own learning of early childhood literacy through involvement in early childhood development training, participating in professional development, and learning about the reading components and best practices. When the principals were asked what their role was in supporting the RtI problem solving process to determine instructional strategies for early childhood students reading below grade level, their responses revealed that they have a data focus on student needs; facilitate collaborative decision making with their staff; provide resources to support student learning; and provide consistent leadership characteristics including fostering trust, communication to promote a culture of collaboration, and teaming. Furthermore, the principals shared that they are driven to persevere with their efforts to promote student achievement despite challenges because of a sense of moral responsibility.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study, five school administrators were interviewed to explore the lived experiences and leadership of elementary principals to better understand how leadership knowledge of the reading process impacted the decision making process related to supporting struggling early childhood students. There are limited data in educational research relating to the literacy knowledge of principals (Aldridge 1973; Allington & Rigg, 1979; Braughton 1989; Burch & Spillane, 2003, Calvert, 1975; Casey, 2003; Cox, 1978; Hall, 2008; Jacobson et al., 1992; Laffey, 1980; Mackey et al., 2006; McNinch & Richmond, 1981; Rauch, 1983; Rupley & Blair, 1977; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007; Szabacsik, 2008). This research contributes to the literature on the lived experiences and leadership of elementary principals relating to their knowledge of the reading process in early childhood students. This chapter is in three sections: conclusions including a review and discussion of the major themes, implications including a comparative examination of the themes in the interview and observation data, as well as the research and literature; and recommendations for practice and future research.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of five elementary principals' journeys to understand the reading process in underachieving early childhood

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students as it relates to the implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI). The

acquisition of reading is an interdependent process based on the physical, social,

emotional, cognitive, and language development of a child (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009;

Epstein et al., 2011; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007). This qualitative multi-case study

revealed how the participating principals understand and structure their personal learning

and leadership experiences to support the development of reading skills in struggling

early childhood students. The evidence for this study, of the lived experiences of the

participant principals, was gathered from interviews, observations, and teacher focus

group interviews. The conclusions were structured by questions asked in interviews. The

following is an interpretive discussion of the 7 major themes.

Research Question One: Principal's Journey to Decision Making Related to Early Childhood Students Learning to Read

How did the educational background and experience of the participant

principals prepare them to support decisions relating to early childhood students' reading

progress? Analysis of the data revealed the theme, *on-the-job training*. Each principal

started an educational career from a different vantage point. Two of the principals began

their career with an early childhood background; one principal received initial

certification in student personnel; one principal began in school psychology; and the

other principal received initial certification in secondary science. Despite the diversity of

their initial educational certification, all five principals participated in similar experiences

in their pursuit of principal certification.

This research revealed that the principals' knowledge of the reading process and

their personal theories of how early childhood students learn to read were limited to

instructional practices. Throughout the interviews, respondents shared examples of how

their experiences had played instrumental roles in preparing them to lead their schools and specifically to support teachers in the decision making related to students struggling in reading. These principals perceived their *on-the-job training* as paramount in their journey to understand the developmental needs of young learners in their schools. This research showed the most influential experience preparing principals to support early childhood teachers was classroom observations. Classroom observations allowed the principals to build on their understanding of the needs of early childhood students. In addition, principals identified specific areas of support teachers needed. Furthermore, the principals recognized that the needs of their early childhood students were diverse, complex, and fluid requiring them as leaders to position themselves as learners. Research revealed that the principals saw themselves as facilitators to the problem solving required in situations where students are struggling. These principals helped their team look at students holistically by considering the physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and language developmental domains.

Research Question Two: Principal's Learning of Early Literacy

How do principals structure their own learning of early childhood literacy? Analysis of the data rendered the theme, *reading process and best practices*. The research indicates that the principals recognized that they had limited early childhood development experience; however, they understood the need to consider all developmental domains in supporting the educational progress of young children. Classroom observations taught them that children develop at different rates and have different needs. They understood that the physical, emotional, and cognitive domains develop at a rapid rate during early childhood years. They recognized that the young

children's experiences have a critical impact on future school success. The research also demonstrates that the principals believed that parents play an instrumental role in supporting their children's development. The principals' understanding of how children learn to read was centered on children's development and instructional practices.

The principals with early childhood backgrounds clearly had insight into the role of language development in future reading success. This was clearly an advantage for these principals as they could more effectively guide teachers in their decision making relating to reading interventions. These principals spoke of specific strategies to foster language development in the classroom and home environments. The principals with backgrounds in alternate certificate areas, school psychology and secondary science, perceive their personal knowledge of early childhood and the needs of young children as limited. They recognize they have more confidence in understanding the curriculum and developmental needs of older elementary children. Principals with certificate areas, other than early childhood, perceive their lack of early childhood knowledge as a personal weakness. However, all these principals have personal goals to expand their knowledge of early childhood and specifically the reading process in young children. These principals display initiative to participate in early childhood professional development with their teachers. They also seek information about early childhood development and reading acquisition through their personal research and readings. In addition, these principals realize that having a hands-on approach, being visible in classrooms, and being active participants in RtI grade-level meetings are key behaviors they need to engage in so they can understand the needs of their early childhood students.

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These principals have developed their own theories of how early childhood students learn to read. These theories are centered on instructional practices that teachers should implement in classrooms and the actions the principals can take to support teaching and learning. The research revealed that the principals referred to the reading process in early childhood students in general terms. When asked how they thought young children learn to read, they typically gave general answers relating to learning the alphabet letters and sounds. Principals occasionally referred to the five components of reading: phonemic awareness instruction, phonics instruction, fluency instruction, vocabulary instruction, and comprehension instruction (NIH, 2000). Only the principal with experience with the South Carolina Reading First initiative was able to articulate an understanding of the reading components. The other principals referred to the reading components in general terms. They recognized that they were more comfortable with the curriculum and assessment of older elementary students.

