Perceptions of Reading Professional Educators on Reading Curriculum

by
Shashu Taylor

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Approval Page

This applied dissertation was submitted by Shashu Taylor under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

Gina Peyton, EdD
Committee Chair

Carole Trueman, EdD
Committee Member

Kimberly Durham, PsyD
Dean
Statement of Original Work

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Shashu Taylor
Name

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Date
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my family who have always believed in me throughout this process. My parents and my sister always saw seeds of greatness in me even when I did not see it in myself. I needed and appreciated their encouragement every step of the way. I also have many friends and associates who have helped me somehow throughout my journey. The support given throughout has made all the difference whether big or small.

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Abstract

Perceptions of Reading Professional Educators on Reading Curriculum. Shashu Taylor, 2019: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice: Keywords: reading, teacher perceptions, reading curriculum, reading teachers

This study was designed to establish the perceptions of reading professional educators on the reading curriculum. The achievement gap in reading assessments was analyzed. Best practices for teaching overall and teaching reading strategies were shared. This study incorporated qualitative data in the form of a questionnaire where professional educators were interviewed. It was also a case study format.

The study answered (a) what do middle school reading teachers perceive are successes, challenges, and needs when preparing students for the FSA reading test; (b) what tools or resources are utilized by middle school teachers to prepare students for the reading portion of the FSA; and (c) what reading strategies are middle school teachers using in the classroom.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Reading scores have been an issue in the state of Florida as evidenced by the Florida Standard Assessment (FSA). Professional educators have also seen a discrepancy between the curriculum and what students are expected to know for the FSA. This study focused on the achievement gap and reading teacher’s perceptions of the curriculum. The problem of this study was there was an achievement gap between the state’s overall FSA test scores and the target middle school’s test scores. In the summer of 2018 during preplanning week, the staff and administration reviewed and analyzed data obtained from the FSA.

The researcher, a Grades 6-8 teacher at the target school, was part of the reviewing process. The head principal indicated the reason for sharing data with the staff was to create a plan to address the needs of all students in order to improve FSA test results and also for the staff to see if there were any trends in the data from previous years. Each team analyzed the data for their subject area and each teacher analyzed specific grade levels taught. It was also indicated in the preplanning meetings that the reading curriculum utilized was correlated to the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) as opposed to the FSA.

The FSA is an element of the state’s effort to improve the teaching and learning of higher education standards. The main objective of the standardized tests is to measure student attainment of the higher-order thinking skills represented in the Florida Standards for English language arts (ELA), mathematics, and end-of-course (EOC) subjects (Algebra 1 and Geometry) and to aid Florida students by measuring education increases and development (Florida Department of Education, 2018). Students in Grades 6 to 8 in
the middle school setting completed the FSA. The FSA has performance levels ranging from low to high (1-5). The following is a description of the levels:

1. “Level 1 inadequate–Highly likely to need substantial support for the next grade” (Florida Department of Education, 2018, p. 3). This is not considered a passing score and students in the middle school setting must take a reading class as an elective in order to prepare them for the FSA for the current school year so they can be proficient and pass.

2. “Level 2 below satisfactory–Likely to need substantial support for the next grade” (Florida Department of Education, 2018, p. 3). This is not considered a passing score and students in the middle school setting are required to take a reading class as an elective in order to prepare them for the FSA for the current school year so they can be proficient and pass the ELA FSA.

3. “Level 3 satisfactory–May need additional support for the next grade” (Florida Department of Education, 2018, p. 3). These students are considered bubble students because they have the ability to succeed if given the proper support or they can decline if not given the proper support. This score is considered passing and these students in the middle school setting do not have to take a reading class. Students may have two electives and four core classes, which include language arts, math, science, and social studies. This indicates the student is succeeding on grade level. The student answers the majority of the easier questions correctly but struggles with the more thought-provoking questions.

4. “Level 4 Proficient–Likely to excel in the next grade” (Florida Department of Education, 2018, p. 3). These students have passed the FSA and have the skills needed to be successful in that subject area. This indicates the student has conquered some of the
thought-provoking content. The student is succeeding at or above grade level.

5. “Level 5 Mastery—Highly likely to excel in the next grade” (Florida Department of Education, 2018, p. 3). This indicates the student has passed the FSA and dominated the most thought-provoking content. The student is succeeding above grade level.

A review of the focus middle school 2017-2018 FSA sixth- to eighth-grade results indicated some students were not performing up to expected levels in reading. Table 1 summarizes the 2017-2018 FSA results for Grades 6-8 at the focus middle school.

Table 1

*Percentage of Students Scoring at a Level 3 or Higher on the Spring 2018 Florida Standard Assessment Results for the Focus School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Reading (English language arts)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>52% scored a Level 3 or higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>55% scored a Level 3 or higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>55% scored a Level 3 or higher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The goal for the state of Florida is for 100% of all students who take the FSA to score a Level 3 or higher. A Level 3 or higher signifies a student is “proficient” in a particular discipline, in this case Reading Levels 1 and 2 is considered “not proficient.” Although some students were meeting the proficiency standard, these data indicated 48% of sixth-grade students scored a Level 1 or Level 2 in reading. The seventh- and eighth-
grade scores indicated that 45% of the students scored a Level 1 or Level 2 in reading.

Ultimately, for the ELA, the following students scored in Levels 1 and 2:

- 201 sixth-grade students
- 219 seventh-grade students
- 219 eighth-grade students

The FSA ELA is divided into four clusters: C1 Key Ideas and Details, C2 Craft and Structure, C3 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, and C4 Language and Editing.

The test is divided into the reading portion and text-based writing portion. Table 2 shows how students performed in each cluster by grade level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1 Key Ideas and Details</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 Craft and Structure</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4 Language and Editing</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another significant component that the focus school as well as all other schools disaggregate are the learning gains, which leads to the school grade. According to the Florida Department of Education (2019b), “Learning gains means that the student
demonstrates growth from one (1) year to the next year sufficient to meet the criteria . . . for FSA or FSAA–Performance Task” (p. 12). Learning gains may be demonstrated through ELA or mathematics. At least 95% of students must be tested in order for scores to count. There is learning gain criteria in place in the state of Florida. The target school FSA ELA learning gains for 2017 to 2018 are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

*Florida Standard Assessment English Language Arts Achievement and Learning Gains 2017 and 2018 Comparison Results in Percentages for the Focus School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Grade 6</th>
<th></th>
<th>Grade 7</th>
<th></th>
<th>Grade 8</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning gains (all)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning gains &lt;25%</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Research Problem**

The problem of this study was there was an achievement gap between the state’s overall FSA test scores and the middle school test scores. The reading test scores at the middle school were not increasing, but rather decreasing as evidenced by Tables 1-3 from the Florida Department of Education. The goal is for student achievement to rise each year on the state standardized test.

**Background and justification.** The former No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was established in 2002. It was a federal law that provided funds for educational aid for low-socioeconomic students in return for advancements in their academic growth. States
were given the responsibility to educate students and follow the laws mandated by the NCLB Act in order to receive the federal funds. The requirements were as follows: (a) establish learning standards in each subject area, (b) produce annual standardized assessments to measure student progress in reading and math from Grades 3-8 as well as high school, (c) have proficiency levels, and (d) document and report proficiency results of the standardized assessments to the public with information such as students’ race, income, disability, and more (FairTest, 2008).

Another important component to the NCLB Act was adequate yearly progress (AYP). AYP was a goal that each school strove to meet each year. The final goal was for all students to meet 100% of the goal by 2014. Students had to be proficient according to the state criteria chosen by that state in reading and math in every subgroup. When a state failed to meet AYP, there were consequences (Phipps, 2015). If a school did not meet AYP after a year, it was put on a school improvement list, which was like a warning. If a school did not make meet AYP 2 years in a row, students had a choice to transfer to a better performing school. Any school that did not meet AYP 3 consecutive years offered students supplemental services to support their growth such as tutoring and after-school programs focusing on increasing student scores in reading and math. If a school was on the list for 4 consecutive years in addition to the requirements on the 3-year list, they had to also do one of the following: change school staff, use new curriculum, reduce school management authority, employ outside experts, extend school year/day, or restructure. Finally, after 5 years consecutively on the list, schools had to completely restructure, such as terminating entire staff, state takeover, or other harsh consequences.

The purpose of the NCLB Act of 2001 was for there to be equal education and achievement for all students; however, there was still an achievement gap as evidenced
by the school data as well as national data (Ugwu, 2013). At the researcher’s school, the achievement gap came from the curriculum not aligned to the FSA. Also, there were not enough resources to expose the students to FSA materials to properly prepare them for the rigor of the FSA. As a result, students were not achieving proficient scores on the test and they had reading the following year. This was evident in the test results each year.

Based on the research, there are other possible factors as to why there is an achievement gap and students are not performing on a higher level. According to Bassette (2016), another factor mentioned was that some teachers were not highly qualified. A highly qualified teacher is a professional educator who embodies qualities such as years of experience, an educational background, and a teaching certificate (Bassette, 2016). Some researchers feel those factors were not that significant in an urban school (Jacob, 2007). The thought is that students can still be successful even if the teacher does not have many years of experience, educational background, and teaching certificate. Other researchers pointed out that impactful educators have four dimensions that effect student outcomes on testing as follows: (a) classroom management, (b) instructional practices, (c) classroom environment, and (d) encouragement of student regulating themselves (Bassette, 2016).

Another study concurred that educators who are prepared to teach in college have better student outcomes (Cekiso, 2017). It was also shared in Cekiso’s (2017) study that if a qualified teacher was in each class, it would be a major component in solving the reading achievement struggle as well as quality professional development. Even then those teachers often are exposed to theory and need real practice to be impactful in the classroom. Another key factor to student success in reading is the teacher understanding effective reading strategies and applying reading strategies correctly, which leads to the
improvement of reading proficiency. If struggling readers learn to utilize effective reading strategies consistently, they will be successful like the students who apply these strategies daily. Again, this starts with the teacher in the classroom having that knowledge first to train their students on spending time on effective strategies that actually work. It is like a domino effect in a positive way; if the teacher gets the appropriate training to prepare their students, everything else will fall into place.

Another area that was mentioned in why there is an achievement gap in low-socioeconomic schools had to do with the race of the students tested. Lee (2006) pointed out that African American students struggle more and have lower scores than their Caucasian counterparts on state-standardized testing (Ugwu, 2013). In addition to minorities, English language learner (ELL) students, low-socioeconomic students, and students with special needs are also at a disadvantage when it comes to high-stakes standardized testing (Borden-Hudson, 2010). Erben, Ban, and Castañeda (2009) shed light on the fact that ELL students struggle a lot more because they do not have the language yet and their parents also do not speak English, therefore, they lack the resources to support their children in that area. This impacts their test scores, which further effects the achievement gap in reading. African American students fell behind Caucasian students in the state-standardized testing every year in reading and math (Horton, 2004; Lavin-Loucks, 2006). African American students also had higher dropout rates than Caucasian students according to this study (Horton, 2004; Lavin-Loucks, 2006). Akinola (2013) shared that households with incomes of less than $20,000 have a higher chance of children dropping out, whereas households with the income of $50,000 or more have a higher chance of graduating. The study by Akinola serves as a reminder that key factors continue to surface when it comes to the achievement gap not closing at
certain schools, which are socioeconomic status and parental education.

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** In this study, the area of need was educational resources for students. Reading teachers were lacking curriculum and supplemental resources to help prepare their students for the FSA test in reading. When teachers get the right resources and tools, the achievement gap closes on the FSA reading test. In some studies, some of the solutions offered to close the achievement gap yielded some growth but not enough to close the achievement gap. The goal was the resources and tools provided as supplemental materials would yield a more positive result and close the achievement gap at the middle school.

**Audience.** This study will impact professional educators overall, but specifically reading professional educators in the focus school. In addition, students could be impacted by this study in a positive manner. Students will reap the benefits of the resources that are obtained and utilized to support their learning. Educators have access to more reliable resources available outside of the curriculum.

**Setting of the Study**

**City demographics.** The focus middle school was located in a large suburban area outside a major city and inside an urban area. The area had a population of about 133,037. The racial makeup was African American 21.8%, Caucasian 66.5%, Hispanic or Latino 25.7%, American Indian/Alaska Native 0.3%, Asian 4.3%, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander 0.0 %, and two or more races 2.8% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). In the focus community, 92.0% of the residents aged 25 and older were high school graduates and 36.9% had at least a bachelor’s degree 2012-2016 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Approximately 36.9% of the population used a language other than English (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).
The school district. The school district was the sixth largest school district in the country and the second largest in the state. This was the first fully accredited school district in the state since 1962, the second largest school district, and $106 million was earned in scholarships by the Class of 2018. In 2018, there were 136 elementary schools, 37 middle schools, 33 high schools, 17 centers, and 88 charter schools. There was a total of 271,517 students enrolled in the various schools. The breakdown for each level was as follows: prekindergarten, 5,939; kindergarten-Grade 5, 96,374; Grades 6-8, 48,335; Grades 9-12, 70,686; centers, 5,090; and charter schools, 45,093. There was a diverse student population represented in this district. There were 204 countries that spoke 191 different languages in the district. The breakdown of student ethnic backgrounds was Caucasian 51.3% (139,325), African American 40.3% (109,338), Hispanic 33.8% (9,927), non-Hispanic 67.1% (182,032), Asian 3.8% (10,300), Native American or Native Alaskan 0.8% (2,091), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 2.0% (581), and multicultural 3.7% (9,927). There were 12.5% (34,605) ELLs and 12.8% (34,822) exceptional student education.

The staff in this district consisted of 15,084 instructional members. There were 10,567 clerical and support staff. Administrators were made up of 1,488 of the staff in this district. The total number of permanent employees were 27,139 and substitute/temporary employees were 7,181. The total number of employees was 34,320.

