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## Exploring the Principal's Role in High Poverty Schools with High Literacy Achievement

Jill E. Jay  
*Indiana State University*

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## VITA

Jill E. Jay

### EDUCATION

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| 2011 | Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana<br>Ph.D. in Educational Leadership         |
| 2004 | Butler University, Indianapolis, Indiana<br>M.S. in Educational Leadership Administration |
| 1979 | Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana<br>M.A. in Elementary Education                    |
| 1977 | Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana<br>B.A. in Elementary Education                |

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- |           |  |
|-----------|--|
| 2010-2011 | Director of Student and Professional Learning<br>Mill Creek Community School Corporation, Clayton, Indiana |
| 2004-2010 | Principal<br>Mill Creek Community School Corporation, Clayton, Indiana                                     |
| 2004      | Interim Director, Title I<br>Indiana Department of Education, Indianapolis, Indiana                        |
| 1995-2003 | Title I Facilitator<br>Plainfield Community School Corporation, Plainfield, Indiana                        |
| 1981-1987 | Pharmaceutical Information Specialist<br>Merck, Sharp, and Dohme, Indianapolis, Indiana                    |
| 1977-1981 | Teacher<br>Wes-Del School Corporation, Gaston, Indiana   |

EXPLORING THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE IN HIGH POVERTY  
SCHOOLS WITH HIGH LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT

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A Dissertation

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The College of Graduate and Professional Studies

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of the Requirements for the Degree

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by

Jill E. Jay

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## **COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

Committee Chair: Todd Whitaker, Ph.D.

Professor of Educational Leadership, Administration, and Foundations

Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana

Committee Member: Steve Gruenert, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Educational Leadership, Administration, and Foundations

Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana

Committee Member: Marilyn Sudsberry, Ph.D.

Director, EPPSP Program, Graduate Programs of College of Education

Butler University, Indianapolis, Indiana

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore educational aspects which help explain high early-literacy acquisition in high-poverty elementary schools. Through this qualitative study, the perceptions of key staff members, including the principal, in four high achieving, high-poverty schools were explored in three areas: 1) contributing aspects of high-level, early-literacy achievement in their particular school setting; 2) role of the principal in a high-poverty school that attains a high level of early-literacy achievement; and 3) how high early-literacy achievement occurred in their particular school setting. The schools in the study were located in multiple states that the researcher had access to and met the study criteria. The topics of the related literature reviewed included early-literacy and student achievement, as well as the role of the principal in effective early-literacy intervention. In this study, findings of contributing aspects of high-level, early-literacy achievement included collaboration, reflective practice, a system of progress monitoring that improved the students' meta-cognition, a resident literacy expert, a positive climate of trust and respect, and distributed leadership. In exploring the principal's role, three elements emerged; establishment of a tiered system of literacy, creation of a schedule that ensured tiered instruction and collaboration, and releasing ineffective teachers. Elements that emerged from the topic of how early-literacy achievement occurred were high expectations for all students, and over-arching district and/or school-wide literacy goals. Insight gained from this study should assist schools in their endeavor to create a safety net of best practices to meet the goal of literacy acquisition for all students.

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## CHAPTER 1

### **The Problem**

The acquisition of literacy may have larger implications for today's students than ever before in our history. To function in the workplace, tomorrow's workforce will have a greater need for literacy as workers will be expected to deal with concepts and connections in a technological age. According to the United States Department of Labor, a student will have 14 jobs before the age of 38, and many of these jobs do not currently exist (Fisch, 2007). There is an enormous need for adults to secure the skills necessary to meet the challenges of a technological workplace. According to a National Literacy Summit Foundation Paper, literacy skills will be the key for adults to "survive and prosper in a world of rapid social and technological change" (DeWitt Wallace/Reader's Digest Fund, 2000, p. 2). The authors of *The State of Americans* warn that youth must possess higher literacy skills than ever before due to technological demands. To fall short will contribute to huge economic disparities (Bronfenbrenner, McClelland, Wethington, Moen, & Ceci, 1996).

The importance of learning to read is well-documented and was the focus of several major research studies. This topic is so important that Congress charged the National Institutes of Health in 1997 with conducting reading research in the United States. The National Reading Panel was formed in order to assess reading acquisition research.

Even with an increased demand for a basic foundation in literacy to compete in today's technological world, statistics show that students do not possess a basic foundation in literacy. According to the 2007 NAEP figures, only 33% of fourth-graders read at or above a proficient level, and 33% read below a basic level (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). Educators nation-wide are focused on finding solutions to this literacy problem.

How to define best practices in reading instruction was hotly debated in recent years (Allington, 2005; Lyon & Chhabra, 2004). However, a consistent theme in the literature is the importance of identifying and intervening to provide extra instruction early, instead of waiting until a student fails.

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the U.S. Department of Education, and several universities conducted long-term research studies, which indicate the need for early intervention if literacy efforts are to be successful.

### **Urgency of Early Intervention**

The research relating to the urgency of early intervention is abundant. Torgesen and researchers at the Florida Center for Reading Research documented that 80% of children who do not read on grade level by third grade will never achieve that goal. However, if identified before third grade and given appropriate intervention, 80% of students who struggle may be reading on grade level by third grade (Torgesen, 2004). In a 9-year longitudinal study involving more than 400 children, researchers found that it would be best to identify students who struggle with reading early and treat this as a deficit in development (Francis, Shaywitz, Stuebing, Shaywitz, & Fletcher, 1996). In a longitudinal study involving a low socio-economic school, students were followed from first through fourth grade, and there was a high correlation between exhibiting poor early reading acquisition and being a poor reader in fourth grade (Juel, 1988). Although

this study affirmed that early indicators could point to later problems with reading, it also highlighted another risk-factor, socio-economic status, in the acquisition of reading.

### **Socio-Economic Status as a Risk Factor**

Students from a low socio-economic background come to school with fewer prerequisite skills for attainment of literacy than students from a high socio-economic background. The federal government, recognizing this, played an historic role in assistance with the attainment of basic skills using various equalization attempts. With the landmark decision of *Brown v. the Board of Education* in 1954 came the first illustration of the federal government's attempt at equalizing *accessibility* in public education. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed, which was the federal government's first attempt at equalizing resources. In 2002, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was the first attempt by the federal government to equalize achievement.

Reid Lyon, former Chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, recognized the challenges that low socio-economic status presents when he stated:

When Reading First became law in 2002, its goal was to improve reading achievement for all students -- but particularly and especially for those youngsters whose futures have typically been limited because poor kids in low performing schools are harder to teach and not expected to excel. (as cited in Shaughnessy, 2008, p. 1)

### **Statement of the Problem**

There is a need for early-literacy acquisition and there is also a target population for whom this will be a difficult task. Are there lessons to be learned by observing and examining schools that have had success in early-literacy acquisition despite having a high poverty rate?

Many studies attempted to pinpoint programs or methodologies that make a difference in early intervention, and there is a great deal of literature to support factors present in school improvement efforts. There is justification, however, for studying high poverty schools that have had success in early-intervention in literacy in a qualitative manner.

In a 5-year study involving nine Title I schools and over 14,000 students, researchers identified five keys to success, but warn of one caveat (Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009). In an interview with Education Week, the authors stated, “The five keys are critical, but the larger context of specific schools cannot be ignored, since that also determines the fate of learning teams” (Gallimore & Ermeling, 2010, p. 1).

Fullan (2001a) also lent credence to the examination of schools in a coherent, holistic manner. He warned that school improvement efforts can become disjointed and lack focus, and stated that these efforts are often “imposed on schools in multiple disconnected ways....The challenge is to replace superficial adoption and disjointed cycles of change with program coherence and deep meaning” (p. 27).

Many studies examined scientifically-based practices and found positive results in a research setting. What factors co-exist in schools that cannot be teased out in a quantitative way?

After disheartening results in a study designed to measure implementation follow-through with research-based reading strategies, Abbott, Walton, and Greenwood (2002) embarked on a mission to assist school leaders. Their focus was on why teachers do not implement effective researcher-based strategies. Results indicate that there are several reasons, one of which is the fact that researchers’ needs and rewards are very different from teachers’ needs and rewards. Teachers must juggle many students and day-to-day academic, cultural, and social needs, while



researchers observe and analyze one particular aspect of instruction. In addition, researchers and teachers may speak different languages, with teachers speaking in more general terms and researchers using technical language that teachers cannot interpret to fit their day-to-day world. Teachers may want to know what works with students while researchers may be focused on why certain strategies are effective. Conclusions point to specific teacher training that is explicit in how to implement researched best practices into the everyday world of the classroom teacher, all of which are monitored by the principal (Abbott et al., 2002).

What happens when success is achieved in a school where success is not expected? What are the dynamics in these schools? Studies point to what we should do in the area of early literacy acquisition; what observations can be made and conclusions drawn from an in-depth study of schools for whom this acquisition is not an easy task, but who succeeded nonetheless?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore educational aspects which help explain high early-literacy acquisition in high-poverty elementary schools. It was not this author's intent to ascertain efficacy or superiority in reading instructional methodology, but rather to observe and examine at-risk schools that were achieving early literacy acquisition. I examined four high-poverty schools that have done an exemplary job of achieving early reading achievement, and interviewed selected staff members in these schools, which included key general education teachers, resource teachers, and principals. Interviews were conducted to explore perceptions of staff with regard to effectiveness in their school, including:

- Role of the principal
- Staff roles/responsibilities

Sites were selected using a variety of criteria:

1. The school must have at least a 40% poverty rate.
2. The school must not have gone through a re-district or reconfiguration in the past 2 years.
3. The principal interviewed must have been at the school 3-5 years.
4. The research sample included high-poverty, high-achieving schools from different demographic areas and different states, including rural and metropolitan schools in Indiana and California.
5. Second-grade DIBELS scores must show at least 80% of students on grade level by the end of the year benchmark.

### **Research Questions**

1. What do teachers in high-achieving, high-poverty schools cite as contributors to effective early interventions in reading?
2. What do principals in high achieving, high poverty schools cite as contributors to effective early-literacy reading programs?
3. How does the principal explain his/her role in setting up a model reading program?
4. What role does the principal play in affecting reading achievement?
5. How does high achievement occur in a high poverty school?

### **Personal Statement**

His name was David. He had curly brown ringlets that danced around a much too serious face. His tan face rarely broke into a smile. David was a new student. I was a new teacher. The year was 1977, and nothing in my undergraduate studies prepared me for David. Neither text nor teacher told me how to handle a student who was born with only one eye. I thought that issue was going to be the tough one of the year. I was wrong. All the second graders (and the teacher)

adjusted to David's glass eye, but the tough issue was that David could not read. He could verbally tell me wonderful stories, but he could not read one of them.

John Donne, in the poem *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, implies that the funeral bell's ringing is not just a signal that someone has died, but that a piece of us has died, too. "The bell tolls for thee" has always struck me as a cry to educators. As long as there are children dying an educational death, the bell is tolling for us. It tolled for me in 1977. Somewhere out there is a 40 year-old man who probably does not know how to read, and I was his second-grade teacher; a young teacher who did not have the tools I needed to help a struggling reader. David left me with a passion to do more.

Since that time I did a lot of growing and I developed a passion for leading schools in their quest to help struggling students. I took extra courses in reading instruction, and spent a lot of time with children who have difficulty with this thing we call *reading*. I learned a lot; I have a lot more to learn. David led me to many things—teacher, principal, director of curriculum, and now doctoral student. Ultimately, I am still on a journey, seeking ways schools can set up models of intervention for struggling students.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Elementary school:* For the purposes of this study, an elementary school is defined as one encompassing pre-school or kindergarten through at least second grade in a public institution. The school may go up to fifth or sixth grade, but does not need to encompass grades past the second grade.

*High-poverty school:* For the purposes of this study, a high-poverty school is a school with a free and reduced lunch count greater than or equal to 40%.

*High-achieving early-literacy acquisition:* For the purposes of this study, high-achieving early-literacy acquisition will be defined as at least 80% of primary students achieving end of the year benchmark score on the Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) reading assessment.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Review of Related Literature**

The review of the literature examines research in two areas. The first area of study reviews current research linking reading instruction to student achievement, focusing on curriculum and instructional practices. The second area of study examines the role of the principal in effective early literacy intervention. These two areas were summarized by Harn when she stated:

Schoolwide beginning reading improvement involves the integration of two complex systems: (a) the scientific knowledge base of reading in an alphabetic writing system and (b) the design and implementation of the knowledge base in a complex host environment (i.e., schools) comprising people, practices, pedagogy, and policy. (as cited in Simmons et al., 2002, p. 565)

### **Reading Instruction and Student Achievement**

The reading wars are alive and well, and literature discussing and debating the methodology of reading and the timing of formal literacy instruction abounds.

**Timing of formal literacy instruction.** Early childhood educators have historically viewed young children as active learners who gather information best when engaged in vigorous exploration. Approaches from Europe influenced early education in North America, including

the Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia methods. While differing in methodology, “all three approaches view children as active authors of their own development, strongly influenced by natural, dynamic, self-righting forces within themselves, opening the way toward growth and learning” (Edwards, 2002, p. 1). While acting as President of the International Reading Association in 2003, Morrow (2004) relayed that this often translated into little or no formal instruction in early reading practices in kindergarten. This philosophy was grounded in the assertion that children, like flowers, would bloom if they were simply cared for by a gardener (i.e., teacher) (Morrow, 2004).

**Urgency of early intervention.** Several studies point to the urgency of early intervention in preventing reading difficulties. Providing interventions early, with the underlying assumption that schools must screen as early as kindergarten, has been shown to increase the likelihood of literacy success, as well as decrease the rate of special education referrals (Jenkins & O’Connor, 2002; Torgesen, 2002). According to Ardoin and Christ (2008), “Prevention is often more cost efficient, more effective, and more beneficial to students than delayed remediation” (p. 109).

Several federal programs emerged based on this data from research the area of early screening and intervention. The national Reading First program, as well as the President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education, is founded on the principles of screening, identifying, and intervening early when it comes to reading acquisition.

There is evidence that kindergarten students may benefit from early literacy experiences focused on developmental skills. Early literacy skills predict literacy and school achievement in general and a window of opportunity exists when a child is beginning to learn to read (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Earlier studies highlight the skill of letter naming fluency as an

accurate predictor of later reading achievement (Blatchford, Burke, Farquhar, Plewis, & Tizard, 1987; Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Chall, 1967; Johnston, Anderson, & Holligan, 1996).

Several studies point to students' acquisition of early literacy as the foundation of later academic success. Early intervention in kindergarten alone, or combined with first grade intervention had positive effects that lasted into the third grade (Vellutino, Scanlon, Small, & Fanuele, 2006), and failure to respond to early intervention can be used to identify students with learning disabilities (Torgesen, 2004; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003). In a study examining two different approaches in two different states, positive results were noted when students received extra help in first grade. Harn, one of the researchers, stated:

The study certainly has implications in how schools approach their instruction and interventions. Schools may want to allocate more instructional resources earlier for struggling students, rather than waiting until later grades when it becomes more difficult to catch up struggling readers. (Linan-Thompson, Roberts, & Harn, 2008, p. 1)

Low socio-economic status has long been recognized as a risk factor in literacy acquisition and school achievement. Legislation that established the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 had as its core purpose the improvement of the educational opportunities for the poor. Studying schools that are considered high-risk in regards to socio-economic status, and yet attain high levels of student achievement, should reveal best practices.

As part of Virginia's Early Intervention Reading Initiative, kindergarten classes identified as high-risk for failure based on socio-economic status were targeted for explicit early literacy interventions (Meier & Sullivan, 2004). Students in those kindergarten classes were screened, and those identified as at risk of not achieving early literacy skills were provided extra interventions. The intervention group of students was given an extra 30 minutes of instruction, 5

days a week. This instruction went beyond the core instruction, so that the students received an extra 150 minutes of instruction weekly. The method of instruction was locally designed, not prescribed by the study.

Of the 870 kindergarten classes (3,500 teachers) that participated in the 1999-2000 school year, there was wide variability in the acquisition of early literacy skills. Investigators targeted the schools that had the most positive movement, with “movement” being defined as “more than 50% of students moving out of the at-risk category based on the screening scores at the end of kindergarten” (Meier & Sullivan, 2004, p. 288). One common element that schools with positive movement shared was explicit instruction in discrete skills. The programs that were studied “used lesson plans in which students were explicitly taught the letters of the alphabet and letter-sound correspondences and were regularly required to put that knowledge to work in spelling letters and writing journal entries” (Meier & Sullivan, 2004, p. 299).

Evidence that intervening early is beneficial was provided by the Florida Center for Reading Research. Sixty children with severe reading difficulties participated in an 8-week intensive intervention. They were randomly assigned to 1 of 2 reading programs that differed in depth and extent of instruction, but both were considered effective in their approach of concentrating on the basic alphabetic principles of reading. The students received instruction during two 50-minute sessions daily. Results indicated that both groups’ reading scores dramatically improved, which was still evident at the end of 2 years. The only measure that still showed a distinct lag was fluency, but all other measures remained in the average range. Forty percent of the participants no longer required special education services at the end of 2 years (Torgesen et al., 2001).



**Foundational skills in early education.** When studying specific programmatic characteristics of successful at-risk kindergarten classes, researchers in Virginia found a variety of programs with certain core characteristics. In the study of 870 kindergartens in Virginia, Meijer and Sullivan (2004) stated that the successful programs “represented a variety of settings, philosophies, and strategies for moving children along the continuum of emergent to conventional literacy” (p. 289).

In three separate studies of various approaches to teaching reading in the primary grades, students who made the largest gains were those who had received decontextualized instruction in phonemic awareness and were explicitly taught how to graph phonemic information to read words (Jenkins & O’Connor, 2002). Other compilations of studies point to the fact that when comparing primary students’ decoding ability, those who received explicit instruction consistently outperformed children who were taught using less-explicit approaches (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

Foorman and Torgesen (2001) summarized research on the basic skills necessary to the acquisition of beginning reading. Also included in this research summary were characteristics of students who do not learn to read, those who do not learn to read well, and those who achieve the goal seamlessly. Foorman’s research highlighted classroom studies using phonics, whole language, and a combination of the two techniques. In summary, the author concluded that phonics is a necessary component in the early months and years of reading acquisition, particularly for those who struggle with the task of learning to read. It can be concluded that primary elementary teachers who employ alphabetic principle techniques in their language arts instruction are the most effective in teaching reading to their primary-age students (Rayner, Foorman, Perfetti, Pesetsky, & Seidenberg, 2001).

In other studies concentrating in urban areas, success was achieved when the supplemental instruction focused on phonemic awareness and the alphabetic principle in the early stages of reading (Musti-Rao & Cartledge, 2007). The authors realized that these skills are not all-inclusive, but must be taught as supplemental to core instruction. While advocates of a literacy-rich environment criticize direct-instruction of teaching reading, one cannot ignore that “the problem for underperforming readers is that these indirect approaches are predicated on a set of readiness skills that most of these students lack” (Musti-Rao & Cartledge, 2007, p. 56).

In one study looking at the effects of different types of instruction on student achievement, students with weaker initial skill levels showed more growth in both first and second grades when there was strong teacher-managed, code-focused instruction. The results also highlighted the need for principals or evaluator to prioritize observations that focus on examining the composition of the classroom as well as the specificity of instruction (Connor, Morrison, & Underwood, 2007).

**Scientifically-based reading research debate.** Controversy surrounding methodology in early reading instruction surfaced shortly after the National Reading Panel Report was published in 2000 (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). The debate among educators revolves around the premise that a focus in the early grades on specific skills will lead to a decrease in student engagement with literacy and that students will not enjoy reading. Evidence of this discourse was evident immediately after the publication of the National Reading Panel Report. The report based its recommendations on scientifically-based research, and concluded:

It will also be critical to determine objectively the ways in which systematic phonics instruction can be optimally incorporated and integrated in complete

and balanced programs of reading instruction. Part of this effort should be directed at pre-service and in-service education to provide teachers with decision-making frameworks to guide their selection, integration, and implementation of phonics instruction within a complete reading program. (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000, p. 11)

Toll (2001) cited several concerns that signify the reasons some educators were not willing to comply with the National Reading Panel's recommendations. In discussing change at the classroom level, and areas in the NRP report that were lacking, she stated that the report ignores "decision making based on engagement with students, concerns for children's affect, and controlling one's (the teacher's) choices" (Toll, 2001, p. 319). She went on to state that the report's focus on research is "removed from individual teachers' experiences and suggests that programs should change when teachers are given "objective" data and motivated to apply conclusions drawn from this data in their own classrooms" (Toll, 2001, p. 322).

Evidence that mandated top-down change may not work is provided by a 2-year study involving teachers asked to change the program they used to teach reading (Hoffman et al., 1998). Teachers were followed for two years during a programmatic change, and the authors concluded, "Even though teachers' practices reflected some changes connected to the new basals, their underlying philosophies reflected little substantive change" (Hoffman et al., 1998, p. 189). Freppon and Dahl (1998) found similar results in a review of the research outlining change in teachers' practices. In discussing how teachers interpret research findings and apply it in their classrooms, the authors stated, "Research projects conducted with teachers suggest that teachers mediate the research they know according to many factors (e.g., continuous changes in their own learning, students' needs, daily classroom events)" (Freppon & Dahl, 1998, p. 248).

**Comprehension.** Much of the debate revolving around methodology stems from a concern regarding comprehension. National statistics from the most recent NAEP scores imply that students in the middle elementary grades and middle school grades are either not able to decode the words or do not comprehend text written at their level. The 2009 NAEP reading scores for eighth graders and fourth graders were disappointing to many educators. Reading scores were stagnant for fourth graders and eighth grade scores rose by only one percentage point (Gewertz, 2010). It becomes a national issue when “more than 50 percent of urban learners are substantially deficit in reading; for urban African-American and Hispanic learners, the rates approach 70 percent” (Musti-Rao & Cartledge, 2007, p. 56).

Much research has been conducted on comprehension; both in ways to encourage students to construct meaning and timing of such strategies. The National Reading Council report (Snow et al., 1998) as well as the National Reading Panel Report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) listed comprehension skill sets that are effective, including summarization, drawing inferences, and evaluating predictions.