The acquisition of knowledge relating to early childhood literacy for the principals in this study can be perceived in a continuum. The five principals were positioned differently in their journey to learn about early childhood literacy and support their teachers in the implementation of RtI. Patty as the newest and least experienced principal was at the beginning of her journey to understand early literacy. She equated the lack of reading progress as a result of bad behavior and the lack of parent involvement in student learning. She relied on her reading teacher and the classroom teachers to make instructional decisions. Because she lacked knowledge about the reading process, she was unable to contribute significantly in RtI meetings. Her implementation of RtI had not evolved to the analysis of individual student's reading data to drive the instructional

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decisions. Susan and Karen were next on the continuum. They both had early childhood backgrounds and an understanding of child development. Yet they were not very different from Patty in equating the lack of reading progress with generic instructional practice. They also delegated instructional decisions to other staff members, and the instructional decisions in their RtI implementation was centered on reading practices. Next on the continuum was Anita who, despite her background in student personnel, displayed more understanding of the reading process. I attributed this to her training through the Reading First Grant that taught her how to facilitate reflective decision making with teachers. Finally on the continuum was Michael. His hands-on approach exhibited the strongest characteristics of a learning leader. He positioned himself to learn along side his teachers in professional development, and he retained the responsibility of facilitating curriculum and RtI data meetings. Whereas Michael admitted having limited knowledge of early childhood literacy, he took an active role in increasing his knowledge. Michael was different from the other principals because he sought to understand how children learn to read versus just relying on identifying instructional strategies to teach struggling readers.

These principals learned about young children through the context of their position as leader of the schools that included visiting classrooms, meeting with teachers, and interacting with parents and families. This research showed that the principals, while recognizing they had things to learn in respect to reading, were comfortable delegating another staff member as the school reading expert. The principals also valued the synergy of their staff in respect to problem-solving strategies to use with their struggling students. When it came time to identify interventions for struggling readers, the principals

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typically deferred these decisions to the classroom teachers or the designated school
reading expert.

Research Question Three: Principal's Role in the RtI Problem Solving Process

What is the role of an elementary principal in supporting the RtI problem
solving process used to determine instructional strategies for early childhood students
reading below grade level? The research revealed five themes related to the principal's
role in supporting student reading progress including: data focused on student needs,
challenges, collaboration and teaming, leadership characteristics, and resources to support
learning.

These schools were at various stages of implementation of RtI. The amount of
time a principal had served at a school seemed to make a difference in the depth and
effectiveness of the RtI team process. Principals new to schools were focused on
establishing procedures and building trust. Those principals who had served at the same
school for several years spoke about how the RtI team process was embedded in the
school culture. Teachers at their schools perceived intervention as part of their daily
instruction.

The examination of student data was a central theme observed in the principal
interviews, focus groups, and RtI data meetings. The research showed that principals
kept data in the forefront of discussions with teachers. A range of data sources were used
to guide the teams in the decision-making process related to student intervention. Michael
had his teachers analyze student work to determine alignment to learning objectives and
next steps for instructional support. Patty encouraged her teachers to examine the social
emotional development of students as part of their efforts to support struggling readers.

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Anita encouraged her teachers to consider a holistic approach with data from teacher and principal observations, parent conversations, teacher anecdotal records, and MAP and Dominie scores.

The research also revealed that principal and teacher conversations about data often contained ambiguous and general terms. For instance in discussing student progress teachers and principals did not name specific targeted expectations to define progress. This observed ambiguity implies that the principals equated the reading process as instructional practice. The research showed that principals tend to discuss data in general terms, often asking if there was "progress." In the absence of "progress," principals typically encourage generic interventions without discussing specific skills relating to reading. Only Anita, the principal with extensive training from her previous experience with the Reading First Grant, talked about specific strategies associated with specific students. Others focused on analyzing student work relating it to learning objectives. The principals with more training related to the reading components tended to talk about specific skills and strategies students needed to make progress. The principal with the least experience appeared to equate poor academic performances with behavior problems. This principal also was more likely to recommend screening for special education services versus looking at specific intervention strategies.

The research revealed that reflective decision making is an ongoing process encouraged by all principals with their stakeholders. Interviews with principals revealed that principals perceived reflection as an integral process for teachers and principals. Furthermore, these principals saw value in young children learning how to reflect on their own learning. They believed that even four-year-old prekindergarten students need to

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think about and assess their own learning. This was necessary so students could communicate their needs for support. This reflective practice was an off shoot of the district's process for continuous improvement.

Research revealed that principals supported struggling learners by demonstrating common leadership characteristics including communication, perseverance, trust, and setting rigorous expectations. In addition principals are advocates for the needs of their students. Principals advocated for resources to support interventions for their struggling students. While some people perceive being a Title I school as a stigma, these principals saw it as an advantage that could expand their ability to secure resources for classroom intervention and reduce class size. The principals of the non-Title I schools believed they were at a disadvantage for not having access to Title I funds. However, not having access to Title I funds did not stop these principals. In fact, they are persistent, determined advocates for their students. All principals are innovative in looking for different resources to support their students. Principals support early childhood students by meeting as many of their physical, cognitive, or social emotional developmental needs as possible. All schools had large percentages of students living in poverty, ranging from 80 to 100 percent of students qualifying for free and reduced-price meals. Principals recognized the challenges and obstacles that their students face as a result of poverty. Children enter school without readiness skills, and many of them have parents who lack the skills to support them in their learning. Many children lack basic needs of health care and nutrition. In many cases, children live in dysfunctional and unpredictable environments.

This research showed that these principals worked to impact these challenges and allow many of these students an opportunity to succeed in school. Principals accomplished this by building support systems to provide many of the things parents were unable to provide such as additional food on weekends, school materials, and clothes. Principals reached out to parents and provided opportunities for them to learn specific skills to work with their children. Principals communicated their beliefs to teachers that the challenges associated with poverty were not an excuse and that all students could and would learn.

My research demonstrates the commitment these principals had for the success of their students. They were driven by a passion, or a moral responsibility, that all students should have the opportunity to work to their potential. This moral tenet drove them to persevere through adversity to ensure that all students learn. They recognized that the early childhood years were of critical importance in building the foundation for life long learning.

Research Question Four: Teachers' Perception of Principal Support

What do teachers think about their principal's support of the reading program in their school? The research revealed that teachers recognized the importance of data analysis in relationship to making decisions to support student reading progress. They saw data analysis as a collaborative process that involved reflective discussion with their team and principal. However, most teachers saw their principal as having a consultant type role in the actual instructional decision making. Principals gave input but mostly deferred the actual decision making to the teachers. This research showed that most teachers believed that their principal had limited knowledge of early childhood literacy

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and the needs of their students. Furthermore, some of the teachers saw their principals as being oriented to the needs of upper level elementary students and at times making unreasonable demands of them in relationship to the abilities of their young children. This caused disconnect for the early childhood teachers in following the directives of their leader while considering the developmental needs of their students.