Middle school. The focus middle school served sixth- to eighth-grade level students. The focus school’s enrollment in 2018 was 1,400 students. The population consisted of 30% Hispanic, 34% African American, 25% Caucasian, 6% Asian, and 4% two or more races. The school was a Title 1 funded school. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2019), the purpose of Title 1 funding is to guarantee that every
child has a reasonable chance to acquire a superior education and be proficient on the state-standardized assessment. For a whole school to qualify for Title 1 funding, at least 40% of students must be enrolled in the free and reduced-price lunch program. Seventy-five percent of the students in the school are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch program. In 2019, students from low-income families were at 62% on free or reduced-price lunch program. In the state of Florida, there were 57.2% of middle school children eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, and 47.0% female students and 53.0% males were at the school.

The school had 8% of the students categorized as ELLs, which means the students were learning English as a second language for the first time or their household’s primary language was another language such as Spanish or Haitian-Creole. The focus school had several ELL classrooms to meet the needs of the ELL population. These students received support in these classrooms as well as all other classes through ELL strategies. This support was to prepare and accommodate students before they transitioned into the mainstream classroom setting in reading and language arts. Approximately 36.9% of the population used a language other than English.

In the focus middle school setting there were reading teachers, language arts teachers, math teachers, science teachers, social studies teachers, and elective teachers. The reading and language arts teachers attended trainings and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) where they learned a plethora of strategies, tools, and techniques focused in literacy whereas the other core teachers did not get that type of knowledge. PLCs are where teachers share and learn best practices in the classroom, which not only enhance teachers’ skills but increase student achievement. They do not get the same training; based on their background experiences, some do utilize reading strategies and
some do not.

At the focus middle school, the reading teachers trained the other core teachers on ways to incorporate reading strategies within their classrooms in the past. The researcher taught the science teachers strategies over a few sessions. There was some resistance from the science teachers with the exception of one or two teachers out of about eight-nine teachers. Some felt they should not have to teach strategies because they only thought they should focus on science content. Some were upset and felt the trainings were a waste of time. Overtime, the researcher and her colleague who was performing the training with her started to breakdown those barriers brought by the science teachers. They presented strategies and gave examples of how these strategies could be used in all classrooms as well as how imperative incorporating these strategies are in every classroom. By the end of the sessions, the majority of the teachers were on board and started to have a positive outlook on implementing these strategies. They realized that if students were unable to read and comprehend the content they presented, students would not be successful in their classrooms either. They started to understand if all teachers in every classroom including electives were teaching students specific strategies, then students would be hearing the same info and be using it daily. As a result, students are not to be taught in isolation. When students are taught skills in isolation, it is not impactful and they do not use the skills learned outside of the environment in which it was taught. Administration’s goal was for students to hear and have consistency throughout the day with the strategies that have been proven to be successful.

**Researcher’s Role**

The researcher’s role in this study was to gather perceptions of peer reading teachers. In addition, the researcher gathered information on techniques and resources as
well as tools these teachers utilized on a daily basis to prepare their students for the FSA test at the end of the year. This information was gathered through interview questions and observation of these techniques and resources.

**Definition of Terms**

There are some terminologies used that possibly are not familiar to the audience members who are not in the educational field. The words listed were used throughout the research study and will be beneficial for all audience members to be aware of to understand all aspects being discussed.

**Adequate yearly progress (AYP).** The premise behind AYP is to regulate how each school district is successfully executing standardized assessments academically as measured by the NCLB Act of 2001.

**English language arts (ELA).** ELA is the portion of the FSA that tests reading and writing.

**English language learners (ELLs).** This term refers to students who are nonnative speakers of English who are in the developmental stages of learning English. As times goes along, students continue to learn and improve in the English process in the elementary to middle school setting.

**End-of-course (EOC) assessments.** These assessments in Florida are taken on the computer, which measures the Florida Standards or Next Generation Sunshine State Standards for particular courses.

**Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT).** This term refers to the state-mandated test Florida had before the FSA. It tested students annually for Grades 3-11. This test measured students’ success at the end of the school year in reading, writing, math, and science based on Florida’s standards.
Florida Standards Assessment (FSA). This term refers to the state-mandated standardized assessment students take at the end of the school year annually in Grades 3-10. It includes reading, writing, and math tests proposed to measure student success. The tests are connected to Florida’s Common Core standards, which provide a framework for the knowledge students should attain by the end of each grade level.

Novice teacher. This term refers to teachers who have been teaching for 5 years or less.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). PLCs are utilized by school districts to enhance the skill sets of teachers. This enhancement of skills help teachers to increase student achievement in the classroom. Teachers learn and share best practices as well as attend a plethora of trainings to hone their skills.

Title I. Federally funded program for economically deprived students who live in school attendance zones with a high number of students from low-income families. The goal is for these students to receive equal opportunity to be successful academically.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate teacher perceptions of the techniques they used to teach reading and identify resources and tools needed to teach reading classes. Obtaining the teachers’ perceptions and identifying resources and tools would assist the staff at the school to prepare students for the state FSA. As a result, learning gains of each student may be increased and the school grade may increase as well. Students who scored a Level 3 or higher can be removed from reading classes the following school year.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a summary of the research related to PLCs, teacher perceptions of reading, best practices for reading, and race as a factor pertaining to the achievement gap in reading. All research is tied to the problem and purpose of the study. The chapter concludes with the purpose statement and research questions that steered the study. The theoretical framework of this study was grounded on multiple intelligences.

Theoretical Framework

Multiple intelligences was established by Gardner in 1983. His theory proposed that intelligence is far more than just IQ, rather Gardner focused on what humans are capable of through eight intelligences. These intelligences cover a comprehensive scope of human prospective. According to American Institute for Learning and Human Development (2019), the intelligences are as follows:

- Linguistic intelligence (“word smart”)
- Logical-mathematical intelligence (“number/reasoning smart”)
- Spatial intelligence (“picture smart”)
- Bodily-Kinesthetic intelligence (“body smart”)
- Musical intelligence (“music smart”)
- Interpersonal intelligence (“people smart”)
- Intrapersonal intelligence (“self smart”)
- Naturalist intelligence (“nature smart”). (para. 2)

Gardner’s (1983) theory of multiple intelligences regarding linguistic intelligence is when learners have a strength with words, language, and writing. Teachers can hone the skills of their students in the areas of reading for a purpose by debating, writing essays, creating/delivering speeches, enjoying reading, and enjoying writing. All of the
skills tie into teaching reading strategies and curriculum to strengthen students’ skills. Gardner’s interpersonal intelligence suggests the strength is understanding and communicating with other people, which can help with delivering the curriculum by the teacher in a more personal way. This can increase student engagement and motivation. Students who embody intrapersonal skills such as self-awareness and analyzing their strengths as well as weaknesses can connect to the teacher’s feedback more and experience growth in reading. This is because they are willing to reflect and are motivated naturally.

According to Glenn (2010), Gardner participated in in-depth research about intelligences of humans in order to be an expert in this area when he made his claims. Gardener suggested humans all had varying strengths and weaknesses, none being the same. It can be beneficial for students to know the multiple intelligences that exist so they can see, which ones they embody. Educators can use the multiple intelligences to their advantage by giving students more opportunities to gain authentic experiences at school (Herdon, 2016). According to Herdon (2016), teachers have power and give students the power when the specific dominant multiple intelligences are incorporated daily within the curriculum. The benefits are student are more responsive, cooperative, and fruitful when exposed to their particular multiple intelligence (Herdon, 2016). The teacher will be and feel more impactful once this step is implemented.

**Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)**

DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) defined PLCs as “educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 469). According to Dufour et al. (2008), PLCs that are successful are composed of educators who are detecting important
results, measuring knowledge, gathering evidence to progress monitor, supporting students who struggle, and concentrating on rigorous learning. A PLC is a significant component for an educator’s growth if implemented with fidelity because it can allow students to grow immensely through the educator’s knowledge.

Wiggins and McTighe (2006) proposed four characteristics differentiate professionals in any field:

- Professionals (1) act on the most current knowledge that defines their field; (2) are client-centered and adapt to meet the needs of the individuals whom they serve; (3) are results-oriented; and (4) uphold the standards of the profession in their own practice through peer review. (p. 27)

Professional educators are constantly staying abreast of new ideas, concepts, strategies, and tools to enhance their skill set. In turn, these skills are used to serve their student body daily so that student achievement can be increased. During PLCs, educators are sharing and gaining best practices amongst their peers (McLaughlin, 2010).

Kelleher (2003) proposed that the best programs “help teachers to think critically about their practice; to develop new instructional strategies, along with new techniques for creating curriculum and assessments; and to measure how new practices have affected student learning” (p. 754). Educators definitely should incorporate reflection into the PLC process. If there is not reflection, there is no direction related to strengths, weaknesses, and improvements for the educator and students. Greenleaf and Schoenbach (2004) categorized professional development as high value if teachers are a part of the learning for an extended amount of time, required resources are available, prospects for teachers to reflect on teaching and learning are designed, and teacher knowledge is improved. Teachers are held accountable by the results of their student gains that are
measurable. Gone are the days of professional development and PLCs only focusing on the teacher. The main purpose now is to start with the teacher and end with student results that show growth.

Williams, Matthews, Stewart, and Hilton (2007) created a definition of a PLC through a scientific procedure, which included eight elements. They also generated a measurement tool, a survey that measured transparently each of the elements of the PLC called Learning Community Culture Indicator. The eight elements identified by Williams et al. were as follows:

1. An interdependent culture based on trust.
2. Common mission, vision, values, and goals that are focused on teaching and learning.
3. Principal leadership that is focused on student learning.
4. Participative leadership that is focused on teaching and learning.
5. Collaborative teaming.
6. Professional development that is teacher driven and embedded in daily work.
7. Systems of prevention and intervention that assure academic success for all students.
8. Data based decision-making using continuous assessment. (p. 3)

PLCs are not a new concept. The concept of people working as a team to achieve a common goal was obtained from the business world and modified for the education world (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). In education, PLC educators work as a team to improve student learning (Eaker & Keating, 2008; Hord, 2009). PLCs are a transformation that offers organized opportunities for analysis and assessment of one’s aptitude (Mitchell, 2013). According to Leininger (2013), a PLC is
A group of people bound together by a common focus on learning for all members of the community while being particularly focused on constantly improving their practice and student achievement. The group shares a passion and philosophy along with the highest level of respect for one another. (pp. 6-7)

Within an environment like this, there will be success for teachers and students.

**Benefits of professional learning communities (PLCs).** A study was conducted by Backman (2013) to analyze the correlation between PLCs and student achievement. This study focused on 26 elementary schools, about 11,000 students, and 439 educators. Backman wanted to determine the individual elements of PLCs and how they impact student achievement. Launching a PLC is a successful way to constantly refresh, advance, and expand schools to develop an environment that is more conducive to increasing student achievement, focusing on data, and collaborating (Backman, 2013). The study results showed there is an impactful relationship between PLCs and student achievement. According to Backman, “This study moved beyond just showing the relationship of an overall construct of PLC and student achievement by indicating the direct relationship between individual PLC element and student achievement” (p. 22).

Hargreaves (2008) stated, “At their best, professional learning communities remain powerful organizational strategies to enable and empower teachers and others to learn and work together in improving the quality and results of teaching, learning, and caring for all students” (p. 187).

Mitchell (2013) interviewed novice and veteran teachers in her study regarding their perceptions of the helpfulness of the PLCs in increasing their knowledge base and retentions as a teacher. They did not have an optimistic outlook on PLCs. The researcher, however, noticed some important suggestions for administration for the following school
year, which focused on the importance of PLCs and revisions that might change the teachers’ perceptions going forward. The researcher listed the following as key components that were important to have a successful PLC:

1. Comprehension of PLCs. Leaders first must understand the development and progression of PLCs and take time to progress monitor them.

2. Implementation. Leaders need to have an outlined design before having teachers start PLCs.

3. Structure. Order for all activities in PLCs is necessary so that everything remains organized.

4. Teacher perception. Leaders should gather information or a needs assessment on what teachers feel they actually need to hone their skills or what they need overall for their PLC to run efficiently.

Mitchell (2013) stated, “For this reason, among others, professional learning communities have been created to increase the confidence and effectiveness of all teachers” (p. 3).

Research suggested many ways how PLCs can be unsuccessful but that it can flourish if implemented correctly. Weber (2011) stated five dysfunctions of PLCs. If these dysfunctions are used in a positive manner, the PLC can be successful. The first dysfunction is not setting norms. When customs are not set, the PLC is not organized. Not only does this cause confusion, it wastes a lot of time that could go towards sharing best practices. This especially is not helpful for the novice teachers. If the PLC leader establishes norms, it will provide a sense of structured needed to get tasks completed.

The second dysfunction is having unclear goals (Weber, 2011). Unclear goals lead to chaos as well. Goals must be clear, concise, precise, and simple. When goals are
understood by the group, they know what is expected of them and are more willing to participate. The third dysfunction is distrust in the PLC team. Many factors can lead to distrust within a PLC, such as teachers not working as a unit. There cannot be a team chemistry if teams withhold information from one another. One way to combat that distrust is through interdependent teams. Weber (2011) stated, “Interdependence is fostered when teachers are committed to one another and create mutually dependent, positive, and nurturing relationships” (pp. 7-9). Leana (2011) concurred by indicating that when teachers had recurrent discussions with their peers, it bought about trust, which led to higher test scores for students. If there is no trust, then that leads to lack of communication, which was Weber’s third dysfunction. In addition, Leana made a connection to teachers feeling good about their jobs, which leads to other positive traits such as them willing to make changes, being more open minded, and developing more connections with peers, which leads to amplified student achievement. This is an encouraging situation for all involved. When there are learning gains, the fifth dysfunction can be avoided, which is lack of learning outcomes.

**Elementary and secondary professional learning communities (PLCs).** A study was conducted by Curry (2010) in a Texas school district that focused on 200 elementary school teachers and 200 secondary teachers who were randomly selected to take a PLC Survey and Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy Scale. Both groups completed the same survey. This district implemented PLC components over a span of 6 years. There was a group of principals and assistant principals who also took a PLC Survey and their replies were compared to the teachers’ replies. The results demonstrated there was a difference between how PLCs were implemented at the elementary level versus how they were implemented at the secondary level. In addition, there were variances in how the
principals implemented versus how teachers implemented. It was also found that no one group was better than the other; rather, in this district, both groups implemented PLC components on a high level. Components were implemented differently because elementary and secondary schools are run differently based class size, schedules, and many other factors (Curry, 2010).

