SUPPORTING READING INSTRUCTION THROUGH A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY: ONE RURAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL'S STORY

by

STEPHANIE REESE GOLDMAN

(Under the Direction of Jami Royal Berry)

ABSTRACT

Rural students deserve a high-quality literacy education comparable to their non-rural counterparts. As rural teachers and leaders face multiple roles and responsibilities, professional learning focused on instructional improvement can lack priority. This study aimed to examine how leaders within a rural, public elementary school setting supported third- and fourth-grade reading teachers by developing and implementing a PLC to improve reading instruction. A total of eight findings and three themes emerged from thorough data analysis. The following themes emerged from the study's findings: 1) improved collaboration, 2) increased instructional knowledge, and 3) differentiated leader support. Leaders can facilitate context-based and differentiated professional learning to best meet the needs of rural teachers and students by establishing defined learning structures through shared leadership practices and continual professional learning to establish a culture of continuous improvement.

INDEX WORDS: Rural teachers, Rural schools, Reading instruction, Professional learning, Professional Learning Communities, Collaboration, School leaders, Shared leadership

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2024

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May 2024

DEDICATION

To my parents, who were my first teachers at the real "Reese Elementary School," thank you for teaching me all I know. The importance of hard work was instilled in me from the very beginning because of you two. Dad, I hope your days in Heaven are filled with endless train sets and fishing, but we sure do miss you down here! Mom, this journey may not have looked like we thought it would over twenty years ago, but I am finally a Doctor!

To my sister, Amy, always remember I LYLAS! To the Goldman family, thank you for all your support during this process and for raising the most supportive husband and father!

To my husband, Matt, there are no words to say how much I love you and appreciate all your support in every single one of my endeavors. I have never doubted; you have been with me 100% of the way. I love you, Nook, PROMISE!

To my daughters, Charlotte, Lynnley, and Annie Kate, thank you for sharing your Mom with classes and a computer for most of your lives. I hope you will learn that anything is possible with hard work, dedication, and the Lord! Like Dee and Pop E taught me, "If you get the choice to sit it out or dance, I hope you dance!" Now, let's dance all the way to Disney!

To God, thank you for your blessings upon blessings! He has good plans for me; Your Plan has been so much better than mine! I am surely not worthy, so I will sing of Your Love forever! For all those reading, those who have or will be touched by this work, "May His favor be upon you, and a thousand generations, and your family and your children, and their children, and their children (Adapted from Numbers 6:24-26 by Kari Jobe, Cody Carnes, & Elevation Worship)."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would not have completed this dissertation without the support of so many. Dr. Jami Berry, I thank you first (despite previous iterations)! You have pushed and challenged me to do this very best work. Thank you to my committee and UGA faculty members, Dr. Karen Bryant, Dr. Kaneisha Dorsan, Dr. Jamon Flowers, and Dr. Sally Zepeda, for contributing to this journey. To my ring and critical friend, Elyse, the new Dr. M. Elyse Durden: I do not know what I would have done without you. Perhaps the greatest gift of this program has been your friendship (and our membership to The Tortured Overthinkers Department)! To the Doctors of 2024, it has been an honor to learn alongside all of you, and I have been blessed to be your "Mom!"

To those who instilled my love of learning and continual improvement: Mrs. Cox, Mrs. Naplacic, Dr. Schmidt, Mr. Hodge, Dr. Ogden, Dr. Huddleston, Mrs. Arthur, Dr. Light, Dr. Gunby, the LC leadership team, and countless others, thank you. Special thanks to Dr. Aycock and Dr. Cunningham, who reminded me there was an end in sight!

To my cheerleaders, both inside and outside the school realm: my Lincolnton Methodist Church family, the Alpha Theta Chapter of Delta Kappa Gamma, Uncle Chris and Aunt Dr. Madelyn Issacs, Camp Lakeside, and the girls who now get their friend back, Katelyn, Kristen, Sarah, Dawn, and Maggie! Finally, I thank my amazing faculty and staff who have "shared" me for so long – WE are finished! To my Emotional Support Partner, the Dream Team, Office iPhones, my editor and her furry friends, and most importantly, the teachers who were the heart of this study - this work is because of and for you and our current and future students at the best rural elementary school and county in Georgia!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Learning to read is an essential component of elementary education (Hulme & Snowling, 2013). Students who are not successful readers by third grade are more likely to remain poor readers in high school (Fiester, 2010), have more behavior and social problems, and experience higher retention rates (Miles & Stipek, 2006, as cited in Fiester, 2010). Workman (2014) found that students are at a greater risk of dropping out of high school, being unemployed, or involved in the criminal justice system if they do not learn to read. Thus, school leaders must take action to guide teachers on how to improve reading instruction.

Educators must adopt the mindset of lifelong learners by actively engaging in well-designed and curriculum-aligned professional development to support students' academic improvement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). To support teachers in this practice, leaders have frequently established professional learning communities (PLCs) to improve teacher practices and, as a result, student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Meissel et al., 2016; Vescio et al., 2008). Effective PLCs are content-focused, collaborative, supportive, and sustained in duration and include active learning and models of effective practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

To plan and implement effective job-embedded professional learning, a leader must understand the demographics and context of the school setting where the professional learning will occur. Detailed data and understanding of the community, school, its students, teachers, and

leaders are necessary to ensure professional learning and its goals align with the mission, vision, goals, chosen methodology, and, most importantly, the school's needs.

Thus, a rural leader must understand the cultural elements of the rural context. Rural schools make up nearly a quarter of the country's schools (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018), but rural resources are not equivalent to their non-rural counterparts (Crumb et al., 2023; Freeman & Randolph, 2013; Gutierrez & Terrones, 2023; Howley & Howley, 2005; Johnston et al., 2018; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Willis & Templeton, 2018). Wei et al. (2010) highlighted the inequitable access to rural professional learning: urban teachers accumulated more hours over three years when compared to rural counterparts. In rural schools, limited resources hinder professional learning (Glover et al., 2016; Wei et al., 2010). Rural students and teachers deserve the same opportunities as their non-rural counterparts.

Rural leaders have more responsibilities with fewer resources than their non-rural counterparts (Gutierrez & Terrones, 2023; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Willis & Templeton, 2018). Additionally, limited personnel impact professional learning (PL) offerings. Non-rural schools have multiple county-level instructional leaders and PL providers, but one position usually subsumes numerous responsibilities in a smaller, rural setting (Azano & Biddle, 2019). Additionally, providing differentiated PL is difficult due to smaller faculty sizes and limited in-house PL providers. A one-size-fits-all approach to PL does not meet anyone's needs (Fairman et al., 2020; Govender et al., 2023). Without support personnel, rural schools have difficulty establishing and sustaining PLCs that meet teachers' needs (Willis & Templeton, 2018). Fostering shared leadership within PLCs allows rural schools to maximize resources for school improvement by increasing teacher leadership (Sharif, 2020; Shen et al., 2020; Zahed-Babelan et

al., 2019). Thus, rural schools must be creative in establishing and maintaining PLCs that meet teachers' instructional needs.

Research on leaders' specific methods to establish and support reading-specific professional learning communities in rural settings is limited. This study examines the role of school leaders in establishing and supporting a professional learning community to improve reading instruction in a rural elementary school and how teachers perceive the impact of the PLC on reading instructional improvement.

Statement of the Problem

Professional learning opportunities to improve reading instruction are limited in rural elementary schools. Student reading achievement is directly related to the quality of reading instruction, as measured by reading on grade level defined as reading proficiency. Nearly fifty percent of Georgia third graders are not proficient readers, as measured by the English Language Arts Georgia Milestones test (Governor's Office of Student Achievement [GOSA], 2019). Due to limited resources, rural elementary school leaders must concentrate on supporting professional learning communities. Barton (2012) found that professional development in reading in the rural setting can improve reading proficiency and its related outcomes and improve teacher efficacy, satisfaction, and retention in the rural setting.

Overview of the Research Site Context

Reese Elementary School (RES) is a rural public elementary school in the southern part of the United States. RES serves as Reese County School District's (RCSD) only elementary school for pre-kindergarten to fifth-grade students, with an enrollment of approximately 600 students and a teacher count of roughly 43. RES is a Title I school, with 63.96% of its population classified as economically disadvantaged (Student Longitudinal Data System [SLDS], 2022).

Teachers employed by RCSD have strong ties to the school and community. Reese County teachers reside within the county or its neighboring counties and tend to remain employed in RCSD until retirement. According to Georgia Insights (2022), the rate for retained teachers for FY22 was as follows: district, 92%; RESA, 88.4%; state, 90.82%. At the end of FY22 at RES, one teacher left the profession (2%), one retired (2%), and one transferred within the district (2%). Data were consistent in the previous three years; the teacher attrition rate did not exceed 2%, nor did the teacher retirement rate exceed 5%. With low teacher turnover, implementing and sustaining a PLC at RES can continually increase teachers' knowledge and impact student achievement over many years. Reese County school and county leaders must invest in the teachers dedicated to Reese County.

However, the rural setting impacts professional learning and development. Reese County School District has a county-wide leadership team of 6 adults: the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Director of Teaching and Learning, and a principal from each of the three schools. Due to limited personnel, these six leaders assume multiple responsibilities, a practice shared across rural schools (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). The Director of Teaching and Learning (Director) is responsible for professional learning (PL), several Federal Programs, Human Resources, and the Induction Teacher Program. Additionally, no school or county position is solely devoted to planning, preparing, and implementing professional learning opportunities. Due to these competing priorities, leaders have not focused on establishing cohesive, ongoing, and needs-based professional learning.

Sustained professional learning focusing on reading instructional improvement can potentially improve reading instruction and achievement. On the English Georgia Milestones Assessment in FY 21, the percentage of RES students scoring proficient or distinguished was

33.33%, lower than the statewide 38.56% (GOSA, 2022). While data were lagging, informal percentage calculations for FY23 were similar. Teachers must improve reading instruction at RES to see an increase in reading proficiency, and collaboration is a crucial component in this. District and school leaders must be creative in establishing and sustaining a PLC for reading teachers despite the resource challenges faced by the rural setting of the elementary school.

This study used the action research process to develop a system of support for elementary RES teachers based on their perceived professional learning needs. The goal of establishing and sustaining a PLC was to improve reading instruction. In addition, this study sought to examine teachers' perceptions of the impact of the said professional learning community on instructional practices.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined how leaders within a rural, public elementary school setting supported teachers by developing and implementing a PLC to improve reading instruction. Specifically, this study examined improving support for reading teachers in grades 3 and 4 as the instruction in these grade levels set the foundation for future reading achievement. Students who are not reading on grade level by grade 3 experience several negative consequences, both in school and beyond (Fiester, 2010; Miles & Stipek, 2006; Singh et al., 2022; Workman, 2014). Fourth graders do not perform at expected reading achievement levels (Terry et al., 2023). For over thirty years, the term "fourth-grade slump," coined by Chall et al. (1990), has been used to "describe the unexpected deceleration of reading skills between first and fourth grades among children growing up in poverty and low-income households" (Terry et al., 2023, p. 414). The intent for including both third- and fourth-grade teachers in this study was to impact instruction related to improving reading proficiency in third grade or as soon as possible beyond third grade.

This study examined the perspectives of the school leaders tasked with providing support through professional learning communities and the teachers who participated in the professional learning communities.

This study examined the following themes: 1) the challenges of establishing and supporting thriving professional learning communities in rural schools, 2) the implementation of effective reading teaching practices that balance phonics and vocabulary, reading accuracy and fluency, and comprehension instruction, and 3) the role of the rural school leaders in supporting professional learning communities to improve reading instruction. In addition, the researcher approached this study with some overall questions: How can school leaders overcome the challenges of providing professional learning in a rural school setting by establishing and supporting a professional learning community to improve reading instruction? How does a professional learning community impact reading instructional improvement? These themes and questions helped frame the overall research questions to guide the purpose and focus of the study.

Research Questions

The following research questions addressed the purpose of this action research study and guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?
2. What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?

3. How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?

The following section discusses the definitions of key terms related to the action research study. This section discussed the terms specifically associated with this study situated at Reese Elementary School.

Definition of Terms

For this study, the researcher defined the following key terms in the context of Reese Elementary School:

- "Collaboration" is defined as educators learning together in both informal and formal settings to improve instructional practice (Hallam et al., 2015).
- "Instructional Specialist" is a building instructional leader who partners with teachers to brainstorm teaching strategies and provide instructional support through small group interventions. At the time of the study, RES employed two instructional specialists.
- "Professional Learning (PL)" is defined as any activity teachers engage in that impacts professional practice.
- "Professional Learning Community (PLC)" is defined as "a group of professionals working collaboratively towards a shared purpose of improvement in instruction and student learning through dialogue" (Doğan & Adams, 2018, p. 636).
- "Reading Instruction" is defined as the teachers' whole and small group instruction in phonics, vocabulary, reading accuracy and fluency, and comprehension.
- "Rural School" is defined as a school located outside a populated urban center in a "small, close-knit [place] with intergenerational connections to land with a strong sense of pride,

community history, and tradition" (Crumb et al., 2023, p. 126). While Biddle and Azano (2016) and Thier et al. (2021) caution against a singular definition of rurality, the primary researcher used this definition to situate the context for this study.

- "Small group reading instruction" is defined as teacher-led instruction provided to a smaller group of students pulled from the total classroom population. Teachers give the students reading instruction based on a similar reading instructional level during this homogeneous group.

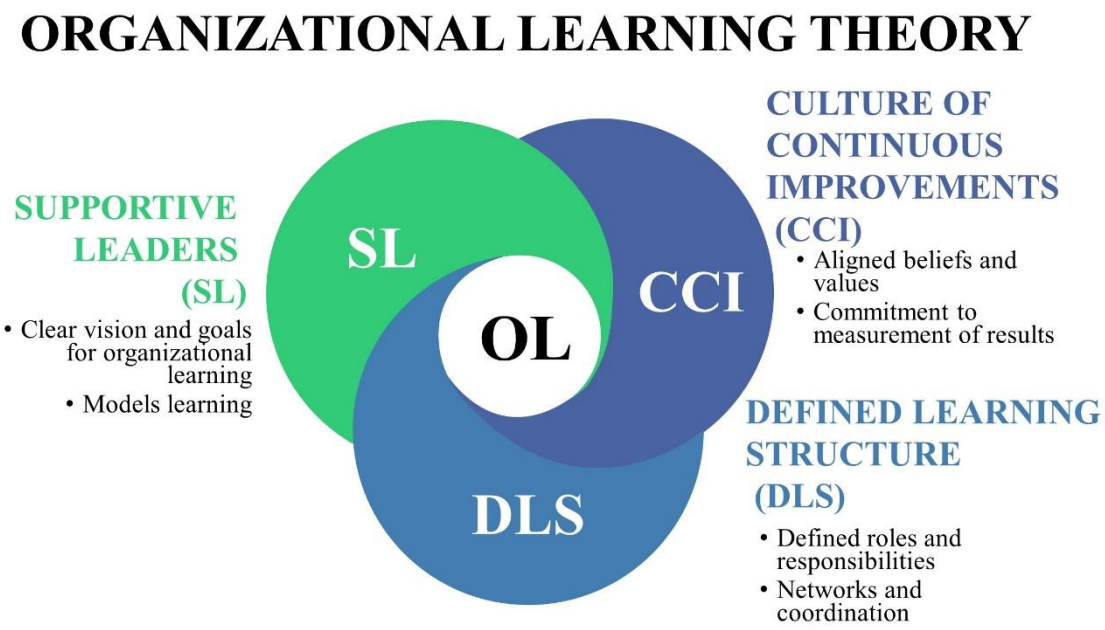
Theoretical Framework

Ongoing learning is essential for teacher instructional practice and improvement. However, in schools, learning should not occur in silos. Collective learning can refer to "the learning of groups within an organization … [through] the development of shared memories and mental models" (Fauske & Raybould, 2005, p. 24). When teachers collaborate, the impact of collective learning increases.

As such, the theoretical framework that provided structure for this action research and guided the creation and support of the professional learning community was Organizational Learning Theory. Specifically, this study modified a four-component model of Organizational Learning Theory influenced by Hamilton et al. (2008) and created by Milway and Saxton (2011) that included supportive leaders, a culture of continuous improvements, and defined learning structures.

Figure 1.1

Theoretical Framework of Organizational Learning Theory



Note: Adapted from Milway and Saxton (2011).

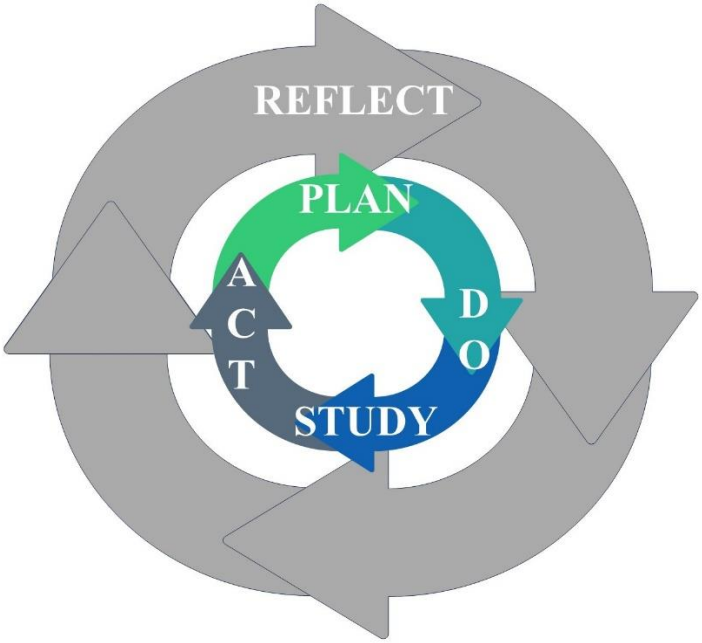
Fauske and Raybould (2005) asserted, "A big obstacle to organizational learning in schools is the lack of opportunities for educators to interact and develop shared understandings" (p. 35). By creating and supporting a professional learning community, the school leaders intended to overcome this organizational shortcoming and impact organizational learning, specifically in reading instruction. Figure 1.1 visually represents the theoretical framework used for this action research. The researcher/principal, assistant principal, and two instructional specialists comprised the Action Research Design Team at Reese Elementary School. Through collaboration, the design team intended to impact organizational learning by establishing and supporting a professional learning community focused on improving reading instruction.

Logic Model

The work of Deming (1993) provides a framework for improvement that includes "a framework to develop, test, and implement changes that would result in improvement" (Moen & Norman, 2010, p. 28). Thus, the action research design and implementation teams at RES used Deming's Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle (Figure 1.2) for continuous improvement throughout the action research process (Deming, 1993).

Figure 1.2

Logic Model of Plan, Do, Study, Act



Note: Adapted from Deming (1993).

Overview of the Methodology

The purpose of action research is to "build the capability of individuals and organizations to move beyond current cognitions and practice… [and to improve] practice and the health of the organization" (Calhoun et al., 1996, p. 5, as cited in Glanz, 2014, p.16). In educational settings, action researchers apply complex methods to identify solutions for everyday problems and improve their or their organization's practices (Corey, 1953; Glanz, 2014). Action research is specifically beneficial as those involved are empowered to commit to continuous improvement (Glanz, 2014). In the context of this study, the primary researcher and the action research team used the literature regarding PLCs overall and reading-specific PLCs, both generally and in rural settings, to provide structures of support in the form of a reading PLC. The action research team sought to support third- and fourth-grade elementary teachers by identifying their reading instructional needs and creating a PLC to support them.

Action Research

Action research was an appropriate methodology for this study because it centered on improvement as "an ongoing process of examining educational problems in school settings" (Glanz, 2014, p. 20). The cyclical action research process allowed time for reflection, identifying a focus, data collection and analysis, and action through targeted intervention (Glanz, 2014). Additional iterations guided by reflection and learned knowledge improved subsequent cycles.

Further, the goals and processes of the PLC mirrored those goals and methods of action research. Coghlan (2019) stated that action research is "a research approach that is based on a collaborative relationship between researcher and members of an organization or community, which aims both to address an issue of concern and to generate actionable knowledge" (p. 54). Similarly, PLCs are defined as "a group of professionals working collaboratively towards a

shared purpose of improvement in instruction and student learning through dialogue" (Doğan & Adams, 2018, p. 636). Both processes focus on collaboration, actionable knowledge, and continual improvement. Mertler (2016) combined these two constructs into an "action research learning community" that merges the key concepts and practices of focus and vision, sustained collaborative inquiry, meaningful professional growth, and "true empowerment through collaborative, inquiry-based, and reflective practice" (p. 2). Thus, during the action research, the researcher and design team also modeled processes necessary for establishing and supporting a successful PLC.

This action research sought to allow participants to pursue actionable knowledge for a "worthwhile purpose" (Coghlan, 2019, p. 56) that was personalized (Glanz, 2014). Reading teachers commented frequently on the need for reading instructional improvement in the years before the study. In FY24, the third-grade teaching team became organized into four self-contained classrooms, teaching all subjects. Two teachers were new to the third-grade team. One returning third-grade teacher had never taught reading. The fourth-grade team comprised one returning teacher and one new fourth-grade reading teacher. The new reading teacher was returning to the classroom after many years as an administrator and a middle school teacher before that. Thus, there was a need for professional learning around reading instruction. The researcher and the school's leadership team agreed that this purpose was necessary and urgent, as successfully teaching reading is one of the primary ethical responsibilities of a school. Thus, the researcher established an Action Research Design Team (ARDT) and an Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT). Tables 1.1 and 1.2 describe the participants of both teams. Participation in the study intended to build content and pedagogical knowledge to improve

reading instruction and allowed participants to expand their understanding of continual improvement processes beyond the study.

Table 1.1

Introduction to Action Research Design Team

Member	Primary Role at Reese Elementary School	Action Research Role
Primary Researcher	Principal	Led and conducted all research with the Action Research Design Team for data analysis. 13 years of classroom instruction experience and 4 years of elementary administrative experience.
Jeremy Jonas	Assistant Principal	Provided experience from 19 years of teaching middle grades and one year of elementary administrative experience.
Mary Goddington	Instructional Specialist	Provided experience from 13 years of teaching early elementary grades. Has served as an Instructional Specialist for 6 years. Also served as a member of the Instructional Leadership Team. Previously served as English Language Arts Benchmark Coach.
Adrian Shill	Instructional Specialist	Provided experience from 16 years of teaching all elementary grades. Has served as an Instructional Specialist for 3 years. Also served as a member of the Instructional Leadership Team. Previously served as Math Benchmark Coach.

Table 1.2

Introduction to Action Research Implementation Team

Member	Current Role at Reese Elementary School	Grades of Teaching Experience	Years of Experience Teaching Reading
Adrian Shill	K-5 Intervention Specialist	3, 4, 5, K-5 Intervention	16
Mary Goddington	K-5 Intervention Specialist	PreK, 1, K-5 Distance Learning, K-5 Intervention	13
Allee Edwards	4th Grade, General/Inclusion Education	PreK, 1, 2, 4, 5	23
Betty Mattison	4th Grade, General/Inclusion Education	4, 6-12	17
McClain Chouser	3rd Grade, General/Gifted Education	3	7
Toni Lesse	3rd Grade, General/Inclusion Education	3, 4, 7, 8	0
Kaden Ryle	3rd Grade, General Education	K, 2, 3	2

Throughout the study, the ARDT supported the ARIT, composed of a rural school's third- and fourth-grade reading teachers. The ARDT planned bi-weekly PLC meetings to provide the ARIT with professional learning and collaborative dialogue regarding areas of needed improvement. The ARDT collected and analyzed data to guide the study and shape the intervention and the PLC establishment. The two research cycles allowed time for implementation, reflection, and revision. Data collection occurred in a variety of ways. Interviews were conducted with the ARDT and ARIT at the beginning and end of the study to measure perceptions about reading instruction. The ARIT completed a reflective questionnaire after each bi-weekly check-in meeting that the ARDT used to gather individual perception data

and feedback and to guide future study actions. At the mid-point of the study, the ARDT and ARIT each participated in a focus group meeting. The researcher also collected data through meeting transcriptions and a researcher's journal.

Interventions

The primary intervention of this study took the form of a small group professional learning community comprised of the ARIT. The ARDT focus was to support the ARIT with professional learning interventions based on their perceived needs and to build instructional capacity to improve reading instruction. The ARIT met as a PLC every other week. During alternating weeks, the ARDT met bi-weekly to debrief the previous PLC meeting and to inform the intervention planning for the PLC.