However, teachers believed their principals were advocates for them by insulating them from some of the district and state-level mandates. Principals also advocated for support for teachers by securing resources in the form of materials and additional personnel. Teachers agreed with principals that the greatest challenge they faced was the readiness level of their students of poverty. Linked to this was lack of parental support for student learning. Teachers saw this as a significant hindrance to their students' progress. Teachers perceived their principals as caring not only about the welfare and progress of the students but also for them.

Research Question Five: Teachers' Perceptions of Their Principal's Knowledge of the Reading Process in Early Childhood Students

What do teachers think their principals know about the reading process in early childhood students? Analysis of the data revealed minimal connections to the themes noted in the first two research questions that looked at the principals' perceptions of their own background and knowledge of early childhood literacy. This research demonstrates that teachers do not know about their principal's background and experience. Teachers typically knew little to nothing about their principal's experience or area of certification. Teachers generally thought their principals had a general understanding of early childhood development. Teachers placed more value on their principal's understanding the needs of young children and how they learn.

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The predominant theme that emerged from the teacher interviews was *reading process and best practices*. The research showed that teachers perceived that their principals communicated their expectations for instruction during classroom observations, one-on-one conversations, and team meetings. They related the topics their principals focused on during these interactions as reflective of what the principals knew about the reading process in young children. Teachers saw their principals focus on the following aspects of reading instruction: comprehension, concepts of print, alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, writing, independent reading or writing, literacy, vocabulary, language, oral language, listening, fluency, and stages of reading. Teachers also believed their principals expected them to implement specific strategies in their efforts to support student progress including: small group instruction, literacy centers or stations, modeling, scaffolding, and differentiation. The concept of small group instruction resonated throughout the data.

Implications

Two types of comparative analysis are offered to explain the implications of the study. A comparison of the principal interviews, focus group interviews, and observations further explains the themes that emerged from the principal interviews. Next, a comparison of the themes in this research and the characteristics in the literature is also provided. These comparisons imply further implications beyond the conclusions.

In order to compare the interview data with the teacher focus group interview data and the RtI data team observation data, I rank ordered the coded responses by theme. Analysis was completed by matching the responses across the three data sources. Comparison data are found in Table 5.1. *Data focused on student needs* ranked first in

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the principal interviews and second in the teacher focus group interviews and in the RtI data meeting observations. *Reading process and best practices* ranked second in the principal interviews and first in the teacher focus group interviews and in the RtI data meeting observations. *Leadership characteristics* ranked third in the principal interviews, fourth in the focus group interviews, and sixth in the RtI data meeting observations. *Collaboration and teaming* ranked fourth in the principal interviews and RtI data meeting observations and ranked fifth in the teacher focus group interviews. *Challenges* ranked fifth in the principal interviews and third in the teacher focus group interviews and in the RtI data meeting observations. *Resources to support learning* ranked sixth in the principal interviews and fourth across the teacher focus group interviews and the RtI data meeting observations.

It is significant to observe that *data focused on student needs* ranked first in the principal interviews and ranked second in the teacher focus group interviews and in the RtI data meeting observations. This may reflect the increased accountability principals and teachers have for assessment data in the early childhood grades. It is also significant that *reading process and best practices* ranked second in the principal interviews and first for both the teacher focus group interviews and the RtI data meeting observations. This indicates the importance principals and teachers place on identifying reading instructional strategies in discussions relating to struggling readers. In comparing the principal and teacher interview data with the RtI data meeting observation data, *challenges*, *collaboration and teaming*, and *resources to support learning* were important in the decision making process used to identify interventions to help struggling readers.

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The theme *on-the-job training* was insignificant overall as it ranked last across the three data sets. *On-the-job training* ranked seventh for the principal interviews, sixth for the teacher focus group interviews and seventh for the RtI data meeting observations. The background and experience of the principal appeared to be insignificant, to both the principals and teachers, in preparing principals to support the RtI decision making in their schools.

Table 5.1

Comparison Data of Principal Interview vs Focus Group vs Observation Ranking of Themes

Theme	Principal Interview Rank	Focus Group Rank	Observation Rank
Reading process and best practices	2	1	1
Data focused on student needs	1	2	2
Challenges	5	3	3
Collaboration and teaming	4	5	4
Leadership characteristics	3	4	6
Resources to support learning	6	5	5
On-the-job training	7	6	7

Comparison of Themes in Literature with Themes in this Research

My review of the literature (Allington, 2009; Au, 2002; Booth & Rowell, 2007; Bright, 1996; Buffum et al., 2009; Clay, 1991; Costa & Garmston, 2002; Dewey, 1963; Duffy, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Farmer, 2010; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; Fullan, 2001; Gambrell & Mazzonie, 1999; Glickman et al., 2005; Gregory & Kuzmich, 2007; Green,

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2010; Hall, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Keane, 2010; Kratochwill et al., 2007; Lai et al., 2009; Lambert, 1998; Lasley, 1992; Leech & Fulton, 2003; Lieberman & Miller, 2000; Marion, 2002; Mays, 2009; McREL, 2003; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004; Peterson, 1992; Risko et al., 2008; Ross & Gray, 2006; Schumaker & Sommers, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2004; Shernoff et al., 2003; Sherrill, 2009; Sterr, 2011; Stephen et al., 1986; Taylor et al., 2002; Tomlinson, 1999; Wahlstrom & Lewis, 2010; Vygotsky, 1962; York-Barr et al., 2001) presented in Chapter II reveals that schools with effective implementation of RtI have the common characteristics of:

1. Professional learning communities

2. Teacher reflection

Furthermore, the review of the literature (Aldridge 1973; Allington, 2008; Allington, 2009; Allington, 2010; Allington & Rigg, 1979; Bandura, 2000; Barth, 1986; Battle, 2009; Blase & Blase, 1999; Block & Mangieri, 2003; Braught, 1977; Braughton, 1989; Braughton & Riley, 1983; Burch & Spillane, 2003; Calvert, 1975; Casey, 2003; Cawelti & Reavis, 1980; Chance, 1991; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Combs, 1982; Cotton, 2003; Cox, 1978; Dandy,1982; Dartnow et al., 2000; Day et al., 2008; Ediger, 2008; Erlandson & Bifano, 1987; Farmer, 2010; Fullan, 2001; Gervais, 1982; Glickman et al., 2005; Green, 2010; Hall, 2008; Hallinger et al., 1996; Harris, 2003; Herzberg, 1966; Hoewing, 2011; Jacobson et al., 1992; Kaplan et al., 2005; Knoeppel & Rinehart, 2008; Laffey, 1980; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Leithwood & Straus, 2009; Little, 1982; Mackey et al., 2006; Marks & Printy, 2003; Maslow, 1954; Millitello et al., 2009; McGough, 2003; McNinch & Richmond, 1981; Mocek, 2002; Mulford, 2005; Murphy & Riggio, 2003; Penlington et al., 2006; Phelps, 2009; Pinnell & Fountas,