Curry (2010) also found that administrators in this study at both levels gave teachers leeway on how to use PLCs within their classrooms. The educators in both levels were very successful because they were in an environment that set them up for success through how their PLCs were structured. Teachers were able to have more time collaborating with their peers, students, and parents. When there is time to communicate, understanding can be improved over time (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). Based on the research, it was clear that even though administrators and teachers had different job descriptions, both groups implemented PLCs with fidelity. This shows both groups in this district understood the significance and impact PLCs had on themselves, their students, their school, and their community as a whole. They understood the bigger picture and what the results could do for their district (Curry, 2010).

Although the study by Curry (2010) yielded excellent results for both elementary and secondary school teachers, there were still recommendations that would allow both groups to strengthen their PLCs. It was recommended each group visit the different level school to actually see how the PLC was operated firsthand. It is one thing to hear about how it is done somewhere else, but it is another thing to see it in action and to ask questions of the teachers implementing. It was suggested the secondary teachers observe specific components when they visited the elementary schools because they scored the lowest in those areas. Secondary teachers should observe communication, socialization,
and interdependent teaching roles whereas elementary teachers should examine cognitive skills, deprivatization of practice, and dedication to meeting consistently.

**Teacher Perceptions of Reading**

In a study on teacher perceptions about reading, eight science and social studies teachers of high school and middle schools were interviewed (Ness, 2009). They all believed reading was a significant component of their classroom instruction. The study consisted of two science middle school teachers and two social studies middle school teachers. The study also involved two science high school teachers and two social studies high school teachers. Many or none of the same teachers who said reading was important did not actually use reading strategies in their classrooms based on 2,400 minutes of observation in total (Ness, 2009). The study also showed the strategies that were utilized were the same in most classes. Out of the eight reading comprehension instruction strategies, only three were utilized by the eight teachers: (a) text structure, (b) question answering, and (c) summarization. Question answering was used the most at 62 minutes, followed by text structure at 18 minutes, and summarization only used 2 minutes out of the 2,400 minutes. According to Ness (2009), overall more reading instruction happened in middle school classrooms with 79 minutes whereas in high school it only occurred 3 minutes. In addition, social studies teachers integrated more reading comprehension instruction at 60 minutes as opposed to science teachers who only implemented 22 minutes of instruction. Each teacher was observed a total of 5 hours. They were observed in 35-minute increments.

In a study by Louden (2018) focusing on novice kindergarten to Grade 5 teachers’ perspectives of learner-centered reading instruction, some information was gathered in hopes of leading to optimistic results. It was observed that novice teachers were not
using learner-centered instructional practices as evidenced by their lesson plans and student success rates (Louden, 2018). In novice teachers’ classrooms, almost 70% of students were not proficient in reading. As a result, administrators delivered professional development for effective strategies to support the novice educators, but there was still a lack in usage.

The premise of learner-centered instruction is for students to play a pertinent role in their education, which makes it more meaningful for them (Roehl, Reddy, & Shannon, 2013). When students are part of the process, they get more involved, which surges their inspiration. A motivated student is an engaged student (Dole, Bloom, & Kowalske, 2016). An engaged student is one who is learning (Weimer, 2013).

The perception of a novice teacher regarding strategies is that they usually use strategies from their background knowledge that is comfortable to them according to Dole et al. (2016). They have the perception that teacher-centered learning is more conducive to learning. Teacher-centered learning is the opposite of learner-centered learning in that it focuses on the teacher providing all of the knowledge and students bare no real responsibility other than show up and receive information (Polly, Margerison, & Piel, 2014). According to Louden (2018), novice teachers in kindergarten-Grade 5 had a desire to learn the strategies to make their students successful in reading but they felt unprepared. In addition, they wanted to get support through working with their peers so they could get organized ahead of time to implement the strategies in their classroom. Having this pertinent information on novice teachers’ thoughts and needs will help the district and school provide them with what they need, which eventually will lead to increase in student success.
Best Practices for Teaching Reading

There are a host of best practices that teachers have been trained on over the years in PLCs. At times, teachers feel overwhelmed by the strategies they are given to use as tools. The reason they feel overwhelmed is because it is just too many strategies, tools, supplemental aides, and even pilot programs. Sometimes less is more to help teachers improve their craft as well as increase student achievement, which ultimately will close the achievement gap in reading. In addition, teachers feel like some of the information given is not aligned to the FSA. Some of the information gathered through the research proves that some specific reading strategies will aid students in improving daily if the strategies are used consistently.

In order to enhance the skill set of middle and secondary teachers, they need to be shown the significance of how reading comprehension instruction can expand student learning (Ness, 2009). Ness (2009) stated, “Truly meaningful professional development opportunities may provide secondary teachers with an understanding of how reading comprehension strategies are beneficial for students’ understanding and retention of content” (p. 160). More than just the reading and language arts, teachers have to be trained in implementing these reading strategies in order for students to benefit in the long run. Content-area teachers need to be given the opportunity to learn how to integrate and implement these strategies in their college courses. If they have that foundation, they will come into the classroom more prepared to provide students with not just content but with meaningful reading strategies that support the reading process throughout the day.

Teaching strategies. According to the research, when teachers take time to teach effective reading strategies by modeling it, giving feedback, and teaching it consistently, students will begin to use the strategies independently (Ness, 2009). When students use
the strategies independently, they are taking charge of their learning, which yields favorable results. As time goes along, students will start to see success for themselves and use the strategies constantly and consistently. They will also start to add more strategies to their toolkit, eventually becoming “good” readers, which is the ultimate goal. Instead of teachers using so many different tools, it is suggested they incorporate specific comprehension strategies. Ness indicated “the NRP (2000) found research evidence for the following eight comprehension strategies” (p. 59). The eight strategies are as follows:

1. “Comprehension monitoring” (p. 60). Students are aware they did not understand the content through the monitoring process.

2. “Cooperative learning” (p. 60). Students working as a team to gain knowledge about reading strategies.

3. “Graphic and semantic organizers” (p. 60). A visual representation of what the student has learned.

4. “Story structure” (p. 60). Students using the five Ws to gather more information about what they are reading.

5. “Question answering” (p. 60). Students are asked questions and students answer those questions verbally.

6. “Question generation” (p. 60). Students ask themselves questions throughout and after reading.

7. “Summarization” (p. 60). Students generate the main idea and supporting details.

8. “Multiple strategy” (p. 60). Students use a plethora of strategies in conjunction with the teacher.

A study conducted by Twinning (2008) in a California elementary school was
focused on developing reading interventions to improve student achievement in Grades 2 through 6. The issue at hand was that 75% of the student population was not successful on the state-standardized test, teachers were not applying the curriculum with faithfulness, and students were not actively involved with classroom instruction (Twinning, 2008). The school had a large number of ELL students with nearly half of the school Hispanic and 36% of the population were ELL. There were special education students in the population at 13%. The school was considered a Title I school with 83% of the population receiving free and reduced-price breakfast/lunch.

According to Twinning (2008), at one point the school had a huge increase in test scores but steadily it began to decrease overtime. There was a problem in the ELL student proficiency with 94% of the students not proficient. Another eye-opener was that 87% of Hispanic students were not meeting proficiency. There were also a host of changes that the school and district faced, such as four superintendents in 4 years. At the school level, the two preceding principals did not reinforce the usage of the curriculum; therefore, teachers did not use it as it should be implemented. It was clear a plan had to be formulated to increase student achievement.

Because this school had so much to work on, it was important for the principal conducting the study to be very strategic. Another important step was for the principal to be firm, fair, and supportive towards the teachers in order for results to be favorable for students and lead to school improvement overall. First, the principal identified the main concern of the teachers so they could get the proper support. Some examples of what teachers needed were workshops on the curriculum that was supposed to be implemented daily and training on how to meet the needs of the ELL students (Twinning, 2008).

There were several factors that influenced educators, but what was key were the
objectives for students to improve that would come from their teachers. The students and teachers would both be learning new concepts and changing together. One major component was that teachers needed to inform students of learning objectives for each lesson (Twinning, 2008). The purpose of this was so students knew what they were expected to learn and know by the end of lessons, units, and for standardized testing at the end of the school year. This knowledge helps identify what is learned, student strengths, student weaknesses, progress monitoring, and data to steer teacher instruction.

In conjunction with objectives connecting concepts, English language development is significant. It is significant because learners such as ELL students and the low-socioeconomic students, of which the school is composed, need to be front loaded with information so they can start connecting knowledge. Twinning (2008) shared that the more experiences to which they are exposed, the more they can start connecting concepts and as a result their knowledge base increases. This will help them comprehend better in reading and language arts.

It was imperative the staff grasped successful solutions to the many issues with which the school had to deal in order to increase scores and prepare students for the next level. One solution that had the potential to be successful was teachers teaching the curriculum with fidelity (Twinning, 2008). There were three specific programs that were required to be taught with fidelity in the area were of reading success: Open Court Language Arts Program, English Language Development Curriculum, and Move Into English. The principal took a very positive grassroots approach. The principal modeled a variety of strategies overtime to not overwhelm the teachers. The principal also was clear on the expectations of the teachers, what was to be implemented and how it was to be implemented. When there were walkthroughs, there would be discussion and feedback on
what was observed to help the teacher. The environment was one of teamwork, which helped with the transitions and the trust factor. The accomplishments of teachers were also recognized so teachers knew that their hard work in an uncomfortable change did not go unnoticed.

Another possible successful solution was focus on learning and the learner (Twinning, 2008). The goal here was for the teacher to focus on higher level intellect so the students could transfer knowledge across the curriculum. Students learn more when they make connections throughout they day and are not taught in isolation. Lastly, benchmarking was introduced as a solution. Teachers were given the opportunity to visit a school population that had the same type of students socioeconomically but not ethnically the same. Teachers were able to observe best practices in actions and take notes. This provided them with a visual of how the strategies should be executed and offered hope that it could be done successfully. In-depth professional developments with rich discussion and examination were included to ensure everyone was on the same page and that growth was occurring. That was a time to clarify information as well. Some of the best practices teachers saw at the school they visited was high student engagement, checking for comprehension, rigor, differentiation with implementation, and smooth transitions. The school was chosen as a benchmark because the school went up tremendously on the Academic Performance Index in the Hispanic subgroup and socioeconomically disadvantaged group. Another reason the school was chosen was because it utilized the same main curriculum as the school in the study. They wanted to know what strategies that school was using to be successful because they both had the same population of students.

The results of the study by Twinning (2008) were overall successful. There were
gains due to all of the effort and strategies that the school implemented. It is unknown exactly which strategies made the most impact. If the school continued to be vigilant about using strategies consistently and with fidelity, they would be able to meet the NCLB goals, which stated 100% of students reach proficiency or above by 2014.

Facella, Rampino, and Shea (2005) studied two school districts in regard to the ELL strategies each one utilized. Ten teachers from each district were asked several questions. The grade levels focused on were prekindergarten, kindergarten, first grade, and second grade. The teachers were asked what the strategies were they found fruitful in encouraging language acquisition for ELL students. Also, they were asked why they thought these were effective strategies. The districts were very distinct from one another demographically. One school had a high percentage of ELL while the other school had a low percentage of ELLs. Another difference between the two schools was that one school had 66% of the students who spoke a language other than English at home whereas the other school had only 31% of the students who spoke a language other than English as home, which was a marked contrast (Facella et al., 2005). This study is significant because ELL strategies are effective for non-ELL students as well. One of the interviewed teachers shared she used the strategies with all of her students stating, “In my experiences, the strategies I use with my ELL kids are beneficial to my English speakers as well” (p. 213).

The teachers interviewed from both districts used a variety of strategies that were impactful in increasing students acquiring the language (Facella et al., 2005). When teachers were interviewed, each one mentioned utilizing at least 10 different strategies. Of the 10 strategies, some were extremely popular as evidenced by the usage more frequently by the teachers. Other strategies were used more often or less often depending
on factors such as grade level. Overall, there were 28 different strategies revealed from the 20 teachers that they used and found to be influential. All teachers agreed they were more effective when they used a plethora of strategies because each child needed different needs met.

The strategies that were most used were put into three key categories: (a) strategies for engaging learners emotionally, (b) strategies for teaching language specifically, and (c) strategies for teaching in general. In addition, four strategies were cited by most of the teachers as being impressive overall: (a) gestures and visual cues; (b) repetition and opportunities for practicing skills; (c) use of objects, real props, and hands-on; and (d) multisensory approaches. These particular strategies yielded positive results in students growing academically throughout the school year (Facella et al., 2005).

Ethnicity as a Factor

There has been attention given to the achievement gap between ethnicities. Multiple studies have yielded a plethora of important information about the achievement gap among multiple ethnicities. The achievement gap usually occurs before students even begin school (MacGregor & Cornelius-White, 2017). In addition, minority students who are Hispanic and African American perform lower on standardized tests than Caucasian and Asian American students (Austin, 2012).

Some studies revealed students had more success academically when they had teachers who were of identical ethnic background and gender. Researchers found that African American students felt more comfortable having a teacher who was the same ethnicity. They also felt they received positive feedback and attention from African American teachers (MacGregor & Cornelius-White, 2017). When minority teachers were present, there was a positive impact on minority students because minority students set
higher educational goals for themselves as well as increased their involvement in school activities (Atkins, Fertig, & Wilkins, 2014). It was also revealed by MacGregor and Cornelius-White (2017) that some minority teachers gave better grades to students who were the same ethnic background as them. Minority teachers also viewed minority students in a more positive light. Minority students with the same ethnic background as the teacher were more successful on tests (MacGregor & Cornelius-White, 2017).