Rasinski and Padak (2004) discussed before, during, and after-reading strategies to use with all ages of readers. He advocated four premises when using these strategies, even with primary students; (a) learning is a social process, (b) students need maximum opportunities to use the language associated with the content area, (c) learners need to be actively involved, and (c) students and the teacher construct meaning through interaction with each other and the text (Rasinski & Padak, 2004, p. 200).

Many authors, such as Paris and colleagues, suggested that there is a certain threshold of decoding that must occur before strategies such as “skimming, rereading, using context, planning, paraphrasing, and summarizing could play a significant role in children’s reading

comprehension” (as cited in Robinson & McKenna, 2008, p. 74). Likewise, in a study comparing a content versus strategy approach to comprehension instruction, McKeown, Beck, and Blake (2009) found that the ability to summarize or employ any comprehension strategies was dependent upon the assumption that the text was at a level where decoding was automatic.

There is research that contends primary elementary teachers, not just intermediate teachers, should increase the time students spend working with informational text in instructional activities. It is not enough just to increase access and time, but there should be explicit instruction on how to read informational text with comprehension strategies. Research points to the efficacy of this as a way to help students construct meaning, even for primary elementary students. Strategies used for explicit instruction include activating and applying prior knowledge, using and making visual representations, and summarizing (Duke, 2004).

Smolkin and Donovan warn that “early reading instruction that stresses decoding but that fails to attend in some substantive fashion to children’s concurrent growth in comprehension of a range of texts may unintentionally put children in peril” (Robinson & McKenna, 2008, p. 76), while also advocating that a certain amount of decoding must be present for children to attend to text. The authors concluded that read-alouds with an emphasis on modeling think-aloud strategies is an effective approach with primary children just learning to decode and interact with text.

In describing strategies that do not work in comprehension, Ivey and Fisher (2005) assail the practice of making students read books that are too difficult for them. The authors stated, “If we want students to comprehend what they read, we must begin by letting them experience texts that make sense to them” (Ivey & Fisher, 2005, p. 12). Allington (2002) also contended that if students can’t decode the material, it is difficult to make connections or comprehend the text.

Many contend that students today simply need more practice; due to an increase in the competition for students' time, schools must make time in the day for students to read for pleasure. Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) and DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) have made their way into schools, with the hope that this extra reading will boost reading achievement and/or vocabulary. Some researchers questioned the efficacy of this free reading as a contributor to vocabulary growth (Beck & McKeown, 1991), and The National Reading Panel surmised in their analysis that encouraging students to read more did not necessarily lead to gains in reading achievement (Snow et al., 1998).

The level of the books that students choose to read may impact gains. In a study done to assess reading gains, researchers' data suggested that "elementary school students who spend 15-30 hours during the summer reading relatively easy library books do not gain in their reading level, or vocabulary, do not gain in their reading rate, and do not gain in their reading efficacy" (Carver & Leibert, 1995, p. 44). The authors cited earlier studies that suggested reading at school as a variable added a statistically significant amount of variance in predicting end-of-year reading achievement, while the amount of reading done at home did not (Carver & Leibert, 1995). This would suggest that while monitored contextual reading may have a positive impact on reading achievement, the level of books read also has an effect.

In a study comparing comprehension strategies, researchers found that there may be some evidence for employing content instruction as opposed to focusing on strategies as skill sets (McKeown et al., 2009). They stated, "Focusing on strategies during reading may leave students less aware of the overall process of interacting with text, especially in terms of the need to connect those ideas into a coherent whole" (McKeown et al., 2009, p. 246). They reiterated that because content instruction focuses on making connections, it might be "more likely to support

students in building a coherent representation” (McKeown et al., 2009, p. 246). Effective programs, then, must help students achieve a level of decoding to enable the student to read and interact with the text independently. At the same time, effective primary teachers support and model content comprehension of the written word, making connections between self and the big ideas contained in read-aloud and independently read text.

**Assessments.** Understanding that reading is a complex skill, assessments used to measure reading ability are varied and offer diverse information to the classroom teacher. There are eight standards used to evaluate educational assessments. These eight standards are recommended by the American Educational Research Association, and the American Psychological Association (Robinson & McKenna, 2008). The standards include:

1. Validity
2. Reliability
3. Test development
4. Fairness in testing
5. Scales, norms, and score comparability
6. Standardized administration, scoring, and reporting
7. Testing individuals of diverse linguistic backgrounds
8. Responsibilities of policy decision makers

A definition of a valid test is one that measures what it is intended measure. Valid and reliable assessments in the primary grades are suggested throughout the literature. Valid and reliable assessments of reading progress provide key information that allows teachers to target their instruction for individual students, and it allows them to determine when further

adjustments need to be made because of a lack of student progress (Torgesen, Houston, Rissman, & Kosanovich, 2007, p. 3).

Valid and reliable assessments are also mentioned as a necessity by other researchers in the area of early literacy when describing key components of effective early intervention (Abbott et al., 2002; Ardoin & Christ, 2008; Baker et al., 2008; Chard et al., 2008; Hall, 2008; Jenkins & O'Connor, 2002; Lyon & Chhabra, 2004; Simmons et al., 2002; Snow et al., 1998).

Some assessments have a high degree of predictive validity, but teachers may not see the information as that which they need to further their instruction (Invernizzi, Landrum, Howell, & Warley, 2005). For example, several studies cite the predictive value of nonsense word reading as highly correlated to future overall reading achievement (Good, Wallin, Simmons, Kame'enui, & Kaminski, 2002; Speece, Mills, Ritchey, & Hillman, as cited in Invernizzi et al., 2005). Both the DIBELS (Good & Kaminski, 2002) and the Test of Word Reading Efficiency, (Torgesen, Wagner, & Rashotte, 1999) include such a measure, and both met rigorous standards to prove both validity and reliability (Baker et al., 2008; Chard et al., 2008; Coyne, M. D., Kame'enui, E. J., Simmons, D. C., & Harn, B. A., 2004). However, classroom teachers may not see the usefulness of a measure of nonsense word fluency.

Several citations in the literature warn about this disconnect. If teachers are not provided with professional development opportunities to explain how to use test results to drive instruction, the result may be ineffective use of instructional time and a loss in opportunities to use the information to assist struggling readers (Simmons et al., 2002; Toll, 2001; Torgesen et al., 2007). Diamond (2005) provided a flowchart to guide teachers in using research-based assessments in the classroom to guide early literacy instruction.



Several researchers questioned the use of a test like the DIBELS, which is comprised of several subtests, as an inadequate indicator of comprehension (Goodman, 2006; Manzo, 2005). This is a key point, because both critics and supporters of the DIBELS agree that the true goal of reading lies in comprehending the text (Goodman, 2006; Snow et al., 1998; Torgesen, 2004). Results from multiple studies indicate a high correlation between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins, 2001; Torgesen, 2004). In a study involving 26 inner-city schools, Riedel (2007) found a positive correlation between the DIBELS oral reading fluency measure in first grade and second-grade comprehension as measured by two different standardized measures. The author stated, “Reading too slowly may be a more likely contributor to poor comprehension. Cognitive resources that could be used for comprehension are consumed by slow decoding of connected text” (Riedel, 2007, p. 567).

There is a potential disconnect between the classroom teacher and research in this area, as accountability at both the state and national level increases and teachers view assessments as mandates rather than a source of information to drive instruction. Authors of a recent piece of literature describing literacy assessments stated, “It is important to clarify that a focus on the empirical base in designing literacy assessment and instruction is long overdue and is clearly an essential foundational step toward improved literacy” (Robinson & McKenna, 2008, p. 199). However, the push for assessment “may create a disconnect between what assessments tell us about students’ performance and what teachers need to know to instruct them” (Invernizzi et al., 2005, p. 611).

**Integration of general education, special education, and Title I.** In a study assessing the sustainability of early intervention gains in a high-risk population, Lai and colleagues found that collaboration among the teachers, with an emphasis on a problem solving process led to

sustained results in early reading achievement (Lai, McNaughton, Amituanai-Tolosa, Turner, & Hsiao, 2009). There was close collaboration between the researchers and the teachers as well, and the authors concluded, “The solution lay in the collective evidence-based problem solving and the increased knowledge that teachers developed to understand the nature of comprehending, learning, and teaching and the characteristics of effective teaching” (Lai et al., 2009, p. 53). Collaboration and integration of a problem-solving paradigm between teachers was cited by the authors as key to the school’s success.

Others cited collaboration and cooperation as keys to effective reform. One of the most effective systems for addressing early intervention is the integration of general education, special education, and Title I (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Therefore, it is imperative that the principal be a key player in facilitating this collaboration.

### **Role of the Principal in Effective Early Literacy Intervention**

A review of the literature reveals the important role that the principal plays in the implementation of an effective early intervention reading system. In *Implementing Response to Intervention: A Principal’s Guide*, Hall (2008) cited three key elements that are present in her observations of effective implementation, with the first one being the role of the principal. She stated that the first key factor is “The principal is committed to systemically solving reading problems before it’s too late and plays a significant leadership and participatory role” (p. xv).

**Principal as participant.** The principal as participant sends a powerful message to stakeholders. Deal and Peterson indicated “Everyone watches leaders in a school. Everything they do gets people’s attention...Their interests and actions send powerful messages. They signal the values they hold” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 90). Describing best practices, Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1998) described the principal as “a model and an encourager and

celebrator of literacy, as an adult and professional in the school” (p. 67). Shaping a school culture that values literacy includes a principal who shares the possibilities outlined by Deal and Peterson (1999):

1. Models values through demeanor and actions.
2. Uses time, a key resource, to communicate what is important, what should be attended to.
3. Realizes that what is appreciated, recognized, and honored signals the key values of what is admirable and achievable.

Critical tasks for principals are described in a guide from the Florida Center for Reading Research (Torgesen et al., 2007). Among the tasks recommended for principals to be effective literacy leaders:

1. Ensure teachers have excellent, ongoing, professional development.
  - a. Techniques of effective teaching, including follow-up in the classroom.
  - b. Program-specific training.
2. Ensure teachers have adequate materials to support high quality instruction.
  - a. Interesting books written at different levels of difficulty.
  - b. Supplemental materials and technology.
  - c. Core, or comprehensive, reading programs.
3. Monitor classroom instruction through principal walk-throughs.

**Leading a change initiative.** “Solving reading problems before it’s too late” may mean leading a change initiative in order for improvement. Reeves (2002) suggested that “Change represents abandoning the past in pursuit of an uncertain future, and it is change that a leader is most frequently required to pursue” (p. 24). The pursuit of change may look like building

capacities within the school, with the leader “defining a compelling need, advocating risk-taking, providing resources and professional development, establishing realistic goals, and establishing a slow pace for change” (Brower & Balch, 2005, p. 97). The leadership keys that Reeves (2002) advocates are:

1. Change is essential.
2. Consensus does not mean unanimity.
3. Understand the sources of individual and organizational resistance.
4. Build change champions.
5. Celebrate small wins.
6. Create a data-friendly environment.
7. Change with a “pebble in the pond.”
8. Choose how to spend the last ten minutes of your day.

Brower and Balch (2005) stated, “At best, change should be initiated and should occur at the level where the need naturally exists” (p. 97). The leader then is the facilitator, or architect of change at the classroom level. “Change where it counts most—in the daily interactions of teachers and students—is the hardest to achieve and the most important” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 10). In a study of high school teachers, researchers found that in schools where top-down reforms were perceived by the teachers as threats, certain characteristics of leadership emerged, including over simplification of instructional and assessment practices, an emphasis on routine, and strong pressure for teachers to conform (Olsen & Sexton, 2009).

Marzano and associates explored reasons some educational initiatives fail and classify change into first order and second order change (Marzano, Zaffron, & Zraik, 1995). First order change assimilates innovations into pre-existing beliefs, while second order change evolves

when those involved interact with situations in a new way, realizing that the current belief system are part of the change process.

**Reform from differing viewpoints.** Reasons cited for the focus on reform and why schools resist it can historically be traced to two different theories. One theory is based on a technical or rational perspective and approaches school reform from an instructional viewpoint (Baum, 2002). Efforts focus on teaching and learning, and the improvement of classroom practices. Resisting reform from this perspective would include the reasoning that teaching and learning techniques in the reform are not based on solid knowledge.

In addition to instructional strategies, a focus on the curriculum itself would fall into this category. Marzano (2003) described the three types of curricula: the intended curriculum, the implemented curriculum, and the attained curriculum. While the intended curriculum is what the state or district mandates, the implemented curriculum is what actually happens in the classroom, while the attained curriculum represents what the students actually learned. “The existence of state-level standards documents and district-level or school-level curriculum guides does not necessarily imply that the implemented curriculum and the intended curriculum are identical” (Marzano, 2003, p. 23). Schmoker (2004) warned that while strategic planning is necessary, a plan without action is futile. Reeves (2009) suggested, “Effective strategies are executed by teachers and leaders who begin the process with the confidence that their professional practices influence student achievement” (p. 84).

Baum (2002) described reform from an institutional, or systems viewpoint. “Most of these efforts aim to improve teaching and learning by holding educators more accountable to administrators or parents for their performance, and for making it possible for unsatisfying

programs to go out of existence” (Baum, 2002, p. 174). Vouchers, school choice, and federal or state sanctions would be considered outcomes of this viewpoint.

Trust is a factor in schools that have achieved positive reform (Daly & Chrispeels, 2005; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Louis, as cited by Chhuon, Gilkey, Gonzalez, Daly, & Chrispeels, 2008). Marzano (2003) discussed school-level factors that affect student achievement and reform, and reported that collegiality among staff members was strongly correlated with positive results. He cautioned, however, against equating trust and collegiality with the term *friendship*. He stated, “One important aspect of the definition of collegial behavior is what it does *not* include. Collegiality is commonly interpreted to involve social interactions and explicit friendships among teachers” (Marzano, 2003, p. 61). However, in his research there was a negative correlation between student achievement and friendship interactions. Collegial behavior, instead, can be described as behaviors that exhibit open sharing of failures, mutual respect, and continual analysis of practices and procedures (Fullan, 2001b).

In a study designed to identify why some teachers are more adaptive than others, researchers identified four perspectives in an attempt to move beyond the instructional viewpoint (Fairbanks et al., 2010). The four perspectives include:

1. Teacher beliefs and personal practice theories
2. Vision
3. Belonging
4. Identity

Although trust alone may not be a sufficient factor to affect change, “the development of trust appears to be an essential part of educational systems as well as a resource for school improvement” (Chhuon et al., 2008, p. 232). Reeves (2009) stated that the chances of achieving

success in a time of reform can be increased if “change is reframed from a personal attack to a new, meaningful, and exciting opportunity” (p. 11).

Gallimore et al. (2009) pinpointed five keys that leaders used at the classroom level in a case study of nine high poverty schools that effectively implemented instructional change. These five keys included:

1. Job-alike teams of three to seven teachers who teach the same grade level, course, or subject.
2. Published protocols that guide—but do not prescribe—the teacher team’s improvement efforts.
3. Trained peer facilitators—point people—to guide their colleagues over time.
4. Stable settings dedicated to improving instruction and learning.
5. Perseverance until there is progress on key student performance indicators.

**Characteristics/traits of successful schools and principals.** When undergoing change, schools experience what Fullan (2001a) described as an *implementation dip*. Addressing this problem takes a special skill set from the leader. Fullan stated:

Leaders who understand the implementation dip know that people are experiencing two kinds of problems when they are in the dip—the social-psychological fear of change, and the lack of technical know-how or skills to make the change work. (Fullan, 2001a, p. 41)

Skills that Marzano identified in his research show a high correlation between responsibilities that would match this need and student achievement (Marzano, R., Waters, T., & McNulty, B., 2005). The two highest correlations of the 21 identified responsibilities were “flexibility”, adapting his/her behavior to the needs of the current situation and being comfortable with dissent, and also “situational awareness,” an awareness of the details and undercurrents in the

daily routines of the school and using this information to focus on existing and prospective problems.

Reeves (2009) also discussed the leader as change agent, and the many roles it entails. He focused on creating conditions, planning, implementing, and sustaining change in schools. When facilitating change in the area of literacy, “Although superintendents routinely expect principals to be instructional leaders, that label does not mean very much if the leaders and teachers hold vague and inconsistent views on the most essential elements of effective instruction in literacy” (Reeves, 2009, p. 116).

Reeves (2009) highlighted the importance of defining consistency in the professional practices of teachers. Other researchers contend that schools must expand this notion. Torgesen (2004) stated that true change in literacy instruction outcomes would occur when leaders go beyond simply defining consistency, and build reading best practices that are monitored and celebrated. This change will be a combination of practice and programming, and will require a leader who has instilled a sense of urgency relative to the cost of failure in this regard. Strong core classroom instruction, effective screening to identify at-risk children and extra instruction that coincides with these at-risk students’ needs are required, and the principal monitors these in the school setting (Torgesen, 2004).

In *Teaching All Students to Read in Elementary School*, the authors listed specific content-related suggestions for principals as effective instructional leaders in the area of literacy (Torgesen et al., 2007, p. 21). These steps include:

1. Develop a school schedule that allows sufficient time for interventions.
2. Provide sufficient personnel to deliver the interventions in small groups.
3. Identify appropriate instructional programs and materials to support effective



interventions, and provide appropriate training to those who will implement the program.

4. Provide oversight, energy, and follow-up in managing the intervention system.

DuFour and Marzano (2009) contended that principals could increase student achievement by thinking of themselves as learning leaders rather than instructional leaders. Instead of conducting individual teacher observations, the authors advocate using student learning as the rallying point for teachers, with principals acting as capacity builders instead of supervisors.

DuFour and Marzano (2009) presented compelling evidence for this change in the role of the principal from observer to team leader. They insisted that principals would be better off spending time assisting teachers in the process of collaborative teamwork. This teamwork would focus on learning to evaluate student work in a consistent manner, and it is the opinion of the authors that this practice is more valuable than formal teacher observations (DuFour & Marzano, 2009). This practice may be seen as more valuable due to the reflective nature of this collaboration, leading to change. Schmoker (1999) wrote that if we reflect on our practice and make adjustments based on those results, we will improve. “Continuous, incremental improvements are the real building blocks of sweeping systemic change that is rapid – and attainable” (p. 56).

Collaborative efforts are cited in the literature as another characteristic that is facilitated by the principal in effective schools in the midst of change. In a quantitative study by Marzano et. al. (2005), a meta-analysis revealed 21 responsibilities that characterize the job of an effective leader. The authors stated, “Taken at face value, this situation would imply that only those with superhuman abilities or the willingness to expend superhuman effort could qualify as effective

school leaders” (p. 99). They described collaboration as the way that effective schools and principals manage this feat. In an effective school, the focus shifts from one individual—the principal—to a team of individuals by developing a strong leadership team.

A study by the Wallace Foundation, which examined the traits of effective school principals, found that collective leadership is highly correlated to high student achievement. Successful principals in the study were “setting the conditions that enabled the teachers to be better instructors” (Samuels, 2010, p. 14).

An effective leadership team has many shared responsibilities, one of the most important being reflective practices. In describing reasons that reflective practices increase a school’s potential to improve, York-Barr, Sommers, Ghore, and Montie (2001) stated:

1. Creates an opportunity to continuously learn about educational practice.
2. Provides a greater variety of perspectives on which to draw.
3. Creates new knowledge and understandings to be applied to practice.
4. Develops efficacy.
5. The educators assume responsibility for their own learning and growth.
6. Reduces isolation and increases staff relationships.
7. Builds connections between theory and practice.
8. Reduces external mandates because educators are seen as addressing the challenge of practice. (pp. 8-9)

According to Fullan (2001a),

Organizations that improve do so because they create and nurture agreement on what is worth achieving, and they set in motion the internal processes by which people

progressively learn how to do what they need to do in order to achieve what is worthwhile. (p. 125)

In a longitudinal study of 400 Chicago elementary schools researchers found that school improvement efforts may be framed in terms of relational trust due to the interrelated dependency in schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Bryk and Schneider stated:

Embedded in the daily social routines of schools is an interrelated set of mutual dependencies among all key actors: students, teachers, principals, administrators, and parents. These structural dependencies create feelings of vulnerability for the individuals involved. This vulnerability is especially salient in the context of asymmetric power relationships. (p. 20)

## **Summary**

In summary, a review of the literature reveals research that can be categorized into the effects of reading instruction and student achievement, and the role of the principal in effective early-literacy intervention and achievement.

When reviewing the effects of reading instruction and student achievement, seven topics emerged: (a) timing of formal literacy instruction, (b) urgency of early intervention, (c) foundational skills in early-literacy education, (d) scientifically-based reading research debate, (e) importance of comprehension, (f) assessments, and (g) integration of general education, special education, and Title I.

When reviewing the role of the principal in effective early-literacy intervention and achievement, four major topics emerged: (a) the principal as a participant, (b) leading a change initiative, (c) reform from different viewpoints, and (e) characteristics/traits of successful schools and principals.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Research Methodology**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore educational aspects which help explain high early-literacy acquisition in high-poverty elementary schools. It is not this author's intent to ascertain efficacy or superiority in reading instructional methodology, but rather to observe and examine schools at risk of failure that are achieving early-literacy acquisition.

### **Research Questions**

1. What do teachers in high-achieving, high-poverty schools cite as contributors to effective early interventions in reading?
2. What do principals in high-achieving, high-poverty schools cite as contributors to effective early-literacy reading programs?
3. How does the principal explain his/her role in setting up a model reading program?
4. What role does the principal play in affecting reading achievement?
5. How does high achievement occur in a high-poverty school?

### **Qualitative Inquiry**

Merriam (1998) stated, "In contrast to quantitative research, which takes apart a phenomenon to examine component parts (which become the variables of the study), qualitative research can reveal how all the parts work together to form a whole" (p. 6). This study examined

many factors that worked together to produce an unlikely result. By using inquiry in the natural school setting among those who were achieving this unlikely result, a process of experiences was explored.

From the perspective of a critical theory in qualitative research, empowering individuals to transcend constraints is paramount (Creswell, 2009). Poverty and its constraints in the educational setting are embedded in the boundaries of this study. The interpretive/constructivist theory relies on the participants' views and observations of the situation being studied (Creswell, 2009). The theoretical lens through which this study was conducted was a combination of critical theory layered with an interpretive lens.

