TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF BEST PRACTICES UTILIZED FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine teachers’ perceptions of best practices utilized for school improvement. The data collected and analyzed from this study provide a greater understanding of teachers’ perceptions of the principal’s role in promoting best practices for school improvement and practices that promote teacher engagement in the school improvement process, as well as teachers’ perceptions of school improvement practices believed to promote student achievement in the content area of reading. The qualitative study consisted of data collected from one-on-one interviews with sixteen educators involved in state-mandated school improvement efforts at a rural elementary school in Southwest Virginia. Additional data were collected through observations and document analysis. The study’s findings identified a list of practices developed by participants as best used by principals for promoting school improvement, as well as a list of practices that participants perceive promote engagement in the school improvement process. Also, participants identified key best practices that they believed promoted student achievement in reading. The study revealed that teachers want principals in their buildings who will build relationships between themselves and teachers, and encourage relationships between teachers as well, while establishing a culture of learning and collaboration. Additionally, teachers want to be involved in the school improvement process by creating and implementing initiatives to help students improve their academic standing; they desire to feel a sense of ownership as they work to make their schools better. Finally, elementary reading teachers believed that differentiated instruction and data analysis are instrumental practices in helping students improve their reading abilities and achievement scores.
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Dedication

It is with love and joy in my heart that I dedicate this study to the memories of my late brothers, Hubert and Matthew Sweeney. With every keystroke, I felt you with me.

I would also like to dedicate this study to my parents, Arthur and Melster Sweeney, who never lost faith in me, even after seemingly losing everything else they loved. This work is a tribute to them and their undying faith.

Finally, I dedicate this study to my husband, Randy Muncy. For every dish washed, towel folded, kindness uttered, and kiss given during these past three years, I thank you for making my dream a reality.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Introduction and Background to the Study

Over the past two decades, much emphasis has been placed on schools and educators’ levels of accountability with regard to students’ academic progress. With President Bush’s passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, schools are now required to reach certain objectives each year, including making adequate yearly progress (AYP) for groups and subgroups of students within schools and school districts (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Examples of these groups include students of different races and ethnicities, socioeconomic status, students with disabilities, and those with limited English proficiency. Schools and school districts that fail to meet their yearly goals toward AYP can be required to take part in mandatory school improvement procedures to reroute their efforts toward acceptable gains in student achievement.

In Virginia, where this research was conducted, annual measurable objectives (AMOs) have been developed to help school systems around the state close achievement gaps between those lower and higher-performing schools within a period of six years (Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Education, 2012). To help identify schools that have both reached their academic requirements and those that are struggling to meet their benchmarks, the Virginia Department of Education has developed a set of guidelines based on students’ pass rates on end-of-course Standards of Learning (SOL) examinations (Virginia Department of Education, 2016a). While in years past, schools were labeled as “fully accredited”, “accredited with warning” with regard to the specific area(s) that needed improvement, or “failing”, in 2015, the Virginia Department of Education revised its accreditation levels to include “partially
accredited” schools as well, for those schools that narrowly missed full accreditation by two percentage points or less, showed acceptable progress toward reaching the accreditation benchmark but missed it by more than two percentage points, and for those schools who after four unsuccessful years of trying to reach fully accredited status choose to reconstitute themselves (Virginia Department of Education, 2016a). For schools identified as “accredited with warning” status in a particular academic area, such as reading or mathematics, school leaders must develop a plan to earn full accreditation over the course of three academic years (Virginia Department of Education, 2016c). To address schools’ and school districts’ specific needs for improvement, improvement plans are developed through careful data analysis by school officials and interventionists that provide guidance to administration and teachers to obtain better results for their students. Typically, these plans involve professional development for staff members on relevant topics as determined by data analysis, an increased presence in classrooms by administration, consultation with state and/or federal liaisons for support, and stringent teacher evaluation practices. Title One schools, like the one involved in this study, must utilize Indistar®, a web-based program designed to help lead schools through the improvement process by tracking data over time and organizing information for school leaders to use for planning purposes (Indistar, 2014). Indistar® also requires school leaders to complete specific objectives toward improvement during each year of the plan’s implementation, such as forming a school leadership team that holds regular meetings to discuss goals and strategies for reaching them, creating timelines for achieving improvement goals, planning and providing professional development opportunities to teachers based on data, and building educators’ capacity to grow and evolve as part of the school improvement process (Indistar, 2014).
**Research Problem**

Although Virginia has outlined a detailed process of school improvement for its struggling schools and school districts, there are still those institutions that fail to make adequate progress in the time allotted. Currently, 78% of Virginia’s schools are fully accredited; this includes 1,415 elementary, middle, and high schools of the total 1,822 schools statewide (Virginia Department of Education, 2016b). The school involved in this particular study did make the necessary gains to become fully accredited after being warned in the area of reading in only one year’s time, which led this researcher to wonder what practices led to these teachers’ success. Due to their often-limited roles in developing school improvement plans, teachers’ perceptions of the process are usually from the point of view of a guided participant. This researcher was interested in learning how teachers perceived this process and the practices associated with school improvement.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine teachers’ perceptions of the best practices utilized in the school improvement process. While some teachers serve as members of school improvement teams and offer support to school leaders who make key decisions regarding schools’ next steps in their progression toward reaching full accreditation status, most teachers are involved in the implementation phase of the improvement plan (Davis, Krasnoff, Ishimaru, & Sage, 2010). They complete the tasks that are assigned to them by their administrators, intervention coordinators, and improvement team leaders including participating in planned professional development to bolster instructional practices in the classroom, crafting complex lesson plans that address state standards and improvement indicators, and undergoing hours of conferences following observations and evaluations by school and district leaders (Indistar,
Taking part in systemic changes like these is essential to facilitating improvement and building teacher efficacy in schools and districts that continue to come up short in areas of student achievement (Wilkerson, Shannon, Styers, & Grant, 2012; Protheroe, 2008). Seeking teachers’ input regarding the involvement of their principal in the school improvement process as well as their own levels of engagement in the school improvement process, and the practices believed to promote increased student achievement in the content area of reading is important for continued development in determining best practices for school improvement.

**Research Questions**

Interested in learning more about best practices utilized in schoolwide improvement, the researcher sought to examine teachers’ perceptions regarding the process by asking these primary research questions:

1. What are teachers’ perceptions of the principal’s role in promoting best practices for school improvement?
2. What are teachers’ perceptions of practices that promote teacher engagement in the school improvement process?
3. What are teachers’ perceptions of school improvement practices believed to promote increased student achievement in the content area of reading?

Answers to these questions were sought primarily through interviews with school personnel, including 12 teachers, the school principal, the director of instruction for the school division, and the state-appointed interventionist who was assigned to the school during the 2016-2017 school year. Data were triangulated with the researcher’s field notes and observations of engagement activities reported by teachers during their interviews.
Rationale for the Study

This study examined teachers’ perceptions of best practices for continuous school improvement in a small rural elementary school in Southwest Virginia. The school was selected for study because its students made significant academic gains according to state-mandated end-of-course examinations, bringing the school out of “academic warning” status in the content area of reading and earning the school full accreditation in only one year. These gains warranted a deeper investigation into the school’s improvement process to discover the professional practices that led to increasing students’ academic achievement.

The Researcher

The researcher is a former high school English teacher with graduate degrees in reading education and educational leadership and policy studies. The researcher holds multiple education endorsements in the state of Virginia, including English instructor for students in grades six through twelve, reading specialist for students in grades kindergarten through twelve, administration for students in grades kindergarten through twelve, and the division superintendent’s license. The researcher has fourteen years of experience in the field of education, serving four of those as a school administrator. Currently, the researcher is employed as an assistant principal at the elementary school selected to participate in the study, and began working there during the 2015-2016 school year, as the school improvement plan to increase students’ achievement scores in the area of reading was first implemented. As part of the school’s administration, the researcher served on the school improvement team, working with teachers to build efficacy and help the school reach full accreditation status within the time period set by the state.
As a former teacher, and a member of the school’s administrative staff involved in the study, the researcher is interested in learning about teachers’ perceptions of the practices used during the school improvement process. As the results of the school’s improvement efforts proved to be quite successful following a year of intense effort on the part of the teachers, the researcher hopes to learn more from interviewing teachers and coding their perceptions of the best practices they utilized firsthand to determine which of these might be most helpful to other teachers undergoing similar experiences in other rural schools.

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms are essential for the understanding of this research study. The definitions for the terms provided are in the researcher’s own description.

Adequate yearly progress: an accountability method for states to measure students’ performance for yearly progress based on standardized test scores as part of the No Child Left Behind legislation of 2001; also known as AYP (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Annual measurable objectives: objectives set by the state for schools to meet over a six-year period that will decrease achievement gaps between groups and subgroups of students; also known as AMOs (Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Education, 2012).

Best practices: practices, backed by research data, that, when implemented appropriately by educators, are proven to help students achieve better results academically (Arendale, 2016).

Curriculum planning: creating and organizing materials, as well as a specific timeline, to aid teachers in the instruction of a specific curriculum built around state and local standards (Ebert, Ebert, & Bentley, 2011).
Data analysis: a process used by educators to collect and evaluate data for the purpose of making decisions and setting goals for continuous schoolwide improvement (Lewis, Madison-Harris, Muoneke, & Times, 2010).

Educational leadership: the process of school leaders working with school staff members and other stakeholders to create a positive climate of change within the school setting for student growth (Learn.org, 2016).

Efficacy: the degree to which teachers believe they can control and motivate students to achieve and succeed (Protheroe, 2008).

Professional development: specialized training for educators intended to help broaden their knowledge base and strengthen their skill level (New Jersey Department of Education, 2013).

Professional learning community: a group of educators that collaborate regularly through shared learning experiences and discussion to reach staff development goals for the improvement of a school; also known as a PLC (Provini, 2012).

Response to intervention: a process used by teachers to help students struggling to understand a skill or concept that involves an initial screening process for all students and the use of a multi-tiered instructional model for providing interventions or enrichment to students as necessary (RTI Action Network, 2016).

School culture: the beliefs, traditions, and ideals that make up the identity of a school; school culture can be positive or negative, depending on the leadership’s emphasis of certain essential qualities (Gruenert, 2008).
School improvement: the process of identifying a school’s needs through data analysis and developing a plan to address those needs through targeted interventions and professional development over a specified period of time (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Design, 1998).

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter one includes an introduction to the research problem, and presents the purpose and rationale for the study, as well as the research questions that drove the study. A review of relevant literature is organized in chapter two to inform the research. Chapter three describes the methodology used to investigate teachers’ perceptions of best practices utilized in the school improvement process, including interviewing school staff members and triangulating data from the researcher’s field notes and observations of engagement activities reported by teachers. The study’s findings, including data and patterns identified by the researcher, are presented in chapter four. Chapter five provides a summary of the results and discusses the implications of the study which could affect future research involving teachers’ perceptions of best school improvement practices.

Summary

This qualitative study was conducted during the 2016-2017 school year as a tool to research teachers’ perceptions regarding best practices in the school improvement process as set forth in the requirements of the Virginia Department of Education’s accountability and accreditation standards for schools in need of additional guidance for improving students’ academic achievement. The study measured teachers’ perceptions including their opinions of the role of the principal in the school improvement process, as well as practices that promote teacher
engagement and practices believed to promote increased student achievement in the content area of reading. Data were analyzed through the collection and coding of personal interviews, field notes, and observations of engagement activities reported by teachers.
Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

Introduction

With the release of President Reagan’s educational task force report *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, school systems around the country began examining the quality of the education provided to their students; this extensive examination sparked the educational reform movement that has swept across the nation for more than three decades (Graham, 2013). To improve instructional quality for all students, retain highly qualified professional teaching staff, and trigger educational innovation throughout the United States’ public school systems, school leaders initiated a process known as continuous school improvement (Park, Hironaka, Carver, & Nordstrum, 2013). The purpose of this improvement process is to develop a strategic plan for school leaders to follow for facilitating lasting, internal change within their schools (Mintrop & MacLellan, 2002). As a follow-up measure, the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001 and more recently, the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 mandate higher accountability requirements for low performing school districts (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). While there are multiple facets that make up the school improvement process, most states and school systems utilize students’ achievement data on standardized tests to determine schools’ levels of improvement for decision-making purposes (Lezotte & Bancroft, 1985).

This literature review will touch on multiple topics involved in the school improvement process, providing the reader with relevant background information needed to understand the importance of these concepts related to schools’ plans for continuous improvement. Topics reviewed include accountability, professional development, professional learning communities, observation and evaluation, response to intervention, data analysis, principals as educational leaders, perceptions of teacher leadership, rural schools’ improvement dilemma, and improving
elementary schools’ reading achievement. By addressing each of these areas, the researcher will construct a framework for effective school improvement efforts in a rural elementary school.

**Accountability**

Since *A Nation at Risk* began the alarming trend of sweeping education reform around the country in 1983, school districts have faced increased scrutiny to show improvement in their schools. This demand for accountability amplified with the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001. As required by No Child Left Behind, schools and districts must meet federal and state benchmarks each year in order to maintain their accreditation status and meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals; these benchmarks are tied to students’ performance on standardized tests, and resulting data are broken into categories and sub-groups (Crum, 2009; Daresh, 2006). Under this legislation, schools that fail to achieve AYP goals could face serious penalties, including reduced funding from state and federal education agencies, school reconstitution, and loss of accreditation (Daresh, 2006; Kimmelman, 2006).

Accountability, in the world of education, is defined as taking responsibility for students’ learning (Fullan, Rincón-Gallardo, & Hargreaves, 2015). According to Fullan et al., there are two types of accountability that school leaders can work to improve in order to see changes in students’ academic achievement: internal and external accountability (2015). Internal accountability happens when personnel within a school or school system take responsibility for their own improvement by working to develop themselves further as educators through self-reflection, planned professional development, and collaborative efforts with other staff members (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009). In contrast, external accountability is the process utilized by school system leaders to provide stakeholders with performance and evaluation data as a means to show their meeting students’ needs as required by state and federal mandates (Fullan et al.,
Educational researchers Fullan et al., (2015) suggested that because constant improvement to teachers’ instructional practice is such an important component of schoolwide improvement efforts, internal accountability must come before external accountability if school systems hope to see real education reform and gains in students’ progress.

As noted by Elmore and colleagues (2004), successful schools establish a culture of collaboration among their teachers that allows them to grow as individuals by setting goals and working towards addressing problems with their instruction. Increasing their internal accountability produced greater, more impactful results than focusing exorbitant amounts of time and resources on external accountability measures (Fullan et al., 2015). The pressure to make adequate yearly progress, however, has caused many low performing schools to alter their instructional practices and teach to the standardized tests that students take as a means of measuring achievement (Choi, 2011). A wiser use of time involves school leaders and teachers reflecting on their current teaching practices, curriculum programs, and professional development needs to create a comprehensive school improvement plan to help guide future reform efforts (Choi, 2011).

**What is School Improvement?**

The idea of school improvement, or continuous education reform, has evolved over the last half century. According to Heck and Hallinger (2010), the capacity for school improvement is defined as the set of conditions that support students’ learning, teacher’s professional growth, and the implementation of a strategic plan for continuously improving schools’ performance. The push to transform lower performing schools into better quality institutions of learning for all students has led educators to create flexible, comprehensive plans driven by accountability standards (Fullan, 2009). To determine the best course of action for each school within a system,
school leaders must make data-driven decisions to help steer school improvement initiatives; of these data, leaders primarily utilize student achievement data from standardized testing results more often than other types of data (Shen, Ma, Cooley, & Burt, 2016). School system and building level administrators rely on such data to help them refine their strategic plans for improvement, including planning for furthering teachers’ professional development, developing professional learning communities, participating in scheduled observations and an evaluation process, implementing best instructional practices in the classroom, performing data analysis, instituting a response-to-intervention program for struggling students, promoting teacher efficacy, and encouraging a school culture centered on students’ learning (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan, 2009; Gray & Streshly, 2008).