A study by Akinola (2013) revealed that in the 2006-2007 school year in a county located in Florida, the results from the FCAT indicated only 16% of African Americans in fourth grade and 13% of African American eighth graders were proficient in reading. The NCLB Act was created to close the achievement gap between minorities, but Hursh (2007) believed the NCLB Act only caused more problems by not closing the gap as well as intensifying discrimination. James (2009) concurred with Hursh that NCLB was not living up to the hype because other factors demonstrated minorities were not being supported. For example, less money was being spent on minority students who needed it rather than students in the wealthy areas (Hursh, 2007).

It was discovered after-school programs may be the key component in downsizing the achievement gap of minority students (Gayle, 2004). A variety of successful after-school programs were described (Brass, 2008; Chenoweth, 2009; Tchibozo, 2007) explaining ways after-school programs were beneficial to students’ success. Some examples to support the success of students and the reduction of the achievement gap in after-school programs were exposing students to field trips, increasing student motivation, providing extracurricular activities, having high expectations for all students, and shifting the focus away from violence in their neighborhoods. The results of the after-school programs demonstrated there was a decrease in the number of minority
students who were retained in grade levels by 53% (Akinola, 2013). Minority students and schools, especially those schools with low-performing students, essentially need after-school programs in order for there to be a real action of first reducing the achievement gap and eventually closing it over time.

It was shared that closing the achievement gap on standardized tests is regarded as a substantial task among the higher and lower socioeconomic groups (Courtney, 2014). The first legislation that provided supplementary funding to schools with students who performed low was launched by Lyndon Johnson in 1964. He called it “War on Poverty” and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was established at that time (Courtney, 2014). Then, in 1983, the National Commission of Excellence in Education shifted the focus of the achievement gap from being a problem of America rather than a poverty issue according to Courtney (2014).

*A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission of Excellence in Education, 1983) established some procedures that would ensure all states were supporting all students in meeting educational needs through implementing actions such as developing standards to assess all students. This was the first time the ESEA was modified according to Hewitt (2008), to explicitly emphasis closing the achievement gap between the low- and high-socioeconomic students. It established itself as a restructured legislation for standard-based assessments (Hewitt, 2008).

The most recent modification on ESEA was introduced by President George Bush, which was the NCLB Act of 2001. The difference between this modification and the previous form of ESEA was that this restructuring goal was to deliver superior education for all students as well as attain undeviating achievement points as evidenced by state standards. States made a commitment to make advancement towards every
student reaching 100% aptitude by 2014 by meet AYP (Courtney, 2014). In addition, schools were required to break down the progress of specific groups and subgroups in an effort to decrease the achievement gap even more. Schools that did not meet the required progress each year were labeled and certain consequences followed after so many infractions. At least 42 states requested an ESEA flexibility where they had the ability to have more time beyond 2014 to meet the goal of 100% of students proficient. As long as that state was making some progress, they were granted the flexibility.

States have the freedom to create their own assessments, select assessments, establish standards, and much more (Lee, 2008). Because there are over 50 diverse standards for measuring educational results, a student can be proficient in one state and deemed not proficient in another state and not meet AYP. States can determine how students will be tested and monitored, which does not support the increase in the achievement gap among the privileged and underprivileged (Borowski & Sneed, 2006). The state of Kentucky shared that 90% of their schools met AYP in 2003, an example of a state’s data not being accurately based on its own guidelines. In actuality, once this information was modified to change the number of students in particular subgroups, it completely changed the outcome and showed that only 31% of the schools in Kentucky met AYP. States having so much power is producing inaccurate outcomes about the achievement gap closing.

There is a discrepancy among what states report and what the NAEP reports regarding the achievement gap between White and Blacks and White and Hispanic students (Courtney, 2014). States are reporting favorable results in the increase of underprivileged students and also reporting that the gap is closing among White students and minorities, whereas the NAEP found those gaps remain practically unchanged. Lee
(2008) stated that the NAEP provided an accurate view of the results regarding the achievement gap amid a plethora of freedoms that the different states are enforcing to gather their results. Some states such as Alabama, Colorado, and California shared outcomes that exhibited growth in the achievement gap among Black, White, and Hispanic students; however, the NAEP results were completely opposite of the state results showing disparity in increases (Courtney, 2014). It appears the pressure of reaching the goals of the NCLB Act has increased the pressure to produce favorable outcomes from states and as a result there possibly may be some fabrication in order to meet those high expectations (Courtney, 2014).

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were used to guide this applied dissertation study:

1. What do middle school reading teachers perceive are successes, challenges, and needs when preparing students for the FSA reading test?
2. What tools or resources are utilized by middle school teachers to prepare students for the reading portion of the FSA?
3. What reading strategies are middle school teachers using in the classroom?
Chapter 3: Methodology

Aim of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate teacher perceptions of the technique they used to teach reading and identify resources as well as tools needed to teach reading classes effectively. Resources were shared that will help all teachers be successful in teaching reading comprehension strategies.

Qualitative Research Approach

A case study was used for this qualitative dissertation. According to Gerring (2004), “A case study is an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (singular) units” (p. 341). In this case, reading teachers were interviewed for information regarding their perceptions of the reading curriculum. The participants’ replies were examined for each interview question to ascertain whether or not teachers shared recurrent beliefs regarding the reading curriculum. The qualitative analysis was completed using Microsoft Excel to support the coding process and to disseminate information regarding similar topics. Participants were asked questions located in the interview protocol that were recorded. Edmonds and Kennedy (2017) defined qualitative method as follows:

A form of data collection and analysis, with a focus on understanding and emphasis on meaning. Research under the qualitative method is considered emerging and nonexperimental. This method is often to explore the “how” and “why” of systems and human behavior and what governs these behaviors. Specifically, it is a method for examining phenomena, predominantly using “words” for data. (pp. 141-142)
Participants

In the qualitative portion of the study, six middle school reading teachers were interviewed about their perceptions of the technique they used to teach reading. The middle school was located in the southeastern section of the United States of America. The study was a case study design. Teacher participants will be briefly described.

The researcher obtained the perceptions of reading teachers at the focus school in relation to the reading curriculum through an interview. The participants were six reading teachers at the focus school. These teachers taught several grades throughout the school year. Their teaching experience ranged from 3 years to over 35 years. The data focused on all sixth to eighth-grade students who were in reading classes 2017-2018 school year at an urban middle school in the southeastern part of Florida.

Teacher A taught for 28 years and will retire next year. She taught the ELL population. The students ranged from sixth to eighth grade. She was in her 60s and Caucasian. Teacher B taught for 27 years and had taught elementary and middle school. She taught only eighth-grade reading. She was in her 50s and Jamaican. Teacher C taught for 3 years. She taught mostly seventh grade and some eighth-grade classes as well. She was in her 40s and Trinidadian. Teacher D had been teaching for 23 years. She taught all three grade levels. She was in her early 60s and Caucasian. Teacher E had been teaching for 24 years. She had only taught middle school. She was in her mid-40s and Jamaican. Teacher F taught for 35 years. She was the Literacy Coach for the school and also taught a class of sixth graders. She was in her 50s and Caucasian.

To be eligible to participate in the interview, teachers had to be considered reading teachers only as opposed to language arts teachers. All six teachers were responsible for preparing students for the FSA. All of the teachers read a consent, the
form was explained to them by the researcher, and the researcher signed the form. The consent form informed teachers about the purpose of the study, steps of the study, collection of data, and their rights as a volunteer. The inclusion criteria to get involved in the research study was to be a reading teacher in the focus middle school. These teachers were considered a “case” because their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions were being examined closely for in-depth data. They were also a small particular group of middle school reading teachers as well, which is a characteristic of case studies. The exclusion criteria included teachers at the focus middle school who were not reading teachers.

**Data Collection Tools**

Qualitative data were collected for this study. The data were collected through a teacher interview protocol (see Appendix).

**Interview protocol.** The interview questions were created by the researcher and adapted from Woo’s (2018) interview questions. Permission was granted by Woo to adapt the researcher’s questions from her questions. The researcher had the questions prepared on paper and asked the interviewee the questions. Seven teachers were asked each question in the media center before or after school on separate days. The interviews were audio recorded. The open-ended questions were utilized to get detailed information about reading teachers’ perceptions about the curriculum, their skill set, student abilities, and student growth.

The participants viewed the questions on a sheet of paper with precise directions and heard the researcher read the questions out loud. Interviews were administered individually in the media center. Each interview was recorded to ensure all answers were captured and accurately translated. The researcher also wrote the answers down on paper. The researcher focused on open-ended questions opposed to closed-ended questions to
capture as many details as possible on the participants’ perspective on various areas. All information gathered was examined.

The researcher assembled data that were directly related to the participants’ encounters with the reading curriculum and their students. Interviews were scheduled based on the participants’ preference regarding the best day for each person to meet. Interviews took at least 45 minutes to 1 hour. If more time was needed, a second interview timeframe was scheduled. Each participant was given the opportunity to view the transcribed interview as an added precaution to ensure all information shared was valid.

The steps of qualitative data analysis (QDA) are imperative according to Chenail (2012):

Involves collecting quality data talk, observations, and/or documents, and being able to talk about the talk, make observations about observations, and or/document the documents along with the ability to talk about the talk about the talk, make observations about the observations the observation, and/or document the documents about the documents. From this perspective QDA can be understood as both the analysis of the data and the analysis of the analysis of the data. Because of this study within a study structure, you must be able to manage your study, your study of your study, and yourself very well and you must also be able to re-present both processes efficiently and effectively in your presentations and publications. (p. 248)

The researcher not only ensured the data were thoroughly analyzed after the interviews but made sure that information gathered was not just repeated or paraphrased because that is not qualitative data analysis (Chenail, 2012).
The interview questions were transcribed and color coded. Color coding is the process of organizing information using specific colors for specific concepts and related categories. Color coding can be done with highlighters or sticky notes initially by hand. Data can also be entered into computer software color coded. According to Moore and Dwyer (1997), “Research has shown that color-coding instructional materials helps learners organize or categorize information into useful patterns which learners interpret and adjust to their environment” (p. 145).

The data were inserted in an Excel document. The researcher looked for common ideas among each participant and categorized them. This help the researcher to see if there were patterns among the thought processes of the participants.

Validation

The researcher utilized four experts for the summative and formative committee to analyze the interview protocol to ensure questions were appropriate and correlated with the research questions. The first expert had been a professor for 20 years of Introduction to Literature, Developmental Reading, Developmental Writing, Student Success Skills, and Honors Leadership. She obtained her Educational Doctorate in Organizational Leadership. The second expert had 13 years of experience as a Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and obtained her doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction. The third expert had 12 years of experience as a reading teacher and was in the process of obtaining his Educational Doctorate in Educational Leadership. The fourth expert had 21 years of experience as a Director of Training and obtained her Educational Doctorate in Organizational Leadership. Each expert was qualified because each of them had been involved in qualitative or quantitative research. Of the four experts, two of them worked in higher education and were exposed to research in their job frequently. One of the
experts was a reading teacher and brought much background in reading curriculum.

The goal of the interview protocol was to gather data about reading teachers’ perceptions regarding the reading curriculum. It was hopeful the data would also reveal tools and strategies that they used to teacher as well as improve student performance. Further, the protocol questions had the teachers reflect on their own growth and learning. The researcher acquired authorization from the principal of the school to interview the participants.

**Procedures**

The following steps guided the study:

**Step 1:** Acquired Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval at Nova Southeastern University.

**Step 2:** Discovered and established a key member associated with the county who would be responsible for acquiring county approval for the research study.

**Step 3:** Submitted the online application for IRB county approval with all required supporting documents and secured IRB approval certificate

**Step 4:** Began meeting with teachers individually in 45 minutes to 1-hour increments each. If needed, another session was scheduled. Interviews took place in the school media center. Each teacher was asked the questions from the interview protocol that correlated with the three research questions. The interviews were recorded in an audio format so they could be transcribed and coded afterwards. Common topics among the teachers through the interviews were gathered and analyzed. Afterwards, all results were synopsized, outlined, and reported.

**Step 5:** The researcher ascertained if there was a gap between the perception of
required instruments and strategies the reading teachers maintained were imperative to prepare students for the ELA FSA.

Data Analysis

All interview data were coded after transcription. According to Edmonds and Kennedy (2017),

Coding is the process of exploring the data for themes. Ideas, and categories, and then marking similar passages of text with a code label so that they can easily be retrieved at a later stage for further comparison and analysis. (p. 325)

The types of coding that were utilized were emotion, descriptive, and in vivo. The researcher used these codes to analyze common topics among teachers interviewed. This information yielded patterns and trends as well that could be used in the results and implications section. Once the common topics had been established from the interview, an inventory of common topics was created for coding purposes. The researcher’s goal was to provide concise and clear patterns after analyzing all data through coding. For further assurance, within-case analysis was employed. Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe (2010) stated that “within-case analysis in case study research is the in-depth exploration of a single case as a stand alone entity” and that “it involves an intimate familiarity with a particular case in order to discern how the processes or patterns that are revealed” (p. 971).  

Ethical Considerations

Participants were reassured that all information was anonymous and would not be shared with anyone in a harmful manner. It was significant the participants felt comfortable confiding in the researcher throughout this process. The more comfortable that participants felt, the more honest they would be about their perceptions. Instead of
using the participants’ names, letters were used instead to identify the teachers for the researcher’s purpose. Consent forms were filled out by the participants granting permission to be interviewed. The site approval letter was issued by the principal to get permission to perform research. All documents were held in a safe area where only the researcher had admittance.

Trustworthiness

According to Edmonds and Kennedy (2017), it is imperative to validate the accuracy as well as interpretation of the data of the research. Members on the formative and summative committee checked the interview questions beforehand to ensure that participants were exposed to quality questions. Feedback was provided from the committees on modifications that needed to be made before the interviews were completed. In addition, member checking was used to check the accuracy of the data collection throughout the process and after the process. The triangulation of information was achieved from various reading teachers interviewed and capturing their various responses (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017).

Potential Research Bias

The researcher had a vested interest in reading curriculum because the researcher was a reading teacher; however, the researcher reserved her thoughts regarding curriculum and gathered the thoughts of her colleagues instead. The goal was to learn the perceptions of reading teachers within the school, which involved listening as well as learning from others as opposed to sharing the researcher’s thoughts.