### **Strategy of Inquiry**

Creswell (2007) defined the case study as “a good approach when the inquirer has clearly identifiable cases with boundaries and seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the cases” (p. 74). This researcher sought to understand at a deep level, which may only be obtained in the natural setting of the school, a process by which unexpected achievement had been attained.

Of the many strategies in qualitative design, the case study is particularly useful when studying a process (Merriam, 1998). There are two views of this process, both of which were used in this research study. The first view of the process is monitoring, which refers to describing the context and population of the study, discovering the extent to which the program has been implemented (Merriam, 1998). Reichardt and Cook (as cited in Merriam, 1998) stated, “The second meaning of process is causal explanation: discovering or confirming the process by which the treatment had the effect that it did” (p. 33). Both processes of monitoring and causal explanation were employed in this research study.

## **Data Collection**

Constructionist and critical theory researchers often utilize purposeful sampling models (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This qualitative technique helps determine which participants will be most beneficial in exploring the research questions. In order to explore educational aspects in high-poverty, high-achieving schools, the sample population must have exhibited these characteristics. Determining factors in the study were:

1. The school must have at least a 40% poverty rate.
2. The school must not have gone through a re-district or reconfiguration in the past 2 years.
3. The principal interviewed must have been at the school 3-5 years.
4. Attempts were made to study high poverty, high achieving schools from different demographic areas (rural, urban, and suburban).
5. Second grade DIBELS scores must show at least 80% of students on grade level by the end of the year benchmark.

Through public announcements on both state and federal department of education websites, this researcher found information to assist in the search for schools that met the study criteria. National Blue Ribbon Schools, cited for excellence in achievement, were cross-referenced with Title I Distinguished Schools to find schools with a high level of both achievement and poverty. To ascertain poverty, schools with a 40% or greater poverty rate were readily accessed through Title I data on each state's Department of Education website. Schools that were considered a school-wide Title school must have a 40% poverty rate to qualify.

In order to determine high-achievement in early reading acquisition, standardized state test scores would not be an ideal determining factor. First, state tests are not uniform across the

nation, nor do the scale scores represent the same level of achievement. By using state test scores, the sites selected to study would need to be from the same state. Secondly, state tests do not typically begin until the end of grade three. Many studies highlight the importance of intervening before third grade (Francis et al., 1996; Juel, 1988; Torgesen, 2004). Therefore, the identification of schools that are intervening in an exemplary fashion needs to be focused on the pre-third grade scores.

The DIBELS assessment is a norm-referenced test used nationally. It is used as an indicator as early as kindergarten for those students who may struggle with the acquisition of literacy. Many studies documented the validity and reliability of the DIBELS measures (Baker et al., 2008; Chard et al., 2008; Coyne et al., 2004). Scores from the DIBELS can be obtained from several sources, including mClass Wireless Generation, Voyager Expanded Learning, and the University of Oregon Reading First website.

School websites were used as a source to determine if the school used DIBELS as an assessment. School improvement plans listed assessments, and many schools post these on the school website.

After compiling a list of schools from various regions that met the criteria, the school administrator was contacted to check for interest in participating in this case study. If there was interest, two questions were asked of the administrator:

1. Has the school gone through a redistricting or reconfiguration in the past two years
2. Is the present principal new to the building?

If the answer to either of these questions was affirmative, the school was eliminated as a possible site for study. It was imperative that the criterion of high-achievement was not due to a reconfiguration of the school's population and that the reading scores were obtained from the

population of students in the school where the interviews took place. Also, it was important that the current principal of the school was the one who was present in the acquisition of high reading achievement. Next, schools were asked to provide DIBELS scores to determine if they met study criteria.

The schools in the study were located in multiple states that the researcher had access to and met the study criteria. Five sites were chosen, and included two representative sites from a rural Indiana setting, one representative site from a metropolitan Indiana setting, one representative site from a metropolitan California setting, and one representative from an urban Ohio setting. Due to inclement weather, the site visit to the Ohio school had to be canceled, and was unable to be rescheduled.

In order to secure an in-depth understanding and exploration of contributors to high-poverty, high-achieving schools, multiple data collection methods were used. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) stated, “Qualitative research is inherently multi-method in focus. However, the use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question” (p. 5). Data collected included semi-structured interviews with participants, informal observations in the school setting, and analysis of public documents regarding reading achievement, poverty, and reading interventions utilized.

Participants interviewed included kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade general education teachers, resource teachers, and the principal of each building. Potential interviewees were sent an invitation to participate and an informed consent if there was interest via email. Email addresses were readily available on school websites.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews collected on-site at a place designated by the building principal. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, and followed a



standard protocol included in Appendix A. Creswell (2007) suggested that open-ended questions are the “core of the interview protocol, bounded on the front end by questions to invite the interviewee to open up and talk” (p. 133) and ending with questions that inquire, “Who should I talk to in order to learn more?”

Interviews with teachers were conducted using focus groups. The teacher selection for the focus groups was determined by the grade level taught and willingness to participate, indicated by the invitation to participate and informed consent. The principal was interviewed individually. The researcher recorded information from the interviews by audio-taping, and also by using a Smart Pen device to hand write responses. To ensure confidentiality, the participants’ names and the name of the school were changed during transcription.

The researcher spent a full day at each site. This allowed time for informal field observations in the school environment, as well as informal observations in classrooms. The observational protocol in Appendix B was followed, and the researcher took both descriptive and reflective notes.

## **Procedures**

In qualitative research, the researcher must organize the data in order to analyze it and then reduce the data into themes through the process of coding, and finally represent the data graphically (Creswell, 2007). Different methods exist, but researchers identified common steps involved in this process (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1998). In this study, the following data analysis steps were followed.

First, the researcher organized and prepared the data for analysis. Interviews and field notes were typed and transcribed. Data were arranged according to source. Next, the researcher

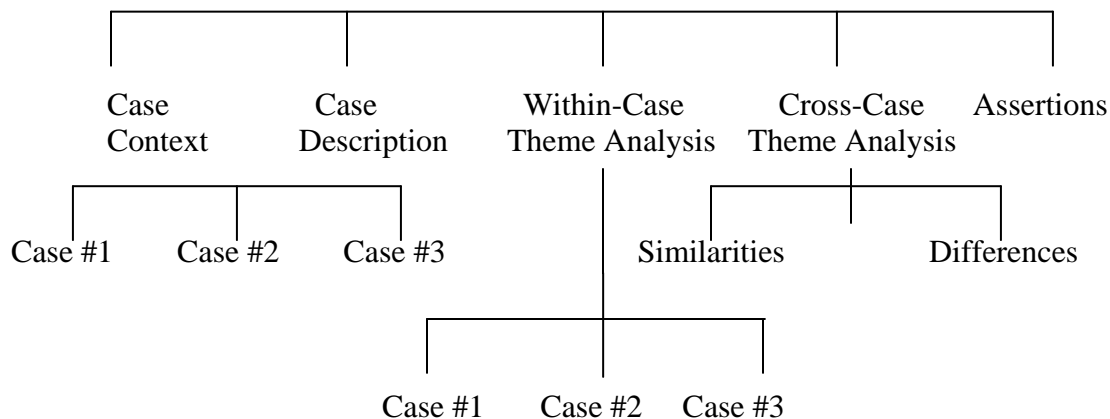
gained a general sense of the information by re-reading through all the information to glean an overall sense of what the participants were saying, and what ideas were being conveyed.

In the next phase, the data were coded. Coding involved using text data collected, and segmenting sentences or paragraphs into categories with a term, or code. Creswell (2009) suggested that researchers analyze case study data by using codes in four different areas: codes that tackle topics one would expect to find based on the literature review, codes that are not anticipated, codes that are unusual, and codes that address a theoretical topic in the research. Using color-coding with different colored highlighters, the researcher organized the interviews into potential themes. The interviews were dissected by color, and quotes were placed on sticky notes. The sticky notes were then placed under potential theme headings to get a gist of the frequency of themes within the interviews.

The coding process was used to generate descriptions and themes. The researcher reported the meaning of the case by first providing a detailed description of each case, and then an analysis of themes within the case, called a within-case-analysis. A cross-case analysis is used to compare the themes between cases, and was utilized in this study. This was represented by the following flowchart (Creswell, 2007):

*Figure 1*

#### Analysis of Themes



The final step was the narrative representing the research findings. The researcher interpreted the findings by answering several questions. Lincoln and Guba (as cited by Creswell, 2009) advocated answering “What were the lessons learned?” as a guiding question, with lessons being either the researcher’s interpretation or meaning derived from a comparison of findings with current theories. New questions raised by the synthesis of data were highlighted in this step. A case study commands holistic interpretation and as Merriam (1998) stated, “A case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single, bounded unit. Conveying an understanding of the case is the paramount consideration in analyzing the data” (Merriam, 1998, p. 195).

### **Establishing Validity and Reliability**

Researchers use procedures to check the accuracy of findings by asking, “were the interviews reliably and validly constructed; was the content of the documents properly analyzed; do the conclusions of the case study rest upon the data?” (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 378). One such procedure is triangulation, or the use of multiple methods, and is a well-known strategy to ensure validity in qualitative design (Merriam, 2009). This study utilized the following methods to increase validity of the findings: a systematic protocol of observations; consistent procedures for data coding and analysis; a semi-structured interview format, and public documents for background and descriptive contextual information.

Reliability, or consistency, refers to “the extent to which research findings can be replicated” (Merriam, 2009, p. 220). In qualitative research where single cases are studied in depth, the consistency of findings with the data presented and the ethics of the researcher presenting them might be more important (Merriam, 2009). This researcher employed such practices in this study.

Reflexivity is defined as the researcher's self-awareness and critical self-reflection of potential biases and predispositions that could influence the research study and the conclusions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As stated in the personal statement, this researcher's background in elementary education, reading, and early intervention could bias perceptions if the techniques employed at the schools were different from those she was familiar with. This awareness is the first step toward interpreting data in an unbiased manner.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, the researcher summarized to the following design components: the research questions, qualitative inquiry, strategy of inquiry, data collection, procedures, and establishing validity and reliability. The main purpose of this qualitative study was to explore educational aspects which help explain high early-literacy acquisition in high-poverty elementary schools.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Findings of the Study**

There is extensive research documenting the critical need for early-literacy acquisition if students are to be academically successful. Research that targeted high-poverty students as a population, for whom this will be a difficult task, has also been conducted.

Many quantitative studies attempt to pinpoint programs or methodologies that made a difference in early intervention, and there is a great deal of literature to support factors present in school improvement efforts. There is justification for studying high poverty schools that have had success in early-intervention in literacy.

Studies have pointed to what we should do in the area of early literacy acquisition. However, a question remains: what observations can be made and what conclusions can be drawn from an in-depth study of schools for whom this acquisition is not an easy task, but who succeeded nonetheless?

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore educational aspects which help explain high early-literacy acquisition in high-poverty elementary schools.

### **Research Questions**

1. What do teachers in high achieving, high poverty schools cite as contributors to effective early interventions in reading?

2. What do principals in high achieving, high poverty schools cite as contributors to effective early-literacy reading programs?
3. How does the principal explain his/her role in setting up a model reading program?
4. What role does the principal play in affecting reading achievement?
5. How does high achievement occur in a high poverty school?

### **Presentation of Results and Study Sample**

In Chapter 4, the researcher presents and analyzes findings from interviews conducted in four elementary schools that met the study criteria. The schools in the study were located in multiple states that the researcher had access to and met the study criteria. Two audio-taped interview sessions were held at each school, using the semi-structured interview protocol outlined in Appendix A. The principal of each school was interviewed first and the duration of interviews was 47 minutes to 1 hour 23 minutes. Focus group participants in each school were interviewed next. Participants included teachers from kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and resource staff, including Title I resource staff members. Interviews in the focus group settings lasted from 42 minutes to 1 hour, ten minutes.

To maintain confidentiality of the interviewees and schools, all participants will be referred to as males. Quotes from interviewees were only altered for readability by imposing punctuation and removing filler words such as “well” and “you know.” The researcher used letter names to identify schools. Each of the four school cases is presented in this chapter with: (a) a description of the school, using demographics and information gleaned from artifacts, public documents, and informal observations, and (b) an analysis of the themes discovered within each case, and (d) a cross-analysis of the themes to compare the themes between cases.

**Study sample.** The schools in the study were located in multiple states that the researcher had access to and met the study criteria. Five schools were selected by utilizing data from the Departments of Education in Indiana, Ohio, and California. Only schools with a poverty rate of at least 40% were considered for the study. From those schools, only schools that used Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Schools (DIBELS) as a formative or summative assessment in grades kindergarten through second grade were considered.

Schools were eligible to be included in the study if at least 80% of the second grade students were at or above benchmark on their end-of-year DIBELS assessment. If the principal had been at the school less than three years, the school was removed from consideration. Likewise, schools that had experienced a reconfiguration or redistricting in the last two years were eliminated as potential participants for the study.

Of the five schools contacted for possible participation, three were in Indiana, one was in Ohio, and one was in California. All schools initially agreed to be included in the study, but the school in Ohio withdrew when inclement weather prevented the researcher from traveling to the school on the agreed upon date. The final schools included two schools in rural Indiana, one school in a metropolitan area of Indiana in close proximity to Chicago, and another school in a metropolitan area of San Diego, California. Table 1 depicts demographic data, achievement data, poverty rates, and ethnicity of the participating schools.

Table 1

*Demographic Data, Achievement Data, Poverty Rates, and Ethnicity*

School	Locale	% Poverty	% Minority	Language Arts Pass Rate-State Test (Grade 3)
A	Metropolitan	70%	75%	80%
B	Rural	41%	6%	83%
C	Rural	40%	2%	94%
D	Metropolitan	61%	35%	94%

The number of years that each of the principals had been at their current position, as well as their educational backgrounds is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

*Principal's Background*

School	Tenure of Principal	Principal's Background
A	6 years	Literacy, Bi-lingual Education
B	5 years	Special Education
C	6 years	Related Arts
D	11 years	Special Education

**Summary of the Interviews and Field Observations**

**School A description.** School A, located in a metropolitan area surrounding San Diego, California, served 400 students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade. Seventy percent of the students received free or reduced lunch, and 75% of the students were minority. The native language of most students was Spanish. The school was not in an enclosed building, but rather



housed in an open-air fashion, with all classroom doors leading to an outdoor corridor. Portable units were brought in from time to time if needed. The cafeteria was located outside, with children eating on picnic tables with a tent-like awning covering the tables. The school's motto, "Respect, Responsibility, Ready to Learn" was prominently displayed in every classroom, and on the outside wall where the students ate lunch.

Evidence of a focus on literacy included uniform visual displays in every classroom of reading benchmark data for the class, as well as a Writing Wall display with anchor papers, and a Reading Wall display with the five components of literacy across the top and the goal for the day underneath.

It should be noted that due to vast budget cuts at the state level, California's public schools suffered massive cutbacks in staff. In the school district studied, any teacher with less than 10 years of experience was given a reduction-in-force notice. Because the principal of School A had hired quite a few new teachers over the past six years, School A lost 70% of its teachers through reductions in force and gained new teachers through reassignments from throughout the district.

School A was a school-wide Title I school. There were no instructional assistants for the primary grades in the classrooms, and class sizes numbered 27 in kindergarten, 32 in first grade, and 35 in second grade. Extra resource staff for the primary grades included a Reading Team, comprised of a Reading Coach funded by Title I, as well as six instructional assistants. The principal was the only administrator in the building.

The school was recognized by the California Department of Education as a California Distinguished School last year, has received a Title I Academic Achievement Award for the last

three years, and this past year was named a national Blue Ribbon School by the United States Department of Education.

Table 3 represents reading achievement data for each of the tested grade levels on the California state test, as well as a summary of the demographics of the school.

Table 3

*School A Characteristics*

Factor	Summary of data
Percentage of students who met or exceeded standards in ELA	80%
Percent growth	80% (California API Index--863)
Number of students	400
Grade configuration	K-5
Percent poverty	70%
Percent minority	75%
Locale	Metropolitan
Recognition	National Blue Ribbon School; Title I Academic Achievement Award; California Distinguished School
Current NCLB Status	Met AYP

**School A analysis of themes: Principal interview.** Principal A had been the principal of School A for six years. His background was literacy and bi-lingual education, and his administrative experience included being an assistant principal in a different school in the same

district prior to coming to School A. Our interview lasted 58 minutes. The following themes emerged from the interview:

- Theme 1: High early-literacy achievement occurred here by raising expectations both of what students could achieve and how the staff operated as a professional learning community;
- Theme 2: In order to achieve high early-literacy, the principal established a structural framework of tiered instruction with a focus on integrating data, goal-setting, and progress monitoring;
- Theme 3: In order to achieve high early-literacy, the principal established a system of collaboration, with a resident expert at the helm of facilitating and managing the literacy system.

*Theme 1: High early-literacy achievement occurred here by raising expectations both of what students could achieve and how the staff operated as a professional learning community.*

When asked to describe how early-literacy happens at this school, the principal of School A began by saying that he and the staff had high expectations for their students, and they operated on a “No excuses” philosophy. He reiterated, “We strive to help our students achieve the same college-level readiness enjoyed by the most advantaged elementary school student.” One might have a hard time believing that this was true from looking at the facilities and demographics; however, Principal A went on to present facts to back up his expectation. In five years, School A went from a California Academic Performance Index rating of 700, considered a mediocre score, to an API of 863, considered outstanding. This 163-point gain was one of the highest in the state. School A was one of the few Title I schools in the state with a free and reduced lunch rate over 70% with an API at 863. Special education referrals were reduced 75%

in the last five years. Over 90% of School A's students read at grade level. School A was named a Title I Achievement Award Winner, and many other accolades followed, including being named a National Blue Ribbon School.

He went on to add, "High expectations guide and inspire our entire learning community. We have the highest expectations for all students at all times. We expect them to achieve proficiency at or above grade level." To accentuate that point, Principal A pointed to a framed "Belief Statement" on his desk. The statement read, "Our student goal is not grade level adequacy but excellence in critical thinking, in future academic endeavors, and in life. We feel that working as a professional learning community doing whatever it takes, these goals can be accomplished." To achieve that level of excellence demanded a staff working together as a team; as a true "professional learning community."

In order to foster and create the professional learning community that such expectations demanded, Principal A continually asked the questions put forth by DuFour (2005) in his description of a PLC:

1. What do we want our students to know?
2. How will we know if they have learned?
3. How will we help them if they haven't learned?

"The focus," said Principal A, "is on LEARNING...what are we going to do for our students?"

It was clear that Principal A anticipated that the staff would act as a professional learning community who functioned as a cohesive unit to set and accomplish these high expectations.

"Operating as a true professional learning community means that, using data and setting benchmark goals, we can identify pretty clearly students then, who are not meeting those grade level expectations." Instead of giving excuses for not achieving at this level of learning, like

language barriers and poverty, the staff focused on what they *could* do to raise the level of achievement to those expectations.

Principal A accomplished this dual task of raising expectations for both what students could do and how staff members should act by “striving to be a true instructional leader, looking at what are the needs of our students and never wavering from that.” He stated,

As the instructional leader, I have to be able to see the gaps, and what the teachers might need to fill those gaps. I will support them and encourage them as we seek ways to figure out what we CAN do, not what we can’t do.

At times this may look like modeling professional learning, and Principal A participated in any training the district provided, and then worked with teachers to incorporate selected strategies in the classroom. Because of his bi-lingual background, he also assisted teachers new to the building who did not have experience with English Language Learners. Due to staff reductions at the district level, there were many teachers who were in this category in the current school year.

During the entire interview, Principal A modeled the “no excuses” philosophy of the instructional leader who never wavers from high expectations. Not only had there been a huge turnover of staff to deal with during the current school year, but later I discovered that there had also been a three-day strike in the fall. Principal A did not dwell on these challenges nor lament their occurrence. Instead, when asked how he dealt with such a large turnover, he reiterated that he “didn’t have time to lament or wallow. The kids are our focus, and we will move forward for them.” To the staff, he “constantly” articulated “this is what we do at (School A). Here is what we expect at (School A).” He explained that his role was to constantly “keep the big picture in front of them” and remind them by questioning, “What are we here for? What is our purpose?”

He added, “On a personal level, I sit down and talk with them. I encourage them. I listen...I hear them. And I remind them why they are here.”

*Theme 2: In order to achieve high early-literacy, the principal established a structural framework of tiered instruction with a focus on integrating data, goal-setting, and progress monitoring.* Principal A realized that the high expectations were the jumping off point for the structural changes that also needed to take place. School A had been engaged in a focused effort to continuously strengthen the core literacy program, Open Court, but he knew they needed more. He scheduled visits and took teams of teachers to other high-needs schools that were having literacy success, and then met with the teams to discuss how they could integrate some of what they had seen modeled in other schools.

Although Principal A knew that a tiered system of literacy instruction was what they needed to incorporate to strengthen the core, he wanted to let the teachers see it at other schools first. They then wanted to implement this system, and did not feel “as though it was a mandate.”

The literacy system had at its base the core reading program, known as Tier I. All students received core instruction. All students were also universally screened with a benchmark literacy assessment. School A used DIBELS three times a year as this universal screening benchmark.

Principal A then described how he guided teams of teachers to create a series of interventions for each at-risk student who fell below the benchmark score in each area of literacy. These interventions were research-based that addressed their specific area of need. Principal A gave this example,

For example, a first grade student may decode at grade level, but may need support with comprehension. This student would receive 30 minutes of comprehension support each

day. Another first grade student may be having trouble decoding simple words. Based on data, that student may need decoding and fluency interventions, both at the appropriate instructional level. That first grader may need two 30-minute interventions per day. The first student was receiving Tier I, or core instruction, as well as Tier II instruction in comprehension. The second student received core instruction in Tier I, and Tier II and Tier III interventions in both decoding and fluency.

Principal A described what transpired after the first year of implementing the tiered system of literacy by stating, “As time went on and teachers started to see growth, they began to really believe and support the system.”

Principal A did not want the teachers to become dependent on any particular program because, as Principal A stated, “it is important for the teachers to use the data to figure out what the students’ needs are, rather than just assigning a struggling student to a programmed intervention.”