**Professional Development**

Professional development is a vital component of educators’ own continuing improvement process. Nearly all states provide guidelines for teachers’ professional growth following their initial licensure, and require educators to continue developing their craft while maintaining certification (DeMonte, 2013). According to research performed by Desimone and colleagues, teachers report that effective professional development activities broaden their knowledge of their specific content area and engage them actively in the learning process (Desimone, 2009; Desimone, Smith & 2013; Desimone, & Stuckey, 2014; Porter, Garet, Desimone, & Birman, 2003). Additionally, educators feel that sustained professional development sessions, taking place over the course of an extended period of time, and linked to their own experiences and skill levels, are most beneficial to them (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010). By targeting explicit instructional practices for focused professional development trainings, teachers are more likely to incorporate the practices learned
in their classroom environments (Desimone, 2009). While the term “professional development” in the past has meant different things—mandated trainings for teachers by district and/or state education officials, required recertification workshops—professional development in today’s world of higher accountability standards must be customized and connected to the needs of the students (Sappington, Pacha, Baker, & Gardner, 2012). As a result of schools’ improvement needs, school leaders can target specific professional development opportunities for teachers based on data collected from classroom observations and scheduled evaluations (Shaha, Glassett, & Copas, 2015).

With regards to improving students’ academic achievement, research has consistently found that there is a link between teachers’ professional development opportunities and school improvement efforts (Hawley & Valli, 1999; Sappington et al., 2012). Ideally, schools evaluate the needs of their students and teachers, and develop a planned program of professional development activities to help achieve goals set forth following data analysis, thus creating an improvement plan (Minthrop & MacLellan, 2002). Rather than allowing the data to determine their plans for professional development, many schools focus professional development sessions on new testing protocols or curriculum updates for standardized assessments, rather than on methods to improve teachers’ instruction or delivery (Minthrop & MacLellan, 2002). In order for professional development to be useful to school staff, however, it must be focused on helping students achieve greater gains and have support from staff participants (Sappington et al., 2012). Without concise, cumulative plans for professional development as part of schools’ plans for continuous improvement, school leaders run the risk of failing to provide students with instruction that meets today’s learning challenges (Sappington et al., 2012).
Professional Learning Communities

One valuable type of professional development that has risen to prominence in the last few decades is the professional learning community (PLC). Professional learning communities are unique entities established by school leaders and the staff members in their schools; while the goal of PLCs is to improve students’ learning as a result of continuous professional learning that advances teachers’ skillsets, there are no established rules guiding the development or structure of these groups (Cherkowski, 2016). DuFour (2007) notes that professional learning communities can be made up of grade-level teaching teams, a school committee or single department, school department heads or lead teachers, or can be of a much larger scale, encompassing educators from an entire school division or state department. Successful PLCs revolve around a culture of learning and innovation created and maintained by the school principal, and his or her ability to engage teachers in meaningful opportunities for professional growth (Cherkowski, 2016; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Professional learning communities are collaborative and reflective, and require participation from all members, not just the school principal, to ensure growth and optimal learning opportunities for teachers (Cherkowski, 2016; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006b). While many school leaders initiate professional learning communities as a method of gaining additional knowledge for their teachers, these PLCs eventually fail due to the participants’ inability to sustain the groups’ purpose (Gillespie, Wells, & Panzer, 2010).

As stressed by DuFour (2004), administrators can keep professional learning communities on track by focusing on three big ideas: ensuring students learn, creating a culture of collaboration, and maintaining a focus on results. To do this, those involved in the PLC must change their mindset from focusing on teaching to focusing on students’ learning (Eaker,
DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). For professional learning communities to be effective, participants must agree that all students should not just be taught, but that they have the ability to learn (Newmann & Associates, 1996). Although this change in perception can cause veteran teachers to feel uncomfortable in their otherwise familiar vocation and in their identity as a teacher, school leaders must not treat the establishment of a real professional learning community as a short-cut or bandwagon approach to school improvement (DuFour, 2007; Graham & Phelps, 2003). True transformation of schools comes from continued persistent effort on behalf of all school staff, led by the principal, working together to bring about positive changes (DuFour, 2007; Schlechty, 2005). Creating and then nurturing a collaborative culture is pivotal for school leaders when incorporating a PLC into their school’s framework, as teachers must develop relationships within their community that allow for meaningful inquiry, suggestions, and reflection to take place to contribute to both individuals’ and the whole group’s learning (DeMatthews, 2014; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006a). Teamwork is an essential function of PLCs, and leaders must promote collaboration between participants for maximum learning growth to occur (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Implementing a professional learning community as a long-standing form of professional development is not a guarantee of any school’s improvement; all participants must be goal-oriented and work toward getting better results demonstrating higher levels of both teachers’ and students’ learning before the venture can be considered successful (DuFour, 2007; Sims & Penny, 2015).

With regards to school improvement efforts, PLCs should play a significant role in educators’ continuous improvement process (Schmoker, 2006). Strong, shared leadership by building administration and teachers focused on a common vision of changing instructional practices to promote students’ academic and social development is the key to sustaining a
successful professional learning community (Hord, 1997). Because engaging adult learners in
the PLC environment is different than teaching students in the classroom, as their needs are
different, it is vital for school leaders to have an understanding of the fundamentals of adult
learning strategies for schools’ professional learning communities to be most beneficial to their
members (Cherkowski, 2016). As Brookfield (1995) points out, teachers need to feel what it is
like being in the role of learner often to stay in touch with how they themselves teach to best
reach their students. Applying Knowles’ six principles of adult learning, which state that adult
learners are motivated, experienced and knowledgeable, goal and relevancy-oriented, practical,
and deserving of respect, to the PLC experience can help school leaders ensure smoother
implementation (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005).

Observation and Evaluation

Because teacher quality is an essential variable in students’ academic success, another
key component of the school improvement process is the system of teacher observation and
evaluation (Mincu, 2015). Observing teachers is a strategy that involves school leaders or other
school personnel watching teachers in their classroom environments while they interact with
students to provide feedback for improved student learning (Shaha et al., 2015). The process
came into vogue during the school reform efforts of the 1980s as a way for offering critical
suggestions to teachers for bolstering performance, and has evolved into an accepted practice in
the education world (Brandt, 1995; Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Pease, 1983). Observers look
for teachers’ effectiveness in the classroom, including the consistency of their instruction, subject
knowledge, differentiation of instruction, and interaction with students (Ko & Sammons, 2012;
Mincu, 2015). Teacher effectiveness is significant, as research has shown that high quality
teachers continue to positively impact their students for at least two years after those students
have left their classrooms (Wiliam, 2013). Observations are relevant to school improvement, as research data proves that the more frequently teachers are observed while teaching, the better their students performed academically (Shaha et al., 2015).

Observations play an integral role in the overall teacher evaluation process. Teacher evaluations provide administrators with valuable information about teachers, based on set criteria that has evolved over time due to changing educational beliefs and philosophies (Ellet & Teddlie, 2003). As noted by Stronge (2006), teacher evaluation is a method for documenting the quality of teachers’ performance in the classroom, as well as the opportunity to hold teachers accountable for their work with students. Stronge (2006) also pointed out that a quality evaluation system is both summative and formative in nature, focusing on both educator accountability and improvement. Since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, most states have adopted teacher evaluation policies that rely on best accepted, standards-based practices (Hallinger, Heck, & Murphy, 2014). Nearly all states now include improving schools’ instructional programs by way of rigorous, research-based instruction as part of their evaluation process to promote continuous schoolwide improvement (Klute, Welp, Yanoski, Mason, & Reale, 2016).

**Danielson’s Framework for Teaching.** Charlotte Danielson, an educational consultant and former school administrator, developed a framework for observation and evaluation after working with educators and learning that most methods used in schools around the country didn’t provide effective feedback to improve classroom instruction or properly assess teachers’ effectiveness (Danielson, 2014). Danielson’s framework combines twenty-two elements of teaching divided into four domains of teaching responsibility: planning and preparation; classroom environment; instruction; and professional responsibilities; these are broken down
further into seventy-four sub-categories within the four domains (Danielson Group, 2013). The framework is based on the most recent version of the standards of the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium, established in 1987, to help create effective teachers (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2016). According to Danielson, trained evaluators who utilize her framework when observing teachers are more likely to provide constructive criticism to those teachers undergoing evaluation, which can lead to increased rigor in lesson planning and student questioning, higher levels of student responsibility for their learning in the classroom environment, and improved conceptual understanding and application of content knowledge (Danielson, 2014). By employing one central framework to all teacher observations and evaluations, school leaders share goals and expectations for improving students’ learning in a universal manner, using a common vocabulary and promoting teachers’ professional development (Danielson, 2014).

**The Marzano Teacher Evaluation Model.** Created by Robert Marzano following decades of research in the field of education, Marzano’s teacher evaluation model promotes effective teaching practices by emphasizing three principles: the model is comprehensive and specific, it includes a developmental scale, and it acknowledges and rewards teachers’ growth (Marzano, 2012). Marzano (2007) noted that an evaluation system that is designed to encourage positive change in educators’ methods of lesson planning, teaching students’ content, evaluating students’ work, and providing them with feedback is vastly different from one that merely measures their levels of performance for quality assurance purposes. Marzano’s framework for teacher evaluation focuses on developing better teachers by improving their use of classroom strategies and certain behaviors that research has found to impact students’ academic achievement (Marzano, 2012). There are forty-one specific strategies and teacher behaviors
identified by Marzano and categorized in subgroups, such as routine strategies, content strategies, and strategies enacted on the spot, that are supported by research to improve students’ success in the classroom (Marzano, 2007).

**Response to Intervention**

With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Legislation of 2001 into law, school leaders in more than half the states in America created policies related to the changing in curriculum or instruction of chronically underperforming schools (Klute et al., 2016). In states like Virginia, these changes resulted in a statewide reform to include a required response-to-intervention (RTI) program for students in all schools identified as needing improvement in the areas of English or math; this requirement also addressed the RTI provision included in the 2004 re-authorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act to help reduce the number of children classified as learning disabled (Johnston, 2011; Klute et al., 2016; Shepherd & Salembier, 2011). RTI is a multi-tiered system of supports, which provides students with research-based strategies to address concerns identified by data collected from their teachers (Graden, Stollar, & Poth, 2007). Students receive either enrichment or intervention instruction based upon their tier level, with some students receiving the most intensive interventions strategies to help them eliminate skill deficits (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Response to intervention is an important part of the school improvement process because it involves collaboration from school personnel to help students overcome their learning difficulties (Graden et al., 2007). Traditionally, teachers worked independently to teach students throughout the day, with the occasional help of a trained special education teacher or a resource aide. Now with the RTI system in place, teachers engage with other educators throughout their school to make decisions regarding best practices for struggling students, making it a *whole school* initiative (Shepherd & Salembier, 2011).
Response to intervention involves data-driven decision making by teachers (Graden et al., 2007). To determine if students are in need of additional supports, teachers must administer appropriate universal screening tools for all students that are quick and easy to use in the classroom (Gibbons & Casey, 2012). Screeners provide teachers with simple, relevant data about each child’s needs (Whitelock, 2010). Following screening, students are placed into tiered groups for intervention or enrichment instruction, depending on their specific needs; teachers then monitor students’ progress regularly to determine if their additional instruction has been helpful to the students (Gibbons & Casey, 2012; Whitelock, 2010). As it is the goal of teachers for students to improve, students can move fluidly throughout the tiers during the course of the school year as their academic needs are met or change (Gibbons & Casey, 2012). Because the response-to-intervention process requires educators to be familiar with a variety of strategies and assessments in order to make the intervention process successful for students, it is necessary for teachers and school leaders to complete quality professional development devoted to components of RTI regularly (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

**Data Analysis**

With regards to continuous school improvement, it is important for school leaders to make data-informed decisions to help make gains in student achievement (Celio & Harvey, 2005). To ensure that students are learning, it is most useful for school leaders to review multiple measures of students’ achievement (Bernhardt, 1998). Student test data from standardized exams and system-level accountability data, to name a few, are used to make important decisions for the continued advancement of the school (Clauser, Keller, & McDermott, 2016). Other data collected by school leaders can be just as telling, including students’ demographic data and survey data from parents and students regarding their perceptions of the
school and its role in meeting students’ needs, as well as information collected from teachers to
determine if they are engaging in best instructional practices in their classrooms (Bernhardt,
2005). Data analysis is crucial to the development of high performing schools, especially when
principals utilize data for the purpose of measuring students’ learning (Shen et al., 2016). While
data analysis occurs throughout school systems, it is most influential at the school level, when
undertaken by principals who desire to implement change (Clauser et al., 2016). Armed with
information gleaned from data analysis, principals have the power to impact the ways all
stakeholders use and understand test data (Supovitz & Klein, 2003). When principals encourage
their staff members to analyze students’ data to look for trends, even greater improvements in
student achievement have been noticed (Zmuda, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004).

Effective data analysis cannot occur without using the proper tools. Schools should
invest in tools, including student information systems, data warehouses, and instructional
management systems, that can provide teachers and school leaders with quick access to students’
information to help them make better decisions about students’ needs (Bernhardt, 2005). Student
information systems are useful for tracking students’ demographics information, such as
attendance, discipline referrals, and enrollment information, while also keeping track of students’
basic information, including addresses, phone numbers, and parental contact information
(Bernhardt, 2005). Data warehouses allow schools and districts to analyze students’ data from a
variety of databases to reach necessary conclusions about teachers’ instruction and schools’
programming needs (Bernhardt, 2005). Instructional management systems are designed to help
teachers align their instruction to curriculum-based standards and raise students’ standardized
test scores (Bernhardt, 2005).
The lack of tools is only one reason why school leaders may not utilize data to its fullest potential. For data analysis to be useful, it must be deemed important by those in positions of authority; it is vital for administrators to place emphasis on procedural data analysis so that teachers and other school personnel understand its importance (Bernhardt, 2000). Additionally, most educators lack proper training in data analysis to use it effectively to benefit their students (Bernhardt, 2000). There is also a stigma of fear attached to the process that something may be revealed through data analysis that teachers and administrators may be afraid of uncovering; in this case, some educators believe that *ignorance is bliss* (Bernhardt, 2000).

At the district level, data analysis also plays an important role in school improvement. Supervisors measure students’ growth over time to determine what system-wide professional development needs for educators must be met, and if there are any existing procedural deficits that need to be addressed (Clauser et al., 2016). Curriculum directors and specialists also review data to make curriculum decisions for determining if current programming is beneficial to the district’s students, or if additional resources are necessary for maximum learning potential (Clauser et al., 2016).

**Principals as Educational Leaders**

Today’s principals face difficult challenges, including managing students’ attendance and discipline, supervising teachers and other staff members, maintaining safe learning environments, communicating important information to stakeholders, analyzing data for decision-making, and developing plans for school improvement (Day & Sammons, 2016). Though school improvement is a continuous process that begins with a plan and builds upon how well that plan is carried out, the process could not be implemented without the determined leadership of courageous school administrators (Angelle & Anfara, Jr., 2006). For better or
worse, principals are held responsible for the level of students’ academic achievement in their schools (Ross & Gray, 2006). Effective principals must exhibit school improvement capacity, which is defined by Heck and Hallinger (2010) as a “set of conditions that support teaching and learning, enable the professional learning of the staff, and provide a means for implementing strategic action aimed at continuous improvement” (p. 228). School administrators can build school improvement capacity by establishing a clear vision for improvement, promoting a positive culture of learning, endorsing high standards for teachers and students, building teacher efficacy, providing teachers with leadership opportunities, fostering positive relationships with teachers, making coaching and mentoring options available for both beginning and veteran educators, encouraging the usage of best instructional practices by teachers, and involving parents and community members in the improvement process.