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2011; Rauch, 1983; Robinson et al., 2008; Ronnenberg, 2000; Ross & Gray, 2006; Rupley & Blair, 1977; Sebring & Bryk, 2000; Sergiovanni, 2004; Sherrill, 2009; Small & And, 1982; Standards for Advanced Programs in Educational Leadership, 2002; Stein & Nelson, 2003; Stephens et al., 2007; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007; Strosberg, 2010; Szabacsik, 2008; Thomson, 1988; Wahlstrom et al., 2010; Waters et al., 2004; Witziers et al., 2003; Vygotsky, 1962; Vygotsky, 1994) presented in Chapter II illustrates that effective principals have the following common characteristics:

3. Focus on teaching and learning

4. Knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment

5. Goal setting

6. Strategic resourcing

7. Provides professional development

8. Supports school improvement

Literature review characteristics were compared with the research's common themes and researcher rank ordered data responses. Analysis was completed by matching the principal interview responses, teacher focus group interview responses, and RtI data meeting observation responses with the themes from the literature review. The analysis is displayed in Table 5.2.

Interestingly, the rankings of the literature review themes among the principal interviews, teacher focus group interviews, and RtI data meeting observations were relatively consistent. Analysis revealed professional learning communities, goal setting and data driven instruction, and knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment as the highest ranking themes in common with the literature review, principal interviews,

teacher focus group interviews, and RtI data meeting observations. Teacher reflection

ranked fourth across all data sources. The literature review revealed the themes

"focusing on teaching and learning, strategic resourcing, and provides professional

development" were common characteristics of effective principals.

Table 5.2

Comparison Data Literature Review vs Research Data Common Characteristics

Theme	Principal Interview Rank	Teacher Focus Group Rank	RtI Data Meeting Observation Rank
Professional learning communities	1	1	3
Teacher reflection	4	4	4
Focus on teaching and learning	5	7	7
Knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment	3	3	1
Goal setting/data driven instruction	2	2	2
Strategic resourcing	6	5	6
Provides professional development	6	6	5
Supports school improvement	7	8	0

and were moderately ranked in the principal interviews, teacher focus group interviews,

and the RtI data meeting observations. The literature review rendered supports school

improvement as a common characteristic of effective principals, but this theme ranked

last in the principal interviews and teacher focus group interview interviews and was not

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present in the RtI data meeting observations. The results may reflect the skill level of the researcher in interviewing and coding data. Asking the questions in the interview guides may have impacted the responses of the principals and teachers.

Personal Reflection

The implications made by this research may be significant to new and aspiring principals as well as other educational leaders. New principals working to implement RtI may benefit from the lived experiences of the principals presented in this study. Many principals may have limited experiences with early childhood literacy as they transition from the position of teacher to principal. Additionally, for most elementary principals, implementing an RtI framework provides for the first time a concerted focus on the progress of early childhood students versus the tested third through fifth graders. My own teaching experiences did not provide me with the background to address the needs of struggling students. I started teaching prior to the emphasis on building professional learning communities and using data to inform instruction. It was really not until I started my administrative career as a curriculum resource teacher that I received training in coaching teachers and data analysis. As the Early Childhood and Response to Intervention Coordinator, my leadership style transitioned from a task-oriented manager to a transformational leader who fosters collegiality and team building. Looking from the district level to the school level has broadened my perspective so that I am now much more open to listen to principals and teachers and look for ways to support their efficacy in problem solving and meeting the needs of their students.

I anticipated my research would uncover some leadership practices and processes that would support early literacy achievement. However, I did not anticipate

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the prevalence and magnitude of compassionate statements related to caring and supporting students. I am incredulous at the numerous accounts of the principals and teachers who, despite facing incredible obstacles and challenges, persevere to focus diligently on meeting the needs of their students. These principals use reflective thinking to develop synergy among their staff and illustrate the phenomenon Pellicer (2003) referred to as using moral leadership and caring enough to lead. Regardless of the adversity these principals face, they lead with what Fullan (2001) calls a moral imperative, to ensure their students have every opportunity to learn to their potential. Regardless of their background or experience with early childhood development, these principals demonstrate relentless commitment to serve their students.

<div align="center">**Recommendations**</div>

Investigation of the lived experiences and leadership of five elementary principals reveals significant findings for new and experienced elementary principals and contributes to the literature on principals' knowledge of early childhood literacy. The following are suggestions for practice and further research.

For Practice

Knowledge drawn from this study has implications for aspiring and practicing principals, superintendents and district personnel, and colleges of education. Aspiring principals may not be aware of the challenges faced by principals and how they must overcome obstacles. They may not realize the significance of understanding early childhood development and the reading process so they can effectively facilitate the decision making process required by RtI. Furthermore, new and aspiring principals may not realize the significance of building meaningful relationships among teachers,

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students, and parents so that the needs of early childhood students can be met holistically (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Superintendents and school district personnel should understand that the primary role of principals is to promote teaching and learning. Principals need knowledge of curricula for all grade levels including the early childhood grades. Principals also need a comprehensive understanding of the reading process, reading components, and best practice instructional strategies. They need this knowledge so they can guide and build their teachers' capacity to meet the needs of struggling early childhood students.

Superintendents and school district personnel should understand the challenges and obstacles schools face and should structure ongoing support for principals and their staff. This support should include an equitable allocation of resources so that all schools have access to what they require to meet the needs of their students. Superintendents and school district personnel should reexamine funding allocations to ensure that all children of poverty have access to the learning opportunities offered and needed. Superintendents have a responsibility to support services that strengthen early childhood students' physical, cognitive, and social emotional development. This support needs to be extended to many of the young children's parents who often lack the knowledge or resources to support the learning of their children. Furthermore, processes should be implemented to examine and review instructional practices and programs to safe guard against instituting unnecessary challenges for principals and teachers to contend with. Developing systems of interactive communication between the district and schools is a way to accomplish this.