Two cycles were designed and implemented for continuous improvement during the action research period. Each cycle had a duration of approximately two months. The RES ARDT and ARIT used the Plan, Do, Study, Act logic model to guide the action research (Deming, 1993; Moen & Norman, 2010). The first cycle for continuous improvement began in mid-August 2023 and concluded at the beginning of October 2023. The researcher provided details for the steps of the Plan, Do, Study, Act logic model used to guide the action research in Cycle I (Deming, 1993; Moen & Norman, 2010):

Plan: Cycle I focused on establishing community within the PLC meetings, collaborative lesson planning, and the elements of reading instruction present in reading small group lesson plans. The ARDT introduced various reading instructional methods using a collaborative small group reading lesson plan that the ARIT could implement during reading instruction to meet the varied needs of RES students.

Do: During the bi-weekly meeting of the PLC, the ARDT modeled their own lesson planning processes with differentiated texts. The ARDT defined and described various elements of reading instruction, specifically focusing on decoding, vocabulary, and morphology. The ARIT members were encouraged to bring texts to use with their student groups and participate in collaborative lesson planning.

Study: The ARIT reflected upon instructional practices in bi-weekly meetings and defined areas of perceived strength and concern to address in future PLC meetings. The ARDT analyzed data during meetings in alternating weeks to determine the next steps for the future PLC meeting.

Act: The ARIT began implementing reading small group lesson plans during their small group reading time. The ARDT analyzed data collected to determine the next steps for implementing an intervention with the ARIT in the PLC during Cycle II.

The second cycle started in October 2023 and ended in November 2023, before the Thanksgiving break. The details of the logic model steps for Cycle II are as follows:

Plan: Cycle II focused on incorporating more morphology and vocabulary resources in third and fourth grade through the continued use of the reading small group lesson plan template.

Do: In bi-weekly ARIT PLC meetings, the group continued to improve upon collaborative lesson planning, and the group began creating a word list to use in third and fourth grade.

Study: The ARIT reflected upon instructional practices in bi-weekly meetings and defined areas of perceived strength and concern to address in future PLC meetings. The ARDT analyzed data during meetings in alternating weeks to determine the next steps for the upcoming PLC meeting.

Act: The ARIT continued implementing small-group reading lesson plans during their small-group reading time and specifically focused on incorporating more vocabulary and morphology practices. Both ARIT and ARDT members discussed steps to take beyond the study.

Significance of the Study

This study was significant because it provided new insight into how elementary rural school leaders can establish and support professional learning communities that improve reading instructional practices. Scholarly research on the rural context (Gallo, 2020) and instructional improvement methods is sparse (Thier et al., 2021). Rural school leaders will glean information from the research related to the role of the school leadership in establishing and supporting the PLCs in the unique rural context with limited resources.

This study specifically focused on reading instructional improvement through professional learning in a rural elementary school to support elementary reading teachers. This study added to the gap in the research around reading instructional improvement through PLCs. This study addressed the gap in the literature related to supporting rural teachers and their professional learning needs. The results of this study contributed to the innovative ways rural leaders must creatively use available resources to support teachers' professional learning opportunities to positively impact student learning and achievement.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 gives an overview of the study and lays out an overview of the research questions, the problem of practice, and the methods for the study. Chapter 2 reviews the related literature for the study and discusses the characteristics and challenges of rural education and leaders, shared leadership, and professional learning and learning communities, both with a broad lens and a more specific focus on reading instruction. Chapter 3 describes the methodology involved in action research and the qualitative methods related to this study. Chapter 4 delves deeper into the action research context by describing the case and the action research cycles and interventions. Chapter 5 details the findings and analyzes them in relation to

the three research questions that guided this study. The researcher preliminarily explores the themes. Chapter 6 summarizes an overview of the study, its findings, and themes and offers implications for school leaders, policy makers, and further research. This chapter also provides final thoughts related to the action research. References and appendices follow Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Rural leaders face many unique contextual challenges (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Schreuder, 2010; Wallin, 2003), including providing systems of support for teachers, such as professional learning and supportive, relevant professional learning communities. Professional learning in a rural setting has the potential to overcome situational challenges by improving teacher content knowledge and pedagogy, as well as teacher retention (Banghart, 2021; Barton, 2012). The literature on the importance of professional learning to improve teacher instructional capacity is robust (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009, 2011; Wei et al., 2010; Zepeda, 2019). Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are frequently used to improve teacher instructional capacity overall (DuFour, 2004a, 2004b, 2014; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Hord, 1997, 2004), as well as specifically with reading instruction (D'Ardenne et al., 2013; Main et al., 2020; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020). Further, fostering shared leadership within PLCs allows rural schools to maximize resources for school improvement by increasing teacher leadership (Sharif, 2020; Shen et al., 2020; Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019).

Purpose of the Study

This study examined how leaders within a rural, public elementary school setting supported teachers by developing and implementing a PLC to improve reading instruction.

Research Questions

The following research questions addressed the purpose of this action research study and guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?
2. What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?
3. How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?

Chapter 2 provides a literature review separated into four sections to achieve the study's objectives. The first section provides an overview of education in a rural context, identifying unique challenges facing rural schools and school leaders. The second section includes information about rural school leaders, including responsibilities, challenges, and implementation of shared leadership practices. The third section explores professional learning and professional learning communities generally and reading-focused in all and rural-specific contexts. The fourth section details reading in elementary school, including history, the importance of reading proficiency, reading instructional beliefs and methods, and reading instruction in rural schools.

Rural Context

Teaching and leading in a rural school have unique challenges. The rural setting is complex (Hamilton et al., 2018; Klar & Huggins, 2020), and no single definition truly defines a rural setting (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Irvin et al., 2020; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018).

Further illustrating the complexity, the rural setting is intricate and constantly changing (Reagan et al., 2019). While there are many challenges that rural schools and students face (Gutierrez & Terrones, 2023; Schreuder, 2010; Wallin, 2003), there are many reasons to celebrate education within a rural setting, including better graduation rates (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021) and a strong sense of community (Brunn & Delany-Barmann, 2001).

To examine these challenges within rural education, one must understand the context of the complex rural setting (Hamilton et al., 2018). Collectively describing rural settings is a disservice (Irvin et al., 2020). In terms of population, a rural setting can vary from under 1,000 to 50,000 people (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2016). Despite the population variation, common rural characteristics are "higher unemployment, higher poverty, isolation, lack of job opportunities, lower education levels, and depopulation" (Wallin, 2003, p. 79). Azano and Biddle (2019) described some of the school and education challenges that transcend rural setting differences as "small, and often declining student populations, staff playing varied and multiple roles, weak teacher and staff labor markets, eroding tax bases, and the ever-present threat of closure and consolidation" (p. 6). Rural students are more likely to live in poverty, be more transient, and lack community resources like medical facilities and mental health services (Schreuder, 2010).

However, rural schools and students should not be viewed from a deficit perspective (Crumb et al., 2023). Azano and Stewart (2015) contended that acknowledging the limited resources and economic disadvantages is not viewing the rural setting through a deficit perspective lens. Instead, it is "an example of a critical and reflective practitioner who is acknowledging the individual needs of students and searching for relevant pedagogies to meet those needs" (Azano & Stewart, 2015, p. 7). Additionally, rural schools and their leaders

leverage a strong sense of community within the school and vital importance in the community beyond the school to overcome challenges (Azano et al., 2021; Brunn & Delany-Barmann, 2001; Marietta & Marietta, 2020). Schuler (2020) asserted that those educators who work in and understand rural schools "are able to draw on the strengths of our communities and mitigate the effects of our deficiencies" (p. 4). Reagan et al. (2019) encouraged practitioners to "embrace the assets of rural places" (p. 91). For example, rural students had higher graduation rates than non-rural high schools (Showalter et al., 2023; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021) and scored higher on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021).

While rural schools educate nearly a fifth of American elementary and secondary students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), these challenges and limited resources have been ignored (Azano & Biddle, 2019). Tieken and Montgomery (2021) stressed, "Rural schools need policies that promise all students, no matter where they live, a well-resourced, community-responsive education" (p. 11).

Rural School Leadership

Principals are essential (Grissom et al., 2021), especially regarding campus responsibility, instructional vision, and structures for student success (Smith et al., 2020). The importance of rural principals is magnified. A rural school is the "heart of its community" (White & Kline, 2012, p. 39). Sperry and Hill (2015) added, "Much of what goes on in small towns revolves around schools" (p. 14). Thus, rural leaders take a leadership role in both the school and community (Forner et al., 2012; Hall & McHenry-Sorber, 2017; Lamkin, 2006; Sutherland et al., 2022; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Thus, it is difficult to separate personal from professional life within a rural community; a rural leader is always on duty, and their actions are always on display (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Hall & McHenry-Sorber, 2017; Lamkin, 2006; Sperry & Hill,

2015; Williams et al., 2019). Further, rural leaders struggle with the "mismatch between identified needs and community priorities" (McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023; p. 458). Hansen (2018) concluded, "The rural principalship is complex and challenging, but it is also a position of tremendous possibility" (p. 51).

Rural leaders must understand the challenges unique to rural communities (Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Klar & Huggins, 2020; Preston et al., 2013), such as location, size, lack of resources, cultural and stereotypical characterization of the rural context, and gender discrimination (Mendiola et al., 2019). District- and school-level leaders have the burden of additional responsibilities with smaller administrative staff than larger districts (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Sutherland et al., 2022; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Willis & Templeton, 2018). Thus, rural leaders focused on managerial aspects over instruction, faced geographic isolation and decreasing enrollments, and handled teacher recruiting and retention concerns (Mendiola et al., 2019; Oyen & Schweinle, 2021; Sutherland et al., 2023). To be effective, rural leaders must balance these challenges and maximize existing resources within their context.

Rural leaders thrive when they understand the context (Barbosa & Coneway, 2023; Barley & Beesley, 2007). Involving school and community stakeholders in decisions (Farmer, 2009), creating partnerships with the community to increase community engagement to support student learning (Farmer, 2009; Henry, 2019; Sperry & Hill, 2015), and emphasizing personal relationships (Forner et al., 2012) help rural leaders become successful. There are harsh consequences for failing to leverage the setting; rural leader turnover rates increase, and schools and districts facd shorter leadership stability (Pendola & Fuller, 2018, as cited in Mendiola et al., 2019).

Rural Leader Responsibilities

Rural school-level leaders are often primarily responsible for recruiting and retaining quality teachers for their buildings. Quality teachers arguably matter more in rural school districts (Ulferts, 2016). However, it is harder to recruit and retain candidates due to differences in salaries, benefits packages, housing, and amenities when compared to non-rural districts (Barbosa & Coneway, 2023; Barton, 2012; Frahm & Cianca, 2021; McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023; Miller, 2012; Monk, 2007; Showalter et al., 2017; Tran et al., 2018). Additionally, there are differences in lifestyle for teachers employed in rural settings compared to non-rural areas. Rural teachers often had difficulty separating their public and personal lives in small communities (Tran et al., 2018), leading to job dissatisfaction and lower teacher retention. Rural students deserve high-quality teachers, just like students in non-rural settings (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Willis & Templeton, 2018).

Successful rural teacher recruitment and retention relies on candidate compatibility with the rural setting (DeFeo & Tran, 2019; Tran et al., 2018). Rural teacher turnover is higher than in non-rural settings (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Rural educators were more likely to remain in a rural school setting if they were educated in that same or a similar rural setting (Goodpaster et al., 2012; Leech et al., 2022; Ulferts, 2016); Huysman (2008) referred to these educators with an existing connection to the rural community as “homegrown” teachers. Partnerships and practicums with surrounding universities (Azano & Stewart, 2015; McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023; Versland et al., 2020) and “grow your own” programs that focus on training high school students and paraprofessionals to become educators help teacher recruitment and retention by building on the connection to and understanding of the rural community (McConnell et al., 2021; Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018; Monk, 2007; Oyen & Schweinle, 2021). Roberts et al. (2022) and Yan

and Li (2023) emphasized the importance of rural teacher preparation regarding understanding the rural context and the pedagogical necessities for teaching in a rural school. The impact of knowledge of the community on recruitment and retention cannot be understated.

Rural educators must understand the "heartbeat" of the community (Romero-Robles, 2018). Teacher retention improved when schools recruited and hired teachers who understood and valued the unique setting of the rural school and were welcomed into the community (Leech et al., 2022; Ulferts, 2016). Retention rates improved when rural leaders oriented new teachers through introductions and familiarization (Brenner et al., 2021; DeFeo & Tran, 2019). With an improved understanding of the community, rural educators further detail many benefits that positively impact rural school retention.

Educators employed in the rural setting benefit from smaller class sizes, more autonomy, fewer discipline problems, closer relationships with students, parents, and the community, and higher perceived job satisfaction (Barton, 2012; Tran et al., 2018). These teachers are also said to enjoy the rural landscape, slower pace of life, close-knit community feeling (Miller, 2012), lower crime rates, and less traffic (Brenner et al., 2021). Huysman's (2008) research found that rural school isolation, limited resources, and other perceived rural school deficits were "acceptable trade-offs" for living in rural communities (p. 35). Overall retention in rural schools is higher than in urban and suburban counterparts. However, Nguyen (2020) and Williams et al. (2021) cautioned against making generalized statements about teacher retention in all rural schools because of the differing contexts within rural settings.

Shared Leadership

The success or failure of an organization is crucial and significantly affected by leadership. It has become more challenging for an individual to possess all the required skills,

characteristics, and abilities to lead an organization effectively (Kocolowski, 2010). For many years, leaders conceptualized the leadership paradigm as an individual's relationship with people under their authority or control. Leadership has primarily focused on the leader as an individual instead of viewing leadership as an activity (Pearce & Conger, 2003). As a result, research was conducted on the leader's behaviors, mindsets, and beliefs rather than researching leadership as an activity involving a team (Pearce & Conger, 2003).

More recently, the traditional leadership paradigm has shifted into a team-level, shared approach where leadership is an action carried out by a team rather than by an individual with a formal title (Wu & Cormican, 2021). Kocolowski (2010) summarized a review of the literature and defined shared leadership as "... a relational, collaborative leadership process or phenomenon involving teams or groups that mutually influence one another and collectively share duties and responsibilities otherwise relegated to a single, central leader" (p. 24). O'Toole et al. (2002) concurred on sharing duties and responsibilities in school improvement efforts.

For many years, school leaders and outsiders believed that a strong, skilled leader was the answer to improving schools. Principals set the tone, hired qualified personnel, managed budgets, guided instruction, created a vision and mission, and developed and worked toward school goals (Nappi, 2014). Lambert (2002) and Nguyen et al. (2020) posited that the days when a principal is the only leader in the school are over. A successful instructional school leader needs the contributions of other educators (Lambert, 2002; Shen et al., 2020; Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019) and stakeholders (Leithwood, 2021). Shared leadership practices have become essential to instructional leadership practices (Hallinger, 2011; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Sharif, 2020; Shen et al., 2020) as principals' instructional leadership has the potential to impact student achievement positively (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Klar et al., 2020).

Incorporating Shared Leadership Practices into a Rural-Specific Context

In any setting, teachers benefit from shared leadership. Teacher self-efficacy improves (Bandura, 1977; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001, as cited by Li et al., 2022, p. 328). As a result of improved self-efficacy, engagement, job satisfaction, and autonomy also improve (Bouchamma et al., 2019; Federici, 2013; Sokmen & Kilic, 2019; Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019). When leaders involve teachers in shared leadership, job satisfaction and retention improve (Koedel et al., 2017). Improved teacher retention due to shared leadership is critical in the rural setting.

There are many benefits to supporting the implementation of shared leadership practices in the rural context. Rural principals have heavy workloads and take on multiple roles in a rural school (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Herrenan & Longmuir, 2019; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). When additional personnel like instructional coaches are limited in rural school settings, principals are often tasked with providing instructional leadership (Mette et al., 2017). This construct is present in a rural school without additional instructional personnel. Thus, successful rural leaders acknowledge the need for others' help (Andreoli et al., 2020). A principal cannot handle all the increased stress and demands as the sole instructional leader (Klar & Huggins, 2020; Leithwood et al., 1999) with the limited resources found in rural districts (Eckert, 2019; Gutierrez & Terrones, 2023). Fortunately, the rural context allows more flexibility in sharing leadership with teachers beyond formal leadership positions (Brenner et al., 2021; Nelson, 2022). Rural teachers hold shared leadership roles as one aspect of shared roles and responsibilities in a rural setting (Nelson, 2022). Additionally, implementing shared leadership practices in rural schools improves teacher retention (Seelig & McCabe, 2021).

Using shared leadership practices to foster school improvement directly relates to professional learning. Shared leadership through professional learning improved teaching, which impacted student achievement (Musselman et al., 2014). Thus, shared leadership practices can foster rural school improvement efforts (Andreoli et al., 2020; Hadden, 2000; Bauch, 2001; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009).

Professional Learning

Professional learning (PL) aims to impact classroom practice and improve student achievement (DuFour, 2004a, 2004b; Garet et al., 2001; Lomos et al., 2011). Single-session PL is ineffective in improving teacher practice and student outcomes (Zepeda, 2019). PL efforts must be sustained (Darling-Hammond, 2017) and extend over time (Desimone, 2009, 2011; Porter et al., 2000, as cited in Zepeda, 2019). Thus, leaders implement Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to provide continual professional learning that seeks to impact student achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Moulakdi & Bouchamma, 2020).

Professional Learning Communities

Zepeda (2019) defined PLCs as "a model of job-embedded professional development where teachers work together to examine their practices and to develop high-leverage teaching strategies" (p. 91). Common features of PLCs include collaboration, a shared vision and purpose, a focus on instruction and student learning, reflection to improve teacher learning and instruction, and structures and support for the de-privatization of teaching (Doğan & Adams, 2018; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Community is at the center of the PLC concept (Stoll et al., 2006), as establishing trusting, collegial relationships create a foundation for collaborative interactions and improvement (Leclerc et al., 2012).

The community must have trust at the forefront for successful PLC improvement efforts. Members of the PLC must trust other members to discuss current instructional practices reflectively. Additionally, practices potentially enacted by PLC, like peer observation and model lessons, require a trusting collegial relationship (Hord, 1997). The PLC members must have mutual respect and be open to criticism from the other members for improved practice (Leclerc et al., 2012). Leaders must establish a trusting culture in the entire school setting to be successful within the smaller PLC setting.

School leaders play an essential role in establishing and sustaining PLCs. Leaders must establish a strong culture of professional learning throughout the school to ensure the transfer of learning from a PLC to teacher practice. A culture that emphasizes the importance of teacher agency and ownership and continuous active learning allows deeper learning to occur (Zepeda, 2019). Establishing a trusting and supportive culture provides for "the ongoing refinement of practice" (Zepeda, 2019, p. 25). Shared leadership elements are present in this supportive culture.

Leclerc et al. (2012) detailed three stages of a PLC: Initiation, Implementation, and Integration. The leader's role is very prevalent in the PLC learning and processes at the beginning initiation phase but then decreases with future, later stages. The last stage, integration, features the leadership of teachers, consistent with shared leadership. While the leader had a prominent role at the beginning of the PLC, the support gradually decreased as teacher leadership increased. Poekert (2016) found that as teachers become leaders within PLCs, professional learning improves for colleagues and the teacher-leaders.

Reading Professional Learning Communities. Effective reading instruction is complex (Connor et al., 2009; Pressley et al., 2023). Further exacerbating this complexity is the gap

between effective reading instruction and teacher preparation (Moats, 2020). Teachers are ill-equipped and under-prepared to teach reading (Clark et al., 2017; Bos et al., 2001; Moats, 2020). Podhajski et al. (2009) concluded that students' progress significantly improved when teachers provided scientifically-based reading instruction that met students' needs. Thus, teachers must participate in professional learning activities to translate reading research into practice that best meets their students' individual and varied needs (Clark et al., 2017).

To improve reading instructional practices, leaders must focus on professional learning (Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020). This professional learning must be content-specific, extended in duration (Desimone, 2009, 2011), sustained (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), and contextualized (Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020). Woulfin and Gabriel (2020) found that embedded professional learning, like PLCs, could improve reading instruction and achievement through educators' collaborative dialogue about students and reading instructional practices. However, Main et al. (2020) urged leaders to critically examine and challenge teacher beliefs and practices to ensure the current or improved reading practices align with the curricular improvement goals of professional learning.

Collaboration is an essential part of a reading professional learning community. D'Ardenne et al. (2013) described a PLC aimed at implementing innovative teaching methods for struggling readers in grades 3 through 5. The teachers collaboratively created small group reading lessons that included four parts: decoding, vocabulary development, comprehension strategies, and responding to standardized test questions (D'Ardenne et al., 2013). The group used the lessons as a starting point to remediate various aspects of reading instruction based on individual student needs and incorporated earlier-level literacy skills at the decoding level, which teachers may not have previously addressed in instruction in third grade and above. Clark et al.

(2017) found that collaborative lesson planning was the most impactful professional development practice. Collaboration helps improve reading instructional capacity.

Professional Learning in the Rural Context

Willis and Templeton (2018) found that shared leadership, buy-in from teachers, mutual trust, consistent leadership from building-level leaders, and understanding of PLC goals were essential to successful PLCs in rural schools. The work of Chance and Segura (2009) found that the already-established community in a rural high school included improved communication and trust, which added to the professional learning community and collaboration that impacted school improvement efforts. Rural leaders used their knowledge of staff strengths and expertise (Preston & Barnes, 2017) and their relationships in their school community and community overall (Howley & Howley, 2005) as foundations to establish successful PLCs in rural settings.

The strength of the community within a rural school and in the rural school community can benefit professional learning communities (Klar & Huggins, 2020). Community is an essential element of a PLC (Stoll et al., 2006). As rural teachers have an improved understanding of community due to the setting, the importance of establishing a community of learners and collective learning and achievement to a PLC (Stoll et al., 2006) mirrors the rural school community.

Professional learning in a rural setting impacts teacher content knowledge and pedagogy and could improve teacher retention (Banghart, 2021; Barton, 2012; Cox & Mullen, 2023). However, PL methods and models implemented in other school settings with more personnel and support resources may not be possible or successful in a rural setting (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Eckert, 2019; Glover et al., 2016; Johnston et al., 2018; Skyhar, 2021; Willis & Templeton, 2018). Rural teachers faced “professional isolation” (Johnston et al., 2018, p. 57) due to a lack of

time for collaborative interactions (Harmon, 2018), as well as geographic separation and limited resources and support (Freeman & Randolph, 2013; Gutierrez & Terrones, 2023; Howley & Howley, 2005; Skyhar, 2021; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). The lack of professional collaboration and resources can negatively impact teacher retention (Goodpaster et al., 2012; McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023). For lasting retention and successful professional learning, leaders must provide opportunities that meet the unique needs of rural teachers.

There is limited research on rural professional development (Glover et al., 2016) and rural teacher support regarding early reading instruction (Glover, 2017). Several studies described reading instructional support provided to rural teachers through web-based coaching cycles (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2018; Glover et al., 2015). More research is necessary to determine the essential characteristics of establishing and supporting PLCs to improve reading instruction in rural settings.

The Foundation of Reading Knowledge in the Elementary School

Best practices for reading instruction have been a source of contention for hundreds of years (Petscher et al., 2020; Pressley et al., 2023). Both professional opinion and legislation have fueled the so-called “reading wars” and have created division instead of collaboration and improvement among scholars and educators (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHHD], 2000; No Child Left Behind, 2001; Petscher et al., 2020; Pressley et al., 2023). However, the research is clear: students who are not successful readers by third grade are more likely to remain poor readers in high school (Fiester, 2010), have more behavior and social problems, and experience higher retention rates (Miles & Stipek, 2006, as cited in Fiester, 2010). Additionally, Workman (2014) found that students are at a greater risk of dropping out of high school, being unemployed, or involved in the criminal justice system if they do not learn to

read. Thus, school leaders must take action to guide teachers to unite to improve reading instruction in schools.

History of Reading Instruction

For hundreds of years, scholars have been clashing over reading instructional practices. In the 1700s, Noah Webster believed in the explicit teaching of letters and sounds. Horace Mann challenged this view of reading in the 1800s; he favored a more holistic approach to reading (Castles et al., 2018). This reading debate continued throughout the next century. Petscher et al. (2020) detailed the conflicting opinions of positivists Chall (1967, 1983, 1996) and Flesch (1955), who believed in explicit instruction for students to acquire reading skills, with the views of constructivists Goodman (1967) and Smith (1971), who thought reading was a natural process nurtured in a literacy-rich environment. The debate continued in state-level legislation during the 1980s and 1990s (Kim, 2008; Thomas, 2022).

Federal legislation sought to end the debate surrounding effective reading instruction with The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Allington, 2006). However, the philosophical arguments continued when states lost the autonomy to make instructional decisions about reading initiatives and expectations. Under the NCLB provisions, lack of achievement and failure to implement mandates would lead to loss of federal funds. Thus, the findings in NCLB influenced reading instructional methods nationally. Congress established the National Reading Panel (NRP) to review research, conclude effective beginning reading instruction, and inform the creation of NCLB and its specific Reading First mandates. While the intentions were to end the debate, the work of the NRP, the creation of NCLB, and the funding provided under Reading First fueled further division.

