

TEACHER ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE INFLUENCE OF  
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON MINORITY STUDENT  
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT  
IN READING

by

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## Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to my family. They have consistently supported me through several years of education and finally to this culminating project – my dissertation. First, to my Mom – Dorothy Coleman and my Dad – Neal Strong, who supported and encouraged me, in their own ways, throughout my educational career, always pushing me to go beyond what I thought was my limit. Next to my children, John, Orrin Tyrel and Colleen who see formal education as important, but have continually educated me through life experiences. Then, my six grandchildren for whom education is paramount to their future success as an aerospace and aeronautical engineer (Jonica), a fashion design business owner (Jaden), an athletic fireman (John, Jr.), a teacher – like me (Nana), the pediatrician (Laila) or in whatever you finally choose (Malcolm). Let this project be the catalyst to light the way.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my step-father, Rev. Richard L. Banks, who worked 14 hours a day and promised to send me to college regardless to how much racial persecution he had to endure to earn the money to get me there.

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*“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” Ephesians 2:10.*

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I gratefully acknowledge participants from the southwest urban school district who generously contributed to this study. Without them, this qualitative study would have been impossible. We share a strong desire to increase reading skills and academic performance of urban, minority young people who live in poverty.

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Abstract

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This qualitative study is written from a phenomenological standpoint using Van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic lived experiences of the participants. Fourth grade teachers from a large urban school district in the southwestern U.S. completed an online questionnaire and participated in a focus group interview to provide insight into their attitudes and perceptions about how professional learning experiences influenced high levels of reading for urban, minority students living in poverty. There are few studies which connect teacher professional learning to student achievement in reading. The current study uses a Vygotskian (1978) theoretical perspective to analyze the data collected and add to the conversation on what might work to augment academic achievement in reading for impoverished, urban minority students. Through teachers' voices, this study reveals the single most important factor having powerful influence on teacher professional growth - collaboration. While evidence is lacking about how to support teacher development, collaboration impacts content knowledge and pedagogical skill, possibly affecting what teachers do in the classroom and perhaps prompting increased minority student achievement in reading.

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## Chapter 1

### Design of the Study

Recent Children's Defense Fund (2011) research findings paint a dismal portrait of minority student achievement across the United States. The report reflects national trends in minority academic achievement in reading. One important research finding was that students in high-poverty, high-minority schools typically had lower scores than students in non-poverty, non-minority schools and that "78% of Hispanic students and 73% of Black students were in predominantly minority schools" (H-2, p. 142). A second important finding was that "Eighty percent or more of Black fourth grade public school students are performing below grade level in reading...in 33 states" (H-7, p. 147). Additionally, "Nearly 80% or more of Black and Hispanic public school students in the fourth grade are unable to read at grade level...compared to 50% or more of White children" (p. 11). Finally, children in low-income, high-minority schools were significantly less likely to be taught by highly-qualified teachers. "Schools with the highest percentages of minority . . . and low-income students are more likely to employ beginning teachers" (p. 94) and "classes in high-poverty schools are 77 percent more likely to be assigned to teachers who did not major in the field in which they are teaching" (Children's Defense Fund, 2005, p. 95).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) confirmed these conclusions with several years of reading assessment data. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), reporting the NAEP data, revealed that while there had been a slight increase in basic reading achievement over the last seven years, fourth-grade children of color (i.e. African American - 54% and Hispanic - 50%) were still functioning below basic proficiency levels in reading (NCES, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012; Aud, Fox, & Kewal-Ramani, 2010). Although these results were higher than

previous assessments (NCES, 1992-2005; 2012), the NCES reported that there was no measurable change between the 2009 and 2011 reading assessments. In 2011, only about 33% of the nation's fourth grade students scored above the fourth grade proficiency level in reading; however, less than a quarter of African American and Hispanic students met this passing standard; which means the majority of America's fourth grade children were reading below fourth grade proficiency level (NCES, 2012). Further, White fourth grade children scored an average of 27 to 30 points higher than minority students in each area on the NAEP measure in 40 states (NCES, 2012; Aud et al, 2010).

Likewise, this phenomenon was evidenced at the state level. In Texas, for example, a close analysis of the 2011 fourth grade NAEP results revealed that only 28% of Texas' fourth grade students scored above the fourth grade proficiency level on the 2009 and 2011 assessment (NCES, 2012). Only 21% of both African American and Hispanic students scored at or above fourth grade proficiency on the NAEP measure. White fourth grade students scored an average of 22 to 23 points higher than African America and Hispanic students (Hemphill, Vannerman, & Rahman, 2011; NCES, 2012; Vannerman, Hamilton, Anderson, & Rahman, 2009).

Urban school districts repeat this trend. In an analysis of NAEP scores in one large urban school district in Texas, similar results were shown. About 14% of the district's fourth grade students scored at or above fourth grade proficiency level on the NAEP measurement. Additionally, White fourth grade students scored 32 to 36 points higher than African American and Hispanic fourth grade students (Hemphill et al., 2011; Vannerman et al., 2009; TEA, 2012). On a subsequent reading assessment in the district, 2011 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), results showed a similar trend. African American and Hispanic students in high-poverty, high-minority schools had lower

scores than White students. Most of the district's fourth grade students (79% or 5,570 students) met the passing standard in reading (Texas Education Agency - TEA, 2012). Yet, about 1,500 fourth grade students from high-poverty, high-minority schools (710 African American, 731 Hispanic and 36 White students) failed to demonstrate mastery of these standards. These results indicate a gap in reading academic achievement between minority students and their White peers (TEA, 2012).

Moreover, with the more rigorous 2012 State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exam, nearly 77% of the district's 7,079 fourth grade students met the passing standard while African-American students lagged behind with an average of 68% meeting the standard. This means 918 African-American, 451 Hispanic and 47 White fourth grade students did not meet the passing standard. Surprisingly, however, the group of Hispanic fourth grade students surpassed the district average meeting the standard with 81% (TEA, 2012).

Researchers have linked this ongoing achievement gap in reading to multiple issues. Teacher effectiveness was cited as influencing the academic achievement results of minority students (Goe, 2007; Horton, 2013; Nye, Konstantopoulos & Hedges, 2004) along with the combination of teacher knowledge of content and the quality of teaching (Goe, 2007; Konstantopoulos, 2009; Ferguson, 2003; Schacter & Thum, 2004). Several studies have attempted to link teacher professional development (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Guskey & Yoon, 2009) to teacher classroom behaviors that positively impact student learning and the ongoing achievement gap in reading (Bean, Draper, Hall, Vandermolen, Zigmund, 2010; Matsumura, Garnier, Resnick, 2010), but few of these studies provide statistically significant results of these relationships (Dole, 2004). The NCES (2005) posits, "Research demonstrates that access to quality teaching is one of

the most significant factors in improving student achievement . . . Yet, for poor and minority children, quality teaching is often not available” (p. 94).

Other researchers believe that the ongoing achievement gap in reading can be improved through sustained, long term professional development with classroom support (Firestone, Mangin, Martinez & Polovsky, 2005; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Kamler, 2005; Otaiba, Hosp, Smartt & Dole, 2008; Sailors & Price, 2009). Even though teacher professional development in reading may have affected teacher classroom practices positively and successfully increased student learning, the reading achievement gap still exists between students of color and their Anglo peers. The study yet to be conducted is one from which links could be made between professional development and student gains in reading.

#### Statement of the Problem

There are multiple professional development strategies proven to improve reading instruction for high-poverty, minority students (Borko, 2004; Dole, Nokes & Drits, 2008; Duffy, 1993, 2004; Sailors, 2008; Sailors & Price, 2010). Currently the most popular national strategy is district-based professional development provided through the ongoing support of a content-focused literacy instructional coach (CFLIC) (Gamse, Jacob, Horst, Boulay & Unlu, 2008; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Marsh et al., 2008; Matsumura, Garnier & Resnick, 2010). Since the primary concern for a CFLIC is to improve teaching, a side effect is that reading academic achievement of poor urban, minority students improves. Sailors and Price (2009) found that “coaching does indeed have the potential to effect positive change in student learning” and that “New teachers may benefit not only from the mentoring of a more experienced coach but also through the social learning that can occur as new teachers interact with more expert colleagues” (p.15).

Despite the effort to improve academic performance in reading through CFLICs for highly impoverished, minority students, not all students have been academically successful. "Evidence is lacking regarding how best to support teachers in learning to teach" reading (Sailors, 2010, p. 303). What teachers have learned through professional development and have done in the classroom following professional development does not appear to translate into student learning for many urban, impoverished, minority students (Dole, 2004; Garet et al., 2008; Sailors, 2008; Wren & Reed, 2005).

Two related streams of research linked to professional development help explain this anomaly. One, Development and Cognition, a Vygotskian notion of social, cultural learning (Vygotsky, 1962) is theory focused on the influence of the interaction of a more knowledgeable person with another. Theoretically, interactions in the zone of proximal development would explain the academic success of some minority students on standardized reading tests and classroom work in terms of the teacher's enhanced pedagogical capacity achieved through one on one professional development. The second, Vygotskian Space Theory, a Harréian (Harré, 1984) notion of growth during group interaction, is theory focused on the influence of persons within a group (McVee, Dunsmore, & Gavelek, 2005). Theoretically, in addition to what teachers do in the classroom, it also matters how teachers interact with other adults during professional learning opportunities (McVee, Dunsmore, & Gavelek, 2005). In this second set of research, group learning was emphasized. Harré (1984) argues that it is through these collaborative or constructivist interactions within the group that individuals learn. It makes sense that through these two types of professional development, one on one interaction and collaborative group interactions, educators can learn to better engage and reach high poverty, minority students.

## Theoretical Framework

Both, Vygotsky's Theory of Development and Cognition and Vygotsky's Space Theory (Harré, 1984) serve as frameworks to shed some light on the idea of teacher learning. Vygotsky's constructivist view of learning and development suggests that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development in children and adults (Moll, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky believed that social circumstances shape thinking and pedagogy and that teaching and learning are collaborative activities (Donato, 1994). This theory of cognitive development seems particularly important when considering implications for teacher-to-student interactions in the classroom and teacher-to-colleague interactions in professional learning settings.

### *Vygotsky's Theory of Development and Cognition*

Within Vygotsky's Theory of Development and Cognition are two central concepts: 1) Mediation and 2) Scaffolding. Mediation is demonstrated by the learner when there is an opportunity to problem solve or an opportunity for interaction between two people with different levels of skill, knowledge and/or understanding (Donato, 1994; McLeod, 2007). Interactions within this learning space (i.e. the present level of development and the potential level of development) Vygotsky termed the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD). Interaction with a "more knowledgeable other" creates a better understanding of a higher ability level task for the learner (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). As the learner (student or teacher) performs more difficult tasks in the classroom or uses techniques acquired through experiences from professional learning, the learner's ability in problem solving and developing higher mental functions increase through the social interaction or peer collaboration, whether the learner is an adult or a child (Vygotsky, 1962). ZPD is important for this study because the most productive learning occurred when the learning was between the level of what could be done independently (the

present level of development) and the level that could only be accomplished with the assistance of a more knowledgeable tutor (the potential level of development) (Donato, 1994; McLeod, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978).

Scaffolding, the second concept of this theory, is a gradual release of responsibility for the learning; adjusting assistance to the learner as (s)he becomes independent (Donato, 1994). The scaffolding concept is important for this study because success with new techniques happens when the learner is gradually given the opportunity to be responsible for his or her own learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Ideally, learning would occur within the ZPD through mediation and scaffolding. And, this theory explains the learning of the individual, whether it is an adult or a child (Gallucci, 2008).

Teacher mediation and scaffolding in the classroom provide the ZPD opportunity within the area of potential learning for students. Professional learning experiences provided comparable ZPD opportunities for in-service teachers, in the position of a learner, to develop new instructional techniques. According to Vygotsky's theory (1978), these opportunities to interact with a more skillful peer increases learning and development. This seems to be true for children, as well as adults (Donato, 1994; Gallucci, 2008; Joyce & Showers, 2002).

#### *Vygotskian Space Theory*

Vygotskian Space Theory, described by Harré (1984) and elaborated by Gavelek (1996), was a second important lens with which to view teaching and learning. According to this theory, learning occurs through collaborative group relationships (Gallucci, 2008; Harré, 1984). As teachers engage in collaborative learning during grade level and content meetings, individual learning is enhanced through participation with the larger group. This idea was extended to teacher learning as a way to understand the connection between individual development and the conditions set for collaborative learning (Gallucci, 2008;

Gavelek, 1996; McVee, Dunsmore, & Gavelek, 2005; Peck, Gallucci, Sloan, Lippencott, 2009). According to Peck, Gallucci, Sloan and Lippencott, (2009), "The "Vygotsky Space" theory represents individual and collective learning in terms of changing relations between two contextual parameters of social activity" (p. 19). Harré's framework of Vygotskian Space Theory, then, could be used to analyze individual and organizational learning processes (Peck, Gallucci, Sloan, Lippencott, 2009). His framework also illustrates how organizational learning and new ideas for teaching could be produced through the individual discussion in a group setting (Peck, Gallucci, Sloan & Lippencott, 2009).

Donato (1994) points toward collaboration during teaching and learning which produces "new, elaborate psychological processes that are unavailable to the organism working in isolation" (Vygotsky, 1989, cited by Donato, 2000, p. 46). Vygotsky's Theories of Development and Cognition and Space Theory offer ideas for improving academic achievement for African American and Hispanic students by building the pedagogical capacity of their teachers. These theories guided this study's data collection and served as lenses for data analysis (Gavelek & Raphael, 1996; Harré, 1984; McVee, Dunsmore, & Gavelek, 2005).

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe and understand teacher attitudes and perceptions about sustained professional development and teacher perceptions of the impact professional development had on classroom actions and instructional behaviors that led to increased student academic achievement of high-poverty, minority children. Descriptions and understanding were filtered using the lenses of Vygotsky's Theory of Development and Cognition and Theory of Space (Gavelek & Raphael, 1996; Harré, 1984; McVee, Dunsmore & Gavelek, 2005),

## Research Questions

To achieve the purpose of the study, the following questions focused and guided this research:

- Following sustained professional development and increased reading achievement for high-poverty, minority children:
  - What were teachers' attitudes and perceptions about sustained professional development and the impact on their classroom actions and their instructional behaviors? Why did they believe as they did?
  - What instructional behaviors and practices did teachers report using?
  - In what ways were these behaviors and practices different from past behaviors and practices? Why were they different?
- In what ways did teacher attitudes and perceptions about the sustained professional development experience and their changed instructional behaviors reflect components of Vygotsky's Theory of Development and Cognition and Vygotsky's Space Theory?
- What other connections were revealed?
- How useful were Vygotsky's theories for understanding the relationship between teacher perceptions, classroom instructional behaviors and increased minority student reading achievement?

## Methodology

Qualitative research methods, particularly phenomenology, best served this study because it provided a framework to describe the experiences of several teachers' lived experiences to produce a "universal essence" (Creswell, 2007, p. 236). A phenomenological pedagogy observational approach allowed the opportunity for reflection from the nature of lived experience and was chosen to guide the design of this

study (Van Manen, 1979; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). According to the phenomenologist

Van Manen (2007),

Phenomenology is a project of sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence, in the sense that reflecting on experience must be thoughtful, and as much as possible, free from theoretical, prejudicial and suppositional intoxications . . . that is driven . . . with meaning. (p. 11)

This methodological framework guided the study.

### *The Researcher*

I saw the world, first and foremost, through the eyes of a life-long educator.

Having served several years as a teacher, campus leader and central district administrator, I had the opportunity to view education from multiple perspectives over the past 30 years. Through the multiplicity of life experiences in a variety of venues inside and outside this country, I additionally carried the bias of a woman who had the opportunity to have sustained experiences in different cultures, including the hegemonic culture of this country.

Having been raised as an only child in an urban, poor, working class African American family and being the first child to complete college, I understood the difficulty of impoverished, minority children. As a former military wife, I think I had unique perspectives as well as biases. Finally, but not least important were my religious background and beliefs which colored my attitude and perceptions.

All of these factors affected the lens through which I saw the world, but also qualified me to engage in this research. I worked hard to understand the world in which I live and work. Meanings within this view were subjective and complex, yet, it was important to establish relationships and interact with individuals to interpret meaning of the world and to bring meaning and understanding to the phenomenon being studied.

The desire to complete this research from a non-biased perspective was stronger than the bias which impacted my worldview. Therefore, to complete this task, I used standardized procedures and focused on hermeneutically collecting, organizing, observing, listening, asking open-ended questions, interpreting, clarifying and analyzing data (Creswell, 2007). In order to properly document all events in the study, I kept a field journal. Finally, one of the researcher's roles in this study, according to Creswell (2007), was to collect, clarify and analyze data rigorously and inductively, adhering to the adopted theory, in this case, phenomenological pedagogy of lived experience (Van Manen, 1990).

#### *Context of the Study*

The public school district in this study was a large urban district, located in the southwestern part of the United States. The setting for this study was appropriate because there were a large number of schools serving high-poverty, minority students. Typically, students in large urban areas have lower scores than urban-area non-poverty, non-minority students (Children's Defense Fund, 2012). In this district, student enrollment topped 156,000. Ninety-three percent of these students participated in the free and reduced lunch program indicating parent income levels below the national poverty threshold at \$23,050 for a family of four (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). The ethnic breakdown for the district's student population was 70% Hispanic, 24% African American and six percent White and other. There were slightly more males (51%) in the district than females (49%).

The composition of the district's fourth grade cohort matched this trend. At fourth grade, there were slightly less than 12, 600 students (TEA, 2012). Almost 6,500 students of the district's fourth grade students were English Language Learners (ELL) with about 90% participating in the bilingual and English as a Second Language programs. Ten

percent of students had parent denials meaning parents opted for an English only curriculum. About 15% of the district's fourth grades students were considered exceptionally talented and gifted and less than 10% were receiving special education services: matching state averages (TEA, 2012).

Of the more than 10,000 teachers in the district, 38% were African American, 27% Hispanic and about 35% were White. Most of the district's teachers were female (70%) with the majority having at least three years teaching experience. Neither of these averages matched the ethnic composition nor the gender distribution of the district's composition of the student population.

#### *Data Needs*

Baxter and Jack (2008) refer to each piece of data in a study as “one piece of the puzzle, with each piece contributing to the researcher’s understanding of the whole phenomenon . . . various strands of data are braided together” (p. 554). Data was needed about fourth grade teachers of impoverished, minority students who demonstrated on-grade level performance or remarkable progress in reading. First, these teachers’ attitudes and perceptions of the sustained professional development they experienced and the impact they perceive that it had on their classroom actions and their instructional behaviors was needed. Additionally, data was needed on how teacher attitudes and perceptions and instructional behaviors changed as a result of the professional development experience.

#### *Data Sources*

Fourth grade teachers of high poverty, minority students self-reported standardized reading test score achievement data. Teachers, who reported significant gains in reading test scores, served as data sources. These teachers were responsible for the Reading Language Arts course of study for their students. Fourth grade teachers

were chosen, because NAEP assessment begins at fourth grade. Additionally, third and fourth grades mark a change in reading instruction. Young children in grades prekindergarten to third grade are learning to read; however, at the end of third grade children begin using the skill of reading to learn new information (Fiester & Smith, 2010). Moreover, Juel (1988) found that children who were not on grade level in first grade were highly unlikely to be on grade level at fourth grade.

To be selected, there needed to be a majority of students in the classroom who 1) met the passing standard on the STAAR assessment, and 2) possessed double-digit gains from beginning to ending scores, or began the study time period with below grade level performance and ended the study time period having achieved on-grade level performance or above, or 3) teachers who reported beginning the semester with a class that had low reading scores on the value-added growth model used by the district and ended the semester with high value-added scores. Student assessment data from the Spring 2012 STAAR assessment, as reported by fourth grade teachers, was used as the beginning score and Spring 2013 STAAR assessment was used as the ending score. These measures were used to demonstrate on-grade level performance or a remarkable increase in academic achievement in reading.

#### *Data Collection*

First, it was necessary to submit a proposal to the school district's Research Review Board housed within the Department of Evaluation and Accountability for review and approval. After securing the school district permission through the prescribed processes and the University of Texas Institutional at Arlington Review Board (IRB) approval, an invitation to participate was emailed to principals to forward to fourth grade teachers.

To achieve the goals of this study, I led three phases of data collection to gather attitudes, perceptions and behaviors of 4th grade teachers who reported having successfully improved the academic performance in reading of high poverty, minority students. To capture background information, Phase 1 consisted of an open-ended questionnaire. Phase 2 provided five purposefully selected teachers, chosen based on their questionnaire responses, an opportunity to participate in a Focus Group Interview to dialogue about their attitudes and perceptions of professional learning experiences and any changes in classroom actions and instructional behaviors as a result (Krueger, 2002). To clarify and reflect upon responses from the Focus Group Interview, Phase 3 of the data collection was an individual interaction through a follow-up conversation or email with selected teachers. During this individual interaction, teachers had the opportunity to reflect and comment on their interview responses or add to the transcript. These data and clarification strategies enhanced the credibility of the study (Baxter & Jack, 2008), because these participants could inform the researcher about their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; Van Manen, 1990).

#### Phase 1 – Questionnaire

After being informed about the study, principals forwarded information about the study and the informed consent to fourth grade teachers on their campus. Selected teachers were invited to provide information through an online questionnaire to capture their attitudes and perceptions about sustained professional development. Additionally, the questionnaire collected personal information (i.e. contact information, number of years of experience, grade levels taught, etc.) using logically ordered questions (Krueger, 1998). The final question offered an opportunity to indicate willingness to voluntarily participate in the next phase of the study.

## Phase 2 – Focus Group Interview

Of the district's fourth grade teachers who participated in the study through completion of the online questionnaire, five exceptional teachers were purposefully selected and invited to participate in a 30-60 minute, semi-structured Focus Group Interview (Krueger, 1998, 2002). Teachers were selected based on their self-reported assessment results, willingness to participate, professional development experiences (e.g. receiving the service of a CFLIC), and ability to contribute to the description of the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2007). Participants received \$20 per hour as compensation for their participation in the Focus Group part of the study.

The interview was used to: 1) cross check the questionnaire results and 2) identify the instructional behaviors that provided increased student performance in reading. The focus group was held in a location that offered privacy and was conducive to recording. Privacy and comfort were important so participants felt secure enough to provide candid comments in a relaxed atmosphere. The interview was recorded with an auditory digital device and written notes were completed as a back-up to the recording (Creswell, 2007; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007).

The Focus Group Interview began using the Krueger (1998, 2002) protocol and a core set of questions. As the moderator for the session, I paid careful attention to the participants, encouraging even the most reluctant, hesitant participants to share their experiences without permitting one person to dominate the group. Along with snacks, a short introduction (including a review of the IRB Consent) and brief conversation aided in creating a relaxed environment for participants. Two very broad open-ended questions from Vygotsky's lens of social interaction, for example, "What reading classroom teaching actions are essential for student success?" and "What do you do in your classroom that contributes to student success?" opened the discussion. A short series of questions

followed, allowing teachers to explain unique experiences, professional development sessions, coaching assistance, if any, and the classroom teaching actions and behaviors they felt influenced or changed student performance in reading. Subsequent questions focused on gaining an understanding of factors teachers felt pushed students toward high levels of academic achievement. After the interview, a verbatim transcription of the audio recording was produced.

### Phase 3 – Individual Interaction

The third phase of data collection, the individual interaction, provided an opportunity for me to clarify any confusion, to ask questions, and to allow the five teachers who participated in the interview an opportunity to engage in member checking of the verbatim transcript (Creswell, 2007), to reflect on their responses from the interview, and to comment on the data presented. My role in this phase was to take notes and to record insights as well as to question and clarify the data (Creswell, 2007).

During non-use periods and at the conclusion of the study, all data was locked in a file cabinet in the researcher's locked office. Identity was protected throughout the study and afterward by assigning pseudonyms to the participants.

### *Data Analysis*

A phenomenological pedagogy observational approach was used to analyze this study's data. Using Van Manen's theory (1990) of everyday lived experiences, I attempted to understand and describe what teachers did to move students toward increased academic achievement in reading – "How they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others." (Patton, 2002, p. 104).

Van Manen conceptualized the structure which guided this study (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). Phenomenologists begin the analysis process by coding the essential

themes from the segments obtained during data collection. During this step of the analysis, I reflected on the themes which characterized teacher perceptions and attitudes. Segments from the focus group interviews were clustered into units of meaning and themes, including a search for specific terminology as well as similarities and differences. These themes provided a composite for the text descriptions of trends and patterns of experiences used to describe, create meaning, and generate understanding (Creswell, 2007; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007).

But, phenomenology calls for more than a structural description, it also requires that I “enrich the descriptions with perceptions and reflections on understandings, provide possible meaning and significance” (Barnacle, 2004, p. 63). Consequently, I “need to do more than use non-theoretical experience to gain phenomenological insight . . . genuine phenomenological reflection can occur” (p. 62). Finally, I tried to capture the “essence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 63) of teacher lived experiences so the reader gained a better understanding of the experience.