Establishing a clear vision for improvement. As school leaders, administrators are looked upon for guidance to determine which direction or plan of action schools will follow next to make the most gains for students (Mendez-Morse, 1993). Therefore, it is the responsibility of principals to establish a clear vision for schools’ futures in terms of educational reform; without a distinct plan for future development aligned with specific goals, schools cannot make necessary progress toward improving students’ achievement (Kantabutra, 2005). Teachers and administrators alike prefer a clear vision for their schools; they want to know where they are going and what they need to do professionally to get there (Kemp, Hardy, & Harris, 2014; Korkmaz, 2006). A principal’s vision is a driving factor in achieving school improvement goals, as he or she is inspired by the vision created for the school and motivated to engage educators within the school to help realize the potential for the school and its students as determined by that vision (Mendez-Morse, 1993). A vital component for the success of any principal’s vision
for improvement is helping faculty embrace that vision (Mayotte, Wei, Lamphier, & Doyle, 2013). Korkmaz (2006) notes, however, that healthy schools involve input from all stakeholder groups in the development of school vision, including teachers, parents, community members, and students; this holds true in developing visionary plans for school improvement as well.

When crafting a vision for school improvement, principals must consider many factors that play into the outcome of schools’ successes. The needs of all students must be taken into account, including those with disabilities and those in poverty, as well as those students who struggle with English-language proficiency or other areas of academic concern, such as low high school graduation rates (Irby & Lunenburg, 2009). To do this, principals, teachers, and other stakeholders must work together to create a vision that revamps schools’ current educational culture, which involves examining age-old norms, values, traditions, and myths associated with the school community (Irby & Lunenburg, 2009; Smith & Stolp, 1995). Keeping as many historical perspectives intact as possible while drawing on the strengths of the school to make academic improvements helps establish a positive vision of change within the school community that can adapt over time, depending on the needs of the students (Pasi, 2003). Just as importantly, principals’ visions for school improvement must align to the visions set forth by school division leaders for the system as a whole, and to national and global trends in education to provide students with the best educational opportunities possible (Irby & Lunenburg, 2009).

Promoting a positive culture of learning. Oftentimes, when schools are labeled as failing or needing improvement, they lose sight of their most important goal of helping students learn (Fullan, 1991). In a struggle to regain their accreditation status, these schools attempt multiple approaches to reform their instructional operations without the desired results their leaders had hoped to achieve (Fuhrman, 1993). Rather than evaluate and change the parts of
their curriculum and instruction that have led to their students’ lackluster performance, these schools choose to implement additional programs to satisfy improvement plan goals (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). In instances such as these, it is necessary for principals to examine their schools’ culture of learning. This is the foundation of the school improvement process; without a school culture committed to learning, lasting change cannot occur (Bailey, Cameron, & Cortez-Ford, 2004).

To bring about positive change in schools, principals must establish a culture for learning for their staff members that promotes collective learning and sharing, as well as instilling change capacity in their teachers (Fullan, 2009). According to Newmann, King, and Youngs (2000), change capacity (the ability of an organization to achieve its goals) is essential for schools to develop new learning cultures for overall improvement. By endorsing a school climate that supports teachers’ learning from each other and reflecting upon daily successes and failures, principals can change the learning culture of their schools (Fullan, 2009). Providing teachers with opportunities to learn together, through planned professional development and the safe environment of the school’s professional learning community, allows teachers to build trust in themselves and each other, collaborate while making decisions, and share a sense of purpose (Deal & Peterson, 2009).

**Endorsing high standards for teachers and students.** To make sure that goals are met, and that the school’s vision comes closer to being a reality, both teachers and students need to be held to higher standards than in the past. By endorsing a climate of high expectations for teachers and students, school leaders send a message that improvement is of vital importance and that all participants play key roles in preparing students for college and career readiness (ACT, 2012). American students must be able to compete not just locally, but nationally and globally,
with other students; as industry shifts and job demands change, students must have the skills needed to be more desirable to employers in the future (Aspengren, 2014). Additionally, parents and caregivers want to be sure their children are learning what they need to be the most successful (Education Post, 2014). Holding teachers to higher standards, and in turn, forcing them to require more rigorous study from their students encouraging higher order thinking skills, is necessary to effect change in students’ academic progress (Williamson & Blackburn, 2009).

**Building teacher efficacy.** Another critical factor for the success of school improvement measures is the building of teacher efficacy. There are two types of teacher efficacy: personal teacher efficacy and collective teacher efficacy. Personal teacher efficacy refers to teachers’ attitudes about their own abilities to teach their students (Bandura, 1977). Fuchs, Fuchs, and Bishop (1992) found that teachers who possessed a stronger sense of self-efficacy were more willing to implement changes leading to higher student achievement suggested by school leadership than those with weaker self-efficacy. Additionally, these teachers were more likely to involve families in students’ learning as well (Garcia, 2004).

Collective teacher efficacy is the idea that teachers’ beliefs in their roles as a combined faculty can positively impact students (Brinson & Steiner, 2007). According to research (Bandura, 1993; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2000) principals should spend more time building teacher efficacy because it can help improve students’ academic performance and diminish the effects of low socioeconomic status on students’ achievement. It is important to note, however, that teachers’ beliefs must be partnered with ongoing, targeted professional development in order to foster a group commitment toward improving students’ learning outcomes (Brinson & Steiner, 2007). School leaders can work to build collective teacher efficacy by providing teachers with opportunities to work together to construct trusting relationships and shared beliefs among
faculty members (Goddard et al., 2000). Through close examination of teachers’ own mastery experiences, both successes and failures, and learning about others’ experiences vicariously, teachers can strengthen their efficacy and lend support to their fellow teachers (Huber, 1996).

**Providing teachers with leadership opportunities.** Strong school leaders understand that they cannot undertake all school improvement tasks themselves; they need help to make their schools as successful as possible (Aspen Institute, 2014). In today’s world, the role of the school administrator has expanded to include the duties of management, data analyst, guidance counselor, public relations expert, policy maker, and academic coach (Tobin, 2014). Principals spend 70-80% of their time each day involved in interpersonal communication, including face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations, and email messages, which can be overwhelming when faced with other duties of running a school (Lunenburg, 2011). The most resourceful principals identify teachers in their schools with leadership potential and delegate responsibilities to them (New Leaders, 2015). Developing teacher leaders provides them with hands-on practice to lead by performing tasks assigned by administrators within the scope of their positions in the classroom (New Leaders, 2014). Allowing teachers the opportunity to become lead teachers, leaders of extended reach teams or school development teams, serves the needs of the students and the school while providing teachers with experience to advance their careers (Doyle, 2013).

Engaging teachers in the decision-making process is a characteristic that administrators from the most successful schools share (New Leaders, 2014). During the school improvement process, principals can feel pressured to make academic gains for students (Schmoker, 2001). Sharing responsibilities with teacher leaders can give teachers a sense of purpose as changes occur during school improvement, help with creating and shaping a shared vision for continuous improvement, and secure other teachers buy-in to that vision while helping lighten the load for
Notably, making teachers feel a connection to the importance of the tasks associated with school improvement, including improving students’ academic standing, refining teachers’ abilities in the classroom, and cultivating teachers’ leadership skills (Marishane, 2016).

**Fostering positive relationships with teachers.** One of the most crucial indicators of whether a school will be successful when engaging in continuous school improvement is the relationships among teachers and the principal (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). Teachers want leaders in their corner who will listen to their concerns and act accordingly as needed; they seek encouragement from administrators that their work is needed and appreciated (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In turn, principals need teachers on their staff who will promote the best interests of the students and the school above their own (Miller, Garciduenas, Green, Shatola, & Enumba, 2008). Two primary components in achieving symbiotic relationships between teachers and administrators is showing respect for one’s time and being accessible when needed (Miller et al., 2008). Teachers expect school leaders to value their time as much as they do, and they prefer not to give away any time for tasks, meetings, or professional development that they deem to be irrelevant (Miller et al., 2008). Likewise, administrators’ time is a precious commodity; they rarely have time to spare, and need every additional moment to focus on the needs of the school (Fullan, 1997). School leaders build relationships with teachers by making themselves available when necessary; being open and approachable when problems arise sends a message to teachers that administrators want to be a resource to them rather than a hindrance (Barlow, 2001).

The key factor in building strong working relationships during a period of reform is trust, as real change can only begin where there are solid foundations built on trust (Hale, 2000). As
pointed out by Tschannen-Moran (2001), for collaboration to take place between administrators and teachers within a school, trust is essential. Teachers who trust their administrators are more likely to buy in to improvement ideas and provide support for change initiatives that are put in place because they believe their leaders care about the welfare of the students and staff of the school (Miller et al., 2008). School leaders can build trust in their relationships with teachers by engaging in two-way communication, spending time listening to the needs of teachers, and encouraging teachers to develop solutions to problems as they arise (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Also, leaders who take a deeper interest in the lives of their employees achieve a greater degree of respect from their staff, solidifying relationships and increasing measures of trust (Lencioni, 2007; Sebring & Bryk, 2000).

Making coaching and mentoring options available for both beginning and veteran educators. Continuous school improvement efforts can be exhaustive for all members of a school’s staff, but especially for those providing instruction. School reform has been ongoing for decades, and throughout all the changes in instructional programming, teaching styles, and school leadership, the one constant has been classroom teachers (Levine & Marcus, 2007). While some principals try to improve schools’ standings by implementing new policies and research-based procedures, others offer teachers opportunities to collaborate with more experienced educators via coaching and mentoring programs (Steiner & Kowal, 2007). The benefits of coaching and mentoring programs in schools include building skills, improving performance, developing talents, solving problems, and fostering professional development for all educators involved (Holloway, 2001; Payne, 2006).

Instructional coaching, when implemented effectively by a knowledgeable school administrator, is a collaborative process that helps teachers improve their classroom performance
and ultimately leads to greater student progress (Yirci, Karakose, & Kocabas, 2016). In their research, Cornett and Knight (2008) found that coaching is a useful form of professional development that can lead to teachers’ improved attitudes about their work, better instructional practice and a greater sense of efficacy, as well as higher student achievement. The purpose of coaching teachers in their classrooms is to give them an opportunity to identify problems with the way they deliver instruction or complete other processes (such as classroom management, lesson planning, or conflict resolution, etc.) essential to educating students and provide them with a model for making changes to enhance their performance by further developing necessary skills (Barutcu & Ozbay, 2009; Yirci et al., 2016). Successful coaching involves building a trusting relationship between the teacher and the coach that promotes the teacher’s growth through frequent examination, personal reflection, and communication (Kilburg, 2000). School leaders can participate in this process by offering their own coaching services due to their involvement in classroom observations, or hire instructional coaches to guide teachers who may need additional help; the coaching process is not intended to be a long-term service for struggling teachers, but a short-range plan to improve their performance (Yirci et al., 2016).

Mentoring programs involve pairing a more experienced teacher with a pre-service or novice teacher to offer support, advice, and encouragement as he or she delves into teaching for the first time (Anderson & Shannon, 1988; Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009). Mentoring programs that afford beginning teachers the chance to reflect on their experiences in the classroom, converse with knowledgeable educators, and collaborate with other teachers are most valuable for aiding in the school improvement process as these programs improve teachers’ instructional practices (Danielson, 1999). Well-crafted mentoring programs in which first-year teachers are supported both emotionally and professionally by an experienced mentor teacher
have been found to lower teacher turn-over rates by at least ten percent; high attrition rates also pose problems for struggling schools, as their leaders are faced with replacing teachers frequently due to job dissatisfaction (Gold, 1999; National Association of State Boards of Education, 1998). To ensure that mentoring programs foster teachers’ development, those chosen to serve as mentor teachers require explicit training focused on developing mentoring and communication skills as well as promoting accountability for new teachers (Richardson, Glessner, and Tolson, 2007). An added benefit of teacher mentoring is that mentors often report learning as much from the experience as their mentees, as the process allows them to feel helpful to young colleagues, respected for their years of experience and expertise in the field, and reenergized as a result of working with youthful teachers (Holloway, 2001; Scott, 1999). This type of energy is essential for the school improvement process to produce results in schools with new teachers on staff.

**Encouraging the usage of best instructional practices.** Effective school leaders can help their schools improve by promoting instructional practices that are backed by research and proven to get the best results for students’ achievement. For principals to be successful, they must be leaders in learning; the higher their skill levels, the higher the levels of achievement can be expected from the students in their schools (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). Administrators must keep abreast of current educational research to share useful information with teachers in their buildings (Bottoms, 2003). By sharing information with teachers on topics such as instructional planning, differentiated and explicit instruction, student engagement strategies, formative and summative assessment, progress monitoring, effective feedback, intervention and enrichment strategies, and self-reflection, school leaders afford teachers opportunities to strengthen their own instructional practices, insuring that students receive a higher quality educational
experience, thereby raising teachers’ and administrators’ expectations for students (Bottoms, 2003; Fullan, 2009). This is especially important during school improvement initiatives, as teachers look to principals as leaders of learning within their schools (Weigel & Jones, 2015).

As administrators encourage their teachers to use the best research-based instructional strategies, they should include the findings of educational analyst Robert Marzano. To learn which instructional strategies were most effective in aiding students’ progress, Marzano conducted a meta-analysis of the results of more than one hundred research studies involving typical classroom instruction, looking for indicators of higher academic achievement in the more than 1.2 million participants whose data he reviewed; from this analysis, Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock identified nine categories of instructional strategies most related to higher levels of student achievement and ranked them by effect size, from greatest to least (Brabec, Fisher, & Pitler, 2004; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). These nine instructional strategies include 1) identifying similarities and differences, 2) summarizing and note taking, 3) reinforcing effort and providing recognition, 4) homework and practice, 5) nonlinguistic representation, 6) cooperative learning, 7) setting goals and providing feedback, 8) generating and testing hypotheses, and 9) cues, questions, and advance organizers (Marzano et al., 2001). By converting effect size into percentile gains, the researchers learned that the effective implementation of the first strategy, identifying similarities and differences, could net teachers a percentile gain of forty-five in regards to students’ achievement (Brabec et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2001). Incorporating these nine instructional strategies into teachers’ daily lesson planning and educational practices ensure higher levels of students’ success; teachers must first model these strategies for their students multiple times before expecting them to practice them on their own (Brabec et al., 2004). As the instructional leaders of their schools, principals must make
classroom observations a priority to determine if the most useful strategies are being modeled and promoted for students’ use (Weigel & Jones, 2015).

**Involving parents and community members in the improvement process.** Even though school leaders are held responsible for the success or failure of their schools, they simply cannot implement the kind of change needed to transform underperforming schools by themselves; they need help (Habegger, 2008). As they navigate the winding roads of school reform, it is easiest for principals to harness the power of teachers and students within their schools since they have access to them most frequently. For school improvement efforts to be effective, school leaders require as much support as possible from stakeholders, including parents and community members; this task can be challenging for administrators who have not developed a network of support within the school community (Sanders, Sheldon, & Epstein, 2005). Multiple research studies show that parents’ involvement in their children’s educational journeys is extremely important in determining students’ and schools’ successes; more involvement from parents leads to better behaviors in the classroom and improved attendance at school (Christenson, 2004; Epstein, 2001; Sanders, Epstein, & Connors-Tadros, 1999; & Van Voorhis, 2003). Partnering with parents, family and community members to provide support for students is a wise use of human capital; this is especially true in schools that lack funds for additional resources, such as personnel and instructional materials, needed to make positive gains for schoolwide improvement (Boyd & Crowson, 1993).

Gaining community support for school improvement efforts requires school leaders who understand how necessary this collaboration between teachers, students, and members of the community is to the success of the school (Preston, 2013). Examples of community involvement can include local people becoming active in the school, patrons initiating programs (such as
establishing scholarships, mentoring programs, apprenticeships, or charitable events), or activities (like field trips or service-learning opportunities) designed to encourage students’ success (Epstein, 2011). School leaders can foster community involvement by sustaining a welcoming environment to the public and by appearing approachable and interested in citizens’ lives and the local community at-large (Newton, 1993). Strong principals can create a network of community members to bridge the gaps that may exist in the school environment and provide additional support for their schools by utilizing social capital—connecting those members of the community who want to help despite their backgrounds (Preston, 2013).