President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. ESSA attempted to rectify the shortcomings of NCLB, such as the need for comprehensive literacy instruction and continuous professional teacher learning (Dennis, 2017). This legislation became known as a positive step toward improving reading instruction (Dennis, 2017) as it reinstated autonomy to the state and local domains (Weiss & McGuinn, 2016).

Despite the positive momentum of ESSA, the term "Science of Reading" (SoR) drew the attention of the US media around 2018, once again polarizing scholars and educators. While SoR was initially used to describe "the broad and nuanced body of research on how children learn to read and how to teach reading best" (Thomas, 2022, p. 14), the media and well-known publishers reduced the phrase to describe phonics-explicit teaching and materials only. Thus, the reading wars continued with disagreements between explicit or embedded phonics practices (Pressley et al., 2023; Thomas, 2022).

Supporting collaboration between social scientists, politicians, researchers, and practitioners recommended by Kim (2008), Castles et al. (2018) called for the reading wars to end so all involved could focus on developing a balanced and deep understanding of how language and writing systems work instead of participating in the continuous, contentious debate. Pressley et al. (2023) affirmed a balanced teaching method, which includes instruction on the varied components of reading, to create skilled readers. Teaching children to read continues to be educators' priority, and centuries-long debates must no longer deter progress.

Reading Proficiency by Third Grade

Podhajski et al. (2009) asserted, "Reading serves as the major conduit for all learning - the groundwork for both school and life-based knowledge" (p. 403). Workman (2014) reported a critical shift from basic reading skills to using reading skills for more complex learning in the

third-grade year. This shift is consistent with stages of reading described by Chall (1967, 1983, 1996), with a transition from learning-to-read instruction to reading-to-learn instruction. Students who are not proficient in the learning-to-read stages will be unsuccessful in the reading-to-learn stages. However, in later elementary years, differentiated reading instruction must include interventions with both foundational, skill-focused, and meaning-focused targets (Donegan & Wanzek, 2021).

Unfortunately, students who are not proficient readers by third grade could potentially experience several negative consequences. Students who are not successful readers by third grade will likely remain poor throughout high school (Fiester, 2010). These students have increased behavior concerns and social problems and experience higher retention rates (Miles & Stipek, 2006, as cited in Fiester, 2010). Additionally, Workman (2014) found that these students are at a greater risk of dropping out of high school, being unemployed, or involved in the criminal justice system if they do not learn to read. Thus, students must receive reading instruction in specific skill deficits to help them become proficient readers. Reading instruction must include multi-component intervention as students progress to later elementary years (Donegan & Wanzek, 2021). Teachers must provide small group instruction with both code-focused and meaning-focused skills to meet the varied needs of upper elementary students (Donegan & Wanzek, 2021).

Castles et al. (2018) concluded, “Learning to read transforms lives” (p. 5). Conversely, illiteracy can be a detriment. The World Literacy Foundation (2015) concluded that “illiteracy costs the global economy more than $1 trillion (US dollars) in direct costs alone” (as cited in Castles et al., 2018, p. 5). Additional indirect costs include failing to acquire basic knowledge about hygiene, diet, or safety, poor physical and mental health, increased participation in crime,

and welfare dependency (World Literacy Foundation, 2015, as cited in Castles et al., 2018). These consequences further illustrate the necessity of successful early literacy instruction.

Next Steps for Reading in the Elementary School

While the contentious debates regarding the current state of reading instruction continue, teacher practitioners must put arguments aside to use instructional methods that meet the needs of their students. Both sides of the reading war agree that there is no one specific, agreed-upon approach to teaching students how to read (Thomas, 2022). Additionally, what works for one student may not work for another. The growing body of research highlighting negative consequences for students who cannot read by third grade exacerbates this urgency.

Theories of Reading and Reading Instruction

To truly meet the needs of individual students, teachers must have a working knowledge of various reading theories that impact reading instruction today. Teachers can gain this knowledge through professional learning experiences.

One of the most widely-cited frameworks of reading instruction is Chall's learning-to-read and reading-to-learn phases (1967, 1983, 1996). Students go through Chall's (1967, 1983, 1996) stages 1 and 2 during the learning-to-read phase. Chall described Stage 1 as initial reading and decoding around ages 6 to 7 and in grades 1 and 2. Children understand the alphabetic principle in this stage and can connect sounds to symbols. In Stage 2, described as confirmation and fluency, students ages 7 and 8 in grades 2 and 3 read familiar books so they may apply the aspects of fluency. Success in the two early stages is essential for success in later stages, but the focus during the early stages should not overshadow the end goal of text comprehension.

The National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) described another reading framework. Their work described five pillars of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and

reading comprehension (NRP, 2000). Many practitioners took this body of research and began implementing the pillars in disconnected instructional activities. Seidenberg et al. (2020) cautioned against this simplistic view of the five pillars in isolation. They argued that the five pillars are interdependent and have the end goal of text comprehension.

Castles et al. (2018) attempted to merge these theories into three parts: cracking the alphabetic code, becoming fluent in word recognition skills, and learning to comprehend text. This body of research integrates both Chall's stages of reading and NPR's five pillars to show the interconnectivity of stages and pillars during reading instruction.

The three primary reading instructional approaches frequently referenced in the reading wars are Whole Language, Structured Literacy, and Balanced Literacy. These instructional approaches have unique beliefs on approaching and implementing a reading framework. Based on the work of Ken Goodman (1967; 1986), the Whole Language approach to reading is holistic. Students learn to read through experiences with texts. Students learn phonics as embedded skills without a prescribed sequence. When students encounter an unknown word, they use a three-cueing system. Conversely, Structured Literacy is an explicit, direct-instruction approach to language skills for all students (Moats, 2019). Balanced Literacy attempts to merge the holistic Whole Language and explicit Structured Literacy approaches and draws upon the unique needs of each student (Pressley, 1998; Pressley et al., 2023).

Pressley et al. (2023) affirmed the need for educators to be well-versed in all aspects of reading instruction to meet the unique needs of students. Further, a balanced approach "takes the research evidence on the potential of early and explicit decoding instruction and blends it with the research evidence on the potential of meaning-emphasis instruction for developing vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation to read" (Pressley et al., 2023, p. 23). Teachers must

be versed in all aspects of reading instruction to succeed (Giles & Tunks, 2015). Professional learning is essential to meet this goal.

Reading Instruction in Rural Schools

Federal legislation, national debates, and local beliefs and mandates influence learning to read in any school. The rural-specific context also impacts learning to read in a rural school. Teachers' instructional practices are affected by limited resources and a lack of professional development (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Eckert, 2019; Glover et al., 2016; Glover, 2017; Johnston et al., 2018; Willis & Templeton, 2018). Further, rural students experience unique, context-specific reading instructional challenges yet to be explored.

There is still much to examine within the confines of reading instructional improvement, especially in the rural context. Rural leaders must also facilitate professional learning to support instructional improvement as they attempt to wade through the myriad of reading theories and debates. Without a firm and deep understanding of how children learn to read, leaders cannot plan successful professional learning experiences for teachers. While some leaders may wait until the current reading war die down, history shows that discord and disagreement will remain. Our students cannot wait any longer; they must have teachers versed in various theories, methods, and instructional strategies to meet their unique and urgent reading needs.

Chapter Summary

The rural setting is complex (Hamilton et al., 2018). Rural leaders face unique challenges (Hansen, 2018) and must understand the rural context to lead rural schools successfully (Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Mendiola et al., 2019). Rural schools have small, decreasing student populations and staff responsible for multiple roles (Azano & Biddle, 2019). Rural students are more likely to live in poverty and are more transient

(Schreuder, 2010). However, rural schools have better graduation rates (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). A strong sense of community permeates both the school and outside school settings, which helps overcome rural challenges (Brunn & Delany-Barmann, 2001).

Rural school leaders have a complex and challenging role (Hansen, 2018). They are leaders in not only the school but also the community, with a blurred personal-professional life separation and little privacy (Forner et al., 2012; Hall & McHenry-Sorber, 2017; Lamkin, 2006; Sperry & Hill, 2015; Sutherland et al., 2022; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Additionally, a lack of resources due to the small size of rural schools permeates a rural leader's role and responsibilities (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Mendiola et al., 2019; Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Sutherland et al., 2022; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Willis & Templeton, 2018). A rural leader is responsible for a school's instructional and managerial aspects, as well as teacher recruitment and retention (Mendiola et al., 2019). Despite these challenges, rural leaders thrive when they understand the context (Barley & Beesley, 2007).

Implementing shared leadership practices helps leaders distribute work and responsibility for instructional improvement (O'Toole et al., 2002). Mendiola et al. (2019) found that rural leaders focused more time on managerial aspects when compared to instructional elements. Thus, involving stakeholders in shared leadership practices in rural schools helps rural leaders focus on school improvement efforts. Successful rural leaders acknowledge needing others (Andreoli et al., 2020).

Professional learning impacts school improvement efforts. Leaders use Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to provide continual professional learning to impact student achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Moulakdi & Bouchamma, 2020). Reading instruction is often a focus of professional learning due to its complexity (Connor et al., 2009) and the

perceived lack of teacher preparation in reading (Clark et al., 2017; Bos et al., 2001; Moats, 2020). Woulfin and Gabriel (2020) found that embedded professional learning, like PLCs, could improve reading instruction and achievement through educators' collaborative dialogue about students and reading instructional practices. Professional learning helps teachers translate reading research into practice to meet student needs (Clark et al., 2017), contributing to school improvement.

Providing professional learning in a rural school setting can be difficult. PL methods and models implemented in other school settings with more personnel and support resources may not be possible or successful in a rural setting (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Eckert, 2019; Glover et al., 2016; Johnston et al., 2018; Willis & Templeton, 2018). Rural teachers face "professional isolation" (Johnston et al., 2018, p. 57), a lack of time for collaboration (Harmon, 2018), and limited resources (Freeman & Randolph, 2013; Glover et al., 2016; Howley & Howley, 2005; Wei et al., 2010; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Thus, rural leaders must be proactive and creative in providing their rural school staff with professional learning opportunities.

Reading instructional improvement should be a priority for professional learning. Students who are not proficient readers by third grade face many negative consequences. They are more likely to remain poor readers in high school (Fiester, 2010) and experience higher retention rates (Miles & Stipek, 2006). These students are at a greater risk of dropping out of high school, being unemployed, or involved in the criminal justice system if they do not learn to read (Workman, 2014). However, best practices for reading instruction have been a source of contention for hundreds of years (Petscher et al., 2020), as there is no one specific, agreed-upon approach to teaching students how to read (Pressley et al., 2023; Thomas, 2022). Thus, teachers

must participate in professional learning activities to translate reading research into practice that best meets their students' individual and varied needs (Clark et al., 2017; Pressley et al., 2023).

Chapter 3 will detail the action research methodology and explore the foundation for further development of the research, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques. Chapter 3 will also describe the interventions of this study in detail.

CHAPTER 3

ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Rural leaders face many unique contextual challenges (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Schreuder, 2010; Wallin, 2003), including providing systems of support for teachers, such as professional learning and supportive, relevant professional learning communities. Professional learning in a rural setting has the potential to overcome situational challenges by improving teacher content knowledge and pedagogy, as well as teacher retention (Banghart, 2021; Barton, 2012). The literature on the importance of professional learning to improve teacher instructional capacity is robust (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009, 2011; Wei et al., 2010; Zepeda, 2019). Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are frequently used to improve teacher instructional capacity overall (DuFour, 2004a, 2004b, 2014; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Hord, 1997, 2004), as well as specifically with reading instruction (D'Ardenne et al., 2013; Main et al., 2020; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020). Further, fostering shared leadership within PLCs allows rural schools to maximize resources for school improvement by increasing teacher leadership (Sharif, 2020; Shen et al., 2020; Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019).

Purpose of the Study

This study examined how leaders within a rural, public elementary school setting supported teachers by developing and implementing a PLC to improve reading instruction.

Research Questions

The following research questions addressed the purpose of this action research study and guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?
2. What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?
3. How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?

Chapter 3 explores the theoretical framework and logic model that guided the study, an explanation of the research design, data collection methods, data analysis, and a discussion of the study's reliability, validity, and limitations.

Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

In qualitative research, participants construct meaning through contextualized, flexible, and relevant learning under the constructivist learning theory (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Stringer & Aragón, 2021). The researcher, situated within the study context, is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Stringer & Aragón, 2021). This study aligned with the qualitative characteristics of a researcher who was situated within the context and making meaning through data collection and analysis as the primary researcher; the school's principal collected and analyzed descriptive data throughout all stages of the study to make meaning of how a Professional Learning Community (PLC) impacted reading instruction at the researcher's elementary school.

As a unique feature of qualitative studies, results cannot be applied and generalized to other contexts. Qualitative research seeks greater clarity and understanding within a specific context, not universal truth emphasized in quantitative research (Stringer & Aragón, 2021). Barbour and Barbour (2003) described qualitative research as a "bottom-up approach" intended to find new and innovative solutions for problems of practice in a specific context (p. 185). Further illustrating the need for this study to be qualitative, Hairon et al. (2015) argued that the PLC's situated context uniquely impacts participants' experiences in a PLC and, as such, is best designed as a qualitative study. As such, the study benefits from the "observational data from smaller samples over a more intensive period to interpret the fine-grained details of PLC enactment" (Hairon et al., 2015, p. 182). The unique time, place, and use of PLC in this research study provided a layered context to examine the impact of a PLC on reading instructional methods implemented by third- and fourth-grade teachers in one rural elementary school.

Based on organizational learning theory, the study intended to examine participants' collective efforts and learning processes while participating in a PLC to improve reading instruction. Hairon et al. (2015) supported a robust research design for PLC studies, including data collection through observation, interviews, and artifacts. Consequently, in this study, data collected through interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, meeting transcriptions, and researcher notes were analyzed by the researcher to make sense of the learning process. Through rich and detailed descriptions, this study sought to gain clarity and understanding of the complex collective learning experiences as impacted by a PLC.

Overview of Action Research Methods

Action research, a subset of qualitative research, builds participant capacity and improves individual and collective practice in response to organization- and context-specific problems

(Corey, 1953; Glanz, 2014). Action researchers are interested in finding potential solutions to a problem they face in their specific context (Mack et al., 2005). Improved capacity and knowledge are directly related to a "worthwhile purpose" that is personally meaningful and applicable to those invested in the research (Coghlan, 2019, p. 56).

This study focused on collaborative action research, defined as the collaboration of practitioners and researchers working jointly to produce knowledge that applies to real-world scenarios and can potentially bring about beneficial social change (O'Brien & Goldring, 2015). Thus, the collaborative role of participants in action research cannot be understated; participants are central to both the action and the research in this process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The work of Sagor (2000) highlighted the study's relevance for the participants. In the specific context of this research study, participants were personally motivated to improve reading instruction to impact student achievement. Thus, implementing action research methods was an appropriate match for the perceived context-specific purpose of supporting reading instructional improvement within the collective work of a PLC.

Action Research Design

Deming's (1993) Plan, Do, Study, Act framework guided the work of the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) in developing and implementing a PLC with the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) to improve reading instruction. Action research allowed the researcher and participants to identify a problem of practice specific to the contextual setting of Reese Elementary School, design and implement interventions to impact the reading instructional practices of participants in the action research, reflect on the impact of those interventions, revise interventions, and plan for next steps for continued improvement beyond the scope of the study. Ultimately, the researcher's findings were insights into how participants

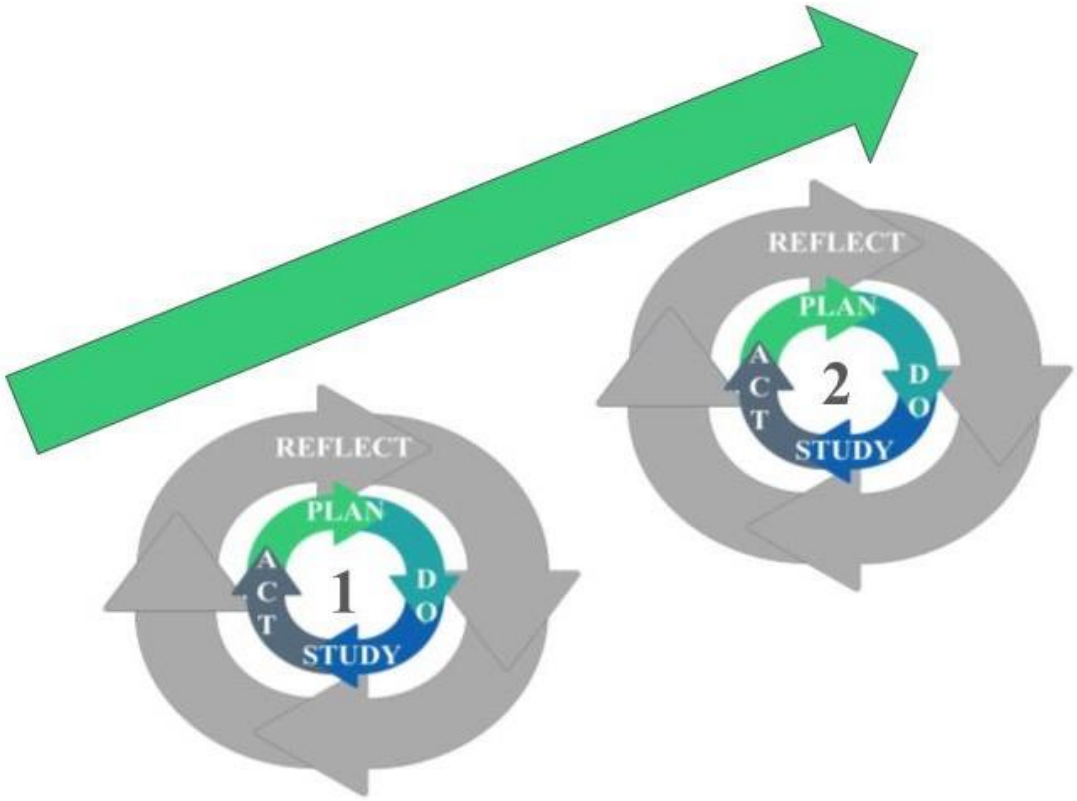
comprehend the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using these findings to guide future studies contributes to the iterative cycle of identifying a focus, collecting data, analyzing data, and creating action through interventions, which is essential to action research (Glanz, 2014).

The Spiraling and Iterative Nature of Action Research

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) used the iterative action research cycle of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) merged with the logic model of Plan, Do, Study, Act (Deming, 1993) to examine the impact of a PLC on reading instructional improvement. Zuber-Skerritt (2001) elaborated that the participants implement the first cycle of strategic planning, action, observation, and reflection to inform decisions for a revised plan for the team to implement later. The team should also critically analyze the process through those same four steps and repeat them multiple times in iterative cycles. Figure 3.1 shows the initial cycle and additional cycles based on iterative improvement based on the work of Zuber-Skerritt (2001) influenced by the logic model of Plan, Do, Study, Act (Deming, 1993).

Figure 3.1

The Spiraling Nature of Action Research



Note: Adapted from Deming (1993) and Zuber-Skerritt (2001).

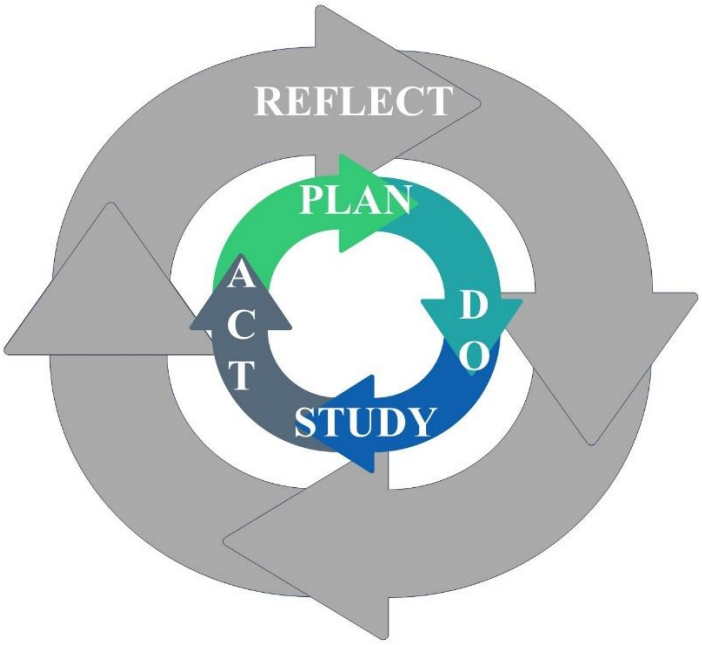
The connected iterations of the logic model and action research cycle phases allowed the researcher and participants to improve their understanding of the impact of a PLC on reading instructional improvement.

Logic Model

This study examined the action research work of the Action Research Design and Implementation Teams through developing and implementing a PLC to improve reading instruction. A logic model provided a frame of reference during the study to highlight inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. Deming (1993) provided a framework for improvement that includes "strategies and methods to develop, test, and implement changes that would result in improvement" (Moen & Norman, 2010, p. 28). Figure 3.2 illustrates the relationship between inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes expected from each action research cycle.

Figure 3.2

Logic Model of Plan, Do, Study, Act



Note: Adapted from Deming (1993).

The arrows surrounding the figure illustrate the iterative nature of revision and reflection. A theory of change pervaded the work of continual organizational learning improvement.

Theory of Change

The study aimed to examine how a structure of support, specifically a PLC, could impact reading instructional improvement. The underpinnings of the study included constructivist beliefs of individuals constructing their knowledge, as well as organizational learning theory, whereby both individuals and organizations individually and collectively learn. A theory of change was pervasive in the study, as the purpose of action research and the theory of change were intertwined. In this specific intersection, the researcher sought to understand how constructivism and organizational learning theory interacted during a PLC intended to impact reading instructional methods.

The PLC itself was undergirded in constructivism and organizational learning theory, as the researcher's intended aim of the PLC was to be a place where teachers can learn new information, skills, and practices, share learning, collaborate during problem-solving, and improve knowledge surrounding a known context-specific challenge (Hellner, 2008). This specific case defined the one context-specific challenge and its boundaries studied.

The Case

The case for this study was to create a PLC to become a support structure for improving reading instructional methods for third- and fourth-grade reading teachers at Reese Elementary School. This specific case focused on this one PLC for a defined time, the first semester of the 2023-2024 school year. The group participating in the PLC was named the ARIT and comprised third- and fourth-grade teachers with various reading instructional experiences. The research aimed to see how school leaders can use a PLC as a support structure to improve reading

instructional methods. Likewise, the goal of this research coincided with the purpose of the case: to develop comprehension and improved insights to enhance professional practice (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The ARDT analyzed various data sources such as interviews, focus groups, questionnaire responses, meeting transcriptions, and notes from the researcher's journal to determine how participants perceived the impact of the support structures on reading instructional improvement.

Because of its rural setting, the small-town community feeling is a perpetual, unwavering presence within the rural elementary school's hallways and classrooms. Each teacher sought to impact the achievement of their students and the collective whole, further strengthened by their ties and dedication to the community. As such, the researcher sought to focus on the concept of community while implementing a PLC, highlighting the facets of organizational learning theory. Dixon (1992) postulated,

> Organizations are created because a task is too large or complex for one individual. To accomplish this greater task, each individual within the organization must have a level of competence, but the organization as a whole must have a competence. (p. 32)

Thus, the researcher implemented a professional learning community (PLC) to improve the collective reading instructional capacity to provide a structure for organizational and individual learning. To achieve this goal, the researcher served as both a researcher and a participant. The researcher, the assistant principal, and two instructional specialists joined the Action Research Design Team (ARDT), while the primary researcher, two instructional specialists, and five teachers comprised the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT).

Action Research Design Team

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) consisted of Reese Elementary School (RES) personnel, including the primary researcher/RES principal, the assistant principal, and the two RES instructional specialists. The primary researcher concurrently served as the principal at RES and was interested in improving support structures through a PLC to improve reading instructional practices.

The remaining three members of the ARDT brought unique experiences to the group. The assistant principal, Jeremy Jonas, served on the ARDT because of his varied previous instructional and intervention experiences and his primary role as the coordinator of the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) process at RES. Mary Goddington and Adrian Shill, the two instructional specialists, were selected as members of the ARDT due to their varied grade-level teaching experiences and previous collaborative relationships with reading teachers at RES. Together with the primary researcher, the ARDT developed interventions to address the problem of practice. Table 3.1 further describes the Action Research Design Team members and their roles in this study.