Vygotsky’s Theory of Development and Cognition, including mediation and scaffolding, and Vygotskian Space Theory, elucidated learning in collaborative settings and were the lenses through which meaning and understanding were developed. This was created from the teachers’ experiences, attitudes and perceptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An effective analysis of the data represented an in-depth picture of teacher actions that occurred in the learning environment through convergence and integration of the data (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Finally, the written descriptions were, “situated in the lifeworld and create crisp, vivid images so the reader understands the experiences and makes the associations as well as generates more questions and wonderings.” While the writing would not allow for multiple interpretations, there were inner meanings which could be used to assist the

reader in being reflective. The text should have been evocative and intense, creating opportunities for epiphanies. “A good phenomenological text has the effect of making us suddenly “see” something in a manner that enriches our understanding of everyday life experiences” for teachers and students in their classrooms (Van Manen, 1997, p.345).

#### *Research Criteria*

To provide credibility, validity and dependability through the analysis and findings, there was sufficient information provided about the participants and the setting to be able to replicate and confirm them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, there was clear criteria for the purposeful selection of participants which helped control for my bias and I diligently pursued voluntary participation from teachers who fit the criteria (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

This research study demonstrated procedural rigor and competence, so there was no question about integrity or ethical procedures (Kline, 2008). The rigor of the study was evident because data was collected from a variety of sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Both, data collection and analysis was robust with rich descriptions to provide a clearer understanding of the phenomenon and demonstrated that the data and the researcher were trustworthy (Kline, 2008).

#### *Credibility*

Credibility is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, credibility was established through the use of various data sources, providing a holistic understanding of the phenomenon rather than analyzing each data source individually (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The data pieces in this research (the teacher questionnaire, the focus group interview responses and the individual interaction) were from the participants’ perspective and contributed to my understanding of the phenomena, lessening the interference of my bias based on my

lived experiences. The teacher questionnaire was used to select participants for the focus group. The focus group interview contained open-ended questions aimed at eliciting data about teacher attitudes and perceptions of classroom actions that made their students successful. The individual interactions completed in Phase 3 of data collection confirmed teacher responses obtained during Phase 1 and Phase 2 of data collection.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that it is the researcher's responsibility to provide a rich, thick description and sufficient information about the phenomenon, the context, the participants, and the data collection methods for replicability of the study. This research study followed rigorous qualitative procedural guidelines as outlined for a qualitative phenomenological study in order to provide opportunities for replicability without question regarding integrity or ethical procedures (Kline, 2008; Patton, 2002). Sufficient information about the participants and the setting was provided to replicate and to confirm the results of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

#### Validity

Validity increases the believability of the researcher's conclusions (Maxwell, 2008). One of the strongest threats to validity is researcher bias (Maxwell, 2008). Data triangulation provided trustworthiness and methodological rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study's triangulation procedures, using teacher questionnaires, focus group interviews, and individual interactions, provided validity for this study and served to limit the influence of my theories, lived experiences, and preconceptions or values (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest "member checking" (p. 264) as one form of validity. Verbatim transcripts and conclusions drawn from the interview responses were provided to the participants, via email, for them to review and reflect upon: 1) their responses to the interview questions, and 2) my conclusions drawn from their responses to ensure there are no misinterpretations in meaning of what was said during the focus

group session. An additional follow up interview was scheduled if there were corrections or clarifications needed on the transcripts and conclusions based on the teachers' reflections. These activities provided additional clarity and dependability of the analysis. It assured that I correctly interpreted the evidence provided.

#### Dependability

Dependability is the ability to achieve the same results using the same methods in the same context (Shenton, 2003). To provide dependability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest "overlapping" data sources. This study used the focus group interview to confirm responses on the voluntary teacher questionnaire. To confirm the results of the interview, individual interactions were provided in person or online.

Another method of ensuring dependability is through the use of a peer debriefer. This is a knowledgeable peer who is familiar with the study, can provide feedback, and check the logic of the coding. A peer debriefer assisted with interpretation of the data after analysis had been completed to help ensure trustworthy findings (Given, 2008). This activity, typically completed to guard against researcher bias, was used to provide a high level of dependability for the study.

Further, the applicability of the findings from this study could positively contribute to the field. The robust data collection and rich descriptions demonstrated that the data could be trusted (Kline, 2008).

#### Significance of the Study

This study was important from a PK-16 perspective for a variety of reasons. It expanded the professional development research base, confirmed and expanded the use of Vygotsky's theories to new areas, and provided evidence to improve teacher practice and perhaps student outcomes. Moreover, this study served to tie minority student

achievement to teacher classroom practices and quite possibly to teacher professional development.

#### *Implication for Research*

Researchers are divided in their opinions on teacher professional development. Some indicate that there is a small amount of empirical research that evidences increased student achievement tied to teacher professional development (Gamse et al., 2008; Garet et al., 2008; Marsh et al., 2008; Sailors & Henderson, 2008); while others claim there is none (Steiner & Kowal, 2007). According to Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss and Shapley (2007),

It is unsurprising that few rigorous studies address the effect of professional development on student achievement . . . There is more literature on the effects of professional development on teacher learning and teaching practice, falling short of demonstrating effects on student achievement. (p. 6).

This study informed the area of study and provided additional empirical evidence while assisting those in the field to understand what happened in the classroom to make urban minority students successful in reading. It is conceivable that this study provided some empirical evidence tying student achievement in reading to sustained teacher professional development; demonstrating that instructional coaching, from teachers' perspectives, can have a positive impact on their teaching and student learning.

#### *Implications for Practice*

With the bleak results from recent NAEP exams, this study offered at least one solution to break the unsatisfactory reading performance urban minority students from low-income families. The study elucidated some of the teacher attitudes, perceptions and beliefs towards sustained professional development that result in changed classroom actions and practices needed to promote and enhance student classroom performance; thus, leading to increased academic achievement in reading. Teacher professional

development, as a vehicle for improvement in our schools (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, Warren, 2005; Dole, 2004; Sailors, 2010; Wise & Jacoby, 2010), could serve as a resource in navigating the myriad of classroom practices involved in improving student experiences and success in reading (Hargrove, 2008; Wise & Jacoby, 2010). Students who are proficient readers in fourth grade and who demonstrate mastery of state standards have a better chance at being college ready at the end of high school and more effectively transition into higher education; changing the current four-year graduation rate of sixty percent for minority freshmen students (Children's Defense Fund, 2012). While this is an alarming statistic, only 19% of African American and 12% of Hispanic college students, ages 24 to 29, graduate in four years compared to 26% of White students from the same age group. The third relevant statistic that may be affected by this research was the 85% of fourth grade students reading below grade level (Children's Defense Fund, 2012). The current study offered a small amount of empirical evidence and possibly a noteworthy solution to help teachers lead students to become more proficient readers, which will affect their future educational success.

The results of this study may have been appropriate for improved practice-based professional development with teachers at every level, PreK-16. At the university level, the results of this research may have shed some light on the kinds of university coursework provided for continuing teachers, particularly considering that professors often are not involved with teacher professional development at the district level. Better teaching and better performance at the secondary level prepares students to be college and career ready. A final consideration for the significance of this study was that it could be applicable to teacher preparation programs at the university level, where the supervising professor acts in the capacity of a literacy coach for pre-service reading teachers.

### *Implications for Theory*

I proposed using Vygotsky's Theory of Development and Cognition and Vygotsky's Space Theory as lenses. The first of these theories seemed to offer one idea for understanding the interaction between various role groups (i.e. teachers with students in the classroom or teachers participating in longer-term professional development). Academic achievement and increased performances on assessments depend on what happened in the classroom (Slavin, Lake, Chambers, Cheung, & Davis, 2009). The second theory, Vygotskian space (Harré, 1984; Gavelek, 1996), is a framework for understanding group interactions and learning in collaborative settings (i.e. teachers in grade level or subject area team meetings). Advancement of knowledge in a social context was evidenced by increased student performance as well as teacher growth in pedagogical and content skills. Empirical evidence for both theories was documented through the online questionnaire responses, the focus group discussion and the follow-up individual interactions.

### Chapter Summary

Based on the NAEP scores and research, impoverished, minority students are underperforming and have lower scores than non-poverty, non-minority students. Because teachers and teaching can make the difference in the academic performance of these students, it is imperative that effective teachers have the pedagogical skills and content knowledge to change student achievement and close the achievement gap between children of color and their White peers. Many poor, minority students lack basic proficiency in reading, but there are numbers of these students who are successful on standardized tests. With all the knowledge and research about what increases urban minority student achievement, as well as the legislative mandates of NCLB, the gap in achievement may be decreased by looking at teacher attitudes, perceptions and their

classroom practices after professional development. Much of the research points towards sustained professional development to improve teacher classroom behaviors through collaborative interactions to make a positive difference in academic achievement for students of color. Few studies connect the effects of teacher professional learning and student achievement.

Vygotsky (1978) stresses the role of social interaction in the development of cognition and believed it to be essential to learning. If learning and development are mediated processes, grounded in Vygotskian theory, this lens could lead to understanding how learning interactions raise teaching standards and causes learners to reach beyond their capabilities, resulting in accelerated growth. The participants in this study have demonstrated success in supporting and leading poor, minority students to mastery of state standards in reading and I am attempting to understand and describe lived experiences with a phenomenological approach that will guide data collection and analysis.

### Reporting

The remaining chapters include a survey of the relevant literature, methodology for the study, presentation of the data, findings, a discussion of the results, implications based on my research, and suggestions for future research. In the literature review, several topics are covered with the focus on teacher professional development and classroom interactions to foster student achievement. The chapter on methodology provides sufficient information about the participants and the setting to be able to replicate the study and to confirm the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data collection and analysis in this study will be robust with rich descriptions. The attitudes and perceptions of teachers who have been successful in teaching students in ways they believe positively impacted their students' test scores in reading will also be presented.

This data serves as the foundation for understanding the impact of professional development on student achievement from teachers' perspectives. The findings and discussion will provide applicability and validity to the results. This study will have implications and positively contribute to the field and will possibly offer some suggestions on how to improve the reading performance of urban minority youth.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

“It’s clear that achievement is not accelerating fast enough for our nation’s children to compete in the knowledge economy of the 21st Century.”

*Secretary Arne Duncan statement  
NAEP Reading and Math Results, 2011*

Educators continue to seek ways to identify and eliminate the learning barriers that hinder the success of urban minority students (Bean, Draper, Hall, Vandermolen & Zigmond, 2010; Ferguson, 2003). A number of variables have been found to contribute to the gap in academic achievement, but a primary issue is that significant numbers of children are struggling to learn to read (NCES, 2010).

In the current era of high-stakes testing and accountability, most states begin statewide assessment at third grade (No Child Left Behind, 2001). However, much of the research indicates that students need to be reading on grade level by the end of first grade, not third and that reading failure is preventable (Clay, 1993; Kennedy, Birman, & Demaline, 1986; Slavin, Madden, Karweit, Livermon, & Dolan, 1990). This is important because one of the findings in a longitudinal study by Juel (1988) was that a struggling reader at first grade has an 88% probability of experiencing reading difficulty at fourth grade, will remain behind throughout the rest of his or her schooling (Juel, 1988; Hernandez, 2011), and is four times more likely to dropout (Hernandez, 2011).

Nationally, African American and Hispanic students continue to exhibit reading failure at fourth grade and are far behind Anglo and Asian students (NCES, 2010). As a result, researchers take numerous approaches to understanding and explaining the reasons urban students struggle with reading. Some examples are: poverty (Fiester & Smith, 2010; Jenson, 2010; Payne, 1996; Thompson & Smith, 2005), student demography (Hormuth, 1998; Jensen, 2009), local policies (Darling-Hammond, 2000),

classroom practice (Ferguson, 2003), teacher quality (NCLB, 2001; Otaiba Hosp, Smartt & Dole, 2008; Sailors & Henderson, 2008; Thompson & Smith, 2005), teacher mobility (Allensworth et al., 2009; Donaldson & Johnson, 2010; Matsumura, 2010; Thompson & Smith, 2005), retention (Thompson & Smith, 2005), parental involvement and support (Fiester & Smith, 2010; Jensen, 2009; Thompson & Smith, 2005), and the format for teacher professional learning (Kamler, 2005; Otaiba et al, 2008). While the above research is important, professional learning for in-service teachers seems to be an avenue to change classroom practice and help teachers to be more successful in leading children to higher levels of academic achievement (Cohen & Hill, 1998; Hawley & Valli, 1999).

Since in-service teacher effectiveness is essential, No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) has a special section which addresses professional development. Title IX of the act calls for professional development opportunities which

Give teachers, principals, and administrators the knowledge and skills to provide students with the opportunity to meet challenging State academic content standards and student academic achievement standards (NCLB, 2001, p. 1963).

Additionally, NCLB calls for teacher professional learning opportunities that are

high quality, sustained, intensive, and classroom-focused in order to have a positive and lasting impact on classroom instruction as well as the teacher's performance in the classroom (p. 1963).

In the face of changing accountability for student achievement, NCLB legislation set goals that aim to “ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (NCLB, 2001, p. 1). NCLB uses a tiered approach to educational improvement (NCLB, 2001). In other words, teachers should be given the opportunity to gain content and pedagogical knowledge to provide instruction for students which results in high academic achievement. Because teachers play such a critical role in student achievement, in 2005,

NCLB called for appropriate teacher certification (state certification, a bachelor's degree, and demonstrated subject competence) as well as state plans to increase teacher effectiveness (NCLB, 2001; Konstantopoulos & Chung, 2011; Palardy & Rumberger, 2008). Furthermore, NCLB outlined that professional learning opportunities are “not to be one-day or short-term workshops or conferences,” but “sustained, intensive” experiences (NCLB, 2001, p. 1963).

Even national organizations recognize the need and importance for quality professional development for teachers. The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) set standards for high quality professional learning and “recognized three kinds of standards that must be addressed simultaneously for staff development to lead to changes in practice and results for students” (NSDC, 2001, np). NSDC includes context, process and content standards designed to provide a framework to help teachers improve knowledge, skills and practices which will enable teachers to engage in effective practice leading to student achievement.

Further, the International Reading Association (IRA), whose mission is “to promote high teacher quality and student learning to improve reading instruction” (IRA, 2004a; b), has set standards for reading teacher professional learning. These standards include a variety of ways for teachers to engage in job-embedded, collaborative professional development. The IRA recommendation for research-based, content-rich opportunities is aimed at developing and empowering reading professionals, especially those in the classroom, so they positively affect student achievement in reading.

High-quality, sustained professional development is imperative if teachers are to impact minority students who live in poverty and raise their academic achievement in reading. Current research of professional development, designed to improve and increase teacher knowledge, is a requirement of national organizations. Content

knowledge in reading and teaching methodology used in a constructivist social context (teachers learning from each other in collaborative sessions) helps teachers begin to understand how to connect theory and practice as well as discuss the incorporation of these models of instruction into classroom practice (Firestone, Mangin, Martinez, & Polovsky, 2005). Extended longer term coherent professional development that includes content and teaching methods increases the incidence of teacher effectiveness through classroom implementation (Firestone, Mangin, Martinez, & Polovsky, 2005).

This literature review continues with three important discussions that center on improved teacher performance that can enhance student achievement. The first, high quality professional development, is supported by standards for teacher professional learning which include the format, content and use of professional development. The second discussion centers on teacher professional learning tied to student achievement. The connection between teacher professional learning, teacher effectiveness and student achievement is considered a viable path to assist with the problem of poor student achievement. Professional development with the support of a knowledgeable expert seems to help teacher connect theory and practice. Within the research community there seems to be some confusion between coaching and mentoring. This section addresses this. This section also discusses content-focused literacy instructional coaching and its benefits for teachers and students. Finally, the third section focuses on an investment in teacher quality which can help teachers become more effective in the classroom, learn new techniques and significantly increase student outcomes in reading.

#### High Quality Professional Development

“If a child is unable to learn to read the way we teach, then maybe we should change the way we teach.”

*Marie Clay's statement  
Texas Woman's University  
Early Literacy Conference, 1993.*

Teacher pedagogical skill and content knowledge are important components which link teacher effectiveness in the classroom to student achievement. Much of the current research on high quality professional development for in-service teachers focuses on improving instructional practices to increase student achievement (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson & Orphanos, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Kadlic & Lasiak, 2003). The NSDC Status Report says, "Professional development should be intensive, ongoing and connected to practice" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 9). To successfully teach students "teachers must learn more about the subjects they teach, and how students learn these subjects" (Garet et al., 2001, p. 916).

While NCLB legislation (2001) provides for ongoing professional development for teachers regardless of their highly qualified status, NSDC (2001) posits on their website that "the most powerful forms of staff development . . . meet on a regular basis . . . for the purposes of learning . . . and problem solving" with the goal of improving teacher effectiveness to increase student learning. In addition, after an exhaustive analysis of research on high quality professional development, Kadlic and Lasiak (2003) called for teacher learning opportunities which included activities that: 1) "are sustained, intensive and classroom-focused in order to have a positive impact on classroom instruction" (p. 48), 2) "advance teacher understanding of effective instructional strategies" (p. 49), and 3) "are regularly evaluated for their impact on increased teacher effectiveness and improved student academic achievement" (p. 52). Clearly, the aim of professional learning is to aid teachers in acquiring the content knowledge and pedagogical skill through high quality professional activities so they can provide instruction which promotes high levels of learning for students.

Of particular interest to the current study is a survey of the literature which reveals that teacher professional development is most effective when it is a sustained,

on-going, collaborative process, followed by support of a knowledgeable expert who provides feedback (Stevyn, 2005). The following two studies, Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss and Shapley (2007) and Garet et al. (2008) illustrate this idea. First, Yoon et al. (2007) recently published a comprehensive report on professional development studies concluding that “studies that had more than had 14 hours of professional development showed a positive and significant effect on student achievement from professional development” (p. 3). Additionally:

Professional development affects student achievement through three steps. First, professional development enhances teacher knowledge and skills. Second, better knowledge and skills improve classroom teaching. Third, improved teaching raises student achievement. If one link is weak or missing, better student learning cannot be expected. (p. 4)

Second, Garet et al. (2008) studied the effects of professional learning tied to second grade student outcomes in six randomly selected eastern and mid-western urban districts that served minority students living in poverty. Long-term professional development centered on the five components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension through classroom practices connected to the basal reading program. The important finding in this study was that teacher knowledge increased as a result of scientifically based learning opportunities in reading through long-term, sustained professional development with the support of a knowledgeable expert (Garet et al., 2008).

Additionally, content of professional development should be student-focused and practice-based, “addressing the everyday challenges involved in teaching and learning” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 10). Teachers felt high quality professional development allowed them to collegially explore specific student learning objectives, identify common misconceptions and analyze performance data (Darling-Hammond et

al., 2009). This collegiality lends itself to the Vygotskian perspective of working with colleagues instead of working in isolation (Harré, 1984).

Concluding, Clary (2007) found that teachers were more apt to attempt new techniques when they felt supported in the implementation stage of classroom practice after high quality professional development. She also reported that teachers had a higher level of commitment when they attempted to take the risks of trying new tasks aimed at increasing student achievement in reading. It is believed that high quality professional development can make a difference in minority student achievement.

#### Professional Development Tied to Student Achievement

“Let’s also remember that after parents, the biggest impact on a child’s success comes from the man or woman at the front of the classroom.”

*President Barak Obama’s statement  
State of the Union Address, 2011*

The tenets of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act through NCLB made schools look deeply at student achievement and it has made districts, schools and teachers more accountable to students. With the scope of NCLB, it has become a necessity for teachers to lead children into consistently higher levels of academic performance. The legislation assumes that teachers who are considered highly qualified are capable of effectively educating urban minority children (NCLB, 2001). To be successful in turning around lower performing campuses, teachers (supported by strong, instructional leaders) must use a repertoire of strategies designed to halt the demise of public schools (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008) and improve the dismal reading scores of at-risk, minority children who live in poverty.

Michael Williams, Texas Education Commissioner, is concerned about the student achievement gap in under-represented groups, that is, between minority students and their White peers (Hobbs, 2013). Nearly 60% of Texas students are poor and 66% are African American or Hispanic. (Hobbs, 2013). Although the achievement gap still

exists between students of color and their Anglo peers, teacher professional development in reading may positively affect classroom practices and successfully increase minority students' scores on standardized tests.

Professional learning is seen as one pathway to academic achievement for poor, minority children (Bean, Draper, Hall, Vandermolen & Zigmond, 2010; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Steiner & Kowal, 2007; Steyn, 2005), because it has resulted in high levels of learning for some urban, poor, minority students (Cole, 1992; Klingner, Vaughn, Arguelles, Hughes, & Leftwich, 2004; McGill-Franzen et al., 1999; Sailors & Price, 2010; Yoon et al., 2007). Thus, it is important to examine the relationship between teacher in-service professional learning, teacher effectiveness and student achievement (Darling-Hammond & Nickerson, 2009; Sailors, 2010). Joyce and Showers (2002) and others (Cohen & Hill, 1998; Hawley & Valli, 1999) posit that professional development used with theory and practice can change teacher classroom behavior and student learning results. Sailors (2010) demonstrates in her exploratory study that while there is a lack of empirical evidence to support long-term instructional coaching as professional development, there is evidence that the duration of professional development and instructional coach contact time with teachers in the classroom can change student outcomes

While many variables have an adverse effect on academic achievement in reading for minority students, current research seems to offer guidance toward professional development with continued support from an instructional literacy coach as one of the ways to begin to change classroom practice and to begin to close the achievement gap in reading (Bean, Draper, Hall, Vandemolen & Zigmond, 2010; Knight, 2006; Marsh, McCombs, Lockwood, Martorell, Gershwin & Naftel, 2008; Neufeld & Roper, 2003). Steyn (2005) suggests that "teachers will not change the way they teach

unless they learn new ways to teach” (p. 10) and that for students to improve academically, teachers must be continuously learning. Though researchers provide a myriad of possible solutions for closing the gap in reading, changes in professional development practices is seen as one conduit to reach the goal of improved student outcomes in reading (City, Elmore, Fiarman & Teitel, 2010; Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Otaiba, Hosp, Smartt, & Dole, 2008).

According to City et al. (2010) and equal to Yoon et al. (2007), professional development affects student achievement through three steps. First, professional development enhances teacher knowledge and skills. Second, better knowledge and skills improve classroom teaching. Third, improved teaching raises student achievement. An increase in student learning happens as a result of the relationship between content, a teacher’s knowledge and skill, and student engagement on a particular task (City, Elmore, Fiarman & Teitel, 2010; Yoon et al., 2007). “If one link is weak or missing, better student learning cannot be expected” (Yoon et al., 2007, p. 4).

With the Yoon et al. (2007) analysis of 1,300 professional development studies, nine studies truly presented evidence tying professional development to student achievement in reading (Cole, 1992; Duffy et al., 1986; McCutchen et al., 2002; McGill-Franzen et al., 1999; Sloan, 1993). Several findings across studies were consistent. For the current study, the most important finding about tying professional development to student achievement is that across the studies, long term, sustained professional development resulted in increased levels of student achievement in reading and only one study demonstrated zero effect of professional development on student achievement (Duffy et al., 1986). The nine studies cited by Yoon et al. (2007) found that “control group students would have increased their achievement by 21 percentile points if their teacher had received substantial professional development” (p. 2).

In three of the above mentioned studies analyzed by Yoon et al., Cole (1992), McCutchen et al. (2002) and McGill-Franzen et al. (1999), intense professional development was provided for teachers and supported through follow-up one-on-one intervention by an expert to document “changes in teacher knowledge and practice as well as links between those changes and student learning” (McCutchen et al, 2002, p. 80). While these studies did not always yield results of increased student scores in reading (Cole, 1992; Duffy, 1986), the studies did find professional development with support from a more knowledgeable individual valuable and noteworthy in the quest to positively affect student outcomes in reading. Although Cole (1992) found no statistical significance, McCutchen et al. (2002) found that students of the experimental teachers outperformed students of control group teachers on all reading measures of the Gates-MacGinitie standardized test (p. 80). McGill-Franzen et al. (1999) found treatment group students had “significantly higher scores . . . than students from other classrooms” (p. 71). Sloan, using the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTB/McGraw Hill), found that the experimental group students scored significantly higher in reading achievement on the measure than the control group students (p. 52). Though Sloan (1993) did not provide follow-up to the professional development on the Direct Instruction Model, she adds that the teacher training would have been enhanced with peer classroom observations and subsequent feedback. These practices are viewed as one form of sustained professional development.

Using a content-focused literacy instructional coach (CFLIC) is another example of teacher professional development designed to build teacher effectiveness. In the Klingner, Vaughn, Arguelles, Hughes, and Leftwich (2004) study, teachers were trained in how to deliver intensive comprehension instruction and engage children in cognitive reading strategies. The teachers in the study were assisted through professional

development that offered ongoing training, support and coaching. The treatment group of high-poverty, minority fourth grade students in ten classrooms demonstrated significant growth in reading comprehension.

Finally, Borko (2004) posits that teachers need content knowledge because it is through content knowledge that they can help students gain conceptual understandings. This kind of learning, accompanied by ongoing support throughout the year—again long term, sustained professional learning—aides teachers to be able to “guide[s] student thinking” (p. 6) improving learning outcomes.