**Perceptions of Teacher Leadership**

Teachers and administrators play crucial roles in the success of schools; without either, schools could not function as centers for education. Both teachers and administrators are tasked with leading schools forward to effect positive change for students, their families and the school community at-large (Vlachadi & Ferla, 2013). Thus, effective leadership throughout is imperative for high quality schools. With increasing demands on school principals to transform schools into institutions of higher learning, the need for teacher leaders has never been greater. Teacher leadership, as defined by York-Barr and Duke (2004), involves teachers working with colleagues in their schools to improve learning for students by promoting better instructional and organizational practices. Teacher leadership positions can be formal or informal, voluntary or involuntary; teachers who lead others in their schools are actively involved in shaping school culture and fulfilling the needs of students and staff (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). School principals who promote the idea that distributed leadership, or multiple sources of guidance within the school sharing their expertise to propel it forward, is most beneficial for the growth and development of the school as a whole, believe that sharing authority and responsibility with
colleagues encourages productivity (Elmore, 2000; Harris & Muijs, 2003; Storey, 2004).

Because multiple research studies (Danielson, 2006; Harris & Lambert, 2003; Harris & Muijs, 2003; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) have found that distributed teacher leadership is a key factor in sustaining change and attaining greater student achievement during the school improvement process, it is important for more school leaders to adopt this type of positive culture in their schools.

**School Improvement: Rural Schools’ Dilemma**

Rural areas are defined as those with fewer than 2,500 residents in an area (Arnold, Biscoe, Farmer, Robertston, & Shapley, 2007; Lawrence, 2009). Presently, approximately 10 million students around the country are enrolled in rural school divisions, which accounts for more than 20% of the nation’s public school enrollment (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). Although school improvement measures are continuous and mandated by individual state boards of education, which has resulted in school systems around the country feeling the pressure to improve their performance, many rural school districts are suffering for other reasons. While they too are underperforming in the area of student achievement, rural schools face challenges that urban and suburban school districts do not; the lack of funding they receive as a result of low student enrollment has left them too crippled to recover (Harmon, Gordanier, Henry, & George, 2007). Due to their limited funds, these systems cannot afford to pay competitive salaries or provide benefits for highly qualified teachers, hire additional support personnel, or purchase necessary equipment and resources for students’ learning (Harmon et al., 2007). It is also more difficult to recruit highly qualified educators to work in rural districts due to limited opportunities for social and cultural stimulation (Robinson, Bursuck, & Sinclair, 2013).
Additionally, rural educators may lack familiarity with trending research-based strategies, as they may not have access to frequent professional development training due to geographic isolation (Glover et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2013). Expenses associated with professional development, such as travelling, registration fees, meals, etc., may prove too daunting for educators in rural areas to seek training opportunities (Clarke & Wildly, 2011). Another challenge facing rural teachers is communities’ acceptance of low student achievement as normal (Harmon et al., 2007). With many of these communities undergoing severe economic crises, populations continue to decrease, diminishing local tax bases and resulting in fewer students for schools’ enrollment counts (Harmon et al., 2007). According to the Southern Education Foundation (2013), forty-four percent of rural students are eligible for free or reduced price meals as provided by the National School Lunch Program, meaning that many rural families are impoverished. As socioeconomic status is the single greatest predictor of students’ success at school, it devastates rural educators to learn that so many of their students are perilously behind in their studies (Chandler, 2014).

**Improving Reading Achievement in Elementary Schools**

With schools being held to higher degrees of accountability since the reauthorization of 2001’s No Child Left Behind legislation, school leaders have become more aware of students’ performance in core instructional areas; no results have been more revealing of students’ shortcomings in the classroom than their standardized test scores in reading. According to a study conducted by Bursuck, Smith, Munk, Damer, Mehling, and Perry (2004), forty percent of fourth grade students lack knowledge and skills necessary to complete grade-level tasks. A similar study by Calhoon (2005) determined that fifty-nine percent of fourth grade students are performing below their expected grade level on standardized reading tests. Sadly, these deficits
do not usually improve as students progress through school, as approximately twenty-three percent of adults in the United States meet only basic reading proficiency levels (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). With governmental mandates now requiring that students be proficient readers, comfortable with information presented to them in a variety of text styles and genres, elementary school teachers must work diligently toward helping their students achieve mastery of reading skills early on (Verlaan, Ortlieb, & Verlaan, 2014).

Acquiring reading abilities is difficult for some children; at least twenty percent of students struggle while learning to read (Therrien, 2004). As noted by Fitts and Peterson (1964), the process of reading skills acquisition for students begins with cognition then progresses to an associative stage before reaching the information processing stage. Children who are poor readers usually experienced difficulties with skills acquisition early in the process of learning to read, and those problems continue and worsen over time (Graney, 2000). Students who cannot reach the information processing stage in the reading process because they lack the skills and desires of a fluent reader are defined as non-readers (Martin & Pappas, 2006). Due to their problems with comprehension, phonics, and vocabulary, these non-readers often feel frustration which hinders their reading progression and longing to become true readers (Neuman & Gambrell, 2013; Ortlieb & Cheek, 2012).

To ensure that students begin acquiring necessary reading skills at an appropriate age, elementary schools emphasize reading instruction for students in grades kindergarten through three (Edwards, Neill, & Faust, 2015). During these early grades, teachers focus children’s reading instruction on building their phonemic awareness and decoding abilities (Hausheer, Hansen, & Doumas, 2011). When students reach fourth grade, however, teachers’ regimen for continuing reading instruction changes from instructing students how to read to helping them use
their acquired skills to learn curriculum content, which forces students to apply comprehension skills to all texts read for classes (Burns & Gibbons, 2008). Without having acquired basic reading skills, from this point onward, non-reading students may feel unmotivated to work toward improving their reading abilities, which is why encouragement from teachers is a vital necessity for continued progress (Marinak & Gambrell, 2013; Ortlieb, 2013).

To provide non-readers with opportunities to grow into skilled readers, all teachers must integrate literacy skills practice into their daily core instruction to address students’ deficits (Brozo, 2010). Incorporating strategies such as assisted reading, paired reading, and reading while listening as part of teachers’ recurrent classroom practices have been found to boost students’ reading fluency and comprehension (Therrien, 2004). Struggling readers can also benefit from instructional strategies that focus on their needs and allow them to receive more individualized help from their teachers and peers, such as small group instruction, direct questioning and response, and sustained reading periods (Calhoon, 2005). Literacy coaches can be useful to classroom teachers who need assistance helping non-readers as well; by sharing their literacy expertise with teachers, they can help spark change and innovation in classrooms through targeted reading interventions and remediation strategies for students in need of extra support (Walker, 2008). The most beneficial strategies for struggling students provide them with opportunities to feel successful as readers while learning core content (Ortlieb, 2013).

**Summary**

With increased federal and state accountability requirements placed on schools as a result of reform efforts including No Child Left Behind, schools around the country are now involved in the continuous cycle of school improvement, a process devoted to refining educators’ instructional practices to facilitate students’ learning. School improvement is a complex,
intricate process that includes all members of a school’s instructional staff collaborating as one professional learning community to improve students’ achievement. Both principal and teacher leadership are critical for the process to be successful; principals and teachers must be trustful and respectful of each other in order for there to be instructional growth. Administrators must build strong partnerships with parents and community members to aid in their school improvement efforts; without the support of all stakeholders, school leaders cannot realize their visions for successful schools. Components of school improvement include professional development, teacher evaluations and classroom observations, response to intervention initiatives, and data analysis. By implementing these strategies, school leaders can help build internal accountability for their schools, transforming under-performing schools and building teachers’ professional capacity.

Principals must act as change agents within their schools; to successfully steer their schools’ improvement process, they must be knowledgeable in the duties and responsibilities associated with school leadership. Envisioning change and involving others in its development, establishing a culture that focuses on both students’ and teachers’ educational advancement, urging teachers and students to perform to the best of the abilities, and building teachers’ individual and collective sense of efficacy are just the beginning steps when administrators are tasked with turning around a low-performing school. Cultivating strong relationships with educators, offering them opportunities to grow as professionals by participating in coaching or mentoring programs, and encouraging their use of sound, research-based instructional practices comprise next steps of the process. Knowing how and when to ask for help from parents and other members of the community is the final step of school reform, as it is so important to maintain a degree of transparency when encouraging their involvement in the school community.
Rural schools with students from low income families are typically low-performing schools; due to their location, these schools suffer from a host of problems, such as finding and keeping highly qualified staff, and teachers seeking professional development opportunities. Rural schools’ leaders often see high-stakes testing as damaging to students’ and teachers’ self-esteem, and the pressure associated with them as unfair (Egley & Jones, 2004). Many students in rural schools receive free or reduced meals, as they are impoverished. Coming from a culture associated with such low expectations for success has detrimental effects on these students’ academic achievement, especially in the areas of math and reading.

To help elementary students perform better in the area of reading, there are strategies that can be implemented as part of a continuous school improvement plan to bolster struggling readers’ capabilities. Paired reading, assisted reading, and reading while listening are examples of research-based strategies that, coupled with individualized help and small group instruction, can help poor readers attain comprehension and fluency. Literacy coaches can provide additional support for content area teachers who many need assistance with struggling readers in their classes. Affording students as many opportunities as possible to build confidence with the skills is necessary for their development as readers.
Chapter Three

Research Methodology

Introduction

This chapter reviews the research methodology for the following study of perceptions of best practices in school improvement. Included in this chapter are descriptions of qualitative research, the specific research approach selected by the researcher for this study, the setting and the participants, and data collection procedures. Also discussed are ethical considerations and data analysis procedures for the study. The chapter ends with a summary of the aforementioned research methodology information.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a broad subject with a history rooted in multiple fields of study, including business, law, medicine, communication, education, anthropology, sociology, and history (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2014; Saldana, 2014). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) define qualitative research as “multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive and naturalistic approach to its subject matter” (p. 2). The process involves gathering data through observations or interviews with research participants, or collecting documents or artifacts for analysis (Riehl, 2001; Silverman, 1993). Qualitative research takes place in the subject’s natural environment, as opposed to studying the subject in a laboratory, clinic, or unfamiliar setting; this allows the researcher to explore the relationship between the subject and its environment, and the factors that may impact that relationship (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Qualitative research is sometimes compared to quantitative research, which collects data to analyze mathematically, usually by statistical analysis (Muijs, 2011). Data analysis for
Qualitative researchers is much more laborious than analyzing quantitative data; examining artifacts and documents collected, and transcribing field notes as well as interview transcripts takes a great deal of time and effort (Ary et al., 2014). As noted by Hogan, Dolan, and Donnelly (2009), there are three phases of qualitative analysis: gathering, managing, and analyzing data. Unlike data gathered for quantitative research, qualitative researchers have no mathematical formulae for finding meaning in their data (Ary et al., 2014). They must organize and reduce their data, and synthesize (or code) it to find patterns and themes to determine what is useful to their research; only then can they begin to interpret what they’ve analyzed and use this information to establish theories about a phenomenon (Ary et al., 2014). The process is cyclical, and is described by Creswell (2007) as a data analysis spiral in which the researcher must continue to repeat each step again and again in order to draw conclusions from the data.

Just as important as the data analysis is the way qualitative research is presented to others for review. Based on their findings, researchers can choose to share their representations with others by creating graphs, tables, diagrams, or figures; others may choose to present their findings in narrative form, depending on the approach of qualitative study undertaken by the researcher (Ary et al., 2014). There are varying approaches for qualitative researchers to take when performing research; these include case study, ethnography, grounded theory, content analysis, historical research, narrative inquiry, and phenomenological research (Ary et al., 2014; Trochim, 2006).

For this qualitative study focused on gaining a better understanding of teachers’ perceptions of best practices utilized for school improvement, the researcher chose to employ the grounded theory approach because it gave the researcher opportunities to observe and interview teachers who had experience implementing school improvement practices in their classrooms, as
well as collect documents and other artifacts that would help develop a theory regarding teachers’ perceptions of school improvement practices.

**Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory is an approach to research that seeks to build an inductive theory “from the ground up” based on the data collected from people regarding a particular idea or phenomenon (Ary et al., 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Developed by Glaser and Strauss as a reaction to the research approach positivism, grounded theory provides a way for social scientists and others to produce new theories from data collected during and after their research, rather than expounding on the theories of others (Cho & Lee, 2014; Birks & Mills, 2011). Glaser and Strauss’ method allows researchers to construct theories around the data they collect, connecting it to the process used to analyze it (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Scott, 1996). Grounded theory research is appropriate for researchers who do not already have a theory to test with their study and want the data collected to determine what they will theorize (Martin & Turner, 1986).

Data collection is an important part of the process for grounded theory research, as studies are driven by researchers seeking answers to questions to establish theories (Ary et al., 2014). The primary methods of data collection involved in the grounded theory research method are participant observation, interviewing, and collection of artifacts and texts (Ary et al., 2014; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Participant observation involves the researcher performing fieldwork by observing and making notes in the setting of those participants being studied (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Interviewing techniques used for grounded theory research can include formal interviews (both structured and unstructured) or informal conversational interviews, or a mixture of the two, depending on what is indicated by the study (Ary et al., 2014; Chenitz & Swanson,
1986; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Utilizing multiple interview approaches offers flexibility to the researcher to gather data by asking questions of the study participants, as necessitated by the theory as it unfolds (Gass & Wimpenny, 2000; Glaser & Holton, 2007; May, 1991). Artifacts such as letters, speeches, diaries, surveys, etc., can also be mined for research data, depending on it how the artifacts relate to the study and its participants (Ary et al., 2014).

Once data has been collected from participants, it must be analyzed by researchers to determine if any similarities or differences exist among the respondents’ answers to interview or survey questions; this allows researchers to look for patterns and group data into conceptual categories through a process known as coding according to certain properties found within participants’ interview responses, their own observation field notes, and any document analysis (Ary et al., 2014; Dillon, 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As Glaser and Holton (2007) point out, turning data collected from observing or interviewing participants, or analyzing artifacts, into coded concepts forms the foundation for grounded theory research. There are different types of coding involved in grounded theory analysis, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding is used to label or develop conceptual categories, while axial coding is used to label or develop subcategories and make connections to their larger conceptual categories (Ary et al., 2014; Dillon, 2012). Selective coding occurs when researchers filter out data that is not relevant to the conceptual categories, and then establish relationship between those categories and the subcategories (Ary et al., 2014; Dillon, 2012).

Researchers continue to compare data from different instruments until no new themes or information present themselves (Ary et al., 2014). When applying the constant comparative method of analysis, researchers repeat a cyclical process of comparing recently collected data with data that has already been processed and coded (Dillon, 2012). This provides researchers
the opportunity to reduce categories as necessary to form the framework for a theory (Ary et al., 2014). The process is arduous, however, and cannot be rushed, as it may fracture the development of a theory.

**Description of the Setting**

The researcher chose to conduct this study on teachers’ perceptions of best practices utilized in the school improvement process in a small, rural school district in Southwest Virginia due to familiarity with the school system and its leadership. The elementary school selected for this study was chosen to participate because its students made significant academic gains on state-mandated Standards of Learning (SOL) exams in the 2015-2016 school year, after being designated a school in need of improvement in the area of reading by the Virginia Department of Education following the 2014-2015 school year. Students in grades three, four, and five are tested in the spring of each year to determine their levels of proficiency on end-of-course exams; students tested at this elementary school averaged a 71% pass rate on reading exams for the 2014-2015 school year. The Virginia Department of Education’s current proficiency rate for reading is 75%, meaning all students’ scores must average at least 75% in order for a school to maintain its accreditation status. Because the students at the participating elementary school scored only 71% in reading but surpassed all the benchmarks set by the state for other core areas including mathematics, social studies, and science, it was granted partial accreditation status and warned in the area of reading. Following an intensive period of school improvement, students tested in the 2015-2016 school year averaged a 77% pass rate in the area of reading and the school earned full accreditation status for the 2016-2017 school year.