Table 3.1

Action Research Design Team

Member	Primary Role at Reese Elementary School	Action Research Role
Primary Researcher	Principal, RES	Led and conducted all research with the Action Research Design Team for data analysis. 13 years of classroom instruction experience and 4 years of elementary administrative experience.
Jeremy Jonas	Assistant Principal, RES	Provided experience from 19 years of teaching middle grades and one year of elementary administrative experience.
Mary Goddington	Instructional Specialist, RES	Provided experience from 13 years of teaching early elementary grades. Has served as an Instructional Specialist for 6 years. Also served as a member of the Instructional Leadership Team. Previously served as English Language Arts Benchmark Coach.
Adrian Shill	Instructional Specialist, RES	Provided experience from 16 years of teaching all elementary grades. Has served as an Instructional Specialist for 3 years. Also served as a member of the Instructional Leadership Team. Previously served as Math Benchmark Coach.

The primary researcher chose the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) members for their leadership, varied instructional experience, and commitment to improved reading instructional practices. During the first meeting, the ARDT participated in a cursory overview of the background of the study, action research, purpose of the study, research questions, and their roles, both current on the ARDT and as part of the Action Research Implementation Team.

The ARDT worked to create and implement interventions to improve reading instructional practices through a collaborative PLC support structure. The researcher and the ARDT worked with the action research participants, the Action Research Implementation Team.

Action Research Implementation Team

Stakeholders directly impacted by the problem of practice should participate in the study (Stringer & Aragón, 2020). Thus, teachers in a specific grade band, second through fifth grades, were invited to participate in the study as the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT). Second through fifth-grade general education, inclusion, and intervention teachers at RES were invited via email in August 2023 to participate in this study during the 2023-2024 school year. Three third-grade and two fourth-grade general education teachers and two instructional specialists serving third and fourth grades comprised the ARIT. As such, the two instructional specialists, Mary Goddington and Adrian Shill, were on both the ARDT and ARIT. Table 3.2 details the Action Research Implementation Team members' RES role and teaching experience.

Table 3.2

Action Research Implementation Team

Member	Role at Reese Elementary School	Grades of Teaching Experience	Years of Experience Teaching Reading
Adrian Shill	K-5 Intervention Specialist	3, 4, 5, K-5 Intervention	16
Mary Goddington	K-5 Intervention Specialist	PreK, 1, K-5 Distance Learning, K-5 Intervention	13
Allee Edwards	4th Grade, General/Inclusion Education	PreK, 1, 2, 4, 5	23
Betty Mattison	4th Grade, General/Inclusion Education	4, 6-12	17
McClain Chouser	3rd Grade, General/Gifted Education	3	7
Toni Lesse	3rd Grade, General/Inclusion Education	3, 4, 7, 8	0
Kaden Ryle	3rd Grade, General Education	K, 2, 3	2

McClain Chouser and Toni Lesse taught third grade together during the previous school year. McClain Chouser taught reading, while Toni Lesse taught math, science, and social studies. Kaden Ryle joined the third-grade team during the 2023-2024 school year. As such, the three third-grade teachers had not taught reading together until this school year. The two fourth-grade teachers, Allee Edwards and Betty Mattison were new to working with each other but had many years of reading instructional experience. Because of these newly created teams, school leaders dedicated more time to supportive, collaborative structures for instructional improvement. For this study, a PLC was established as a support structure to improve reading instructional practices through collaboration.

Research Plan and Timeline

The research plan and timeline were specific to this study and the problem of practice. The research plan was both cyclical and emergent (Glanz, 2014). The action research timeline in Table 3.3 describes the two cycles of reflection and action used in the study.

Table 3.3

Action Research Timeline

	Action Research Activity	
	Action Research Design Team (ARDT)	**Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT)**
August 2023	• Secured consent to participate in the study (Appendix A)	• Secured consent to participate in the study (Appendix B)
	Cycle I	
August and September 2023	• ARDT Interviews • ARDT Bi-Weekly Meetings (3) • Researcher's Journal • ARDT Focus Group	• ARIT Interviews • ARIT Bi-Weekly Meetings (3) • ARIT Questionnaires (3) • Researcher's Journal • ARIT Focus Group
	Cycle II	
October and November 2023	• ARDT Bi-Weekly Meetings (3) • Researcher's Journal • ARDT Interviews	• ARIT Bi-Weekly Meetings (3) • ARIT Questionnaires (3) • Researcher's Journal • ARIT Interviews
December 2023	• Appropriate follow-up activities	• Appropriate follow-up activities

The research plan and timeline were situated in the specific context of the research. The context of Reese Elementary School uniquely influenced all aspects of this study.

Context of the Study

At the time of the study, Reese County School District was a rural public school district with one elementary school on its own campus and one middle and one high school on a shared campus. The overall enrollment in FY 2022 was 1,101 students (GOSA, 2024). At the time of this study, Reese Elementary School (RES) was the county's only elementary school. The building housed pre-kindergarten (PreK) through 5th grade. During the Fiscal Year 2024 (FY24), there were approximately 610 enrolled students in PreK through 5th grades (Internal Student Information System, 2024). RES was a Title I school, with 36.1% of its population classified as economically disadvantaged (GOSA, 2024).

In FY24, RES employed three PreK teachers, four teachers in each grade (kindergarten through fifth grade), three self-contained special education teachers, five special education inclusion teachers, two speech-language pathologists (one full-time and one part-time), one part-time Occupational Therapist, one part-time Physical Therapist, one gifted resource teacher, two full-time instructional specialists, three specialists (art, music, physical education), one media specialist, and one counselor, for a total of 43 certified faculty members. Over 70% of certified personnel at RES have been teaching for ten years or more, with 30% of personnel with 20 years or more of teaching experience. The faculty at RES was highly experienced and committed to RES, as evidenced by the longevity data referenced in Chapter 1.

The Bright from the Start/Department of Early Care and Learning PreK program housed in the elementary building had an enrollment of three classes with 20 students each, for a total of 60 students served in PreK. Kindergarten through fifth grade each have four homeroom classes per grade with an average of 22 students each, totaling 24 homeroom classes. Before FY24, kindergarten through second-grade classes were self-contained, whereby the homeroom teacher

provided all content area instruction, and third grade used a departmentalized model. However, beginning in FY24, third-grade teachers became self-contained, and teachers taught all subjects. School leaders continued with the structure of departmentalized instruction in Grades 4 and 5, as had been done in the ten years prior. Grade 4 students received reading, writing, and grammar instruction from one teacher and math, science, and social studies from another. Grade 5 students had one teacher for reading, writing, grammar, and social studies and another for math and science.

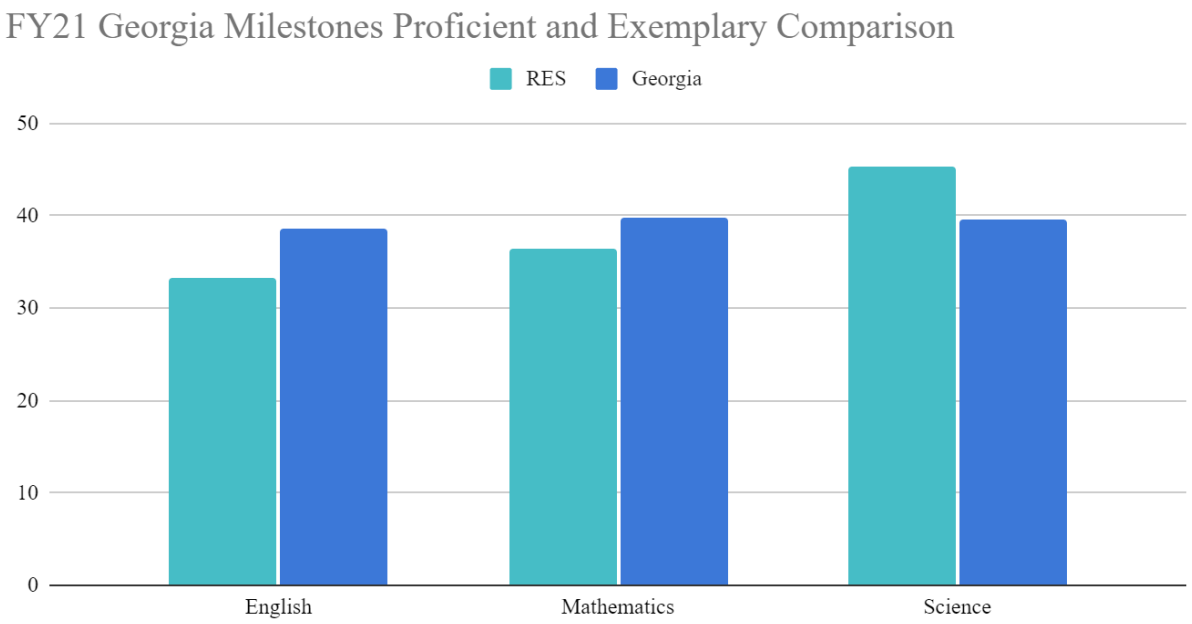
Various models were used to meet student needs, focusing explicitly on reading. In FY24, school leaders leveraged the master schedule and all available certified personnel to provide cross-grade level grouping for all kindergarten to fifth-grade students through the Early Intervention Program (EIP) innovative model. School leaders scheduled all available certified teachers to reduce student group size during intervention periods and maximize the impact of the interventions. For example, during the third-grade intervention period, the four third-grade homeroom teachers, one special education teacher, and two instructional specialists were used to homogenously group students into seven different groups instead of creating homogenous groups in each homeroom. Likewise, the fourth-grade intervention teachers included two reading-specific team teachers, one instructional specialist, and two special education inclusion teachers. This intervention schedule allowed students to receive more teacher-led instruction in a homogenous group during the intervention period. EIP aimed to provide students with timely and specific interventions to reduce or eliminate the need for grade retention. The FY21 student retention rate was consistent with this goal at 2.12% (SLDS, 2022).

State legislation required students in grades 3 through 5 to take the Georgia Milestones Assessment System. All third- through fifth-grade students took the English and Mathematics

assessments; only fifth-grade students took the Science assessment. The Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA, 2022) website provided the data featured in Figure 3.3. The state average was higher than the RES average in reading, providing evidence of the necessity of reading instructional improvement.

Figure 3.3

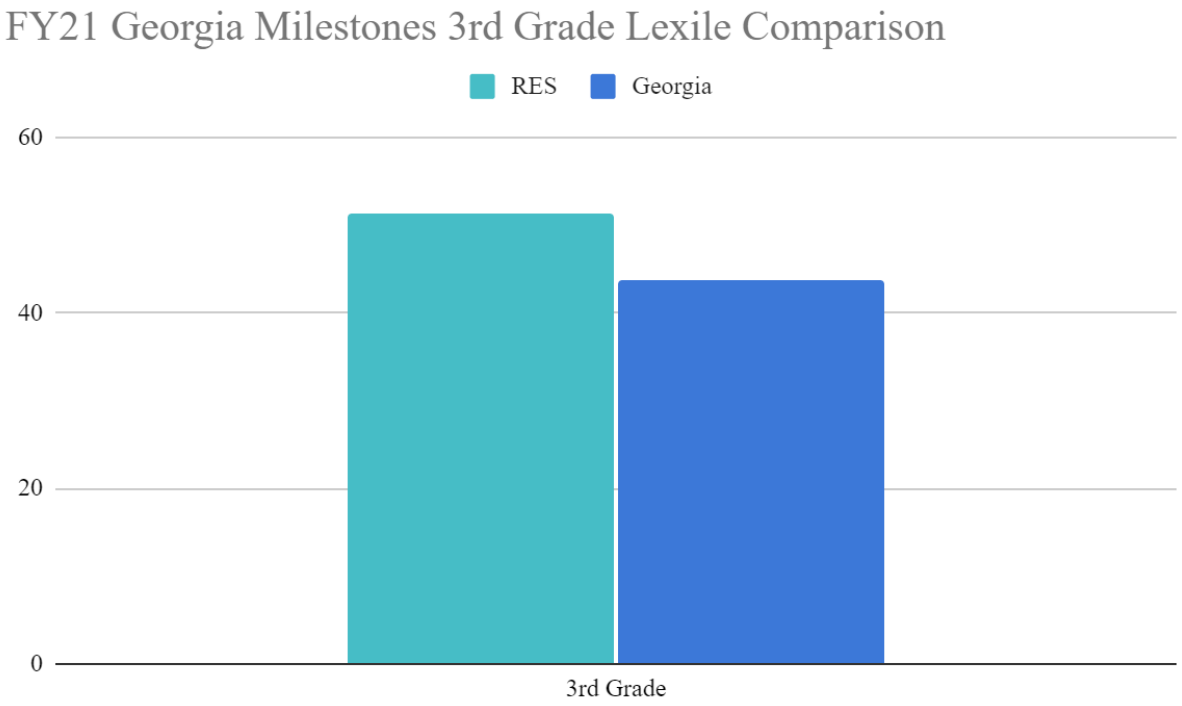
FY21 Georgia Milestones Proficient and Exemplary Comparison



Additional data derived from the Georgia Milestones Assessment System were the percentage of students reading at or above the grade level target, measured by student Lexile scores. Figure 3.4 shows that the FY21 percentage of RES students in grade 3 achieving a Lexile measure equal to or greater than 670 was higher than the statewide percentage (GOSA, 2022). However, both scores being around 50% were concerning. Again, data supported the need for reading instructional improvement to impact reading achievement.

Figure 3.4

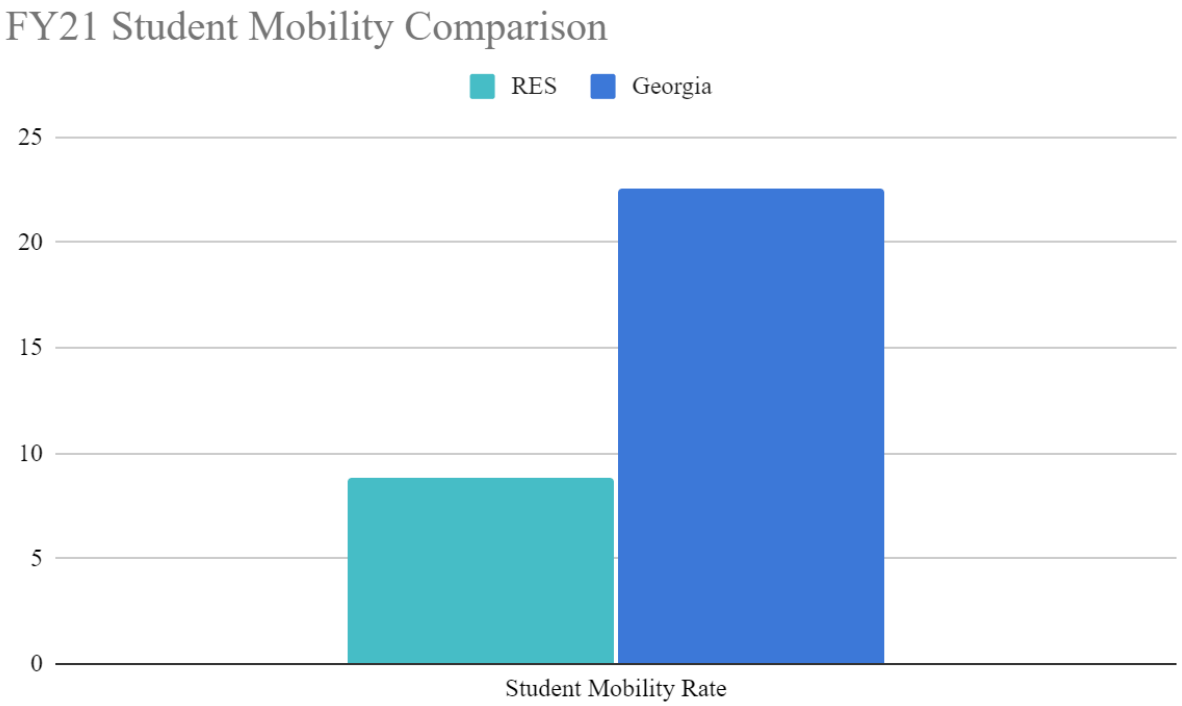
FY21 Georgia Milestones 3rd Grade Lexile of 670 or Higher Comparison



A unique area of note was the mobility rate, defined as the percentage of students who enter or withdraw between the October and March FTE dates (GOSA, 2014). In FY21, the mobility rate of RES, featured in Figure 3.5, was much lower than the state rate (Beaudette, 2015; SLDS, 2022). Additionally, in FY13, Reese County had the seventh-lowest rate in the state, with 7.4% (GOSA, 2014). Students tended to stay at RES for the entirety of their elementary school years. Thus, reading instructional improvement across all grade levels could impact the whole school population.

Figure 3.5

FY21 Student Mobility Comparison



As mentioned previously, the teacher retention rate at RES was high at the time of this study. Teachers employed by RES and living in Reese County and its neighboring rural counties tended to remain employed by RES until retirement. According to Georgia Insights (2022), the rate for retained teachers within the district was 85% in 2021 and 92% in 2022. Data were consistent in the previous three years; the teacher attrition rate did not exceed 2%, nor did the teacher retirement rate exceed 5%. The data for FY23 were inconsistent with past trends. At the end of FY23, three teachers left the profession (6%), one retired (2%), and one transferred outside the district (2%). However, sustained, extended professional learning had the potential to impact the teacher population as teachers tend to stay at RES for many years.

In FY24, RES was led by a principal (the primary researcher) with an educational specialist degree and seeking her doctoral degree, holding one year of experience as the principal and three years of experience as the assistant principal of RES. She had thirteen years of elementary classroom experience, six of which were at RES. The RES assistant principal was in his second year in that role, having previously worked for nearly twenty years within the classroom in a neighboring suburban county. Additionally, two instructional specialists were a part of the informal administrative leadership and the formal Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) of RES. One specialist had served in that role for six years, with thirteen years of classroom experience. The second specialist had served in that role for three years, with sixteen years of classroom experience. Most of this four-person leadership team at RES mirrors the faculty's traditionally low mobility and high retention rates, as three members have nearly ten years of experience at RES.

During FY22, many faculty and staff members disagreed with hiring an out-of-county assistant principal, citing the lack of understanding and commitment to a rural community. RES faculty and staff historically have been employed by Reese County for most of their teaching careers while also living in Reese County. At the beginning of FY23, hiring the out-of-county assistant principal complicated improvement efforts as leaders lacked trust. However, by the end of FY23, the assistant principal had built strong relationships with all faculty and staff members, which improved trust in his leadership and the leadership of RES. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) described trust as "an essential element in vibrant, well-performing schools" (p. 257). The primary researcher perceived that the assistant principal had proved trustworthy to the faculty and staff, as evidenced by dedication to the faculty, staff, and students, and the overall

improvement and ongoing success of RES. Together, the leadership and faculty of RES established a culture and community of improvement.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, many sentiments of RES teachers mirrored those of teachers worldwide; they were “emotionally exhausted” (Chan et al., 2021, p. 533; GaDOE, 2022). COVID-19 impacted the professional learning climate of RES, as leadership actively committed to reducing additional responsibilities as teachers balanced increased student needs. School leaders walked a fine line between improvement efforts and teachers’ emotional well-being. Leaders recognized that COVID-19 continued to impact school culture, even if the impacts were not as visible as they once were. As such, leaders dedicated limited time to professional learning and professional learning communities during that period of time between the pandemic and FY24. However, by the end of FY23, many teachers expressed interest in improving reading instructional methods; thus, the relevance and importance of this study were more personally meaningful to the study participants.

Data Sources

As the instructional assignments of third-grade classrooms changed during FY24, the urgency for reading instructional improvement increased as all third-grade teachers were now reading teachers. The two fourth-grade teachers were also in their first year of working together. This urgency was underscored by the global importance of third-grade reading proficiency, as highlighted by research (Fiester, 2010; Miles & Stipek, 2006; Workman, 2014). These seven teachers responsible for third- and fourth-grade reading instruction had varying years of reading experience. Consistent with the purpose of this study, the ARDT established a Professional Learning Community to improve collaboration between school leaders and teachers while also improving reading instructional methods. A variety of sources were used for data collection

throughout this study to gain an in-depth understanding of the impact of a PLC on reading instructional methods in third- and fourth-grade classrooms.

Participants

The researcher selected third-grade teachers for this study due to the new instructional organization being implemented in third grade during FY24 at RES. All third-grade teachers were responsible for teaching reading, which differed from the team-teaching structure used in years past. These teachers had varying years of reading instructional experience, with at least one teacher having no teaching experience and another third-grade teacher with under three years of teaching experience. Additionally, the primary researcher invited the two fourth-grade teachers to participate in the study due to the newly-formed teaching relationship between the two and the return of the new fourth-grade teacher to the classroom after serving for many years as an administrator. Thus, a support structure was essential to improve reading instruction while building upon the already-established collegial community.

Selection Criteria

The selection of the participants was purposeful, as the researcher intended to gain insight from the participants closest and most connected to the problem and purpose of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). In addition, the researcher selected participants to support the case study. It was necessary to select participants who were teaching reading. Third-grade teachers transitioning from team teaching to self-contained teaching added a unique layer with participants of varying instructional experiences. The researcher further defined the sample as unique due to the distinct rural setting of RES (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The rural context added a unique perspective, as rural schools benefit from a deep sense of community (Brunn & Delany-Barmann, 2001) but also struggle with “professional isolation” (Johnston et al., 2018, p.

57) due to a lack of time and resources for collaborative interactions due to a lack of time for (Harmon, 2018). These third- and fourth-grade reading teachers provided robust data due to their unique context and varying experiences.

Data Collection Methods

The researcher used qualitative data collection methods in this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described the qualitative researcher as one who is "interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 15). As such, the methods for collecting qualitative data must match the researcher's primary goal of understanding how people make meaning within their context. For this specific study, the researcher used various data collection methods to reach this purpose, including individual interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, meeting transcriptions, and a researcher's journal.

In this study, multiple sources of information included data collected from the ARDT and ARIT. Multiple data collection methods included:

1. Individual interviews with the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) and the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) at the beginning (pre-Cycle I) and end of the study (post-Cycle II). The initial interviews provided baseline perceptions and understandings before the implemented interventions. The post-study interviews provided cumulative data on the research study.
2. Focus groups with both teams to collect the perceptions and ideas of leader support and leader design and implementation at the midway point of the research study.

3. Questionnaires given to the ARIT members to record meeting reflections. The ARDT used these completed questionnaires to determine individual and overall research progress in that session.
4. Meeting transcriptions from all ARDT and ARIT meetings.
5. A researcher's journal of personal reflections of said meetings to track progress throughout all stages of the study.

The researcher analyzed the various data collected formatively during and cumulatively after the study using codes "according to whatever scheme is relevant to [the] study, and according to the theoretical framework that informs the study" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 200).

Interviews

DeMarrais (2003) describes interviews as "a conversation focused on questions related to a research study" (p. 54). The researcher individually interviewed Action Research Design Team (ARDT) and Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) members to provide data for all three research questions at the beginning and end of the study. By engaging participants in interviews, the researcher learned from their stories and their conscious and unconscious methods of making meaning from their experiences (Seidman, 2019). The researcher intended these interviews to be flexible and open-ended to allow participants to share freely and make meaning from their prior knowledge and current learning (Glanz, 2014).

Specifically, interviews were used with the ARDT to gather information about their perceived role in supporting, designing, and implementing the PLC. Interviews conducted with the ARIT attempted to collect data about the perceived impact of the PLC on the ARIT members' reading instruction and the perceived role of school leaders in supporting the PLC.

Semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to provide a first-hand account of their experiences through elaboration and extended responses (Packer, 2011).

Further, the specific timing of the interviews at the beginning of the study allowed the researcher insight into prior experiences that may impact the research and a baseline of understanding of each educator's perceptions of small group reading instruction, professional learning and professional learning communities, and collaboration. The interviews at the end of the study allowed participants to provide a summative reflection of the overall process, including the perceived impact of the leaders' role on the ARDT and ARIT members. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further, the researcher used post-study interviews with each ARDT member to reflect on the design and implementation of the PLC from a summative standpoint in hopes of comparing data from the two data collection points. Table 3.4 offers a sampling of interview questions. The primary researcher provided the full interview protocol in Appendix C.

Table 3.4

Sample of Initial and Final Interview Questions

Research Question	Interview Questions
RQ 1: How do teachers describe the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?	For ARDT: • How has collaboration impacted reading instruction? • How have past professional learning communities impacted small-group reading instruction in grades 3 and 4? For ARIT: • How has collaboration impacted your reading instruction? How has this PLC impacted your reading instruction?
RQ 2: What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?	For ARDT: • Describe how you have supported reading teachers since the beginning of this year. • How has this PLC impacted the support you have or will provide? For ARIT: • Describe actions of school leaders that have supported your small-group reading instruction in the past. What role have school leaders played in supporting you during this PLC?
RQ 3: How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?	For ARDT: • Describe the process of designing this PLC. • Describe the process of implementing this PLC. • Describe the impact of this PLC on reading instructional improvement at RES.

Focus Groups

Using focus groups in qualitative research allows a group to make meaning collectively through interactive discussion (Kleiber, 2003). The primary researcher planned focus group sessions with the ARDT and ARIT at the end of Cycle I before beginning Cycle II to gain a mid-

point assessment of participants' perceptions of the PLC's impact and the leaders' roles in the PLC. Specifically, the researcher used this collected data for Research Question 1 to inform the data surrounding the perceived effect of the PLC on reading instruction after Cycle I, as well as for Question 2 in terms of member perception of leader support thus far in the study.