Limitations

A limitation of this study was the size of the participants was low at only seven reading teachers. If more middle school reading teachers were interviewed or surveyed, a
wider variety of data could have been collected. More data could yield more results such as successful strategies utilized by those teachers. Teachers could have also been able to reflect more on their practices and modify practices based on the results from other reading teachers.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This dissertation was intended to investigate teacher perceptions of the techniques they used to teach reading and identify resources and tools needed to teach reading classes. This chapter provides results of this case study regarding the perceptions of reading teachers in middle school. It is significant to get reading teachers’ perceptions because they can help improve student achievement on the state-standardized test. These perceptions lead to tools and strategies the reading teachers are using in their classrooms daily. This study describes the various ways that reading teachers viewed the current reading curriculum. In addition, the information obtained helped the researcher gather an abundance of data about the teachers’ knowledge. Reading teachers shared their successes and challenges within their classroom that they perceived to be significant to prepare students for the FSA reading test. Reading teachers also shared tools, resources, and strategies utilized to help prepare students for the reading portion of the FSA.

Six teachers were interviewed to respond to the research questions in this study. The reason for interviewing the teachers was to gather pertinent teacher perception information that can lead to improved student achievement in reading. The participants were reading teachers who were responsible for teaching the reading curriculum. The participants offered a plethora of resources, tools, and strategies they applied during their teaching. Interview questions were transcribed and coded in order to capture themes among participants. Most of the teachers were considered veteran teachers with 20 years or more of teaching experience, but one was considered a newer teacher with less than 5 years of teaching.
Data Analysis

Each interview was analyzed in-depth by the researcher. All interviews were recorded on the researcher’s recorder and will be stored on the recorder for 60 months, per the school district’s request, and will be deleted at that point. The researcher created a Word document to categorize and code interview questions. All other information related to the interviews was stored on the researcher’s laptop, which is password protected. Teachers’ information was identified by using letters instead of names on interview data and related documents.

Findings

The findings were assembled from the interviews conducted with the teachers. The findings identified that 16 themes arose from the interviews. The themes were identified by the researcher based on the similarity of answers shared by teachers. A Microsoft Word document was created to organize themes found among teachers. Data composed from the teacher interviews gave pertinent information about the reading literacy curriculum at the research location.

Potential Research Bias and Researcher’s Role

The researcher has been a teacher for 16 years. Out of the 16 years, the researcher taught middle school reading for the last 3 years. Prior to that, the researcher taught elementary school for 13 years with a focus on all subject areas including reading. The researcher chose to conduct this research because there is an achievement gap between the state’s overall FSA test scores and the middle school test scores and there was, therefore, a need to capture the perceptions of other reading professional educators. In addition to capturing their perceptions, the researcher wanted to gather effective tools, resources, and strategies that all reading professional educators could use to help their
students prepare for the FSA thoroughly. The researcher’s background knowledge from being an educator for 16 years helped prepare the researcher for this study. The researcher also obtained a degree in reading, a degree in Curriculum Administration, and completed all doctoral courses leading up to this study, which equipped the researcher to assess the efficiency of the reading literacy curriculum.

**Themes of Study**

Evaluating the data yielded 16 themes that emerged. At times, there were several themes that emerged from one interview question in Research Questions 1 and 2. Some themes were similar in nature and were combined as a theme. There were eight themes that emerged from Research Question 1, regarding teachers’ perceptions of their successes, challenges, and needs when preparing students for the FSA reading test. They were growth, lack of parental involvement, lack of motivation, insufficient time, supplemental materials, more challenging content, using a variety of modalities, utilizing assessments, and attending ongoing workshops. There were six themes that emerged from Research Question 2. The themes that emerged from Research Question 2 were below level content, groups, i-Ready (Curriculum Associates, 2019), assessments, computer software programs, high-level passages, and tutoring programs. Research Question 3 had two themes arise, workshops and time.

**Theme 1: A success encountered in reading literacy was growth**. Reading educators shared that their greatest success in the classroom is when students have growth throughout the school year or by the end of the school year. Because most students come in on a low level in one or all of the areas of reading, any success was considered positive and an increase. One teacher shared, “Any growth was success amongst struggling and possible non-readers.”
Theme 2: Socioeconomic background impacts parental involvement. Teachers believed the socioeconomic background of students does make a difference among student bodies regarding reading literacy. Teachers concurred the lack of parental involvement among low-socioeconomic students made an impact on their reading literacy. There were various reasons why there was no parental involvement. For example, most parents worked multiple jobs, which resulted in parents not being available to support their child in activities such as homework. These students also miss out on rich discussions in the evenings over dinner with their parents if their parent is not home.

Theme 3: A challenge encountered in ready literacy is student motivation. Motivation and attitude were mentioned by all teachers at some point during the interviews. Participants discussed the overwhelming need to motivate the students each day before learning began. They observed students were not intrinsically motivated. Most students in reading class need to be convinced to engage or be given an incentive. They are motivated extrinsically and even then, sometimes it is a struggle to keep them engaged.

One teacher shared, “They are not interested in opening up to new knowledge.” She also added, “Some of them block you out when you are trying to teach something new and in this case comprehension will always be a problem.” Teachers revealed there was an absence of preparation among middle school students. Another teacher included that because some families do not back up the teacher, the students do not participate in other important tasks such as homework. If the parent does not find certain actions such as homework imperative, the student does not either. There is no accountability held at home that will carry over to the school environment.

One teacher believed that technology was a factor of students’ lack of motivation
stating, “As a technological society, we are using scanning of the text more often than deep reading.” She further explained, “Many students see no purpose behind reading boring text or putting forth the effort to even try suggested strategies.”

**Theme 4: Teachers do not believe that they have enough time to teach all requirements thoroughly.** The teachers reported that time was a crucial aspect because in order to be impactful, time is needed to be able to teach students. According to teachers, there is not enough time to settle the students down, get into the lesson, and teach the lesson thoroughly in a 55-minute block. A teacher found that after trying to rush so much information into the short block of time, often students did not remember what they learned the previous day and it was not profound. It was suggested that middle schools have 90-minute block scheduling like high schools in order to have enough quality teaching time with students.

A key point one teacher pointed out is that some intensive reading programs need to be implemented for 1 to 3 years in order to be effective. In some cases, students are only in the programs for a short time due to circumstances such as transient families, being an eighth-grade student, or a student coming in at a very low level. The teacher shared, “One to two years cannot make up for 12 or more years of lack unless the child has exceptional home support and internal motivation.”

**Theme 5: Supplemental materials and challenging content should be added to the curriculum so that it aligns to the FSA.** Teachers agreed that the content of the curriculum was not challenging because it was 2 years below the grade level of the students. This included the vocabulary being below level as well. Although the students were below grade level, they still needed to be challenged because the FSA is on grade level. In this case, supplemental materials need to be added to the curriculum to boost it
and make it more challenging. For example, some teachers affirmed that questions that align to the FSA need to be added to the assessment and comprehension question portions. Currently, the questions are aligned to the previous state-mandated test, the FCAT, which is mostly simple multiple-choice questions. The questions usually solicit “right there” responses, which are answers that are easy to locate in the text and are right there. The FSA solicits more thought-provoking responses and sometimes is comparing more than one text that requires students to dig deeper.

Theme 6: Different modalities should be utilized when teaching students diverse ways that they can learn about reading. Teachers acknowledged that applying different modalities when teaching students diverse ways to learn reading was advantageous. The four main modalities of learning are kinesthetic, visual, auditory, and tactile. Giving students the opportunity to move, see, hear, and touch increases a better learning experience, which allows them to take ownership of their education as well as remember what was learned. Teaching students through various modalities ensures that students get the opportunity to learn through the modality that lends itself to them and is their preference.

One teacher imparted, “My students do not usually arrive with the skills necessary to engage in critical or analytical discussion and as a result the majority struggle with inferencing.” She also added, “Students need to be taught how to interact with the text as well as how to interact with each other.” The vast range of educational websites and computer software programs available assist in teaching students. As one teacher stated, “Educational websites and computer software programs enhance direct teacher instruction and provides additional ways to explore reading.”

Theme 7: Teachers use assessments to identify students’ reading background
knowledge. The usage of assessments by teachers was the key to them determining students’ reading background knowledge. The majority of the teachers utilized the beginning-of-the-year assessments to obtain student background knowledge. The assessments mentioned were oral reading fluency (ORF, Building Capacity RTI, 2019), Diagnostic Assessments of Reading (DAR, Roswell, Chall, Curtis, & Kearns, 2019), and beginning of the year I-Ready Diagnostic (Curriculum Associates, 2019). These assessments guide teachers on the strengths and weaknesses of students in the five areas of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Once teachers have established this information, they can better meet the needs of students. It also helps teachers create groups based on the different skills that students lack. Ultimately, this act of gathering reading background knowledge helps better prepare students for the FSA because they will get tailored instruction based on what they need more of throughout the school year.

Some teachers used observations as their assessment of student background knowledge. One teacher responded, “After a few weeks I can pick up who knows about reading literacy through oral responses.” She also said, “I can tell who is actually thinking and making connections as opposed to kids who just read to read.” Some teachers also used previous FSA scores of the students in combination with beginning-of-the-year assessments to gather some background knowledge about the students’ reading literacy. A teacher stated, “I look at the last 3 years of the students’ FSA scores so that I can find patterns with their reading history.” Teachers who look for and find patterns in students’ academic behavior can make a positive impact on student achievement.

Theme 8: Trainings and workshops are tools used by educators to gain knowledge in reading. The majority of the teachers believed they had the knowledge
and tools to teach reading because they attended trainings and workshops. One teacher divulged, “I always go to workshops and I’m opened to new strategies and systems.” Another teacher shared, “Ongoing education is a must, I will only improve myself with more reading and training.” Another teacher said, “I have been trained in a lot of research-based programs and I would like to have more at my fingertips.”

**Theme 9: The reading curriculum is below level.** The consensus of teachers was the main reading curriculum, Inside Reading (Oxford University Press, 2019), was not sufficient enough to prepare students for the FSA because it was 2 years below level. It was intended to be a remediation tool because it was below level. Teachers also concurred the content was considered “babyish,” including the vocabulary. One teacher shared, “Inside is too babyish for our kids.”

Another teacher stated, “Inside is weak because it is not built on anything solid. The curriculum and vocabulary are not challenging and we have to boost the curriculum by adding supplements.” Inside was viewed in a negative light by all of the teachers. An additional teacher said, “Inside is poor and missed the point.” One teacher shared, “Inside is all over the place and confusing.”

**Theme 10: The most effective methods when working with students who lack basic reading skills and strategies are small group, whole group, and I-Ready.** According to teachers, there are some effective methods they used to work with students in their classrooms who lacked basic reading skills and strategies. One strategy that a few teachers mentioned was whole-group reading. They expressed that first they liked to see how the student performed in whole group and that allowed them to decide what they needed in small group.

Another effective strategy mentioned by some teachers was breaking students into
small groups. One teacher stated, “Kids love doing stations because they are so engaged and I rotate my groups.” She further explained, “Students get a lot of practice in small groups on their level and on the skills.” A second teacher shared, “All students especially the low students can benefit from small group and direct teaching for fluency, decoding, vocabulary, comprehension, and modeling reading strategies.” Students need to have personalized instruction in order for them to grasp the concepts they lack. In small groups, the teacher is able to discover other strengths and weaknesses of the student and give further support as needed. The teacher can also enrich the areas in which the student is strong and can add enrichment activities.

The final strategy that teachers found to effective was I-Ready (Curriculum Associates, 2019), which is an educational online reading program that exposes students to an assortment of reading standards. Participants engage students in different I-Ready incentives throughout the year to keep them engaged. Teachers conduct data chats with students to ensure that students are aware of the level at which they started and the progress they have made during the school year. A teacher mentioned, “I-Ready has been very beneficial because the reading is broken down into the 5 areas of reading.” The same teacher used the I-Ready toolbox, which is paper-based, in small groups. This was used after the teacher had done the online tutorial in whole group with the class. Using all of these resources together has been impactful in student growth.

**Theme 11: Teachers use a plethora of assessments to monitor student progress.** There were a host of progress-monitoring tools used by teachers to monitor the progress of their students. Most of these tools were required by administration or by the county but a few were optional. All participants mentioned using DAR (Roswell et al., 2019), ORF (Building Capacity RTI, 2019), I-Ready (Curriculum Associates, 2019), and
Inside assessment test (Oxford University Press, 2019). Some teachers also mentioned using Rewards (Voyager Sopris Learning, 2019). A few teachers use Florida Assessment in Reading (FAIR) testing (Florida Department of Education, 2019). Although it was not a requirement, they found it useful in gathering information about their students’ abilities. It assesses vocabulary knowledge, word recognition, comprehension, and syntactical knowledge. Some shared they did not use the Inside assessment test all of the time because it did not align to the FSA and it could be easy for most students. Many of them did weekly, monthly, and quarterly data chats with their students using data from these progress-monitoring tools. Teachers met with their students to share results from the various assessments. Students also set goals for some of the diagnostics that were administered at the beginning, middle, and end of the year such as I-Ready and FAIR test. The purpose was for students to be aware of their progress or lack of progress so that they could strive for higher goals and improve.

**Theme 12: Resources available during the school day and after school are an array of online resources.** All teachers mentioned specific computer programs that could be used during the school day and after school, which were I-Ready (Curriculum Associates, 2019), Vocabulary.com (2019), and Newsela (Common Sense Education, 2015). Although some students did not have access to the Internet at home, these programs were available. Some students utilized the local library or their phones for some of these programs. All of these programs were located on the school board launchpad. All students and teachers had access to the programs once they signed into the school board launchpad along with many other resources. Most teachers had a laptop cart in their classroom so that students could access these resources. Reading and language arts teachers had a schedule with set days that I-Ready was used for each class. Newsela
could be used in any class but was usually used in the reading and language arts classrooms for the whole group, small groups, and station groups. Vocabulary.com could be used in all subject classrooms. It was used a lot by reading teachers for reading selection vocabulary and FSA vocabulary quizzes/practice.