The tiered system depended on data from the benchmark assessments to guide teacher conversations that centered on the questions “How did our kids do?” and “What do we need to do differently?” He went on to add that after looking at benchmark and progress monitoring data in the second year after implementing the tiered system, “we recognized that we were being successful with fluency deficiencies” but went on to say that the data was not favorable in the areas of language and vocabulary development. “These were needs that the data showed we were not adequately addressing.” Therefore, language and vocabulary interventions were refined, and the classroom teachers all decided to “add academic vocabulary to the core instruction.”

Scheduling for all of the interventions can be complicated. Since English is the second language of many students, there are many students who receive Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III instruction, with the third tier being a language acquisition program. Principal A stated that “schedules are built first” so teachers can adequately plan for the many interventions taking place in each room and not have students miss core instruction.

In further describing this literacy system, Principal A explained, “The system is in place, and now we refine based on what the data tells us.” To accomplish this, progress is closely monitored using data. “All this growth is charted and shared with teachers so they can see the progress toward goals, and it doesn’t stop there.” Principal A went on to describe, and later showed me in an informal walk-through, how the literacy goals were displayed in every room. Also, every student kept track of his goals in an individual tracking folder. Data drove the instruction, and also provided a guide for teachers and students alike to monitor progress.

Principal A stated, “We monitor progress constantly. Teachers and students don’t mind this...they look forward to seeing how much they’ve grown.”

*Theme 3: In order to achieve high early-literacy, the principal established a system of collaboration, with a resident expert at the helm of facilitating and managing the literacy system.*

Principal A established a system called ACE, Articulation for Collaboration and Excellence, which was a “focused time of collaboration devoted to improvements both vertically across grade levels and horizontally with grade level teams.” ACE teams met once a week, and the calendar was set at the beginning of the year.

Collaboration during ACE in School A revolved around school goals and areas of need. Principal A explained, “We set the structure at the beginning of the year based on our goals, and



tweak the topics if the need arises.” A leadership team comprised of a grade level representatives and Principal A decided the scheduling and topics.

The ACE teams meet on Thursdays, but Principal A was quick to point out that “there is so much need here; so much work to be done that the teachers can’t—and don’t—just meet on Thursdays.” To exemplify the collaborative nature that is ingrained in the climate of the building, Principal A described how the teachers meet for collegial conversations “to share ideas, plan, and discuss things that are working during lunch, after school...they are constantly talking with one another.”

At the same time that School A established their tiered model of literacy instruction, a position was added with the dual role of facilitating collaboration and management of the literacy system. The Reading Coach position was added to the staff. This position was paid for with Title I funds, and Principal A “depended on the Reading Coach” to manage and facilitate the tiered system of literacy.

Principal A stated that he met “daily” with the reading coach, and saw the role as “part administrator, part reading expert,” a role with implied authority. He depended on his expertise with data, and reiterated that his role demanded “flexibility and the ability to manage many things at once” as well as a strong knowledge base in language arts. The Reading Coach was in his first year in the position, and replaced a “trusted and respected” coach who went on to become an assistant principal in another building.

The district that School A was in had a program called ETAP, which stood for Elementary Teaching Assistant Principals. Any teacher who aspired to be an administrator but did not want to be out of the classroom could request an ETAP role, and this allowed them to take on a little more responsibility at the building level and get a “risk-free taste of

administration.” There was also a Level II ETAP, where the teacher was out of the classroom half of the day. This was how the Reading Coach position was classified.

Principal A perceived this position as “vital” and discussed how the role had “evolved.” The first Reading Coach did not “act in any sort of administrative function” and did not want to function in that capacity at all. Principal A said that year was very “difficult, as he discovered that he had many more responsibilities than implementing the interventions.” As the position evolved and the Reading Coach role was better defined and refined, Principal A reiterated, “There has to be a full-time individual running the program, and we’ve found through experience that it must be a person with some administrative responsibilities.”

Principal A went on to describe what the coach’s day looked like.

Our Reading Coach teaches intervention groups in the morning, then the afternoons are free from classroom responsibilities so he can coach teachers, meet with me, pull and analyze data, conduct collaborative meetings with grade level teams. I could never put an inexperienced person in that role.”

**School A analysis of themes: Focus group interview.** The teachers’ focus group included five staff members. Participants included the Reading Coach and general education teachers from kindergarten, grade 1, and grade 2. Years of experience of the interviewees ranged from 12 to 27 years. The interview lasted 40 minutes. The following themes emerged from the interview:

- Theme 1: High early-literacy achievement began with implementation of a tiered literacy system;
- Theme 2: Collaboration was vital to high achievement in early-literacy;

- Theme 3: The principal set the framework for the literacy system and was responsible for supporting the teachers in implementation, while the Reading Coach was the literacy expert who managed the literacy system.

*Theme 1: High early-literacy achievement began with implementation of a tiered literacy system.* Teachers perceived that a large reason for their students' early-literacy success was due to the tiered system of instruction that they employed. Teachers also credited this system, as well as their implementation, with the success they had achieved. Implementation with fidelity was noted many times during the interview, and teachers were very open about that expectation. They perceived that they would not have continued success without the full implementation of the tiered system, with its focus on adding tiers of instruction based on what data from benchmark assessments show. They also discussed that the system relies heavily on core instruction, progress monitoring, and adjusting instruction based on student response. Teachers worried that new staff members were not on board with this effort. One teacher explained, "When staff members are transferred here, we expect them to implement core instruction with fidelity, but that isn't always the case." Another added, "I'm working my tail off, and I am going to expect them to do the same." A first grade teacher said,

It is really hard when we have so much turnover. We have many new staff members this year, so it is up to us to help those staff members adopt our philosophy. This is the way we do things here. We are here for the kids, and we implement this literacy system with fidelity.

As if sensing that the conversation had taken a negative turn, a kindergarten teacher, boasting of the system in place, reiterated "We know where students are, and where they need to

be, and how to get them there. Because we monitor progress so closely, it is easy to see growth and that is so motivating.”

*Theme 2: Collaboration was vital to high achievement in early-literacy.* Collaboration was perceived by the teachers in School A as an expectation; one that was vital to achieve early-literacy in a high-poverty school. One teacher explained,

We have a high level of expectation for collaboration and sharing, and it’s driven by the principal. We work as a team to look at data. Our principal crunches the numbers for us, and then we share how we got the results that we did, or ask for help if we didn’t see the growth that we would like to see.

This expectation of collaboration was one that the teachers valued. “We help one another; if one of us is working hard and not seeing progress, sometimes another set of eyes will help solve the problem or give a new idea life.” Another teacher added,

One of the hardest things about having so many new staff members is getting them on board with the way we share. It would almost be easier if they were first-year teachers, because then old habits wouldn’t get in the way.

Teachers at School A, despite huge obstacles brought on by budget cuts, found ways to make collaboration happen. When discussing the importance of collaboration, teachers expressed concern about bringing new staff members “on board” with this climate of sharing. A first grade teacher shared, “We maintain and carry on, because we believe in what we are doing and expect you (new staff members) to believe and share, too. During these difficult times, we persevere together.”

To illustrate one way the principal assists in this endeavor, the teachers mentioned that there is a time set-aside weekly for the sole purpose of collaboration. One teacher explained,

We have a set time weekly called ACE to collaborate. The topic is set by the leadership team, and we have a set agenda that we follow, with a record keeper taking notes. At the beginning of the school year, we have more cross-grade level ACE meetings in order to articulate strengths and weaknesses of each grade level. Our principal has done a really good job of fostering the attitude that a child may not be in my class anymore, but I own a piece of his progress. It makes me proud when I see how far we've come. And I don't stop feeling proud of the little guy who was in my room in first grade, and now is doing well years later.

Teachers model this collaboration for the students as well, and use cooperative teams and peers to help in reflections about academic performance. For example, one second grade teacher explained,

After our benchmark assessments, we go over how we answered questions with a buddy. We talk about why we answered the question the way we did, and I have a guided sheet with boxes to check. For example, "I hurried and didn't read the question." Or "I didn't understand this word." Then pairs of students discuss how they did with each other, and discuss ways to improve. The student then sets a goal and writes it in his tracking folder. We are all—students and teachers alike—transparent about our goals, our progress, and the sharing of ideas on how to accomplish that.

*Theme 3: The principal set the framework for the literacy system and was responsible for supporting the teachers in implementation, while the Reading Coach was the literacy expert who managed the literacy system.* The teachers of School A perceived the Reading Coach and team of assistants to be vital in the quest to achieve early-literacy for all students. In describing the role, one teacher stated, "The Reading Coach needs to be a true reading specialist, and the knowledge

base must be solid, with primary experience and leadership skills.” Another added, “The ability to collaborate is key...collaboration with us is key.” A second grade teacher expressed some concern over recent turnover, saying,

The position has been a revolving door lately. Our last one was a coach in the true sense of the word...modeled for us, answered our questions and supported us in our quest to help our kids acquire language and literacy. He was organized and very flexible. He is a principal now. We miss him.

One area of support that the teachers perceived as a need was in the area of scheduling. In order for the literacy system to be effective, there had to be time built into the schedule so the Reading Coach and team of assistants were focused and intentional in their efforts. This time also had to be at a time when core instruction was not taking place.

Teachers perceived the roles of the principal and Reading Coach as vital in scheduling the many tiers of instruction in order to make the system work. One teacher explained,

Our Reading Coach and principal work out what is a very complicated intervention schedule with many moving parts. We sit down together and share concerns, refine and tweak, and then implement the plan. After each benchmark, we may collapse some groups and add others, depending on what the data shows us.

Another added, “The literacy coach and the principal hold monthly data shares, and we appreciate that they pull together all the data for us to look at. We then have time to plan what to actually do with that information.”

A second grade teacher articulated another example of the way the teachers perceived this tandem role of the principal and the Reading Coach. He said, “The principal directs our literacy initiative, but the Reading Coach and team help us implement the system. We are a

team.” A first grade teacher added, “I would have a really hard time meeting the diverse needs of my kids without the Reading Team.”

**School B description.** School B, located in rural Indiana, served 457 students in grades kindergarten through sixth grade. Forty-one percent of the students received free or reduced lunch, and 6% of the students were minority. The school was housed in a recently remodeled two-story brick building, with primary grades clustered in one section of the first floor. The school’s mission statement was prominently displayed in the foyer: *We will be a progressive school community dedicated to excellence in education, holding high expectations for students and staff, and committing our resources and energies toward continuous improvement.*

The school was recognized this year by the United States Department of Education as being a National Blue Ribbon School, and was also named an Indiana 4-Star School last year. In 2004, School B did not make AYP due to language arts scores in special education.

School B was a Targeted-Assisted Title I school. There were three instructional assistants for the primary grades, as well as Title I Resource Staff comprised of a Title I Director, who was also the assistant principal, and five instructional assistants. Administrators in the building included the principal and the assistant principal.

Table 4 presents reading achievement data for each of the tested grade levels on the Indiana state test, as well as a summary of the demographics of the school.

Table 4

*School B Characteristics*

Factor	Summary % Passing
2010 ELA ISTEP Grade 3	83%
2010 ELA ISTEP Grade 4	86%
2010 ELA ISTEP Grade 5	81%
Percent growth	58%
Number of students	457
Grade configuration	K-6
Percent poverty	41%
Percent minority	6%
Locale	Rural
Recognition	National Blue Ribbon School; Indiana 4-Star School
Current NCLB Status	Met AYP

**School B analysis of themes: Principal interview.** Principal B had been at School B for five years. His background was special education and his administrative experience has only been in School B, where he was the assistant principal before being appointed principal. Our interview lasted 47 minutes. The following themes emerged from the interview:

- Theme 1: High early-literacy achievement began by adding a structured framework of tiered instruction to an already existing climate of trust, support, and respect;
- Theme 2: In order to achieve a high level of early-literacy, the principal established a system of collaboration, with a focus on data and progress monitoring;



- Theme 3: The principal established distributed leadership with a literacy expert in the building, whose role as the assistant principal was to facilitate and manage the literacy system.

*Theme 1: High early-literacy achievement began by adding a structured framework of tiered instruction to an already existing climate of trust, support, and respect.* Principal B was appointed principal of School B five years ago after serving as the assistant principal. He was quick to attribute the school's achievement to the groundwork laid by the former principal. He stated that much of the work to create a climate of trust and respect had been done by him, adding, "The people before me did a lot of things right," and also "The former principal really set a model of support and respect out for us; he set the stage."

Principal B was reluctant to take credit for the success of the school. He described his role of bringing change as a focus on the system of literacy. "I have done more schedule changes, introduced more literacy initiatives...I made structural changes that benefited literacy," but added "I cannot emphasize enough what influence the former principal here had on me and this building."

Respect and support were cornerstones of the climate at School B. Reiterating, "a lot of this was set in place before I was ever the principal," he explained how important respect was in the building by reviewing pertinent background information. Principal B's predecessor was brought in eight years earlier as a result of a "near meltdown of trust" in the building, and Principal B was appointed assistant principal. He explained,

The principal who was here was not a nice man. Several events led to his demise. The high school assistant principal was brought over to this elementary, and I was hired as assistant. Teachers, especially some of the veterans, saw him as a sort of 'savior' because

boy he changed their lives. The whole climate changed. That allowed me to come in and make structural changes that focused on literacy.

He stated that one of the most important lessons he learned was that structural change was easier because the staff trusted him. He said, “I think a key word here is trust. A trust that you support them, you look out for their best interests...support is the biggest thing.” Principal B added, “They did not feel supported or trust eight years ago. That is huge...they have to believe that you are ethical and moral. My boss portrayed those, and they saw me as his protégé.”

Developing trust and respect allowed the staff to be open to the structural changes Principal B initiated. Principal B illustrated, “Just like you have to engage your students, you have to engage your peers and get buy-in. Teachers will close the door before they ever hear what the person has to say if there isn’t respect.”

After a climate of trust was established, Principal B began the task of instituting a framework of early-literacy best practices. He saw one important part of establishing the literacy structure as ensuring that he was informed about literacy practices that worked by connecting with other educators. He said, “I set the framework, and am always looking around at other schools who are doing good things as models.” He stopped short of calling it a mandated structure, instead saying, “My job is not necessarily to mandate, but to set up possibilities that the teachers may not be able to see because they are in the trenches so to speak.”

The biggest structural change that Principal B instituted in early-literacy was the incorporation of a 3-tier model of reading instruction in the primary grades. This system included an uninterrupted 90-minute block of time for core reading instruction in the primary grades, with an additional 30 minutes in addition to core instruction for targeted intervention or

enrichment. When comparing the difference between that framework and what was in place earlier, Principal B said,

We include all children more than anything. Students do not miss core instruction.

When we provide a second tier of instruction, they don't miss core. We are trying to close the gap between where they are and things they haven't mastered yet. To me that is the difference.

The framework included literacy support from the Title I resource staff. Staff members included a Title I Director, who was also the assistant principal, and five Title I assistants. Depending on the grade level, that support varied. At the kindergarten level, one of the Title I assistants operated a "push-in" second tier as he rotated through three kindergarten classes. Principal B explained, "He has one to one activities based on where they show deficits...they rotate in about 20 minute intervals. He differentiates that instruction depending on the student." He also reiterated how the support for the classroom teacher filters down from the Title I director by saying,

He works closely with the Title I director with the student needs monitored closely. Last year we saw so much progress with the students that by the end of the year he was providing enrichment for students who were really succeeding.

Another structural change in the literacy system framework established by Principal B was the addition of full-day kindergarten. He stated, "When we started full-day kindergarten, we talked carefully about what we wanted the day to look like and what reading components we would include and when. The focus is definitely early-literacy." Some of the benefits of that structural change included "re-teaching and monitoring, giving true focused, individual attention."

In grades 1 and 2, the second tier of instruction that Principal B set up in the structural change used literacy groups. The Title I literacy assistants provide an “extra set of hands” so that every student received small group instruction, on top of the core, for 30 minutes every day. This structure, Principal B explained, “catches every kind of learner—high achievers as well as struggling students.”

Monitoring changes in the master schedule that may enhance this system was a role Principal B discussed. He explained, “I really moved the schedule around this year to better utilize our framework.” He went on to say, “I listened when the teachers told me that they would get more focused literacy time if there were no specials or recess before literacy time.” Bringing children back from the heightened excitement of recess or gym was an issue, so Principal B rearranged the schedule so that specials and recess in the primary grades occurred after the 90-minute block of core instruction.

Another example of Principal B structuring the framework through scheduling was illustrated by a change this past year in the use of special area teachers. He described the change by saying,

One thing I’ve done this year is to pull the special area teachers into literacy groups. I have a couple of grade levels that only have two sections instead of three, so I have them take literacy groups at those times. This was a huge transition for the kids—to go from 18 students in the classroom to 28 was a big adjustment for them. To be able to provide an extra set of hands during literacy groups helped with that transition.

Principal B discussed many ways he supported teachers, and saw that as a major role in establishing an early-literacy system that was effective. He stated, “There is a shared expectation that we will all address student needs, and I will support you in any way I can with those

endeavors.” He went on to add, “If in your classroom you don’t feel that is happening, seek us out and we will help you find the resources and help you figure out how to make that happen.”

Principal B articulated another area of support for his teachers when he stated, “Sometimes behavior management prevents good instruction. One way to support teachers is to support a consistent classroom management plan in order for learning to take place.” He went on to illustrate an example of a first grade classroom where achievement soared after responding with behavior management support.

At times, support was more formal. Principal B explained, “Sometimes it is good to be a bit more formal around conversations, with a product to document those conversations.” Collegial conversations happened frequently, with the principal alert to concerns. “When a teacher has concerns, he knows he can come to me.” He also thought that his background in special education helped him support teachers with concerns,

My background in special education, I think, helps me here. I talk him through—what are you doing in the classroom? That’s another way for me to keep asking “Now what?” What are we going to be doing differently? I know what good instruction is, and I think it’s important that teachers feel supported in that.

Support in the form of conversations and guiding questions were frequent in School B. The principal explained that he always tried to be in tune with issues that were standing in the way of student achievement, and addressed them in a supportive way with teachers. He described, “One grade level has struggled a bit for that cohesiveness, and I see that as another part of my job—to help guide those conversations.” He went on to illustrate that he asked questions in those situations such as “Let’s think about our structure...is it being effective? How do we know? What would help?”

*Theme 2: In order to achieve a high level of early-literacy, the principal established a system of collaboration, with a focus on data and progress monitoring.* Principal B explained that there was an “expectation for collaboration regarding literacy,” and that the collaborative meetings always have data as the focal point. Grade level teams meet to plan weekly, and then meet with the principal or assistant principal every other week.

Principal B gave examples of both structured and unstructured collaborative efforts, saying “finding the time for that collaboration” was always difficult. He explained,

We have a shared planning time. Specials time are always at the same time for a specific grade level. We hold grade level meetings at those times to talk about data—data shares and obviously there is that expectation that they have their own independent grade level meetings. Sometimes those are held after school; there is flexibility about when these discussions happen. That shared common planning time is huge. Thirty minutes is definitely not enough (laughs) but it’s a start.

The principal modeled and expected collaboration. He stated, “It takes work and it takes effort; you have to lead by example.” He added,

Our teachers know that they can’t just be someone who can go in their own classroom and shut the door and create an amazing structure for one classroom situation. To be able to share that out with others is a special gift.

To increase the productivity of the collaborative meetings, Principal B began focusing on data. “I will tell you when you focus on the data, there is a distinct shift in the focus of the collaborative conversation.” He relayed that it created more data-centered discussion by saying,

The piece where we focus on is this—we can give the assessments, but what comes next?

We can focus the discussions more –OK, now what? We see that Johnny went from green to red...what are we going to do for Johnny?

Productivity was also increased by using data to focus on positives and ways to improve.

Principal B relayed, “Maybe we see that Lucy went from red to green—now there’s a celebration. Making sure we capture these celebrations are important as well.” Discussions at collaborative meetings focused the results, what to keep doing, and what should be done differently. Principal B stated that “The “Now what?” will always be a work in progress, and the data provides feedback for that important work.”

Principal B cited this use of data as an area of change for teachers when the tiered system of literacy instruction was implemented and that it was a “continuous goal.” To help with this change, he asked, “How can we turn all those wonderful interventions we use into data that we can all share and see?” The principal went on to say that this positive approach built buy-in, and was also a source of affirmation for teachers. He added, “Sometimes teachers don’t recognize the great things they are doing, so if I can somehow turn that into some quantitative data to help us see what we have done, it keeps us all on the same page.”

To assist the teachers in using data, Principal B sometimes gave a short assignment at grade level meetings. He illustrated with an example, “I gave them some guiding questions during their grade level meeting to respond to using data from our DIBELS benchmark. I saw them later discussing these questions together on their own.” It was evident to him that “They really do share literacy practices” and he helped guide that sharing.

In School B, data from benchmark assessments was not only used to monitor the progress of students for teachers’ use, but for the students to see as well. Principal B stated, “We do

continuous progress monitoring with the kids; that is a HUGE focus for us as a school.” This allowed teachers to determine whether the interventions were successful or not, and made students aware of their own progress. “We have created data walls to keep the data in front of us,” Principal B explained. For the data walls, each grade level team decided what they wanted to highlight that would give students the most relevant information. The data walls are “constantly evaluated, tweaked, and revised.” He added, “It took us a little while to get here...this didn’t happen all at once.”

To achieve a high level of early-literacy, this system of collaboration using data to monitor progress was extended to include monitoring of the system itself by the principal. He explained it as an important role for student achievement as a follow-up to collaborative conversations based on data. “I think my role, then, is okay you’ve had these discussions; so this is where we’re heading.” He went on, “My role then becomes to be in these classrooms and see it happening; monitoring that it IS happening.”

It was evident that monitoring was an important contributor to success, just as implementation of the tiered system of instruction was also an important contributor to success. Principal B explained, “We’ve talked; we’ve said we’re going to do something different for students. So is this really happening? And what is the effect on the student? Monitoring and problem solving might be my two biggest roles. Monitoring what is happening, and if this isn’t happening for the student what are we going to do?”