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Superintendents and school district personnel should recognize that ongoing professional development is a key ingredient to improve instructional practice and student achievement. Sustained professional development specifically focusing on early childhood literacy is needed for principals and teachers. Too often professional development focuses on upper elementary levels. The principals need to understand early childhood literacy so they are competent in evaluating teacher practice and facilitating decision-making processes related to struggling early childhood students. Superintendents need to support their principals in acquiring this knowledge. Providing a mentor is an approach to provide principals with elbow-to-elbow professional development.

For Research

The role of the principal has shifted from a managerial focus to a reflective, transformational style of leadership (Blase & Blase, 1999; Ediger, 2008). There is substantial research documenting the impact of principal leadership on student achievement and effective principal characteristics (Fulan, 2001; Hallinger et al., 1996; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Wahlstrom et al., 2010). However, there is limited research looking at the lived experience of principals' knowledge of early childhood literacy (Allington & Rigg, 1979; Block & Mangieri, 2003; Cawleti & Reavis, 1980; Hoewing, 2011; Sherrill, 2009; Stein & Nelson, 2003; Szabacsik, 2008; Thomson, 1988). Although the results of this multi-case study of the principals' knowledge of early childhood literacy revealed practices and processes used by principals to support the reading achievement of struggling early childhood students, it is suggested that future research be broadened to include a larger sample. In addition, future research might

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include a survey for principals and teachers to provide additional data. Using a survey could result in a quantitative or mixed methods study.

A longitudinal study might explore the story of the principals from this study over an extended period of time to examine how their experience of implementing RtI influenced their understanding of the reading process. Another longitudinal study might examine the future progress of the early childhood students impacted by the implementation of RtI in this study to see if early interventions impacted their future experiences. An action research might provide an opportunity to develop a model of professional development for principals to learn about early childhood development and the reading process. Additional research could examine the perspective of teachers by exploring their lived experiences related to their knowledge of the reading process related to implementing RtI for their struggling students.

Final Thoughts

Principals are the catalyst for building professional learning communities that foster collaboration and decision making to support the learning of all students. Principals can ensure that early childhood students receive appropriate instruction and intervention by creating a structure of support for struggling students. Positioning themselves as learning leaders allows principals to work along side teachers to problem solve specific strategies children need to learn to read. This includes placing data at the center of collegial conversations between principals and teams of teachers. Additionally, principals must recognize that the needs of young children are tied to their developmental level and instruction needs to be matched to those needs. Furthermore, principals need to understand that the progress or lack of progress in young children is impacted by a

number of variables that need to be considered and supported. The principal is a key player in building the capacity of teachers. Meeting the diverse needs of young children can be challenging. Principals must lead by example and demonstrate to teachers that the answers for helping students progress are there if teams collaborate and are willing to problem solve in creative and innovative ways.

Epilogue

I reflect once again to where my journey as a reader began in first grade. As a curious six-year-old, I perceived the process as a light switching on allowing me into the world of reading. In retrospect it really was not that easy for me. My mom gave me an envelope with some papers she had kept over the years and among them was a report card from that first grade year. The teacher wrote on it, "Christine is a sweet girl who listens in class and is enthusiastic to learn. However, she is having trouble sounding out and recognizing words. Encourage her to work harder in class." Another artifact in that envelope was a book I had made by folding a couple of papers and pasting pictures of birds from a magazine. I had written a short story about the birds finding food in the winter. Another note from the first grade teacher on that book said, "Great job Christine. You **are** a reader and writer!" My mom told the story of how she had talked with the teacher who had relayed her concerns that she did not understand why I was not making progress and that she needed my mom to work with me at home. I suspect that there was a lot of support rendered to me both at school and at home which made a difference in transforming me from a non-reader to a book worm who could never get enough reading.

If nothing else, I have learned from this study that learning to read is a complicated process for some children. Children of poverty typically have

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incomprehensible obstacles to overcome, and for them, RtI provides a structure to help them surmount challenges and become successful readers. Reading acquisition may be impacted by any number of variables that often are beyond their control. What makes a difference for these children is having adults around them who care about them and who take the time to really figure out what they need to be successful. I started this study with a bias that principals without early childhood backgrounds would not be effective in supporting the RtI decision-making process used to develop intervention plans for struggling readers. I learned that principals who position themselves to be learning leaders structure their own professional development to learn about early childhood, the reading process, and most importantly, what their students need to be successful.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval

OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

August 7, 2012

Mrs. Christine LeBlanc
College of Education
Education Leadership & Policies
Wardlaw 308
Columbia, SC 29208

Re: Pro00018601
Study Title: *A Case Study of Principals' Knowledge of Early Childhood Literacy*

FYI: University of South Carolina Assurance number: FWA 00000404 / IRB Registration number: 00000240

Dear Mrs. LeBlanc:

In accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2), the referenced study received an exemption from Human Research Subject Regulations on 8/6/2012. No further action or Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is required, as long as the project remains the same. However, you must inform this office of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research protocol could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

Because this project was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, consent document(s), if applicable, are not stamped with an expiration date.

Research related records should be retained for a minimum of three years after termination of the study.

The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the USC Institutional Review Board. If you have questions, please contact Arlene McWhorter at arlenem@sc.edu or (803) 777-7095.

Sincerely,

Thomas A. Coggins
Director

cc: Zach Kelehear

University of South Carolina-Columbia, South Carolina – 803/777-7095 – Fax 803/576-5589

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APPENDIX B

District Approval of Research Letter

September 5, 2012

Ms. Christine LeBlanc
██████████████

Dear Ms. LeBlanc:

The █████████ Research Committee has **approved** your proposal titled, **"A Case Study of Principals' Knowledge of Early Childhood Literacy"**. This approval is good for one year for the following schools: ██████████Elementary, ████████ Elementary, ██████████ Elementary, ██████████ Elementary, and ██████████ Elementary. You may conduct your research during the fiscal year, 2012-2013. Please maintain confidentiality of data and do not make public district, school's, student's or parent's names. Also, on completion of your research, please provide us with your final results.

On behalf of the Research Committee, we wish you well with your endeavor.

Sincerely,

██████████████████

Chair
Research Committee

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APPENDIX C

Recruitment Letter to Principals

August 9, 2012

Dear____(Principal name)_____ ,

I am a doctoral student in the College of Education at the University of South Carolina under the direction of Dr. Diane Harwell. The district is neither sponsoring nor conducting this research. I am writing to seek your assistance with my dissertation research. In order to add to the body of knowledge on principal leadership, I am interested in learning what principals perceive as important to know about the reading process for early childhood students as it relates to the implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI). Your experience as a principal leading a school in the implementation of RtI means you have an important story to share.