The current study uses a variety of research to support Sailors and Price (2010) who wrote “professional development of reading teachers is a long-term process that requires careful monitoring and intensive follow-up support” (p. 303). Much of the plethora of research on long term coaching effects during teacher professional development agree with Sailors and Price, pointing towards experimental designs that further validate coaching effects and efficacy related to quality instruction (Biancarosa et al., 2008; Bean, Draper, Hall, Vandermolen, & Zigmond, 2010; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Knight, 2006; Neufeld & Roper, 2004). Certainly, teacher content knowledge and teaching skill is paramount to advancing student achievement. The referenced studies hypothesize that intensive professional development guided by an expert content-focused literacy instructional coach (CFLIC) will have significant effects on instruction and the academic achievement in reading for minority students. Yoon et al. (2007), for example, believe teachers should be “supported by ongoing school collaboration and follow-up consultation with experts” (p. 4).

A CFLIC is a highly-skilled external colleague who works one-on-one with the teacher to solve problems and provide a variety of solutions or strategies based on the context, serves as an observer in the classroom, and is dedicated only to the teacher

being coached (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005; Duncan & Stock, 2010).

CFLICs provide job-embedded support for the learner (Steiner & Kowal, 2007).

Instructional coaching is a “strategy for the transferring of training” (Showers, 1984, p. 1).

It is an opportunity to learn skills that were not previously learned (Showers, 1984).

Bloom, Castagna, Moir and Warren (2005) describe coaching as deliberate support.

There seems to be a mix of ideas and some confusion in the research community on the difference between coaching and mentoring (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005; Duncan & Stock, 2010). Coaching is different from mentoring. Coaching is for new or veteran teachers and comes from an external source (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005; Silver, Lochmiller, Copland & Tripps, 2009). Mentoring, on the other hand, happens during the pre-service or induction process (Barnett & O'Mahoney, 2006; Daresh, 2004; Laine, 2006; Silver, Lochmiller, Copland & Tripps, 2009). Mentoring and induction programs provide guidance from a colleague to develop in the leadership role (Duncan & Stock, 2010). A mentor has been defined as a veteran colleague in the profession in a similar job who advises and guides a junior colleague (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005; Daresh, 2004; Duncan & Stock, 2010; Reyes, 2003). Coaching, then, is a vehicle for improvement of instruction and pedagogical practice in our schools (Wise & Jacobo, 2010). Besides knowing the goal of the coaching experience, the CFLIC must be prepared to assist his or her colleague, as a partner in learning (Wise & Jacobo, 2010) to improve classroom instruction and practice.

One example of coaching for instructional improvement was conducted in a study involving several Chicago Public schools that served high-poverty, predominantly African-American and Hispanic students (Matsumura, Garnier & Spybrook, 2012). Professional development provided by content-focused literacy instructional coaches (CFLIC) assisted teachers through large group, small group and one-on-one individual sessions. The

content for the series of teacher professional development sessions was intentional instruction on comprehension, discussion strategies and cognitive development in reading. The CFLICs demonstrated a variety of instructional techniques through the Content Focused Coaching model defined in a study by Petrosky, McConachie and Mihalakis (2010). Teachers learned to think metacognitively and to evaluate their own thinking as well as that of their students as they engaged in connecting and interpreting texts, asking questions about significant moments in the texts, and allowing students to engage in cognitive strategy routines (Petrosky, McConachie, Mihalakis, 2010). Then, teachers were able to adapt their practices to fit the instructional needs of students (Petrosky, McConachie & Mihalakis, 2010). Even though no direct link could be established between the professional development and student achievement on standardized tests, results of the study yielded positive effects on student comprehension and text discussions.

Various additional studies tie coaching to student achievement (Joyce & Showers, 1995; 2002; Stevens, 2006). In 2008, several studies found a positive relationship between CFLIC interaction, elementary teachers and improved student achievement in reading evidenced by gains on the state standardized tests (Biancarosa, Bryk & Dexter, 2008; Marsh et al., 2008; Otaiba et al., 2008). Joyce and Showers (1995, 2002) demonstrated that ongoing professional development with the support of literacy coaches (CFLIC) is the most effective professional development to change classroom teaching practice. CFLICs provide teachers with theory, demonstration, and practice, which increase both teacher pedagogical knowledge and skill in effective classroom practices.

In addition to the above referenced studies which demonstrate the effectiveness of coaching tied to student achievement, the Otaiba et al. (2008) research study involved

a reading coach (a CFLIC) who designed a year-long professional development aimed at systemic change of reading instructional classroom practices. Besides building teacher content knowledge, teachers received support for classroom implementation. Teachers in the study acknowledged that they learned about reading development in children and how to begin to solve instructional problems as children learned to become more proficient readers. Similarly in another study (Stevens, 2006), 49 teachers participated in professional development sessions aimed at changing classroom instructional practices to improve student outcomes in reading on a standardized assessment measure. To guarantee fidelity to the instructional interventions after the CFLIC provided training, teachers were observed implementing specific teaching strategies in the classroom with students. The teaching strategies included: 1) small cooperative grouping for instruction, 2) increased opportunities to connect reading and writing activities, 3) increased time on meaningful tasks including discussions, and 4) explicit vocabulary teaching. This particular professional development with teachers, supported by CFLICs, led to significantly higher reading achievement for students across four of the five campuses on mandatory state assessments (Stevens, 2006).

Further, Bean, Draper, Hall, Vandermolen, and Zigmond, (2010) investigated the extent to which CFLICs focused on professional development and mentoring teachers to impact student performance. This qualitative study evaluated 20 reading coaches, the time they spent with teachers, the activities in which they engaged on a continuous basis and the types of planning and organizing that took place. Bean et al. (2010) concluded that for coaches to have a significant impact on teachers and student achievement in reading, they must have expert knowledge about content, instructional practices, literacy acquisition, assessment and professional development. The Bean et al. study relates to the current study because it illustrates that when teacher learning is facilitated and

focused on student learning, student results improve. The referenced study revealed through teacher diaries that teachers value the relationships developed with literacy coaches. A paramount final point from the Bean et al. study is that CFLIC expertise, content knowledge and pedagogy are directly related to student performance (Bean et al., 2010). CFLICs who work with less skilled teachers were able to discuss and analyze instructional practices and develop more effective instruction.

Professional development on teaching methodology used in a constructivist social context (i.e. teachers learning from each other in collaborative sessions usually led by a CFLIC), helps teachers begin to understand how to connect theory and practice as well as to discuss the incorporation of these models of instruction into their classroom (Firestone, Mangin, Martinez, & Polovsky, 2005). Accordingly, professional development provided through a CFLIC may be useful in order to change teacher classroom practice and enhance student achievement (Cohen & Hill, 1998; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Konstanopolus & Chung, 2011), but also, a skilled coach working one-on-one with an experienced teacher, providing timely feedback on instructional practices may be useful in changing classroom practices (Bean et al., 2010).

It makes sense that extended longer term coherent professional development that includes content and teaching methods and aided by a CFLIC support may increase the chance of effective classroom implementation of learned practices (Firestone et al., 2005; Joyce & Showers, 2002). Sailors and Price (2010) used a Vygotskian perspective when they posited that teachers must not only be motivated to voluntarily participate in professional development, accompanied with levels of support, they must also be provided support which comes “in the context of their practice and must be monitored by a knowledgeable other,” followed by opportunities to “reflect on their practice” and “engage in conversations and discussions as they improve their practice” (p. 303). One-

on-one professional development from a CFLIC could provide new information for new and veteran teachers to improve outcomes for students. The Sailors and Price study (2010) explored instructional improvement through classroom-based coaching (also known as content-focused literacy instructional coaching, CFLIC) to learn which coaching aspects were related to increased student academic achievement. The three central and south Texas urban school districts in the study served highly impoverished, minority students. Randomly selected teachers from 14 elementary schools received the service of a CFLIC to improve academic achievement in reading. Students were taught to use cognitive reading strategies. The results indicated that students in the coach-assisted treatment group made statistically significant gains in reading.

Guskey and Yoon (2009) concur with the Bean, Draper, Hall, Vandermolten, and Zigmond, (2010) results, suggesting 30 hours of professional development at the beginning of the year followed by continued classroom support for teachers (Guskey & Yoon, 2009). Their idea, matching that of Matsumura (2010), is that coaching must be well-established, intensive for teachers and occur prior to instruction. They, along with Allensworth et al. (2009), believe CFLICs deepen the skills of teachers, but for the most impactful learning, coaching should be continual and incorporate new teachers into the existing professional development structures.

It is not surprising, then, that recently content-focused literacy instructional coaching has emerged as a popular strategy in district-based professional learning (Gamse, Jacob, Horst, Boulay & Unlu, 2008; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Marsh et al., 2008; Matsumura, Garnier & Resnick, 2010), and is considered to have “an impact on teacher efficacy. . . and improved practices” (Sailor & Price, 2010, p. 303). Sailors and Price (2010) added to this concept when they conducted a study in three urban districts in Texas. They used two models of professional development to teach teachers how to

assist students in engaging in cognitive strategy routines. The study focused on determining the influence of teacher learning on student achievement in reading. Both groups participated in a two-day workshop; however, the second group received support from a CFLIC. Forty-four teachers with varying levels of experience participated in the study. The results revealed that student gains in reading were based upon repeated opportunities to engage in the cognitive routines that teachers learned during the course of the professional development with in-class coach support. Although it was an exploratory study, the results align with the idea that “coaching may be a viable model of professional development for classroom reading teachers” (p. 317) and a way to improve minority student outcomes. It is no wonder that many urban school districts have begun to lean on this type of professional development for teachers to improve student achievement in reading.

#### An Investment in Teacher Effectiveness

“If you show us the most innovative plans to improve teacher quality and student achievement, we’ll show you the money.”

*President Barak Obama statement  
State of the Union Address, 2011*

Researchers have suggested solutions to the problem of poor student achievement, one of which is the campus leader (Fullan, 2003; Hallenger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). Through a meta-analysis, Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) make the case for the principal as most important in affecting student achievement. However, despite the research and advice from a myriad of authorities on school leadership, the teacher is still the person who must figure out how to maneuver classroom instruction so students receive the greatest benefit from the instruction (Konstantopoulos & Chung, 2011; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005).

Designed to close the achievement gap for low-achieving, poor students, NCLB (2001) focuses on teacher effectiveness because it is believed that highly-qualified teachers can improve student achievement. NCLB begins with putting a highly qualified teacher in every classroom with the idea that a certified teacher is an effective teacher. There is evidence, however, that “teachers are often licensed without acquiring content knowledge of language and reading development” (Moats & Foorman, 2003, p. 37). Moats and Foorman (2003) provide several examples of certified teachers with limited effectiveness in the classroom. One example from their study was teachers teaching students “to blend words letter by letter instead of sound by sound” (p. 37) which affects reading, spelling and writing. This is important information for the current study when considering the dismal scores of impoverished, urban minority students and the effectiveness of their teachers.

Goe and Stickler (2008) found that teacher effectiveness is not only measured by certification and credentials. They established the idea that while effectiveness can be measured by qualifications (credentials), there are three additional measures to be considered when measuring teacher effectiveness: characteristics (attitudes), classroom practices (teacher behaviors) and productivity (student learning). Their research demonstrates that all of these affect student achievement (Goe & Stickler, 2008). For the purposes of the current study, the term teacher effectiveness is used in the context of classroom practice and productivity, that is, how teachers provide quality instruction based on professional development experiences and increased student achievement.

One reason to move away from certification only as a measure of teacher effectiveness comes from Fisher and Frey (2007) who acknowledge that there are “exceptional and highly skilled teachers at every school, we are less sure about what it takes to ensure that all teachers have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary

to ensure that their students develop increasingly sophisticated understandings of literacy” (p. 32). In the Moats and Foorman study (2003), teacher content and pedagogical knowledge improved through explicit teaching during coursework and professional development sessions accompanied with job-embedded practice and teaching experience.

Changing teacher instructional practice is not easy, but it is necessary as evidenced by declining standardized test scores of African American and Hispanic students on the NAEP measure (2004-2011). Poor, urban minority students may often have a team of new inexperienced teachers who lack sufficient teaching skills, who are ineffective in the classroom, and who are ineffective in increasing the academic achievement of minority youth (Ferguson, 1998; Krei, 1998; Langford, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2002; Matsumura, Garnier, Correnti, Junker & Bickel, 2010; Thompson & Smith, 2005). Ferguson (1998) further explains that schools in high poverty areas with high numbers of minority children have teachers who are learning the craft of teaching, and afterward, leave to more affluent areas. Thus, minority students in high poverty schools have teachers with little to no experience in teaching or who have experience but are struggling in the profession (Donaldson & Johnson, 2010; Ferguson, 1998; Krei, 1998). In 1995, Darling-Hammond pinpointed recruitment and retention of effective teachers for urban minority children as a problem, and it remains a problem (Donaldson & Johnson, 2010). These researchers, decades apart, agree that “attracting and retaining good teachers for low-income children” is important in closing the gap between poverty and low achievement (Donaldson & Johnson, 2010, p. 320).

Goe (2008) in a meta-analysis of teacher quality studies found that teacher experience as well as pedagogical and content knowledge positively impact instruction and student achievement. Implementation of the core standards using content knowledge

requires reading professionals who are well-trained; not just general teachers assigned to teach reading classes (Ferguson, 2003; Fiester & Smith, 2010; Konstantopoulos, 2009; Scott & Teale, 2009; Thompson & Smith, 2005). Effective teachers can help students read on-grade level and prepare them to be college and career-ready students. Konstantopoulos and Chung (2011) feel strongly that “examining teacher effectiveness in high-minority schools is a timely task” (p. 74).

Student achievement in elementary grade levels is significantly cumulative and only effective teachers can increase it (Konstantopoulos, 2009; Konstantopoulos & Chung, 2011). Further, effective teachers understand how to implement reading strategies in the classrooms and “make expert decisions based on data” (Fisher & Frey, 2007, p. 32). They have pedagogical understanding of the instructional needs of students and extensive content knowledge in reading. It makes sense that effective teachers can enhance student achievement (City et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2010).

As teachers learn new techniques and gain teaching experience, they become more effective. Actions they take in the classroom should change, consequently affecting student achievement (Konstantopoulos & Chung, 2011; Palardy & Rumberger, 2008; Steiner & Kowal, 2007). Teacher effectiveness plays an important role when assessing student achievement, particular that of poor, minority students (Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004), and it is key when examining student achievement, particularly that of poor, minority students (Nye, Konstantopoulos & Hedges, 2004). It is paramount that high poverty, minority students have access to effective teachers because it is “crucial for improving equality of educational opportunity” (Konstantopoulos & Chung, 2011, p. 85).

Knight (2006) found that teachers who participated in sustained professional development, supported by a CFLIC early in the school year increase effectiveness and that teachers were more likely to implement new teaching practices (Knight, 2006).

CFLICs assist and scaffold teacher growth in knowledge, skill and practice (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Knight, 2006; Neufeld & Roper, 2004). Bean et al. (2010) found that coaches were student-focused with the intent to change teacher actions in the classroom. Additionally, the CFLICs assisted teachers with analyzing assessment results, so they could deliver the instruction needed to improve student performance, and create appropriate classroom activities to make the classroom instruction more beneficial for students. These measures improved student learning and resulted in significant increases in reading proficiency among students who were not on grade level. To improve teacher effectiveness in terms of pedagogy and skill, teachers needed clear understanding of expected outcomes (Bean et al., 2010). Only teachers and teaching can change student achievement based upon their practice; what they actually do with children in the classroom (Nye, Konstantopoulos & Hedges, 2004; Shacter & Thum 2004).

Teaching effectiveness often depends on what teachers are asked to learn during professional learning situations, how well they assimilate the content, and opportunities for them to grow through classroom experience, practicing new techniques and behaviors in the classroom (City et al., 2010; Marzano, Frontier & Livingston, 2011). In essence, “teachers must have the motivation, belief and skills to apply the professional development to classroom teaching” (Yoon et al., 2007, p. 4).

In the Nye, Konstantopoulos and Hedges teacher effectiveness study (2004), teachers and students were randomly assigned to classrooms. A range of schools were included in the study, large urban districts and small rural ones. Controls were used for variables, such as, economic backgrounds, ethnicity, and age to make equivalent classrooms. Differences in student achievement were attributed to teacher effectiveness, because treatment classrooms were summarily similar. Two variables that were

considered to be related to student achievement were teacher education (i.e. graduate and advanced degrees or not) and teacher experience (i.e. the number of years of classroom teaching). The important finding in this study was “that interventions to improve the effectiveness of teachers ... might be promising strategies for improving student achievement” (p. 253). Additionally, “in low SES schools, it matters more which teacher a child receives than it does in high SES schools” (p. 254).

Finally, to improve teacher quality, some universities offer school and university partnerships designed to provide content knowledge and pedagogy supported by a university professor who acts in the capacity of an instructional coach (O’Ferrall & Johnson, 2010). In two studies, O’Ferrall and Johnson (2010) and Klinger, Ahwee, van Garderen, and Hernandez (2004), teachers received long term professional development with the support of a university research professor to improve their effectiveness. Sometimes the university professor co-taught the class followed by consultation “for feedback and clarification about content and pedagogy” (O’Ferrall & Johnson, 2010, p. 58) or “identifying and prioritizing needs” (Klinger et al, 2004, p. 102) of the teachers to improve teaching quality and to meet the instructional needs of students. Both school districts involved in the partnership studies served impoverished, urban, minority students. One study was completed in a metropolitan southeastern school district where 91% of students were minority and more than 80% of students qualified for the free and reduced lunch program (O’Ferrall & Johnson, 2010). The other study was completed in an urban district where 98% of students were minority and at least 50% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch (Klinger, Ahwee, van Garderen Hernandez, 2004).

Results for both studies demonstrated that teachers gained a higher level of proficiency in applying research-based practices. The O’Ferrall and Johnson study (2010) offered teachers opportunities to “collaborate for improved teaching and learning.

Second, it provided a public forum for administrators and teachers from other schools to come and study the success” in improving teacher quality and classroom effectiveness (O’Ferrall & Johnson, 2010, p. 59). The result of both partnership studies was “changes and improvement in individual practice” of teachers (O’Ferrall & Johnson, 2010, p. 60). The Klinger et al. study (2004) found that added support for teachers and the strong research component helped teachers provide better quality instruction, making them more effective in improving student outcomes.

Turning attention to teacher quality and classroom effectiveness of in-training teachers is important, because they often work in urban areas with poor, minority students (Ferguson, 1998; 2003). In a study by Walsh, Glaser and Wilcox (2006), seventy-two university schools of education which taught 223 required reading courses to future reading teachers were evaluated using course syllabi to see how higher education is responding to the need for teacher quality. Surprisingly, only 15% of these courses provided future teachers exposure to reading science content and research-based practices needed to help children become successful readers. In fact, the strategies taught at the university level would help only 40% of children be proficient readers by fourth grade (Walsh, Glaser & Wilcox, 2006).

#### Literature Review Summary

Current assessment results reflect that urban children who live in poverty are not faring well on standardized reading tests. In fact, a large majority of fourth grade children are below basic proficiency for their grade level. Third and fourth grades are the critical grade levels when the learning focus changes from learning to read to reading to learn (Fiester & Smith, 2010). Unfortunately, many urban minority children living in poverty continue to exhibit reading failure as they progress through school. Researchers have given a lot of attention to the perceived causes for this reading failure. Recent research

and intervention to increase academic achievement in reading seems to point towards teacher professional development as one possible solution to this problem. High quality professional development models seem to offer support for teachers to improve their classroom practice to positively affect academic performance.

The findings of the above referenced studies are important when considering the plight of impoverished, urban minority children. Although teacher effectiveness “can be determined only after the teacher has had an opportunity to impact his or her students’ learning” (Goe & Stickler, 2008, p. 9), teacher quality is important and has a positive relationship with student achievement (Bean et al., 2010; Biancarosa et al., 2008; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Ferguson, 1998; Ferguson, 2003; Goe & Stickler, 2008; Kadlick & Lasiak, 2003; Konstantopoulos & Chung, 2011; Marsh et al., 2008; Nye, Konstantopoulos & Hedges, 2004; Otaiba et al., 2008; Sailors & Price, 2010; Yoon et al., 2007). While Goe and Stickler (2008) feel there are other more important outcomes of teaching than student achievement, for poor African American and Hispanic students, there is no more important outcome. The positive impact that teacher effectiveness can have on student achievement will have a lasting effect on a student’s school career and possibly success in life, because the student has gained an important life skill—reading.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

Qualitative research methods, particularly phenomenology, best served this study because it provided a framework to describe the experiences of several teachers' lived experiences to produce a "universal essence" (Creswell, 2007, p. 236). A phenomenological pedagogical observational approach allowed the opportunity for reflection from the nature of lived experience and was chosen to guide the design of this study (Van Manen, 1979; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). According to the phenomenologist Van Manen (2007),

Phenomenology is a project of sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence, in the sense that reflecting on experience must be thoughtful, and as much as possible, free from theoretical, prejudicial and suppositional intoxications . . . that is driven . . . with meaning. (p. 11)

Van Manen (1990, 2007) expanded Husserl's view of hermeneutic phenomenology (a description of human life through lived experience) and grounded the lifeworld from where it emerged (Barnacle, 2004; Creswell, 2007; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007; Van Manen, 1990). His point of view on phenomenological research was that

phenomenology operates in the space of the formative relations . . . these formative relations have pedagogical consequence for professional and everyday practical life . . . Phenomenological reflection . . . can contribute to the formative dimensions of a phenomenology of practice. (2007, p. 26)

"Phenomenology of practice is practice in everyday living" (Van Manen, 2007, p. 12). Creswell (2007) points out that, "Van Manen does not approach phenomenology with a set of rules or methods" (p. 59), and Barnacle (2004) says, "Van Manen's human science approach is descriptive; it describes lived, or existential, meanings, as meanings that occur in the immediacy of everyday life" (p. 59).

Additionally, this method of data collection included pedagogy which was “cemented deeply in the nature of the relationship between adults and children” (Van Manen, 1983, p. 285), because pedagogy is “the most profound relationship that an adult can have with a child” (p. 290). Van Manen (1979) posits that, “A pedagogue demonstrates his or her practical competence in the manner by which he or she can structure a situation into an educational situation” (p. 2). This theory of observation, the lived experience model, draws on collecting data and reflection by the researcher who has lived the experience, “becoming full of the world, full of lived experiences” (van Manen, 1990, p. 32). This theoretical perspective provided an opportunity for me to reflect on my own experience while interacting, talking, and listening to teachers about their attitudes and perceptions about professional development and their classroom instructional behaviors. Further, I observed them as they engaged in discussion during the focus group session. “This usually happens when . . . the class has been dismissed; then the pedagogic life of . . . teachers finds reprieve” (Van Manen, 1982, p. 294). On these occasions, when children are not present, adults talk about students, another adult form of pedagogic theorizing (Van Manen, 1982).

Those who have experienced the phenomenon being observed, according to Van Manen (1979), have three ways to engage in pedagogic observation of a phenomenon: 1) the outside observer (a passerby) of the phenomenon with no background knowledge or relationship to what is being observed, 2) the inside observer who has knowledge and a relationship with the phenomenon, and 3) the scientific observer who has responsibility with the phenomenon. Each of these points of view engages in the pedagogic observation in a different manner. For the purposes of this study, I engaged in observation from the second and third points of view. I was an insider as an educator with some knowledge of the phenomenon, but without a relationship to

those being observed and I was an observer with particular responsibility to the current study. This methodological framework guided data collection for this study.

### Context of the Study

The public school district in this study was a large urban district, located in the southwestern part of the United States. The setting for this study was appropriate because there were a large number of schools (140 out of 152) in the district serving high-poverty, minority students. Typically, students in large urban areas have lower scores than urban-area non-poverty, non-minority students (Children's Defense Fund, 2012). In this district, student enrollment topped 156,000. Ninety-three percent of these students participated in the free and reduced lunch program indicating parent income levels below the national poverty threshold at \$23,050 for a family of four (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). The ethnic breakdown for the district's student population was 70% Hispanic, 24% African American and six percent White and other. There were slightly more males (51%) in the district than females (49%).

The composition of the district's fourth grade cohort matched this trend. At fourth grade, there were slightly less than 12,600 students (TEA, 2012). Almost 6,500 students of the district's fourth grade students were English Language Learners (ELL) with about 90% participating in the bilingual and English as a Second Language programs. Ten percent of students had parent denials meaning parents opted for an English only curriculum. About 15% of the district's fourth grades students were considered exceptionally talented and gifted and less than 10% were receiving special education services: matching state averages (TEA, 2012).

Of the more than 10,000 teachers in the district, 38% were African American, 27% Hispanic and about 35% were White. Most of the district's teachers were female (70%) with the majority having at least three years teaching experience. Neither of these

averages matched the ethnic composition nor the gender distribution of the district's composition of the student population.

#### Data Needs

Baxter and Jack (2008) refer to each piece of data in a study as “one piece of the puzzle, with each piece contributing to the researcher’s understanding of the whole phenomenon . . . various strands of data are braided together” (p. 554). Data was needed about fourth grade teachers of impoverished, minority students who demonstrated on-grade level performance or remarkable progress for the year. First, these teachers’ attitudes and perceptions of the sustained professional development sessions they experienced and the impact they believe it had on their classroom actions and instructional behaviors were needed. Additionally, data was needed on how teacher attitudes and perceptions and instructional behaviors changed as a result of the sustained professional development experience.