For Principal B, monitoring teachers was very similar to the progress monitoring that students participated in. Just like with the students, an “awareness of the problem” needed to happen. To that end, the principal said,



I tend to ask a lot of questions. Let's look at Johnny. Let's look at Johnny's history, and see if the teacher could articulate the fact that Johnny is not progressing. If they can't, then it's my job to say this is what I see...what are we going to do now? That's where I have a responsibility, and that is definitely where my role is different than my assistant principal's role. I think if he saw a trend like that happening, and again he and I have lots of discussions, then my role, my responsibility, would be to keep a close eye on the situation.

Principal B demonstrated positive, but clear, communication skills when monitoring teachers. He said,

I've always thought a strength of mine is communicating without them feeling attacked in any way; like let's work on this together and figure this out attitude; yet leaving with the understanding that my expectation is that this has got to change, because Johnny has to be able to read. And it's probably not just Johnny, it's probably the whole class.

Monitoring any teacher practice that interfered with early literacy achievement was a role Principal B felt comfortable with. He articulated, "Academics can't come if the behaviors are out of control," and gave an example from the previous school year to illustrate his point,

Last year we had a first grade teacher whose class was out of control. So he and I worked on a behavior management system. I spent a lot more time in his classroom, watching and working with him, and you could see the AHA's when options we worked out started working. Increased achievement followed.

Principal B summarized his monitoring role from the teachers' perspective. "I think the teachers truly see me as the leader of the building; the success of the students or the lack thereof, that is my role—to monitor the success."

*Theme 3: The principal established distributed leadership with a literacy expert in the building, whose role as the assistant principal was to facilitate and manage the literacy system.*

Principal B described the assistant principal, who was also the Title I Director, as the one who managed and facilitated the literacy initiative in the building. He managed the “logistical things with early intervention,” including programming, support for students, and all of the benchmark assessments. Facilitation efforts included “participation in collaborative grade level meetings,” as well as “informal collegial conversations” regarding the “nuts and bolts of programming.”

Principal B described their relationship as “synergistic,” and added, “I am more a shared leadership type of person.” Their roles, although not formally defined, were clearly delineated by Principal B. “I think both of us sustain this effort. I establish and set up the framework, communicate the wider vision and remind them of our learning targets through emails, daily notes, and just conversations.” The assistant principal, on the other hand, is the person teachers sought for specific curriculum issues. “He is the voice, and can always be present when I get caught up in management issues, but they know we are on the same page and his message is coming from both of us.”

Although in an administrative position, the assistant principal did not evaluate teachers. Principal B explained, “My assistant is not in the evaluator role; that is my job. That may make it easier for them to take risks and talk about mistakes.”

Principal B described the assistant as someone teachers trusted due to his knowledge. “His knowledge of curriculum and instruction, especially in the language arts, is huge.” It was important for the teachers to trust and have confidence in his ability to lead them “down the right path.” The principal explained that it was “vital” for the person in the assistant’s role to have

that strong foundation in early-literacy. “The person I need beside me to make our building all it can be--I need someone with a strong *elementary* literacy background and knowledge base.”

According to the principal, the assistant also must possess the ability to lead others and deal with different groups of people. He stated, “His ability to lead others is a key component of that role; you have to be able to inspire others to do what is right for kids.” That leadership role included being responsible for the early-literacy professional development, which was, he stated, embedded in a routine way at our school. Our assistant leads and manages those endeavors. I don’t mean to minimize his position in any way, but they see him as being very knowledgeable with a LOT of expertise, but they see the day-to-day functioning of the school, the day-to-day instruction of the school, the success of the students or the lack thereof as my job.

**School B analysis of themes: Focus group interview.** The teacher focus group included nine staff members. Participants included one Title I teacher and general education teachers from kindergarten, grade 1, and grade 2. Years of experience of the interviewees ranged from 6 to 27 years. Our interview lasted 57 minutes. The following themes emerged from the interview:

- Theme 1: High early literacy achievement began with implementation of a tiered literacy system in a positive climate of trust and respect;
- Theme 2: Collaboration and reflection were vital to high achievement in early-literacy;
- Theme 3: The principal was pivotal in providing resources and support, while the assistant principal was the literacy expert who managed the literacy system.

*Theme 1: High early literacy achievement began with implementation of a tiered literacy system in a positive climate of respect.* School B teachers proudly described the 3-tier model of

reading instruction that they used. The system included a ‘common core reading program, and a series of benchmark assessments using DIBELS.’ The students have an uninterrupted 90-minute block of literacy in core instruction, and then all students receive an additional 30 minutes of support daily at their level.

The teachers ensure that the students understand the “Big Five” areas of literacy during core instruction. By using frequent formative assessments, “We find what skills are lacking and help fill in the gaps.” A second tier of instruction ensures 30 minutes of structured literacy instruction geared toward individual needs. A second grade teacher offered, “During Tier II time, some of my students are reading and responding to chapter books and working more on comprehension skills and higher order thinking skills.” Another second grade teacher added, “Remediation groups are working more on foundation skills at this time.”

In addition to a system of tiered literacy instruction, teachers provided many examples of how this system was intertwined with a positive climate. The system of literacy worked and was enhanced by this atmosphere of trust. For example, a first grade teacher offered, “People aren’t afraid to ask questions here.” A second-grade teacher shared how an atmosphere of trust led to a “this is not just a job” atmosphere. He added, “We know the kids; we don’t just know their scores. We know what their struggles are both at home and at school.” At this point in the interview, as if to illustrate the spirit of trust and respect this group had for each other, another teacher looked at the second-grade teacher and affirmed, “You do a wonderful job!”

The positive climate that enhanced instruction was also something teachers were proud of and wanted to share. One teacher stated, “We are family. We don’t get involved in each other’s

personal lives, but we care about each other.” Another said,

It is so easy to get depressed—in the news all you hear is how bad education is. Turn around and look at what we have here. We are doing great things, and we support one another in the good work.

One teacher summarized up “how literacy happens here” by saying “It’s a comprehensive system that would be hard to single out just one or two things. This is also what makes our students successful. A comprehensive program is what works; it’s the best approach.”

*Theme 2: Collaboration and reflection were vital to high achievement in early-literacy.*

Working together was something that teachers at School B valued as a contributor to high achievement in early-literacy. A first grade teacher explained,

We talk a lot, just between ourselves. First grade meets every week, and the three of us sit down and plan not only what we are going to do curriculum wise, but is there something that isn’t working or where do we want to go? We see a discrepancy in scores, so what do we want to do about that? How will we approach it? So we’re kind of...well when you get together and talk it just makes things better.

Collaborative discussions were informal at times and happened routinely. A kindergarten teacher offered, “Sometimes we even have discussions about students in the bathroom, by the copy machine—especially the hallway—that’s our version of the water cooler.”

Much of the collaborative talk centered on what to tweak with lessons or how to get students to achieve at a higher level. One teacher explained, “I think there is constant reflection in this building.” Another teacher added, “We have good reflection, and I think we are always reflecting on what we need to do and where we want to head.”

This collaboration and reflection made it easier to “face the brutal facts” when School B did not make AYP in 2005 as determined by the federal No Child Left Behind legislation.

Besides changing the framework of literacy, School B teachers used reflection to adjust instruction. A first grade teacher explained, “We are more aware of what we are doing, and we just keep refining what we do and make it better.”

Reflection using data was a change from past practices. Another added, “After we didn’t make AYP six years ago, we really began to look at scores and discuss how we can change this or that to better meet needs.” Another teacher noted, “We are simply more aware of our scores, and more importantly, we are more aware of what we do to affect them.”

*Theme 3: The principal was pivotal in providing resources and support, while the assistant principal was the literacy expert who managed the literacy system.* School B teachers distinguished between the role of the principal and the role of the assistant principal. The principal was the one providing general leadership and support, while the assistant principal managed and facilitated the literacy system.

The assistant principal was the person who teachers saw as leading the literacy initiative. One teacher explained, “(Assistant Principal) knows all about literacy and shares what we need to know and what that looks like in the classroom.” The assistant principal managed resources provided by Title I, including the Title I teacher and Title I assistants. He arranged and provided professional development, and sat in on collaborative meetings. A teacher stated, “(Assistant Principal) leads us in literacy.” Another added, “(Assistant Principal) spends a lot of time and prepares so well...he gives us such good, targeted information.”

Besides being a source of information, the assistant principal was a facilitator, connecting all aspects of the early-literacy system. “(Assistant Principal) coordinates communication between all the teachers, staff, administration, and parents,” stated one general education teacher.

The principal’s role in early-literacy achievement was more general in nature. Teachers reiterated that the principal “should have a strong background and understand elementary level literacy.” In terms of specifics, the teachers acknowledged and appreciated the way the principal set the schedule to “allow us to plan together.” One teacher stated, “It would be really hard if we didn’t have that shared time.” Also, teachers gave an example of the way the principal provided resources in the form of “extra hands” where needed. “Our Tier II literacy groups were huge this year due to losing a section of the grade level, so (Principal B) started pulling resource staff from special areas in order to reduce the size of those groups.”

When describing the role of the principal in the achievement of early-literacy, the teachers stressed the importance of support, and the need for involvement if that support was to happen. One teacher stated, “The principal should stay out of their office and be in the classrooms as much as possible. Our principal is so good at that.” Another added, “Our principal knows the kids; knows them academically, what their personalities are, knows about their homes.”

In order for high early-literacy achievement to happen, School B teachers articulated that moral support was part of the principal’s role. One veteran teacher remarked, “I’ve been around a long time, but my goodness education is under the gun. The principal’s role might be to keep us from running! Right now is not easy.” Another teacher stated, “The principal can support us if he knows where we come from and the challenges we have.” A resource teacher added to that comment by saying, “Our principal works really hard at that. We are fortunate.”

**School C description.** School C, located in rural Indiana, served 304 students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade. Forty-one percent of the students received free or reduced lunch, and 2% of the students were minority. The school was housed in a recently remodeled one-story brick building, with primary grades and the Reading Resource room clustered in one section of the building. The school's motto, "Reaching for the Stars" was prominently displayed in the main foyer, in the office, and throughout the building. Evidence of a focus on literacy included student work covering much of the available wall space in all primary hallways. The school was recognized by the Indiana Department of Education as an Indiana 4-Star School last year. In 2005, School C did not make AYP due to language arts scores in special education.

School C was a Targeted-Assisted Title I school. There were no instructional assistants for the primary grades. Extra resource staff for the primary grades included a Reading Team, comprised of a Reading Coach funded by Title I, as well as two instructional assistants. The principal was the only administrator in the building.

Table 5 represents reading achievement data for each of the tested grade levels on the Indiana state test, as well as a summary of the demographics of the school.



Table 5

*School C Characteristics*

Factor	Summary % Passing
2010 ELA ISTEP Grade 3	94%
2010 ELA ISTEP Grade 4	94%
2010 ELA ISTEP Grade 5	89%
Percent growth	44%
Number of students	304
Grade configuration	PK-5
Percent poverty	41%
Percent minority	2%
Locale	Rural
Recognition	Indiana 4-Star School
Current NCLB Status	Met AYP

**School C analysis of themes: Principal interview.** Principal C had been at School C for six years. His background was the related arts, and his administrative experience has only been in School C. Our interview lasted one hour, 10 minutes. The following themes emerged from the interview:

- Theme 1: High early-literacy achievement occurred here by raising expectations both of what students could achieve and how the staff operated as a team;

- Theme 2: In order to achieve high early-literacy, the principal established a structural framework of tiered instruction with a focus on integrating data, goal-setting, and progress monitoring;
- Theme 3: In order to achieve high early-literacy, the principal established a system of collaboration, with a resident expert at the helm of facilitating and managing the literacy system.

*Theme 1: High early-literacy achievement occurred here by raising expectations both of what students could achieve and how the staff operated as a team.* When asked to describe how early-literacy happens at this school, the principal of School C first pointed out that this level of achievement had been a change for stakeholders. He called what happened over the past six years in his school a “definite change process” that began the minute he was hired. He relayed it as an expectation first and foremost of his “duty” to the students and staff. When describing that, he said, “to be honest there were some things that I was just told by my superintendent, ‘these things are unacceptable, and that’s why I’m bringing you in to lead this.’”

Principal C elaborated on this expectation of his role as principal. At first, “that came with a bit of pressure for me from the superintendent. It was pressure I put on myself, because I knew that’s why he hired me.”

The expectation from the district level included more than increasing student achievement. The superintendent said to Principal C, “I want you to be collaborative, model collaboration, and expect it from your staff.” With those charges, Principal C said he began to work on increasing expectations for student achievement, and increasing the expectation of working together to eliminate the atmosphere of isolation.

To begin to break the cycle of “low expectations,” Principal C asked a lot of questions. The most frequent question he asked was “Why would we not want our kids to have the absolute best education they could possibly have?” He said, “When I first came in, I used the word “complacent” a lot. I don’t think we were giving our kids the best. Actually it was just low expectations. We were OK with a low pass rate.” He used questioning techniques to develop awareness about those low expectations with teachers. He persisted and was relentless in his questioning of practice. He relayed,

A lot of our change came about because of my asking, asking, asking. There was a mindset change among this staff. They thought we’re good, it’s definitely a comfortable place to bring our kids, but I would question then is it great? Is this the absolute best that we can offer these kids? Because if it’s not, what’s the point?

Keeping the expectation front and center and challenging them to improve was key, according to Principal C. He said, “I simply kept saying here is the goal, and here’s where we’re going. Setting that expectation of excellence, and yes it was definitely clear. Raising that expectation level was key.” He did not see challenging them as a negative thing, but rather something the teachers were hungry for. “I don’t think the teachers felt challenged. Before, teachers just kept doing what they did, and they were never challenged to go above that.”

Another technique that helped with acknowledging the prevalent low expectations happened at his first staff meeting. He called it the first “call to change by confronting the brutal facts. He described it like this:

One of my very first staff meetings was one of the most powerful. I didn’t get the impression in my first weeks that there was ownership...that these were everybody’s kids. That was last year’s grade. These are my current kids. So I tried something that I

heard about from another principal...see, we share, too! I made a power point with pictures of all the kids who did not pass ISTEP. It put a face with every single score. He didn't make it. She didn't make it. It was huge. There was a big list of kids, because we had several who didn't pass. When we sat there—there was no music, no sound—and watched the faces scroll by...that was powerful. There were teachers who said they never realized just how many kids we were talking about. When they saw that...what was happening...and that we were allowing that to happen...that was a big step toward awareness.

Using the premise that most teachers want to do well, Principal C used the analogy of equating low expectations to hurting kids. “We were doing a book study with the book *Failure is Not An Option* as administrators,” he said, “and I used it as my mantra that first year. If there's a kid who leaves here who didn't make it and we didn't give our absolute best, then we have let him down.”

The superintendent modeled a combination of high expectations, with redirection and support when needed. Principal C used that same combination with his staff,

Why I was hired and the job I had to do was clear. But because the superintendent took a mentor position, I was never afraid. The expectation and goal was clear to me, and he was there to support me to get it done.

He went on to describe this support as vital. He described the superintendent's attitude as,

There's where we want to be. Go there. I will help you. Tell me what you need.” If I was off task, then I got re-directed. It was “Hey that might not be the best direction,” or “When I was in your shoes I had to deal with that, too, and this seemed to work.”

Definitely lots of encouragement.

Principal C did not hesitate to use the same techniques with his staff. He “challenged, steered in the right direction, and offered support.” He also was not worried about the staff “liking him.” He was clear and upfront about mediocrity, relaying “Here’s the line in the sand. If you feel like you’ve left something out there, you’re going to get called on it and I hope you call me out on it, too.”

The superintendent’s dual charge of increasing expectations of student achievement and staff collaboration were integrated into daily practice, and one seemed to flow into the other. According to Principal C, “I told my teachers to just do what’s great. If you do what’s great, more people will do what’s great.” He reiterated that this is exactly what began to happen, and credits “working together as a team” with one of the reasons for their success. He went on to say,

So literally, without trying to sound cheesy or corny, now we really do have a learning community because everyone’s expectation is high, the focus is on the kids, and whatever we can do together to get those kids where they need to be.

Principal C provided an example of the current team effort as he described a current team process after the mid-year reading benchmark assessment. If a student doesn’t make benchmark he receives a second tier of instruction. If that student was already receiving a second tier of intervention instruction, “then we *as a team* would discuss this student with our Reading Coach and a team of teachers. Right now we’ve got at least five different people in this meeting who are trying to figure out solutions for him.”

The team effort did not start smoothly. The administrators in the district didn’t always model team effort consistently, so they made it a goal to do more teaming themselves. Principal C explained, “The administrators in the district felt like we should model that behavior for our

teachers. We shared. And then I moved those conversations and the modeling of those conversations to my office on grade level meeting days.” He questioned,

How are we making things happen for kids? These things aren’t confidential—what’s working and what’s not; questioning what’s happening and getting them to ask questions of themselves. Modeling those conversations and affirming that it IS ok to talk about teaching and learning was a big step.

Principal C knew the road would be “rocky” since the teachers were used to working alone. He said,

It was easy for me as the new person to come in and say, “Hey...this is the bar. I need you to be with me. We are a team.” There was some complaining at first, to be sure. I just kept reiterating here’s where we’re going, and I need you to get on the bus with me!” It really didn’t take much convincing. They wanted to do well.

The principal mentioned that team meetings no longer look like team meetings of six years ago. Today’s meetings rely a lot on data shares, but in the beginning,

it wasn’t so much data as it was collegial conversations. Data was embedded for sure, because you had to know where your kids were in relation to the goal. But it wasn’t so much looking at numbers every time, but it was more “What are you teaching this week, and how are you teaching it?”

Another example of how changing the expectation for a team effort impacted early literacy in School C is the Reading Team. The Reading Team is headed by a Reading Coach who is “responsible for an umbrella of people to make sure teachers and students have the literacy tools they need.” The key contact is the student’s homeroom teacher. Instead of trying to figure things out alone, a teacher might say, “I could really use this...and they go to the

Reading Team for help. This kiddo needs this, and this is what we're seeing. Principal C reiterated, "Now we figure out together what we need."

An area of action that stemmed from raising the expectations of what was required of staff members involved teachers leaving School C. He described, "In six years I've had seven teachers leave. Every year I've had at least one that I've had to counsel about improvement issues." His actions usually started with "This needs to be addressed...this is a problem. Here's the plan and here's what I'm asking you to do." He said the response of teacher many times was "I can't do that," or "this is not what I think," or "I have a different style of teaching." He said some teachers would argue. "Some would say, 'you shouldn't be in my room all the time,' or 'that's not how I teach,' or 'I can't be all about standards,' or 'I can't be all about the test.'"

Implementing improvement plans was a consequence of increased expectations for Principal C. "That's always the driving force for the improvement plan process. It's not about getting you off the bus, it's about literally what it says, helping you improve to meet our expectations." Being honest in those expectations was also a key point for Principal C. "If you don't improve, then let's all be real about this and say you're not in the right spot. I would want somebody to do that for me," he stated.

Raising those expectations for teachers and counseling them was not viewed as a negative thing. Principal C relayed this story about one staff member to illustrate that point:

I had one teacher—it was actually very shocking—who was very open about me being the first one to talk with him about improving. I didn't have him on a formal improvement plan, but he was one who I definitely spent a lot of time with, and encouraged, and tried to steer in the right direction. It kind of surprised me at the end of the year when he said "You know this just isn't the right spot for me, and I see that, and I

really do appreciate that.” He said it really was not what he wanted to do, and it was not where his heart was, and probably that’s why it had been so hard for him. I knew that must have been very hard for him to say to me. But it was enlightening. You know, we all have our callings, and if it’s not there it just isn’t there.

*Theme 2: In order to achieve high early-literacy, the principal established a structural framework of tiered instruction with a focus on integrating data, goal-setting, and progress monitoring.* Principal C described one key element of success in early-literacy as implanting a tiered model of reading instruction, with “a core reading block of 90 minutes every day,” and “targeting an extra 30 minutes of literacy on top of core instruction every day for every student as a staple.” He added, “It was a big transition period—setting up this system, but now it really clicks.”

The ability to set up a system of tiered instruction required vision and the ability to prioritize. As Principal C put it, “Setting out those big priorities of what makes a difference in beginning reading is so important. Having the vision to see the big picture.” He saw that as a vital role of the principal for a high level of early-literacy achievement,

Setting the framework of here’s what is important; setting up the framework for success.

The teachers are the ones who will put it all together and make it happen, but the framework and the plan has to be there and that is my job.

An important part of this early-literacy framework is setting specific literacy goals, and using data to quantify those goals. Principal C views that as key in his job as the instructional leader. “Making sure we set literacy goals is a big part of my role. I continually monitor our progress toward our goals by asking questions. How did we do? How will we get there?”

Principal C described how goals and data are intertwined when he stated,



Our teachers, our paraprofessionals, me as the building leader, our Reading Coach—we all use data. *Everybody's* looking at that information, because we have a goal. We've set out that this is where these kids need to be based on where they started...so where are they headed? How will we get them there?

Principal C stated,

Data is key as far as what our teachers use and do. Everybody uses it daily. We have data sheets that we use to track progress three times a year. Also, all the kids are ranked with a needs index based on three pieces of data. That procedure helps us identify who needs what.

The two “driving forces” in this literacy framework, according to Principal C, are “Where are the kids in relation to their goal, and how do we get them there?”

This focus on data was another area of big change for School C from six years prior.

According to Principal C,

Data was just something that happened to us. Scores just happened, it wasn't due to anything that I as the teacher did. There wasn't that sense of determination; it was more like, “Well, I hope they do well.” And those facts were evident. We were right at the state average on passing ISTEP and we clearly needed to go somewhere.

Data was vital in another part of this system. Besides setting up a framework of core reading plus an extra 30 minutes of a second tier of individualized instruction, another role was the identification of reading power standards. As Principal C explained the power standards' importance, he said,

It very much affects our literacy instruction. The teachers decide targeted skills that they want to work on based on each grade level's need. So initially we identified power

reading indicators. The teachers teach mini-lessons all week, and then post-test at the end of the week. Kids that don't achieve 80% mastery or better are then put into a remediation group. This is different from the Tier II instruction that I referenced earlier. This is dedicated time to ensure that the key literacy skills needed at each grade are mastered.