I am requesting your participation in an interview at a time and place convenient to you. The interview will last approximately 90 minutes and will be conducted within a period of 2 to 4 weeks. With your permission, the interviews will be audio recorded. I am also requesting an opportunity to review the transcript from the interview with you through a follow-up interview or by email. Additionally, with your permission, I am requesting to conduct a focus group meeting with a group of your early childhood teachers. Furthermore, I am requesting to make observations of you in the context of your school relating to the implementation of RtI (ie. Facilitating a RtI team meeting). Finally, I am also requesting any supporting documents you may be able to provide relating to your school's implementation of RtI. All components of this study will be scheduled at times that are convenient to you and your staff. Every consideration will be made to avoid impacting student instructional time throughout the duration of this study.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from this study at any time without any kind of penalty. All information I collect for this study will remain confidential. If you consent to participating in this study, your identity and stories will remain completely confidential. I will take all the necessary steps to maintain your confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms. At no time will your name, school, or district be identified in this research or at any time in the future. Results of this study may be published.

Although there maybe no direct benefit to you, your participation in this study will contribute to the knowledge and research of the leadership experiences of principals. If you have any questions concerning the study, please contact me at (803) xxx-xxxx or at xxxxxxxxx@aol.com. Thank you in advance for your consideration and support.

Sincerely,

Christine LeBlanc, Ph.D. Candidate

University of South Carolina

A CASE STUDY OF PRINCIPALS' KNOWLEDGE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Christine Elizabeth LeBlanc. I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policies at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements for my Ph.D. degree in Educational Leadership. This research is being conducted under the direction of Dr. Diane Harwell, Department of Educational Leadership and Policies. The purpose of this study is to explore what principals need to know about the reading process for early childhood students as it relates to the implementation of RtI in their schools. The school district is neither sponsoring nor conducting this research. The following explains what you will be asked to do if you decide to participate in this study:

1. If you participate in this study you will be asked to:
    A. Participate in an interview about your knowledge and experience relating to early childhood literacy as it relates to the implementation of Response to Intervention and allow the researcher to record and transcribe the interview as data.
    B. Be available for a follow-up interview if necessary to clarify and expand on information from the initial interview.
    C. Identify 2-4 early childhood teachers at your school to be invited to participate in a focus group meeting relating to this study.
    D. Allow the researcher to observe you in the context of your school (ie. Facilitating school RtI Team Meetings) to be scheduled at times mutually agreeable to you and the researcher.
    E. Provide the researcher with any documents relevant to this study such as school RtI forms, etc.
2. You will have the opportunity to review and respond to interview transcripts and make additional comments or revisions. Copies of the interview transcripts will be available to you upon request.
3. You will not benefit directly from this research. However, your participation in this study may lead to findings that build understanding of what principals need to know about early childhood literacy to support student learning.
4. No harm or stress is expected during this research to participants.
5. No deception will be involved in this study.
6. There are no known risks associated with participating in this research except for a small risk of breach of confidentiality, which remains regardless to efforts that will be taken to protect your privacy.

7. Participation in this study will be confidential. A pseudonym will be assigned to each participant at the beginning of the project. This pseudonym will be used on project records rather than your name, and no one other than the researcher will be able to link your information with your name. Study data and records will be stored in a locked file cabinet and protected computer files. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, however, your identity will not be revealed.
8. Participation in the study is voluntary and you are free not to participate or to withdraw at any time, for any reason, without any negative consequences. There is no penalty for not participating in this study. In the event that you do withdraw from this study, the information you have already provided will be kept confidential.

I have read the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to participate in this study. I understand that I may withdraw at any time without negative consequences. I have received a copy of this form for my records.

Signature of Participant _____ **Date**_____

As the researcher for this study, I have explained to the participant the purpose, the procedures, the possible benefits, and the risks of this research study; the alternatives to being in the study; the voluntary nature of the study; and how privacy will be protected.
Signature of Researcher_____**Date**_____

As a witness, I attest that the consent form was read by the subject, the research purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits were explained to the subject, questions were solicited and if the participant had questions, they were answered to the subject's satisfaction. In my judgment, the subject voluntarily agreed to participate in this study.

Signature of Witness _____**Date**_____

APPENDIX D

Recruitment Letter to Teachers

October 9, 2012

Dear Teacher,

I am a doctoral student in the College of Education at the University of South Carolina under the direction of Dr. Diane Harwell. The school district is neither sponsoring nor conducting this research. I am writing to seek your assistance with my dissertation research. In order to add to the body of knowledge on principal leadership, I am interested in learning what principals perceive as important to know about the reading process for early childhood students as it relates to the implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI). Your experience as an early childhood teacher working with your principal to implement RtI means you have an important story to share.

I am requesting your participation in a focus group interview scheduled at a time and place convenient to you. The focus group will be comprised of early childhood teachers who work with the principals who are participants in this study.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from this study at any time without any kind of penalty. All information I collect for this study will remain confidential. If you consent to participating in this study, your identity and stories will remain completely confidential. I will take all the necessary steps to maintain your confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms. At no time will your name, school, or district be identified in this research or at any time in the future. Results of this study may be published.

Although there maybe no direct benefit to you, your participation in this study will contribute to the knowledge and research of the leadership experiences of principals. If you have any questions concerning the study, please contact me at (803) xxx-xxxx or at xxxxxxxx@aol.com.

Thank you in advance for your consideration and support.

Sincerely,

Christine LeBlanc, Ph.D. Candidate
University of South Carolina

A CASE STUDY OF PRINCIPALS' KNOWLEDGE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Christine

Elizabeth LeBlanc. I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational

Leadership and Policies at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a

research study as part of the requirements for my Ph.D. degree in Educational

Leadership. This research is being conducted under the direction of Dr. Diane

Harwell, Department of Educational Leadership and Policies. The purpose of this

study is to explore what principals need to know about the reading process for

early childhood students as it relates to the implementation of RtI in their schools.

The school district is neither sponsoring nor conducting this research. The

following explains what you will be asked to do if you decide to participate in this

study:

1. If you participate in this study you will be asked to:
   A. Participate in a focus group meeting with other early childhood teachers to discuss your principal's knowledge and experience relating to early childhood literacy as it relates to the implementation of Response to Intervention and allow the researcher to record and transcribe the interview as data.
   B. Be available for follow-up questions via email if necessary to clarify and expand on information from the focus group meeting.
2. You will have the opportunity to review and respond to the transcript from the focus group meeting and make additional comments or revisions. Copies of the transcripts will be available to you upon request.
3. You will not benefit directly from this research. However, your participation in this study may lead to findings that build understanding of what principals need to know about early childhood literacy to support student learning.
4. No harm or stress is expected during this research to participants.
5. No deception will be involved in this study.