#### Data Sources

Experienced fourth grade teachers of high poverty, minority students self-reported the results of their standardized reading test score achievement data. Teachers who reported significant gains in reading test scores of minority students, served as data sources. These teachers were responsible for the Reading Language Arts course of study for their students. Fourth grade teachers were chosen, because the NAEP assessment begins at fourth grade. Additionally, third and fourth grades mark a change in reading instruction. Young children in grades prekindergarten to third grade are learning to read; however, at the end of third grade children begin using the skill of reading more to learn new information. Moreover, Juel (1988) found that children who are not on grade level in first grade will be highly unlikely to be on grade level at fourth grade. Additionally,

at third and fourth grades, teachers turn their instructional focus away from learning to read (i.e. phonics instruction) to reading improvement (i.e. comprehension skills).

To be selected, teachers needed to report having a majority of students in their classroom who: 1) met the passing standard on STAAR, and 2) possessed double-digit gains from beginning to ending scores, or began the study time period with below grade level performance and ended the study time period having achieved on-grade level performance or above, or 3) teachers who reported beginning the semester with a class that had low reading scores on the value-added growth model used by the district and ended the semester with high value-added scores. Student assessment data from the Spring 2012 STAAR assessment, as reported by fourth grade teachers, was used as the beginning score and Spring 2013 STAAR assessment was used as the ending score. These measures could show on-grade level performance or a remarkable increase in academic achievement in reading.

#### Data Collection

First, it was necessary to electronically submit a proposal to the school district's Research Review Board housed within the Department of Evaluation and Accountability for review and approval of the current study. To be approved, the study had to offer educational value to the district, not just add to the educational research base. After the first month of waiting for the approval, I made contact with the Evaluation department. The process had been delayed by more pressing activities, but I learned that the Informed Consent Document needed to include some district specific statements, for example, "While the district has approved this research, the district is not involved in conducting the research." Additionally, I needed the campus principal's permission to conduct research with teachers on the campus. The Principal Permission form was an important addendum item that might have been overlooked had I not contacted the

Evaluation department. At the end of the second month after submission, approval arrived by email. The process of securing the school district permissions through the prescribed processes was long; however, it was understandable that in a mega-sized urban district, the many research proposals received were not the priority – educating children was.

After receiving the school district permission to conduct research, I met with a representative from the University of Texas at Arlington Institutional Review Board (IRB). This meeting was beneficial because I learned more about the approval process and was able to revise the needed forms prior to IRB submission. Email and phone scripts to be used with potential participants needed to be created. Revision included changing the language to move from a pencil and paper informed consent document to an electronic one and creating two informed consent documents instead of one. The first informed consent was for Phase 1 of data collection – the online questionnaire and the second was for Phase 2 – the Focus Group Interview. I learned that it was permissible to use the Interview consent for Phase 3 – the follow-up individual interactive contact. Of course, I included the school district's approval as required. The process for IRB approval lasted only a few weeks (see Appendix A, p. 126).

While I was waiting for IRB approval, I selected a date and location for the Focus Group session. The date was in September after school had been in session for about one month so the previous year's experiences were still fresh in the teachers' memories. Selection of a location was important because the venue needed to be centrally located, offer privacy for the teachers (not at a school) and be conducive to a digital audio recording. Privacy and comfort were important to me so participants would feel secure enough to provide candid comments in a relaxed atmosphere.

To achieve the goals of this study, I led three phases of data collection. Phase 1 consisted of a brief, open-ended questionnaire to capture attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of 4th grade teachers. Phase 2 of data collection centered on a Focus Group Interview, featuring an opportunity to dialogue about teacher attitudes and perceptions of sustained professional development experiences and any changes in classroom actions and instructional behaviors as a result (Krueger, 2002). These teachers self-reported having successfully improved the academic performance in reading of high poverty, minority students. Phase 3 of the data collection was an individual interaction to clarify, comment and reflect on responses from the Focus Group Interview session.

#### *Phase 1 - Questionnaire*

Even though there were 152 campuses in the district, the survey was only sent to the 140 principals who had high populations of impoverished minority students (Hispanic and African American). Upon receiving the university approval, a consent letter was emailed to 140 principals. The email provided information about the study and requested that the principal of each campus: 1) give authorization for the study to be conducted with his or her teachers, and 2) forward the electronic questionnaire link to the previous year's fourth grade reading teachers. The questionnaire link that was to be sent to teachers informed them about the study, obtained consent for their voluntary participation in the study, invited them to provide information through a brief online questionnaire, and offered an opportunity to participate in the Focus Group Interview.

Of the 140 principals receiving the authorization email, eleven provided immediate authorization and received the teacher link, two asked for further clarification about the study, and one indicated that district resources should not be used to inform teachers about an external study. Consequently, the district entity providing permission revoked using principal communication with teachers as a vehicle to solicit teacher

participation. The district's research department then required that teacher communication pass through the district's legal department with an Open Records Request. During the waiting period between submitting the request and receiving teacher contact information, I submitted a modification to the original IRB proposal to contact teachers directly and was quickly granted permission to continue the data collection process. Two weeks later, I received a CD rom with email addresses for all teachers in the district who were certified to teach fourth grade. It was then necessary to sift through 3,235 teachers with certification to locate approximately 140 fourth grade reading teachers (basically, one or two per elementary campus) and to identify the 2012-2013 fourth grade teachers who fit the profile for this study. Initially, 11 teachers completed the nine-question online questionnaire. Within a week of emailing teachers, over 30 teachers had responded to the survey and after the second reminder, 52 teachers had responded.

The first section of the questionnaire was designed to capture teacher background information, for example, gender, age and teaching experience. This section was followed by an opportunity for teachers to self-report individual Classroom Effectiveness Index (CEI) scores. CEIs are computed by the district using pre- and post-normed state criterion referenced assessments in reading (Weerasinghe, 2008). CEIs use a value-added gain model while controlling for variables such as: gender, family income, language proficiency and continuous enrollment. Yearly, each teacher receives a CEI score based on student growth for the academic year. At fourth grade, a teacher's CEI score includes the results of the state exam. Because this document is evaluative, highly confidential, and not publically available, the only way to obtain the information was to allow teachers to self-report.

The third section of the questionnaire was designed with two open-ended, non-leading questions designed to capture current professional learning experiences and the

nature of any follow-up support received. The questionnaire concluded with an opportunity for teachers to voluntarily participate in Phase 2 of the study. Teachers who expressed a desire to continue submitted their contact information through the online questionnaire.

The intended number of respondents for the questionnaire was at least 140 fourth grade teachers from 2012-2013; however, 51 teachers responded to the survey. This is a reasonable amount of responses if one considers attrition from one campus to another, teachers leaving the district, and retirement. These factors may have accounted for a large percentage of non-respondents. Five of the responding teachers were purposefully selected from the responding group based upon their replies to the online questionnaire.

#### *Phase 2 – Focus Group Interview*

In Phase 2, the purposefully selected teacher group was chosen based on the following criteria: 1) their willingness to participate, 2) meeting the survey criteria of having a majority of minority students who made remarkable gains in reading achievement (i.e. meeting the passing standard on STAAR, receiving scores indicating double-digit gains from beginning to ending scores, high levels on the CEI growth score), and 3) the previous year's professional development experiences (e.g. receiving the service of a CFLIC), and 4) their perceived ability to contribute to the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2007). The five exceptional teachers selected were invited electronically to participate in Focus Group Interview (Krueger, 2002, 1998). The Informed Consent Document with a summary of the Focus Group Interview was attached to the electronic invitation. Those who did not respond to the electronic invitation received a follow-up phone call inviting them to participate.

The focus group was held in the conference room at a centrally located faith-based site. The interview was recorded with a digital audio device and written notes were completed as a back-up to the recording (Creswell, 2007; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). As the participants arrived, I greeted them and invited them to partake of the refreshments. After everyone was seated, we re-introduced ourselves and I talked about the Informed Consent Document and provided them with a hard copy. We talked about the procedures for the Focus Group session. The snacks, the short introduction (including a review of the IRB Consent Form) and the brief conversation seemed to aid in creating a relaxed environment for participants. The interview discussion began using the Krueger (1998, 2002) protocol and a core set of questions. As the moderator for the session, I paid careful attention to the participants, encouraging even the most reluctant, hesitant participants to share their experiences without permitting one person to dominate the group. Two very broad open-ended questions from Vygotsky's lens of social interaction, for example, "What reading classroom teaching actions are essential for student success?" and "What do you do in your classroom that contributes to student success?" opened the discussion. A short series of questions followed, allowing teachers to explain unique experiences, professional development, coaching assistance if any, and the classroom teaching actions and behaviors they felt influenced or changed student performance in reading. Subsequent questions focused on gaining an understanding of factors teachers felt pushed students toward high levels of academic achievement (See Appendix C, p. 140).

At the conclusion of the FGI, I expressed sincere gratitude for their participation and reminded them of Phase 3 of the data collection process, the individual interaction. Participants received \$20 per hour from the researcher's personal funds as compensation for their participation in the Focus Group part of the study. After the

interview, a verbatim transcription was produced from the digital audio recording and the written notes. The interview was used to cross check the questionnaire results and identify the instructional behaviors that provided increased student performances in reading.

### *Phase 3 – Individual Interaction*

The third phase of data collection, the Individual Interaction, provided an opportunity for me to clarify any confusion, to ask additional questions, and to allow the five teachers who participated in the interview an opportunity to engage in member checking of the verbatim transcript (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), to reflect on their responses from the interview, and comment on the data presented. My role in this phase was to take notes and to record insights as well as to question and clarify the data (Creswell, 2007). These data and clarification strategies enhanced the credibility of the study (Baxter & Jack, 2008), because the participants could inform me about their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; Van Manen, 1990).

During non-use periods and at the conclusion of the study, all data was locked in a file cabinet in the researcher's locked office. Personal identity of the participants was protected throughout the study and afterward by assigning pseudonyms to the participants. At the conclusion of the study, all data was stored in the secure offices of the UTA Educational Leadership and Policy Studies until it is to be destroyed.

### Data Analysis

Because the study was based in Van Manen's theory, a phenomenological pedagogy observational approach was used to analyze this study's data. Van Manen's theory of everyday lived experiences (1990) helped me to describe what teachers' professional development experiences were.

Vygotsky's Theory of Development and Cognition and Vygotskian Space Theory provided lenses through which to garner meaning and understanding. The teachers' experiences provided a context to apply Vygotsky's theories using the Van Manen perspective of examining lived experiences. An analysis of the data presented an in-depth picture of teacher actions, perceptions, attitudes and any changes that occurred in the learning environment as a result of professional learning experiences.

First, I chose what seemed to be the essential themes from the questionnaire responses. I reflected on the themes to characterize teacher experiences, attitudes and perceptions. Similar messages were grouped together and specific quotes were extracted to capture the essence of meaning from the various opinions of teachers about their professional learning experiences.

Then, I listened to the digital audio recording several times, a little at a time, and wrote verbatim what was on the recording to produce a verbatim written transcription document. I cross checked this document with notes that were taken during the focus group interview. Reading and rereading segments from the focus group interview discussion, I clustered experiences into themes and units of meaning. Teacher insights and specific quotes were included to capture their attitudes and perceptions as well as what they identified as important. Each statement was analyzed to identify specific terminology, including similarities and differences between their experiences. The themes I created provided a composite for the text descriptions of trends and patterns of experiences used to describe, create meaning, and generate understanding of the data collected in the focus group setting.

Phase 3 of the data collection provided an opportunity to examine the descriptions. It also provided an opportunity for the participants to reflect upon their own understandings and to identify meaning and significance from the experiences discussed.

Finally, written descriptions helped to provide crisp, vivid images so I could understand the experiences, attitudes and perceptions about professional learning and how these affected student achievement in reading in particular classrooms. The idea behind the analysis was to provide an opportunity to see and use the analysis in a manner that enriched my understanding of everyday life experiences of teachers and students in their classrooms.

#### Research Criteria

This study conforms to the high standards set for qualitative research. The standards for evaluating qualitative research have been established by some of the giants in the field (Creswell, 2007; Kline, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2008). Also included in this section are “some of the common characteristics of quality research” (Kline, 2008, p. 47). Credibility, trustworthiness, and dependability were chosen to establish this study as quality research, showing integrity and competence. Further, these evaluative elements demonstrate procedural and methodological rigor.

To provide credibility, trustworthiness and dependability through the analysis and results, there needs to be sufficient information provided about the participants and the setting to be able to replicate and confirm them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, the criteria for the purposeful selection of participants were clear and helped control for my bias and I diligently pursued voluntary participation from teachers who fit the criteria (Baxter & Jack, 2008). First, I looked at the self-reported teacher Classroom Effectiveness Index (CEI) for two years. This was important because focus group participants needed to demonstrate success in helping urban minority students become proficient readers. A green or blue score indicated that the majority of the teacher’s students had demonstrated at least a year’s growth in reading achievement. Next, I looked at years of experience. New teachers, those who were just completing their first

year teaching 4<sup>th</sup> grade, were eliminated from the selection process. Then, school locations were considered because the teachers selected needed to be in a school with large minority populations and have a large number of students receiving free or reduced lunch, indicating parent income level. This process yielded five teachers who would become the focus group participants. After being selected, I emailed and called them to explain further about the study and to encourage their voluntary attendance at the Focus Group Interview session.

This research study demonstrated procedural rigor and competence, so there would be no question about integrity or ethical procedures (Kline, 2008). The rigor of the study was evident because data was collected from a variety of sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Data collection included an online questionnaire, a Focus Group Interview and a follow-up Individual Interaction. Teachers were invited to continue to add to the data as they remembered additional experiences. Focus group participants received a verbatim copy of the verbatim transcription and a copy of the findings so they could reflect on their responses and add to the data or clarify it.

### *Credibility*

Credibility is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is the accuracy with which participants are described (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, credibility was established through the use of various data sources, an online survey for all 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers in the district, a Focus Group Interview with five successful teachers, and follow-up individual interactions which provided a holistic understanding of the phenomenon rather than analyzing each data source individually (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The data pieces in this research (the teacher questionnaire, the focus group interview responses and the individual interaction) were from the participants' perspective and contributed to my understanding of the

phenomena, lessening the interference of my bias based upon my lived experiences. The teacher online questionnaire from Phase 1 of data collection was used to obtain background information and to select participants for the focus group. The Focus Group Interview session from Phase 2 of data collection contained open-ended questions aimed at eliciting data about teacher attitudes and perceptions of professional learning experiences and the influences these learning experiences had on their classroom actions which they believed helped their students attain academic success in reading. The individual interactions completed in Phase 3 of data collection confirmed teacher responses obtained during Phase 1 and Phase 2 of data collection, provided an opportunity for them to discuss their professional learning experiences, and offered an opportunity to reflect on the changes in their teaching as a result of their professional learning.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that it is the researcher's responsibility to provide a rich, thick description and sufficient information about the phenomenon, the context, the participants, and the data collection methods for replicability of the study. This research study followed rigorous qualitative procedural guidelines as outlined for a qualitative phenomenological study in order to provide opportunities for replicability without question in regard to integrity or ethical procedures (Kline, 2008; Patton, 2002). Sufficient information about the participants and the setting has been provided to replicate and to confirm the results of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

#### *Trustworthiness*

Trustworthiness increases the believability of the researcher's conclusions (Maxwell, 2008). One of the strongest threats to trustworthiness is researcher bias (Maxwell, 2008). Data triangulation provided trustworthiness and methodological rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study's triangulation procedures included using: 1) an

online teacher questionnaire, 2) a focus group interview, and 3) follow-up individual interactions, to provide validity for this study and served to limit the influence of my theories, lived experiences, preconceptions or values (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest “member checking” (p. 264) as one form of validity. Verbatim transcripts and conclusions drawn from the interview responses were provided to the participants, via email, for them to review and reflect upon: 1) their responses to the interview questions, and 2) my conclusions drawn from their responses to ensure there are no misinterpretations in meaning of what was said during the focus group discussion. Additional follow up interactions occurred through personal contacts to make corrections and to clarify responses on the verbatim transcription of the interview. Participants were encouraged to add to their responses as they remembered additional experiences and classroom actions which contributed to the success of their students. The results, based on teacher reflections, were corrected and meaning was clarified as teachers reflected and read my interpretations of their responses. These activities provided additional clarity and dependability of the analysis. It assured that I correctly interpreted the evidence provided.

#### *Dependability*

Dependability is the ability to achieve the same results using the same methods in the same context (Shenton, 2003). To provide dependability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest “overlapping” data sources. This study used the Focus Group Interview to confirm responses of the voluntary online teacher questionnaire. The responses to the online questionnaire were confirmed and meanings were expanded in the interview. The individual interactions provided electronically and in person, served to clarify intended meanings of responses.

Another method of ensuring dependability was through the use of a peer debriefer. A peer debriefer is a knowledgeable peer who is familiar with the study, can provide feedback, and check the logic of the coding. In this case, my peer debriefer assisted with interpretation of the data after analysis had been completed, and ensured that the results were trustworthy (Given, 2008). This activity, typically completed to guard against researcher bias, served to add to the dependability of the study.

Further, the applicability of the findings from this study positively contributed to the field. The robust data collection and rich descriptions demonstrated that the data could be trusted (Kline, 2008).

#### Methodological Summary

This chapter provides a thorough description of the methodology used for the study. Beginning with some background information on data collection in a qualitative phenomenological study using lived experiences as a framework, the chapter contains a detailed description of the context, data needs and sources. The chapter concludes illuminating the three phases of data collection and consideration for research criteria. The next chapter will tell the story of teacher attitudes and perceptions of the influence of professional development on minority student achievement in reading.

## Chapter 4

### Presentation of the Data – Their Story

The data was collected in several slices. The first slice of data, in Phase 1, was collected through an online teacher questionnaire via Survey Monkey, an electronic medium for collecting and analyzing data. The online teacher questionnaire explored teacher backgrounds and professional learning experiences. All fourth grade reading teachers in the district were invited to complete the questionnaire. Many fourth grade teachers participated; however, so did two math teachers, three high school teachers and one Kindergarten – Second grade teacher. The second slice of the data, in Phase 2, came from the Focus Group Interview (FGI). The FGI included five teachers from the questionnaire respondents who were purposefully selected because they met the study criteria. The third slice of data, in Phase 3, was collected through an individual interaction. The individual interaction was an opportunity for the FGI participants to reflect on the interview responses and to add or change their responses. Participants were provided a verbatim transcription of the interview session which allowed them to participate in member checking. All slices, together, provided a robust picture of the lived experiences of the participants.

### Participant Demographics

A total of 52 teachers responded to the survey. Thirty-four survey respondents (80%) were female. The majority of the participants (37 or 57.6%) were over the age of 35; however, many teachers (13 or 42.3%) were in the 25-35 age range, as shown in Figure 4.1. Two teachers chose not to reveal their age.

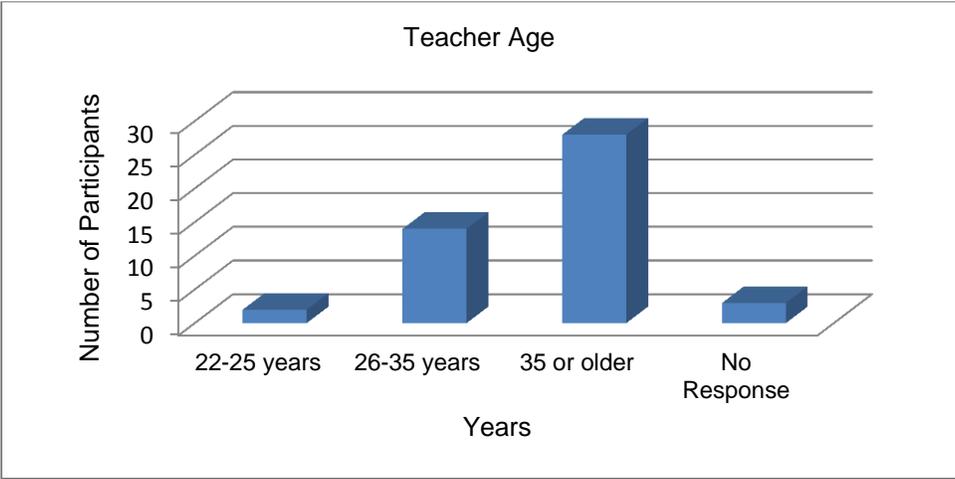


Figure 4.1: Teacher age. This figure illustrates the age of participants.

The majority of teachers (35 or 84%) responding to the survey had four to ten years teaching experience (See Figure 4.2); however, 26 teachers (64%) had less than three years teaching fourth grade (See Figure 4.4). As shown in Figure 4.3, most teachers (24 or 61%) had lower grade experience, Pre-Kindergarten to second grade.

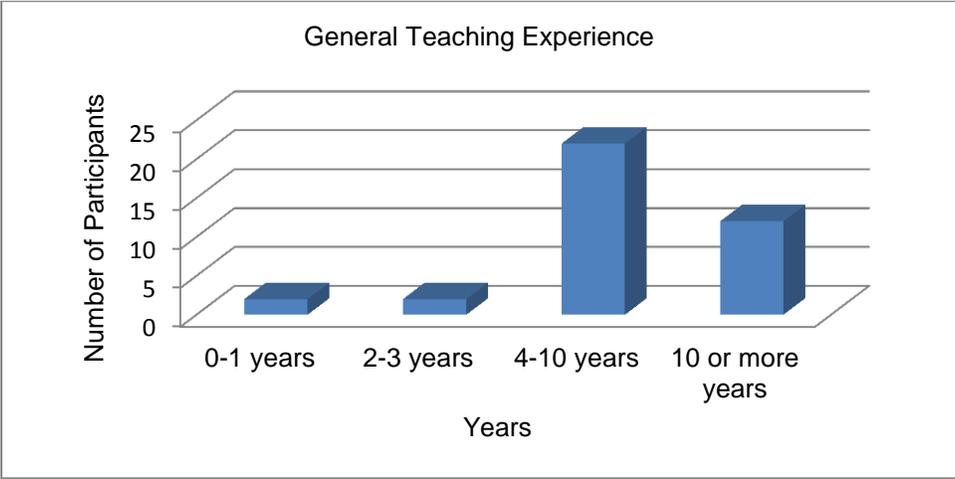


Figure 4.2: General teaching experience. This figure illustrates years of teaching experience of participants.

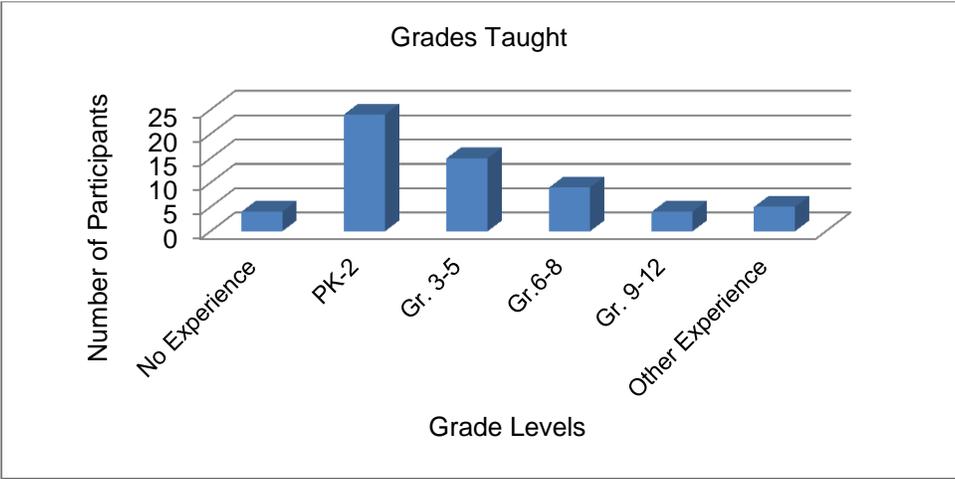


Figure 4.3: Grades taught. This figure illustrates previous grade levels taught by participants.

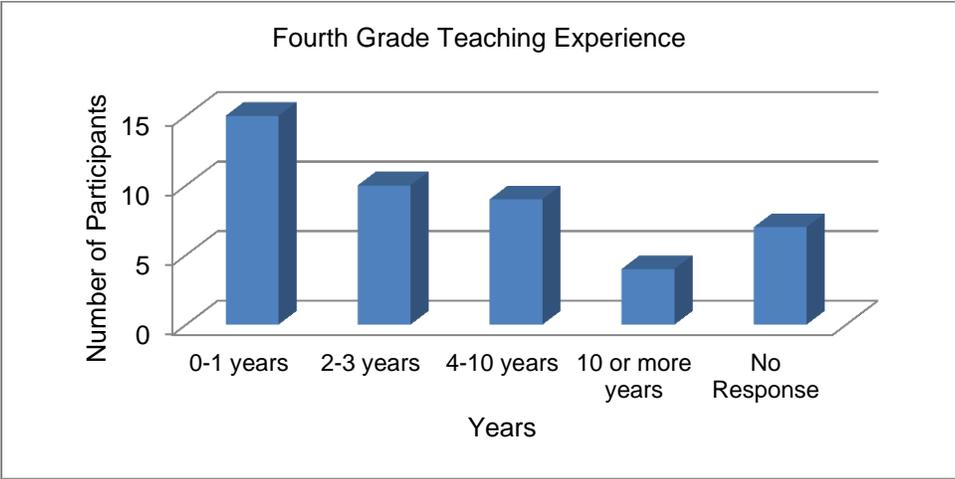


Figure 4.4: Fourth grade teaching experience. This figure illustrates years of fourth grade teaching experience of participants.