Data was used to drive instruction. With the power reading indicators, the goal, Principal C explained,

was literally that 100% of the kids will master these standards before they leave the grade. That's the target for the staff. So the teachers would track—these five kids went out for the power standard because they weren't at 80%. Where were they at the end? And now my plan is, if they are still not there, now what? So that's the question that we continually ask—now what?

The principal stated the teachers weren't "overwhelmed" by that question. Rather, "The power reading indicators played a big part in easing their minds. It was, OK, that's the goal. I can chew on that. I don't have to hit everything, but I know if they get those they will be okay."

Data was also used to frame goals. Both staff and students used data when they articulated their goals. This focus on goals and data began with the teacher. Principal C reiterated that in School C,

The teachers are the ones who work the magic with the kids. They know them, they know where they are, and they know where they need to be. So they embed that every day with "Here's where we're going." And it should be that way.

Another example of teachers using data in the classroom was in kindergarten. Principal C explained, “Kindergarten teachers use binders to track data on every kid every month. Again, here is the goal, and here’s how we’re going to get there.”

In School C, students set individual goals. Principal C observed, “They know their target scores. Teachers sit down with them through conferences and the kids say “My STAR score was this last time, and I’d like to beat that this time. Here’s my DIBELS goal...” Kids absolutely know that.” He provided another example of students knowing their goals,

If I go in the classroom or on the bus with a kid and ask “How many words a minute did you read?” they know exactly how they did. Many times they come to the office to share good news, and they are so excited about their goals. They are definitely excited when they hit them. That certainly makes a difference.

Another large piece of setting up a framework for high early-literacy achievement was building a system for monitoring the goals. Progress toward benchmark goals was monitored at scheduled intervals, as students falling below a goal are monitored more frequently than those at the goal are. For example, teachers in School C use DIBELS as a formative assessment for early reading skills. It was used to monitor student progress toward goals at specified time intervals. Teacher’s reaction was favorable because, as Principal C put it,

It was what they were hungry for...monitoring with specifics. It allowed them to really target the area of weakness. Rather than just look at an overall standardized test score, we were able to really dig in and see “Is it fluency? Is it phonics? Are they missing letter naming? What is it about this kid that’s telling us where they are struggling in learning to read?” To me that was the biggest piece.

Monitoring of progress did not end at the end of the school year, but continued for each student into the next school year. When teachers in kindergarten noticed that students in the beginning of first grade had fallen from where they were at the end of the kindergarten year, they began to use the data to look for explanations. They observed that most students who were just at the reading benchmark goal score at the end of the year came back significantly below in the fall. Principal C explained how they “set their goal for 30 to 40 points above the aimline, and now the teachers are disappointed if the kids aren’t well above the end of the year benchmark, not just that they made it.” He likened it to “The Music Man and the think method. If you think it, you’ll do it. We say, if you set a goal and monitor it, you will do it. They did it!”

Likewise, Principal C gave an example of when progress monitoring wasn’t completed as outlined in the framework, so results were not as favorable. He explained,

When people are involved in the monitoring, progress happens. For example, we used a benchmark assessment called TRC, which is like a running record, but it was done in the reading room only. The classroom teachers were not involved. When the teachers have their hands on it, when the teachers know where their kids are, then they are the ones who make a driving effort. They’re the ones who are with them every single day.

*Theme 3: In order to achieve high early-literacy, the principal established a system of collaboration, with a resident expert at the helm of facilitating and managing the literacy system.* “Collaboration,” explained Principal C, “has taken a long time to happen. It was not something that was easy for everyone to wrap their brain around.” His role was to go about supporting collaborative efforts, and he knew it would make a difference in the teachers’ practices. First expectations of achievement and collaboration had to be articulated and modeled; next, a framework of instruction was put in place; and lastly the teachers needed to

have a system of organized sharing in order to help each other be better. The principal said that once change started, he sensed the teachers thinking,

These folks are doing really good things, but I never talk to them. Those kids—not mine—are doing really well and I really don’t know why. Teachers didn’t know what to do with these thoughts. And so I observed and discovered through conversations with them that teachers weren’t talking much about their craft to one another. There just wasn’t a lot of that going on; there wasn’t a lot of collegial sharing. There wasn’t a lot of sharing about data. They needed an organized way to be able to say, “I don’t know how to do that.” Or, “How did your students do so well on that? I want to do what YOU are doing. It seems to be working!

Offering professional development in a structured manner, centered around sharing and collegial practices, gave the teachers an avenue to learn from each other. In talking about the change, Principal C said, “When they saw other people stand up and share; when others took interest in talking about things that were working and talking about things like “I have this kid with this need, and need some advice.” That definitely helped.” He lamented their lack of exposure to this approach,

Never being offered quality professional development about collaboration was a huge change for this building six years ago. It’s invigorating when I think back on it. People started to enjoy coming to work, because they felt like what they were doing was making a difference, and they had a common goal. It was I’m going to make a difference for this kid, and everyone will help me do it.

The structured professional development to model collaboration was embedded in many ways, and the principal started slowly. Principal C used grade level meetings and staff meetings

at first, and then added voluntary after school meetings to promote sharing of best literacy practices. He said,

That first year, that was the whole conversation of our meetings. Knowing that they were going to be safe in sharing, trying, and discussing those things, and they were going to be okay if they made a mistake. We are going to try something and have the courage to be risk-takers. I'm okay to try something. I'm okay to open my door and share. I'm okay to talk about what's happening during instruction.

Trust began to emerge. Principal C did not mention that the teachers trusted him. He did state, "they trust each other." He went on, "I mean, I was the new guy. Nobody knows the new guy, so you don't really know where to tread." He prefers to think of himself as a "teacher of teachers; a facilitator of the sharing of best practices." He referenced saying to a teacher once "This is incredible and it's happening two doors down from you, not ten miles away in another school." His role was to facilitate that sharing.

To facilitate sharing, the principal saw his role as setting the framework. He did that by establishing meeting times once a week. He added, "If we are going to do great things for kids, then we need to be able to talk about it and carve time to do that, and so we are going to meet every week." He also established extended time if needed. He stated, "Sometimes I will hire subs to float through the grade levels in order to give the teachers an extended prep time."

Establishing a system of best practices in reading also requires a facilitator of that system. Principal C was adamant that the Reading Coach in the building filled that role. He commented, "The Reading Coach is so vital. I view the Reading Coach as a reading administrator; a literacy teacher-leader." Describing her role further, he went on,

I want him to be able to identify student data, and share how to look at that student data with everybody that he works with; from the para-professionals to the teachers to the entire K-2 team, as well as parents. So together, we look at all of that information and put together a plan for teachers, interventions for students. We talk about what's available, what resources are there; what's happening in classrooms. The Reading Coach sits in on team meetings and leads much of our literacy professional development.

Principal C described his role with the Reading Coach as laying the groundwork. He stated, "I set the "this is what the Reading Coach looks like." Here are some of the things we should be doing with that." He went on to say "If you were to look at the Principal body as the manager, and the instructional leader, and the budget person, and all the other roles, then the Reading Coach is the arm of that position in literacy."

The Reading Coach's role is to support the teachers. Principal C reiterated, He's the one they should go to and feel comfortable with; he can hook them up with any resource they might need—leveled books, how to teach vocabulary, or why is my student not growing in this area. That role is absolutely vital. It is a big job. He stated that he could not "imagine how a school could possibly achieve early literacy without that person in place." So strongly did he feel about her role of support for the teachers, that he said, "I just told my Superintendent a couple of weeks ago that I would throw myself in front of a truck before I saw that position go away."

**School C analysis of themes: Focus group interview.** The teachers' focus group included nine staff members. Participants included one Title I teacher and general education teachers from kindergarten, grade 1, and grade 2. Years of experience of the interviewees ranged

from 4 to 30 years. The interview lasted 42 minutes. The following themes emerged from the interview:

- Theme 1: High early-literacy achievement began with implementation of a tiered literacy system;
- Theme 2: Collaboration was vital to high achievement in early-literacy;
- Theme 3: The principal set the framework for the literacy system and was responsible for supporting the teachers in implementation, while the Reading Coach was the literacy expert who managed the literacy system.

*Theme 1: High early literacy achievement began with implementation of a tiered literacy system.* The teachers of school C described the tiered model of reading instruction that they used. The students had an uninterrupted 90-minute block of literacy in core reading instruction, and then all students received a second tier of support in the form of an extra 30 minutes of daily instruction. Students were assessed three times a year with formative and summative benchmark assessments, and the data from these assessments was used to provide support in the second tier. Students who fell below the goal set for each benchmark were monitored for progress toward the benchmark goals every two weeks.

Describing the importance of uninterrupted 90-minute reading block in the literacy system, a second grade teacher stated,

One thing that is a big factor for us is that we take the 90-minute reading block very seriously. This is one time of the day when there are no interruptions and we can count on things going fluidly.

Another teacher added, “This sacred time is just part of the culture here. It’s embedded...we don’t even think of it anymore.”



The Tier II time for an extra dose of reading instruction at the student's level was also noted as playing an integral role in early-literacy achievement. A first grade teacher explained,

That second tier allows us to meet the needs of ALL the kids, not just those who struggle. We are able to really extend and push those top kids during this time while kids who are struggling might need extra time and intensity with basic skills.

Goal setting was an important piece of the system, and teachers discussed how this was integral for them and for the students. One teacher said, "The students all have goals. They know what their mid-year and end-of-year goals are, and they are conscious of where they are in relation to achieving those goals." Another added, "They want to see the progress monitoring every two weeks. They always ask to see the graph. We just finished a benchmark, and they are already asking when the next one is."

Data was vital to the literacy system as a way to check progress toward goals and to drive the teachers' instruction. "We looked at benchmark scores to find weak areas, and used that and other data we collect to find out where our gaps were. Then we teach, assess, re-teach if necessary," one teacher explained. Another added, "I see our teachers really hone in on those kids that you see as falling down based on the literacy assessments we use. What are we going to do to make sure this child understands?"

A first grade teacher summarized how the literacy system was of paramount importance at School C. He offered, "Providing tiers of instruction--a second tier of instruction in addition to the 90-minute block of core reading and a third tier if needed—are positive contributions that have led to our kids' academic success."

*Theme 2: A resident literacy expert who managed the literacy system was vital to early-literacy achievement.* When discussing early-literacy achievement, the role of the Reading

Coach was repeatedly mentioned as someone “we couldn’t do without.” Another added that if that position were to go away, it would be “devastating for our kids.” One teacher noted, “I would rather see a beginning teacher take a classroom and move an experienced classroom teacher to the Reading Coach role. That would be preferable to putting someone without experience in that role.” The teachers described the many roles of this position and articulated why that role was vital.

A strong foundation in early-literacy was mentioned as a basic requirement of the Reading Coach position. When describing the role, one teacher stated, “Knowledge about reading is a must, and experience in primary-level reading assessments and techniques in reading interventions are required as well.”

Facilitating and coordinating teachers’ effort was another role of the coach. “The Reading Coach facilitates our whole reading program, and how those second tier groups work for each teacher,” said one teacher. Another added, “He keeps everyone on the same page and touches base with all the primary teachers daily.” A second grade teacher said, “The coach oversees the literacy assistants and just keeps everything going.”

Making sense of the data and using it to target instruction were also roles of the coach. The Reading Coach “reviews the progress monitoring” and “makes recommendations for groups.” One teacher noted, “The person in the Reading Coach position needs to be someone who is interested in and understands data.” He went on to say, “But they also need to understand that the data is attached to a real person. This is not just a number, but a little person.”

*Theme 3: The principal set the framework for the literacy system and was responsible for supporting the teachers in implementation.* The teachers in School C perceived the principal as the person who set up and monitored the early-literacy framework. A kindergarten teacher

stated, “Our principal has been key in saying here is the framework and checking to make sure we are following the framework.” Another added, “He is in the classrooms daily, and we have grade level meetings weekly where we share data and figure out next steps.”

One way the principal set the framework was by making the master schedule to accommodate the tiers of instruction. A first grade teacher explained,

We are always making sure we are plugging in the 90 minutes of core instruction and remediation. We sit down as a team with the principal at the end of the year and talk about what our needs are and map out the schedule for the next year.

Another added, “The scheduling of Tier II time is so important. The efforts of our principal make that happen.”

Teachers mentioned that support from the principal was vital to their success. A kindergarten teacher said, “Support is the best word to use...he is someone who understands the importance of early-literacy and is willing to support it 100%.” Support also came in the form of guidance. One teacher stated, “We look to the principal for guidance on how we are going to get that third tier of instruction in, or how we can solve this problem or that one.” Another added, “Our principal is creative in his ways to help us.” A kindergarten teacher summarized, “If there is something we don’t have, he would be there to help us get whatever we need.”

**School D description.** School D, located just outside Chicago, served 538 students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade. Sixty-one percent of the students received free or reduced lunch, and 35% of the students were minority. The school was housed in an older two-story brick building, with primary grades on the first floor and intermediate grades on the second floor. The school’s goals and the corporation goals were prominently displayed inside the front door, along with current student data by grade level pertaining to achievement of the school

goals. For the purposes of this study, it was noted that one of the corporation goals included that all students entering third grade be able to read grade level material.

The school was recently recognized by the Indiana Department of Education for being a High-Achieving, High-Growth School, and the State Superintendent of Public Instruction visited in fall of 2010. This school was also recognized as achieving the highest growth scores in the county.

School D was a school-wide Title I school. There were three Title I instructional assistants for the primary grades, as well as a Reading Team comprised of a Title I teacher and four instructional assistants. There was also a DIBELS team, paid for with the Title I grant, comprised of a lead teacher and one assistant. The principal was the only administrator in the building; there was no assistant principal. School D was currently in Year 1 of Title I School Improvement due to not making AYP in math in special education. Table 6 presents the reading achievement data for the Indiana state test and a summary of the school demographics.

Table 6

*School D Characteristics*

Factor	Summary % Passing
2010 ELA ISTEP Grade 3	94%
2010 ELA ISTEP Grade 4	93%
2010 ELA ISTEP Grade 5	80%
Percent growth	61%
Number of students	538
Grade configuration	K-5
Percent poverty	61%
Percent minority	35%
Locale	Metropolitan
Recognition	High Achieving, High Growth Indiana School
Current NCLB Status	School improvement Year 1

**School D analysis of themes: Principal interview.** Principal D has been at School D for 11 years. His background was special education, and his administrative experience has only been in School D. Our interview lasted one hour, 23 minutes. Themes that emerged from the interview included:

- Theme 1: High early-literacy achievement began with high expectations and over-arching goals for students and staff;
- Theme 2: In order to achieve high early-literacy, the principal established a structural framework of tiered instruction with a focus on reflection of practice and progress monitoring;

- Theme 3: The principal was responsible for modeling and fostering a climate of trust, respect and collaboration in order to attain high early-literacy in a high poverty school;
- Theme 4: In order for a high-poverty school to achieve high early-literacy, the principal set up a system of distributed leadership and shared excellence. This system cultivated teacher leaders, including a resident literacy expert at the helm of facilitating and managing the literacy system.

*Theme 1: High early-literacy achievement began with high expectations and over-arching goals for students and staff.* When asked to describe how early literacy happens in this school, the principal of School D did not hesitate to state,

Let me start with the one thing that our district did when we got a new superintendent.

We came up with core values and a mission statement, and district-wide goals K through 12. One of those goals was that all children will be grade level proficient in reading by the end of second grade. So with that understanding, there have been things that have been put in place.

He was able to clearly articulate when a change began for his school, and it began with a new superintendent's focus on reading.

He further stated, "You have a vision in your head of where you want to be, and where you are now" and then described that the road to get to that place is "paved with high expectations." The high expectation for that goal was clearly embedded in daily practice and the perception that the programs did not make the achievement of these goals possible. He stated that the "things that were put in place" included "the Baldrich model, DIBELS, and the 8-step process" but the "true power of our achievement came from those high expectations of both students and staff." He went on to say,

I'm a firm believer that the earlier we catch kids and intervene, the better off they're going to be. Our poverty rate is 61%, we're transient...kids move in and out and back all the time. I'm a firm believer in 'There are no excuses.'

The principal described this philosophy of high expectations in the context of his own upbringing in poverty. He stated,

I don't care what kind of home they come from. I don't care if they come from poverty...I came from poverty. It didn't impact the expectation in my house. Our expectations are not going to be any less because of their house. So, whether they are in special education or they're poor; regardless of the circumstances, we expect all kids to achieve.

The principal's high expectations were not just for the students. He expected the teachers to be exemplary, and modeled that quality for himself. "My staff knows that I will not ask them to do anything that I would not be willing to do myself. They know that I am a hard worker." Some of the expectations he had for himself included participating in professional development, knowing the students and families on a personal level, and setting the system of high academic achievement by allowing time for collaboration. He said, "I think I'm effective because this staff expects and deserves that."

He elaborated on the expectation that a team effort is required in order to achieve a high level of literacy. The principal stated,

This is my 11th year as principal so these are just unspoken expectations now. These are all our kids. This is not just a second grade, or kindergarten, or first grade problem and the rest of us don't have to worry about it. These are *our* kids. This is everybody, including me, pulling together.

It was his philosophy that this expectation of one's self and team was also applicable to expectations for colleagues. When there is a culture of high expectations throughout the building, there is peer pressure to be "the best you can be." The principal described this when saying of his staff,

The staff members are such high achievers. If there is someone who is not pulling their weight on staff, the staff will either mold that behavior, or you've got to go. They are the nicest people you would ever want to meet, but they are hard, hard working and they have no tolerance for lazy. They know I have no tolerance for lazy. If you don't understand something, tell me and I'll help you. But lazy? I'm sorry. If you hurt kids, you've got to go.

Hurting kids included not giving them the opportunity to be successful by expecting too little of them.

This high expectation of staff for each other permeated School D. The principal described a teacher who transferred from another building in the corporation to School D. Upon arriving, the teacher let everyone know that he was aware of the reputation of the school. He told the staff, "The reputation of this school is so good; I know I will have to raise the level of my game." Principal D said it didn't take long for him or the staff to figure out that the teacher was "all talk." The staff complained that he did lots of cut and paste art projects, and that "the kids weren't achieving in the area of literacy." At the end of the year, "he quit. Said he wasn't coming back. He felt the pressure that these people are on top of everything. If you're weak, you are not going to hide here, because the caliber of teaching is like a dream team."

*Theme 2: In order to achieve high early-literacy, the principal established a structural framework of tiered instruction with a focus on reflection of practice and progress monitoring.*



In order for early literacy to take place, the principal of School D believed that his role is that of an architect; he sets the framework and the teachers, through tiered instruction, reflection, and progress monitoring achieve great things. The first step in building the framework is to “identify power indicators” and “align the curriculum” to those indicators. The next step is to have certain key literacy components in place. There must be “a core reading program” along with mechanisms to assess progress toward goals.

The principal described the power indicators as “Those indicators we think the kids absolutely have to have to mastery by the time they leave the grade level. We consider mastery to be 80%.” He did not see his role as dictating what these literacy indicators and assessments should be, but rather carving out the time for the teachers to figure that out for themselves. When asked who created the assessments, he answered,

The entire grade level. First grade created the first grade assessments, second grade created second grade, and so on. They are constantly modifying them, and they have just become so proficient at this that they can look at an assessment now and say ‘You know this really doesn’t measure what it needs to measure,’ and so we create a new one. We tend to use our own things.

He saw his role as carving out the time for teachers to do this important work. “Each school in the district is given the charge of creating indicator assessments to measure how the student is performing” in addition to using DIBELS to monitor progress toward early reading foundation skills. He said,

I put out a schedule, and I ask the teachers, what times do you need to target what we know is our biggest area of need based on our data? The teachers tell me what times they need, and I make it happen.

His role is also to ensure that there is an uninterrupted block of time for core literacy instruction. He was very adamant that the literacy time “is sacred.” When I asked who deemed it sacred, he answered,

The teachers and myself. There are NO interruptions. I have been in a building where there are constant interruptions. I make sure there are no interruptions. Unless there is something so critical that the teacher needs to be interrupted, it is NOT done. I am very protective of their time.

The principal, in collaboration with the classroom teacher, also scheduled a second tier of instruction or remediation during the day that effectively utilized all the support staff. “The teachers know assistants follow kids during this time. They are not going to be in a classroom during art instruction grading papers when they could be helping in a classroom.” This time is considered above and beyond the core reading instruction and does not replace the core, but is in addition to it. He explained,

I don’t want it to happen during core instruction because they will get further behind. So if they need remediation services they will get it from their teacher, they’ll get it from Title I, they will get it from the remediation specialist, they’ll get it with the DIBELS assistants, we provide resources beyond resources.

At School D, the important thing was that this remediation time happened daily, and that it happened in an intentional and planned way. Principal D described it like this:

If they don’t achieve mastery, they immediately go into a remediation group at the intervention Tier II time. So for example, a student doesn’t get it, and there are three students in that group who didn’t get it at 80%, those kids are then pulled and either

worked with a teacher or assistant. The rest of the class is broken out into groups doing other extension or enrichment activities during that time.

Scheduling is crucial for this second tier to happen, and the principal saw his role as pivotal in that regard. He said,

I try to take as much extraneous stuff off their plate as I can. I won't just put out a blank schedule and say 'figure it out.' You tell me what you need, and I'll coordinate the efforts. I don't want them to be bothered with that stuff.

Once the principal set the framework, this time for remediation is embedded and routine in School D. According to the principal, "Remediation is an expectation throughout the school year, throughout the day, it is not an event; it is ongoing."

Reflecting on practice is essential to high early-literacy achievement in a high needs population, both for the principal and the teacher. When discussing this reflection as one of the most important aspects of both his and the teacher's role, the principal said,

A good teacher is reflective. A kid doesn't get it, and the teacher will say 'Oh my gosh, I have to go back here, and here.' That's what a good principal does, too. You have to have that vision, and if something isn't clicking, the principal is able to see--I have to plug this hole, fix this, change that, and I've got to look at what I'm going to do differently.