The elementary school selected for this study serves a population of approximately 520 students in grades pre-kindergarten through five, with approximately 218 of those students in
grades that must complete Standards of Learning exams each spring. The school has a student population that is approximately 98% Caucasian, 1.5% African American, and .5% Asian. Nearly 60% of the student body are identified as socio-economically disadvantaged and qualify for free or reduced lunches provided by the National School Lunch Program. All students speak English, with only two students identified as non-native, English-language learners. Approximately 13% of the student population receives special education services.

During the 2015-2016 school year, the elementary school underwent restructuring, adding fifth grade to its student body; this was the result of a project that consolidated all the district’s middle school students in grades six through eight and high school students in grades nine through twelve onto one comprehensive campus, eliminating a local middle school that housed fifth grade students as well. With those students came four additional teachers from the former local middle school, increasing the elementary school’s faculty and staff to 27 classroom teachers, four resource teachers, one Title One reading coach, four special education teachers, 24 instructional aides, one speech therapist, one guidance counselor, one part-time resource officer, one part-time occupational therapist, one part-time physical therapist, five cooks, five custodians, one nurse, one secretary, one assistant principal, and one principal.

**Description of the Participants**

Because this qualitative research focuses on teachers’ perceptions of best practices in school improvement, it was imperative for the researcher to find participants for the study who have engaged in the school improvement process. Of the participants involved in the study, twelve are classroom teachers in grades one through five, and one is a teacher who serves as a Title One reading coach for the school. Though all of these teachers are reading instructors, seven teach in self-contained classrooms while five teach in departmentalized grade-level blocks.
These participants’ points of view are important to the research as they implement school improvement plans in their classrooms as per directives from school, division, and state department personnel. Additionally, the researcher chose to involve others in the study who contributed to the school’s academic progress, including the school principal, the director of instruction for the school division, and the state-appointed interventionist who was assigned to the school during the 2015-2016 school year. These key players help determine the steps necessary for school improvement following data analysis, classroom observations, and other strategies, and note teachers’ reactions, concerns, struggles, and successes when carrying out school reform initiatives.

The level of professional experience and educational background for this group of participants varies. Four participants have fewer than ten years of service as educators, and five participants have more than ten years, but fewer than twenty. Four participants have served more than 20 years in the classroom, but fewer than 25 years. Three participants involved in the study have served more than 30 years in the education profession. The average number of years of service for this group of participants is 18.96 years. All participants are highly qualified and hold the correct endorsements to be teaching in an elementary school or working in a supervisory role, with eight of sixteen participants holding more than one teaching endorsement from the Virginia Department of Education. Additionally, five of the sixteen participants in this study have administrative or supervisory credentials included on their licensure. While all the participants have earned a bachelor’s degree initially, five have also earned a master’s degree, and one has earned a doctorate.
Table 3.1
*Demographics of Teacher Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assigned Number</th>
<th>Years Taught</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Subject(s) Taught</th>
<th>Endorsement(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>All subjects</td>
<td>Elementary education, grades p-6 Middle education, grades 6-8: history Administration and supervision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>All subjects</td>
<td>Elementary education, grades 1-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Language arts</td>
<td>Elementary education, grades p-6 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>All subjects</td>
<td>Elementary education, grades p-6 Middle education, grades 6-8: history Middle education, grades 6-8: math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Language arts Social studies</td>
<td>Elementary education, grades p-6 Middle education, grades 6-8: English Special Education, grades k-12 Administration and supervision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>All subjects</td>
<td>Early education, grades p-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Language arts Social studies</td>
<td>Elementary education, grades p-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>All (p-5)</td>
<td>Language arts Social studies</td>
<td>Elementary education, grades p-6 Middle education, grades 6-8: history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>All subjects</td>
<td>Early education, grades p-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Language arts Social studies</td>
<td>Elementary education, grades p-6 Middle education, grades 6-8: history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>All subjects</td>
<td>Early education, grades p-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Language arts Social studies</td>
<td>Elementary education, grades p-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>All (p-12)</td>
<td>State-appointed interventionist</td>
<td>Psychology Speech communication Special education, grades k-12 Administration and supervision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>All (p-12)</td>
<td>Division curriculum and instruction director</td>
<td>History and social sciences Administration and supervision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>All subjects</td>
<td>Early education, grades p-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>All (p-5)</td>
<td>School principal</td>
<td>Early education, grades p-4 Special education, grades k-12 Administration and supervision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * indicates participants with Masters degrees; † indicates participants with Doctorate degrees
Data Collection Procedures

To better understand teachers’ perceptions of best practices utilized in the school improvement process, the researcher planned a qualitative grounded theory study that incorporated data collection from three sources: one-to-one interviews with selected teacher participants from a rural elementary school and other key supporting staff; observations monitoring the implementation and use of best practices for school improvement; and artifact collection. Because the researcher did not already have a theory identified before beginning this study, it was important to create a research plan that provided flexibility to allow a theory to develop as a result of the insights provided by the variety of data samples and collection methods (Ary et al., 2014).

One-to-one interviews were conducted with sixteen selected participants from the representative elementary school and additional key staff. Interview questions were designed to focus the topic of discussion on teachers’ perceptions of best practices for school improvement, including their perceptions of the role of the principal in promoting the school improvement process, the practices that promote teacher engagement in the school improvement process, and the school improvement practices believed to promote increased student achievement in the content area of reading. The researcher created an interview guide containing eight open-ended questions to help direct participants toward sharing information with the researcher to help craft a theory (Gass & Wimpenny, 2000). The researcher allowed one hour for each one-to-one interview. All interviews were recorded, and notes were taken during each interview. Following each interview, the researcher transcribed each interview and made notes about the interview.

The researcher performed observations of study participants throughout the elementary school environment by attending professional development sessions, faculty meetings, and
grade-level planning sessions. As a complete observer, the researcher did not attempt to alter these experiences in any way, only record them for later analysis using an audio recorder and field notes (Ary et al., 2014). Following these observations, the researcher transcribed each observation and made notes about the observation experience.

Documents related to the elementary school’s improvement process were also collected by the researcher. Examples of these include available teachers’ quarterly benchmark test data and relevant meeting agendas and minutes. Document collection is useful in grounded theory if the researcher can situate the text within the context of the study; if not, the documents are useless and cannot provide a connection to one of the conceptual categories or subcategories (Ary, et al., 2014; Dillon, 2012). The researcher analyzed the documents by examining each for similarities and differences with previously gathered data (Ary et al., 2014).

Following data collection, the researcher performed member checks by asking study participants to review transcripts of their interviews and interactions, and make changes as needed so the researcher would be working with the most accurate data (Ary et. al., 2014; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

**Ethical Considerations**

Before beginning this study, the researcher completed an online course titled CITI: Course in the Protection of Human Subjects to help the researcher understand the basic rights of human participants in all research studies. Also, before beginning the study, the researcher sought and secured permission to proceed with the study from the Internal Review Board at Carson-Newman University. After receiving permission to begin the study from the Internal Review Board, the researcher met and secured permission to proceed with the study from the
superintendent of schools who leads the district where the small, rural elementary school is located. The superintendent approved the study, as did the principal of the elementary school (Appendix A).

After securing proper permission from the superintendent and principal to begin the study, and identifying subjects within the school and other key staff to interview and observe, the researcher invited those prospective participants to be part of the research study. The researcher began by explaining that no outside sources were connected to this study, as this study is a culminating experience to fulfill requirements for a doctoral degree from Carson-Newman University. The researcher provided each potential participant with an outline detailing the purpose and conditions of the study, and the roles of the researcher and the participant in the study; additionally, the researcher explained that any and all information obtained throughout the course of the study, by means of interview, observation, or document collection, would remain anonymous and confidential, and would only be used by the researcher for the purpose of developing and further understanding a research theory (Appendix B). To maintain confidentiality, the researcher explained to each possible participant that all audio, written, or document data would be transcribed by the researcher, and all data (in its original and analyzed form) would be stored on a password-protected computer during and after the study.

The researcher explained that each prospective participant had a right to privacy, and to respect from the researcher. At no time would a participant’s dignity or health be compromised as a result of the study, nor would their students’ be either. Furthermore, no one would be compensated for participating in the study, or penalized for not participating; it was an optional experience. After providing time for questions or comments, the researcher then asked each
potential participant to indicate their full consent to participate in the study by signing a permission form.

**Data Analysis**

As noted by Ary et. Al., (2014) “data analysis is the most complex and mysterious phase of qualitative research” (513). The researcher spent a considerable amount of time analyzing data from this grounded theory study involving teachers’ perceptions of best practices utilized in school improvement. First the researcher became familiar with the data from the interviews, observations, field notes, and document collection by rereading it multiple times in order to organize it appropriately using the NVivo computer software (Ary et al., 2014; Cho & Lee, 2014). While being immersed in the data, the researcher created memos about insights captured from rereading the transcripts’ information over and over again (Birks & Mills, 2011). Using NVivo to help search for patterns of similarities and differences in the data, the researcher began the open coding process to label conceptual categories, then moved on to axial coding, still making memos as relationships between the conceptual categories and subcategories came to light (Ary et. al., 2014; Dillon, 2012).

After reviewing the data numerous times, the researcher started reducing the coded categories as themes became prevalent (Ary et. al., 2014). Continuing to review data from transcripts, code the remaining data as conceptual categories and subcategories, label them, write memos about relationships, and reduce unnecessary information led the researcher to connect certain themes within the data. (Ary et. al., 2014). This allowed the researcher to begin finding meaning in the data, and create a visual representation of the coded information. From the concept map created, the researcher performed the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis, and again coded the data to create conceptual categories and find relationships to
help establish a theory about teachers’ perceptions of best practices utilized for school improvement purposes (Dillon, 2012).

To complete data analysis, the researcher performed data triangulation to determine if the results from all the researcher’s data collection methods (one-to-one interviews, observations, and document analysis) converged on similar findings (Ary et. al., 2014; Mays & Pope, 2000). Following triangulation, the researcher engaged in the co-coding, or peer review, process with a colleague to determine if the researcher’s initial interpretation of the data was within reason, making the interpretation valid (Ary, et. al., 2014).

**Summary**

To determine teachers’ perceptions of the best practices utilized in the school improvement process, including their perceptions of the role of the principal in promoting the school improvement process, the practices that promote teacher engagement in the school improvement process, and the school improvement practices believed to promote increased student achievement in the content area of reading, the researcher designed a qualitative grounded theory study that took place in a small, rural elementary school in Southwest Virginia whose students made significant academic gains during the 2015-2016 school year. After receiving permission from the Internal Review Board of Carson-Newman University and the school division superintendent, and giving careful ethical considerations to the study and its potential subjects, the researcher solicited participants for the study who worked primarily as teachers of reading and school improvement leaders at the elementary school.

Following gaining the participants’ consent, data collection began with one-to-one interviews, observations of participants in the school environment, and collecting documents for
analysis. Transcriptions of data were completed and participants were given the opportunity to member check their responses for accuracy. Next, the researcher began analyzing data using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to look for patterns within the transcribed data. The patterns created conceptual categories and subcategories, which, after reducing the data through constant comparative analysis, gave way to themes.

After multiple cycles of analysis, the researcher developed a theory from the data collected during the study. To make sure the theory was reasonable, the researcher triangulated the data from all three methods of data collection, then engaged in co-coding for validation. By taking these steps, the researcher was able to validate the study and the theory established to help determine teachers’ perceptions of the best practices used in the school improvement process.
Chapter Four

Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of this grounded theory qualitative study was to determine teachers’ perceptions of the best practices utilized in the school improvement process. The information collected through sixteen interviews with educational professionals from a small rural elementary school in Southwest Virginia helped the researcher improve her understanding of teachers’ perceptions of best practices related to school improvement, as well as teachers’ thoughts related to the principal’s role in school improvement. Additionally, the researcher developed theories regarding these topics and that of promoting teachers’ engagement in the school improvement process, along with teachers’ perceptions of best practices utilized to promote increased student achievement in the content area of reading. By gathering additional data through observations and document analysis, the researcher performed data triangulation to affirm her theories; through peer review, the researcher accepted that her theories were justified using the data collected during this study.

Research Questions

To learn more about best practices utilized in schoolwide improvement, the researcher sought to examine teachers’ perceptions regarding the process by asking these primary research questions:

1. What are teachers’ perceptions of the principal’s role in promoting best practices for school improvement?

2. What are teachers’ perceptions of practices that promote teacher engagement in the school improvement process?
3. What are teachers’ perceptions of school improvement practices believed to promote increased student achievement in the content area of reading?

**The Interview Process**

To discover the answers to these research questions, the researcher conducted a series of sixteen one-to-one interview sessions over a two-week period, asking each interview participant the same eight questions and additional follow-up questions (Appendix C). The questions focused on the theme of teachers’ perceptions of best practices utilized in school improvement, with the first three questions designed to solicit information from participants about principals’ roles in school improvement. Questions four, five, and six required participants to think about teachers’ engagement in the school improvement process, while the two remaining questions specifically targeted teachers’ thoughts about the school improvement practices used in the teaching of reading. The interview sessions ranged in length from 28 minutes to 93 minutes, with most averaging 45 minutes. Following each interview, the researcher transcribed participants’ responses taken from audio recordings and performed member checking, asking each interview participant to review the transcript of their interview for accuracy.

**Data Analysis**

After interviewing each of the sixteen participants, gathering documents, and conducting observations, the researcher engaged in the process of qualitative data coding using NVivo data coding software and Microsoft Excel. For initial coding, the researcher coded large quantities of data from participants’ interviews regarding best practices in school improvement, as well as from document analysis and field notes, creating labels for data and focusing attention on similar ideas shared by data sources. During a second, more focused effort, the researcher coded the
data again, developing categories for the labeled data to bring similar ideas together in one category. Following a third coding, the researcher studied categories, and the labeled data inside them to develop themes for each of the three research questions asked as part of this qualitative study. Five themes emerged from this axial coding process. With regards to teacher’s perceptions of the principal’s role in promoting best practices for school improvement, the themes of building relationships and establishing a culture of learning and collaboration were prevalent. The theme of ownership was paramount in teachers’ perceptions of practices that promote teacher engagement in the school improvement process. With regards to teachers’ perceptions of school improvement practices believed to promote increased student achievement in the content area of reading, the themes of differentiated instruction and data analysis dominated participants’ responses.

Additionally, data collected from interviews, observation, and document analysis, was triangulated to determine if the results from all the researcher’s data collection methods converged on similar findings. The researcher engaged in co-coding with multiple colleagues during and after the coding process to determine if the researcher’s initial interpretation of the data was within reason, making the interpretation of the five themes valid.

The following sections answer the first research question, what are teachers’ perceptions of the principal’s role in promoting best practices for school improvement?

**Participants’ Examples of Principals’ Promoting Best Practices for School Improvement**

Every educator has their own definition of what best practices are when it comes to school improvement. For some, this can mean engaging in research-based practices to help students improve academically; for others, the meaning of best practices can come from a more
personal place within themselves. The researcher asked interview participants to share examples of how a principal promotes best practices for school improvement within his or her school.

Providing professional development. Professional development was identified by seven of sixteen participants. These participants noted that a good principal should insure that staff members receive quality professional development opportunities. Participant 5 said, “A good principal is always offering supports to her teachers, and finds professional development to address teachers’ weaknesses. She must keep researching best practices.”

Participant 8 explained, “Professional development is important—like developing PLCs. Our former principal initiated PLCs here, learning communities, and that was great.” Seeing the principal being directly involved in the process is also helpful, according to participant 10. “Having the principal explain a process to us, or offer professional development on a topic like explicit instruction, shows she supports us”.