**Theme 13: Teacher use I-Ready, novels, and high-level passages to supplement and enrich the reading literacy.** Teachers agreed there are certain resources they use to supplement and enrich the curriculum to ensure their students are getting the proper support. One significant resource mentioned in numerous areas was I-Ready (Curriculum Associates, 2019). I-Ready was used often because the program had a lot of resources incorporated for the teacher to use and the student to use. One teacher said, “I use I-Ready because I can modify it to meet the needs of low students and when students are progressing.” Teachers had access to change levels of the student as needed throughout the school year. Students were automatically put on a pathway based on the scores they got on the I-Ready diagnostic that was administered at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. Because students were tested on their grade level at the end of the year on the FSA, most teachers modified the student level by spring so students were exposed to their grade level in enough time to help prepare them.

Other supplement and enrichment tools teachers used were novels and high-level passages. Because the main curriculum, Inside (Oxford University Press, 2019), was two grades below level, often teachers tried to find other ways to expose students to higher-level text and build their stamina for the FSA. Teachers usually had a novel study followed by watching the movie that correlated with the novel. Throughout the novel study, students engaged with the text by doing activities such as graphic organizers, comprehensions questions, and much more. High-level passages are found on Newsela.
(Common Sense Education, 2015), Readworks.org (2019), Teacher Pay Teacher (2019), and other resources. The goal was to not just remediate, but to enrich students.

**Theme 14: Classes that are offered after school to help students prepare for the FSA are a variation of tutoring resources.** All teachers mentioned ELL camp, which was offered from February to April only to ELL students. This camp was offered before and after school. Participants got prepared in reading and mathematics skills. The sessions were led by reading language arts and mathematics teachers. One of the teachers led the reading club once a week for 1 hour. This club focused on reading strategies and skills to prepare for the FSA as well as ways to enjoy reading. Students also had the opportunity to go online to access I-Ready, Vocabulary.com, Newsela, read novels, and reading support on homework.

There were two student groups that provided support with tutoring. One group of students was the peer counselors. They offered tutoring several times per week in any subject area the students needed but especially in reading and math. These tutoring sessions occurred before school. The other student group that provided tutoring support was the Junior Honor Society. These were students who were considered high achievers or gifted students. They also offered tutoring in the morning several times per week for students who needed support in any subject area. Most students got help in reading and math. The final tutoring resource was called Study Zone, which was provided by a private vendor and was housed at the research school location. The students who attended tutoring were from the research school location and from local elementary schools. The teachers who led the tutoring sessions were reading, mathematics, and language arts teachers from the research school location. Students got support specifically in mathematics and reading skills, which helped them in their areas of weakness.
Theme 15: Teachers used county trainings and workshops as resources to prepare to teach the reading curriculum. All teachers shared a host of trainings and workshops that were offered and that they had or would take to enhance their skills. Some of the examples shared were programs that were mentioned in this dissertation because they were programs used daily in the classroom. The programs that were mentioned by participants were Canvas (Instructure, 2019), Collections (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), Inside (Oxford University Press, 2019), Rewards (Voyager Sopris Learning, 2019), Vocabulary.com (2019), Lips (Lindamood-Bell Learning Processes, 2019), and Just Words (Wilson Language Training, 2019). Some trainings occurred at the research school so that teachers did not have to leave school for the entire day. Other trainings were offered at other locations throughout the week, online, or over the summer.

One teacher stated, “Our county offered a lot of workshops so that’s good and I make use of the workshops!” A second teacher shared, “I have been trained in several programs that I use daily.” Another participant mentioned, “Our county supplies a quarterly curriculum map, a monthly instructional focus calendar that identifies standards, and supplement materials.” A final participant said, “Training and support on using the core text with fidelity and confidence is available every year.” She also added, “Trainings on county adopted technology programs are delivered throughout the year.” The county offered a plethora of trainings to meet the needs of reading teachers as evidenced by the responses.

Theme 16: Other resources that can improve the reading curriculum are including more time in key areas. A key component among teachers’ answers was the need of more time to implement best practices, collaborate, and plan to use information
learned at trainings. Teachers were given many opportunities to hone their skills in
different areas of reading so that their students got the support they needed to increase
academic achievement. It takes time to learn the skills thoroughly, implement the skills,
and make adjustments as needed. The teachers believed that at times they could not
implement with fidelity due to a lack of time to prepare.

One teacher stated, “Teachers need more time to prepare after we have had a
training and one planning period is not enough time.” She also said, “If we had more time
to prepare we would be better and have better results.” Another teacher said, “There is
not enough time during our PLC to have quality sharing.” The PLC was only about 30
minutes and there was a lot of housekeeping issues that had to be shared in this
timeframe. The literacy coach attended a training on how to run a more effective PLC.
She shared,

We implemented certain things this school year like the PLC being more
structured as well as more teachers sharing best practices. We will push for more
blended learning, feedback, follow-up, and reflection to ensure that we get the
most quality out of our PLC.

Another teacher suggested they could use our time more wisely to obtain
knowledge from other schools. She said, “Sometimes we need to go to other middle
schools, at least once per quarter, to get some great ideas on best practices to use in our
classroom that are working for them.” One teacher said, “We should search out programs
that work in other places and hopefully the county will become a pilot program for new
programs that will help our students increase knowledge in reading.” A teacher also
stated,

What is missing is the time for collaborative planning and an exchange of ideas.
Delivery of information is driving the trainings, which can create information overload. Experienced and new teachers need time to share what is working. There is no one system or program that will fix the problem of poor reading performance.

**Findings Related to Research Questions**

Findings for Research Question 1, regarding the successes, challenges, and needs in preparing students for the FSA reading test, showed participants believed that student growth was a success they encountered, whereas motivation and time were challenges they experienced. Parental involvement was different for various socioeconomic groups. Teachers used various assessments and trainings to help themselves and students improve. They believed that adding specific supplements and challenging content would help students be more prepared for the FSA. In addition, utilizing a variety of modalities is an effective way to teach students diverse ways to learn about reading.

Findings for Research Question 2, regarding tools and resources utilized by middle school teachers to help prepare students for the reading portion of the FSA, indicated the curriculum used by the middle school was below level and not effective to help prepare students for the FSA. Teachers believed that using the whole group, small groups, and computer software were effective methods for progress monitoring and teaching. Teachers also agreed that certain programs were helpful in assisting students by enriching and supplementing the curriculum.

Research Question 3, regarding reading strategies that middle school teachers used in the classroom, revealed there were many trainings and workshops available to prepare teachers to teach the reading curriculum but that time to implement innovations was an issue and that time needed to be considered, by administrators, when providing so
much knowledge.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to obtain an increased knowledge of reading literacy from the perspectives of reading teachers so that tools, resources, and strategies can be shared to improve student achievement and increase levels on the state-mandated test. Data gathered and examined from interviews revealed some themes from the findings of the study:

1. A success encountered in reading literacy was growth.
2. Socioeconomic background impacts parental involvement.
3. A challenge encountered in ready literacy is student motivation.
4. Teachers do not feel they have enough time to teach all requirements thoroughly.
5. Supplemental materials and challenging content should be added to the curriculum so that it aligns to the FSA.
6. Different modalities should be utilized when teaching students diverse ways they can learn about reading.
7. Teachers use assessments to identify students’ reading background knowledge.
8. Trainings and workshops are tools used by teachers to gain knowledge in reading.
9. The reading curriculum is below level.
10. The most effective methods when working with students who lack basic reading skills and strategies are small group, whole group, and I-Ready.
11. Teachers use a plethora of assessments to monitor student progress.
12. Resources available during the school day and after school are an array of
online resource.

13. Teachers use I-Ready, novels, and high-level passages to supplement/enrich the reading literacy.

14. Classes that are offered after school to help students prepare for the FSA are a variation of tutoring resources.

15. Teachers used county trainings/workshops as resources to prepare to teach the reading curriculum.

16. Other resources that can improve the reading curriculum are including more time in key areas.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Linkage of Findings to Existing Research

The discoveries of this study convey the strategies, tools, and resources used for reading literacy by reading teachers. It also conveyed other important information such as programs utilized, challenges experienced, successes experienced, and effective methods. The majority of the teachers had 20 years of experience or more. A great amount of knowledge was shared and as a result 16 themes arose from the interviews:

1. A success encountered in reading literacy was growth.
2. Socioeconomic background impacts parental involvement.
3. A challenge encountered in reading literacy is student motivation.
4. Teachers do not feel they have enough time to teach all requirements thoroughly.
5. Supplemental materials and challenging content should be added to the curriculum so that it aligns to the FSA.
6. Different modalities should be utilized when teaching students diverse ways they can learn about reading.
7. Teachers use assessments to identify students’ reading background knowledge.
8. Trainings and workshops are tools used by teachers to gain knowledge in reading.
9. The reading curriculum is below level.
10. The most effective methods when working with students who lack basic reading skills and strategies are small group, whole group, and I-Ready.
11. Teachers use a plethora of assessments to monitor student progress.
12. Resources available during the school day and after school are an array of
online resource.

13. Teachers use I-Ready, novels, and high-level passages to supplement/enrich the reading literacy.

14. Classes that are offered after school to help students prepare for the FSA are a variation of tutoring resources.

15. Teachers used county trainings/workshops as resources to prepare to teach the reading curriculum.

16. Other resources that can improve the reading curriculum are including more time in key areas.

**Theme 1: A success encountered in reading literacy was growth.** Teachers perceived a success they encountered in reading literacy was student growth. They believed any growth was considered a success for below-level students. Many of the students had not experienced any or very little success in reading according to teachers. Some students start out on a third-grade reading level and if the student increases to a fifth-grade reading level, that demonstrates growth. According to the teachers, often times students perceived growth had to be on level or higher in order to be successful. Teachers used various incentives to motivate students to work harder and achieve goals throughout the school year in different areas of reading.

A qualitative study was conducted at a California Community College on students to investigate students’ perception of what student success meant (Rockstroh, 2011). The study consisted of 18 students being interviewed and focus groups. It was discussed that students have different definitions of success and definitions should be left up to the individual rather than have to use the classic definition of college success that can include graduation. Success can be measured very differently from student to student based on
their goals and other factors. Many community colleges or organizations in California have different definitions of success as well or vague definitions. Although there are different definitions. Rockstroh (2011) noted,

This study concludes a current state-wide definitions of student success primarily include (1) traditional measures – graduation, transfer, retention, persistence, and passing grades, (2) certificate completion, (3) increase in income as a result of workforce/occupational training, (4) basic skill development, (5) personal educational development, (6) student support services received, and (7) student learning. (p. 66)

Rockstroh (2011) contended that the state-wide measures of success do not correlate with the definitions given above for success. Students did agree with the traditional definition of success at 61%; however, 78% of students felt the definition should be more developed. When given the opportunity to share their own definition, students’ answers varied, but six themes emerged among students, which were interest/passion/motivation, goals, traditional measures, balance, apply skills, and other.

Theme 2: Socioeconomic background impacts parental involvement. Teachers indicated there was a difference in the reading literacy among varied socioeconomic student bodies. A notable difference is that parental involvement of students of low socioeconomic background was lacking according to teachers. Teachers gave a variety of reasons why parents are not involved, such as the parent working multiple jobs, and they did not always see their child to support them with their education.

A study was conducted to explore parental involvement. A total of 313 Greek Cypriot parents participated in Parental Attributions Scale and the Parental Involvement Scale. According to Georgiou and Tourva (2007), “The aim of this study was to examine
the relation that may exist between parental attributions of their child’s achievement, their belief in getting involved and their involvement in the child’s educational process” (p. 475). There was a random choice of eight elementary schools and seven high schools. Only parents who had a degree from a university were to complete the survey. About half of the surveys were returned, which was recognized as adequate. The results indicated that parents who viewed themselves as making an impact on their child’s education would get engaged in and be hands on, which is parent efficacy. The parents who did not believe they made an impact, but rather other factors made an impact, did not get engaged in their child’s education. The involved parent(s) would formulate activities and engage in activities. This data can help educators and other stakeholders to increase parental involvement in schools.

A qualitative case study was conducted in a southwest Tennessee middle school to examine the perspectives of administrators and teachers on the motives, practices, attitudes, and barriers of parental involvement (Rucker, 2014). Participants were engaged in a focus group discussion and answered open-ended questions. Parents involved in the study had to have at least one child enrolled in the school. Teachers had to have at least 5-10 years of teaching experience. The study included twelve participants in total broken up into groups of four. There were four administrators, four teachers, and four parents involved in the study. The results of the study revealed a large number of participants affirmed parents who had favorable involvement and a high education gravitated towards committing to their child’s education. Rucker (2014) explained,

The participants expressed a strong belief in education being a valued commodity and a priority as a means of parents getting involved in the education process for their child as well as the belief that some children are resilient and will perform
on or above grade level in the absence of parental involvement. (p. 71)

Administrators and teachers play an imperative role in establishing, cultivating, and maintaining relationships with parents. The study acknowledged that the more involved the parent, the more successful the student. Parental involvement was also valuable for other stakeholders such as teachers and administration because there was an increase in student performance and attitude (Rucker, 2014).

**Theme 3: A challenge encountered in ready literacy is student motivation.** A challenge the majority of teachers encountered was absence of motivation among students. The lack of motivation led to teachers’ inability to teach the students daily lessons effectively. A lot of effort had to be put in just to get the students engaged each day. Teachers spent a lot of time brainstorming ways as a team to increase student motivation during team meetings and PLCs.

An ex post fact study was conducted to compare and contrast the perceptions of students and teachers on motivation and factors of amotivation (Schwan, 2015). This study took place in a rural school district in South Dakota. A survey was conducted titled A Perceptions of Student Motivation Questionnaire on 32 teachers, 377 students, and district personal. Teachers perceived that student engagement and student interest was higher than it was compared to student perception of the same topics on the topic of motivation. There was no difference of perception on the motivational factor effort. On the topic of amotivation, teachers believed that home was an issue whereas as the numbers were lower for students’ perception. Teachers evaluated relevance lower than students did for amotivation. Also, teachers classified future utility much lower than did students. Finally, there was a compelling difference of perception in the area of personal factors and social factors. There were also some differences in results of male and female
teachers in some areas. Elective teachers had a different perception on motivation based on their experiences with students in their classrooms. A difference between elementary to middle school versus high school level also existed. Female and male students had some difference of perceptions regarding amotivation as well.