Participants' Student Growth

Respondents were offered an opportunity to self-report individual Classroom Effectiveness Index (CEI) scores. CEIs are computed using pre- and post- normed state criterion referenced assessments in reading (Weerasinghe, 2008). A green CEI, for example, indicates that the majority of the teacher's students achieved a year's growth in

reading. Seventeen (36%) of the teachers chose not to reveal their CEI score, effectively refusing to indicate the level of growth of their students; 11 teachers (36.7%) reported receiving green or blue CEIs which indicated positive growth in reading with the majority of their students for the 2011-12 school year. For the 2012-13 school year, 10 teachers (32%) received green or blue CEIs, which indicated positive growth in reading for their students. See Figure 4.5 for the 2011-12 and 2012-13 CEIs.

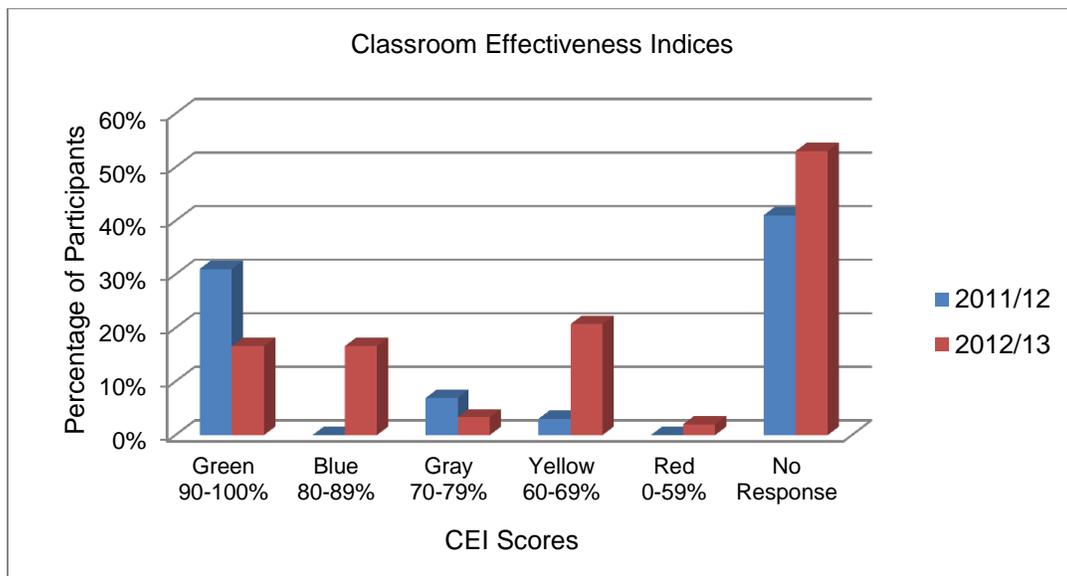


Figure 4.5: Classroom Effectiveness Indices (CEI) of teachers who completed the online questionnaire. CEIs indicate the number of students in a teacher’s class who made a year’s growth.

#### Participants’ Professional Learning and Support Experiences

The third section of the questionnaire was designed with two open-ended, non-leading questions designed to capture current professional learning experiences and the nature of any follow-up classroom support received. Various respondents indicated some type of professional development in writing instruction. This was expected since the STAAR test included writing a composition as a component of the 4th grade exam. One teacher wrote, “I went to a Writing Course during the summer, absolutely enlightening,

especially because it linked Writing to Reading to the max.” Others attended STAAR Writing Updates and Lucy Calkin’s Units of Study Workshop for writing.

Teachers also reported a number of professional learning experiences, including an assortment of reading growth opportunities. These learning experiences included the Academia de enseñanza de Español - Leer Más (Teaching Academy in Spanish – Reading More), university coursework in reading, and the Daily 5/Café Reading Instruction. These teachers’ experiences could be characterized by the quote, “The training helped to broaden [our] thinking about the concept of how to effectively expand reading performance and student thinking through essential questions.”

An additional category of professional learning had the intent of improving instruction through planning topics. This group of learning experiences included using student performance data to write Learning Objectives (LOs) and Demonstration of Learning (DOLs) objectives (a district requirement) and adjusting lesson plans to respond to students needing intervention. One quote captured the essence of this professional learning.

No official "outside" professional development so far this year. Professional development has centered around [District Name] mandates regarding LOs [Learning Objectives] and DOLs [Demonstrations of Learning]. Instructional support was geared toward the writing of the SEs [Student Expectations], LOs, and DOLs and not to the delivery of instruction.

Another category of professional learning focused on instructional delivery described by the quote, “. . . implementing a no excuse policy for poor instruction.” Based on the title and my past experience, the Response to Intervention training focused on leaving no child behind and providing instructional interventions so every child could be successful.

A final area of professional learning experience fell into the category of technology. This training was aimed at classroom technology integration to improve

student learning. According to one respondent, the workshop had “good information that I needed for students. It was not about teaching reading.” Finally, it should be noted, a few teachers (13) chose not to comment or respond about their professional learning experiences. Table 4.1 summarizes these data.

Table 4.1 – Teacher Professional Learning Experiences - 2012-2013

Topic	N
<b>Writing</b>	
ESC-Region 10 Workshop	3
STAAR Writing Update	2
University Course on Writing	2
Lucy Calkins Writing Workshop	2
Writer’s Workshop	2
<b>Reading</b>	
Academia de la Enseñanza through MLEP	6
Leer Más	2
University Coursework on Reading	2
Daily 5/Café Reading and Small Group Instruction	3
Balanced Reading	1
<b>Planning</b>	
LOs and DOLs	20
Lesson Planning	3
Mapping low objectives to develop lesson plans	1
<b>Instructional Delivery</b>	
Delivery based on student need	2
Response to Intervention	1
Book Study	1
<b>Technology</b>	
Classroom Technology Workshop	2
<b>Other</b>	
None	1
Not 4 <sup>th</sup> grade	2
Skipped	13

*Note.* N=52. In responses with more than one topic, each topic was categorized.

In addition to professional development, support for learning also came from the principal, fellow teachers or an instructional reading coach (CFLIC). While several

principals were credited with being “the well-trained instructional leader, providing teacher support,” some teachers also felt supported by their reading CFLIC illustrated by the following quote from a teacher respondent.

This school year, our school had the luxury of having an instructional reading coach and a reading specialist on site. These individuals served as a resource in reading and writing for PK-5 reading teachers. They worked collaboratively with the reading team to build and implement reading programs for individuals and groups of students. They served as advocates for students who struggled with reading.

In addition to CFLIC support, and without being mandated to do so, teacher colleagues supported each other. The following quote illustrates what appeared to be voluntary teacher collaboration.

Our campus has very dedicated teachers not only to their own classes, but they are always willing to help others who may not be in their grade level. I know I can always ask for support and will receive it in a way that does not undermine me as a professional. The instructional reading coach on our campus is very helpful and has great supportive ideas.

A second quote confirmed collegial support and further emphasized that teachers collaborated voluntarily, “I am getting support from my team member that has more experience than me.” Some teachers felt adequate support was provided, but did not comment on the nature of support received.

A few teachers did not receive a sufficient amount of support. One teacher reported: “two hours of support to implement Daily 5 instruction and that wasn’t enough.” Another teacher seemed to have become accustomed to support and no longer received it.

In previous years our reading coaches were a very necessary support resource to give us needed help for our struggling students. This year, most of the support was through instructional coaches who were, for the most part, unequipped to do the job. Most of them were ACs [Alternatively Certified Teachers] with very little experience but who were able to climb the ladder quickly.

Unfortunately, a number of teachers reported receiving no support. One stated: “I do not get support only more stuff to do or implement.” Another added: “Unfortunately, we had very little [support]. Non-important topics occupy too much time of the professional development sessions.” Yet another noted, “We did have an instructional team for the district that would attend meetings at our campus; however, any additional support for the classroom was not forthcoming,” One teacher who had a CFLIC on campus commented, “I hardly saw the coach or received support.” While there was variability in the levels of support, 16 teachers still declined to offer any insight.

Table 4.2 – Levels of Classroom Support

Level of Support	N
<b>Lots of Support</b>	
Principal provided support	2
Colleagues supported each other	6
Content-Focused Literacy Instructional Coach (CFLIC)	6
Reading Specialist – Campus based	2
<b>Adequate Support</b>	
“My support was adequate.”	3
<b>Some Support</b>	
Very little support	5
<b>No Support</b>	
“No one has provided support.”	2
“None.”	8
“I have received no support.”	2
<b>Other</b>	
Not offered	2
Skipped	16
“Very clear and adequate support for math.”	1
“I received science support.”	1

*Note.* N=52. In responses with more than one statement, each statement was categorized.

In sum, participant responses painted a picture through a multiplicity of lived experiences in this urban district, as shown in Table 4.2. Even teachers at grade levels other than fourth grade teachers felt the need to respond about their professional

experiences. An example is: "I am not a fourth grade teacher. I teach high school; however, my professional development has been on LOs and DOLs, but this does not help me improve reading."

#### Focus Group Interview Participants

Although there were a myriad of professional development experiences, the Focus Group Interview (FGI) allowed me to delve deeper into individual experiences and the influence of those experiences on poor, urban minority student performance and academic achievement in reading. Fourth grade teachers purposefully selected to participate in the FGI were chosen because their responses identified them as fitting the parameters of the study. To be selected, teachers needed to be the Language Arts - Reading teacher of record and report having a majority of students in the classroom who: 1) met the passing standard on STAAR assessment, and 2) possessed double-digit gains from beginning to ending scores, or began the study time period with below grade level performance and ended the study time period having achieved on-grade level performance or above, or 3) teachers who reported beginning the semester with a class that had low reading scores on the value-added growth model used by the district and ended the semester with high value-added scores. These measures could show on-grade level performance or a remarkable increase in academic achievement in reading.

There were 12 (24%) male teachers who participated in the study. The two male survey participants who supplied their contact information were in their first year of teaching fourth grade. Of the males completing the survey, none who fit the study criteria offered to participate. Consequently, all the FGI participants were female.

Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants. All participants work in schools with a high population of urban minority students who live in poverty. As shown in Table 4.3, all FGI participants were female, but they had varying

levels of teaching experience. Two of the teachers had more than 10 years' teaching experience, particularly at the fourth grade level. Two participants had between 4 and 10 years' teaching experience. One of these participants had 2-3 years' experience teaching fourth grade, and the other teacher had experience teaching at intermediate level (grades 3-5) and middle school (Grades 6-8). All participants reported having green CEIs which meant that the majority of their students made at least a year's growth in reading over the course of the school year. Two teachers were Hispanic, two were African American, and one was White. Four teachers taught only in English; one was bilingual (Spanish).

Table 4.3 – Focus Group Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age Range	Teaching Experience	4 <sup>th</sup> Grade Experience	Other Grade Level Experience	CEI	
						2011-12	2012-13
Darla	F	35+ years	10+ years	10+ years	PK-2	Green	Green
Claire	F	35+ years	10+ years	10+ years	3-5	Green	Green
Jenny	F	35+ years	10+ years	10+ years	PK-2; 3-5; 6-8; 9-12	Green	Green
Mari	F	25-35 years	4-10 years	4-10 years	PK-2	Green	Green
Tomei	F	35+ years	4-10 years	2-3 years	3-5 and 6-8	Green	Green

The FGI questions were aimed at capturing teacher attitudes and perceptions of professional development experiences and how these experiences influenced their teaching and impacted student learning. The results of the FGI is mostly reported in groups because the participants identified similar professional learning experiences which they felt influenced their classroom teaching and impacted the academic performance of their students. Each section below captured and conveyed teachers' experiences using their words.

### *Building Capacity and Influencing Teaching*

Different experiences helped these teachers build capacity to positively influence their teaching. Overwhelmingly, the one experience which most influenced professional learning, built capacity and influenced teaching actions was collaboration. Every FGI participant reported having varying levels of interaction with colleagues inside and outside their school. These collaborative interactions occurred with district and campus-based CFLICs, administrators – particularly principals, teachers on their campus or not on their campus, and relatives who were also teachers. Unanimously, they identified collaboration as the single most important factor which helped them to grow as teachers; influencing their teaching, instructional practices, content and subject area knowledge, and classroom interactions with students. Collaborative sessions happened throughout the day, after school and on Saturday in the form of observation and feedback, question and answer conversations, discussion of student work and classroom artifacts, analysis of common assessments, discussions about appropriate texts, and conversations about what worked or did not work in the classroom.

Claire, one of the quiet participants with over ten years teaching experience, started the conversation during the focus group session by explaining that her daily interaction with colleagues allowed her to ask questions about procedures, ask for suggestions and get feedback about her classroom activities. She believed that “collaboration with other teachers in the building over the years” had been essential in influencing her practice. She explained, “You can ask for suggestions or go observe somebody’s classroom to see what they are doing, even if it is about teaching the basic skills in reading.” She further explained that she could not work without her peers: “I need a lot of collaboration with the peers I work with.”

Darla, a talkative well-seasoned teacher, visited with her colleagues during and after school. They liked to talk about student work to see which elements of classroom practice proved to be effective and to “discuss different types of stories so we are sure to include appropriate literature that fits our students.” She believed strongly that children had to see themselves in the stories to indeed connect with the characters, setting, or plot. Darla liked to “share the artifacts she collects after reading a story. That is really good for me. We have to depend on each other.”

Mari, the youngest teacher who was the most pensive before she commented, admitted that she “needs teacher collaboration.” She remembered her experience of going to observe a colleague last year at another school. She described her experience,

The moment I stepped into .... Elementary School, I took out my spiral to record the routines, what the teacher was doing, what the teacher was saying and what the students were doing. Afterward I had questions for her to learn why she was doing what she was doing. It cleared a lot of things up for me.

This year, Mari changed groups in 4th grade and she voluntarily “follows the lead teacher.” She did that because she wanted to know, “what that teacher is doing, how is she doing it, and what the teacher thinks of the plan I made.” Mari fervently believed that “It takes a lot of teacher collaboration to help your kids grow academically.”

Tomei, the newest, yet very confident teacher, worked at a smaller elementary school where she was “the single 4th grade teacher.” She felt that she needed feedback so she “communicates regularly on Teacher Tube and with my sister who is a teacher in Florida.” They worked together on “how she did it and figuring out how I am going to do it. We collaborate to find a way to help my kids.” Because Tomei was the only 4th grade teacher on her campus, she thought, “there is no real collaboration at school and I want to be able to say to another 4th grade teacher that I am having a difficult time with this aspect of my teaching and find out what my colleague did.”

Jenny, the bilingual Spanish teacher who speaks slowly and distinctly, worked with an instructional coach (CFLIC). She reported “clearing objectives and activities with the instructional coach a week before teaching, because you can’t do it alone.” Jenny had a principal who was not bilingual, so she collaborated with the coach to make sure the principal’s expectations were met and that she was “doing the right things.”

The second most influential factor affecting professional learning and identified as having a significant impact on student achievement in reading was university coursework. Darla began the conversation by describing her multicultural graduate reading class and admitting that although the class was the beginning of last year, she still actively used the textbook. She shared, “...even at my age, and I’m old, it was exciting to me. After each class session, I came back to school motivated. I learned how to interest my kids in books and I still do it now. That was a real change for me.”

Jenny believed that children needed to be taught at the highest level possible and instruction should be differentiated based on each student’s level of reading. She wanted to be more effective with this concept, so she began university coursework with a focus on Response to Intervention (RtI).

I found that my high kids were not performing at the peak of their potential. They were just passing, so I got interested in the Talented and Gifted (TAG) curriculum to hit the problem that way. The problem is that all our professional development had to do with LOs (Learning Objectives) and DOLs (Demonstrations of Learning) and that really got in the way. Now, I am working on my doctorate at the University of North Texas to combine the two curriculum areas, RtI and TAG, to help my kids, especially the high ones.

The participants tried various other venues to gain content and pedagogical knowledge which they could use to help their students attain high levels of reading proficiency. Some of the most beneficial experiences were in the form of day long workshops at the Region X – Educational Service Center. These workshops offered

training in reading strategies, like using the Daily 5 and Café (Boushey & Moser, 2006; 2009).

Daily 5 is a curriculum framework that includes five components which engage students. During the Daily 5 time frame, students have opportunities to: 1) read to self, 2) read to someone, 3) work on writing, 4) work on words, and 5) listen to reading (Boushey & Moser, 2006). Children learn to choose books on their level to read independently, freeing the teacher to monitor and assist other students during small group instructional time. Café is the sequel book about engaging students in assessment and instruction (Boushey & Moser, 2009).

The other beneficial reading professional development the participants attended was offered in a week-long training on reading strategies through a neighboring school district. The training, led by the neighboring district's reading personnel, was six hours per day for four days. The material covered was mostly reading strategies aimed at promoting high test scores in reading and teaching teachers some best practices they could use in their reading classrooms.

From the participants' perspective, their own district professional development was one-dimensional, insufficient at offering growth opportunities, and ineffective. Training offered by their home district included "the what and not the how of teaching and learning." Jenny intimated that, "all our professional development has to do with LOs and DOLs and that really gets in the way." While Darla pointed out that, "I don't think it is a bad thing. I just think it is the way it was presented and the assumption that we didn't discuss objectives with the students." Yet Claire believed, "We were kind of on our own. Maybe they think we had been there for so long and that we should have known what we were doing in teaching reading." Mari thought,

One problem with professional development was that it was not really being offered. There were not many opportunities to go. When I tried to

enroll, it was all booked. I never received any communications about openings being offered. Also, I think the problem a lot of teachers faced with LOs and DOLs was being able to bring that professional development back into the room and make it look the way it was supposed to look.

But, Tomei summed it up,

I don't think . . . ISD provided enough professional development. There was a definite void in our reading professional development. Professional development was very surface. Most of the district professional development was how to write LOs and DOLs. There was no collaboration. We just had to sit and get. We were left to ourselves to research how to help our students become successful readers.

While these teachers felt there was a “definite void in the professional learning opportunities,” they were adamant that this had not happened in the past. Teachers excitedly spoke of the Video Professional Learning Community (vPLC) and the year-long Reading Academies as well as a variety of other helpful summer workshops.

The vPLC was a structured professional development with required opportunities to collaborate with other teachers and campus administrators. The hour-long vPLC lesson sessions supported teaching and learning in reading classrooms by providing in depth explanations of content, demonstrations of the teaching procedures and behaviors, after-workshop assignments to be completed with students, and talking points for collaborative sessions with teachers and campus administrators. The session discussions featured classroom artifacts based on the video presentation. Participants were required to bring and discuss student-produced artifacts to the collaborative sessions. The interactive videos were convenient because they could be viewed at home or at school and individually or in group settings. The video was interactive because it provided breaks for discussions, opportunities for reflection, and allowed for practice in the classroom. Classroom activities or assignments were to be completed with students prior to the subsequent video presentation and collaborative session. The district required

documentation from the campus administrator and teachers prior to the release of the subsequent vPLC lesson.

Different from the vPLC, the district's reading academies were delivered in person. The district's reading instructional team and cooperating university professors constructed a Foundations in Reading course delivered over two semesters. The classes (12-15 sessions per semester) met one night per week for two hours and included one hour per week of classroom implementation. Classes of 15-18 teachers met at various campuses across the district. A central staff, district-based CFLIC led the university reading course and supported teachers through classroom observational visits to assist with implementation of a particular reading strategy, followed by a collaborative session between the teacher and the CFLIC with timely instructional feedback. Darla commented,

The coach would present and show you how to implement different strategies in your class. The Academy did focus on students that were struggling, but other students as well. It gave you something to go back and use. It was like, this is what's working in Texas and nationwide. You learned a process. You would be so excited about your learning. You had to practice how you were going to let the kids make the connection. Those were things you could actually use.

Teacher participants felt that classroom support for their learning was important. The Reading Academies provided weekly support through the service of a CFLIC, but that was not a recent event. Darla felt,

The instructional coaches [CFLIC] were helpful when we had them, but I received support from my fellow teachers and they supported me in my classroom. My principal allows us to occasionally observe in classrooms and then we discuss it after school. I get feedback which is very helpful when they observe me.

Mari reported that there was an instructional coach who occasionally visited her campus and while she was very conscientious and offered to help, she was not very instructional. "My help comes from my administrator. She finds resources that help me, especially online programs for the kids. We have instructional conversations about my teaching and

that is a plus.” Claire identified the previous reading instructional coaches [CFLICs] as very helpful, but since we don’t have them anymore, I lean on other 4th grade reading teachers, on and off campus. Jenny had the service of an MLEP [Multi-Lingual Education Program] coach last year when she was at a low performing campus; however,

This year my coach is only interested in documentation. She records what I am doing every 10-15 minutes and she gives me lots of forms to fill. I have a huge notebook of those forms. I would like to have support in my classroom to help me continue learning. That is why I decided to take university classes.

#### *How Teaching Changed*

Each of the teachers was able to describe the influence of professional learning on their teaching. Darla reported a change in her teaching after having taken a multicultural class at the university. After her class last year, she “read interesting books to students.” She chose ones that had children in the book who looked like her students or who had similar backgrounds, “And I still do it now and that was a change for me.” Mari attributed the changes in her teaching to the support she received from her colleagues. “I followed them around and asked, ‘What are you doing? How did you do this?’ It took a lot of teacher collaboration, but I was an AC [Alternative Certification teacher], so I was learning. That was the change for me.”

Tomei referred to the summer school when she used a particular set of district-made materials. She felt, “Teaching metacognitively changed my teaching. We learned those strategies and I used one every day.” Jenny also credited her university coursework. “Learning to combine the RtI and TAG curriculums changed my teaching.” Claire’s teaching changes were based on strategies she tried from one year to the next. She admitted learning “to always include 10-15 minutes of oral reading, because it makes a difference in the reading scores of my children. I learned last year, the kids performed better when I was consistent.”

### *Impact on Student Learning*

Teachers had a variety of professional learning experiences which they felt impacted student achievement in reading in their classrooms. The teaching actions and classroom behaviors that teachers implored were ones they believed could change the outcomes of student performances in reading. Each participant willingly shared what she had learned and felt was the most effective strategy for this purpose.

Most of the teachers agreed that if you are to leave no child behind, small group instruction was essential, particularly at 4th grade. In fact, one teacher, Jenny, chose to get her doctorate in RtI which is a very detailed strategy to ensure that you reach every child at his or her level. Additionally, Darla and Tomei pinpointed small group instruction as a key strategy for gaining ground in reading with minority students. Darla commented, "You know 4th grade doesn't like to do small groups. We don't have the time, but I moved back to that. Although there is little time, teachers must make time for small groups." Tomei agreed that small group instruction was the key to her success with students. She also identified small group instruction as "crucial to meeting students' need in reading . . . I was trying to get this time in because there was a lot of ground that needed to be covered."

During small group instruction, several activities occurred. Although some of the strategies used in small groups could have been done through other reading activities, it was in small groups that teachers listened to children read. Darla used "mentor texts or books that were on their grade level." Tomei suggested that the librarian take a small group to do literature circles while she worked with other small groups of children from her classroom. Teachers admitted that stolen moments for planned small group instruction were used to provide feedback and practice for students. It was in small

groups that teachers were able to build a stronger reading foundation, especially for students who were struggling with the skill of reading.

There was consensus between four of the five teachers for reading aloud to children. Even though reading aloud was a small part of the Daily 5 routine, Tomei admitted that when she was consistent with modeling, her students did better. She coupled the read aloud with “I think aloud when I’m reading. I made sure I modeled how I engaged with the text.” Think alouds allowed students to pattern their reading and thinking after her lead. Tomei “hoped this was going to get engrained with them,” and soon, she “started seeing the fruit of that” strategy. She added, “You know how they take on your voice” in “think aloud and modeling.” Because “they are not getting it at home . . . Parents don’t read bedtime stories to them.” Mari made sure to make time for it during the school day as well.

Additionally, Darla and Claire gave importance to reading aloud orally, whether the teacher did it or the kids did it. Both teachers agreed that oral reading contributed to student success in the classroom. Claire explained, “Students had to read orally 10-15 minutes per day. I noticed that when I was consistent with it I saw more progress than when I didn’t do it.” Darla committed to having students read aloud at school. She commented, “They didn’t do it at home, so, I had to make the time and let them do it at school. The kids actually wanted to read aloud.” Darla also used “partner reading” to ensure that students had the opportunity to practice reading orally. Jenny confided that “whether it was part of her LO or DOL, that students read orally.” Mari, similar to Darla, utilized “pairs of students to read aloud to each other.” Incidentally, when teachers were using the Daily 5 format, the oral reading equated to the Read to Someone part of the framework.

"My students needed books they could read. I asked the librarian at my school to assist them in choosing books," proclaimed Tomei, followed by nods of agreement. Mari and Jenny acknowledged that Reading to Self is also part of the Daily 5 routine, while Darla stressed the use of "mentor texts." After students read, it was paramount to engage in discussion of the story through: "literature circles" (Tomei), "asking essential questions" (Tomei), "discussing story elements" (Mari), "using story maps" (Claire), and "talking about character traits, plot, setting and how important that was to your story" (Darla).

Among other strategies for assisting students in becoming great readers, teachers identified a couple of areas that were important to 4th grade reading success. Claire and Darla chimed, "It was constant practice" while Darla suggested that, "you had to spiral back through the objectives and help kids make the connection." Tomei agreed and added, "It was difficult to cover all these SEs [student expectations], but it spiraled back anyway . . . to teach with rigor and depth, I had to do it this way."