To elaborate on that concept, participant 14 mentioned modeling, which is a process in which the principal demonstrates a concept or strategy for his or her teachers. Participant 14 explained:

Great principals model continuous learning for teachers and students. They encourage them to be innovative and to share. Other teachers will see if things are working or not working and this will spark them to try something of their own. This encourages collective teacher efficacy. Really good teachers don’t call themselves “good teachers”; neither do good principals. They are diamonds in the rough.

Additionally, the researcher observed participants at a day-long professional development session for all teachers in the school division. Multiple participants expressed disappointment
that more opportunities were not presented for them to work as grade-level or subject-level teams during the day-long event. The researcher reviewed the schedule of events for the professional development session, which ran from 9:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m., noting that there was only one session available for elementary level language arts teachers to meet and that conflicted with the session for reading and writing resources held at the same time.

**Improving morale and keeping it at high levels.** Six of sixteen participants identified improving staff morale and keeping it at high levels as a priority best practice for principals to help improve their schools. Participant 1 mentioned that for her, morale was of utmost importance. She explained:

> Teacher morale is so very important. Morale in our building has been low for so long; our new administration knows this and is working to fix it. A good principal works to bring his or her staff together, to build confidence and trust. That’s what we need—someone who makes us feel important and useful, like professionals.

Participant 8 spoke similarly, sharing that in her opinion, “a big part of a principal’s job is to promote staff morale. We need to know we are appreciated by someone other than our students”.

To improve staff morale, participants 9 and 13 intoned that principals must work to build relationships with their staff members, as positive relationships between administration and teachers are a necessity for achieving school improvement goals. Participant 9 said, “I think to have a good relationship with your principal allows you the freedom to develop the plan for your own classroom. It makes teaching easier”. Participant 13 echoed that sentiment, stating, “Without relationships, your school does not work together as one unit.”
**Being aware of teachers’ strengths and needs by spending more time in classrooms.**

Six of sixteen participants identified being aware of teachers’ strengths and needs by spending more time in classrooms as a necessary practice for principals planning to improve their schools’ academic achievement. During their interviews, participants 4, 5, and 7 all shared their expectations for principals to be present in their classrooms. Participant 4 explained:

> The best way a principal can be involved is to be aware of what is happening in our classrooms. That can’t happen in a 30-minute, one-shot deal. She has to come in regularly to know what’s going on with our kids and us.

Similarly, participant 5 said, “Principals must be in the classroom often enough to know what’s going on, to understand teachers’ deficits. That way they can offer support when needed.” Participant 7 said it was principals’ responsibility to “visit classrooms and see what works” for teachers.

Participant 11 described awareness as an important trait for school principals, stating, “Principals should be aware of everything—weaknesses and strengths—to make it the best environment for everyone: students, teachers, and parents.”

**Supporting a collaborative environment for teachers.** Four of sixteen participants expressed that principals interested in promoting best practices for school improvement support a collaborative environment that prompts teamwork and unity within the school. Participants 7 and 12 specified teamwork as critical for improving schools. Participant 7 explained it was paramount for a principal to “get teachers’ input” in order to “work as a team”, while participant 12 shared, “When a principal works with a staff as a whole to make everyone feel like they are doing their jobs—as a team—positive things will happen.”
Achieving a sense of unity is important, noted participant 10, saying, “It’s great when a principal can get everyone together, on the same page, working toward a common goal, to promote unity within the group”. With regards to channeling that unity, participant 13 explained, “A leader needs to be bold and courageous and provide guidance to teachers regarding expectations,” which helps unify the staff by providing them with specific goals for improvement.

**Establishing and promoting a healthy culture of learning within the school.**

Fourteen of sixteen participants felt that in order for principals to promote best practices for school improvement, they must establish a culture within their schools that allowed teachers opportunities to collaborate, communicate, and feel like valued contributors to the school improvement process. They must continually promote this culture by insuring the environment is conducive to teachers’ innovation, input, and involvement in decision-making. Apart from participants 2 and 4, the group found these concepts to be the most important for principals to emphasize when promoting best practices for school improvement.

Participants 5, 7, and 11 felt that collaboration was critical for principals when creating a supportive learning culture. Participant 5 explained, “Principals must create respected relationships between teachers and themselves. It’s about collaboration, working together, to make a difference for our students.” Participant 7 added that effective principals “set a positive, uplifting environment that encourages teachers to pursue different avenues in their classrooms. It’s important for them to let teachers know that things may not work, and to get input from teachers too.” Driving home this point, participant 11 stated, “Teachers need a principal who will take others’ opinions and listen. They must be willing to work through problems as they arise.”
Just as significant as establishing a culture of learning is promoting that culture to maintain its health and vitality within the school. Participants 6, 12, 13, and 14 had multiple ideas to help principals achieve this. Participant 6 noted, “A principal must show that she is interested in the success of the children.” This is further expounded by participant 12, who said, “A great principal acknowledges teachers and students when things are going well. It shows that the principal cares about the thoughts and opinions of the faculty and staff.” Participant 13 responded, “A best practice is to lead by example—be willing to work side by side with teachers…and share decision making with them. Let them take ownership over that process.” Participant 14 agreed with that thought, stating, “Principals must have an awareness of who their go-to people are in their building. They must be willing to share responsibilities with these people.”

Participants 1, 8, 9, 10, and 15 each mentioned different strategies for principals to try as they continue promoting a healthy culture in their schools. “Being in the classroom and seeing what teachers and students are doing is a great place to start,” remarked participant 1. Participants 9 and 15 perceived that principals “offering help” to those teachers in need and “giving direction and guidance” in useful ways were beneficial to teachers and students during school improvement. Participant 10 said:

A principal needs to set high expectations for teachers. If you show kids that you will give 150%, they will give 150% too. We need positive feedback from our principal, and reinforcements. I will rise to meet the expectations of my principal.

**Utilizing data for goal setting and progress monitoring.** Seven participants of sixteen interviewed felt that in order for principals to promote best practices in school improvement, they must use data to set goals for students’ academic achievement, make plans to achieve those
goals, implement plans to help teachers improve instruction, monitor progress, and take steps accordingly as a result of following up with teachers during this process. As noted by participant 2, “using screening tools like PALS (Phonological Awareness and Literacy Screening) data can help school leaders and teachers set goals for students.” Other participants mentioned screening tools such as Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) and Read Theory for data collection. After reviewing data and setting goals, principals must formulate a plan for improvement. Participant 10 responded, “There must be a plan in place to help teachers achieve their goals—especially younger, inexperienced teachers.”

Implementation is a key part of the process, as participant 12 remarked, “The principal has to implement a plan that each teacher needs to follow”. Following implementation is progress monitoring, according to participant 13. “Monitoring is crucial to the success of any school improvement plan. Without monitoring…school improvement tends to go nowhere.” In these situations, as noted by participant 15, “Sometimes, there’s no follow-through…teachers feel left out of the process. Participant 16 elaborated, “Follow up by examining data is vital to note whether or not strategies are enabling the school to move in the desired direction. If there is no analysis, one will not know where the organization is headed.” Additionally, Participant 16 pointed out the need for principals to take the next steps necessary following progress monitoring, which can involve simply tweaking a strategy, or something more complicated such as revising a class schedule, or starting the process over again from the beginning, based on the data collected while monitoring. “Flexibility and the willingness to make changes when needed to enhance the overall instructional program is the key to achieving and maintaining success”.

The following sections answer the second research question, what are teachers’ perceptions of practices that promote teacher engagement in the school improvement process?
Participants’ Perceptions Regarding Teachers’ Engagement in School Improvement

Teachers feel a great deal of responsibility to help their students learn and continue making academic gains, but that pressure increases when schools enter a formal school improvement process. All participants interviewed expressed this when asked about teachers’ level of responsibility during the school improvement process, with 14 of 16 participants citing their students’ academic achievement as their biggest responsibility. To ensure that teachers take part in activities designed to help schools improve academically, principals are charged with engaging their staff members as vital pieces of the puzzle. The researcher asked participants to explain their perceptions of teachers’ engagement in the school improvement process to grasp a better understanding of how principals utilize best practices for school improvement.

Engaged in collaborative activities during the school improvement process.
Participants 1, 2, 7, 10, 12, and 15 responded that teachers in their building played a pivotal role in the school improvement process by engaging in collaborative activities. Participants 7 and 15 described their roles as “large” and “major”, respectively. Participant 1 said, “We’re deeply engaged…we trained on looking at data, keeping up with data, discussing data. We had so many trainings—gathered a lot of information. We delivered that information [to administration] every six weeks, then every 45 days—it was very overwhelming.” Participant 7 shared, “We had grade-level meetings, held discussions, made suggestions for improvement. Teachers have a huge stake in the process.” Participant 15 commented, “Teachers played a major role. We met, we gave input, answered questions, served on committees, and provided feedback.” Participant 12 shared, “Teachers were asked what they do to get their data throughout the year—the websites, programs—what they use to assess students’ learning.” Participant 4 contributed, “We
worked together to reach goals we set together.” Likewise, participant 10 said, “The reading teachers wanted everyone to do well. There was unity. We were on the same page.”

**Invited or encouraged to participate in the development of school improvement activities.** Of the sixteen participants interviewed, twelve responded that teachers are invited or encouraged to participate in the development of school improvement activities for the school. Participants 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, and 16 agreed that teachers in their building were afforded opportunities to participate throughout the school year if they wanted to be a part of the process. Participant 4 said, “Central office staff has asked and pleaded for involvement from teachers. There’s not enough participation.” Participant 9 echoed that, stating, “The principal will invite teachers to help or open it up for suggestions for projects after school.” Participant 6 shared, “[Teachers] are invited. There are opportunities, if we take them. If workdays are attached as incentives, more people are likely to volunteer.” Participant 11 responded, “We have lots of opportunities. We have meetings, committees—we know what the concerns are for our building—at least here we do.” Participant 14 commented, “I think [teachers] are [invited]. Rather than be directed, they are encouraged to participate and collaborate. It’s collegiality—no one want to be told, “This is what you have to do.”

**Afforded opportunities to engage in leadership roles throughout the school improvement process.** All sixteen participants interviewed by the researcher responded that teachers within the school have opportunities to engage in leadership roles throughout the school improvement process. Some participants, like 7 and 12 responded that teachers have many opportunities to lead within the school. Participant 12 said, “Teachers are always able to chair committees or be grade-level or departmental meeting heads, or lead teachers. They always have the chance to be a leader.” Participant 7 shared, “There are teachers in [leadership] positions
here. They have insight. There are many opportunities to participate. Several people express interest and feel comfortable doing so.”

While all participants interviewed agreed that school improvement leadership opportunities are available for teachers within the school, three participants responded that sometimes people choose not to accept those roles. Participant 4 commented, “We do have opportunities. Many people do not take advantage of it. Some would rather not wait and respond to things that happen.” Participant 11 responded, “The opportunities are there if teachers feel the need to do that.” Additionally, participant 15 said, “Teachers are given opportunities to take the initiative to take leadership roles. Sometimes teachers don’t feel comfortable in doing that.”

**Felt a sense of ownership during the school improvement process.** Those who were involved felt a sense of ownership during the process. Participants 1, 2, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14 expressed feeling a sense of ownership through their involvement in the development and implementation of school improvement plans. Participant 1 responded, “If we have a vision we help create, we will work hard toward achieving that vision.” Participant 2 said, “Teachers must be involved. If they aren’t, how do we help students?” Participant 7 shared, “It’s important if teachers have input, even if it’s just for validation purposes. It makes them feel like they are part of the process, and that helps.” Participant 12 commented, “It’s important for teachers to be involved when creating a plan for improvement. They know what works for their students and what doesn’t.” Participant 14 remarked, “If [teachers] are not involved, it’s not a plan. It’s a piece of paper on [a principal’s] desk. There must be ownership by everyone in the building. It must be communicated and participatory.”
Distributed responsibility for improvement among all staff. All sixteen participants interviewed indicated that teacher participation was pivotal for success during the school improvement process, and that all teachers are responsible for participating. Of the sixteen participants interviewed by the researcher, fourteen responded that duties and responsibilities should be assigned to teachers during the school improvement process. Participant 3 replied:

I think teachers should be assigned. Because the principal, if they are involved in their teachers, know who is good at what. Not every teacher is perfect at everything. So, um, some teachers are intimidated; they don’t want people talking about them or their just too intimidated to step forward and show what they can do and give the support in that area. So I think principals should go to that person and say, “I’ve seen you in your classroom. You’re wonderful at this. Can you please help the other teachers with it?” and go and assign what they are good at. Because the same people volunteer all the time; just because they volunteer and they think they are good doesn’t mean they are.

Similarly, participant 5 shared, “Administrators know their teachers, and what they are capable of. Those are teachers who should be chosen to lead or head committees. Some want to be involved.” Participant 4 said, “All teachers should be assigned. This makes them accountable, to be engaged—to contribute.” Participant 10 commented, “There’s nothing wrong with assigning responsibilities. If you want one person to do it, you want all to do it.” Participant 11 contributed, “Volunteer work doesn’t happen as often. Clear leaders are needed. Letting teachers volunteer won’t supply the input needed.” Likewise, participant 15 said, “If you ask for volunteers, you sometimes don’t get them. Or it’s the same old people each time. Each person has something valuable to contribute.
Shared responsibilities for improving the school with administration. Participants 4, 5, 7, 10, 13, 14, and 15 responded to the researcher that they perceived that school leaders should share school improvement responsibilities with their staff members. Participant 5 remarked, “It is a group process—we must work together, even in classroom observations, both before and after.” Participant 7 said, “I’m sure there are some things leaders have done [during school improvement], but everything should be open and we should have access.” Similarly, when asked if there are certain school improvement responsibilities that only school leaders should be responsible for completing, participant 10 echoed, “I don’t think so. If you create something like [an improvement plan], do it together. Allow it to be open, with the leader setting the expectations. Participant 13 commented, “School leaders should oversee the process and certainly know every aspect, but I feel there is a need to share the overwhelming responsibility.” Participant 14 shared, “No, it goes back to ownership. If we don’t own it, we won’t improve.” Likewise, participant 15 said, “I don’t believe so. We should all be in it together. Principals know what’s going on in schools and teachers should know.”

The following sections answer the third research question, what are teachers’ perceptions of school improvement practices believed to promote increased student achievement in the content area of reading?

Participants’ Responses Regarding Best Practices to Promote Achievement in Reading

Students’ achievement scores in reading are important for both state and federal accountability reporting purposes. In Virginia, schools must earn an average pass rate of 75% for all students taking Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) exams in English or language arts. The teacher participants involved in this study were chosen because they teach in a school whose students’ test scores increases by 7% during one school year after undergoing school
improvement efforts initiated by the Virginia Department of Education. With an average pass rate of 77% on the school’s most language arts exam, the researcher felt compelled to ask participants what best practices they believed promoted increased student achievement in the content area of reading.

**Differentiating instruction.** Six of sixteen participants interviewed responded that differentiating instruction for their students had helped them attain the most academic growth. Participants 7, 9, 12, 13, 14, and 15 indicated that differentiated instruction was an important practice in the teaching of reading. Participant 7 remarked, “It’s about teaching the basics—learning the steps of the reading process before moving to more complicated skills.” Participant 9 contributed, “Differentiation with groups and centers. Some students will learn to read phonetically; some will not. You have to go back and make up what these students are missing with differentiated instruction.” Participant 12 said, “Differentiation takes students at their level and helps them feel confident enough to make progress.” Of differentiation, participant 13 said, “It may sound so simple, but meeting students where they are and moving them forward” is the key to success.