6. There are no known risks associated with participating in this research except for a small risk of breach of confidentiality, which remains regardless to efforts that will be taken to protect your privacy.

7. Participation in this study will be confidential. A pseudonym will be assigned to each participant at the beginning of the project. This pseudonym will be used on project records rather than your name, and no one other than the researcher will be able to link your information with your name. Study data and records will be stored in a locked file cabinet and protected computer files. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, however, your identity will not be revealed.

8. All participants in the focus group are expected to keep the comments shared during the focus group confidential and agree not to share any information with others not participating in the focus group.

9. Participation in the study is voluntary and you are free not to participate or to withdraw at any time, for any reason, without any negative consequences. There is no penalty for not participating in this study. In the event that you do withdraw from this study, the information you have already provided will be kept confidential.

I have read the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to participate in this study. I understand that I may withdraw at any time without negative consequences. I have received a copy of this form for my records.

Signature of Participant _____ **Date**_____

As the researcher for this study, I have explained to the participant the purpose, the procedures, the possible benefits, and the risks of this research study; the alternatives to being in the study; the voluntary nature of the study; and how privacy will be protected.

Signature of Researcher_____**Date**_____

As a witness, I attest that the consent form was read by the subject, the research purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits were explained to the subject, questions were solicited and if the participant had questions, they were answered to the subject's satisfaction. In my judgment, the subject voluntarily agreed to participate in this study.

Signature of Witness _____**Date**_____

Principal Interview Guide and Consent Form

Consent Script: You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an elementary principal leading a school in the implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI). In order to add to the body of knowledge on principal leadership, I am interested in learning what principals perceive as important to know about the reading process for early childhood students as it relates to the implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI). Your experience as a principal leading a school in the implementation of RtI means you have an important story to share.

I am requesting your participation in an interview at a time and place convenient to you. The interview will be conducted within a period of 2 to 4 weeks. The interview will last approximately 90 minutes. With your permission, the interviews will be audio recorded. A follow-up interview may be requested to review the transcript of the original interview to provide any clarification needed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from this study at any time without any kind of penalty. All information I collect for this study will remain confidential. If you consent to participating in this study, your identity and stories will remain completely confidential. I will take all the necessary steps to maintain your confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms. At no time will your name, school, or district be identified in this research or at any time in the future. The school district is neither sponsoring nor conducting this research. Results of this study may be published.

Although there may be no direct benefit to you, your participation in this study will contribute to the knowledge and research of the leadership experiences of principals. If you have any questions concerning the study, please contact me at (803) xxx-xxxx or at xxxxxx@aol.com.

Thank you in advance for your consideration and support.

Christine LeBlanc

1. What career path led you to your current position as principal at (name of school)?
   Follow up questions:
   - What was your original area of certification?
   - What teaching experience did you have prior to becoming an administrator?
   - What training have you had relating to early childhood and/or early literacy?

2. What do principals need to know about early literacy so they can support early childhood teachers?
   - How did your educational background and experience prepare you to support your early childhood teachers in making instructional reading decisions?
   - What are the primary needs of your early childhood students regarding their emerging reading skills?
   - What problems do children in your school have that inhibits their reading progress?
   - What do children need to be able to do to read?

3. What is your role in the RtI problem solving process used to determine instructional strategies for early childhood students reading below grade level?
   - Describe how the RtI team process operates in your building.
   - What criteria (data) are considered when the early childhood team makes decisions regarding the needs of students?
   - How confident do you feel with the decisions the team makes? What else do you wish you knew?
   - What do you look for when you observe reading instruction in early childhood classrooms?

4. How do you structure your own learning of early literacy within the context of your school?
   - What is your personal plan for learning about the reading process for early childhood students?
   - Where and to whom do you go when you need to know more in regards to early literacy?
   - What support do you think you and your staff need in order to meet the needs of your early childhood students effectively in relation to their learning to read?
   - What is your professional development plan to support yourself and your staff in regards to reading achievement in early childhood students?

5. How do your early childhood teachers perceive your support of the reading program?

6. Do your early childhood teachers see you as an expert in regards to reading instruction for early childhood students?

APPENDIX F

Teacher Focus Group Interview Guide and Consent Form

Consent Script: You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an early childhood teacher in a school implementing Response to Intervention (RtI). In order to add to the body of knowledge on principal leadership, I am interested in learning what principals perceive as important to know about the reading process for early childhood students as it relates to the implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI). Your experience as an early childhood teacher working with your principal to implement RtI means you have an important story to share.

I am requesting your participation in a focus group interview scheduled at a time and place convenient to you. The focus group will be comprised of early childhood teachers who work with the principals who are participants in this study. The focus group interview will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes. With your permission, the focus group interview will be audio recorded.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from this study at any time without any kind of penalty. All information I collect for this study will remain confidential. If you consent to participating in this study, your identity and stories will remain completely confidential. I will take all the necessary steps to maintain your confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms. At no time will your name, school, or district be identified in this research or at any time in the future. The school district is neither sponsoring or conducting this research. Results of this study may be published.

Although there may be no direct benefit to you, your participation in this study will contribute to the knowledge and research of the leadership experiences of principals. If you have any questions concerning the study, please contact me at (803) xxx-xxxx or at xxxxxxx@aol.com.

Thank you in advance for your consideration and support.

Christine LeBlanc

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Introduce yourself and tell us about your current position.

2. What do principals need to know about the reading process and how early childhood students learn to read?

3. What is your principal's educational background and experience?
   - How has his/her background and experience helped in supporting early childhood reading progress and the implementation of RtI?
   - What training has your principal had relating to early childhood and/or early literacy?

4. What are the primary needs of your early childhood students regarding their emerging reading skills?
   - What problems do children in your school have that inhibits their reading progress?
   - What do children need to be able to do to read?

5. How can principals support early childhood teachers in the area of literacy?

6. How does your principal support the reading program in your school for early childhood students?

7. What is the principal's role in the RtI problem solving process used to determine instructional strategies for early childhood students reading below grade level?
   - Describe how the RtI team process operates in your building.
   - What criteria (data) are considered when the early childhood team makes decisions regarding the needs of students?