The design procedures of the focus groups were also necessary. The group established ground rules, and the researcher acted as the moderator to encourage all participants to share their opinions in a non-judgmental space (Kleiber, 2003). The focus groups were also recorded and analyzed through coding to contribute to the data collection and analysis (Barbour, 2014). Table 3.5 offers a sampling of focus group questions. The primary researcher provided the entire focus group protocol in Appendix D.

Table 3.5

Sample of Focus Group Questions

Research Question	Interview Questions
RQ 1: How do teachers describe the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?	For ARDT: • How has reading instruction changed since the beginning of this year? • Describe the impact of this PLC on RES reading instruction. For ARIT: • How has your reading instruction changed since the beginning of this year? • Describe the impact of this PLC on your reading instruction.
RQ 2: What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?	For ARDT: • Describe how you have supported reading teachers since the beginning of this year. • How do you envision supporting reading teachers for the remainder of the semester? For ARIT: • How have school leaders supported you thus far in the year? • How can school leaders support you for the remainder of the semester?
RQ 3: How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?	For ARDT: • Describe the process of designing this PLC. • Describe the process of implementing this PLC. • Describe the impact of this PLC on reading instructional improvement at RES.

Questionnaires

The primary researcher implemented questionnaires for individual and confidential input during this study. At the end of every ARIT session, each member completed the same open-ended questionnaire for reflection. The designation as open-ended was critical as participants elaborated on questions while sharing their attitudes about the completed session (Glanz, 2014).

This questionnaire collected data after each meeting to gauge progress and change throughout the study's timeline.

The researcher used this reflection form as a highly subjective personal document that detailed the events of the meeting session, including the participants' attitudes, beliefs, and views of the session, as a way to glean information from the participants' perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The specific areas of reflection included the impact of this meeting on meeting the overall goals of the study, which informed Research Question 1, as well as the participants' personal beliefs of how leaders could support the participants with the new information and learning from the session with dedicated time or resources. The repetitive nature of this questionnaire documented change over time. The primary researcher provided a complete list of questionnaire prompts in Appendix E.

Researcher's Journal

The researcher used an integrated journal to record reflections, notes, and learning in real-time during the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The recording and transcription features on Google Meet recorded and generated an initial, automated transcription document of each in-person ARDT and ARIT meeting. The researcher later used the recording and initial transcription to create a revised, finalized transcription. These printed transcriptions were added to the researcher's journal and analyzed using thematic coding. These transcriptions informed all research questions, and they were also explicitly used as data collection for Research Question 3, detailing the process of designing and implementing the PLC. These "thick descriptions" added a wealth of data to support the study process (Glanz, 2014, p. 127).

Additionally, the researcher completed a personal reflection in the researcher's journal after each ARDT and ARIT meeting session. It included specific focus areas for Research

Question 2 by describing leaders' roles in the session just held and detailing the design and implementation for each session to inform Research Question 3. These focused reflections served as field notes and were completed immediately after each session to ensure accurate notes, thoughts, reflections, and descriptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The primary researcher provided a complete list of Researcher's Journal prompts in Appendix F.

Interventions

The primary intervention of this study was the implementation of a Professional Learning Community with members of the third- and fourth-grade teams at RES. Within that PLC, the ARDT planned and implemented two specific intervention cycles to support improving reading instruction. The participants' needs informed the focus of these two interventions. The group determined that teachers must understand essential elements of reading instruction. Thus, the first intervention implemented was creating and using a small group reading lesson plan template. The second intervention, guided by conversation and data analysis, continued the work of Cycle I by continuing collaborative lesson planning while also beginning the process of vertically designing vocabulary instruction.

The cyclical action research process allowed time for reflection, identifying a focus, data collection and analysis, and action through targeted intervention (Glanz, 2014). Additional iterations guided by reflection and learned knowledge improved the subsequent intervention cycle. The researcher and ARDT used conversation in the PLC sessions, post-session reflective questionnaires, and ARDT and researcher personal reflections to ensure fidelity in intervention implementation based on the group's needs to meet the goals of support for reading instructional improvement. These interventions are detailed in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6

Interventions for Study

Intervention	ARDT Activities	Connection to the Theoretical Framework	Timeline	Data Collection
Overall Intervention – Cycles I and II				
PLC Creation	• Community-building activities • Goal creation • Implement Meeting Protocols	• Culture of Continuous Improvements (CCI) • Supportive Leaders (SL) • Defined Learning Structures (DLS) • Defined Learning Structures (DLS)	August-September 2023	• Initial and Final Interviews • Focus Group • Questionnaires
Cycle I				
Collaborative Lesson Planning	• Research, create lesson plan template • Research elements of template • Collaboratively Plan	• Culture of Continuous Improvements (CCI) • Defined Learning Structures (DLS)	August-October 2023	• Initial Interviews • Focus Group • Questionnaires
Cycle II				
Planning for Vocabulary and Morphology Activities	• Research vocabulary and morphology best practices • Implement elements into planning	• Culture of Continuous Improvements (CCI) • Defined Learning Structures (DLS)	October-November 2023	• Meeting Transcriptions • Final Interviews • Questionnaires

Data were collected and analyzed during and after the study. Qualitative research data analysis methods were implemented to examine what happened during the study and how it happened (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The primary researcher reduced data to extract patterns, categories, and themes through coding to describe what happened during this case in its unique time and place (Glanz, 2014).

Data Analysis Methods

Data collected were systematically analyzed using various methods during and after the study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) referred to these data collection processes as "recursive and dynamic" (p. 195). Likewise, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described data analysis as "inductive and comparative" (p. 201). Data collection and analysis were intertwined in an iterative cycle as led by the researcher during the action research study. The researcher noted the importance of data analysis concurrent with the collection thereof and revised the direction of the study.

According to Glanz (2014), the goal of data analysis is "to discover patterns, ideas, explanations, and understandings" (p. 168). The researcher used content analysis as a sense-making process by reducing data to patterns, categories, and themes through coding (Glanz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The primary researcher analyzed the data to gain understanding and focus on what happened and how it transpired (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further, the primary researcher collected and analyzed data until the point of saturation, or until "no new insights [were] forthcoming" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 101).

Coding

The researcher used coding to make sense of the large amount of data collected during the study. Saldaña (2014) described coding as assigning meaning to data using symbolic words or phrases. Additionally, the researcher used coding "as a way of patterning, classifying, and

later reorganizing [codes] into emergent categories for further analysis" (Saldaña, 2014, p. 7). Glanz (2014) referred to this process as reduction. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) further described this process: "naming the categories, determining the number of categories, and figuring out systems for placing data into categories" (p. 236). This process started in the planning phase and the early weeks of Cycle I. During this time, the researcher coded the collected data and created basic themes from this coding. This cursory data analysis led to a deeper understanding through thematic analysis.

Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2012) describe thematic analysis as "a method for systemically identifying, organizing, and offering insights into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (p. 57). Further, Nowell et al. (2017) assert the flexibility and ease of modification of thematic analysis to provide a "rich and detailed, yet complex account of data" (p. 2). In this action research study, the researcher continued refining the codes used at the onset of the study to create initial themes. Extensive coding during the study's systematic data collection and analysis supported thematic analysis. By the end of the study, the researcher's coding and overall analysis led to final themes and findings that informed the answering of the research questions. Table 3.7 describes the thematic analysis phases and how actions in each of those phases led to the trustworthiness of the study.

Table 3.7

Phases of Thematic Analysis and Connection to Trustworthiness

Phases of Thematic Analysis	Phase Actions	Phase Connection to Trustworthiness
Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data	• Organize data • Familiarize self with data intimately through immersion in data • Document thoughts and questions through note-taking	• Prolonged engagement • Data triangulation • Peer debriefing with ARDT
Phase 2: Generating initial codes	• Create codes relevant to answering research questions • Code for participants' language and concepts; also for researchers' conceptual and theoretical frameworks • Reread data multiple times • Analysis is inclusive, thorough, systematic	• Persistent observation • Peer debriefing with ARDT
Phase 3: Searching for themes	• Shift from codes to themes • Review coded data by collapsing and expanding codes • Determine patterns to generate themes • Explore the relationship between themes • Create a thematic map with accompanying data	• Persistent observation • Data triangulation • Peer debriefing with ARDT

Phase 4: Reviewing themes	• Recursive process of reviewing themes from coded data and data sets • Quality checking themes with extracted data • Determine if themes capture the entire data set or part • Potential revision of themes to best portray data	• Persistent observation • Data triangulation • Peer debriefing with ARDT • Negative case analysis • Referential Adequacy
Phase 5: Defining and naming themes	• Determine the singular focus, scope, and purpose of each theme • Determine subthemes, if necessary • Extract data across data sets to illustrate themes • Describe what and why the extract is interesting • Analyze descriptively, as well as conceptually and interpretatively • Develop each theme, as well as in relation to research questions and other themes	• Data representation across all data collection methods • Data triangulation • Thick description • Peer debriefing with ARDT • Member checks with ARIT
Phase 6: Producing the Report	• Intertwine analysis and writing • Connect themes logically • Describe themes with enough data examples and analysis • Link themes to existing literature	• Audit trail • Thick description • Peer debriefing with ARDT • Member checks with ARIT

Note: Adapted from Braun and Clark (2012) and Nowell et al. (2017).

Further illustrating its importance, the thematic analysis led to the study's trustworthiness, establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). The researcher used the terms *reliability*, *validity*, and *generalizability* for this study.

Reliability, Validity, and Generalizability

In quantitative studies, definitions of reliability include the replicability of the study. Similar definitions of generalizability link a study's ability to be transferred to broader contexts. Due to this study's qualitative nature and unique place, time, and problem, it cannot be replicated to yield the same results or generalized to other, differing settings. However, the terms *reliability*, *validity*, and *generalizability* are used synonymously and uniquely in qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003).

With qualitative-specific definitions, qualitative studies have their methods of ensuring the study is reliable, valid, and generalizable. Qualitative research studies must be ethical and rigorously conducted to be considered reliable and valid (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described qualitative reliability as "whether the results are consistent with the data collected" (p. 251). Similarly, internal validity attempts to validate the study by matching research findings with reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further, it is necessary to approach the study with careful attention to the research design planning and data collection, analysis, and interpretation phases (Lincoln et al., 2003, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher employed triangulation and an audit trail to ensure this study was reliable and valid despite the primary researcher's context-specific perspective.

To support the study's reliability, internal validity, and generalizability, the researcher planned for research triangulation by using data from two or more sources using two or more methods (Lapan, 2003). Triangulation allowed the researcher to obtain multiple perspectives to inform the study. Several times in the study, the researcher used two or more additional pieces of data to support findings from the original data source. Table 3.8 details the triangulation methods

for this study. While not explicitly described in the table, meeting transcriptions were used as an additional data source to support findings and themes.

Table 3.8

Triangulation Matrix and Timeline

Research Question	**Source 1**	**Source 2**	**Source 3**
RQ 1	What: Questionnaire Who: ARIT When: At the end of each ARIT Session	What: Focus Group Who: ARIT When: After Cycle I	What: Interview Who: ARIT Individual Members When: Before Cycle I, After Cycle II
	What: Questionnaire Who: ARDT When: At the end of each ARIT Session	What: Focus Group Who: ARDT When: After Cycle I	What: Interview Who: ARDT Individual Members When: Before Cycle I, After Cycle II
RQ 2	What: Interviews Who: ARIT Individual Members When: Before Cycle I	What: Interviews Who: ARIT Individual Members When: After Cycle II/ End of Study	What: Questionnaire Who: ARIT When: At the end of each ARIT Session
	What: Interviews Who: ARDT Individual Members When: Before Cycle I	What: Interviews Who: ARDT Individual Members When: After Cycle II/ End of Study	What: Researcher's Journal Who: Primary Researcher When: At the end of each ARDT and ARIT Session
RQ 3	What: Questionnaire Who: ARDT Individual Members When: At the end of each ARIT Session	What: Interviews Who: ARDT Individual Members When: After Cycle II/ End of Study	What: Researcher's Journal Who: Primary Researcher When: At the end of each ARDT and ARIT Session

Like triangulation, an audit trail that featured “thick descriptions” (Glanz, 2014, p. 127) of all decisions and choices made by the researcher, as well as the actions of the study as they unfolded, added to the reliability and validity of the study (Nowell et al., 2017). The researcher maintained all data sources throughout the study in an organized manner to ensure the study’s final report was consistent with what happened during the examination of the impact of the PLC on reading instructional methods. The researcher implemented the triangulation and audit trail practices to ensure the study’s reliability, validity, and generalizability, which ultimately led to the qualitative research goal of a deeper understanding of unique phenomena (Golafshani, 2003).

Subjectivity Statement

Finlay (2002) postulated that in a qualitative study, researchers “accept that the researcher is a central figure who influences, if not actively constructs, the collection, selection, and interpretation of data” (p.212). This specific research study focused on providing support structures through a PLC to improve reading instructional methods for third-grade and fourth-grade teachers in one rural elementary school. The researcher had a unique position as a previous teacher and current administrator at the research site. As such, several preconceived ideas and prior experiences may have influenced the development of the study. In this section, the researcher examined herself reflexively to present potential subjectivities and biases.

At the time of the study, the researcher was a middle-aged, middle-class Caucasian woman with Christian religious beliefs. She had a privileged upbringing in an affluent vacation town in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Her father was a high school graduate, while her mother was college-educated. She learned to read with little to no problem after being reared in a literacy-rich home. On the other hand, her younger sister struggled to learn to read but

eventually became successful using different methods. The researcher believed all students could learn to read using various instructional methods and strategies to meet unique needs.

The researcher believed that literacy success is one of the main goals of elementary education and devoted most of her time and focus to achieving this goal as the school's instructional leader. The researcher selected the focus of the study based on personal experiences as a third- and fourth-grade teacher who experienced struggles with providing meaningful reading instructional methods to students who were not reading on grade level by the third grade. The researcher believed and assumed that other third- and fourth-grade teachers also struggled in this area. Hence, the participants in the study were selected based on the researcher's perceptions.

Additionally, the primary researcher assigned the third- and fourth-grade teachers to their grade levels for the FY24 school year as a responsibility of her role as the school principal, which adds another layer of subjectivity. Similarly, two of the three Action Research Design Team members were also placed in their current leadership roles by the researcher's choice due to their perceived leadership skills and strengths. However, the third Action Research Design Team member served in the leadership role prior to the researcher's administrative position. However, the primary researcher acknowledged that this Instructional Specialist continued in this role due to her perceived leadership skills and strengths.

While the school was a close-knit community with daily informal collaboration, there were few opportunities to participate in formal support structures like a professional learning community. The researcher believed that collaboration and collective learning are essential to instructional improvement. Specifically, these two elements were crucial when addressing reading instructional improvement, as evidenced by the study's focus selection. The researcher

also believed teacher instructional methods improved through collaboration and collective learning.

Limitations

There are limitations to this action research study. This study took place in a small, rural elementary school, with the primary researcher employed as the school's principal during the research study. Additionally, the researcher was in a position of power over the participants in the study, which potentially impacted participation in the study and participant responses. To counteract this power dynamic, all participants consented to participate in the study with no negative repercussions. Additionally, the primary researcher asked participants to review and revise their responses if desired. Throughout the study, the researcher involved the participants in reviewing the ongoing data analysis to ensure the researcher accurately represented the findings.

At the time of the study, RES was mainly composed of Caucasian and African-American students. There was very little diversity beyond these two groups. These student demographics may not be characteristic of other elementary schools or rural elementary schools. The free and reduced lunch percentage was around 40%, which may be considered low compared to other schools. Additionally, the number of teachers involved was small, and the teachers in the study were a homogenous sample, being from the same school and the same two grade levels. The study took place over four months, which is a short time. Due to these limitations, the primary researcher noted that this area requires additional research.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 detailed both qualitative research and action research design methods. The researcher described the context, problem of practice, and essential members of both the Action Research Design Team and the Action Research Implementation Team. The primary researcher

described the data sources, collection methods, and analysis used in the two-cycle research study. This study included data sources such as interviews, focus groups, questionnaire responses, the researcher's journal, and meeting transcriptions. Data were analyzed using coding and thematic analysis methods. Further description included reliability, validity, generalizability, subjectivity, and limitation statements. Chapter 4 will describe the context of RES, problem framing overall and at RES, and the data collected from the structures of support created through a PLC intended to improve reading instructional methods for third- and fourth-grade teachers at RES.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE

Rural leaders face many unique contextual challenges (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Schreuder, 2010; Wallin, 2003), including providing systems of support for teachers, such as professional learning and supportive, relevant professional learning communities. Professional learning in a rural setting has the potential to overcome situational challenges by improving teacher content knowledge and pedagogy, as well as teacher retention (Banghart, 2021; Barton, 2012). The literature on the importance of professional learning to improve teacher instructional capacity is robust (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009, 2011; Wei et al., 2010; Zepeda, 2019). Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are frequently used to improve teacher instructional capacity overall (DuFour, 2004a, 2004b, 2014; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Hord, 1997, 2004), as well as specifically with reading instruction (D'Ardenne et al., 2013; Main et al., 2020; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020). Further, fostering shared leadership within PLCs allows rural schools to maximize resources for school improvement by increasing teacher leadership (Sharif, 2020; Shen et al., 2020; Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019).

Purpose of the Study

This study examined how leaders within a rural, public elementary school setting supported teachers by developing and implementing a PLC to improve reading instruction.

Research Questions

The following research questions addressed the purpose of this action research study and guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of professional learning communities (PLCs) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?
2. What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?
3. How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?

Chapter 4 describes the context of the study and findings from this case study. The context includes a description of the school, details about the faculty and their professional learning history, and the problem-framing in the context of Reese Elementary School, the site of this action research. The chapter continues by telling the story of the action research study, its four-month progress, and its outcomes. The timeline of data collection methods, including initial and final interviews, focus groups, and reflective questionnaires, are described as they occurred within the two-cycle action research study. The researcher additionally describes the alignment between the research questions and theoretical framework.

The Context of the Study

Reese Elementary School (RES; pseudonym) is a rural public elementary school in the southern United States. RES serves as Reese County School District's (RCSD) only elementary school for pre-kindergarten to fifth-grade students, with an enrollment of approximately 600

students and a teacher count of roughly 43. RES is a Title I school, with 63.96% of its population classified as economically disadvantaged (SLDS, 2022).

In FY24, RES employed three pre-kindergarten teachers, four teachers in each grade (kindergarten through fifth grade), three self-contained special education teachers, five special education inclusion teachers, two speech-language pathologists (one full-time and one part-time), one part-time Occupational Therapist, one part-time Physical Therapist, one gifted resource teacher, two full-time instructional specialists, three specialists (art, music, physical education), one media specialist, and one counselor, for a total of 43 certified faculty members. Over 70% of RES certified personnel have been teaching for ten years or more, with 30% of personnel with 20 years or more teaching experience. The faculty at RES is highly experienced and committed to RES, as evidenced by the longevity data presented in Chapter 1.

Teachers employed by RCSD have strong ties to the school and community. Teachers live in the county and its neighboring counties and tend to remain employed in RCSD until retirement. According to Georgia Insights (2022), the rate for retained teachers for FY22 was as follows: district, 92%; RESA, 88.4%; state, 90.82%. At the end of FY22 at RES, one teacher left the profession (2%), one retired (2%), and one transferred within the district (2%). Data were consistent in the previous three years; the teacher attrition rate did not exceed 2%, nor did the teacher retirement rate exceed 5%.

In FY24, RES was led by a second-year principal and second-year assistant principal, with the assistance of two instructional specialists. Additionally, one representative from each grade level, PreK to 5th grade; a representative from the following areas: special education, related arts, and gifted; the media specialist, counselor, principal, assistant principal, and two

instructional specialists comprised the Instructional Leadership Team. This team meets monthly to analyze data and make instructional decisions guided by that data.

Reese County School District has a county-wide leadership team of 6 adults: the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Director of Teaching and Learning, and a principal from each of the three schools. Due to limited personnel, these six leaders assume multiple responsibilities, a practice shared across rural schools (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). The Director of Teaching and Learning (Director) is responsible for professional learning (PL), several Federal Programs, Human Resources, and the Induction Teacher Program. Thus, professional learning and development needs are determined, planned, and implemented by school-level leaders.

Problem Framing Based on the Site

On the English Georgia Milestones Assessment in FY 21, the percentage of RES students scoring proficient or distinguished was 33.33%, lower than the statewide 38.56% (GOSA, 2022). While data were lagging, informal percentage calculations for FY22 were similar. After data analysis by the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT), the team determined that teachers must improve reading instruction at RES to increase reading proficiency. Thus, the ILT suggested establishing a PLC for reading teachers to engage in personalized and group professional learning, vertical planning, and collaboration would be formed to improve reading proficiency.

Additionally, an instructional change in third grade during FY24 aimed to maximize instructional time. The third-grade teachers were now self-contained, meaning each teacher taught all subject areas. This scheduling change allowed flexibility in the minutes allotted to literacy instruction and less time spent transitioning to other teachers' classrooms. However, this also exacerbated the need for professional learning centered around reading instruction. Two

teachers on the third-grade team were new to RES. One returning third-grade teacher had never taught reading. The fourth-grade team comprised one returning teacher and one new reading teacher. The new reading teacher was returning to the elementary classroom after serving for many years as an administrator and a middle school teacher.

Various models met student needs, explicitly focusing on reading instruction. In FY24, school leaders leveraged the master schedule to provide a large, uninterrupted literacy block for both Tier I instruction and Tier II and III interventions. School leaders used all available certified personnel to provide cross-grade level grouping for all kindergarten to fifth-grade students through the Early Intervention Program (EIP) innovative model, thereby reducing student group size during intervention periods. For example, during the third-grade intervention, the four third-grade homeroom teachers, one special education teacher, and two instructional specialists were used to homogenously group students into seven different groups instead of creating homogenous groups in each homeroom to maximize the impact of the interventions. Likewise, the fourth-grade intervention teachers include two reading-specific team teachers, one instructional specialist, and two special education inclusion teachers. Thus, students received more teacher-led instruction in a homogenous during this intervention period. EIP aimed to provide students with timely and specific interventions to reduce or eliminate the need for grade retention. The FY21 student retention rate was consistent with this goal at 2.12% (SLDS, 2022).

The Story and Outcomes

The qualitative action research study included a design team and an implementation team. The principal (researcher), assistant principal, and two instructional specialists comprised the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) at RES. In FY24, RES was led by a principal (the primary researcher) with an educational specialist degree and seeking her doctoral degree,

holding one year of experience as the principal and three years of experience as the assistant principal of RES. She had thirteen years of elementary classroom experience, six of which were at RES. The assistant principal of RES was in his second year in that role, having previously worked for nearly twenty years within the classroom in a neighboring suburban county. Additionally, two instructional specialists were a part of the informal administrative leadership team, the instructional leadership team (ILT), and the ARDT. One specialist served in this role for six years, with thirteen years of classroom experience. The second specialist served in this role for three years, with sixteen years of classroom experience. The primary focus of the ARDT was to create a professional learning community (PLC) and provide interventions to improve reading instruction within that PLC. The theoretical framework and logic model guided the creation of the PLC as an overall intervention and the interventions provided within the PLC. After the primary researcher obtained consent, discussion and planning for the research study began in August 2023. The ARDT was essential in focusing on reading instructional planning within a collaborative, supportive environment throughout the action research process.

Action Research Design Team

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) was essential to this study. The ARDT met every other week between ARIT PLC meetings to discuss individual perceptions, debrief after the PLC meetings, and determine support structures to provide the reading teachers participating in the PLC. The ARDT reviewed interviews, questionnaires, and focus group data to plan and implement interventions for the reading teachers' perceived needs. The reflective and iterative nature of the study allowed the ARDT to continually review the provision of support and plans for the PLC to ensure support provided and PLC agendas met the unique needs of the members of the PLC. Details of the team are provided in Table 4.1. The primary researcher, Adrian Shill,

and Mary Goddington served as the core of the ARDT, while Jeremy Jonas offered alternative analysis as his duties necessitated that he join the ARDT meetings intermittently.

Table 4.1

Action Research Design Team Experience

Member	Primary Role at Reese Elementary School	Teaching and Administrative Experience
Primary Researcher	Principal	13 years of elementary grade instruction experience 4 years of elementary administrative experience
Jeremy Jonas	Assistant Principal	19 years of middle grades instruction experience 1 year of elementary administrative experience
Mary Goddington	Instructional Specialist	13 years of teaching all elementary grades
Adrian Shill	Instructional Specialist	16 years of teaching all elementary grades

Individual Roles

Both Adrian Shill and Mary Goddington were essential members of the ARDT. As reading instructional specialists, these two teachers served as teacher-leaders at Reese Elementary School. They both taught small group reading to grades 1 to 5 and served in informal leadership roles as a part of the instructional aspect of the administrative team. Adrian Shill and Mary Goddington served as the co-chairs of the School Improvement Plan's reading goal. They also provided Tier II and Tier III reading intervention support to students and informed the multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) team about student progress and next steps. Through participation in grade-level monthly MTSS meetings, Adrian Shill and Mary Goddington supported all reading teachers. Their involvement in the ARDT and ARIT was invaluable, as

they were able to provide “in the trenches” information and experience to inform the action research.