That reflection is assisted and modeled by systematically monitoring progress toward goals. In School D, the progress toward reading goals is continuous and visual for teachers and students. Students, beginning in kindergarten, have a folder that they use to track attainment of weekly reading goals. Teachers also participated in this visual reflection by reviewing their attainment of school-level goals with the principal. He explained,

We monitor everything. Nothing is left to chance. So for example, we have another monitoring window that opens on January 26. The teachers submit results to me at all grade levels; they submit their percentage and then we get a grade level average. I don't know if you noticed when you came in, but you will see all of our data displayed.

This progress monitoring assisted in the reflection process, and helped the principal foster professional growth. The principal cited an example of a teacher who had a low progress monitoring score in reading comprehension:

I've had this happen before, too, let's say second grade had three of the teachers with scores in the 80s and one with a score in the 40s. I would have a conversation with this teacher and say 'Ok, your score was really low in comprehension...how can I help you, what do you need? I would bring in a teacher whose score was high and we would talk together. I also have teachers observe one another.

Besides modeling and fostering this reflective thinking, Principal D hired reflective people to increase the needy students' achievement levels in School D. When hiring new staff members, he sought people with a heart for making a difference and reflective personality traits. He said,

It's not just a matter of wanting to make a difference, it's a matter of wanting to constantly improve. How can I tweak this? It is not a concerted 'I'm going to make big changes because they're necessary.' It's more 'You know this didn't work last time, so I'm just going to tweak it a little bit here.' It's subconscious and is a way of thinking.

Principal D used a "committee comprised of the grade level team that the person we're hiring will be working with" and said they looked more for reflective thinking than a skill set. He explained,

I wouldn't expect a first year teacher to have all the classroom management tools she needs. I can teach someone things, their colleagues can teach them things, but I can't teach reflection and I won't teach nice. If you don't reflect on what you do or like kids, you're not working here.

*Theme 3: The principal was responsible for modeling and fostering a climate of trust, respect and collaboration in order to attain high early-literacy in a high-poverty school.*

Principal D shared his philosophy that needy students will not achieve in an atmosphere of distrust, and teachers will not be able to do the hard work required of them without an atmosphere of trust and respect. He stated,

My philosophy is this—I trust you to do the job. *I know* you will do the job. The excellence of this staff and the caliber of this staff is apparent. So I trust them to do the job, and I trust them to let me know what they need, and if they are not getting something they need. And they will tell me!

This spirit of mutual respect and trust was also reflected in a statement that the principal made when discussing specific reading programs. “We haven’t talked about programs because it’s all about the people. Who is making that curriculum accessible to the kids? It is not a program that is going to make these kids perform or achieve.”

Because the level of trust is high, staff members don’t feel threatened by monitoring practices, nor do they hesitate to speak up if there is a problem. Principal D shared,

If something is intrusive in their day, they will come in, they’ll say this has become a problem, we work through it, and it’s done. But I trust them to do the job. I check and monitor progress *all the time*, so I don’t need to threaten, I don’t need to have my hand on doing their job.”

That trust was also exemplified by Principal D when he volunteered, “I don’t ever have to worry that they’re not going to do what they say they’re going to do, like on a planning day.” He went on to show me the first grade literacy remediation plan that came from their last collaboration meeting. “I know they don’t goof off, because this is the kind of stuff they create.”

Another example of the kind of trust that Principal D and his teachers had for each other was transparency with data, even when results were less than stellar. Principal D presented a graph that showed kindergarten benchmark scores from the fall benchmark. One of the classroom’s average benchmark score was 45%, while the rest of the classroom scores were in the 80% range. Principal D stated,

Now that indicates a relationship built on trust. They know I am true to my word. When we look at these percentages, it is not meant to be hung over their head or for me to catch you doing something wrong. It is meant to find what is working, where do we need additional support, and for me as an administrator it indicates what kind of supports do I need to put in place for this team to help raise these scores. So if you are dishonest, that doesn’t help our kids. That took being true to my word, not just saying it, before they were able to come to “OK he really means what he says.” If I put a 45% down, I’m not in trouble.

This spirit of trust and respect made collaboration easy to achieve. The principal related many examples of collaboration at School D. He said, “I love our staff meetings. That’s a time for people to share their ideas. When we first started that—boy that was stressful.” He said that at first staff members were “hesitant to share” because they didn’t want to be “perceived as a know-it-all or a brown-noser.” He went on to state that now the expectation is “*you share.*”

Another example of collaboration was when there was any transition in programming. The principal stated, “Whenever we have a transition in programming that is new to the staff, we spend the first few staff meetings sharing teacher created materials or something that their colleagues saw that worked.”

Principal D fostered collaboration by modeling and also by being aware of the teachers’ individual comfort level. He relayed,

If somebody isn’t comfortable standing in front of a group but they have a great idea, I’ll put it in the daily notes, and I’ll say look at this great idea that so and so shared. Or I’ll email it. I always ask the teachers—gosh this is a great idea, do you mind if I share? Because he was out in the classrooms frequently, it was not hard to “catch people being good.” He rewarded collaboration by affirming and rewarding great ideas that came from collaborative efforts. “My teachers *like* to share, and they’re honored and flattered that someone would recognize that they’ve created something really awesome.”

Instead of a *mandate* of collaboration, Principal D systematically set up opportunities, modeled the expectation, provided support, and rewarded positive outcomes. For example, Principal D described his practice of asking guiding questions at each grade level meeting in regard to vertical alignment. The teachers developed a plan for a “vertical collaboration time.” Principal D explained, “Tomorrow we have a grade 1 and 2 vertical collaboration meeting. These are different than grade level meetings. Here’s a sample agenda. This happens once a semester—we don’t use subs, it’s a morning meeting from 7:50 to 8:40.” At this point, Principal A showed me an email that he sent that outlined the expectations of the meeting. He went on, “Here is our agenda. I don’t want them to come to this meeting unprepared. Notes and materials are shared. I wanted to have an initial meeting where I can guide them. The conversations were

very fluid and forthright. It became their guide as they plan. The goal then is for them to meet without me to plan.”

Reflection and trust were embedded in these vertical collaboration meetings. For example, at the initial grade 1 and 2 meeting, the staff reviewed the strengths of incoming second graders. Principal D stated that this was “very affirming” to the teachers in outlining what they did well. Then they shared weaknesses, and instead of being defensive, the staff discussed “What are things we can do differently or improve upon at the first grade level to help them be more prepared at the second grade level?” Principal D further stated, “The teachers meet to plan at each grade level, but these conversations vertically have been powerful. Grade level planning meetings that happen throughout the year go more smoothly when we begin the semester with vertical collaboration meetings.”

*Theme 4: In order for a high-poverty school to achieve high early-literacy, the principal set up a system of distributed leadership and shared excellence. This system cultivated teacher leaders, including a resident literacy expert at the helm of facilitating and managing the literacy system.* Principal D shared the hard work that his staff did every day made the difference in the early literacy achievement in his school. However, he went on to say that it must be viewed as a system, with *all* staff members knowledgeable about their craft and dedicated to literacy. One way Principal D set up this system was by cultivating teacher leaders.

There are lots and lots of teacher leaders because I’ve cultivated lots and lots of teacher leaders. I don’t want someone to rely on me for everything. I’m able to say Go see him. He knows this. Or go see him, he knows that.



Principal D is convinced the system works because it is not dependent on any one person. He elaborated, “I want as many people to have their hand on that knowledge as possible, so that if one person leaves, the whole system doesn’t fall apart.” He went on to say,

I don’t ever want any one person to be the keeper of the knowledge. Including myself. I am a firm believer that there is strength in knowledge, and there is strength in numbers. I don’t ever want to create a situation in this building where if someone leaves there is a hole.

There was one role in the building that Principal D insisted would be “a tough one to replace” and so “crucial” to making this literacy system work. The Title I resource teacher was so vital to the function of this system, that he called him the “literacy expert” that is necessary to facilitate teachers and students. He described him as the one who “handles the whole Title I program. He is well respected among his colleagues, among administrators, among teachers. I’ve had principals from other districts request that he talk to their staff about literacy initiatives.” In further describing this person so crucial to the literacy initiative at his school, Principal D relayed that “He is one of those people where you think he might actually be an angel. He has that ethereal, calming demeanor, and is incredible with language arts.”

Qualifications for this expert in literacy included not just a “vast knowledge of literacy, but a collaborative personality as well.” Descriptors that reappeared in the conversation about the literacy expert in the school were “knowledgeable” and “approachable.” Teachers needed to be able to have collegial conversations routinely with the Title I teacher, and they must trust that his guidance is based on best practice.

He described an incident that occurred in his building before he hired the current Title I teacher,

The person who was here before had a great knowledge base in literacy, but did not know how to relate to colleagues. He just had a knack of making you feel like you were a complete moron every time you talked to him. So you stopped talking to him.

Principal D observed that another important role of the principal is getting a teacher “off the bus” if they are not effective. This is essential to creating the system he described and making it work. Principal D was a firm believer that it is the principal’s responsibility to create a system dependent on distributed leadership, that the principal has to hire well, and get rid of ineffective teachers. He said when he first began his career, it seemed he always had someone in “the hot seat” and he was afraid that he “might get the reputation of a (expletive).” What he discovered, however, was that,

When I have an opening people are requesting to come here. And we have the one of the highest free and reduced lunch rates in the district. What that means is the really good teachers in other buildings who are frustrated say ‘I want to go over there.’

**School D analysis of themes: Focus group interview.** The focus group of teachers interviewed included eight staff members. Participants included one Title I teacher, one Title I DIBELS coach, and general education teachers from kindergarten and first and second grades. The interviewees’ years of experience ranged from a first year teacher to 27 years. The interview lasted one hour, 10 minutes. The following themes emerged from the interview:

- Theme 1: High early literacy achievement begins with effective teacher implementation of a literacy system based on best practices, along with high expectations of success that trusted administrators have established;
- Theme 2: Collaboration is a vital key to high achievement in early literacy;

- Theme 3: The principal is pivotal in providing support with resources, as well as acting as an instructional leader;
- Theme 4: The resident literacy expert in Title I leads the literacy initiative by managing and facilitating the literacy system in place.

*Theme 1: High early literacy achievement began with the implementation of a tiered literacy system along with high expectations of success that trusted administrators have established.* Staff members were eager to talk with me, and excited to share their success in early-literacy efforts. When asked about those efforts, one teacher described a “literacy system” that had been laid out by administrators. The system included a common core-reading program, and a series of benchmark assessments using DIBELS.

Teachers at School D trusted their principal and their district level administrators. One teacher stated,

We are charged with following the systems they deem as positive. It would be interesting to see their take on how we are implementing the systems they set forth. They set a framework and we trust them—we know that they know best practices. They are not interested in micro-managing, but truly have our kids’ best interest at heart.

This trust led to effective implementation and buy-in of School D’s literacy system. One teacher offered, “I have heard administrators from other schools say in meetings that we have certain staff members that don’t do that or won’t do that.” He added, “I can tell you that if (Principal D) says this is what’s best for children, everybody is going to do it.” Another chimed in, “I have been in a lot of schools...there is not one person on this staff that is not on board with our early literacy initiative.” One of the resource teachers added, “Everyone is on board 100%. This is what is expected, and this is what we will do.”

The teachers implemented a 90-minute block of core instruction, and then used data to monitor where each student was in relation to his goals. That progress was then shared with the student and Principal D. A kindergarten teacher offered, “The kids are accountable. They know their goals. We do monitoring each week, and we keep track in a binder. Starting in kindergarten the kids keep track of their own progress.” One teacher summarized when he said, “We use data to drive what we do, and the results are transparent.”

*Theme 2: Collaboration is a vital key to high achievement in early literacy.* Throughout the interview, teachers from School D discussed how they depend on one another for ideas and reflection. A first year teacher offered how this collaboration helped him,

[Principal D] has us meet with the grade level above us and below us. It’s a great opportunity to share what we see with the kids when we get them. This is my first year teaching, and I know they will give me honest feedback. They can tell me oh you’re kids really struggle with this or that and I will listen.

Collaboration helped the teams coordinate literacy efforts. A second grade teacher said, “We work as a team—we are in constant communication as a grade level team as well. We have planning days where we curriculum map together so we are on the same page.”

Collaboration also fostered a team spirit at School D. A second year teacher described the collaborative efforts when he said,

I notice that everyone here wants to do good for everybody. Not just for your principal and not just for you, but you want to do good for your kids. You want these kids to succeed. You want to make it easier for the next grade’s teachers. It is a team.

Another teacher emphatically stated,

We thrive on collaboration. It is how we keep going; it's how we keep improving. I would hate for that to ever end. That's how I become better as a teacher, by learning from others. We have those conversations daily; at lunch, before school, after school. It doesn't feel like we are competing against each other.

Many others chimed in with "No, not at all."

The value that these teachers placed on collaboration was evident by the passion with which they spoke. A teacher voiced a concern over what she viewed as the competitive nature of proposed education legislation in the state of Indiana. He exclaimed,

This is one thing that worries me with the whole merit business that's being talked about right now. For example, we were struggling with math facts as a grade level, so we brainstormed some ideas and thought of different ways to approach the problem, and we shared it with all our team. And I'm thinking, in a competitive atmosphere maybe that won't happen. If your class performs better than my class...that sort of thing. Is a teacher really going to continue to share or say hey try this it really works in my room? That was a really good idea, I like the way you did that—I'm going to try it, too—we have those conversations constantly. We are that comfortable with each other. I can say to my team that I am struggling with something, and they are right there with suggestions; here's this here's that, try this it worked for me. Those conversations make me better as a teacher.

*Theme 3: The principal is pivotal in providing support with resources, as well as acting as an instructional leader.* The teachers at School D felt that the support and resources provided by the principal as contributors to their success.

One teacher stated,

My goal every year is to take them from where they are when they come in to as far as I can possibly stretch them in a year. With all the resources and support that we have here, I feel like I can do that.

Another added, “(Principal D) has high expectations, but I know he will help me with any resource I may need to be better.”

The teachers recognized that they had a professional, collegial staff, and that Principal D was responsible for that. A first grade teacher reflected, “I think we have a very strong staff. And [Principal D] is our number one cheerleader and person responsible for that.”

The teachers described not just material resources, but the manner in which Principal D provided time to touch base with them and foster best practices. One teacher stated, “We have a site based team that meets with (Principal D) monthly. (Principal D) supports us by guiding discussions about decisions that are going to impact students.” Another teacher offered, “We have grade level teams that meet with (Principal D) as well.” A second grade teacher added, “I have a question, I have a concern, or he notices something and will approach us...it’s a true combination of informal one on one and planned, more organized conversations that support us.” A first-year teacher stated, “The beauty of (Principal D) is...even my formal observations are coaching sessions.”

Teachers credit Principal D’s leadership with their academic success in early-literacy. One teacher explained,

I feel like we are ahead of the eight ball because of Principal D. He will say, “Let’s just start on this now.” And we never feel like “Oh my gosh, pressure.” He can see this is what is coming down the pike, so let’s get a jump on it and wrap our brain around it to

make sure it works for us and works for our staff. He is able to foresee things that need to happen; things that need to be done at the state level and the district level. (Principal D) is very much ahead of the game. And because of that, so are we.

*Theme 4: The resident literacy expert in Title I leads the literacy initiative by managing and facilitating the literacy system in place.* There was consensus that the Title I lead teacher was the literacy expert in the building. When asked who led their literacy initiative, the teachers all agreed that it was the Title I lead teacher. One staff member answered, “One hundred percent our Title I teacher,” and all voiced their agreement. One teacher said,

I’m a fairly new teacher and didn’t feel as comfortable in the area of language arts, so he comes in once a week and models a lesson for me. That is so helpful to my kids and to me as a teacher. We have our Title I staff that is able to pull out and give extra support for those struggling readers, and we also have our DIBELS staff who are able to give individual skill help. They are able to get those students where they need to be and to give that intervention early, which we all know is crucial.

So important was the role that the Title I lead teacher held, that one staff member described the job as “one that a first year teacher could not possibly do.” Another added, “The Title I teacher must be someone who has a really strong knowledge base of literacy.” He added, hinting that he had worked in schools where this was not the case, “That sounds like it should be a no-brainer for Title I, doesn’t it?” Another teacher chimed in, “We so trust him.”

The Title I lead teacher managed all of the instructional assistants, and ensured that they were trained to assist in monitoring the reading progress of students, as well as what to do in small groups based on what needs the data revealed. Teachers perceived this help and assistance as essential, and accolades were abundant. One teacher reiterated, “I have so many resources as

far as knowledgeable hands to help our struggling students. I can say these children need help, and I have a support staff that I know will do the right things.” Another teacher described why there was such a large amount of respect for the work that Title I did when he stated, “I have a lot of resources...assistants and Title I help. Because of that, the amount of growth that we see from these kids in just one year is phenomenal.” Another teacher summarized how she felt about the Title I team by saying, “We love them! They are wonderful.”



## CHAPTER 5

### **Summary, Discussion, Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to explore educational aspects that help explain high early-literacy acquisition in high-poverty elementary schools. Through this qualitative study, the perceptions of key staff members, including the principal, in high achieving, high-poverty schools were explored in three areas: (a) contributing aspects of high-level, early-literacy achievement in their particular school setting; (b) role of the principal in a high-poverty school that attains a high level of early-literacy achievement; and (c) how high early-literacy achievement occurs in their particular school setting.

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What do teachers in high achieving, high poverty schools cite as contributors to effective early interventions in reading?
2. What do principals in high achieving, high poverty schools cite as contributors to effective early-literacy reading programs?
3. How does the principal explain his/her role in setting up a model reading program?
4. What role does the principal play in affecting reading achievement?
5. How does high achievement occur in a high poverty school?

The qualitative study utilized a collective case study methodology for data collection and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The theoretical lens through which this study was conducted was a combination of critical theory layered with an interpretive lens.

Purposeful sampling was used to select four high-poverty schools that attained a high level of early-literacy achievement. Data was gathered through on-site, semi-structured interviews with groups of teachers and the principal from each site. The principal was interviewed individually. In addition, field observations were conducted and the school improvement plan, DIBELS benchmark scores, ISTEP scores, and demographic data were studied for each site. In the interviews, the researcher searched for patterns or concepts to emerge through selective coding. This allowed the researcher to develop themes or key findings.

To ensure validity, the researcher triangulated the data by using a systematic protocol of observations, using consistent procedures for data coding and analysis, using a semi-structured interview format, and utilizing public documents for background and descriptive contextual information. In addition, a colleague with expertise in the area of school administration and school improvement served as a peer examiner to provide assistance in discovering emerging concepts and themes. Member checking was also utilized to check the accuracy of interviews.

Reflexivity is defined as the researcher's self-awareness and critical self-reflection of potential biases and predispositions that could influence the research study and the conclusions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As indicated in the personal statement, this researcher's background in elementary education, reading, and early intervention could bias perceptions. This awareness is the first step toward interpreting data in an unbiased manner.

### **Contributing Aspects of High Early-Literacy Achievement**

Elements that emerged in the themes from this topic included collaboration, reflective practice, a system of progress monitoring that improved the students' meta-cognition, a resident literacy expert, a positive climate of trust and respect, and distributed leadership.

1. All participants in all schools perceived that collaboration was a contributing aspect of the attainment of a high level of early-literacy achievement. In all of these effective schools, the teachers and principals relied on collaboration for continual sharing of what worked, as well as learning to evaluate student work in a consistent manner. The spirit of collaboration also helped foster relationships, and eliminated an atmosphere of isolation. Collaboration was cited in the literature review as an important characteristic of schools in the midst of change, as well as in high-achieving schools (DuFour & Marzano, 2009; Klinger & Edwards, 2006; Lai et al., 2009; Marzano, et. al., 2005).
2. All of the principals and teachers interviewed perceived reflective practice as essential for attaining a high level of literacy achievement. Previously cited in the literature review, reflective practice allowed staff members to continually adjust and monitor their instruction in order to better serve students (Fullan, 2001; Marzano et al., 2005; Reeves, 2009; Schmoker, 1999; York-Barr et al., 2001). Continuous reflection was embedded in the professional practice of each school. As one teacher put it, "We constantly ask ourselves what worked with that; how can we do it better next time" and in addition "we use data to guide us." The use of literacy data was essential in order for the reflection to be meaningful. Principals and teachers in all schools mentioned the use of data when discussing reflection as a contributor to their success, and one teacher discussed how that had changed for them. "We are just more aware now than we used to be. Data makes us

more aware of what we are doing so we can keep refining what we do to make it better.”

The principals in every interview perceived the importance of this practice as a contributor to literacy achievement. Discussing student performance data with teachers and making the link between data and change in instructional practice was vital.

3. Participants in all schools perceived that a major aspect of their success was utilizing a system of progress monitoring that improved the students’ meta-cognition. The system did more than use data to monitor students’ progress; it afforded the students various ways to make that progress visible and real. Although studies in the literature review pointed out the importance of progress monitoring, the theme of student meta-cognition was not anticipated (Reeves, 2009; Torgesen, 2004). The schools in this study used individual tracking methods for literacy goals that the students themselves kept a record of and followed closely. The goal they were tracking was different in all schools; what seemed to be important was the fact that there were established literacy goals that the students knew and understood. The students could relate exactly how they were performing in relation to that goal as well, and did not depend on the teacher to connect the goal to performance.

4. All teachers and principals perceived that a resident literacy expert was essential to a high level of early-literacy in their schools. This theme was unanticipated, and was not cited in the literature review. The principals viewed this expert as an extension of their own leadership, and as vital to the school. One principal summarized the role by saying,

If you were to look at the principal as the body—the manager and the instructional leader, then the Reading Coach is the arm of that position in literacy. He’s the one the teachers can go to; he can hook them up with any resource they

might need, or why is my student not growing in this area. That's what he answers. He prompts questions. The role is absolutely vital. It is a big job.