The mention of depth and rigor led to a discussion of comprehension. "Giving students a clear focus and setting a purpose for reading helps with comprehension," Tomei added, "You had to give them a focus for reading and an expectation. That was how I held them accountable. They had to engage with the text." Mari noted, "At first, I didn't do that. And so, before we read, I set the purpose and when we read the story, we are looking for that." She continued,

It had to do with a deeper level of comprehension to be able to move from just an overview type of reading, grabbing what is on the surface, to really understanding the deeper stuff within the story. That is comprehension. You had to use some kind of strategy that moved kids from surface level to deep.

Of course, comprehension is the whole purpose behind reading to learn – which is a strong focus in 4th grade as students read increasingly complex text. Teacher participants agreed that students had to use prior learning in later stages of reading

which fostered deeper levels of comprehension. Setting the purpose for reading helped students focus and allowed for more comprehension, but, participants admitted comprehension could be hindered by lack of word attack skills or lack of vocabulary. This discussion on comprehension led teachers to talk about how writing fits into reading as a reciprocal process.

Darla started the conversation, “Reading helped with the writing.” Mari added, “As a former 1st grade teacher, I learned that writing was important to reading, because it slowed down the reading process so kids could focus on reading through details. If they couldn’t write, it would show up in the reading. Writing had to be incorporated into the reading.” Jenny quickly interjected, “You had to apply the writing into the reading and vice versa.” Claire echoed this sentiment. Jenny reported completing activities which connected writing to reading and she added, “Daily 5 has a specific framework for focusing on writing and I applied it to the reading. I concentrated on integrating those things so that it makes sense to the students.”

Additionally, one teacher believed professional development geared toward upper grades helped push students to high levels of achievement. She attended doctoral classes to gain high-yield strategies to prompt high levels of achievement from her students in reading.

#### *Prompting High Levels of Student Achievement*

While the previous section discussed teacher perceptions of professional development which teachers believed impacted student learning, this section focused on high levels of student achievement. The FGI teacher participants discussed their past professional development experiences and how they learned strategies for helping their students become great readers. Yet from these teachers’ perspectives, some professional learning experiences, when used with African American and Hispanic

students, specifically prompted high levels of achievement. Teachers reported that workshops which discussed how to teach reading comprehension with depth and complexity best served this purpose. Additionally, reading academies were identified as having supported the use of professional learning and implementation of high-yield comprehension strategies in the classroom.

Because the academies included demonstration, role-play, observation, discussion, opportunities for feedback, and practice – all within their ZPD, teachers felt these academies led to high levels of student achievement in the classroom. While the reading academies existed a couple of years prior to the timeframe of this study, teachers continued using what was learned and perfected through experience to have a high impact on achievement. Academies cemented teacher learning through opportunities to practice new strategies and best practices for teaching reading. Teachers continue to use them, because they believe these practices have proven themselves successful for use with urban minority students from low income families.

Teacher self-directed research and self-directed collaboration seemed to impact the level of achievement for students, because teachers said they looked for specific things they identified as a need. The internet, too, provided a wealth of opportunities (ex. webinars, articles and conference presentations) to get specific ideas for high-yield strategies. They reported using the strategies they learned to push their students to compete with colleagues' students, even if those students were in a classroom in another school across town.

Some teachers believed that professional development through university coursework, particularly classes geared for older students, helped these 4th grade teachers push their students toward more complex stories and strategies. One such

strategy, language to literacy charts for middle school, was used for working toward deeper levels of comprehension.

### *Teacher Perceptions of What Is Most Important To Share*

Of course, teachers want their children to be successful. Teachers have a vested interest in continued success of their students. So, when asked about the most important ideas for another 4th grade teacher to know, they were bubbling with encouraging comments and ideas of how to motivate students. I asked them to stop and reflect on all their experiences, classroom actions, and student successes to come up with their responses. Tomei began the discussion. She felt it was important to

Model your thinking in whatever you do. Whatever you expect them to do, even in your expectations of strategies for reading . . . model your thinking. Be clear. Have high expectations for them. Set the bar high, but show them how to get there. If I believed my 4 year old could read, then my students were going to read.

Darla, on the other hand believed it was important for 4th grade teachers to instill the “love to learn . . . read to them and listen to them read. They must read and they must love it. You love it and you have to teach them so they will. You do whatever you have to do.” Mari was more intent on the parent connection. She wanted teachers to include parents and help them understand the difficulty of the reading task.

Parents were always asking what they could do at home. I would tell her [the teacher] to understand that kids have to read at home. Their parents can also have conversations with their kids. Whatever they don’t get at home, though, you have to try to give it to them at school – in terms of reading within the classroom. You also have to have classroom management. Those two things go together, hand-in-hand and if you don’t have one of those, then you are not going to be as successful as you could be if you keep those two things in mind. Parent involvement and classroom management are necessary so you can get to the reading.

Jenny thought the most important thing was to “figure out the expectations. Help the kids to know the expectations for them.” Then, Claire identified three important points that contribute to teacher success: “1) know your students (learn what they can do, then

you will know how to help them), 2) know your content (if you don't know your subject, you can't teach it, or help them to love it, or even explain it to parents), and 3) don't give up (Recognize there will be good days and bad days, but you are in this for the children and you have to stick with it.)” Tomei concluded, “Don't accept excuses for them not learning and you have no excuses for poor teaching.”

#### Chapter Summary

This chapter was a presentation of the results from data collection. I discussed the results of the brief online questionnaire. Realities about teacher backgrounds, experiences, and participation in professional learning activities were revealed. Additionally, a Focus Group Interview was completed. This chapter discussed the results of the interview discussion and told the stories of a few selected participants. Finally, participants had an opportunity to individually reflect upon their experiences and responses. The next chapter will be a discussion of the analysis of the teachers' story.

## Chapter 5

### Analysis of Their Story

This study began with a problem. What teachers have learned through professional development and have done in the classroom following professional development does not appear to translate into student learning for many urban minority students living in poverty. This study is about finding at least one viable solution for the problem, because “Evidence is lacking regarding how best to support teachers in learning to teach” reading (Sailors, 2010, p. 303).

Professional development matters (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Firestone, Mangin, Martinez & Polovsky, 2005; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Sailors & Price, 2009). It influences teacher attitudes, perceptions, classroom actions, teaching behaviors and teachers believe it directly impacts student learning (Bean, Draper, Hall, Vandermolten, Zigmund, 2010; Matsumura, Garnier, Resnick, 2010; Sailors & Price, 2009). Based upon the data obtained in this study, the single most important factor for the case of professional development is that teachers believe it affects minority student achievement. It is no secret that many African American and Hispanic children need to make significant gains in reading to become proficient readers at their grade level. The factor which most influences teachers to provide instruction that helps them to improve minority student performance is paramount. Professional development has risen as a viable option to change classroom outcomes for these students by changing the classroom behaviors and teaching actions of their teachers.

This chapter begins with a philosophical overview of the theories used to analyze the stories espoused in the previous chapter. It is followed by an overview of Vygotsky’s Theory of Development and Cognition and Vygotskian Space Theory, characterized by Harré. The analysis of the data begins with a discussion of demographics of the

participants and academic growth of their students. Moreover, this chapter offers my interpretation of the data and contains a discussion on how Vygotskian and Harréian theories were useful in understanding teacher perceptions about professional development and the influence it has on minority student achievement in reading. Finally, this analysis focuses on other factors that were revealed in the study.

To achieve the purpose of this chapter, the following questions were fundamental in the analysis for this phenomenological study:

- Why did teachers believe as they did?
- Why were teacher practices different?
- In what ways are Vygotsky's Theory of Development and Cognition and Vygotsky's Space Theory reflected?
- How useful were Vygotsky's theories for understanding the relationship between teacher perceptions, classroom instructional behaviors and increased minority student reading achievement?

#### Philosophical Overview

Phenomenologists typically begin the analysis process by coding the essential themes from the segments obtained during data collection; however, Van Manen (1982) would have said, "There is no systematic argument, no sequence of propositions that we have to follow in order to arrive at a conclusion, a generalization, or a truth statement, because that would be to see theorizing itself as method" (p. 298). There also is no "single method to learn the truth or garner meaning" (1997, p. 347). "Reflection on the method is to discover suppositions that allow the researcher to interpret and understand the human experience" (p. 347). Consequently, during this analysis, I reflected upon the data and looked for common themes which characterized teacher lived experiences. After considering the themes that communicated meaning, segments were clustered into

meaningful units, including a search for specific terminology, including similarities and differences between experiences. These themes provided a composite for the text descriptions of trends and patterns of experiences used to describe, create meaning, and generate understanding (Creswell, 2007; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). Van Manen's principles (1997) for using lived experiences guided my interpretation of teacher attitudes and perceptions. To compose this analysis, these strategies were used as a guide, not as a recipe.

Phenomenological pedagogy differs from other so-called methods of inquiry in that it is not offered as a "new" epistemology or as an alternative research methodology which problematizes the topic of children and pedagogy in certain ways . . . [but] phenomenology bids to recover reflectively the grounds which, in a deep sense, provide for the possibility of our pedagogic concerns with children. (Van Manen, 1982, p. 298).

Thus, phenomenological pedagogy calls for more than a structural description of the phenomenon. It requires that I "enrich the descriptions with perceptions and reflections on understandings [and] provide possible meaning and significance" (Barnacle, 2004, p. 63). Consequently, I "need to do more than use non-theoretical experience to gain phenomenological insight . . . [so] genuine phenomenological reflection can occur" (p. 62). Van Manen (2007) writes about writing an analysis,

In doing phenomenological research, through the reflective methods of writing, the aim is not to create technical intellectual tools or prescriptive models for telling us what to do or how to do something. Rather, phenomenology of practice aims to open up possibilities for creating formative relations between being and acting. (2007, p. 13).

"We may say that phenomenology of practice operates in the space of the formative relations between who we are and who we may become, between how we think or feel and how we act" (2007, p.26). Phenomenological writing makes a lived experience "reflectively understandable and intelligible" (Van Manen, 1989, p. 28). That is the inherent aim of the writing in this analysis.

## Theoretical Overview

Vygotsky's Theory of Development and Cognition (Vygotsky, 1978) includes the idea that learning precedes development. In fact, if one thinks about learning as the ability to take on new information and development as assimilation of learning that learning can be used in other contexts independently. Development is the learned ability to problem solve independently. Learning, then, leads development. In other words, development is the result of learning. Cognition is the development of thought processes and problem solving. There are a set of abilities that one can perform independently, a set that one can perform with assistance, and a set that one cannot perform, even with assistance. Vygotsky asserts that there is a gap between development (i.e. what can be done independently) and learning (i.e. what can be done with assistance from a knowledgeable tutor). This gap is what he termed the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving... in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 33).

Within Vygotsky's Theory of Cognitive Development are two central concepts: 1) Mediation and 2) Scaffolding. Mediation is demonstrated by the learner when there is an opportunity to problem solve through an interaction between two people with differing levels of skill, knowledge and understanding (Donato, 1994; McLeod, 2007). Mediation in the ZPD is important for this study because the most productive learning occurs when the learning is between the level of what could be done independently and the level that could only be accomplished with the assistance of a more knowledgeable peer, up to the level that could not be accomplished even with assistance.

Scaffolding, the second concept of this theory, is a gradual release of responsibility for the learning; adjusting assistance to the learner as (s)he becomes increasingly independent (Donato, 1994). The scaffolding concept is important for this study because success with new techniques happen when the learner is gradually given the opportunity to perform a task independently (Vygotsky, 1978). Ideally, learning would occur within the ZPD through mediation and scaffolding.

Vygotskian Space Theory, developed by Harré (1984), using Vygotsky Social Cultural Learning Theory, represents individual and collective learning in a group setting. Individual learning occurs through mediation and scaffolding while collective learning occurs in a group setting (Gavelek & Raphael, 1996; McVee, Dunsmore, & Gavelek, 2005). New ideas or practices are introduced in a public setting and the participants, in varying degrees, assimilate them privately. Some may attempt the new practice; others may question it, while others may discard it. When participants try to demonstrate, practice or share the new idea, learning may be transferred through social processes, transforming learning within a group, organization or community. It is in this social context that individual learning has occurred within a group setting. As the individuals in the group learn, the group moves forward in learning and development. Vygotskian Space Theory is important in this study's data analysis because as teachers engage in collaborative learning in group settings (i.e. workshops, professional learning communities, collaborative content sessions, etc.) their individual learning is enhanced through their participation with the larger group.

#### Analysis

This analysis is an act of reflection on lived experiences of the participants using the lenses of Vygotskian and Harréian theory. It is easy and difficult at the same time. It is easy because I reflected on lived experiences daily, and it is difficult because I had to

make reflective determinations, clarify and explicitly explain what the experience meant (Van Manen, 2011). The discussion of lived experiences in our focus group, for example, was collaborative and helped each of the participants gain deeper insight into the collective lived experiences and come to reflective understandings about their professional learning experiences. It was my job to examine, articulate, interpret, and report my view of the experiences we discussed (Van Manen, 2011).

In Phase 1, teachers' experiences provided an opportunity to analyze demographic data. I chose what seemed to be the essential themes from the questionnaire responses and reflected on the themes to characterize teacher experiences, attitudes and perceptions. In Phase 2, similar messages were grouped together and specific quotes were extracted to capture the essence of meaning from the various opinions of teachers about their professional learning experiences. Each statement was analyzed to identify similarities and differences between their experiences. Themes were created providing a composite for trends and patterns of experiences to create meaning and generate understanding of the data collected. Phase 3 of the data collection provided an opportunity to examine the descriptions; however, no new data emerged.

#### *Teacher Demographics*

Most of the questionnaire respondents were female, over 35 years of age, with several years of experience (see Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2, p. 68). They had moved around in the grade levels because most of the respondents had relatively little experience teaching 4th grade (see Figure 4.3 and Figure 4.4, p. 69). Additionally, when considering the age and number of years of teaching experience, some teachers began their teaching career later in life, approximately 10-12 years after the typical undergraduate graduation age of 22. This means that a number of 4th grade minority

students in this district had older teachers who were fairly new to teaching 4th grade, matching the Ferguson (1998) research.

Like survey respondents, a majority (four of the five) of the focus group participants were 35 years of age or older and had several years of teaching experience, and had four or more years teaching experience at the 4th grade level (see Table 4.3, p. 76). This information is partly what led to them being selected to participate further in the study. They differed, however, from most of the respondents to the questionnaire because the FGI participants seemed to have more experience in teaching 4th grade. All focus group participants were female because the males who provided contact information did not fit the criteria. They were in their first year of teaching 4th grade or they had low CEIs indicating insufficient student growth in the study year.

I wondered, however, whether some of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire were moved to fourth grade due to success at other grade levels or lack of success at other grade levels (see Table 4.2, p. 68 and Table 4.4, p. 69). To begin to form an answer, I reflected back to when I was a campus administrator. I surmised that teachers placed in 4th grade classrooms had achieved good results in other grades (ex. 3rd, 5th and 8th). Though students in these grade levels typically have multiple opportunities to take standardized assessments, a teacher who could get good results with other students on the first administration of the assessment may be placed in 4th grade to replicate the results, because 4th grade students take the assessment only once and need a great score on the first administration of the exam.

Some of these teachers may have been placed in 4th grade classrooms with the expectation of similar success on standardized assessments as they had in previous years. The subsequent unanswered question is whether this had an impact on student academic achievement in reading for these students. Because several teachers who

completed the survey chose not to respond to the CEI questions about student growth, I believe that it was the lack of success which may have prohibited responses to the questions about student growth (see Figure 4.5, p. 70). Indeed, if teachers had great CEIs and the majority of their students had made a year's growth in reading, resulting in green (90-100% of students) or blue (80-89% of students) CEIs, they would have willingly responded to the question about their students' success in reading achievement.

The demographic information of teachers in the district did not match the demographics of the district's student population. Likewise FGI participant demographics did not reflect student demographics of the district. In the FGI, participants who were White and Hispanic, different from their students, were able to have success with urban minority students from impoverished families. Based on teacher conversations during the interview, student success occurred because instructional behaviors and classroom actions provided for students allowed them to collaborate (e.g. interaction with a knowledgeable other – teacher or peer – during small group instruction or one on one learning situations.). Learning seemed to be produced in social contexts with a knowledgeable tutor through interactions within the student's ZPD.

### *Student Growth*

As shown in Figure 4.5 (p. 70), green CEIs decreased and blue CEIs increased from 2011-12 to 2012-13. CEI results may have been affected by a change in the state assessment. The state assessment changed from TAKS to STAAR, a considerably more rigorous assessment. Where green CEIs scores were high in 2011-12, they dropped significantly in 2012-13. While the green CEIs dropped, the blue CEIs and yellow CEIs increased sharply with the introduction of the more rigorous assessment. It is conceivable that teachers who experienced success with minority students in 2011-12, did not have the same level of success in 2012-13. This change in CEI scores indicate that fewer

students experienced the success of attaining a year's growth in reading achievement. Moreover the district's NAEP exam, given every two years, occurred in the 2011-12 school year. Approximately 16% of African American and Hispanic students attained grade level proficiency on that administration of the exam. It seems probable that had students taken the NAEP exam in 2012-13, perhaps even less than 16% would have scored at grade level proficiency.

A closer look at student growth revealed that focus group participants maintained green CEIs throughout both years (see Table 4.3, p. 76). This group of teachers seemed to remain unaffected by changes in the state assessment. This could be partially a result of having had more teaching experience at 4th grade level or professional development experiences aimed at 4th grade teachers.

#### *Professional Learning Experiences*

Using the lens of Vygotsky's Theory of Development and Cognition to understand professional learning was important for this study. Professional development experiences as reported by teachers in this study often included some kind of social interaction. It was during these social interactions, particularly during professional development training sessions, workshops, or one on one situations, that learning seemed to occur. According to Vygotsky (1984), one on one interaction with a knowledgeable tutor is the basis for potential growth. Desire for individual professional growth seemed the whole reason that study participants attended professional development sessions. Clearly the survey participants wanted to be involved in professional learning situations in which they could grow individually as teachers illustrated by the statement, "No official 'outside' professional development so far this year . . . instructional support was geared toward . . . LOs and DOLs and not to the delivery of instruction". When they could not see themselves growing through

professional development in the district, they tried other venues to experience personal professional growth when one participant who attended a ESC Region X training stated: “The training helped to broaden [our] thinking about the concept of how to effectively expand reading performance and student learning.” Focus group participants reflected upon positive professional development experiences which came from collaborative situations. One example is when Claire explained that she enjoyed, “collaboration with other teachers in the building over the years.”

At the same time that there were changes in the assessment, professional learning experiences in the district changed as well. Teachers who had been participating in professional development sessions in the district now felt they had to go outside the district to receive professional development for writing training, reading (content) development and small group instruction, evidenced by the comment indicating there was “No official ‘outside’ professional development.” However, one participant admitted to attending training outside the district, “I went to a Writing Course . . . absolutely enlightening” (The district, according to survey participants, only offered LO and DOL training).

Previously, the district had offered professional development in these areas (e.g. writing, reading, small group instruction, etc.), but in 2012, there was a change in the district’s leadership. The new superintendent’s agenda for professional development was that of teaching teachers to write and use Learning Objectives (LOs) and Demonstrations of Learning (DOLs). Professional development aimed at augmenting knowledge of how to write these objectives was to come from the campus principal. Classroom teaching actions were to be improved through the campus leaders’ frequent, short-term classroom visits and feedback on whether the teaching matched the written objectives. Professional development to improve content knowledge and pedagogical skill was virtually not

existent inside the district, captured in the quote, “Professional development has centered around . . . mandates regarding LOs and DOLs,” demonstrating that professional development inside the district took a sharp turn as did student scores in reading and CEI results (see Figure 4.5, p. 70).

While the district offered workshop sessions focused on reading through an academy for bilingual teachers, the training most teachers received seemed to send the message that what is written on paper, such as planning, is going to ensure great instruction and that teachers will know how to implement what is written in their plans. The quote: “support was geared toward the writing of the SEs, LOs and DOLs and not to the delivery of instruction” indicates that support was provided; however, it was not in the categories of content or pedagogy and teachers did not see district professional development as a vehicle for growth.

It is intriguing, nevertheless, that some teachers who were not teaching fourth grade reading felt so strongly about their professional learning experiences that they responded to the survey. It seemed they wanted to share their experiences with someone they thought would listen. Most of these kinds of responses provided candid information about their professional learning experiences. Some sample quotes were: 1) “This is not my grade level, but the LO and DOL professional development has not been useful. The best way for me to get development is . . . doing my own research . . . and apply whatever I feel useful to my practice.”, 2) “The PD offered has not been useful. Science pix training, was a good training, helping me to focus on how to teach science.”, and 3) “I am a math teacher. I like the lead4ward trainings. They are very clear and accurate to my goal oriented natural approach.”

While it is clear in the previous chapter that content and pedagogical professional development for the district’s teachers mostly occurred outside the district, teachers

overwhelmingly felt the need to have professional learning experiences that allowed them to grow professionally and impact their students' reading achievement. Many chose learning contexts that would improve their content knowledge (i.e. university coursework in writing or in reading as well as becoming a doctoral student, like the study participant who chose to study gifted education) while others chose professional learning to improve pedagogical skill (ex. Lucy Calkins Writing Workshop, Daily 5/Café training, Balanced Reading workshop) or instructional delivery to improve student outcomes (ex. Response to Intervention training, small group instruction workshop, and classroom technology integration training).

Moreover, in addition to the apparent need for individual professional growth opportunities, survey teacher participants seemed to desire follow up classroom support for sustained, intensive professional growth and development. They reported receiving support from various people, the principal, fellow teachers or an instructional reading coach. Though a good amount of the support seemed to be focused on writing objectives and planning strategies, not on the actual teaching, teachers' still showed appreciation for the support they received regardless of the source or what was being supported. This quote illustrates one example of a level of support: "At my school, my principal is an awesome instructional leader, and the leadership team is well trained and provides tons of support."

While some teachers overwhelmingly seemed to feel that collaboration moved their "intellectual thinking", it was also the basis for their classroom interactions and teaching practices with students. Because a few successful teachers identified their past collaborative activities as most influential to their teaching (i.e. adding new practices, changing past practices, etc.), these past collaboration experiences could be said to have prompted high levels of achievement from students. Collaboration was so important that

even the quietest focus group participant opened the conversation with the comment, “Collaboration with other teachers in the building . . . over the years . . . you go ask people. Or you go observe somebody’s classroom or go off campus to another school . . . But it takes a lot of collaboration.” Another focus group participant liked that the fact that during collaborative sessions teachers were able to “ask questions about procedures, ask for suggestions, and get feedback about classroom activities.” These quotes confirm that even experienced teachers needed opportunities to participate in individual or group collaborative settings which focus on content, pedagogy, and practice. Why else would a teacher go to another classroom to observe?

Teacher professional growth can also occur through a one on one collaborative meeting with a knowledgeable CFLIC. When the bilingual teacher participant had a “principal who was not bilingual” and was not able to assist her, the teacher worked collaboratively, one on one with the CFLIC. These interactions facilitated the teacher’s professional growth as well as served to clarify the principal’s expectations for teaching and learning in the teacher’s classroom and the school. While some teachers reported that there “were no ‘outside’ professional development” activities, the teachers who felt supported in these activities were those who received support from “a well-trained principal” or from the “CFLIC who served the campus.”

Further, another participant explained the importance of observation in a collaborative setting, “You can ask for suggestions or go observe somebody’s classroom to see what they are doing, even if it is about teaching the basic skills in reading.” Even the most successful teachers needed collaborative opportunities for observation, feedback and reflection on practice. Clearly, Vygotskian type interactions occurred at the zone of proximal development for teachers during these types of collaborative occasions, even for teachers with several years of teaching experience.

Student work products and artifacts were a valuable context for some collaborative discussions, because they provided an active demonstration of classroom teaching and student demonstrations of learning. Artifacts offered confirmation of whether classroom instruction was appropriate for that particular group of students. Discussions centered on student work products were grounded in Vygotskian Space Theory where the individual and the community of learners grew professionally through these types of collaborative activities. Teachers depended upon each other to deepen their content and pedagogical knowledge when they had opportunities to “share artifacts.” While discussing student work products, teachers discussed their understandings about reading that children must have, the instructional techniques used and teacher classroom actions that served to create these products, growing the teacher as the learner. That was not all, teachers also “depend on each other” to grow “each other’s students . . . academically.”

Collaborative activities occurred in situations that were not one on one, but in groups, as well. This was evidenced with the vPLC professional development that one participant said, “It worked.” In fact, one participant was adamant that the district should have continued to use the vPLC, even when there were no video lessons to accompany the discussion. Her statement: “I don’t think [district name] realizes when they have a good thing . . . We were doing the video professional development; it was good . . . They only did it one year . . . It should have continued, even without the lessons, because you got together, you brought artifacts . . . you shared them.” illustrated this point.

Harré’s expansion of Vygotsky’s theory, Vygotskian Space, applies to the aforementioned professional development situations. Most of the growth activities occurred in group settings. University classes, where individual learning was received through group settings, caused the community of learners to grow. Harré asserted that group learning occurs in quadrants which include: private, public, individual and

collective. University classes, for example, provide the opportunity for a student to learn privately, but also, while in the class through interaction with others, the student learns publically, making the learning individual as well as collective for the group of students in the class. Through these quadrants, the individual learner grows intellectually and the group of learners grows collectively.