The core team of the primary researcher, Adrian Shill, and Mary Goddington shared the data, analysis, and interventions with Mr. Jonas, who participated in ARDT meetings inconsistently due to unforeseen circumstances. His position allowed an outside perspective on ARDT analysis and decisions to improve the interventions presented.

Action Research Implementation Team

The action research implementation team (ARIT) comprised the three members of the ARDT described above, as well as three third-grade and two fourth-grade reading teachers. These teachers were each assigned a pseudonym throughout the study to ensure confidentiality. The primary researcher invited all second through fifth-grade reading teachers to participate in the study via email in August 2023, with these five teachers answering the call. Consent was obtained a week later in August 2023 (see Appendices A & B). The goal of the ARIT was to create a collaborative and supportive PLC to discuss, plan, and implement effective reading instructional methods to improve reading proficiency. The ARIT provided the researcher and ARDT feedback through initial individual interviews, post-meeting questionnaires, a mid-study focus group, and final individual interviews.

The primary researcher invited study participants based on their current classroom assignment, specifically teachers of reading in mid- to upper-elementary grades. Three third-grade and two fourth-grade teachers consented and participated in the study as the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT). This team had members with varying years of experience teaching reading, as highlighted in Table 4.2. Additionally, the two instructional specialists and the primary researcher held dual roles in both the ARDT and ARIT.

Table 4.2

Action Research Implementation Team: Reading Instructional Experience

Member	Primary Role at Reese Elementary School	Years of Reading Instructional Experience
Primary Researcher	Principal	13
Mary Goddington	Instructional Specialist	13
Adrian Shill	Instructional Specialist	16
Allee Edwards	Fourth-Grade Teacher, Reading/ELA	23
Betty Mattison	Fourth-Grade Teacher, Reading/ELA	17
McClain Chouser	Third-Grade Teacher, All Subjects	7
Toni Lesse	Third-Grade Teacher, All Subjects	0
Kaden Ryle	Third-Grade Teacher, All Subjects	2

Further, Table 4.3 shows the timeline of the action research study from June to November 2023.

Table 4.3

Action Research Timeline of Events

Action	**Audience**	**Materials**	**Date Completed**
Seek IRB Approval from the District	RCSD Superintendent	IRB Email	June 6, 2023
Seek IRB Approval from the University	IRB Committee	IRB Application Packet	June 9, 2023
Initial Research Study Contact Email	2nd-5th Reading Teachers; Assistant Principal, Instructional Specialists	IRB/UGA Presentation/Email	August 15, 2023
Obtain Consent	ARDT, ARIT	IRB Consent Form	August 23, 2023
Initial Individual Interviews	ARDT, ARIT	Interview Protocol; Recording Devices	August 23, 2023

Cycle I ARDT Bi-weekly Planning Meetings	ARDT	Theoretical Framework; Logic Model; Research-based Interventions; Interview Data	September 21, 2023
Cycle I ARIT Bi-Weekly PLC Meetings	ARIT	Agendas; PLC Protocols; Small Group Reading Lesson Plan Template; Reading Instructional Materials	September 28, 2023
Focus Group Meeting	ARDT	Focus Group Interview Protocol; Recording Devices	October 5, 2023
Focus Group Meeting	ARIT	Focus Group Interview Protocol; Recording Devices	October 5, 2023
Cycle II ARDT Bi-weekly Planning Meetings	ARDT	Theoretical Framework; Logic Model; Research-based Interventions; Cycle I Questionnaire and Focus Group Data	November 8, 2023
Cycle II ARIT Bi-Weekly PLC Meetings	ARIT	Agendas; PLC Protocols; Small Group Reading Lesson Plan Template; Reading Instructional Materials	November 9, 2023
Final Individual Interviews	ARDT, ARIT	Interview Protocol; Recording Devices	November 16, 2023

Initial Interviews

Initial individual interviews were held with each member of the ARDT and ARIT at the beginning of Cycle I in mid-August of 2023. These interviews were held face-to-face in the researcher's office on campus at RES. The researcher and interviewee mutually decided on the time and date. The researcher emailed each participant to schedule the interview and confirmed the date and time via Google Calendar. Initial interviews began on August 15, 2023, and concluded on August 23, 2023. Table 4.4 shows the dates of the initial interviews.

Table 4.4

Action Research Initial Interviews

Member	Primary Role at Reese Elementary School	Action Research Team Role	Date of Initial Interview/s
Jeremy Jonas	Assistant Principal	ARDT	August 15, 2023 (ARDT)
Mary Goddington	Instructional Specialist	ARDT & ARIT	August 15, 2023 (ARDT) August 21, 2023 (ARIT)
Adrian Shill	Instructional Specialist	ARDT & ARIT	August 15, 2023 (ARDT) August 21, 2023 (ARIT)
Allee Edwards	Fourth-Grade Teacher, Reading/ELA	ARIT	August 17, 2023
Betty Mattison	Fourth-Grade Teacher, Reading/ELA	ARIT	August 21, 2023
McClain Chouser	Third-Grade Teacher, All Subjects	ARIT	August 16, 2023
Toni Lesse	Third-Grade Teacher, All Subjects	ARIT	August 17, 2023
Kaden Ryle	Third-Grade Teacher, All Subjects	ARIT	August 18, 2023

The primary researcher asked ten questions of the five teachers on the ARIT. The ten questions on the ARIT Interview protocol targeted teachers' descriptions of their current reading small group instruction, their perceptions of strengths and challenges relating to reading small

group instruction, past and present support of reading small group instruction provided by school leaders, and the impact of past professional learning on reading instructional improvement. Each interview ended with an open-ended opportunity to provide any additional information or elaboration not explicitly asked in the set questions.

The primary researcher asked the ARDT members ten questions from the ARIT interview protocol and nine questions from the ARDT interview protocol. The questions on the ARDT interview protocol focused on descriptions of small group reading instruction in grades 3 and 4, as well as strengths and challenges related to small group reading instruction in those two grades, how they had previously provided support to reading teachers and their plans of support for the first semester of the school year. The primary researcher also asked about the impact of collaboration and professional learning on reading instructional improvement at RES. Just as in the ARIT interview protocol, the ARDT protocol ended with an open-ended opportunity to provide any additional information or elaboration not explicitly asked in the set questions.

The interviews lasted up to thirty minutes. The researcher used her phone and Google Meet to record the interviews. Transcriptions from both Google Meet and an AI transcription website, Otter.ai, were used. The transcriptions were shared via Google Docs with each participant no more than three days after the interview to review for accuracy and clarity. The participants revised the transcripts as necessary.

The interviews were reflective and honest. Each interviewee articulated or implied a goal of instructional improvement. The interview process gave insight into teachers' perceptions of strengths and challenges related to reading small group instruction, previous professional learning experiences, and school leader support provided for small group reading instruction. At the same time, the one-on-one time allowed the participant to reflect and articulate perceived

strengths and challenges privately. The primary researcher shared the data and analysis from the pre-interviews with the ARDT, who then used the data to plan the overall PLC intervention and the interventions within the PLC. The ARDT completed two action research cycles over four months.

Action Research Cycle I and Intervention

Action Research Cycle I began in mid-August of 2023. Cycle I lasted approximately six weeks and concluded at the end of September. The overarching intervention within this action research was to create a PLC, as leaders had not yet established formal professional learning structures at RES in recent years. As such, the ARDT planned to develop a PLC to improve reading instructional methods.

Within the PLC, the ARDT would use interview and perception data to plan specific reading instructional interventions to meet the teachers' needs in planning appropriate reading small group instruction. The ARDT met every other week to debrief the previous PLC meeting, describe the support given to teachers during and between PLC meetings, and plan the upcoming PLC meeting. These PLC meetings were held with the ARIT the weeks opposite the ARDT meetings. Table 4.5 visually represents the bi-weekly alternating meetings and briefly describes each meeting's focus.

Table 4.5

Action Research Cycle I Meetings

Date	Meeting Title	Meeting Focus
August 23, 2023	ARDT 1.1	Planning for PLC ARIT 1.1
August 31, 2023	ARIT 1.1	PLC ARIT 1.1: Implementing Intervention 1
September 6, 2023	ARDT 1.2	Planning for PLC ARIT 1.2
September 14, 2023	ARIT 1.2	PLC ARIT 1.2: Continuing the implementation of Intervention 1
September 21, 2023	ARDT 1.3	Planning for PLC ARIT 1.3
September 28, 2023	ARIT 1.3	PLC ARIT 1.3: Continuing the implementation of Intervention 1

The ARDT met for the first time on August 23, 2023, for meeting ARDT 1.1 (Cycle I, Meeting 1). The primary researcher, Jeremy Jonas, Adrian Shill, and Mary Goddington were present. The purpose of this meeting was to review interview data and plan the intervention for Cycle I. However, due to other pressing matters, the ARDT spent most of this meeting discussing other school and instructional needs unrelated to the action research project.

After refocusing attention on the action research at hand, the team ultimately agreed that Cycle I should focus on the overarching intervention of creating a PLC and the intervention within the PLC of the collaborative creation of a reading lesson plan template to guide small group reading instruction. Since this was the first formal PLC held at RES in several years, the team brainstormed options for team and community building. The team selected tasks included on the PLC meeting's agenda.

To plan for the intervention within the PLC, the ARDT focused on instructional planning. Due to the various years and ranges of reading instructional experiences represented in the PLC with those teachers on the Implementation Team, the ARDT felt it was necessary to provide professional learning surrounding the meaning, examples, and importance of each literacy component in a small group lesson. Additionally, the team agreed that a lesson plan template with the various literacy components would help members improve instructional planning. The team verbalized an agenda for the first meeting of the PLC with the ARIT that would be held the following week, with a division of duties for the ARDT members during the PLC. The researcher took minutes during the meeting and reflected after the meeting in the Researcher's Journal.

The ARIT met for the first PLC meeting (ARIT 1.1) on August 31, 2023. All members of the ARIT attended. The attending members included the primary researcher, Adrian Shill, Mary Goddington, Allee Edwards, Betty Mattison, McClain Chouser, Toni Lesse, and Kaden Ryle were present. The ARDT shared the agenda with the ARIT via email a day prior to the meeting. Members of the ARDT were unclear on their roles and responsibilities for the first meeting. As a result, the researcher revised the agenda to take the lead on various activities. The ARDT members made a note to discuss the agenda creation to improve clarity in the next ARDT meeting the following week.

The ARIT meeting 1.1 focused on building relationships between those within the PLC since most members had not collaborated previously. The researcher described the timeline of the two-cycle research project and articulated the three guiding research questions. The group collaborated to create PLC norms, which included confidentiality, a supportive environment, and honoring the group's time by having the meeting last no longer than forty-five minutes. The two

instructional specialists, Adrian Shill and Mary Goddington, led a community-building activity in which each member selected two M&Ms and answered questions based on the color of the M&Ms selected. The members of the ARIT shared instructional experience and personal history freely, immediately establishing a warm, collaborative, supportive environment for the PLC. The primary researcher led the group in an interactive reading of a professional article on the importance of reading and the necessary instructional components. An honest and open group discussion followed, revealing areas of support desired for the PLC. The group reviewed various lesson plan templates that teachers could adapt for small group reading instructional planning. The meeting ended with each member completing a reflective individual Google Form questionnaire that the ARDT would review to plan the next PLC meeting. The researcher completed the researcher's questionnaire and recorded personal notes and reflections in the Researcher's Journal.

The ARDT met for the second time on September 6, 2023 (ARDT 1.2). The primary researcher, Adrian Shill, and Mary Goddington were present. Jeremy Jonas was unable to attend. The team debriefed both the first ARDT and ARIT meetings. Speaking candidly, the team realized that without an agenda for the ARDT meetings, the team would spend time discussing other instructional and school needs not explicitly related to the action research study. The researcher created a Google Docs agenda attached to the Google Calendar invite for each future ARDT meeting. The team agreed to discuss only the items on the agenda. The researcher did add an agenda item at the beginning of each ARDT to discuss pressing school matters, but the team agreed that the time spent on this item would last no longer than 5 minutes of the 45-minute meeting. The focus would be mainly on the planning of the upcoming PLC meeting.

Additionally, since the agenda for the PLC with the ARIT was only verbally discussed in the previous ARDT 1.1 meeting, there was some confusion about the roles of the ARDT members in preparation for and execution of the first PLC meeting (ARIT 1.1). The team decided to type the upcoming PLC meeting agenda with duties finalized before ending the current ARDT planning meeting to ensure all members of the ARDT were clear on their necessary preparations and roles for the upcoming PLC meeting. Additionally, the detailed agenda would be sent to the members of the ARIT to serve as a reminder of the forthcoming PLC meeting and prepare for the meeting by articulating necessary resources to be gathered by the participants before the meeting.

Regarding executing the first PLC meeting (ARIT 1.1), the ARDT articulated the perception of immediate community and collaboration. The group quickly shared personal challenges and supported each other with positive comments. The ARDT realized the ARIT did not discuss all agenda items, so the team set the second PLC meeting (ARIT 1.2) agenda with more time devoted to the small group lesson planning template and its elements. The ARDT planned for Adrian Shill and Mary Goddington to share research-based best practices around small group reading instruction as a model since they were practicing instructional specialists. The researcher took minutes during the meeting and reflected after the meeting in the Researcher's Journal.

The PLC met for the second meeting on September 14, 2023 (ARIT 1.2). The primary researcher, Adrian Shill, Mary Goddington, Allee Edwards, Betty Mattison, McClain Chouser, and Kaden Ryle were present. Toni Lesse was unable to attend. This meeting included Adrian Shill and Mary Goddington sharing literacy "must haves" for small group reading instruction, including text sets with student choice and word work highlighting morphology and vocabulary

work. The group looked at various ideas for small group reading templates as Adrian Shill and Mary Goddington shared what their small group lesson plans looked like with features of these templates present. The PLC members shared elements of their small group reading plans, including aspects of the various literacy pillars. The meeting ended with each participant completing the reflective Google Form questionnaire. The researcher completed the researcher's questionnaire and recorded personal notes and reflections in the Researcher's Journal.

The ARDT met to debrief the ARIT 1.2 meeting and planning for PLC on September 21 (ARDT 1.3). The primary researcher, Jeremy Jonas, Adrian Shill, and Mary Goddington were present. The team agreed that the shortened agenda was more achievable in the short time allotted for the PLC meeting. Continuing the work of the previous PLC meeting, the ARDT planned the agenda to include participants bringing differentiated reading texts to the next PLC meeting (ARIT 1.3) to plan instruction using the lesson plan template collaboratively. The researcher took minutes during the meeting and reflected after the meeting in the Researcher's Journal.

The final PLC meeting of Cycle I (ARIT 1.3) was held on September 28, 2023. The primary researcher, Adrian Shill, Mary Goddington, McClain Chouser, Toni Lesse, and Kaden Ryle were present. Allee Edwards and Betty Mattison were unable to attend. Each PLC participant brought a text for small group reading for the upcoming week's instruction. Adrian Shill modeled how she took a text and planned to use the small group template to guide her lesson. The PLC participants then collaboratively discussed various members' texts and highlighted various pillars of literacy instruction to include in planning. The meeting ended with each participant completing the reflective Google Form questionnaire. The researcher completed

the researcher's questionnaire and recorded personal notes and reflections in the Researcher's Journal.

Focus Groups

Focus groups with both the ARDT and ARIT were held with both teams at the end of Cycle I during the first week of October 2023. These focus groups aimed to gain a mid-point assessment of participants' perceptions of the PLC's impact and the leaders' roles in the PLC. Specifically, the researcher used this collected data for Research Question 1 to inform the data surrounding the perceived effect of the PLC on reading instruction after Cycle I, as well as for Question 2 in terms of member perception of leader support thus far in the study.

These focus groups were held in-person, with necessary design procedures set. The groups established ground rules, and the researcher acted as the moderator to encourage all participants to share their opinions in a non-judgmental space (Kleiber, 2003). The primary researcher recorded the focus groups using a closed Google Meet and the researcher's phone. Then, she created transcriptions from both Google Meet and Otter.ai. Focus group transcriptions were analyzed through coding to contribute to the data collection and analysis (Barbour, 2014).

Members of the ARDT met during the school day on October 5, 2023, for their focus group interview. The primary researcher, Adrian Shill, and Mary Goddington were present for the focus group. Jeremy Jonas was unable to attend due to a disciplinary conflict at school. The primary researcher asked the group twelve questions from the ARDT Focus Group Protocol (Appendix D). These questions mirrored the initial interview questions about strengths and challenges related to small group reading instructional planning, collaboration, the impact of the PLC, and leader support. The last question was open-ended to provide an opportunity for additional information not explicitly targeted in the previous questions.

Members of the ARIT met on the afternoon of October 5, 2023, for their focus group held after Cycle I concluded and before Cycle II started. The primary researcher and the five classroom teachers, Allee Edwards, Betty Mattison, McClain Chouser, Toni Lesse, and Kaden Ryle, were present. The instructional specialists, Adrian Shill and Mary Goddington, did not attend due to personal schedule conflicts. The two also previously mentioned that they did not want to impact the teachers' responses regarding leader support due to their presence in the focus group. The primary researcher asked the group ten questions from the ARIT Focus Group Protocol (Appendix D). These questions mirrored the initial interview questions about strengths and challenges related to small group reading instructional planning, collaboration, the impact of the PLC, and leader support, with an open-ended question at the end to provide an opportunity for additional information not asked in previous questions.

Action Research Cycle II and Intervention

Action Research Cycle II began at the beginning of October 2023 after the completion of the focus group meetings. Cycle II lasted approximately six weeks and concluded in mid-November, before the Thanksgiving holiday. Again, the ARDT met every other week to debrief the previous PLC meeting, describe the support given to teachers during and between PLC meetings, and plan the upcoming PLC meeting. These PLC meetings were held with the ARIT the weeks opposite the ARDT meetings, except for the last ARDT and ARIT meetings. The primary researcher scheduled the ARDT 2.3 and ARIT 2.3 meetings the same week to ensure that she would complete the final individual interviews before the Thanksgiving holiday. Table 4.6 visually represents the bi-weekly alternating meetings and briefly describes each meeting's focus.

Table 4.6

Action Research Cycle II Meetings

Date	Meeting Title	Meeting Focus
October 11, 2023	ARDT 2.1	Reflection of Cycle I, Review of Focus Group Data, Planning for PLC ARIT 2.1
October 18, 2023	ARIT 2.1	PLC ARIT 2.1 implementing Intervention 2
October 25, 2023	ARDT 2.2	Planning for PLC ARIT 2.2
November 2, 2023	ARIT 2.2	PLC ARIT 2.2 continuing the implementation of Intervention 2
November 8, 2023	ARDT 2.3	Planning for PLC ARIT 2.3
November 9, 2023	ARIT 2.3	PLC ARIT 2.3 continuing the implementation of Intervention 2

The overarching intervention within this action research was to sustain the newly created PLC, continue the intervention from Cycle I, collaborative small group reading lesson planning, and begin another intervention. The Cycle II intervention provided within the PLC focused on creating a vertical word list for grades three and four by building on lists created and used in kindergarten, first, and second grades, while incorporating new learning on morphology instruction from Cycle I.

The ARDT met on October 11, 2023, (ARDT 2.1) to debrief and reflect on Cycle I, review data from the focus group interviews with the ARDT and ARIT, and plan for the first PLC meeting in Cycle II. The primary researcher, Adrian Shill, and Mary Goddington attended the meeting. Jeremy Jonas was not able to attend due to schedule conflicts. The primary

researcher reviewed the responses from both the ARDT and ARIT focus groups, noting the positive comments provided by both focus groups. The team agreed that the ARIT received the small group collaborative lesson planning template positively. As such, this Cycle I intervention should continue in Cycle II. The team reflected on vocabulary and word work as a literacy pillar repeatedly discussed in Cycle I meetings. The team decided that this pillar would be a focus for Cycle II, with the intervention of Cycle II specifically focusing on incorporating vocabulary and word work into the small group reading lesson plan as well as creating third- and fourth-grade word lists as a continuation of younger grades' phonics and vocabulary work. The agenda for ARIT 2.1 was set, with collaborative lesson planning and review of K-2 word lists highlighted. The researcher took minutes during the meeting and reflected after the meeting in the Researcher's Journal.

The ARIT met on October 18, 2023 (ARIT 2.1), to begin the Cycle II intervention. The primary researcher, Allee Edwards, Betty Mattison, and Kaden Ryle attended the meeting. Due to scheduling conflicts, Adrian Shill, Mary Goddington, Toni Lesse, and McClain Chouser could not attend. The meeting began with a discussion of past and future reading lesson plans. The group also reviewed the kindergarten, first, and second grades' word lists created by teachers at RES in the past three years using various phonics scopes and sequences. The three teachers in attendance agreed that continuing the list for both third and fourth grade would be helpful across multiple literacy aspects. The meeting ended with each participant completing the reflective Google Form questionnaire. The researcher completed the researcher's questionnaire and recorded personal notes and reflections in the Researcher's Journal.

The ARDT met on October 25, 2023 (ARDT 2.2), to debrief and reflect on ARIT 2.1. The primary researcher, Adrian Shill, and Mary Goddington attended. Jeremy Jonas was unable

to attend due to scheduling conflicts. The primary researcher reviewed the ARIT 2.1 meeting with the small number of participants present and the focus on working on the word list for 3rd and 4th grades. Adrian Shill and Mary Goddington shared resources from their professional learning courses with Orton Gillingham. Mary Goddington offered to cross-reference the Orton Gillingham developmental progression with the existing RES word list to ensure earlier grades met foundational phonics skills and to provide a direction for the word list work for the upcoming PLC. The team created the agenda and assigned duties. The researcher took minutes during the meeting and reflected after the meeting in the Researcher's Journal.

The ARIT met on November 2, 2023 (ARIT 2.2), to continue the Cycle II intervention. The primary researcher, Adrian Shill, Mary Goddington, Betty Mattison, and Toni Lesse were present. Due to scheduling conflicts, Allee Edwards, McClain Chouser, and Kaden Ryle could not attend. The meeting began with a ten-minute collaborative discussion about reading lesson plans. The group also discussed the importance of continual review of phonics skills to improve decoding. The group then reviewed the work Mary Goddington prepared for the meeting, looking at the Orton Gillingham resources and the RES K-2 word list, and made notes on areas of concern for their current third and fourth graders. These areas will be reviewed or introduced in the new draft of the RES word list. The meeting ended with each participant completing the reflective Google Form questionnaire. The researcher completed the researcher's questionnaire and recorded personal notes and reflections in the Researcher's Journal.

The ARDT met on November 8, 2023 (ARDT 2.3), to debrief and reflect on ARIT 2.2. The primary researcher, Adrian Shill, and Mary Goddington were present. Jeremy Jonas was unable to attend. The team referenced the state ELA standards to ensure the representation of phonics or vocabulary standards in the word list. The primary researcher said she was

responsible for going through the standards and showing progressions for second through fifth grades. She also typed a list of Orton Gillingham word features not featured in the RES word list for the next meeting. The researcher took minutes during the meeting and reflected after the meeting in the Researcher's Journal.

The ARIT met on November 9, 2023 (ARIT 2.3), for the last PLC meeting in Cycle II. Again, the group began with an instruction update in small group reading, with ideas from others shared collaboratively. The group then switched to the word work. The PLC group decided on various grade level foci, including second grade focusing on common prefixes of pre-, re-, un-, ex- and suffixes -ful, -less, -ness, -ly; third grade focusing on Anglo-Saxon morphemes, fourth grade on Latin, and fifth grade on Greek morphemes for the updates to the RES word list.

As this was the last meeting, the end of the meeting included some time for reflective and goal-based discussion. The group discussed more frequent reading assessments to measure the learning impacted by the small group reading planning and incorporating the vocabulary pillar into these plans. Additionally, the group discussed using the PLC format of focusing on specific interventions in the loosely created school improvement goal group meetings after monthly faculty meetings. McClain Chouser mentioned that the PLC's highly-focused intervention format would benefit vertical planning in writing through the creation of grade-level benchmark prompts and graphic organizers. The team also expressed interest in continuing this PLC beyond the scope of the primary researcher's study. The ARIT decided that the PLC would continue its work in monthly meetings on the first Thursday of each month going forward. The meeting ended with each participant completing the reflective Google Form questionnaire. The researcher completed the researcher's questionnaire and recorded personal notes and reflections in the Researcher's Journal.