**Assessing students and analyzing data.** Of the sixteen participants interviewed, six responded that assessing students and analyzing data were important to their students making the most academic growth. Participants 2, 5, 6, 12, 14, and 16 mentioned assessing students and analyzing data in their responses to the researcher. Participant 2 shared, “There has to be testing to gather data. Then we look at data to decide what plan to use to help students improve in reading.” Participant 5 said, “It’s useful to look at data to see students’ needs.” Participant 6 said, “PALS testing gives us valuable information about our students.” Participant 12 shared, “SRI (Scholastic Reading Inventory) testing helps us with monitoring students’ progress in
reading throughout the year.” Participant 16 commented, “Short-term and long-term monitoring of achievement data by the individual school” had been helpful for teachers and school leadership. Additionally, participant 16 said:

I think adding our mid-year assessment in PALS and training teachers to examine the data that PALS gives us has improved reading instruction. Assessment isn’t seen as something we do at the beginning and end of the school year; the mid-year component has helped reading teachers see that it is vital to monitor progress along the way. Teachers look at the various components of the PALS assessment and look for student weaknesses in specific areas. They are able to share these specifics in parent conferences when discussing ways to help students succeed.

**Reading appropriate leveled texts.** Of the sixteen participants interviewed, five responded that having students read texts on or near their appropriate reading level was important to students’ academic growth in reading. Participants 1, 9, 11, 12, and 13 mentioned leveled texts in their responses to the researcher. Participant 1 said, “Giving each child an opportunity to read something on grade level is a necessity for them to grow as readers.” Participant 11 shared, “The Accelerated Reader program is great because it offers kids the chance to earn points for reading books on their reading level. Kids like earning points—it hooks them on reading. They like the gratification of winning.” Participant 12 said, “It’s important to find out students’ reading levels as early as possible and get them started reading books that match their ability level.” Participant 13 shared, “There must be a literacy-rich environment with teachers teaching reading skills using authentic texts”.

**Utilizing explicit instruction strategies.** Four of sixteen participants responded that they utilized explicit instruction strategies for their students to increase academic gains.
Participants 2, 3, 8, and 10 mentioned an example of an explicit instruction strategy in their response. Participant 2 said, “reading with students” was a useful strategy, while participant 3 cited “modeling” as an essential classroom strategy. Participant 8 shared, “Any of the strategies we learned from the Anita Archer professional development series”, and participant 10 added:

I attended a conference with Anita Archer. The things she did and said clicked with me. She used explicit instruction strategies. Kids have to keep going, and these kinds of strategies keep them going in the classroom. We do things every day like reading everything together and choral reading.”

**Implementing Response to Intervention (RTI).** Three of sixteen participants indicated to the researcher that their students had made achievement in reading due to their implementing Response to Intervention activities. Participants 2, 6, and 12 responded that Response to Intervention helped their students make gains in reading. Participant 6 shared, “M-TIM (Response to Intervention) has been a great addition to our program. It makes a big difference. It gives students higher levels of independence.” Similarly, participant 12 said, “The M-TIM program helps students build skills at the level they are on. They work up to where they are supposed to be, on grade-level.”

**Implementing the school improvement plan for increased student academic achievement in reading.** Participants 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, and 16 responded to the researcher that they perceived implementing the school’s improvement plan helped students attain academic success in reading. Participant 1 said, “Sure, in our school improvement plan, it states that we will strive to help every student achieve their reading goal, or any goal.” Participant 2 stated, “Students try harder if they know they are responsible. Reading daily has improved reading scores when reading for pleasure was emphasized—like in our plan.”
Participant 5 remarked, “Teachers had to revisit the Standards of Learning as part of this process, which brought awareness to them, so perhaps. Sometimes it comes down to a matter of will.” Participant 6 said, “Yes, M-TIM (Response to Intervention) gives kids opportunities to be pulled out for small group instruction, and that has made a difference.” Participant 7 shared, “Through the improvement plan, some of the reading skills were dissected which helped teachers hone in on components to help students gain skills in reading.” Participant 8 said, “Yes, the data shows success.”

Participant 10 contributed, “Yes, using the Anita Archer strategies for professional development and talking more led to our success.” Participant 12 added, “The push on differentiation has helped. It’s been beneficial to more groups of students. Being tested throughout the year helps students see their progress. M-TIM (Response to Intervention) provides extra help for students’ success.” Similarly, participant 14 said, “Yes, differentiation itself will do that. A cookie-cutter lesson plan will not net gains.” Participant 15 remarked, “Yes, we’ve seen growth throughout the year. If you compare the previous year’s group with our new students, you can see growth with changes to our instruction.” Participant 16 opined:

I think the teachers’ implementation of these components have helped. When teachers got together and discussed strategies for increasing specific skills, they shared ideas and picked up some things other teachers were doing that they thought could work in their classrooms.”

The researcher reviewed school-wide data from end-of-year Standards of Learning (SOL) exams, as well as data from students’ beginning, middle, and end-of year Phonological Awareness and Literacy Screening (PALS) scores and Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) scores. After implementing the school’s improvement plan to increase students’ achievement
scores in the content area of reading, the school’s average scores on these formative and summative exams increased in the areas of reading comprehension, word analysis, sound recognition, letter and word identification, and spelling.

**Summary**

Through this qualitative study, teachers’ perceptions of the principal’s role in promoting best practices for school improvement were discussed, as well as their perceptions of practices that promote teacher engagement in the school improvement process. Additionally, teachers’ perceptions of school improvement practices believed to promote increased student achievement in the content area of reading were discussed as well. The two themes identified by the researcher with regards to teachers’ perceptions of the principal’s role in promoting best practices for school improvement were building relationships with staff and establishing a culture of learning and collaboration. The theme identified by the researcher with regards to teachers’ perceptions of school improvement practices believed to promote teacher engagement in the school improvement process was the principal’s promotion of ownership of the process. The two themes identified by the researcher with regards to teachers’ perceptions of school improvement practices believed to promote increased student achievement in the content area of reading were differentiated instruction and data analysis. Chapter 5 will discuss recommendations and implications of this study on best practices for school improvement and increasing student achievement in reading.
Chapter Five

Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

In order to discuss the findings, implications, and recommendations of this qualitative study regarding teachers’ perceptions of best practices utilized in the school improvement process, Chapter Five is divided into five sections. The chapter begins with a brief summary of the study’s purpose. The summary is followed by a presentation of the findings of the study, and an examination of the existing literature related to the findings. The third section explores the conclusions of the study. The fourth section of the chapter addresses possible limitations of the study. The final section of chapter five suggests recommendations for future research to be conducted regarding best practices utilized in the school improvement process. These recommendations also include additional research on students’ perceptions of best practices utilized to increase students’ achievement scores in the content area of reading.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this grounded theory qualitative study was to determine teachers’ perceptions of the best practices utilized in the school improvement process. The study involved collecting data through one-on-one interviews with sixteen participants involved in state-mandated school improvement by the Virginia Department of Education during the 2015-2016 academic year. These participants included twelve language arts teachers and one Title One reading coach from a rural elementary school in Southwest Virginia, as well as the school principal, the school division’s director of curriculum and instruction, and a state-appointed intervention specialist that worked with the staff during school improvement. The researcher
collected additional data for the study through observations of participants and document analysis of their students’ formative and summative assessments.

Though concern about students’ achievement in school was stirred in 1983 by President Reagan’s educational task force with the publication of their report *A Nation at Risk*, school reform efforts caught fire and spread throughout the United States following President Bush’s reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Traub, 2002). To increase accountability measures for educators, and to insure that all students become proficient in the content areas of reading and mathematics, initiatives were implemented that required students to reach certain performance benchmarks on standardized tests, including students grouped into sub-categories to track their performance, such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and learning disabled (United States Department of Education, 2010). This push to reform America’s education system by holding principals and teachers accountable for their students’ academic performance has led schools across the country to engage in the school improvement process.

School improvement is a continuous process that does not yield results magically overnight; leaders must start with an overall goal in mind and guide their schools toward it, stopping frequently to gather data and input to reassess their plan to reach that goal (Reynolds & Teddlie, 2000). Though principals face great pressure in the school improvement process, especially in schools that may be facing state-mandated improvement efforts, they can fail to fully utilize their greatest resources while trying to improve their students’ academic performance: teachers. The most successful school leaders realize that their work alone does not transform schools into thriving educational institutions; they work together with teachers to make changes that help students reach their potential (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011). By implementing sound practices for school improvement, principals and teachers can help their
students make gains over time and instead of remaining static, their schools can continue to evolve into effective learning centers (Angelle & Anfara, Jr., 2006).

The analysis of data collected from this study, as well as the theories developed by the researcher, provides a better understanding of teachers’ perceptions of best practices utilized in school improvement. The recommendations for best school improvement practices developed as a result of this study include those focused on the principal’s role in promoting best practices for school improvement and promoting teachers’ engagement in the school improvement process, as well as promoting increased student achievement in the content area of reading.

Research Questions

The researcher conducted the qualitative study to examine teachers’ perspectives related to the following research questions:

4. What are teachers’ perceptions of the principal’s role in promoting best practices for school improvement?

5. What are teachers’ perceptions of practices that promote teacher engagement in the school improvement process?

6. What are teachers’ perceptions of school improvement practices believed to promote increased student achievement in the content area of reading?

Findings

The research questions were answered through one-to-one interviews with all sixteen participants. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Member checks were performed by the participants to insure accuracy. The researcher coded the data collected
during these interviews a total of three times, and engaged in co-coding with a colleague during the second and third rounds of coding. After the third round of coding, individual themes emerged from each of the eight questions asked during the interviews. Additionally, the researcher observed participants and made field notes of those experiences, while also analyzing documents related to teacher participants’ students’ academic progress, including benchmark test data. The researcher triangulated data from these three sources (interviews, observations, and document analysis) to determine if the researcher’s initial interpretation of the data was within reason, validating this interpretation (Ary, et. al., 2014).

The following is a brief summary of the findings related to the developed themes.

**The Principal’s Role in Promoting Best Practices for School Improvement**

The participants were asked three questions related to teachers’ perceptions of the principal’s role in promoting best practices for school improvement. Two of those questions were similar in nature, as they asked participants to name or provide personal examples of things a school principal can do to promote best practices for school improvement. The following six themes emerged from participants: provide professional development; improve morale and keep it at high levels; be aware of teachers’ strengths and needs by spending more time in classrooms; support a collaborative environment for teachers; establish and promote a healthy culture of learning within the school; and utilize data for goal setting and progress monitoring.

**Provide professional development.** Seven participants indicated that a good principal should insure that his or her teachers receive quality professional development opportunities, but especially during times when the school hopes to improve its academic standings. Teachers need professional development that is directly aligned to their needs and the needs of their
students, in order for schools to make academic gains (Sappington, Pacha, Baker, & Gardner, 2012). As the instructional leader of the school, the principal must determine teachers’ instructional weaknesses and make a plan to address them, which includes providing teachers with opportunities to obtain meaningful professional development as well as receive feedback after implementing new strategies in their classrooms (Reickhoff & Larsen, 2012).

**Improve morale and keep it at high levels.** Six participants explained to the researcher that a priority for principals should be improving teacher morale and keeping it at high levels. Teachers need to feel that their work is appreciated by their principal; this is especially true while teachers are involved in school improvement initiatives (Studer, 2008). An important role for every school leader is to motivate teachers to perform at peak capacity at all times, and to inspire them to engage in learning opportunities that will add to their teaching skills (Whitaker, 1999). The rewards are great, as schools with higher levels of teacher morale typically have higher levels of student morale, which translates into higher levels of students’ academic achievement (Whitaker, Whitaker, & Lumpa, 2000).

**Be aware of teachers’ strengths and needs by spending more time in classrooms.** Six participants indicated to the researcher that they felt it was important for the principal to be present in their classrooms regularly to build his or her awareness of teachers’ strengths and needs. While most school divisions have implemented mandatory teacher evaluation protocol, the brief amounts of time that principals spend in classrooms as part of the evaluation process has not been found helpful for teachers who need to improve their instruction (Tosh & Rothman, 2008). Classroom visits (or observations) are best when done as part of a program for instruction in coordination with meaningful professional development opportunities to help teachers address their needs (Coppola, Scricca, & Connors, 2004).
Support a collaborative environment for teachers. Four of sixteen participants indicated that principals interested in promoting best practices for school improvement support a collaborative environment for teachers. Teacher collaboration expands teachers’ professional knowledge and broadens their experience (Octovar-Nameghi & Sheikhamadi, 2016). Offering teachers the opportunity to collaborate helps them establish trusting relationships with other educators, which can help eliminate teachers’ feelings of isolation that often lead to feelings of burnout and job dissatisfaction (Carlson & Thomas, 2006).

Establish and promote a healthy culture of learning within the school. Fourteen of sixteen participants expressed that in order for principals to promote best practices for school improvement, they must establish a culture of learning within their schools. They must continually promote this culture by ensuring the environment affords teachers opportunities to innovate, offer input, and help make decisions for the school. In schools where principals work with teachers to establish and promote a healthy culture of learning for both students and teachers, students make the most academic gains (Lewis, Asberry, DeJarnett, & King, 2016).

Utilize data for goal setting and progress monitoring. Seven participants indicated that using data to set goals and monitor progress was important for principals during the school improvement process. School leaders use data to help them make critical decisions to aid students’ academic growth (Bernhardt, 2003). When data is used effectively to drive school reform, significant student achievement can occur (Carlson, Borman, & Robinson, 2011).

Practices that Promote Teacher Engagement in the School Improvement Process

Study participants were asked three questions related to teachers’ perceptions of practices that promote teacher engagement in the school improvement process. The questions focused
participants’ responses on teachers’ levels of engagement in the process, teachers’ involvement in the development and implementation of school improvement plans, and best ways to involve teachers who are not actively engaged in the school improvement process. The following six themes emerged from participants’ responses: engage teachers in collaborative activities during the school improvement process; invite and/or encourage teachers to participate in the development of school improvement plans; afford teachers opportunities to engage in leadership roles throughout the school improvement process; instill a sense of ownership in teachers involved in school improvement; distribute responsibility for improvement to all staff; and share responsibilities for improving the school between teachers and administrators.

**Engage teachers in collaborative activities during the school improvement process.** Participants 1, 2, 7, 10, 12, and 15 responded that teachers in their building played a pivotal role in the school improvement process by engaging in collaborative activities. Multiple participants described their roles as “large” due to their participation in collaborative activities, such as redesigning lesson plan templates, “unpacking” Standards of Learning documents, contributing to kindergarten and first grade report card drafts and leading professional development opportunities such as staff book studies. Slater (2004) noted that the success of a school improvement plan depends on school staff working together to achieve common goals.

**Invite and/or encourage teachers to participate in the development of school improvement plans.** Twelve participants indicated that one of the best ways to engage teachers in the school improvement process is to invite or encourage them to participate in the development of school improvement plans. Anytime teachers in a school can be involved in the development of plans that move the school forward toward reaching its goals, they are more likely to take ownership of the plan and implement it to the best of their abilities (Smith &
Goodwin, 2014). Giving teachers opportunities to help develop school improvement plans allows them an opportunity to offer their input and put their professional knowledge to use, which is essential for the success of school reform efforts (Weingarten, 2012).

**Afford teachers opportunities to engage in leadership roles throughout the school improvement process.** All sixteen participants indicated that principals should provide teachers opportunities to engage in leadership roles throughout the school improvement process. Teacher leadership is important to the success of schools, especially when they believe their role in the school improvement process helps students learn (Katzenmayer & Moller, 2009). Through serving as lead teachers, heading committees and grade or departmental-level teams, or leading professional development sessions, teachers can serve their students, administrators, and schools by sharing their expertise with other teachers during school improvement.

**Instill a sense of ownership in teachers involved in school improvement.** Participants 1, 2, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14 expressed feeling a sense of ownership through their involvement in the development and implementation of school improvement plans. When principals allow teachers to own the process, teachers are more apt to buy into and support principals’ visions for continuous school improvement, resulting in greater academic gains for students (Lumpkin, Claxton, & Wilson, 2014). Instilling ownership in teachers empowers them to make better decisions for their students and work together to solve problems without being assigned by the principal (Lumpkin, et. al., 2014).