Vygotskian and Harréian theories were particularly useful as a picture description was painted about: 1) collaboration in individual and group settings during teacher professional learning contexts, 2) understanding individual teacher growth in content and pedagogy within the teachers ZPD, and 3) learning environments and social practices which occur in the classroom during activities. Ideally, discussion of student work products accurately reflects student learning which falls within the student's ZPD. Vygotskian and Harréian theories help to explain teacher attitudes and perceptions about the kind of interactions which promote their professional growth and influence classroom practice as well as foster academic achievement for urban, minority students.

Vygotskian and Harréian theory may account for a push in pedagogical skill and content knowledge acquired through social interaction and collaboration, plus the ensuing academic achievement of students. The past reading academy class sessions, mentioned by focus group participants, proved to contain fruitful discussions that encompassed more than pedagogy, also content. Although these collaborative classes occurred prior to the study, teachers still used and conversed about classroom practices that worked and what classroom behaviors and teaching practices needed to be tweaked to work in new situations. One of their statements characterized this: "They were presenting and showing you how to present different strategies in your classroom . . . what's working in Texas, nationwide . . . something to go back and use . . . you would be so excited . . . you had to practice."

Harré asserts that collective learning occurs within a group when individuals actively participate in the group. This idea can be illustrated using this quote: “The funny thing is that they don’t want the kids to sit and get, but that is the way they do us in professional development . . . There is no real collaboration” or when the coach “decides on the topic beforehand and we sit and listen. I don’t get much out of it.” This is not collaboration, but a presentation causing limited individual learning and group learning does not occur.

Harré, who characterized Vygotskian Space Theory, expanded Vygotsky’s theory of learning and cognition in individuals to learning in collaborative contexts and posited that group learning in organizations occurred in much the same way as in Vygotsky’s original theory. Teachers confirmed that it is through these lenses which meaning and understanding were developed. An analysis of the data provides an in-depth picture of teacher actions as they interacted in group gatherings and learned from each other during their discussions. This theory would account for the structured collaborative activities which occur in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that teachers said “were beneficial.” While some teachers felt that the LO and DOL professional development was insufficient and ineffective, it could be that the crucial elements of collaboration were not included. Obviously, teachers felt the need to come together for feedback, assistance and confirmation about their teaching to increase minority student achievement in reading.

#### *Impact on Student Achievement*

Just as professional learning experiences provided comparable ZPD opportunities for in-service teachers, in the position of a learner, to develop new instructional techniques, teacher mediations and scaffolding in the classroom provide the ZPD opportunity (area of potential learning) for students. These classroom interactions

move the group forward in development through the learning that was assimilated. Interactions within groups in the classroom should mirror the individual and group learning in teacher professional development. Students have opportunities to interact with knowledgeable peers and teachers within their ZPD to realize potential learning added to their development in reading. These classroom discussions can occur in whole group discussions, like the literature circles that one participant created through utilization of the librarian, or during small group instruction that participants felt was a necessary part of the reading instructional day. Neither of these classroom configurations is “sit and get” as one participant refers to it, but they are opportunities for discussion and collaboration which promote desired learning.

Teachers talked about reading aloud to children and about children reading aloud to each other. They all expressed similar thoughts: “. . . about reading orally, I think that is very important.” When teachers are reading aloud to children, they interact with the book or piece of text and the teacher uses questioning techniques that help children make connections to the text and ensure comprehension. A sample quote from one participant illustrated what happened during read alouds, “When we are reading together . . . I ask essential questions.” Teacher reading alouds to children is another opportunity for interaction with a knowledgeable tutor. The tutor demonstrates how to interact with a book while interacting with children. Reading texts that are slightly outside the child’s ZPD, beyond what a child could read himself, “stretches the learning.”

Additionally, children read aloud to each other using texts that were on their instructional level (i.e. within their ZPD). One participant stated, “Everybody says they should be reading aloud . . . the kids actually want to read aloud. You can tell if they are comprehending what they read [through] their expression with the sentences.” When children read aloud to each other, they do not question each other unless there is

misunderstanding or what was read does not make sense; however, teachers look for student to student interaction after reading. One teacher tells students to, “Be engaging and you hold whoever you are reading with accountable.” This interaction, while peer to peer, fits within Vygotsky’s Theory of Development and Cognition. Learning occurs when children have the opportunity to take turns being the knowledgeable individual as they “engage with the book” and talk afterwards.

Think alouds and other techniques model learning much as a mother models speech and language for a baby. As the baby imitates speech and monitors the responses received, the baby develops language. This learning occurs in a social context. The learning leads to development of language, thinking, and problem solving for the baby (Vygotsky, 1962). Mentor texts were mentioned by Tomei, “We use a lot of mentor texts.” to provide model language, and Darla who adds, “That is another thing, I read to them a lot.” These textual opportunities model reading for children and allow them to interact with a book in a learning context, using the book as a tutor and model, much like the mom is a language tutor and model for the baby. Similarly, teacher practice during professional development follows this same type of development of language (i.e. used while practicing the new technique) and thought (i.e. problem solving discussion after the practice). Vygotsky (1962) asserted early that the interaction with a knowledgeable tutor increased thought and language, a precursor to development and cognition (Vygotsky, 1978).

Small group instruction within a classroom occurs when the teacher pulls a few students aside to work with them on a piece of text that is at their instruction reading level, in other words, within their ZPD. This learning situation is more than simply a small group of students interacting with each other and the teacher, it allows for one on one interaction as students read aloud and the teacher questions the reader as well as the

other students in the small group. These opportunities develop children, individually and collectively, falling under Vygotskian and Harréian theories.

Teachers mentioned “spiraling back through objectives to cement the learning” for students. They asserted that this spiraling “provides depth and rigor and deepens the learning.” This spiraling is known as reteaching objectives that reoccur in the curriculum. Learning that occurs on a deeper level is development, an important part of Vygotsky’s theory because he points out that development follows learning. The transfer of developed knowledge, “applying the reading into the writing” is what Vygotsky attributed to cognitive development where the learner can transfer learning from one situation to another novel or new situation.

According to a few study participants, previous professional learning experiences prompted high levels of minority student achievement. Their development as professionals rested on professional learning and classroom results which proved to lead poor, urban minority students to become proficient readers and them to be considered successful teachers whether they reflected the students’ demographics or not. While teachers engaged in some self-directed research, more importantly, self-directed collaboration impacted their level of development and helped to make them successful teachers. Even the experiences that would be shared with a new 4th grade teacher were centered in Vygotskian and Harréian theories. They would tell perspective 4th grade teachers to “model” their thinking through reading, “set the bar high for students” and “show them how to get there” by reading and discussing stories or pieces of texts, “teach them to love reading” by reading to them, and “involve parents” by talking with parents about what should be happening at home.

Finally, participants received a verbatim transcription of the FGI and my findings from the previous chapter. As we made contact, individually, participants agreed that their

perceptions and attitudes were accurately captured. This member checking activity through individual interactions prompted several positive responses. However, no new data was collected in Phase 3. One quote from a FGI participant, Jenny, is an example. She said, "This was exactly what I said and you captured what I meant. My question is if we will be able to meet with the whole group again? I enjoyed discussing what happened in our classrooms and learning what happened in other 4th grade classrooms." A second sample quote was received by email from Claire, "I enjoyed reading your conclusions. They were very accurate."

#### Summary of Analysis

All considered,

Phenomenology helps us to bring to light that which presents itself as pedagogy in our lives with children. It is that kind of thinking which guides us back from theoretical abstractions to the reality of lived experiences – the lived experience of the child's world, the lived experience of schools, curricula, etc. Phenomenology asks the simple question, what is it like to have a certain experience? (Van Manen, 1982, p. 296)

So in this analysis, I tried to capture the "essence" (Creswell, 2007, p. 63) of teacher lived experiences so the reader could gain a better understanding of the experience.

Additionally, I considered Van Manen's question (1982), "How can we come to a deep understanding of that which makes it [the phenomenon] possible (p. 297)?" My task, as the researcher, was to enrich the readers' understanding of the lived experience and bring meaning and insight of teachers' attitudes and perceptions of the influence of professional development on minority student academic achievement in reading through this analysis and speak to the readers' senses (1997).

As a result, "Concrete examples [were provided] so the reader will gain an understanding of the phenomenon thus gaining . . . attentiveness" (Van Manen, 1997, p. 351). The examples in this analysis were used to create a "concrete realness" (Van Manen, 1997, p. 351). My descriptions were concrete and a part of participants' lived

experiences, so they offered a glimpse of reality through thick, rich, crisp descriptions to provide understanding and to bring meaning to the reader (Van Manen, 1997). This phenomenological analysis was designed by me to help the reader “see something specific” through the intensity of the writing (p. 361).

A phenomenological pedagogy observational approach was used to understand and analyze this study’s data. Using Van Manen’s theory (1990) of everyday lived experiences, I attempted to understand and describe what teachers do to move students toward increased academic achievement in reading. The FGI, while painting a picture of professional learning in this context, also raised questions about how professional development translates into classroom behaviors and interactions. Of all the factors influencing classroom teaching behaviors and student achievement in reading, from the teachers’ perspective, was collaboration. Teachers gather during the day, during conference time, and after school to observe colleagues on other campuses to improve their teaching. I believe this happens because teachers feel the desire to have conversations about their teaching to improve their teaching.

Using the lens of Vygotsky, learning occurs when there is collaboration with a more knowledgeable person. This more knowledgeable person could be one with more experience, one with more content knowledge, one who knows and produces great academic results, or an individual figuring out how to help with a problem, together. I found, through analysis of teacher voices in this study, confirmation, support and enhancement of Vygotsky’s Theories of Development and Cognition and Vygotskian Space. My analysis made connections to what happened, analyzed relationships through theory, and identified teacher attitudes and perceptions about professional development. Teacher voices linked professional learning to student learning.

## Chapter 6

### Organization of the Study, Conclusions From the Study, Significance of the Study, Implications of the Study, and My Reflections

The chapter, divided into several parts, opens with the study's organization followed by conclusions from the study. The next section, Significance of the Study, is followed by my recommendations and implications for theory, research and practice. The chapter concludes with my reflection as a researcher.

#### Organization of the Study

This was a qualitative study about teacher attitudes and perceptions of professional development and how those professional learning experiences influenced teaching and academic achievement of poor, urban minority students in reading. This study examines a large, urban district with a large population of African American and Hispanic students who are living in impoverished situations. This district participated in the 2011 NAEP exam.

Based on the NAEP scores and research, urban, minority students living in poverty are underperforming in reading and have lower test scores than non-poverty, non-minority students. More than 80% of poor minority students (African-American and Hispanic) scored below the fourth grade proficiency reading level on the most recent exam. Certainly there is a need to improve reading performances of minority students who continue to struggle with reading. While NAEP reported no difference in reading scores between 2009 and 2011 in fourth grade, children have continued to fail to read proficiently at their grade level. Children are supposed to learn to read early so they can use those reading skills to learn in other subjects. Poor reading skills affect a child's school career and later success in life. Nationally, teachers who are successful with helping students with this task are few in number illustrated by years of NAEP results for

fourth grade students who are reading on grade level. “Dropout rates were highest for the children reading below NAEP’s ‘basic’ level” (Fiester & Smith, 2010, p. 11).

With all the knowledge and research about what increases urban minority student achievement, as well as the legislative mandates of NCLB, it is evident that the gap in achievement could be decreased through effective teaching in the classroom and better professional learning opportunities for teachers. While there are many poor, urban minority students lacking basic proficiency in reading, there are numbers of these students who are successful on standardized tests. Because teachers and teaching can make the difference in the academic performance of these students, it is imperative that effective teachers engage in the professional learning experiences which lead students to increased reading achievement and close the achievement gap between children of color and their White peers.

By examining teacher attitudes and perceptions and their classroom practices after professional development, we can learn what strategies teachers believe improve reading performance. Though much of the research points towards professional development as a viable option to improve minority student achievement, few studies connect the effects of teacher professional development to student academic achievement in reading. The current study describes teacher attitudes and perceptions about professional development and how they believe it influenced their classroom actions and instructional behaviors which they believe led to increased student academic achievement for urban, high-poverty, minority children in a large district in the southwestern part of the United States.

#### Theoretical Framework

I used Vygotsky’s Theory of Development and Cognition and Vygotskian Space Theory as lenses to analyze the data because these theories offered ideas for

understanding the interaction between various role groups. Vygotskian theories stressed the role of social interaction in the development of cognition and believed it to be essential to learning. These theories served as a framework to explain how collaborative interactions increased teacher and student learning, causing them to reach beyond their capabilities, resulting in accelerated growth for both groups.

#### Research Questions

I set out to answer questions about teacher professional learning experiences, their attitudes and perceptions about the impact of professional learning on their classroom actions and instructional behaviors as well as differences between current and past teaching practices. Data was synthesized and analyzed to provide insight into the following research questions:

- Following sustained professional development and increased reading achievement for high-poverty, minority children:
  - What were teachers' attitudes and perceptions about sustained professional development and the impact on their classroom actions and their instructional behaviors? Why did they believe as they did?
  - What instructional behaviors and practices did they report using?
  - In what ways were they different from past practice? Why were they different?
- In what ways did teacher attitudes and perceptions about the sustained professional development experience and their changed instructional behaviors reflect components of Vygotsky's Theory of Development and Cognition and Vygotsky's Space Theory?
- What other connections were revealed?

- How useful were Vygotsky's theories for understanding the relationship between teacher perceptions, classroom instructional behaviors and increased minority student reading achievement?

#### Methodology

My methodology began with a detailed description of the context for the study. Fourth grade reading teachers in a large, urban district serving a large population of poor, urban minority students had the opportunity to complete an online questionnaire through Survey Monkey, an electronic data collection software program. This software was utilized to collect general background information and professional development experiences. Then, data was collected in a focus group interview setting from successful fourth grade teachers, purposefully chosen based upon their questionnaire responses because they fit the study's criteria. Teachers provided specific information about how they led impoverished, inner-city minority youths to successful mastery of on-grade level academic achievement in reading. A follow-up individual interaction with each focus group participant offered the opportunity to reflect upon interview responses, add to the data and check the accuracy of the data. Each piece of the data collected provided more depth and added to the rich description and understanding of the lived experiences of the teachers being studied.

Using the phenomenology of lived experiences, data was analyzed using the lenses of Vygotskian theories. Triangulation was accomplished through: 1) an online questionnaire to all 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers in a large urban district in the Southwest, 2) a focus group interview with five successful teachers from that district, and 3) a follow-up individual interaction with the focus group participants.

## Results

Some realities were revealed through this study's data analysis and confirmed current research on teacher professional learning opportunities. Clearly, teacher attitudes and perceptions in this study showed that they believed professional learning increased reading proficiency levels of their urban minority students. This study did not reveal a causal relationship between teacher professional development and academic achievement of African American and Hispanic students from low income families; however, the perceptions of teacher participants in the study clearly linked Intense professional collaborative activities, which fostered changes in their content and pedagogical knowledge and classroom practice through Vygotskian kinds of interactions, to African American and Hispanic student learning. Teachers reflected positive attitudes toward professional learning through the support of a more knowledgeable individual and found this valuable and noteworthy. Teachers also believed Vygotskian professional learning activities positively affected poor, urban minority student outcomes in reading. This was revealed by their self-reported minority student gains in reading and was based upon repeated opportunities that teachers created for minority students to engage in classroom activities after their collaborative experiences. As a result, teachers believed longer-term, sustained professional collaborative activities provided optimal opportunities for their learning and contributed to increased minority student achievement for African American and Hispanic students.

Workshops, on the other hand, have been considered "intellectually superficial" because they offer "patchwork of opportunities" (Yoon et al., 2007, p. 1); however, some teachers in the study district have had to settle for this somewhat mediocre format. In this analysis, Learning Objectives (LOs) and Demonstration of Learning (DOLs) workshops seemed to occupy most of the professional development opportunities provided by the

district in this study; however, teachers saw the need for more intense, instructionally-based, long-term interactions received through Vygotskian-type collaborative techniques.

### Conclusions From the Study

From this study, I learned that it is necessary to:

- Link professional development to minority student learning and support the professional development with teacher observation, timely feedback, and ongoing opportunities for reflection with a focus on refining content knowledge and pedagogical practice. Teachers needed deliberate practice, observations, coaching, feedback, and opportunities to reflect upon their teaching.
- Focus on implementation of professional learning (e.g. LOs and DOLs), but also provide differentiated support for teachers who are operating at various levels of proficiency (e.g. new versus veteran teachers). They need opportunities for deliberate practice of new teaching strategies.
- Provide opportunities for teacher collaboration, both structured and unstructured. Organized time during the school day and after school provides optimum opportunities for teachers to look at student work, reflect upon teaching behaviors, and analyze classroom practices. While it is important for teachers to know how to set objectives, communicate those to their students and watch for demonstrations of learning, it is equally important that teachers have the opportunity to talk with each other so they grow in content and pedagogical knowledge.
- Ensure depth of implementation and fidelity to a set of practices over time with no gaps between what teachers know (theory) and do (practice) in the

classroom. Intense focus and reflection with feedback can enhance instructional delivery and teacher classroom actions.

- Prepare principals to be instructional leaders who can recognize, promote and lead instruction and professional learning for teachers. Principals must know what to look for during observations and how to provide classroom instructional support as well as feedback on instructional practices. Their impact on teacher professional learning greatly affects minority student achievement. Obviously, principals cannot be well versed in every content area; however, as the instructional leader on the campus they should be able to recognize and coach effective instructional practices and provide time for collaboration so teachers can work to improve each other's practice.
- Reflect upon Vygotsky and Harréian theories when planning teacher professional development. Because of the overwhelming evidence from teachers who participated in this study, these theories are an important component in providing the most productive professional learning experiences and account for individual and group learning in gaining content knowledge and pedagogical skill. Additionally, modeling the use of these theories in professional learning settings transfers to similar classroom actions and teaching behaviors which yield high levels of academic achievement in reading for students.
- Consider preparation programs for sitting superintendents who will be serving minority populations and for those in-training. While this is an area not directly considered in this study, it seems important to focus on the support systems that superintendents could provide for principals and teachers in districts serving large populations with urban minority children

from low income families. School district superintendents must understand the value of collaboration in professional learning and begin to create systems of professional development to support campus leaders and classroom teachers.

- Study state and local policies for professional development. NCLB (2001) does address professional development and calls for teacher professional learning opportunities that are “high quality, sustained, intensive, and classroom-focused in order to have a positive and lasting impact on classroom instruction as well as the teacher’s performance in the classroom” (p. 1963). Additionally, NCLB (2001) states “professional learning opportunities are not to be one-day or short-term workshops or conferences” (p. 1963). However, except for the reading academies of the past and last year’s video Professional Learning Communities (vPLC), all professional learning opportunities in the study district were one day workshops. The major professional learning opportunities in the district, as reported by teachers, did not fully include the intent of the tenets from NCLB. Teachers searched on their own to create sustained professional learning opportunities (e.g. university classes, frequent visits to colleagues’ classrooms, etc.).

#### Significance of the Study

This study was important from a PK-16 perspective for a variety of reasons. It served to expand the professional development research base for teachers in elementary, middle and high school. Additionally, it offers a small amount of viable evidence, based on teacher attitudes and perceptions, tying teacher professional learning experiences to increased African American and Hispanic student achievement in reading in the K-12 setting. Because universities offer coursework for pre-service and in-service

teachers, professors should consider using this research as they design university reading courses. At the university level, the results of this research may have shed some light on the kinds of university coursework that should be provided for continued education of teachers. Finally, this study is significant for school district consideration as they plan to offer teacher professional development learning experiences, especially if they have African American and Hispanic students who are reading below grade level. Moreover, the results of this study has significance for all minority students at every level, PK-16, and the teachers who teach them.

#### Implications of the Study

After reflecting on the findings and coming to some conclusions about this study, I have made some recommendations for theory, research and practice. Each of these areas has suggestions for additional research. These areas, theory, research and practice, which affect each other, serve as a place to enter the conversation on future teacher professional development.

#### *Implications for Theory*

This research study adds to the body of evidence of application of Vygotskian theories, interaction with a knowledgeable individual and social learning processes, and confirms the use of Vygotsky's theories in professional learning settings. This research study adds to Vygotsky's Theory of Development and Cognition, because teachers' attitudes and perceptions about their best opportunities for professional development and learning came through a strong presence of engagement in collaborative activities while interacting with another knowledgeable individual (e.g. going into a colleague's classroom, support from a more experienced team member, interaction with the principal or CFLIC as an instructional leader, etc.). Teachers searched for Vygotskian kinds of professional learning experiences and talked about how these interactions influenced

their teaching and tied their classroom interactions to minority student outcomes through collaboration of various role groups. They also gave examples of how they provided Vygotskian kinds of opportunities for students, specifically for African American and Hispanic students (e.g. asking essential questions during reading, modeling through think alouds, Daily 5 activities, Response to Intervention activities, etc.).

Vygotskian Space, Harré's expansion of Vygotskian theory, focuses on individual and collective learning in a group setting. Teachers participated in workshops and classes as a part of a larger group (e.g. teacher reading academies, the video Professional Learning Community discussions, university coursework, etc.) to gain instructional practices, content knowledge and pedagogical skill. They learned in group settings which influenced individual and group interactions with their students (e.g. student read alouds, small group instruction, literature circles, group discussions on story essential elements, etc.).

I think this study expands Vygotsky's Theory of Development and Cognition through a student's interaction with text that is within that student's ZPD. In this context, learning from a knowledgeable other occurs as students read a text at their instructional level and they are able to take away some new learning through that interaction with the appropriate text. Some focus group teachers discussed using mentor texts in the Reading to Self part of the Daily 5 framework. When students practice their reading skills as they read to themselves, they get better at reading and understanding texts. They read and understand increasingly difficult texts, thus, expanding their ZPD in reading. This learning did not occur alone, but as a result of interacting with an instructional text. After students engage with the texts, they can become involved in a discussion with peers or their teachers to further expand their learning beyond their interaction with the text. Oftentimes, after students read, they think about what was read and they complete

writing activities based on the text. Though more research is needed to confirm this expansion of Vygotsky's theory, I submit that students demonstrated their new cognitive learning as they engaged in follow up discussions one on one with peers or in discussion with their teacher in larger group settings. Teachers believed firmly that minority students, particularly African American and Hispanic students, need Vygotskian kinds of activities to advance their learning.

#### *Implications for Research*

This study illuminates the fact that researchers are divided in their opinions on teacher professional development. While some believe there is a small amount of empirical research tying teacher professional learning experiences to student achievement (Gamse et al., 2008; Garet et al., 2008; Marsh et al., 2008; Sailors, 2008; Yoon et al., 2007), others believe there is none (Steiner & Kowal, 2007). This rigorous study adds to the body of evidence addressing teacher attitudes and perceptions of professional development and teacher perceptions of its effect on poor, urban minority student achievement, tying the two.

The data from the current study offers evidence that teachers believe their classroom actions and teaching behaviors as a result of their professional learning can result in increased academic achievement in reading for poor, urban, minority children. As a point of entry into the conversation on professional development, the current study assists those in the field in understanding what teachers believe happened in their classrooms to propel African American and Hispanic students from low income families toward academic success in reading – even if the teacher's demographic information differs from that of his or her students. In short, from the teachers' perspective in this study, previous professional learning experiences taught them how to positively impact minority student reading performance for the student group who typically have had dismal

scores on the NAEP assessment – urban minority students living in poverty. And, equally important, the study can be replicated.

### *Implications for Practice*

With the bleak results from recent NAEP exams, this study offered at least one practical solution to break the unsatisfactory performance of impoverished, urban minority students in reading. The research results elucidated some teacher attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs towards the professional learning experiences they feel resulted in changes in their classroom actions and practices allowing them to positively impact and enhance urban African American and Hispanic student classroom performance in reading. They believe collaboration during professional development led to increased grade level performance in reading for poor, minority students.

Demonstrating that teacher professional learning could be used as a vehicle for improvement in our schools, this study could serve as a resource in navigating the kinds of experiences teachers need to improve learning outcomes for minority students. African American and Hispanic students who are proficient readers in fourth grade and who demonstrate mastery of grade level reading and beyond have a better chance at future educational success and can more effectively transition into secondary school and higher education. This study offers one viable set of practices that could be taken to scale in large and small, public and private school districts who serve African American and Hispanic students.

This study affects a second area of practice, post-secondary studies. University coursework can be designed to support in-service classroom teachers who serve minority students by providing content and pedagogical knowledge, helping them to match theory with practice. Another consideration for the practical implications of this study at the university level is that it is applicable to teacher preparation programs. Supervising

professors could perform duties in the capacity of a knowledgeable CFLIC who offers opportunities for collaboration for pre-service reading teachers who are expecting to teach minority students. This would be an appropriate area for action research. Finally, in university programs for campus and district leadership, it is important to include a component that fosters an understanding of teacher needs for collaboration to improve their craft. The understanding of the value of collaborative activities is paramount for practice.