Final Interviews

Final individual interviews were held with each member of the ARDT and ARIT at the end of Cycle II in mid-November of 2023. These interviews were held face-to-face in the researcher's office on campus at RES. The researcher and interviewee mutually decided on the time and date. Table 4.7 shows the dates of the final interviews. The primary researcher asked the five members of the ARIT ten questions. Likewise, the primary researcher asked the ARDT members ten questions from the ARIT interview protocol and ten questions from the ARDT interview protocol. The researcher recorded the interviews in a closed Google Meet session and on the researcher's phone and transcribed them using Google Meet and Otter.ai. The primary researcher shared the transcriptions with each participant to ensure accuracy and clarity. The interview process gave insight into teachers' perceptions of strengths and challenges related to reading small group instruction, the PLC experiences during this research study, and the support school leaders provided before and during this research study. The primary researcher intended the one-on-one time to allow the participant to reflect and articulate perceived strengths and challenges in a private setting. The final interview was a summative capstone of the participants' experiences during this two-cycle research study.

Table 4.7

Action Research Final Interviews

Member	Primary Role at Reese Elementary School	Action Research Team Role	Date of Final Interview
Jeremy Jonas	Assistant Principal	ARDT	November 15, 2023
Mary Goddington	Instructional Specialist	ARDT & ARIT	Not held due to Maternity Leave
Adrian Shill	Instructional Specialist	ARDT & ARIT	November 16, 2023 (ARDT & ARIT)
Allee Edwards	Fourth-Grade Teacher, Reading/ELA	ARIT	November 16, 2023
Betty Mattison	Fourth-Grade Teacher, Reading/ELA	ARIT	November 15, 2023
McClain Chouser	Third-Grade Teacher, All Subjects	ARIT	November 13, 2023
Toni Lesse	Third-Grade Teacher, All Subjects	ARIT	November 14, 2023
Kaden Ryle	Third-Grade Teacher, All Subjects	ARIT	November 14, 2023

Action Research Team Artifacts

Throughout this four-month study, the primary researcher met with the Action Research Design and Implementation Teams on alternating weeks to create and facilitate an overall intervention, a PLC, and guided interventions provided within the PLC. The Action Research Design and Implementation Teams used Organizational Learning Theory (Fauske & Raybould, 2005; Hamilton et al., 2008; Milway & Saxton, 2011) as the theoretical framework to guide the action research process. The logic model of Plan, Do, Study, Act model (Deming, 1993) guided the planning and creation of a PLC to improve reading instructional methods (Figure 1.2).

Within the PLC, the ARDT implemented interventions to improve reading instruction based on current best practices in reading instruction.

As such, action research team artifacts included the theoretical framework and logic model. Additionally, other artifacts collected include IRB documents; consent forms; emails between the researcher and participants; transcribed initial and final interview responses; transcribed focus group sessions; ARDT planning meeting agendas, minutes, documentation, and transcriptions; ARIT PLC meeting agendas, minutes, documentation, and transcriptions; ARDT, ARIT, and researcher bi-weekly questionnaires; and researcher journal notes. Table 4.8 summarizes the alignment between the research questions, collected data sources, and the theoretical framework.

Table 4.8

Alignment of Research Questions and Data Sources to Theoretical Framework

Research Questions	Collected Data Sources	Alignment to Theoretical Framework
RQ 1: How do teachers describe the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?	Questionnaires Focus Group Responses Initial and Final Interview Responses	Culture of Continuous Improvements (CCI) Defined Learning Structures (DLS)
RQ 2: What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?	Questionnaires Focus Group Responses Initial and Final Interview Responses Researcher's Journal	Supportive Leaders (SL) Culture of Continuous Improvements (CCI)
RQ 3: How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?	Questionnaires Initial and Final Interview Responses Researcher's Journal	Culture of Continuous Improvements (CCI) Defined Learning Structures (DLS)

Chapter Summary

This chapter described and framed the problem within the context of RES. The chapter further detailed the four-month, two-cycle action research study and the data artifacts collected, including initial and final interview responses, focus group responses, and reflective questionnaires. The researcher further described the alignment between the research questions and theoretical framework.

Chapter 5 will present the case findings presented chronologically as the study unfolded during two action research cycles, with the perspectives of the action research design and

implementation teams highlighted to illuminate the findings. This chapter will provide an in-depth description of data collection, findings, and analysis. Triangulation of multiple data sources, including responses from initial and final interviews, focus groups, reflective questionnaires, the researcher's journal, and meeting transcriptions, will be used to extrapolate themes. The researcher will revisit the three action research questions regarding the findings presented in the chapter.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE

Rural leaders face many unique contextual challenges (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Schreuder, 2010; Wallin, 2003), including providing systems of support for teachers, such as professional learning and supportive, relevant professional learning communities. Professional learning in a rural setting has the potential to overcome situational challenges by improving teacher content knowledge and pedagogy, as well as teacher retention (Banghart, 2021; Barton, 2012). The literature on the importance of professional learning to improve teacher instructional capacity is robust (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009, 2011; Wei et al., 2010; Zepeda, 2019). Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are frequently used to improve teacher instructional capacity overall (DuFour, 2004a, 2004b, 2014; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Hord, 1997, 2004), as well as specifically with reading instruction (D'Ardenne et al., 2013; Main et al., 2020; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020). Further, fostering shared leadership within PLCs allows rural schools to maximize resources for school improvement by increasing teacher leadership (Sharif, 2020; Shen et al., 2020; Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019).

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to examine how leaders within a rural, public elementary school setting support teachers through developing and implementing a PLC to improve reading instruction.

Research Questions

The following research questions addressed the purpose of this action research study and guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?
2. What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?
3. How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?

Chapter 5 presents the findings of the case presented chronologically as the study unfolded during two action research cycles, with the perspectives of the action research design and implementation teams highlighted to illuminate the findings. This chapter will provide an in-depth description of data collection, findings, themes, and analysis. Triangulation of multiple data sources, including responses from initial and final interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, the researcher's journal, and meeting transcriptions, will be used to extrapolate themes. The primary researcher will revisit the three action research questions considering the findings presented in the chapter.

Overview of Key Findings and Themes

Through a process that will be described in detail in this chapter, the researcher identified the following eight key findings:

1. Participants indicated that the PLC improved collaboration between ELA teachers within the PLC meetings.

2. Participants indicated that the PLC improved collaboration outside the PLC meetings.
3. Participants indicated that the PLC fostered increased collaboration between teachers and school leaders.
4. Teachers revealed that participation in the PLC improved their curricular understanding and, as a result, their classroom instruction.
5. Teachers believed they had an improved vertical instructional understanding across grade levels.
6. Leaders indicated that their own professional learning impacted the design and implementation of the PLC.
7. Participants acknowledged the differentiated support provided by school leaders inside and outside PLC meetings. This support encouraged and sustained instructional improvement progress.
8. Leaders believed that the refined, specific focus of the PLC made its work more successful.

Further, the researcher developed three broader themes connected to each research question after continual review and analysis of the findings and their alignment to the research question. Those themes are as follows:

1. Improved Collaboration
2. Increased Instructional Knowledge
3. Differentiated Leader Support

The primary researcher will present the process used to extract the themes and description of the themes in this chapter.

Introduction to Analysis

This action research case study examined how school leaders can support reading teachers through a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction. Reading teachers in grades 2 through 5 were invited to participate in the study, with three third-grade and two fourth-grade reading teachers consenting to participate. Two reading teachers were in their first year of teaching at RES, with one returning to the classroom after working more than ten years in administration. One of the teachers had never taught reading before the 2023-2024 school year. Two other members, experienced reading teachers, sought to continually improve their instructional practices to meet their students' needs.

Initial interviews were conducted with this group, called the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT), comprised of the consenting group of five third- and fourth-grade teachers, two instructional specialists, and the principal/primary researcher. The Action Research Design Team (ARDT), composed of the primary researcher, assistant principal, and two instructional specialists, also participated in individual interviews at the start of the study. The primary researcher selected interviews as a data collection source as ARDT and ARIT members may not have shared individual perceptions in a group setting due to the sensitive, introspective nature of the comments. The assistant principal was originally planning to be a part of the ARDT and ARIT, but he could not attend ARIT meetings due to scheduling conflicts. Nevertheless, he served as an integral part of the ARDT.

The ARDT met to discuss data collected during the interviews to design and plan the implementation of a PLC at RES. Meetings of the PLC with the ARIT were held every other week throughout the fall of 2023. The ARDT met for a debrief and planning meeting during opposite weeks. In its totality, Cycle I contained three meetings of the ARDT and three of the

ARIT. At the end of Cycle 1, the primary researcher conducted focus groups with both the ARDT and ARIT as the mid-point in the study. Cycle II included three meetings of the ARDT and three meetings of the ARIT. At the study's conclusion, final interviews were held with each ARDT and ARIT member individually.

The data told the story of upper elementary reading teachers collaborating to improve small group reading instruction at their rural elementary school. The study uncovered several findings. The following sections will detail the action research process findings.

Findings

The researcher identified key findings using a coding process with responses from initial interviews, focus groups, final interviews, transcriptions of bi-weekly ARDT planning meetings, and questionnaires completed after each ARIT PLC meeting. The researcher's journal notes confirmed the themes from the coding process and informed the findings. As a result, eight findings emerged from the study after data analysis:

1. Participants indicated that the PLC improved collaboration between ELA teachers within the PLC meetings.
2. Participants indicated that the PLC improved collaboration outside the PLC meetings.
3. Participants indicated that the PLC fostered increased collaboration between teachers and school leaders.
4. Teachers revealed that participation in the PLC improved their curricular understanding and, as a result, their classroom instruction.
5. Teachers believed they had an improved vertical instructional understanding across grade levels.

6. Leaders indicated that their own professional learning impacted the design and implementation of the PLC.
7. Participants acknowledged the differentiated support provided by school leaders inside and outside PLC meetings. This support encouraged and sustained instructional improvement progress.
8. Leaders believed that the refined, specific focus of the PLC made its work more successful.

The researcher developed the findings from this qualitative research study by analyzing the data collected formatively during and cumulatively after the study. The researcher used thematic codes "according to whatever scheme is relevant to [the] study, and according to the theoretical framework that informs the study" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 200). The researcher used a transcription website, Otter.ai, to transcribe each interview, focus group, and ARIT and ARDT meeting. After transcribing the data, the researcher used a coding website called Delve to analyze and code the data. Saldaña (2014) describes coding as assigning meaning to data using symbolic words or phrases. The researcher repeatedly reviewed the data for coding and recoding the transcriptions throughout both action research cycles. Additionally, the researcher reviewed the keywords and themes found throughout the literature that supported the researcher as central components of this process. Table 5.1 shows major and minor codes that emerged during the coding process.

Table 5.1

Major and Minor Codes by Research Question

Codes	RQ 1	RQ 2	RQ 3
Major Codes	Learned through collaboration (53) Improved connections (47) Reflection of practices (39)	Shared knowledge of pedagogy and resources (21) Planned collaboratively (12) Participated in co-teaching (10)	Planned with specific purpose for participants' needs (25) Planned with a distinct focus (13) Design impacted by outside personal PL (17)
Minor Codes	Implemented new learning (17) Affirmed Practices (6) Highlighted time constraints (5)	Shared new learning from outside PL (5) Teacher reassurance (5) Mitigate time constraints (4)	Facilitated discussion (8) Improved relationships (3)

Initial themes emerged through collapsing, combining, and refining codes. The researcher then used data triangulation to confirm themes across various data sources. Table 5.2 shows data sources used in triangulation.

Table 5.2

Triangulation Matrix

Research Question	Source 1	Source 2	Source 3
RQ 1	ARDT and ARIT Questionnaires	ARDT and ARIT Focus Groups	Initial and Final ARDT and ARIT Interviews
RQ 2	ARDT and ARIT Questionnaires	ARDT and ARIT Focus Groups	Initial and Final ARDT and ARIT Interviews
RQ 3	ARDT Questionnaires	Initial and Final ARDT Interviews, ARDT Focus Group	Researcher's Journal, ARDT Meeting Transcripts

Additionally, the primary researcher consulted the ARIT and ARDT members to confirm reoccurring themes. By the end of the study, the researcher's coding and overall analysis led to final themes and findings that informed the answering of the research questions. Table 5.3 summarizes the themes connected to the research questions and theoretical framework of Organizational Learning Theory. The researcher aligned the themes with the three aspects of Organizational Learning Theory highlighted in this study: supportive leaders (SL), a culture of continuous improvements (CCI), and defined learning structures (DLS). These themes will be explored in detail later in this chapter.

Table 5.3

Summary of Themes Connected to Research Questions and Theoretical Framework

Research Questions	Alignment to Theoretical Framework	Major Themes
RQ 1: How do teachers describe the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?	Defined Learning Structures (DLS) Culture of Continuous Improvements (CCI)	Theme 1 – Improved Collaboration Theme 2 – Increased Instructional Knowledge
RQ 2: What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?	Culture of Continuous Improvements (CCI) Supportive Leaders (SL)	Theme 1 – Improved Collaboration Theme 2 – Increased Instructional Knowledge Theme 3 – Differentiated Leader Support
RQ 3: How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?	Defined Learning Structures (DLS) Culture of Continuous Improvements (CCI)	Theme 2 – Increased Instructional Knowledge Theme 3 – Differentiated Leader Support

Results from Action Research Cycles

Cycle I

The overarching intervention within this action research was to create a PLC, as leaders had not established formal professional learning structures at RES. As such, the ARDT planned to develop a PLC to improve reading instructional methods. Within the PLC, the ARDT would plan specific reading instructional interventions to meet the teachers' needs in planning appropriate small group reading instruction.

Action Research Cycle I began in mid-August of 2023. Cycle I started with individual interviews with both the ARDT and ARIT. Cycle I lasted approximately six weeks and concluded at the end of September.

Initial individual interviews were held with each member of the ARDT and ARIT at the beginning of Cycle I in mid-August of 2023. The interview process gave insight into teachers' perceptions of strengths and challenges related to reading small group instruction, previous professional learning experiences, and school leader support provided for small group reading instruction. The one-on-one time allowed the participant to reflect and articulate perceived strengths and challenges privately. ARDT and ARIT members may not have shared individual perceptions in a group setting due to the sensitive, introspective nature of the comments.

Table 5.4 highlights initial interview questions, categories developed, and alignment to each research question from responses given by members of the ARDT. The complete interview protocol can be found in Appendix C.

Table 5.4

Initial ARDT Interview Coding, Categories, and Alignment to Research Questions

Q1: Perception of small-group reading instruction in each grade level, RES overall. RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Know end goal, not means to achieve	1	1
Shift from decoding in 3rd to comprehension in 4th	4	2
Lower levels teacher-directed, higher groups more independent	1	1

Q2: Areas of strength in small group reading instruction in grades 3 and 4? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Plethora of text resources	3	3

Teacher interaction/questioning with students	2	2
Teacher motivation and expertise	4	1

Q3: Challenges of small group reading instruction in grades 3 and 4? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Incomplete scope and sequence for 3rd-5th	1	1
Inexperienced reading teachers	2	2
Communication/collaboration between adults	1	1
Varied needs of students, esp. SPED	1	1
Time constraints – not enough time	3	3

Q4: How have you typically supported reading teachers in grades 3 and 4? RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Sharing ideas and resources	2	2
Sharing own learning from PL	2	2
Assisting with and analyzing assessments	2	1
Assisting with groups or in classrooms	3	3

Q5: What barriers, if any, are there to support reading teachers? RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Time constraints for collaborative planning	2	2
Time constraints within instruction to implement new	1	1

Q6: What support would you like to provide to reading teachers this semester? RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Foster school-wide literacy language consistency	1	1
Facilitate vertical/horizontal planning and collaboration	2	2

Q7: How has past PL impacted small group reading instruction in grades 3 and 4? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Positive impact on improving instruction	5	2
More teacher autonomy	1	1

Q8: How has collaboration impacted reading instruction? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Helps improve instruction	1	1
Helps improve vertical alignment	1	1
Cultivates community of support	2	2
Increases accountability	2	2

Q9: How have past PLCs impacted small group reading instruction in grades 3 and 4? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Increases accountability	2	2
Improves vertical alignment	2	1
Improves collaboration	1	1
Rejuvenates, reignites passion	1	1

Additionally, the primary researcher interviewed each member of the ARIT individually to garner the teachers' perspectives on reading instruction, professional learning, and collaboration at RES. Table 5.5 highlights each initial interview question, categories developed, and alignment to each research question based on responses from members of the ARIT. The complete interview protocol can be found in Appendix C.

Table 5.5

Initial ARIT Interview Coding, Categories, and Alignment to Research Questions

Q1: Describe your current small group reading instruction. RQ1

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Texts on instructional levels	8	5
Vocabulary instruction	3	2
Comprehension activities	6	3

Q2: Describe your perceived strengths in small group reading instruction. RQ1

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Relationships with students	2	2
Comprehension strategies	2	2
None at this time since new to teaching reading	1	1
Engagement through student interests	6	4
Targeting student need	4	3
Supporting Tier I instruction	1	1
Consistent instructional routines	1	1

Q3: What have been the biggest challenges for implementing small group reading instruction? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Lack of phonics instructional knowledge	3	3
Lack of reading instructional experience	1	1
Varied student needs	7	5

Q4: What supports do you feel would help you address those challenges? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Modeled lessons	3	3
Any professional learning/supports	2	1
Collaboration with special education co-teacher	3	2
Data analysis with instructional specialists	1	1
More resources for morphology	1	1
Devote more time to small group lesson planning	1	1
More personnel to decrease teacher/student ratio	2	1

Q5: Describe school leader support for small group reading instruction. RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Suggesting new ideas, resources	14	5
Easily approachable	4	4
Master scheduling to reduce group size	4	3
Provide time for instructional peer observations	1	1
Provide time for collaborative planning	2	1
Teacher autonomy in the use of resources	4	3

Q6: Describe previous professional learning that has impacted your small group reading instruction. RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Secret Stories – increase decoding	1	1
RESA – writing resources	2	2
RES – the science of reading	1	1
Monthly vertical faculty conversations	2	2
CAFÉ Book – strategy instruction	1	1
Program-specific, not pedagogy	1	1
Self-motivated professional learning	5	5
Orton Gillingham ISME – common language vertically	2	2

Q7: How has collaboration impacted your reading instruction? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Learn from and share new things with others	23	7
Improve planning	5	4
Clarifying horizontal and vertical expectations	5	4
Restructuring instructional format	1	1

Within this overarching intervention of establishing a PLC, the ARDT designed a specific Cycle I intervention after analyzing data from initial interviews. The data revealed that many reading teachers needed help addressing the many elements required in reading instruction. Thus, the intervention implemented within the PLC during Cycle I would specifically focus on collaboratively planning small group reading instruction and ensuring teachers' understanding of the various elements of reading instruction necessary in these plans.

For the remainder of Cycle I, the ARDT met every other week to debrief the previous PLC meeting, describe the support given to teachers during and in between PLC meetings, and plan the forthcoming PLC meeting. These PLC meetings were held with the ARIT the weeks opposite of the ARDT meetings. After each PLC meeting, the members of the ARIT completed a

reflective questionnaire to provide feedback about the meeting, inform future PLC meetings, and provide data to inform the three research questions. Table 5.6 summarizes questionnaire responses from Cycle I. The complete list of questionnaire prompts can be found in Appendix E.

Table 5.6

Questionnaire Responses Connected to Research Questions after Cycle I

RQ 1: How do teachers describe the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Realization of the need for new learning	13	6
Reassurance of current practices	7	4
Identification of replacement practices	11	5
Implementation of new practices	18	7
Extend learning to personal research	6	5

RQ 2: What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Facilitate collaborative opportunities	4	2
Provide resources and share practices	17	7
Cultivate supportive environment	4	3

RQ 3: How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Use questionnaire responses to guide planning	4	3
Focus on specific intervention/product	4	3

At the end of Cycle I, both the ARDT and ARIT participated in focus group meetings. Using focus groups in qualitative research allows a group to make meaning collectively through

interactive discussion (Kleiber, 2003). The purpose of the ARDT focus group was to collect the perceptions of PLC impact, details of leader support, and leader description of design and implementation at the midway point of the research study. Table 5.7 highlights each focus group question, categories developed, and alignment to each research question from responses given by members of the ARDT. The complete focus group protocol can be found in Appendix D.

Table 5.7

ARDT Focus Group Coding, Categories, and Alignment to Research Questions

Q1: Perception of small group reading instruction in each grade level, RES overall. RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Balancing decoding and comprehension	3	3
Focus on vocabulary and comprehension	2	2
Intervention and Inclusion students	5	3
Continued focus on vocabulary	3	3

Q2: Describe how you have supported reading teachers since the beginning of this year. RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Provided resources	3	2
Helped with organization	2	2
Created groups	2	2
Modeled lesson plans	2	2
Answered questions	2	2
Cultivated relationships	3	3

Q3: How has reading instruction changed since the beginning of the year? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
More focused, intentional	5	3
More organized due to lesson plan	3	3

Q4: Why has reading instruction changed? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Lesson plan format	6	3
Collaboration in PLC	6	3
Highly-focused PLC	6	3

Q5: How has this PLC impacted reading instruction? RQ1

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Improved collaboration	6	3
Improved focus in small groups	6	3
Created usable lesson plan	6	3

Q6: How do you envision supporting reading teachers for the remainder of the semester? RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Continuing collaborative discussion	1	1
Improving/revising flexible grouping	2	2
Providing resources	2	2
Exploring assessments	7	3

Q7: Describe your planned supports for the future. RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Continuing use of lesson plan template	2	2
More collaborative conversation	2	2
Discussing goals for next year	3	3
Collaborative planning for next year	3	3

Q8: How has this PLC impacted the support you have or will provide? RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Improved collaborative relationships	3	3
Increased collegial conversation	2	2
Improved clarity of expectations	4	3

More reflective of leader practices	6	3
Ideas for improvement of leader practices	10	3
Motivation for more collaborative opportunities	5	3

Q9: Describe the process of designing this PLC. RQ3

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Initial planning meetings prior to PLC	6	3
Planned to have participants bring resources to make PLC applicable to them	6	3

Q10: Describe the process of implementing this PLC. RQ3

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Respectful of time	2	2
Use suggestions to improve PLC planning for next time–observing	2	2

Q11: Describe the impact of this PLC on reading instructional improvement at RES. RQ1

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Positive impact	3	3

Q12: Is there anything else you'd like to share that would shed light on this topic?

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Cycle II ideas – vocabulary	9	3
Cycle II ideas – continue collaborative conversations with planning	9	3
Cycle II ideas – "make and take" with flash cards and videos	6	3
Vertical planning	3	3
Exploring existing resources	6	3

The purpose of the ARIT focus group was to gain a mid-point assessment of participants' perceptions of the PLC's impact and the leaders' roles in the PLC. Table 5.8 highlights each

focus group question, categories developed, and alignment to each research question from responses given by members of the ARIT. The complete focus group protocol can be found in Appendix D.

Table 5.8

ARIT Focus Group Coding, Categories, and Alignment to Research Questions

Q1: Describe your current small group reading instruction. RQ1

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Leveled passages/groups	8	5
Focusing on skills student needs	5	3
Using PLC to plan future small and whole group	8	5
Vocabulary instruction	12	6
Written response	1	1
Building background knowledge	2	2
Dictation	1	1

Q2: What have been the biggest challenges for implementing small group reading instruction? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Finding time for writing small groups	7	2
Differences in reading and writing abilities	2	2
Monitoring independent groups	2	2
Providing meaningful independent groups	2	2
Time constraints	5	5
Finding balance within pillars	4	3

Q3: Changes to small group reading instruction since the beginning of the semester? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Improved expectations for instruction	2	1
Improved awareness of student need	2	2
Improved use of variety of text	3	2
Increased time spent improving background knowledge	1	1

Increased time spent on vocabulary activities	9	5
Balance of technology activities	2	2
Increase in student motivation	3	2

Q4: What area/s still need improvement? RQ1

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Writing	6	3
Balancing time	13	5
Challenging higher learners	5	3
Teacher confidence	9	5

Q5: What supports can be put in place to help the areas of improvement? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Collaborative conversation with instructional specialists	1	1
Use of media specialist to pull text resources	7	3

Q6: How has collaboration impacted your reading instruction? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Improves teacher confidence to hear others are struggling as well	3	3
After faculty meetings – vertical planning for writing	4	2
Improves vertical understanding	2	2
Improved understanding of reading instruction	1	1

Q7: How has this PLC impacted your reading instruction? RQ1

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Sharing resource ideas – flashcards	3	3
Shown need for increased vertical planning/assignment – What grade does this? Basics (days of the week)	3	3
Improved small group instruction	1	1
Improved understanding of reading instruction	1	1
Improved collaborative relationships	4	4

Q8: How have school leaders supported you thus far in the year? RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Providing increased time to plan	3	3
Reassuring presence/relationship	3	2
Sharing knowledge	2	1
Providing resources	3	3

Q9: How can school leaders support you for the remainder of the semester? RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Provide additional planning days during school day	4	4
Continue vertical time	5	4
Provide vetted reading/writing resources	2	2

Results from Cycle I

After the primary researcher completed the focus group meetings, the ARDT met to debrief Cycle I and the process of designing and implementing a PLC to improve reading instructional practices. Using data from initial interviews, questionnaires, and the focus group, the ARDT summarized current small group reading instruction, as described by the members of the ARIT. These changes included a more extensive variety of reading activities presented during small group reading. For example, during the initial interviews, there were eight responses about using instructional-level text, three about incorporating vocabulary instruction, and six about implementing comprehension activities. During the focus group, a wider variety of instructional practices were mentioned, including eight responses about using instructional-level text (remained the same), 12 responses about incorporating vocabulary instruction (previously 3), and three responses that comprise comprehension activities (previously 6). New responses included focusing on student need (5 responses) and using learning from the PLC to plan instruction (8).