The topic of scientifically-based reading research is immense, and perhaps this was the reason that all participants interviewed perceived that the knowledge base of an expert in the building was necessary and vital to early-literacy success. There has been much research in the area of the science behind early-literacy acquisition, and several studies were cited earlier in the literature review (Ardoin & Christ, 2008; Foorman, 2001; Jenkins & O'Connor, 2002; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Torgesen et al., 2001; Torgesen, 2002; Torgesen, 2004; Vaughn et al., 2003; Vellutino et al., 2006). The literacy expert came in different forms in each school. In two schools the position was a Reading Coach, in one school the role was that of the Assistant Principal, and in another the role was filled by the Title I Director. The Reading Coach model has been used and encouraged by the federal Reading First Program, so the fact that two of the schools interviewed used this model was not surprising. The surprising aspect was the perception that there must be an expert in place, whether it was a Reading Coach or not, and that this role was vital to the attainment of early-literacy in the school.

5. Teachers and principals in two of the four schools perceived that the school climate was one of trust and respect. This climate created a risk-free environment in which teachers changed instruction to ensure student success, and were transparent with their results. The teachers and the principal regarded each other with respect. The importance of trust, respect, and a positive climate was supported in research previously cited in this study (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Chhuon et al., 2008; DuFour & Marzano, 2009;

Fairbanks et al., 2010; Fullan, 2001; Marzano, 2003). It might appear surprising that a positive climate of trust and respect was a major theme in only two of the four schools, as it was heavily cited in a review of the literature. However, contextual events might help explain this unexpected result. The principal of School A relayed that due to extensive budget cuts to education by the state of California, the district made major reductions in staff. School A lost 70% of its staff when the cuts were made at the end of the previous school year. Principal A stated that he was “faced with a major rebuilding effort.” Also, one of the key players on staff, the Reading Coach, went on to an administrative position in another building. This left the veteran teachers with a person in charge of the literacy system who they did not know or trust, as well as a majority of colleagues who were new to the building. One teacher stated “It is very difficult when the rest of your team doesn’t know how things work here.” School C also experienced a staff change, which may have led to a decreased sense of trust and respect. The Reading Coach, who had been in the role since its inception six years earlier, decided to go back to a first grade classroom the year prior. It became clear in the interview that the teachers still trusted him and his expertise. When asked who led the literacy effort, they talked about the “reading team” instead of the present coach specifically, and mentioned the former coach by name as someone they went to frequently for advice.

6. Two of the principals interviewed perceived the practice of distributed leadership as a major contributor to high early-literacy achievement. Distributed leadership was cited earlier in this study in the literature review (Gallimore et al., 2009; Marzano et al., 2005; Samuels, 2010). Distributed leadership allowed the system of support in place to be stretched, and also guaranteed that there were no gaps or holes if someone left. One

principal described it as “no one person being the sole keeper of the knowledge.” It is interesting to note that it was the principals of the same two schools that perceived a high level of trust and respect that also perceived distributed leadership as vital.

It should be noted that while these elements emerged as themes when discussing contributors to high early-literacy achievement, there is overlap when discussing and analyzing the role of the principal. Embedded in each of the principal interviews was the notion that it was the responsibility of the principal to ensure that the contributors mentioned above were in place.

Table 7

*Contributing Aspects of High Early-Literacy Achievement*

<i>Element</i>	<i>Prin-A</i>	<i>Tch-A</i>	<i>Prin-B</i>	<i>Tch-B</i>	<i>Prin-C</i>	<i>Tch-C</i>	<i>Prin-D</i>	<i>Tch-D</i>
Collaboration	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Reflective Practice	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Progress Monitoring	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Literacy Expert	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Positive Climate			X	X			X	X
Distributed Leadership			X				X	

**Principal's Role in a High-Poverty School with High Early-Literacy Achievement**

Three elements emerged from the themes revolving around specific roles of the principal. Elements that emerged in the themes from this topic included establishing a literacy framework of tiered instruction, creating a master schedule that ensured the tier system and also time for collaboration, and monitoring teacher progress, releasing ineffective teachers when necessary.

1. All principals interviewed, as well as all teachers, perceived that one of the most important roles of the principal was the establishment of a tiered system of literacy

instruction. Every school employed a time of core literacy instruction, which every child received, and then established additional tiers of instruction to meet the students' needs.

These needs were determined by data provided by benchmark assessments.

Establishment of a system was cited in the literature review earlier in this study (Baum, 2002; Hall, 2008; Lai et al., 2009; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Reeves, 2009; Zemelman et al., 1998). The principals and the teachers saw the establishment of this system as the role of the principal. Acting as the instructional leader, the principal was the architect of this framework for his school. One teacher, when discussing administrators' roles, said,

We are charged with following the systems they deem as positive. They set a framework and we trust them—we know that they know best practices. They are not interested in micro-managing, but truly have our kids' best interest at heart.

2. All interviewees perceived that a major role the principal had in ensuring the school achieved a high level of early-literacy was creating a master schedule that ensured the tier system and also allowed time for collaboration. This practice ensured that the all-important tiered system could be implemented with fidelity, and that the vital component of collaboration discussed earlier was not left to chance. Although this role was only cited twice in the literature review, the importance that interviewees placed on this was evident (Hall, 2008; Torgesen, 2007).

3. The principals, but not the teachers, in all schools perceived that a major responsibility of their role in achieving success in early-literacy was monitoring teacher progress, and releasing ineffective teachers when necessary. Although this is a topic generally discussed when talking about school improvement in general, not specifically literacy,



the principals all perceived that this was one of their most important jobs if their students were to achieve a high level of early-literacy. Cotton (2003) pointed out this relentless approach in monitoring learning when she stated that effective principals do not stop with encouraging high levels of learning, they “insist on it and push unrelentingly” (p. 28). All principals described at least one experience of releasing an ineffective teacher, and felt it was their “duty” to do so.

Table 8

*Principal's Role in a High-Poverty School With High Early-Literacy Achievement*

<i>Element</i>	<i>Prin-A</i>	<i>Tch-A</i>	<i>Prin-B</i>	<i>Tch-B</i>	<i>Prin-C</i>	<i>Tch-C</i>	<i>Prin-D</i>	<i>Tch-D</i>
Establishment of a Tiered System of Literacy	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Creation of Schedule that Ensures Tiers and Collaboration	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Monitoring Teachers; Release of Ineffective Teachers	X		X		X		X	

**How Change Occurred in the Attainment of High Early-Literacy Achievement**

All four schools had undergone a change process, although the principals were much more keenly in tune with this than the teachers. Possible explanations for this could be that some of the teachers were not on staff when changes began to happen, or perhaps the principals held a wider vision of the school and the process that took place to make a high level of early-literacy happen. Elements that emerged in the themes from this topic included high expectations for all students, and over-arching district and/or school-wide literacy goals.

1. All principals, and teachers from two schools, demonstrated that they had high expectations for all students, and perceived that this was a major change from years past. There was an attitude of “no excuses,” no matter what the students’ circumstances were. This attitude gave a relentless quality to the interviewees as they discussed how literacy happened in their school. Because they believed that their students could, indeed, succeed, they did. Schools exemplified what Reeves (2009) spoke about when he said, “Effective strategies are executed by teachers and leaders who begin the process with the confidence that their professional practices influence student achievement” (p. 84). Several studies cited earlier are consistent with the findings (Brower & Balch, 2005; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Marzano et al., 1995; Reeves, 2009; Zemelman et al., 1998).

2. Three of the principals, and one teacher group, perceived that over-arching district and/or school-wide literacy goals were an important part of the change process that assisted them in the attainment of early-literacy. The principals were very assured in their comments about this being a focal point of change. In the interviews, the participants indicated much of what Fullan (2001a) described,

Organizations that improve do so because they create and nurture agreement on what is worth achieving, and they set in motion the internal processes by which people progressively learn how to do what they need to do in order to achieve what is worthwhile. (p. 125)

Table 9

*How Change Occurred in the Attainment of High Early-Literacy Achievement*

<i>Element</i>	<i>Prin-A</i>	<i>Tch-A</i>	<i>Prin-B</i>	<i>Tch-B</i>	<i>Prin-C</i>	<i>Tch-C</i>	<i>Prin-D</i>	<i>Tch-D</i>
High Expectations	X	X	X		X		X	X
Over-arching District Literacy Goals	X				X		X	X

### **Implications**

There are several implications one can infer from this study of schools that would not be expected to achieve high early-literacy, but did so nonetheless. First of all, the principal is paramount to the success of this endeavor. He is the architect, and instructional leader. Without the vision and belief that early-literacy can be accomplished from the leader of the building, it will not happen. The following educational aspects should be examined when stakeholders are looking for answers to early-literacy achievement.

There are 10 areas that schools should examine in their pursuit of early-literacy, and should be posed as questions:

1. Does the district (or at the minimum the school) have an over-arching goal of early-literacy achievement?
2. Is there evidence that there are high expectations for ALL students?
3. Is there a positive climate of trust and respect? If not, what circumstances are prohibiting it? What steps can the principal take to build that trust and respect?
4. Has the principal established a tiered system of literacy instruction?

5. Has the principal created a master schedule to juggle the various tiers effectively, and in addition, has time for collaboration and sharing been carved out?
6. Is there a resident literacy expert, with a strong knowledge base of early-literacy as well as the ability to relate well to staff, students, and parents?
7. Is there a system of using data for progress monitoring, with a focus on student meta-cognition?
8. Does the principal model, value, and ensure that collaboration and reflection are routine practices?
9. Does the principal set up a system of distributed leadership in the form of teacher leaders?
10. Does the principal effectively monitor teacher progress, releasing ineffective teachers when necessary?

Other implications that might warrant further research include studying the effect that an atmosphere of competition promoted by merit pay has on a school. In this day of budget cuts and pay for performance, competition will increasingly be a factor in the climate of education. The effect on a positive climate of trust and respect and collaboration should be addressed, as these aspects are vital to early-literacy success. One teacher mentioned this concern, stating,

This is one thing that worries me with the whole merit business. We were struggling with something as a grade level, so we brainstormed some ideas and thought of different ways to approach the problem, and we shared as a team. And I'm thinking, in a competitive atmosphere maybe that won't happen.

Another area of possible further study is implicated by the importance of the resident literacy expert, and the effect that role has on the building climate. Without trying to ascertain

cause and effect, this researcher noted that changes in the literacy expert in two of the schools were also the two schools that did not mention trust and respect as a contributor. These observations might warrant further investigation.

Reading coaches arrived on the educational scene fairly recently, and not all schools have adopted this role. With budget cuts looming, this position may be in peril. What would the effect be on a school if that role was taken away? Also, many schools use Title I funds to pay for a Reading Coach. Do all schools consider the importance of the role, or do they hire first year teachers for this position? Is it a respected spot, or a place to wait until a “real job” in a classroom opens up? Hiring practices in high-achieving, high-poverty schools might be another area of study.

In the interviews, there was very little discussion about specific programs. Although it was not this researcher’s purpose to ascertain specific literacy program efficacy, it was noted that not one of the schools used the same program of interventions. The system that was set up was identical in all schools, but the programs were not. This begs the question of what is initially more important, the framework or the program? In that same vein, in these very effective schools, reflection played a large role in professional practice. Perhaps if the framework is set and reflection is embedded, it would not take long for the data to reveal if a program is not working. Therefore, change in programming would be a given under those circumstances, and it would not be necessary to mandate certain programming.

Every single school interviewed mentioned that the system of literacy that they had established benefited not only the struggling students, but high ability students as well. Their needs were being met, and growth was occurring in that population of students, too. Perhaps this tiered system of literacy should be investigated for the effects on high ability students, also.

Neither teachers nor principals discussed professional development to any great degree as a contributing aspect of their success, which was surprising. They did, however, describe in great detail all of the embedded time that they spent on planning, collaboration, reflection, and sharing data. I believe that the term “professional development” brings to mind one-day workshops, and these schools participated in those very rarely. What they described was embedded professional development, but they did not perceive it as such.

It is interesting to note the difference in answers during interviews when participants were asked, “Who should I talk to in order to learn more?” In the two schools that had perceived trust and respect as contributors to their success, the principals and one teacher group mentioned the central office. In the other schools, the principals and the teachers mentioned those closest to implementation, such as the students and instructional assistants.

When selecting the sample schools, there were many more rural schools that met the criteria than metropolitan or urban schools. Criteria that might explain this phenomenon could be explored further.

Finally, it should be noted that the background of the principal matched the background of the students. The principals from rural schools shared that they, too, were from rural backgrounds. The school with 75% of its students from a Hispanic background had a Hispanic principal. The principal from the school outside Chicago with a 61% poverty rate confided that he, too, was brought up in poverty. A quantitative study examining if there is a correlation between successful schools and a match in the principal’s and students’ background might be warranted, as well as a study examining the educational background of the principal.

## Conclusions

The principal holds the key to early-literacy success. Beginning with over-arching literacy goals with an expectation that all students will succeed, the principal in a high-poverty, high-achieving school is at the helm of creating a positive climate of trust and respect. This climate fosters collaboration and reflective practice. From establishing a tiered framework of literacy to hiring an accomplished resident literacy expert, the principal sets up the system of literacy for success. There is no room for failure in this system, as students' progress is monitored and adjustments in instruction made until literacy is attained. The principal ensures that there is also a system of making this progress visible and real to students, with well-defined literacy goals and transparent tracking of individual progress by the student.

The principal ensures that the master schedule effectively accommodates all tiers of literacy instruction, and also ensures there is time allotted for collaboration and data-shares. Cultivating teacher leaders is another contributor to success that the principal nurtures. Supporting teachers, while at the same time monitoring teacher effectiveness and releasing ineffective teachers when necessary, are essential roles of the principal in a high-achieving early-literacy school.

The attainment of literacy before third grade is an essential component for the academic achievement of our students. This researcher agrees with Ron Edmonds, one of the founders of the Effective Schools movement, who stated,

We can whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this.

Whatever we do, it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far.

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## APPENDIX A

### **Standard Protocol Questions**

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee(s):

Position of interviewee(s):

Questions:

1. Talk about early literacy in your school.
  - a. What is your role in this process?
2. How does this occur in your school?
  - a. Who leads this?
  - b. Who sustains it?
  - c. What are the key roles; who are the main players?
3. What is the role of the principal in supporting literacy?
4. Who should I go to in order to learn more about your school?

## APPENDIX B

**Observation and Reflective Notes**

Location:

Length of Activity:

Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes

## APPENDIX C

**Invitation to Participate in Research**

(Date)

Dear School Leader:

RE: Qualitative Research Interview

My name is Jill Jay. I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership, Administration, and Foundations at Indiana State University. I am contacting you in hopes that you will agree to participate in a qualitative study looking at the principal's role in early literacy achievement.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview wherein you will be asked to answer questions to explore your perception regarding aspects of early literacy acquisition in your school. This interview will occur in person and will be audio-taped to aid in transcription. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. I also ask that I be able to observe the school environment on the day of your interview, and conduct a focus group interview with select staff members, including Title I teachers and general education teachers in grades K-2.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you volunteer, you may withdraw at any time without consequence of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also feel free to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Please contact me, Jill Jay, at (317) 539-9285 extension 636 or [jjay@mccsc.k12.in.us](mailto:jjay@mccsc.k12.in.us) in the next week if you are interested in participating.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Erickson Hall, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-8217, or email the IRB at [irb@indstate.edu](mailto:irb@indstate.edu). You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research participant with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the

University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I know that you lead a busy life as an educator, but I would be greatly appreciative of your assistance as I work toward completing this study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Jill Jay  
Doctoral Student at  
Indiana State University

Todd Whitaker, Ph.D  
Professor, College of Education  
Indiana State University

## APPENDIX D

**Location of Study**

*Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana  
Department of Educational Leadership, Administration & Foundation*

Date:

To:

From: Jill Jay, Principal Investigator

Re: Agreement for location of study

Thank you for considering my research entitled “Exploring the Principal’s Role in High Poverty Schools With High Literacy Achievement.” I am conducting research to explore educational aspects, including perceptions of selected staff members, which help explain high early-literacy acquisition in high poverty elementary schools.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview wherein you will be asked to answer questions to explore your perception regarding aspects of early literacy acquisition in your school. This interview will occur in person and will be audio-taped to aid in transcription. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. I also ask that I be able to observe the school environment on the day of your interview, and conduct a focus group interview with select staff members, including Title I teachers and general education teachers in grades K-2.

I will mail initial interpretations, data, and analysis from each interview to the direct person that was interviewed. Each teacher and the principal will have an opportunity to individually review the documents and evaluate them for accuracy of their intent and communication during the interview. Each interviewee will have an opportunity to respond to the content of the document and suggest additions that are needed for clarity. Dr. Todd Whitaker, my faculty advisor, and I will be the only ones who have access to notes or tapes. They will be kept in a locked cabinet destroyed three years after my study is complete. All names of schools and people will be kept confidential.

Please complete the signature page of this letter and return to me electronically.

If you have any questions about the right of participants as a research subject, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-8217 or email the IRB at [irb@indstate.edu](mailto:irb@indstate.edu). The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I grant permission for \_\_\_\_\_ to be used in Jill Jay's study on "Exploring the Principal's Role in High Poverty Schools With High Literacy Achievement."

\_\_\_\_\_ Signature of Administrator

\_\_\_\_\_ Printed name of Administrator

\_\_\_\_\_  
District Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
School Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX E

**Consent to Participate in Research—Principal****Exploring the Principal's Role in High Literacy Achievement in High Poverty Schools**

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Jill Jay, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership, Administration, and Foundations at Indiana State University. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore educational aspects which help explain high early-literacy acquisition in high poverty elementary schools. It is not this author's intent to ascertain efficacy or superiority in reading instructional methodology, but rather to observe and examine at-risk schools that *are* achieving early literacy acquisition.

**Procedures**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

1. Participate in an interview wherein you will be asked to answer questions designed to explore aspects of your role in this particular school which have led to a high level of early literacy achievement, despite factors known to put this school at risk of not attaining early literacy. This interview will be audio-taped to aid in transcription and will last approximately one hour.
2. The interview will take place individually in your school.

**Risk of Participation**

As with most research, and especially research involving specific groups of participants where the research is tape recorded, there is a potential risk of breach of confidentiality. Every measure will be taken to avoid this potential risk. Since many of the questions to be asked will revolve around personal views, you should be reminded that confidentiality will be maintained. Interviews will occur in a secure room within the school building at your convenience. Since the interviews will occur in the school building, others in the building could likely know that you are participating in this research.



### Benefits of Participation

While there are no direct benefits provided for participation, the information gathered from this study will help further the understanding of early literacy acquisition.

### Confidentiality

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

Confidentiality will be maintained in the following ways:

- You are asked not to identify yourself by name or school district on the audio-taped interview. Information will be reported in aggregated form. Data will not be linked with individuals or individual school districts at any time.
- A code will be assigned to each participant. A hard copy master list of participants and codes will be stored in a secure filing cabinet in the home office of the researcher, Jill Jay.
- During transcription and analysis by the Principal Investigator, Jill Jay, data will be identified by code.
- Tapes will be stored in a secure filing cabinet in the home office of Jill Jay. These tapes will be kept for three years following completion of the research and then destroyed.
- The only people having access to the data will be Jill Jay and her dissertation committee chairperson, Dr. Todd Whitaker.

### Participation and Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you volunteer, you may withdraw at any time without consequence of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also feel free to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer.

### Identification of Investigators

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact the principal investigator:

Jill Jay  
Co-Principal Investigator  
(317) 417-0672  
jjay@mccsc.k12.in.us

Todd Whitaker  
Co-Principal Investigator  
(812) 237-2904  
todd.whitaker@indstate.edu

### Rights of Research Participants

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Erickson Hall, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-8217, or email the IRB at irb@indstate.edu. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research participant with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

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Printed Name of Participant

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Signature of Participant

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Date

***Date of IRB Approval: 01/11/2011***

***IRB Number: 11-066***

***Project Expiration Date: 12/13/2011***

## APPENDIX F

**Consent to Participate in Research--Participant**

## Exploring the Principal's Role in High Literacy Achievement in High Poverty Schools

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Jill Jay, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership, Administration, and Foundations at Indiana State University. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore educational aspects which help explain high early-literacy acquisition in high poverty elementary schools. It is not this author's intent to ascertain efficacy or superiority in reading instructional methodology, but rather to observe and examine at-risk schools that *are* achieving early literacy acquisition.

## Procedures

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

3. Participate in an interview wherein you will be asked to answer questions designed to explore aspects of the principal's role in this particular school which have led to a high level of early literacy achievement, despite factors known to put this school at risk of not attaining early literacy. This interview will be audio-taped to aid in transcription and will last approximately one hour.

## Risk of Participation

As with most research, and especially research involving specific groups of participants where the research is tape recorded, there is a potential risk of breach of confidentiality. Every measure will be taken to avoid this potential risk. Since many of the questions to be asked will revolve around personal views, you should be reminded that confidentiality will be maintained. Interviews will occur in a secure room within the school building at your convenience. Since the interviews will occur in the school building, others in the building could likely know that you are participating in this research.

## Benefits of Participation

While there are no direct benefits provided for participation, the information gathered from this study will help further the understanding of early literacy acquisition.

### Confidentiality

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

Confidentiality will be maintained in the following ways:

- You are asked not to identify yourself by name or school district on the audio-taped interview. Information will be reported in aggregated form. Data will not be linked with individuals or individual school districts at any time.
- A code will be assigned to each participant. A hard copy master list of participants and codes will be stored in a secure filing cabinet in the home office of the researcher, Jill Jay.
- During transcription and analysis by the Principal Investigator, Jill Jay, data will be identified by code.
- Tapes will be stored in a secure filing cabinet in the home office of Jill Jay. These tapes will be kept for three years following completion of the research and then destroyed.
- The only people having access to the data will be Jill Jay and her dissertation committee chairperson, Dr. Todd Whitaker.

### Participation and Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you volunteer, you may withdraw at any time without consequence of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also feel free to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer.

### Identification of Investigators

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact the principal investigator:

Jill Jay  
Co-Principal Investigator  
(317) 417-0672  
jjay@mccsc.k12.in.us

Todd Whitaker  
Co-Principal Investigator  
(812) 237-2904  
todd.whitaker@indstate.edu

### Rights of Research Participants

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Erickson Hall, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-8217, or email the IRB at [irb@indstate.edu](mailto:irb@indstate.edu). You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research participant with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

---

Printed Name of Participant

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Signature of Participant

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Date

***Date of IRB Approval: 01/11/2011***

***IRB Number: 11-066***

***Project Expiration Date: 12/13/2011***