#### My Reflections

Just prior to this printing, the 2013 NAEP scores were released. Nationally, fourth grade students gained only one point over the 2011 results (NCES, 2013). Again, Texas students scored lower than the nation's students in proficiency at fourth grade level in reading. The results reveal that the average score for Texas fourth grade students (217) was lower than the national average (221) and the Texas score was not significantly different from 2011 score (218) - a loss of one point. Also, the 2013 Texas score was lower than 30 other states in the nation, equal to 14 states, and higher than only 7 states. Similar to 2011, only 28% of Texas fourth grade students scored proficient, meaning that 72% are not reading proficiently at fourth grade level. Locally, Dallas ISD students gained only one point, too. Looking more closely at the Dallas ISD reading scores, minority students (i.e. African American and Hispanic students) at fourth grade scored lower than their White peers. African American students scored 24 points lower than White students and Hispanic students scored 27 points lower than White students (NCES, 2013). It was noted in the current study that in 2011 Dallas students in fourth grade scored lower than the national and state average in reading. For the current year, 2013, the Dallas scores have not yet been released, but I suspect a gain of one point, mirroring state and national results.

This year's 2013 STAAR results are just in as well. Texas Education Agency data (2013) reveals that the enrollment in fourth grade of the study district decreased (7,079 fourth grade students in 2011-2012 to 6,934 students in 2012-2013) and so did student scores. The 64% pass rate for the district's fourth grade students in 2011-12 dropped to 62%. African American students still lag behind with 55% passing. Surprisingly, however, the group of Hispanic fourth grade students again surpassed the district's average meeting the standard with 65%, but this is still less than the previous year's score of 69% (TEA, 2013). Sadly, 45% African American (1,162 students) and 35% Hispanic (1,263 students) still did not meet the passing standard for STAAR (TEA, 2013). These two groups represent 94% of the fourth grade student population in the study district. Yet, 96% of White fourth grade students passed with only 14% (63 students) not meeting the passing standard. This means more White students met the standard this year while the reading scores for minority students declined.

Because minority children who struggle early with reading find it difficult to rise to grade level proficiency, we must continue to search for solutions to help our minority youth and we must utilize them. African American and Hispanic students who have not mastered reading in third grade are 11 to 12 percentage points less likely to graduate from high school than White students with similar reading skills. This is a dynamic factor which affects the future of minority students, and also, the future of this country. As we attempt to prepare children for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we will fail miserably if minority children cannot read.

When I began this study, I was convinced that professional development was a viable solution to changing classroom teaching. I believed the catalyst for that change was the CFLIC. I learned that it is the interaction during collaborative activities, not the CFLIC, that could change teaching. I learned that a CFLIC, in essence, is just a position;

but, it is the collaboration that has value. Whether teacher collaboration happens with a principal, a CFLIC or a fellow teacher inside the building or in another school, it must happen consistently and it is highly beneficial if that individual is knowledgeable in content and pedagogy. This knowledgeable individual must be forthcoming with a desire to interact with colleagues and be able to provide valuable feedback. I know that CFLICs must be well-trained so they can be the knowledgeable person in Vygotsky's theory, but they must also be willing to offer assistance. The collaborator must engage the teacher collaboratively about instruction and student achievement in reading, particularly achievement of minority students. Previously, I thought CFLICs made the difference in whether or not teachers were successful in teaching minority students to read, but now I think it is structured opportunities for collaboration in Vygotskian-type professional learning experiences for teachers. They must learn how to create learning situations within the zone of proximal development of African American and Hispanic children to make a difference in their academic achievement in reading. Teachers need discussions focused on observation, feedback, student work artifacts, and reflection to help them connect theory and practice.

If I were to repeat this study, I would widen its scope. This study offers results from one urban district serving a large population of poor African American and Hispanic students. I would expand the study to other urban districts with high populations of minority children and increase the number of teachers included in the study. It would be interesting to learn whether this was a unique experience in one large urban district or whether similar phenomenon exists in other urban districts serving large numbers of minority students who live in poverty. Teachers in districts on the west coast, in the Midwest or on the east coast may have similar professional learning experiences, similar attitudes and perceptions about their professional learning, and experiences. These

attitudes and perceptions serve to influence their teaching. For the few teachers in one urban district who are successful with poor, minority students, I learned to what they attributed student academic achievement in reading; however, is that the case with teachers in non-urban settings who serve large numbers African American and Hispanic students?

Based on the NAEP results, African American and Hispanic student achievement in reading is a national problem, not exclusively an urban problem. A third area for research would be professional learning experiences for teachers of minority students in 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades. NAEP reveals 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading scores is also an area of concern. Low levels of reading proficiency for post-secondary minority students may have an impact on higher education developmental classes. How does the landscape change in a longitudinal study where reading teachers are specifically trained in content and pedagogy, then, supported through structured sessions using collaborative techniques?

Further, research on taking collaborative activities to scale is needed. If there are research based practices that work specifically for African American and Hispanic students, our focus should be on finding those and taking those practices to scale, nationwide, for the benefit of our children. I have come to believe that collaborative activities, structured and unstructured, in professional learning settings is one of those successful activities that could be used to increase teacher professional learning and positively affect African American and Hispanic student achievement in reading.

My final statement: We cannot rely on a few students to move this country forward into the future. We must depend on the masses, but they must be able to read proficiently.

How can you become involved and help?

Appendix A  
Institutional Review Board Approval

**UT Arlington**  
**Online Questionnaire Informed Consent Document**

kellerd@uta.edu

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR**

The researcher may be contacted at any time prior to, during, or after participation in the study.  
Clarissa Plair, Doctoral Student, University of Texas at Arlington. Phone Number: 214.773.6530.  
Email: utastudy@hotmail.com

**NOTE:** While this project has been reviewed by the Dallas Independent School District, Dallas  
ISD is not conducting the project activities.

**FACULTY ADVISOR**

Dr. Adrienne Hyle is the Chairperson for Educational Policy and Leadership Studies, University  
of Texas at Arlington. Phone number: 817.272.0149 Email: [ahyle@uta.edu](mailto:ahyle@uta.edu).

**TITLE OF PROJECT**

Teacher Attitudes and Perceptions of the Influence of Professional Development on Minority  
Student Achievement in Reading

**INTRODUCTION**

You are being asked to voluntarily participate in a research study. Refusal to participate or  
discontinuing your participation at any time will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which  
you are otherwise entitled. This form provides a clear explanation and information about the  
study. Please read the information below and feel free to ask any questions about the study.  
Participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without any negative consequences.

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to understand and to describe teacher attitudes and perceptions about  
sustained professional development and its impact on classroom actions and instructional  
behaviors that lead to reading academic achievement for high-poverty, minority children. Data  
will be collected through a brief questionnaire, a focus group interview and an individual  
follow up interaction

**DURATION**

Upon agreement to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in these data  
collection activities.

- A brief online survey (10 minutes)
- One semi-structured Focus Group Interview with five other teachers. (30-60  
minutes)
- Individual Follow-up Interaction which provides an opportunity to clarify any  
confusion, to ask questions, and to allow participating teachers an opportunity  
to reflect on their responses in the interview and comment on the data. (This  
will last no longer than one hour.)

**NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS**

IRB Approval Date: **SEP 03 2013**

1

IRB Expiration Date: **SEP 03 2014**

## UT Arlington Online Questionnaire Informed Consent Document

atmosphere will be promoted. You have the right to discontinue any procedures at any time and you may refuse to answer any question without consequence should you experience any discomfort.

### COMPENSATION

No compensation will be available for the survey. Should you be selected and choose to participate in the Focus Group Interview, you will be compensated for your participation in the session at \$20 per hour.

### VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Should you participate in the online questionnaire, you can get copies of the questions by contacting the researcher: Clarissa Plair, phone Number: 214.773.6530, email: [utastudy@hotmail.com](mailto:utastudy@hotmail.com)

### CONFIDENTIALITY

Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. Data transfer across the Internet is not secure and could be subject to third party observations. However, all data collected from the survey responses will be stored on the Survey Monkey website and password protected for duration of this study. At the completion of the study, data will be deleted from Survey Monkey. Paper documents (i.e. notes, transcriptions, data collected - personal identifiers removed) will be maintained in a locked file cabinet in the UTA offices of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Trimble Hall, Room 105B for at least three (3) years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a participant. Additional research studies could evolve from the information you have provided, but your information will not be linked to you in anyway; it will be anonymous. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the UTA IRB and personnel particular to this research have access to the study records. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above. The IRB at UTA is aware of this study and the information within this consent form. If in the unlikely event it becomes necessary for IRB to review your research records, UTA will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law.

### CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS

Questions about this research study may be directed to [Dr. Adrienne Hyle](#), the Chairperson for Educational Policy and Leadership Studies, University of Texas at Arlington. Phone number: 817.272.0149 Email: [ahyle@uta.edu](mailto:ahyle@uta.edu).

Any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant or a research-related injury may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817-272-2105 or [regulatoryservices@uta.edu](mailto:regulatoryservices@uta.edu).

### CONSENT

IRB Approval Date:

SEP 03 2013

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IRB Expiration Date:

SEP 03 2014

## UT Arlington Online Questionnaire Informed Consent Document

The total number of participants will not exceed 150.

### **PROCEDURES**

You will be asked to complete an online questionnaire. (10 minutes). Questionnaire responses will be coded with numbers. No personally identifiable information will be included in the study. After the six focus group participants have been selected, personally identifiable information will not be included in any analysis or reporting.

Six voluntary online participants will be contacted by email and a follow-up phone call during their conference time to invite them to participate in the Focus Group Interview (30-60 minutes) and an Individual Follow-Up Interaction (30-60 minutes). An additional consent process will provide details of subsequent procedures.

The Focus Group Interview will be digitally recorded and transcribed. After the interview, the tape will be transcribed, which means it will be typed exactly as it was recorded, word-for-word, by the researcher. The transcription will be coded with numbers and pseudonyms so participant identity and privacy will be protected throughout the study. The recording will be destroyed after transcription. Notes may be taken during the Follow-Up Interaction. Three years after completion of the dissertation, the transcription will be destroyed. During non-use periods and at the conclusion of the study, all data (i.e. notes and transcripts) will be secured in the UTA Education and Leadership Policy Studies offices, Trimble Hall, Room 105B. If the results of the study are published or presented at conferences, personal information will not be included. Only numbers or pseudonyms will be used. The recording and transcriptions will not be used for any future research purposes not described here.

### **POSSIBLE BENEFITS**

This study will provide evidence for improving teacher practice and perhaps assist teachers in enhancing student classroom performance; thus, leading to increased academic achievement in reading. Students who are proficient readers in fourth grade and who demonstrate mastery of state standards will have a better chance at being college ready at the end of high school and more effectively transition into higher education; changing the current four-year graduation rate of sixty percent for minority freshmen students.

### **POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

There is minimal risk for completion of the online questionnaire. You may refuse to answer any question without any consequence.

You may feel a little discomfort during the Focus Group Interview because a digital auditory recording will be made to ensure accuracy of the data. This discomfort may come from sharing personal perceptions and attitudes within the group interview. To minimize the discomfort, the focus group will be held in a location that offers privacy and is conducive to recording. Your privacy and comfort are important so a relaxed

2

IRB Approval Date: **SEP 03 2013**

IRB Expiration Date: **SEP 03 2014**

## UT Arlington Online Questionnaire Informed Consent Document

By clicking "ACCEPT", you confirm that you are 18 years of age or older and have read or had this document read to you. You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions and you have been informed that you can ask other questions at any time.

By clicking "ACCEPT", you voluntarily agree to participate in this study: Teacher Attitudes and Perceptions of the Influence of Professional Development on Minority Student Achievement in Reading. You are not waiving any of your legal rights. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty, no loss of benefits, and will not prejudice your present or future relations with the Dallas Independent School District or the University of Texas at Arlington. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits, to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the project, your information will be removed from the project results.

Ferpa Disclosure: It is understood that compliance with all confidentiality requirements is required, including but not limited to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). This research study does not involve student data; however, if student data is used, appropriate parental consent forms will be obtained for all students whose information is used.

IRB Approval Date: **SEP 03 2013**

4

IRB Expiration Date: **SEP 03 2014**



Office of Research Administration  
Regulatory Services  
817-272-3723  
regulatoryservices@uta.edu

September 11, 2013

Clarissa Plair  
Dr. Adrienne Hyle  
Educational Leadership & Policy Studies  
The University of Texas at Arlington  
Box 19575

**IRB No.: 2013-0616**

**Title:** *Teacher Attitudes and Perceptions of the Influence of Professional Development on Minority Student Achievement in Reading*

#### **EXPEDITED PROTOCOL MODIFICATION APPROVAL**

The UT Arlington Institutional Review Board (UTA IRB) Chair (or designee) reviewed and approved the modification(s) to this protocol on **September 10, 2013** in accordance with Title 45 CFR 46.110(b)(2). Therefore, you are authorized to conduct your research. The modification approval will additionally be presented to the convened board on October 8, 2013 for full IRB acknowledgment [45 CFR 46.110(c)]. The modification(s), indicated below, was/were deemed minor and appropriate for expedited review.

- Recruitment will consist of contacting teachers directly upon approval of an Open Records Request from the District Legal Department

#### **MODIFICATION TO AN APPROVED PROTOCOL:**

Pursuant to Title 45 CFR 46.103(b)(4)(iii), investigators are required to, “promptly report to the IRB any proposed changes in the research activity, and to ensure that such changes in approved research, during the period for which IRB approval has already been given, are **not initiated without prior IRB review and approval** except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject.” Modifications include but are not limited to: Changes in protocol personnel, number of approved participants, and/or updates to the protocol procedures or instruments and must be submitted via the electronic submission system. Failure to obtain approval for modifications is considered an issue of non-compliance and will be subject to review and deliberation by the IRB which could result in the suspension/termination of the protocol.

#### **ADVERSE EVENTS:**

Please be advised that as the principal investigator, you are required to report local adverse (unanticipated) events to The UT Arlington Office of Research Administration, Regulatory Services within 24 hours of the occurrence or upon acknowledgement of the occurrence.



Office of Research Administration  
Regulatory Services  
817-272-3723  
regulatoryservices@uta.edu

### **TRAINING**

All investigators and key personnel identified in the protocol must have filed an annual Conflict of Interest Disclosure (COI) and have documented *Human Subjects Protection (HSP)* training on file with this office prior to protocol approval. HSP training certificates are valid for 2 years from completion date.

### **COLLABORATION:**

If applicable, approval by the appropriate authority at a collaborating facility is required prior to subject enrollment. If the collaborating facility is *engaged in the research*, an OHRP approved Federalwide Assurance (FWA) may be required for the facility (prior to their participation in research-related activities). To determine whether the collaborating facility is engaged in research, go to:

<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/assurance/engage.htm>

### **CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS:**

The UT Arlington Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services appreciates your continuing commitment to the protection of human research subjects. Should you have questions or require further assistance, please contact Robin Dickey at [robind@uta.edu](mailto:robind@uta.edu) or Regulatory Services at [regulatoryservices@uta.edu](mailto:regulatoryservices@uta.edu) or 817-272-2105.

Sincerely,

Judy R.  
Wilson, Ph.D.

Digitally signed by Judy R. Wilson,  
Ph.D.  
DN: cn=Judy R. Wilson, Ph.D.,  
o=University of Texas at Arlington,  
ou=Vice-Chair IRB,  
email=jrwilson@uta.edu, c=US  
Date: 2013.09.12 09:19:14 -05'00'

Judy R. Wilson, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
UT Arlington IRB Vice-Chair

Appendix B  
Online Teacher Survey

## Teacher Attitudes and Perceptions of Professional Development

### Online Informed Consent

#### PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

The researcher may be contacted at any time prior to, during, or after participation in the study. Clarissa Plair, Doctoral Student, University of Texas at Arlington. Phone Number: 214.773.6530. Email: utastudy@hotmail.com

NOTE: While this project has been reviewed by the Dallas Independent School District, Dallas ISD is not conducting the project activities.

#### FACULTY ADVISOR

Dr. Adrienne Hyle is the Chairperson for Educational Policy and Leadership Studies, University of Texas at Arlington. Phone number: 817.272.0149 Email: ahyle@uta.edu.

#### TITLE OF PROJECT

Teacher Attitudes and Perceptions of the Influence of Professional Development on Minority Student Achievement in Reading

#### INTRODUCTION

You are being asked to voluntarily participate in a research study. Refusal to participate or discontinuing your participation at any time will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. This form provides a clear explanation and information about the study. Please read the information below and feel free to ask any questions about the study. Participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without any negative consequences.

#### PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to understand and to describe teacher attitudes and perceptions about sustained professional development and its impact on classroom actions and instructional behaviors that lead to reading academic achievement for high-poverty, minority children. Data will be collected through a brief questionnaire, a focus group interview and an individual follow up interaction

#### DURATION

Upon agreement to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in these data collection activities.

- A brief online survey (10 minutes)
- One semi-structured Focus Group Interview with five other teachers. (30-60 minutes)
- Individual Follow-up Interaction which provides an opportunity to clarify any confusion, to ask questions, and to allow participating teachers an opportunity to reflect on their responses in the interview and comment on the data. (This will last no longer than one hour.)

#### NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

The total number of participants will not exceed 150.

#### PROCEDURES

You will be asked to complete an online questionnaire. (10 minutes). Questionnaire responses will be coded with numbers. No personally identifiable information will be included in the study. After the six focus group participants have been selected, personally identifiable information will then be destroyed and not included in any analysis or reporting.

Six voluntary online participants will be contacted by email and a follow-up phone call during their conference time to invite them to participate in the Focus Group Interview (30-60 minutes) and an Individual Follow-Up Interaction (30-60 minutes). An additional consent process will provide details of subsequent procedures.

The Focus Group Interview will be digitally recorded and transcribed. After the interview, the tape will be transcribed, which means it will be typed exactly as it was recorded, word-for-word, by the researcher. The transcription will be coded with numbers and pseudonyms so participant identity and privacy will be protected throughout the study. The recording will be destroyed after transcription. Notes will be taken during the Follow-Up Interaction. Three years after completion of the dissertation, the transcription will be destroyed. During non-use periods and at the conclusion of the study, all data (i.e. notes and transcripts) will be secured in the UTA Education and Leadership Policy Studies offices, Trimble Hall, Room 105B. If the results of the study are published or presented at conferences, personal information will not be

## Teacher Attitudes and Perceptions of Professional Development

included. Only numbers or pseudonyms will be used. The recording and transcriptions will not be used for any future research purposes not described here.

### Informed Consent continued

#### POSSIBLE BENEFITS

This study will provide evidence for improving teacher practice and perhaps assist teachers in enhancing student classroom performance; thus, leading to increased academic achievement in reading. Students who are proficient readers in fourth grade and who demonstrate mastery of state standards will have a better chance at being college ready at the end of high school and more effectively transition into higher education; changing the current four-year graduation rate of sixty percent for minority freshmen students.

#### POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

There is minimal risk for completion of the online questionnaire. You may refuse to answer any question without any consequence.

#### COMPENSATION

No compensation will be available for the survey. Should you be selected and choose to participate in the Focus Group Interview, you will be compensated for your participation in the session at \$20 per hour.

#### VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Should you participate in the online questionnaire, you can get copies of the questions by contacting the researcher: Clarissa Plair, phone Number: 214.773.6530, email: utastudy@hotmail.com

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. Data transfer across the Internet is not secure and could be subject to third party observations. However, all data collected from the survey responses will be stored on the Survey Monkey website and password protected for duration of this study. At the completion of the study, data will be deleted from Survey Monkey. Paper documents (i.e. notes, transcriptions, data collected - personal identifiers removed) will be maintained in a locked file cabinet in the UTA offices of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Trimble Hall, Room 105B for at least three (3) years after the end of this research. At that time, these data will be destroyed. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a participant. Additional research studies could evolve from the information you have provided, but your information will not be linked to you in anyway; it will be anonymous. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the UTA IRB and personnel particular to this research have access to the study records. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above. The IRB at UTA is aware of this study and the information within this consent form. If in the unlikely event it becomes necessary for IRB to review your research records, UTA will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law.

#### CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS

Questions about this research study may be directed to Dr. Adrienne Hyle, the Chairperson for Educational Policy and Leadership Studies, University of Texas at Arlington. Phone number: 817.272.0149 Email: ahyle@uta.edu.

Any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant or a research-related injury may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817-272-2105 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu.

## Teacher Attitudes and Perceptions of Professional Development

**\* 1. By clicking “ACCEPT”, you confirm that you are 18 years of age or older and have read or had this document read to you. You have been informed about this study’s purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions and you have been informed that you can ask other questions at any time.**

**By clicking “ACCEPT”, you voluntarily agree to participate in this study: Teacher Attitudes and Perceptions of the Influence of Professional Development on Minority Student Achievement in Reading. You are not waiving any of your legal rights. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty, no loss of benefits, and will not prejudice your present or future relations with the Dallas Independent School District or the University of Texas at Arlington. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits, to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the project, your information will be removed from the project results.**

- ACCEPT  
 DECLINE

### Demographics

**2. Please specify your gender.**

- Male  
 Female

**3. What is your age range?**

- 22-25  
 25-35  
 35 and above

### Teaching Experience

Please provide a little background on your experience.

**4. How many years teaching experience do you have?**

- 0-1 years  
 2-3 years  
 4-10 years  
 More than 10 years

## Teacher Attitudes and Perceptions of Professional Development

### 5. How long have you been a 4th grade reading teacher?

- 0-1 year  
 2-3 years  
 4-10 years  
 More than 10 years

### 6. In addition to 4th grade, which other grades have you taught?

- None  
 Primary PK-2  
 Intermediate 3-5  
 Middle School 6-8  
 High School 9-12  
 Other

### 7. Please provide CEI information (This will be kept confidential).

	2012-2013	2011-2012
Select one for each year	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

## Professional Development

Professional development is a strategy to help educators continue to strengthen their practice throughout their career. Great teachers help create great students. Please describe any sustained professional development in which you participated this year.

### \*8. Briefly describe your professional learning experiences this year.

## Instructional Support

## Teacher Attitudes and Perceptions of Professional Development

The reading specialist supports classroom teaching, and works collaboratively to implement a quality reading program.

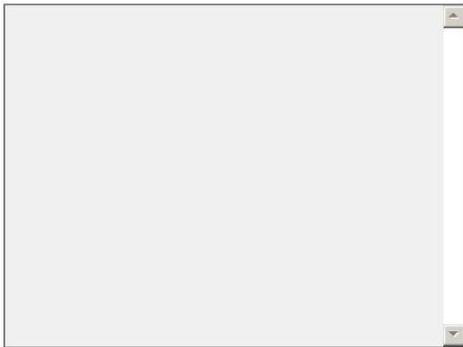
**9. If you had continued instructional support, briefly describe your interaction and the nature of the support you received.**



### Personal Information (Optional)

Would you be willing to voluntarily participate in a group interview session for this study? The session will last approximately one hour. You will be compensated for your time.

**10. Please include your contact information (i.e. name, school, email and phone number). -  
OPTIONAL**



### Thank You

Thank you for your time in completing this survey.

Appendix C  
Focus Group Interview Questions

### Focus Group Interview Questions

1. In your mind, what reading classroom teaching actions are essential for student success?  
Probes: What do you do in your classroom that contributes to student success?  
Can you give me an example?
2. Suppose you have one minute to talk with the new 4<sup>th</sup> grade replacement reading teacher. Both of you want maximum student achievement for your students. What would you say is most important for this teacher to know about teaching reading to minority 4<sup>th</sup> grade students?  
Probes: What have you done that you believe has made a difference?  
How did you learn to do this?  
Can you give me an example?
3. What experiences in professional learning assisted you in teaching reading this year?  
Probes: What professional development helped you teach better, building capacity?  
How did it influence your teaching?  
How did it build capacity?  
Can you give me an example?
4. Think back to your professional learning for this school year. What professional learning experiences do you feel prompted high levels of student performance in your classroom?  
Probes: What impact did that professional development have with student learning in your classroom?  
Why do you think this is so?  
Can you give me an example?
5. Describe how professional learning situations influenced your classroom behavior this year as a reading teacher?  
Probes: Describe any changes in your classroom behavior as a result of this year's professional learning experiences.
6. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience with professional learning and student success that we have not discussed?  
Probes: Is there anything else you want to tell me about your students' success in reading?

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### Biographical Information

Clarissa Plair, a South Bend, Indiana native, has demonstrated her love and respect of lifelong learners through her educational career. After graduating from John Adams High School, she attended several universities: Bachelor of Science in Education at Indiana University; Master of Arts in Foreign Language at University of Texas, Reading Recovery/Descubriendo La Lectura at Texas Woman's University, and Principal and Superintendent Certifications at the University of Texas at Arlington. She also earned a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at University of Texas at Arlington.

Clarissa holds several certifications and has served as a lifelong educator, serving students in several states and countries. Her professional career began in East Chicago, Indiana as a high school English teacher. As a military wife, Clarissa taught military personnel and their dependents. As an adult instructor, Clarissa taught English as a Second Language to adults and spent several years educating teachers through local universities. As a Spanish bilingual educator, she taught students in K-12. Beginning in 2003 in Dallas, Clarissa served as a campus leader and central office administrator for several years before her retirement from public education in August, 2012, ending a 37-year career.

Currently, Clarissa is serving teachers and students through her research on what helps teachers improve minority student academic performance and she is planning to publish her research. Her interests also include how educational leadership affects minority student achievement and providing literacy support to educators. She continues to be a lifelong learner, educator, and now, researcher.