**Distribute responsibility for improvement to all staff.** All sixteen participants responded to the researcher that teacher participation was vital for the success of school improvement initiatives; additionally, they felt that all teachers were equally responsible for
helping during school improvement. Several participants expressed their desire for principals to assign responsibilities to teachers in order to distribute the responsibilities fairly. Principals can help by creating teams or committees in which teachers share responsibility for helping students make academic gains, and insuring that those groups have appropriate time to meet and work together to achieve their goals (DuFour & Mattos, 2013)

**Share responsibilities for improving the school between teachers and administrators.** Participants 4, 5, 7, 10, 13, 14, and 15 explained that school leaders should share the burden of school improvement with their staff members. Both teachers and administrators face stringent accountability standards to propel students’ academic achievement; by collaborating, principals and teachers can make plans to further students’ learning and then reflect on those plans following implementation, and regroup as necessary to meet the needs of students and staff (Sloan, 2012).

**Practices Believed to Promote Increased Student Achievement in Reading**

Study participants were asked two questions related to teachers’ perceptions of school improvement practices believed to promote student achievement in the content area of reading. The questions focused participants’ responses on the best practices for increasing students’ academic achievement in reading. The following six best practices emerged from participants’ responses: differentiate instruction; assess students and analyze data; read appropriate leveled texts; utilize explicit instruction strategies; implement Response to Intervention; and implement the school improvement plan for increased student achievement in reading.

**Differentiate instruction.** Six participants responded that differentiating instruction for their students helped them obtain the most academic growth. Differentiated instruction has been
a school improvement highlight for teachers at the school chosen for this study, with lesson plans
crafted to plan for instruction for all levels of learning within teachers’ classrooms. When
teaching a classroom full of learners with diverse needs, teachers cannot take a “one-size-fits-all”
approach and expect to see students make gains (Riccomini, Sanders, Bright, & Witzel, 2009).
Tomlinson suggested that effective differentiated instruction blends whole group instruction with
small group and individualized instruction to best meet the needs of all learners (1999).

**Assess students and analyze data.** Participants 2, 5, 6, 12, 14, and 16 expressed a need
for teachers to assess students’ levels of mastery and analyze data to help students make
academic gains in reading. Authentic assessments provide teachers with valuable information
about students’ progress, highlighting both areas of strength and weakness, which give teachers
insight into whether or not real learning has occurred as a result of their instruction (Lumpkin,
Claxton, & Wilson, 2014). Teachers who make a routine effort to use data to make decisions
regarding their students’ instructional needs are more likely to see increases in students’

**Read appropriate leveled texts.** Five participants explained to the researcher that a
necessary practice for reading teachers to promote increased student achievement is students’
reading appropriate leveled texts. A form of differentiated instruction, making sure that students
are reading texts that are appropriate for their independent reading levels can significantly
improve students’ individual reading growth (Stover, O’Rear, & Morris, 2015). Providing
students opportunities to read a variety of texts on their reading level helps them establish
background knowledge, build fluency, and develop an interest in reading (Fisher & Ivey, 2006).
**Utilize explicit instruction strategies.** Four of sixteen participants responded that utilizing explicit instruction strategies helped their students make academic gains in reading. Teachers using explicit instruction strategies in their classrooms provide supports for students by directing them through the learning process with examples and models, and give them opportunities for guided practice until they master the concepts taught (Archer & Hughes, 2011). By making cognitive procedures a structured process for students to follow, reading becomes less stressful for students who encounter difficulties making learning connections (Swanson & Deshler, 2003).

**Implement Response to Intervention.** Participants 2, 6, and 12 indicated that implementing the school’s Response to Intervention model, M-TIM, had helped their students increase their reading achievement. Response to Intervention (RTI) is a multi-tiered approach to early intervention that groups students based on their needs for remediation or enrichment (Hall & Mahoney, 2013). When implemented correctly, RTI can help teachers provide targeted instruction to students who need additional help mastering concepts, and also serve as a useful tool for helping teachers determine if students are learning disabled (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2014).

**Implement the school improvement plan for increased student achievement in reading.** Participants 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, and 16 responded that they perceived implementing the school’s improvement plan helped increase students’ reading growth. Implementing a plan created in earnest by teachers and school leaders after studying students’ achievement data and teachers’ professional development needs can yield positive results for students’ academic achievement (Siebersma, Wheeler-Clouse, & Backus, 2012). Providing support to teachers during and after the implementation process and continuing to monitor
progress while reflecting on changes that can make the school improvement plan more beneficial to students’ and teachers’ growth is paramount to schools’ success.

**Conclusions of the Findings**

The results of this qualitative study developed a more comprehensive understanding of best practices utilized in the school improvement process. With regards to the principal’s role in promoting best practices for school improvement, recommendations for best practices include: providing professional development for teachers; improving teacher morale and keeping it at high levels; being aware of teachers’ strengths and needs by spending more time in classrooms; supporting a collaborative environment for teachers; establishing and promoting a healthy culture of learning within the school; and utilizing data for goal setting and progress monitoring.

With regards to practices that promote teacher engagement in the school improvement process, recommendations for best practices include: engaging teachers in collaborative activities during the school improvement process; inviting or encouraging teachers to participate in the development of school improvement activities; affording teachers opportunities to engage in leadership roles throughout the school improvement process; instilling a sense of ownership in teachers during the school improvement process; distributing responsibility for improvement among all staff; and sharing responsibilities for improving the school with administration. With regards to school improvement practices believed to promote increased student achievement in the content area of reading, recommendations for best practices include: differentiating instruction; assessing students and analyzing data; having students read appropriate leveled texts; utilizing explicit instruction strategies; implementing Response to Intervention; and implementing the school improvement plan for increased academic achievement in reading.
Participants’ responses revealed five major themes during the course of the study. First, teachers want their principal to build relationships with them that will aid both them and their students by providing support and direction when needed. Next, teachers need their principal to establish a culture that fosters learning and collaboration for teachers. Third, teachers want to take ownership during the school improvement process by working with school leaders to create and implement reform initiatives; they desire to be active, rather than passive, participants. With regards to improving students’ achievement in reading, teachers believe that differentiated instruction in multiple forms works best, including having students read leveled texts, grouping by ability levels, and participating in Response to Intervention. Finally, teachers feel strongly that data analysis is essential for increasing students’ growth in reading, as data provides teachers with a wealth of information about students’ present level of performance and can guide teachers’ future instruction.

The researcher feels hopeful that if the aforementioned best practices are implemented, schools will see greater gains as a result of school improvement efforts and students’ achievement scores in reading will increase.

**Limitations**

There were limitations in this qualitative research study. The participant population of sixteen educators involved in state-mandated school improvement for reading in a rural elementary school in Southwest Virginia is a limitation, as data for best practices for school improvement were not collected from teachers of other content areas, or from resource or special education teachers. Because the sampling only contained teachers from grades one through five, input was not gathered from early childhood educators, or middle school or high school teachers.
The student population to which the teacher participants were implementing the best practices for increasing students’ achievement in reading was limited to their classrooms within the rural elementary school. Additionally, the researcher’s interview guide limited the study, as the researcher’s choice of questions to be included on the eight-question guide may have limited participants’ responses.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

While this study sheds some light on teachers’ perceptions of best practices utilized for school improvement, additional research should be undertaken to help school administrators and division leaders make school improvement more successful for everyone involved. Further research should be conducted from students’ perspectives to learn what practices work best to improve their academic achievement in reading. Additionally, as this study only included teacher participants who taught reading, research should be conducted to determine if teachers in other content areas, including resource teachers and special education teachers, recommended similar best practices for school improvement. Also, research could be performed to determine if school leaders in rural schools have implemented these recommended best practices during the school improvement process with increased student achievement as an indicator of success.
References

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Appendices
Appendix A

Superintendent’s Research Approval
Dec. 13, 2016

Dr. Gregory A. Casalenuovo
Institutional Review Board
Carson-Newman University
1646 Russell Avenue
Jefferson City, TN

Dear Dr. Casalenuovo and Members of the Institutional Review Board:

As a representative of the Dickenson County Public Schools system, I confirm that the school district grants permission to Lavada B. Muncy for the proposed research for the purpose of writing her dissertation titled *Teachers’ Perspectives of Best Practices Utilized in School Improvement*. The research will take place in Clintwood Elementary School.

This also serves as assurance that our school division complies with requirements of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of Mrs. Muncy’s research.

I support Mrs. Muncy’s effort and will provide any assistance necessary for the successful implementation of this study. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call. I can be reached via phone at (276) 926-4643.

Respectfully,

Haydee L. Robinson
Division Superintendent
Appendix B
Informed Consent Form
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF STUDY
Teachers’ Perceptions of Best Practices Utilized in School Improvement

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
Lavada B. Muncy
Doctoral candidate, Carson-Newman University
5365 Bartlick Road, Haysi, Virginia 24256
276-865-4371
lbmuncy@cn.edu

PURPOSE OF STUDY

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

The purpose of this study is to determine teachers’ perceptions of the best practices utilized in the school improvement process.

STUDY PROCEDURES

To better understand teachers’ perceptions of best practices utilized in the school improvement process, the researcher will perform a study that incorporates data collected from three sources: one-to-one interviews; observations monitoring the implementation and use of best practices for school improvement; and artifact collection.

The total length of time of your involvement with this study should be approximately 2 hours.

Interviews

Interview questions are designed to focus the topic of discussion on teachers’ perceptions of best practices for school improvement, including their perceptions of the role of the principal in promoting the school improvement process, the practices that promote teacher engagement in the school improvement process, and the school improvement practices believed to promote increased student achievement in the content area of reading.

The researcher will use an interview guide containing eight open-ended questions to help direct participants toward sharing information with the researcher.

The researcher will allow approximately one hour for each semi-structured one-to-one interview. All interviews will be audio recorded, and notes will be taken during each interview. Following each interview, the researcher will transcribe each interview and make notes about the interview experience.
The researcher may need to involve participants in an additional follow-up interview after data analysis.

If additional questions arise during transcription, follow-up questions may be asked and answered via electronic mail or follow up interviews.

**Observations**

The researcher will perform observations of study participants throughout the elementary school environment by attending professional development sessions, faculty meetings, grade-level planning sessions, and visiting classrooms.

As a complete observer, the researcher will not attempt to alter these experiences in any way, only record them for later analysis using an audio recorder and field notes.

Following these observations, the researcher will transcribe each observation and make notes about the observation experience.

**Artifact Collection**

Documents related to the elementary school’s improvement process will also be collected by the researcher. Examples of these include available teachers’ quarterly benchmark test data, Google classroom blog posts, and relevant meeting agendas and minutes.

The researcher will analyze the documents by examining each for similarities and differences with previously gathered data.

**Member Checking**

Following data collection, the researcher will perform member checks by asking study participants to review transcripts of their interviews and interactions, and make changes as needed so the researcher will be working with the most accurate data.

**RISKS**

This research study is an exploration of teachers’ perceptions of best practices utilized during the school improvement process. Study participants will only be asked questions regarding their perceptions of practices that promote teacher engagement in the school improvement process, their perceptions of the principal’s role in promoting best practices for school improvement, and their perceptions of best practices believed to promote increased student achievement in the area of reading. There are no anticipated physical, psychological, social, legal or economic risks to participating in this study; however, you may decline to answer any or all questions and you may terminate your involvement at any time if you choose.
BENEFITS

You will receive no direct benefit from your participation in this study, but your participation may help us better understand how to further develop the school improvement process for other administrators and teachers. By learning what school improvement practices teachers find most useful (especially in the content area of reading) and what they expect from their school leaders during the school improvement process, principals can better tailor their improvement plans to meet the needs of their students and staff.

CONFIDENTIALITY

For the purposes of this research study, your comments will not be anonymous. Every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your confidentiality including the following:

- Assigning code names/numbers for participants that will be used on all research notes and documents
- Keeping notes, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information in a locked file cabinet in the personal possession of the researcher during the research process and for at least three years following the completion of the research.
- Securing digital notes and transcribed data on the researcher’s personal password-protected computer during the research process.
- Securing research notes, data, and findings on a USB drive in a locked file cabinet in the personal possession of the researcher for at least three years following the completion of the research.

Participant data will be kept confidential except in cases where the researcher is legally obligated to report specific incidents. These incidents include, but may not be limited to, incidents of abuse and suicide risk.

COMPENSATION

No participant will be compensated to participate in this study.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about this study, or you experience adverse effects as the result of participating in this study, you may contact Lavada Muncy via telephone at (276) 865-4371 or by email at lbmuncy@cn.edu. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or if problems arise which you do not feel you can discuss with the Primary Investigator, please contact Carson-Newman University’s Institutional Review Board at (865) 471-3236 and speak with Dr. Casalenuovo, Chairman.
VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form. After you sign the consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship you have, if any, with the researcher. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Participant's signature ______________________________ Date __________

Investigator's signature ______________________________ Date __________
Appendix C

Interview Guide
Interview Guide

Interview Questions for Teachers’ Perceptions of Best Practices Utilized for School Improvement

1. Let’s begin by talking about your school improvement beliefs. Tell me about your beliefs or attitudes regarding school leaders and the school improvement process. I am interested in learning about your perception of how a principal promotes best practices for school improvement within his or her school. Can you provide me with an example or tell me a story that illustrates your point?

Probes:

   a) Can you respond to the statement… “when a school sees gains in student achievement, it is because the building principal implemented a strategic plan for school improvement”?

   b) Can you respond to the statement… “the most effective principals are instructional leaders first”?

2. From your view, what are the three most important things a school principal can do to promote best practices for school improvement?

Probes:

   a) Why are each of these three things important to improving a school’s academic performance?

   b) From your viewpoint, is there an area(s) of the school improvement process/plan that is overlooked or needs more attention from school leadership?

3. How do you perceive the importance of the principal’s role in establishing a clear vision for school improvement, setting goals, and working with teachers to meet accountability objectives?

Probes:

   a) What is your perception of the importance of data analysis for principals in the process of school improvement? And for teachers?

   b) Can you respond to the statement… “teachers are trained to desegregate data and use data analysis strategies to help their students make academic gains”?

4. Now let’s shift the focus to your perceptions of practices that promote teacher engagement in the school improvement process. What is your perception on the level of engagement of teachers in your building in the school improvement process?
Probes:

a) Can you respond to the statement… “teachers are invited or encouraged to participate in the development of school improvement activities for the school”?

b) Can you respond to the statement… “teachers within the school have opportunities to engage in leadership roles throughout the school improvement process by leading professional development sessions, chairing committees, or analyzing data”?

c) Can you provide me with an example of a school improvement decision you were involved in making?

5. What is your perception of the involvement of teachers in the development and implementation of school improvement plans?

Probes:

a) Can you respond to the statement… “teachers are more responsible for implementing school improvement initiatives than creating them”?

b) For what are teachers responsible as agents of school improvement?

c) To whom are teachers responsible as agents of school improvement?

d) How are teachers responsible as agents of school improvement?

e) What happens if teachers do not fulfill their responsibilities as agents of school improvement?

6. What are your perceptions of the best ways to involve teachers who are not actively engaged in the school improvement process?

Probes:

a) Should all teachers be assigned school improvement responsibilities, or should those duties be filled by volunteer teachers only? Explain.

b) Are there certain school improvement responsibilities that only school leaders should be responsible for completing? Such as?
7. Shifting gears again, let’s consider teachers’ roles as instructors of reading. I’m interested in learning more about your perceptions of school improvement practices believed to promote increased student achievement in the area of reading. What are your perceptions about best school improvement practices that have led to students’ academic growth in reading?

Probes:

a) As a reading instructor, what three school improvement practices do you perceive helped your students attain the most academic growth? Why?

b) Do you perceive any of the components of the school’s improvement plan helped students attain academic success in reading? Why or why not?

8. Again, as a reading instructor, name one school improvement practice that has not been implemented as fully or as usefully as you’d perceive it to be helpful to students’ academic progress in reading.

Probes:

a) Why do you perceive school leaders have not implemented this practice? Is it doable?

b) Have you or someone else suggested this to school leaders? What was the outcome?

Final Question

Is there anything else regarding school improvement practices that you’d like to share with me?