Coding Processes

Theme	Total Coded Remarks by Theme	Process	Total Coded Remarks Principal Interview	Total Coded Remarks Teacher Focus Group	Total Coded Remarks RtI Data Meeting	Total Coded Remarks for Process
		Teaching experience	16	4	0	20
		Teacher evaluations	13	1	0	14
		Mentoring	3	0	0	3
		Inquiry	5	2	0	7
1. *On-the-job training*	75	Classroom observations	20	8	3	31
		Early childhood training	11	4	0	16
		Child development continuum	12	7	8	27
2. *Reading process and best practices*		Knowledge of reading process	16	4	4	24

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Theme	Total Coded Remarks by Theme	Process	Total Coded Remarks Principal Interview	Total Coded Remarks Teacher Focus Group	Total Coded Remarks RtI Data Meeting	Total Coded Remarks for Process
2. *Reading process and best practices* (continued)		Professional develop-ment (PD)	16	7	6	29
		Principal attending school PD	7	2	0	9
		District PD	9	6	2	17
		Opportunity to learn	1		2	3
		Comprehen-sion	10	2	23	35
		Concepts of print	1		7	8
		Alphabet knowledge	7	7	18	32
		Phonologi-cal Awareness	5	1	26	32
		Writing	11	4	36	51
		Independent reading or writing	4		6	10
		Literacy	6	1	0	7

Theme	Total Coded Remarks by Theme	Process	Total Coded Remarks Principal Interview	Total Coded Remarks Teacher Focus Group	Total Coded Remarks RtI Data Meeting	Total Coded Remarks for Process
		Vocabulary	8	2	10	20
		Language			2	2
		Oral Language	3	3	12	18
2. *Reading process and best practices* (continued)		Listening	0	3	1	4
		Fluency	0	2	2	4
		Stages of Reading	1	6	6	13
		Best practices	16	0	0	16
		Centers/ literacy stations	0	1	1	2
		Classwork	0	0	1	1
		Groups	12	15	24	41
		Scaffolding	0	1	4	5
		Classroom environment	1	4	0	5
		Modeling	5	1	4	10
		Differentia-tion	2	2	1	5
	473	Homework	1	4	11	16

211

Theme	Total Coded Remarks by Theme	Process	Total Coded Remarks Principal Interview	Total Coded Remarks Teacher Focus Group	Total Coded Remarks RtI Data Meeting	Total Coded Remarks for Process
		Understanding data	33	11	29	73
		Struggling student	13	10	6	29
		Dominie	16	0	9	25
		Concern	10	7	22	39
		Numerical	1	0	2	3
		Intervention	26	10	30	66
		Progress monitor	0	5	15	20
		Ability	2	4	9	15
		Student progress	11	1	1	13
		Emotional need	22	3	6	31
		Individual needs	11	2	4	17
		Need behavior	16	4	17	37
3. Data focused on student needs		Special education testing	2	0	0	2

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Theme	Total Coded Remarks by Theme	Process	Total Coded Remarks Principal Interview	Total Coded Remarks Teacher Focus Group	Total Coded Remarks RtI Data Meeting	Total Coded Remarks for Process
		Below grade level	0	5	0	5
		Student achievement	5	4	2	11
		Student self assessment	3	0	0	3
3. Data focused on student needs (continued)	421	Student engagement	5	5	3	13
		Motivation	10	3	6	19
4. Resources to support learning		Reading materials	13	5	12	30
		People resources	11	7	10	28

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Theme	Total Coded Remarks by Theme	Process	Total Coded Remarks Principal Interview	Total Coded Remarks Teacher Focus Group	Total Coded Remarks RtI Data Meeting	Total Coded Remarks for Process
		Referral for support services	0	0	8	8
		Resource and speech services	1	1	5	7
		Student intervention services	6	3	5	14
		Special education	2	1	1	4
		Support school	14	4	0	18
		Support teachers	18	9	11	38
		Support students	8	2	10	20
		Curriculum	4	0	5	9
4. Resources to support learning (continued)		State and common core standards	1	5	13	19
	197	Technology	1	0	1	2

Theme	Total Coded Remarks by Theme	Process	Total Coded Remarks Principal Interview	Total Coded Remarks Teacher Focus Group	Total Coded Remarks RtI Data Meeting	Total Coded Remarks for Process
		Leadership style	2	0	0	2
		Interpersonal relationships	6	0	1	7
		Procedures	8	3	0	11
		Consistency	2	1	0	3
		Perseverance	10	2	0	12
		Communi-cation	43	14	4	61
		Culture	3	2	0	5
		Trust	17	5	0	22
		Expectations	32	10	16	58
5. Leadership characteris-tics	236	Moral responsibility	12	5	0	17
		Empathy	3	0	0	3
		Caring	0	3	0	3
		Commitment	5	1	0	6
		Beliefs	9	0	0	9
		Transience	7	6	9	22
6. Challenges		Parental involvement	19	10	32	61
		School readiness	12	6	3	21

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Theme	Total Coded Remarks by Theme	Process	Total Coded Remarks Principal Interview	Total Coded Remarks Teacher Focus Group	Total Coded Remarks RtI Data Meeting	Total Coded Remarks for Process
		Social emotional development	6	7	7	20
		Physical need	1	3	7	11
		Self esteem	18	0	1	19
		Time	0	5	11	16
		Change	17	3	3	23
		Resistance	6	1	0	7
		Poverty	8	2	5	15
		Obstacles	9	6	1	16
		Frustration	2	2	4	8
		Size of class or school	11	2	1	14
		Attendance and tardies	0	0	2	2
		Classroom management	3	4	3	10
6. Challenges (continued)	274	Attention	0	0	9	9

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Theme	Total Coded Remarks by Theme	Process	Total Coded Remarks Principal Interview	Total Coded Remarks Teacher Focus Group	Total Coded Remarks RtI Data Meeting	Total Coded Remarks for Process
		Team	20	9	9	38
		Shared leadership	20	2	2	2
		Roles of principal and teacher	11	0	1	12
		Collabora-tion	29	5	5	39
		Principal peer collabora-tion	4	1	0	5
		Decisions	20	2	11	33
		Reading strategies	4	7	33	44
7. Collabor-ation and teaming	268	Intentional teaching	11	1	8	20
		Reflection	9	2	10	21
		Questioning	21	8	3	32
Total	1,927	94	907	355	665	1,927

217