**Theme 4:** **Teachers do not feel they have enough time to teach all requirements thoroughly.** Another challenge faced by teachers was inadequate time to integrate new knowledge. Often times, teachers are trained on important information to increase student achievement but they feel more time is needed to prepare. They believed if sufficient time is given to prepare, they could be more successful. Some participants mentioned having double block with the lowest classes was beneficial. Double block is when a teacher has a particular class for two period back to back. In the past, these were students who were the lowest reading level groups. These students were instructed on remediation curriculum that was scripted. In addition, they would get the on-level curriculum with participants using various reading strategies to support them.

A study was conducted in two states located in the northeast portion of the United States to examine how general and special education teachers designated their time during language arts block. In addition, it was explored how the teachers used their time based on their experience and knowledge in reading (Spear-Swerling & Zibulsky, 2014). Half of the 102 teachers examined from one state were general education teachers who had less experience teaching and held more graduate elementary and special education degrees. The other half from the other state were special education teachers who had more experience teaching, and the majority of them had an elementary school license with no special education credentials.

Teachers were given the freedom to choose activities from Language Arts
Activity Grid that they wanted to use during a 2-hour language arts block without considering how they would normally be required to use the time. They needed to share as many details as possible about the activities they were going to utilize. In order to see how teachers’ experiences connected with the activities they chose, a background questionnaire was completed before the activities was chosen. Teachers’ answers were coded using reading and writing categories. Teachers were also given a Teacher Knowledge Survey to assess their knowledge in the five areas of reading, which were broken up into two subscales. The questions determined teachers’ knowledge of content as well as operation of the knowledge.

The study demonstrated time was not distributed with researched-based strategies and techniques in mind. Specific skills should be focused on in specific grades, but that was not occurring consistently across the board. There was no big difference in times apportioned between general education teachers and special education teachers.

According to Spear-Swerling and Zibulsky (2014),

The results underscore the need for school districts to provide educators with research-based core curricula for both reading and writing that are explicit, systematic, and comprehensive in addressing important components of literacy, as well as to monitor fidelity of implementation. (p. 1372)

**Theme 5: Supplemental materials and challenging content should be added to the curriculum so that it aligns to the FSA.** There is a need for content aligned to the FSA to better prepare the students. Supplemental materials and more challenging content are an avenue to meet that need. The current curriculum does not provide enough content aligned to the FSA to support the participants and prepare the students according to the teachers.
Glatthorn (1999) discussed the varying perspectives on curriculum alignment. Some stakeholders believe in aligning the curriculum while others are strongly against it. From the perspective of a teacher curriculum, alignment is a helpful tool to prepare their students. Teachers have the pressure of teaching the student and need to produce acceptable scores from the state-mandated test. Glatthorn stated, “Moreover, students’ results on those examinations will be used for several purposes: to evaluate your teaching; to judge your school; to reward or punish you and the school; and to determine if students will be retained or promoted” (p. 26). It is significant for the curriculum to be aligned already because teachers do not have a lot of time to search for more materials.

**Theme 6: Different modalities should be utilized when teaching students diverse ways they can learn about reading.** Utilizing different modalities when teaching students diverse ways they can learn about reading was a likeness among teachers. Distinct modalities give students opportunities to gain knowledge about reading in their learning style. This will help students connect to the information better.

A study was conducted in Australia of students admitted in a university that determined learning attributes (Johnson & Cooke, 2015). Students were sent a survey in the mail and 12% of the students returned the survey with the majority being female. Over 80% of the students were going to school to be primary school teachers, about 10% wanted to be early childhood teachers, and a small percentage were not sure what they were going to be (Johnson & Cooke, 2015).

Students were given an online questionnaire that focused on visual, aural, and kinesthetic (VAK). The VAK Learning Styles Self-Assessment Questionnaire was specifically modified and given to the students to capture their learning preferences. Visual learners are those who learn better through visual means, such as videos. Aural
learners are those who digest information better through hearing it, such as a podcast. Kinesthetic learners are those who learn better through hands-on experiences. The students who participated in the study were enrolled in a fully online program. Being enrolled in that type of program met the needs of the bulk of the students because most students were visual learners. The rest of the data showed some students only had one preference while other students had more than one and some were also neutral.

**Theme 7: Teachers use assessments to identify students’ reading background**

Teachers use different assessments so they can get a full scope of students’ reading background. Different assessments can focus on the five areas of reading, which are phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Once teachers have established students’ backgrounds, they can prepare themselves to support the students based on their strengths and weaknesses.

A qualitative study conducted in central South Carolina focused on a middle school group of sixth-grade teachers (Wright, 2015). Out of all of the language arts teachers invited to participate in the study, four agreed to be part of the study. The teachers had been trained on a variety of alternative assessments; however, they still used the traditional assessments even though students were not successful on these assessments. The goal was to investigate the assessments teachers used and to regulate how these assessments aided in student growth. Teachers were given an open-ended survey, and two of them took an individual interview. They were also required to share their lesson plans with the researcher. The hope was that after the study was conducted, that assessments would focus more on the student. When students start to see success, it may inspire them more to work harder.

As a result of the open-ended questions, the three themes that emerged from the
teachers were (a) a variety of teaching strategies is needed, (b) alternative assessments are great teaching tools, and (c) working collaboratively is essential (Wright, 2015). Although teachers agreed on the impact of alternative assessments, they still utilized traditional assessment more often because it was more accessible and easier to construct. Creating alternative assessments was a time-consuming task and was not always easier to grade. On teacher stated, “I consider alternative assessments for most of my lessons, but some lessons are not easy to mold into alternative strategies” (Wright, 2015, p. 80). The researcher stated about the students, “Whereas with alternative assessments they learn the material and apply it-it is a process” (p. 81). She also said, “I think they (students) receive much more from that process” (p. 81). Combining traditional and alternative assessments was discussed as a positive action for teachers to take.

When the lesson plans of the two teachers who also took the interview were examined, it showed they mostly implemented traditional assessments even though they agreed that alternative assessments can be more impactful. Wright (2015) explained, “The participants are aware of the impact alternative assessments have on individual student learning; however, these teachers are still using traditional assessments because these assessments are easy to create and grade” (p. 84).

**Theme 8: Trainings and workshops are tools used by educators to gain knowledge in reading.** Teachers are constantly honing their skills to know what the latest programs and tools are available to strengthen their skills and their students’ skills. The ultimate goal is using all of the skills learned that students will have a positive impact and increase student achievement throughout the school year.

Beard and Antrim (2010) concentrated on a teacher who created a structure to support her students’ reading achievement through a partnership with her school
librarian. She used skills she learned to create a program for her students. Her students were 19 below level fifth graders. She observed their progress over two semesters to see if her program including support from the librarian was working. One semester the students did not get an intervention from the librarian and the next semester they did get support. The extra component of working with an expert in the area of books made all the difference.

Reading workshops consist of students having the freedom to choose learning activities and books that meet their individual interests and needs. Overtime, students are taught how to become independent in doing that. Students are taught lessons and rotate in groups that touch different areas of reading. Students should be exposed to a large library of books. According to Beard and Antrim (2010), “Teacher-librarians play a vital role in the success of literacy programs in a school, and they help strengthen students beyond that” (p. 25). A successful librarian exposes students to many different activities, which increases student engagement and knowledge.

In the first semester, students were allowed to choose books on their own with no librarian support, but the below-level students often chose books that were too hard for them. In the second semester, students received support from the librarian in picking the correct level books. She taught them how to choose the correct book. The teacher and librarian met each month regarding the student levels and progress. The results of this support were demonstrated through the midyear and end-of-the-year assessment. There were major gains in various areas of reading for these students. Students were also able to read 16 books within a certain timeframe whereas before they could not. Beard and Antrim (2010) concluded, “The teacher-librarian became a purposeful collaborator with the teacher to enhance the reading experiences of each of the targeted children” (p. 29).
Theme 9: The reading curriculum is below level. Teachers believed the reading curriculum was not as effective as it could be because it was below level. This forced teachers to search for on-level resources to supplement the curriculum. The FSA is on level and in order for students to be prepared for the curriculum as it is is not sufficient for student preparation. Teachers also implemented reading strategies to supplement the below-level curriculum and the on-level curriculum. These strategies aided students in improving their reading skills and helped them to become stronger in the five areas of reading.

Belk, Seed, and Abdi (2005) highlighted the importance and impact that reading comprehension skills have on the science comprehension. There are some likenesses among science and reading aptitudes. According to Belk et al., as an example of how skills are similar, “In science, students investigate a problem and collect data; in reading, students ask questions and take notes” (p. 44). There are a host of reading strategies that can be used to strengthen students’ skills in reading, which can also be used in other subject areas. Belk et al. focused on three specific skills, before, during, and after reading strategies. These strategies help students delve deeper into any type of text they are reading for better understanding. These strategies were presented by Tennessee Higher Education Commission during a professional development program.

One prereading strategy teachers use in science is called PREP. The teacher displays a topic, students reflect on what they already know about the topic, and students discuss what they know about the topic. The teacher then uses a graphic organizer to write down students’ feedback. Students are able to explain what they stated and the teacher is able to clear up any student confusion. Finally, students have a discussion and learn new knowledge from their classmates. Belk et al. (2005), shared “The PREP pre-
reading strategy helps students to rehearse, elaborate, and organize information about the science topic” (p. 44).

A reading strategy mentioned was monitoring comprehension during reading. Students monitor their reading by stopping and checking for comprehension throughout the reading process. For example, students can read a paragraph and stop afterwards and ask themselves if they understood the content. If the answer is no, then they should reread the content for better understanding. Finally, an after-reading strategy discussed was asking comprehension questions after students read a selection. It was suggested that asking open-ended questions would yield deeper knowledge and higher order thinking as well. There are also many ways teachers can make questioning easier, such as putting it in a game format such as science jeopardy.

**Theme 10: The most effective methods when working with students who lack basic reading skills and strategies are small group, whole group, and I-Ready.** There were a plethora of successful methods the teachers used when working with this population of students daily. The top three that stood out were whole group, small group, and I-Ready. Participants used whole groups as a means to predict students’ strengths and weaknesses, which allowed them to place students in the correct small group. Teachers also received trainings on small-group implementation and literacy stations throughout the school year, which aided in them feeling more comfortable using small groups.

A case study was conducted on by Kracl (2011) 4 first-grade teachers on the positive impact that implementing small group and literacy work stations have on the students. The teachers were exposed to professional development videos and a book about literacy stations. Literacy work stations were used as a means to have students be engaged in meaningful work while teachers were in small groups. Teachers were
observed before and after watching the videos and reading the book. Teachers were also interviewed by the researcher of the study. The results of each teachers’ observation were positive. Teachers followed steps from their professional development and made adjustments as needed. This case study demonstrated that when teachers are trained to appropriately use small groups and implement strategies consistently with support, the outcome can be successful. It also demonstrates the impact that small group has on the classroom environment (Kracl, 2011).

**Theme 11: Teachers use a plethora of assessments to monitor student progress.** Progress monitoring plays a significant role in the goal of student progress. It gives the teacher and student the responsibility to work towards specific goals. There are also benchmarks for these goals. There are many assessments teachers use to monitor student progress. Some progress-monitoring tools are used at the beginning and end of the year such as DAR and ORF. There are other assessments used at the beginning, middle, and end of the year such as FAIR and I-Ready Diagnostic. Some assessments are utilized after each story selection biweekly such as the Inside assessment. A few of the teachers teach a program called Rewards, which has daily assessments. In some instances, administration gives educators freedom to follow-up on certain progress-monitoring tools and in other cases certain tools are mandatory at certain points in the school year.

Teachers also mentioned doing data chats with their students. Data chats are when the student and teacher sit down and discuss the students’ scores and what goals they have in the future for improvement. Students are usually more successful when data are paired with data chats because they are striving towards a goal of improvement in specific areas according to the participants.
A mixed-methods study of 96 preservice teachers was conducted focusing on the significance of data chats in the classroom (Piro, Dunlap, & Shutt, 2014). These preservice teachers were in their senior year at a public university located in the southwest part of the United States. The purpose of the study was to train preservice teachers on implementing data and data chats so that when they became teachers, they would be prepared to support student achievement realistically. Teachers need to put theory into practice when they start teaching. They need to have authentic experiences that are hands on as opposed to just reading it in books (Piro et al., 2014). Piro et al. (2014) stated,

The context of the course in which the intervention was explored examined such topics as the selection of state standards to guide lesson plan design, the appropriate use of both formative and summative assessments, and responsive techniques to use for student feedback. (p. 4)

The results of the study by Piro et al. (2014) was that preservice teachers’ confidence went up significantly regarding the usage of data as evidenced by pre- and postdata performed on them. In addition, there was an increase in knowledge by the preservice teachers in the area of content data literacy and how to use testing data reports with increasing student knowledge. Preservice teachers said that working in collaborative groups was impactful as well because they were able to tackle all of the data as a unit.

**Theme 12: Resources available during the school day and after school are an array of online resources.** The school offered an assortment of resources that students can engage with during school and after school hours. Online resources are a convenient way for students to reinforce skills learned in the classroom. In the technology age, online resources are expected to be used as a resource. All teachers have a laptop cart along with
the majority of educators at the school.

In a mixed-method study conducted in Tanzania at three universities, there were 69 participants, composed of student teachers and tutors. The goal was to get their perspectives on the usage of online resources for advocating critical thinking (Mwalongo, 2018). The study used surveys, focus group discussion, interviews, and documentary reviews.

According to Mwalongo (2018), the use of online resources that are real, modern, and straightforward usually endorse critical thinking. Also, Mwalongo pointed out the benefits for the student teacher and students by saying,

> When student teachers have a good mastery of these skills, they are likely to be critical thinkers who analyse, evaluate, synthesise, draw conclusions, solve problems, and make sound decisions about issues they encounter. Similarly, when students are exposed to a variety of resources, they can become inquisitive and open-minded. (p. 193)

The results of the study by Mwalongo (2018) revealed much information. Tutors helped student teachers assess through posting information regarding the course. As a result, student teachers adapted their thought process at the end. Student teachers were exposed to the process of inferencing by them getting an opportunity to hear a wide variety of viewpoints. A high percentage of student teachers believed that online resources supported the escalation of problem-solving skills. When the resources are real, it helps with students’ transmission of information. Student teachers believed that new proficiency was a result of modern resources being offered. Student teachers and tutors learned from one another through having an open mind when sharing. Another critical point was using transparent language with the tasks so that student teachers could digest
knowledge easier. The outcomes all related to promoting critical thinking with the use of online resources.

**Theme 13: Teachers use I-Ready, novels, and high-level passages to supplement/enrich the reading literacy.** Teachers revealed they are constantly supplementing and enriching the curriculum because it lacks key elements to prepare students for the FSA. They used a variety of programs to accomplish that goal. The programs that all teachers incorporated was I-Ready, novels, and high-level passages. The purpose was to challenge the students to perform on a higher level than where most of them were. Challenging them with on-level text helps them prepare for the FSA. If students never get exposed to on-level text because teachers are remediating, students are not getting the opportunity to properly prepare for the FSA.

A mixed-method case study was conducted in Turkey with three fifth graders involving reading strategies and a reading enrichment program to improve reading skills. Akyol, Cakiroglu, and Kuruyer (2014) expressed this about students: “However, they can be relieved of their problems through a suitable reading environment, teaching program, and family support” (p. 200). They also shared that it is significant students are not nervous, the program should be deep rooted in best reading practices, and family/teacher involvement must occur. This study used a reading enrichment program to increase reading success. The reading enrichment program was established from Renzulli’s Enhanced Triple Model. According to Akyol et al., “This model emphasizes that students should be provided with a range of learning strategies and environments complying with their interests and skills so that they can acquire valuable experiences” (p. 201).

When some people hear the word enrichment, they think it is only for high-achieving students but that is not the case. Students who have reading deficiencies can
benefit from enrichment programs too if formulated correctly as evidenced by this study. The results of the study by Akyol et al. (2014) showed that utilizing a reading enrichment program had a positive impact on students as evidenced by an increase in desired behaviors such as progression of reading skills and elimination of certain behaviors such as number of reading mistakes.

Theme 14: Classes that are offered after school to help students prepare for the FSA are a variation of tutoring resources. There were a few types of tutoring resources offered before and after school. The peer counselors tutored several times a week for about an hour before school. Junior Honor Society also tutored a few times a week for about an hour before school. There was a Reading club offered once a week for an hour after school. There was an ELL FSA Camp offered for about 2 months in Spring prior to the FSA. The ELL camp was only for ELL students and focused specifically on reading and math standards to prepare for the FSA. There was also a private tutoring company named Study Zone that some of the educators that worked at the school also worked with the private tutoring company. Reading and math standards are focused on during the tutoring session. It is offered to middle school and elementary school students at the research location. All of the tutoring services have been beneficial to assist students on preparing for the FSA.

A study conducted in Korea focused on the casual effects of after-school programs and private tutoring on Korean secondary students’ academic achievement (Ha & Park, 2016). According to Ha and Park (2016), Korean parents hold education to a high standard. Korea is one of the countries that has their children in private tutoring because they want their children prepared to take important college exams. This country uses private tutoring more for enrichment rather than remedial purposes. Performing well
on these exams will help students be successful in the future. Korea spends about half of educational funds on private tutoring. After-school programs were introduced to help offset the high cost of private tutoring as well as give students who are not rich the opportunity to get support with their education. At first, after-school programs focused on a variety of things and over time shifted more towards academic support to increase student achievement.

Data were taken from middle and high school students (Ha & Park, 2016). There were a total of 3,387 middle students and 2,775 general high school students. The results of the study revealed a few different pieces of information. Overall, after-school programs and private tutoring did expand student achievement in the secondary school setting. Specifically in middle school, private tutoring was more impactful whereas in high school, after-school programs were more impactful on student achievement.

**Theme 15: Teachers used county trainings/workshops as resources to prepare to teach the reading curriculum.** The district in which teachers worked offer many trainings throughout the school year and summer. Some trainings are at the research location or different locations. The trainings help increase their knowledge and support student achievement. It prepares them for the latest research-based tools and strategies. Some trainings and workshops took place during the PLCs.

Hilliard (2012) shared the definition of, characteristics of, and importance of a PLC in higher education. The importance of PLCs hold true for all educational levels such as middle school. PLCs are put into place to support the growth of students through the partnership of teachers and administration. The type of learning community that was used at the university was a staff development, which concentrated on data and strategies to enhance the experiences of both staff and students. According to Hilliard, “If our
students are not taught or trained with relevant information at the university, many of our students will be left behind and we cannot afford that as a country economically” (p. 72). This is the same thought process at the elementary, middle, and high school level. Students must be taught pertinent information to prepare them for each next level.

Hilliard (2012) mentioned utilizing the models of collaborative and decision making. This model encourages teamwork to advance the knowledge of students and staff. Hilliard also shared, “The collaborative approach creates a time and place for faculty and students to communicate in a less formal manner, but still being able to maintain a professional relationship in getting the task accomplished through talk of support and respect” (p. 72). The notion is that when there is collaboration, the results will be more successful than working alone. The study also focused on the significance of determining the effectiveness of a PLC and evaluating a PLC. The effectiveness can be regulated by the outcomes of the PLC goals that were set forth at the beginning. The PLC can be evaluated by using a rubric.

**Theme 16: Other resources that can improve the reading curriculum are including more time in key areas.** Teachers could have stated that more trainings and PLCs could have helped improve the reading curriculum. Instead, everyone mentioned needing more time. They wanted more time to share best practices, collaborate, and teacher preparation time. They said they appreciated all of the trainings, workshops, and PLCs, but with no time to share and prepare that, it defeats the purpose of getting all of that training. Information will be implemented with their students, but not necessarily with fidelity. Some participants also mentioned having a 90-minute block schedule would be beneficial instead of the 55 minutes for six periods each day as it is now. In the 90-minute block schedule, participants would have more time with their students but they
would not see the same group of students daily. Also, teachers would have a block of
time to plan using all the new skills learned during trainings, workshops, and PLCs.

An article published about the English teacher community focused on supporting
new teachers through mentorship, best practices, time, and patience (Bush, 2005). It also
talked about keeping all teachers in a “new” state of mind; that is, even if a teacher is at
the end of his or her career, he or she can still have a new mindset through professional
development that aims to maintain that mindset (Bush, 2005). According to Bush (2005),
new teachers feel isolated. At the research location, participants felt isolated at times
because once trainings occurred, they were in their classrooms trying to figure everything
out on their own. Participants shared there was not enough time to share best practices
with their peers. They felt like the new teachers in the article. There were several ways
shared in the article to support the English leadership community, which were (a) provide
a sense of community and belonging; (b) provide a sense of purpose and value; (c) create
relationships with positive professional mentors; (d) introduce new teachers to local,
regional, and national teaching communities; and (e) encourage long-term professional
learning and reinforce concepts of reflective practice. The above ways to support new
teachers can also be implemented to support veteran teachers with so much information
and new skills to digest for a teacher daily. Taking a moment to slow down and
implement this support will give teachers the time to organize what they have learned and
create a plan to implement it with fidelity. In the teaching field all teachers need guidance
throughout the different phases of their career. Their ideas and suggestions need to be
heard because they are the ones who have to comprehend the information and apply it
daily.
Implications of the Findings

The objective of this portion is to explain the conclusions of the research as evidenced by reading teachers’ perceptions. This portion was driven by the research questions, which generated feedback from reading teachers.

**Research Question 1.** For Research Question 1, regarding the successes, challenges, and needs perceived by middle school reading teachers as significant to students to prepare students for the FSA reading test, showed that teachers believed growth was a success they encountered whereas motivation and time was a challenge they experienced. Low or no parental involvement was a difference among socioeconomic student bodies. Teachers used various assessments and trainings as tools to help students grow as well as grow as educators. They believed that adding specific supplements and challenging content would help students be more prepared for the FSA. In addition, utilizing a variety of modalities is an effective way to teach students diverse ways to learn about reading.

**Research Question 2.** For Research Question 2, regarding tools and resources utilized by middle school teachers to help prepare students for the reading portion of the FSA indicated the curriculum used by the middle school was below grade level and not effective to help prepare students for the FSA. They believed that whole group, small group, and computer software were effective methods for progress monitoring and teaching. Teachers also agreed that certain programs were helpful in assisting students in enriching and supplementing the curriculum.

**Research Question 3.** Research Question 3 was created to recognize the reading strategies used by reading middle school teachers in the classroom revealed there are many trainings and workshops available to prepare teachers to teach the reading
curriculum. Time was an issue and time needed to be considered when obtaining so much knowledge. Teachers wanted to implement the knowledge learned with fidelity. In order to do so they needed time to understand the information learned and organize it within in their classrooms and lesson plans.

**Limitations**

Studies that researchers conduct will potentially have limitations. This case study had several limitations. The first limitation was the number of the teacher participants. Originally there were supposed to be seven teachers; however, six was the final number. One teacher had a medical emergency. In the past, the reading department had 10 reading professional teachers. Having 10 teachers would have yielded more perceptions and tools that could have been shared to increase student achievement in reading.

Another limitation was the researcher limiting herself to only interviewing reading teachers. After further thought, including the language arts teachers would have contributed to the study. They teach reading standards in addition to other standards such as writing. The reading and language arts teachers had collaborative PLCs twice a week. Language arts educators are in contact with all students because all students must take language arts for a credit whereas students who take reading scored a Level 1 or 2 on the FSA the previous school year. Language arts teachers are exposed to students who score Levels 1-5 so they would share a wider variety of answers possibly because their perspectives could be different than reading teachers based on the exposure.

**Future Research Directions and Recommendations**

Studies in the future could explore gathering perceptions of other reading professional educators in other middle schools in this district. Schools that are designated an A or B could be studied for best practices and other important tools used to prepare
students for the FSA. In addition, the perspectives of elementary school professional educators would be valuable. Elementary school educators are exposed to different types of training than middle school educators. This different training could be a key element to support middle school students better. The perceptions of high school reading professional educators can also be explored to gain more insight on what systems are being used at each level to increase student achievement on the FSA. Another recommendation is having the reading teachers from around the district who have excellent ELA FSA scores train other reading educators on what strategies and tools they use. It is important to utilize resources such as other educators to support successful outcomes and develop the skills of educators in the district. A quantitative study can be conducted by sending out surveys and capturing more perceptions of reading and language arts teachers.

Finally, parents are another stakeholder who can benefit from trainings by teachers or district personal. Many parents ask how they can help prepare their children at home for the FSA. Teachers share ways parents can help at home during conferences, but workshops with more details and resources can help the school to home connection. Lueder (2011) created intervention strategies to help get parents involved with their child’s education. The four intervention strategies are connecting, communicating, coordinating, and coaching. The coaching strategy was designed to “enhance the parents’ ability and capacity to effectively play the Parent Partner Roles and enhance the parents’ general sense of well-being, knowledge, and skill level” (Lueder, 2011, p. 110). The goal of these strategies is to overcome barriers between the school and the families, build collaborative relationships, coordinate resources, and help the parents play their different roles. There is a correlation between parental involvement to student achievement.
Conclusion

The effort to improve student achievement on the FSA in reading is a significant focus each year. The perspectives of reading professional educators is imperative because implementing tools, programs, and strategies suggested by them helps in reaching the goal of increasing student achievement. These educators are at the grass roots and see what helps the students become successful as well as making key strides throughout the school year. Reading teachers have shared key elements to strive towards more success in reading that include, but are not limited to, continuous trainings, new curriculum that aligns to the FSA, and more preparation for new concepts.
References


Kracl, C. L. (2011). *Managing small group instruction through the implementation of literacy work stations* (Dissertation, University of Nebraska). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 344924)


measure multidimensional application of learning communities in schools

(Doctoral dissertation, Brigham Young University). Provo, UT.


Appendix

Interview Protocol
Interview Protocol

R1: What are some of the successes, challenges, and needs perceived by middle school reading teachers as significant to students to prepare students for the FSA reading test?
1. What successes do you encounter when teaching reading literacy to students?
2. What are the differences in reading literacy among varied socio-economic student bodies?
3. What challenges do you encounter when teaching reading literacy to students?
4. What can be added to the curriculum that will align to the FSA and help prepare the students better?
5. What tools are available to teach students about diverse ways they can learn about reading.
6. Do your students have a background knowledge about reading literacy when they enter your classroom? How do you evaluate their knowledge?
7. Upon completion of your reading literacy curriculum, do students have the basic skills to be prepared for the FSA? How do you measure the learning/knowledge received?
8. Do you feel you have the knowledge and tools to teach reading literacy? How do you evaluate your own knowledge?

R2: What tools or resources are utilized by middle school teachers to help prepare students for the reading portion of the FSA?
1. Describe the existing reading literacy curriculum in your school?
2. Which teaching methods have you found to be effective when working with students who do not embody the basic reading skills and strategies?
3. What methods work best to teach that curriculum?
4. How do you assess students’ knowledge and skills as they related to the existing reading literacy curriculum? What progress monitoring tools do you use per administration or on your own to ensure that students are grasping concepts?
5. What other resources are available to students, both during the school day and after school (e.g. I-Ready)?
6. What other resources are students able to access that supplement/enrich the reading literacy at your school?
7. What classes are offered afterschool to help students become better prepared and more knowledgeable about skills needed to pass the FSA?
8. What other recommendations do you have for improving reading literacy skills of middle school students?

Research Question 3: What reading strategies are middle school teachers using in the classroom?

Reading Teachers

1. What tools and resources were available to you to prepare you to teach the reading curriculum?
2. What other resources, trainings, or Professional Learning Community opportunities will improve reading curriculum