Regarding changes to reading small group instruction since the beginning of the school year, the ARDT members believed it was more focused and intentional (5 responses) and more organized due to the lesson plan format implemented as the Cycle I intervention (3 responses). The responses of the ARIT members corroborate these sentiments, as responses include improved expectations (2), improved awareness of student needs (2), improved use of a variety of text (3), and increased time spent on vocabulary activities (9).

Specifically focusing on the impact of this PLC, ARDT members responded that they perceived participation in the PLC had improved collaboration (6), improved focus in small group planning (6), and created a usable lesson plan format (6). Again, ARIT responses confirmed these perceptions, as responses included increased collaborative relationships (4), improved small group instruction (1), and enhanced understanding of reading instruction (1). Questionnaire responses further describe the impact of the PLC on reading instruction as participants realized the need for new learning (13), identified appropriate replacement practices (11), implemented new practices (18), and continued their learning beyond the confines of the PLC meetings (6). Thus, the intervention implemented during Cycle I that focused on collaboratively planning small group reading instruction and ensuring teachers' understanding of the various elements of reading instruction necessary in these plans had a notable impact on teachers' reading instructional practices.

Cycle II

Cycle II began in October 2023 and lasted until mid-November 2023. Again, the ARIT attended weekly PLC meetings, while the ARDT held planning meetings during opposite weeks. After analysis of data from Cycle I, the ARDT determined that the intervention for Cycle II should be to continue collaborative planning and discussion for small group reading plans and

add more professional learning around various vocabulary activities that teachers could implement within these small group plans.

The primary researcher collected data from questionnaires completed by the ARDT and ARIT after each ARIT meeting, transcripts of ARDT and ARIT meetings, final interviews, and the researcher's journal. Table 5.9 summarizes ARDT and ARIT questionnaire responses. The total response number decreased due to more scheduling conflicts during Cycle II.

Table 5.9

Questionnaire Responses Connected to Research Questions after Cycle II

RQ 1: How do teachers describe the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Reassurance of current practices	3	2
Improved planning for small groups	9	4
Implementation of new practices	16	4

RQ 2: What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Facilitate collaborative opportunities	1	1
Provide resources and share practices	15	5
Plan for future PLC/PL sessions	8	4

RQ 3: How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=3
Use questionnaire responses to guide planning	6	3
Focus on specific intervention/product	3	3

At the end of Cycle II, the primary researcher conducted individual final interviews with members of the ARDT and ARIT. Table 5.10 highlights each final interview question, categories developed, and alignment to each research question from responses given by members of the ARDT. Due to maternity leave, Mary Goddington did not participate in the final ARDT or ARIT interviews. As a result, the highlighted responses only represent two ARDT members.

Table 5.10

Final ARDT Interview Coding, Categories, and Alignment to Research Questions

Q1: Perception of small group reading instruction in each grade level, RES overall. RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=2
Better than before PLC	2	2
More cohesive	2	2
More collaborative	2	2
More eager to improve vibe	1	1

Q2: Areas of strength in small group reading instruction in grades 3 and 4? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=2
Eagerness	1	1
Adaptability	1	1
Honesty	1	1
Vocab after PLC	1	1
Variety of texts after PLC	1	1
More flexibility after PLC	1	1

Q3: Challenges remain in small group reading instruction in grades 3 and 4? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=2
Time for instruction	2	2
Gaps in teacher knowledge	2	2

Q4: Support reading teachers in grades 3, 4 since beginning of year? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=2
Used own PL to impact PLC	1	1
Shared resources and ideas	1	1
Designed and implemented this PLC	1	1
Increased email communication regarding planning	1	1

Q5: Describe your planned supports for the future. RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=2
Provide opportunity for more teachers to participate in reading PL opportunities (LETRS)	1	1
Provide more opportunities for redelivery for outside PL	1	1
Add background knowledge topics to vertical planning	1	1

Q6: How has this PLC impacted the support you have or will provide? RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=2
Created vehicle for cultivating relationships that led to increased collaboration	1	1
This experience will impact all in the future – highly focused and specific	1	1

Q7: Describe the process of designing this PLC. RQ3

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=2
Specific planning protocol	2	2
Data from stakeholders to guide design	4	2
Gathering resources	1	1

Q8: Describe the process of implementing this PLC. RQ3

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=2
Using data to guide future session planning	2	2
High comfort level	1	1
Receptive teachers	1	1
Culture of improvement	1	1

Q9: How will your learning from this process impact future PLCs at RES? RQ2, RQ3

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=2
Communication and collaboration improvements	2	1
Plan highly-focused future PL	2	1

Q10: Describe the impact of this PLC on reading instructional improvement at RES. RQ1

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=2
Increased teacher self-efficacy	2	2
Increased collaboration	2	2
Increased teacher instructional capacity	2	2

Additionally, the primary researcher interviewed the ARIT members individually for the final time. Table 5.11 highlights each final interview question, categories developed, and alignment to each research question based on responses from members of the ARIT. Mary Goddington did not participate in the final interviews due to maternity leave. The total number of ARIT members interviewed was 6.

Table 5.11

Final ARIT Interview Coding, Categories, and Alignment to Research Questions

Q1: Describe your current small group reading instruction. RQ1

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Reading skills and strategies based on student need	4	4
Flexible grouping	1	1
Implemented lesson planning template from PLC	1	1
Variety of text	2	1
Implementing activities to build background knowledge	1	1

Q2: Describe your small group reading instruction prior to this PLC. RQ1

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Rigid (not flexible grouping)	1	1
Good intentions	2	2
Lacked clarity for instructional expectations	2	2
Not differentiated to meet needs of current learners	4	4
Technology-heavy	1	1
Missing vocabulary instruction	3	3

Q3: Describe your perceived strengths in small group reading instruction. RQ1

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Questioning	1	1
Implementing various aspects of reading instruction through new lesson plan template	1	1
Reflection	1	1
Know students' needs	1	1
Motivating students	1	1
Engaging students	1	1
Consistent routines and procedures	1	1
Relationships with students	1	1

Q4: How have your strengths changed since the beginning of this semester? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Applied learning from outside PL	2	2
Added time for discussion for ideas to improve writing	1	1
Added multi-sensory approaches from outside PL	1	1
Know students better	2	2
Trying new things	2	2

Q5: Anything different from beginning of year, in terms of small group reading? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
More conscious of planning for all pillars	4	2
Less overwhelmed	1	1

Included learning from outside PL	2	2
Included improvements from this PLC	6	6

Q6: How has collaboration impacted your reading instruction? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Provided continuity between grade levels	4	3
Garnered new ideas, resources	4	4
Group problem solving	1	1
Improved confidence	2	1
Ideas for own self-research	1	1

Q7: How has this PLC impacted your reading instruction? RQ1

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Improved direct instruction with vocabulary	3	3
Improved continuity between grade levels	3	3
Improved collaboration	4	3
Improved overall reading instruction	7	4
Improved reflection	1	1
Improved self-perception of strengths	3	3
Increased time spent doing self-research for improvement	3	3

Q8: What role have school leaders played in supporting you during this PLC? RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Provided opportunity for continued PLC and PL with teacher autonomy	9	5
Positive, supportive leaders	3	3
Kept PLC focused	1	1
Instructional specialists provided resources and examples	1	1
Learning alongside PLC	1	1

Q9: Current challenges relating to small group reading instruction? RQ1, RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Groups too large	2	1
Improve instruction (comprehension, encoding)	2	1

Worry I am missing something	1	1
Wanting data via growth monitoring	1	1
Time constraints for planning	2	1

Q10: What supports can leaders put in place to address those challenges? RQ2

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=6
Use funds to hire additional personnel, not technology or print resources	1	1
Continue learning in PLC	6	4
Improve horizontal planning time	2	2

Results from Cycle II

After the primary researcher completed all interviews, the ARDT met for a culminating meeting at the end of Cycle II. The primary researcher, Jeremy Jonas, and Adrian Shill were present; Mary Goddington was on maternity leave. Notable changes to descriptions of small group reading instruction include responses that instruction had become better than before PLC (2), more cohesive (2), and more collaborative (2). These perceived changes are confirmed by ARIT final interview responses, with responses of improved practices because of the PLC (6) and increased consciousness of planning for all reading pillars (4).

The perceived impact described by the ARDT through questionnaires of increased teacher self-efficacy (2), increased teacher instructional capacity (2), and increased collaboration (2) is solidified by ARIT questionnaire responses. The ARIT participants described the impact of the PLC on their instruction through implementing new practices (16) and improved planning for small groups (9). In final interview responses, ARIT members noted improvements in all the following areas: direct instruction with vocabulary (3), continuity between grade levels (3), collaboration (4), overall reading instruction (7), reflection (1), self-perception of strengths (3), and increased time spent on self-research to improve practices (3). Thus, the intervention for

Cycle II to continue collaborative planning and improve vocabulary knowledge made an evident impact on instruction.

Findings Analysis

Finding 1: Participants indicated that the PLC improved collaboration between ELA teachers within the PLC meetings.

Data collected during both cycles in the form of questionnaires, the mid-point focus groups with both the ARIT and ARDT, and during the final interviews with all members of the ARIT and ARDT supported this finding. During the coding process, codes related to "learning through collaboration" appeared 53 times through data collection for research question one, and "planning collaboratively" appeared 12 times during data collection for research question two. These two codes were major codes for each research question mentioned.

During Cycle I, questionnaire responses related to providing resources and sharing practices, two concrete examples of collaboration, were mentioned seventeen times by all 7 participants completing questionnaires. Likewise, during Cycle II, responses to the same topics were mentioned fifteen times by five of the six members completing questionnaires. Betty Mattison responded in one of her questionnaire responses, "I think just having time to talk and mainly listen to other experts is a wonderful opportunity for me. I want to be a fly on the wall and soak in as much knowledge as I can!" Similarly, Kaden Ryle desired to continue "to seek out best practices and [continue] collaborating with professionals [and] leadership" in future PLC meetings.

At the mid-point of the study, responses from the ARDT focus group revealed that each of the three ARDT members mentioned improved collaboration twice, for a total of six mentions

of the PLC impacting collaboration. Adrian Shill confirmed the importance of collaboration as she said, “There’s power in that small group talk [during PLC meetings].”

During the ARIT focus group, four ARIT members mentioned improved collaborative relationships as an impact of the PLC on reading instruction. Betty Mattison spoke of collaboration during PLC meetings, saying, “It’s helpful. I’m happier than I’ve ever been. But it is a challenge. And it’s nice that other people are challenged as well.” Later, during her final interview, Betty Mattison said of the PLC: “I think [has] just given me confidence that I didn’t have. You know, I thought I was out there on an island by myself and didn't know what I was doing. But nobody knows what they’re doing, [and that] is okay.”

Similarly, improved collaboration was specifically mentioned four times by three of the ARIT members in their final interviews. Multiple individual responses corroborated the improved collaboration during PLC meetings. First-year reading teacher Toni Lesse said she “really likes the fact that I can talk to other teachers and get ideas from them. I love all the ideas. I love hearing Adrian Shill’s and Mary Goddington’s ideas, and Betty Mattison’s ideas, because you can tell that they really know what they’re talking about.” McClain Chouser, the veteran third-grade teacher, responded that she liked “the collaboration aspect of [the PLC meetings], just being able to learn from everybody and [ask], ‘How are you doing this in your room?’” Likewise, Kaden Ryle spoke about collaboration impacting her instruction:

> It has greatly benefited it. I mean, just from hearing from what everybody else is doing, what’s working for [other teachers], having resources shared. And you know, what isn’t working. So, all of these things, I think, have really impacted [my instruction] in a positive way.

At the end of the research study during the ARDT interviews, Jeremy Jonas summed up this finding of the PLC improving collaboration between teachers when he said, “So basically, the PLC was a vehicle to improve relationships that have led to increased collaboration.”

Finding 2: Participants indicated that the PLC improved collaboration outside the PLC meetings.

Improved connections emerged as a major code, appearing 47 times across data sources. Specifically, evidence of the PLC impacting improved collaboration outside PLC meetings was evident in data collected from the ARDT and ARIT initial interviews, ARIT focus group, ARIT questionnaires, and ARDT and ARIT final interviews.

In his ARDT final interview, Jeremy Jonas spoke of the PLC impacting outside collaboration, “I think just the communication part and the collaboration [has been impacted by the PLC meetings] because once you open that door, then it’s easier to collaborate on other things, it’s easier to ask people and as easier for them to open up and say, ‘Hey, this is what I need help with.’” McClain Chouser, in her final interview, seemed to provide a concrete example of Jeremy Jonas’s sentiment:

> This [PLC] has been really helpful, though. I mean, I definitely learned a lot. So, I just want to continue in the morphology route and learn more about that. I think Kaden Ryle is like the queen of that. So, I’m going to start talking to her more about what she’s doing.

McClain Chouser believed the PLC “helped establish the communication line.” She said she and Kaden Ryle had increased collaborative communication outside the PLC. McClain Chouser feels comfortable talking to Kaden Ryle about how she feels “scattered” during her reading instruction and began using Kaden Ryle as a sounding board about instructional

improvement. Adrian Shill confirmed that the communication line had been established outside the PLC in her mid-study focus group and final interview responses when she referenced a group email that the group had started during the action research study where the Instructional Specialists and teachers shared resources back and forth.

Additional data collection revealed that several participants were interested in beginning practices that would foster collaboration outside the PLC meetings due to collaborative relationships built in the PLC. In a questionnaire completed during Cycle I, Kaden Ryle said she was interested in observing "modeled small group instruction, perhaps going to another teacher, or having someone come to my room to model for me with my students to ensure I am delivering the instruction effectively." Similarly, Betty Mattison desired to "visit other classrooms" and "watch someone else teach their small group and be part of their planning session, using the fishbowl technique" to improve her own practices. During her final interview, McClain Chouser stated she thought it would be "good for everyone to observe each other." She also elaborated on her previous sentiment of speaking with Kaden Ryle about her practices in morphology and her desire to observe her in action.

Betty Mattison's Cycle II questionnaire response summarized the impact of the PLC on outside collaborative relationships as she exclaimed, "I just want this group to continue. It's so important! The bonds will build with each other will help make a change after the trust is built between grade levels."

Finding 3: Participants indicated that the PLC fostered increased collaboration between teachers and school leaders.

Data collection corroborated this finding through major and minor codes: the importance of connection (47), leaders' facilitation of discussion (8), improved leader-teacher relationships

(3), and improved teacher reassurance from leaders (5). Further, the primary researcher supported this finding with evidence from responses from ARDT and ARIT initial interviews, Cycle I and II questionnaires, ARDT and ARIT focus groups, and ARDT and ARIT final interviews.

At the beginning of the study, participants' responses highlighted the already-established collaborative relationship between teachers and leaders. ARIT members mentioned that leaders supported them with new ideas and resources fourteen times, with the opinions of five of the seven ARIT members represented. Three of the seven ARIT members said the leaders were easily approachable in four instances. In a collection of Cycle I questionnaire responses, all seven ARIT members mentioned leaders providing resources and sharing practices for seventeen occurrences. During the ARDT focus group, when asked why reading instruction had changed after Cycle I, all three ARDT members responded that it was due to collaboration in the PLC. Further data supported these examples.

During her ARDT focus group responses, Mary Goddington spoke of collaboration with teachers and leaders because of the PLC:

> I think it's helped us [teachers and leaders] relationship-wise. I mean, we [the leaders] feel comfortable talking to them. But I think [the teachers] feel more comfortable talking to us, like just kind of reached out a little bit more. And it's just opened up more conversations that we wouldn't have otherwise had that I think are helpful.

Jeremy Jonas echoed this leader sentiment:

> I don't feel so much as though offering ideas and saying, 'Hey, let me help,' is an intrusion as I once did. You know, teachers are more open now than they were. [They weren't] closed to begin with, but I think they're more open to help [from leaders].

During her final interview, Toni Lesse's responses supported these two leaders' beliefs, saying, "I know that I can ask [Adrian Shill and Mary Goddington] anything." She also spoke directly about the primary researcher, assistant principal, and two instructional specialists when she said,

> So, you have always been easy to answer any questions that I have. And I like that I can feel comfortable to ask you questions without you feeling like I have no idea what I'm doing, even if [that's how I] perceive it. Like, [you] are flexible, you help me, and you give me resources. I'm not scared to ask anything.

Similarly, in her final interview thoughts, Betty Mattison stated:

> I don't feel like y'all [sic] are being leaders in there. I think you're on the same level as us and learning with us and not saying, 'You have to do this.' And I think it's the professionalism that's there is, you know, it's not negative, I don't leave feeling overwhelmed and [thinking], 'Oh, my gosh, I [have to] read and I got to do this. And I got to do that.' It's just a positive reflection while we're in there.

Kaden Ryle's questionnaire response also showed a desire to continue "to seek out best practices and [continue] collaborating with professionals [and] leadership" in the future, due in part to her focus group sentiments about the primary researcher:

> I think she's [primary researcher] been a wonderful calming presence, like when we're getting really, really bogged down by like, the nitty gritty and how we're [going to] get through this day to day. [She's] just kind of like, 'Calm down and think about the big picture, like, zoom out a little bit; it's [going to] be fine.'

Theme 1: Improved Collaboration

Findings 1, 2, and 3 support the theme of improved collaboration. The implementation of the PLC improved collaboration within and outside the PLC. The PLC also impacted

collaboration between teachers and leaders within and outside the PLC. This theme will be further developed later in the chapter.

Finding 4: Teachers revealed that participation in the PLC improved their curricular understanding and, as a result, their classroom instruction.

Data collected from various sources supported this finding. Major codes revealed during data analysis surrounding this finding were improved learning due to collaboration (53) and reflection to improve practice (39). Minor codes were improved new learning (17) and planned collaboratively (12). Additionally, data were collected from the following sources that impacted this finding: questionnaire responses during Cycle I, ARDT focus group, and ARDT and ARIT interviews. The researcher compared data from the beginning and end of the action research study to connect this finding to individual teachers' journeys.

Toni Lesse, the teacher with the least amount of reading instructional knowledge, was very honest at the beginning of the study when she responded to this statement in her questionnaire responses after the first meeting of the PLC:

> This was a good first meeting. It really hit me that I may not actually fully understand what it means to actually read. There are [so] many components that go into reading that I know I need to do a better job studying up on these before future lessons.

By the mid-point of the study, Toni Lesse articulated improved instructional knowledge during the ARIT Focus Group, as she was "taking more time for background knowledge and focusing on those vocabulary words." During the final interviews, Toni Lesse's improved curricular knowledge and its impact on her instruction was evident:

> First of all, you gave me a wonderful thing to plan on planning guide, the lesson plan. … I'm glad that I did this [PLC], though, because I was very nervous about reading and

> writing. Like, especially coming from only teaching math, well, first only science and social studies, and then math. You're just introducing me to every single chip there is. But it makes me more comfortable [as]… I've never had a problem asking [for help with ELA instruction].

Returning fourth-grade teacher Allee Edwards responded in Cycle I and II questionnaire responses that her instruction had become more varied and that "[t]he PLC has helped me plan better for my small groups. I am able to focus better on vocabulary as recommended by my colleagues." During the ARIT focus group, new fourth-grade teacher Betty Mattison said that due to the PLC, she knew better what the students needed. A few weeks later, Betty Mattison said during a Cycle II questionnaire response, "My work with students during small groups has become more centered on specific skills [like] word focus and writing." McClain Chouser spoke to improved understanding of meeting readers' varied needs due to increased understanding of reading development during the ARIT focus group: "I'm spending more time on [vocabulary instruction]. … My misconception [was that] … high readers …should be able to figure out all of the vocabulary words. I'm really forcing myself to, you know, show them more."

The instructional specialists Mary Goddington and Adrian Shill also articulated improvement in their instruction throughout third and fourth grade at RES. During the ARDT focus group, Mary Goddington replied, "Everybody kind of knows what their group should be focused on for small group reading," while Adrian Shill commented that the teachers were "more intentional in the small group, mostly focusing on comprehension, which I think is good … They're getting a handle on beefing up all of the resources." Jeremy Jonas best summarized the overall improvement during his final interview thoughts: "I do know that it [the PLC] has given

[teachers] more confidence, more tools in the toolbox, if you will, … that will then hopefully translate into helping kids meet standards and become better readers."

The researcher will further examine individual teachers' progression of improvement throughout the action research study in the culminating theme relating to increased instructional knowledge.

Finding 5: Teachers believed they had an improved vertical instructional understanding across grade levels.

Data collected from Cycle I and II questionnaires, ARDT and ARIT focus groups, and ARDT and ARIT final interviews supported the finding that the action research study improved understanding of the requirements of each grade level. Two major codes, shared knowledge and pedagogy (21) and increased learning due to collaboration (53), provide additional support for this finding. In the ARIT focus groups, major response categories include improved vertical understanding (2 instances by 2 of the 6 participants), the need for increased vertical planning (3 instances by 3 of the 6 participants), and the value in continued vertical planning time (5 instances by 4 of the 6 participants). In the ARIT final interviews, three of the six participants articulated the improved continuity between grade levels.

During initial interviews, Adrian Shill described the shift in independence between second and third grades: "The challenge for third grade is moving [the students] to independence from second grade when things are read aloud and getting them to be able to read in a small group and transfer that to an assessment." During her final interview, Kaden Ryle spoke of instructional differences between her previous experiences in second grade and the requirements of third grade:

> I think I had good intentions. But I had a lack of clarity in terms of ... how to focus it and introduce or reinforce skills. I was still kind of using methods that had worked for me in teaching second grade last year, [and] it was not exactly right.

In her final interview, Allee Edwards spoke about vertical understanding and collaboration:

> I've really enjoyed working with the third-grade teachers in particular. Because I kind of … I mean, I pretty much know what fifth grade does. But I had no clue what third grade did. And so that has been helpful. And I've enjoyed getting to know them, too. And I feel like … we're on the right path.

Likewise, comments made by Kaden Ryle supported the mutual feeling of the importance of vertical curricular understanding: "And in here, I like to know what we need to [do to] be laying the groundwork for y'all. I wish that there had been some second-grade teachers [in this PLC]. And … [that jump from second to third grade is still] a struggle." McClain Chouser confirmed this belief during her final interview comments: "I would say, a wide range of educators, not just from our grade level, but having more of a vertical sharing process [made the PLC more successful]."

Finding 6: Leaders indicated that their own professional learning impacted the design and implementation of the PLC.

Since the Spring of 2022, Adrian Shill and Mary Goddington have participated in various formal professional learning opportunities, including sessions related to the practices endorsed by Orton-Gillingham and LETRS and informal professional learning through social media channels. New and ongoing learning was continually included in conversations with the ARIT during the PLC meetings, ARDT planning meetings, and post-meeting questionnaires. Adrian Shill pointed to the importance of practicing teacher-leaders improving practices continually

through professional learning and leading improvement work as she stated, “The smartest people are the people [who] are in the trenches every day so that you can learn the most from your peers.”

Minor codes from research questions 1 and 2 pointed to outside professional learning impacting the learning within the PLC meetings, such as improved new learning (17) and shared new learning from outside PL (5). A major code revealed in the research question 3 response analysis was design impacted by outside personal PL (17). During the transcription of ARDT planning meetings, the researcher counted nearly five references to the Instructional Specialists’ current PL in just one meeting. This improved content knowledge was being shared with other teachers during the PLC meetings to provide a positive impact within more classrooms.

Theme 2: Increased Instructional Knowledge

Overall, Findings 4-6 impacted the theme of increased instructional knowledge. Leaders who designed and implemented the PL continued their own learning through outside professional learning, which influenced the instruction in single classrooms at RES and vertical understanding across grade levels. More details surrounding this theme will be explored later in this chapter.

Finding 7: Participants acknowledged the differentiated support provided by school leaders inside and outside PLC meetings. This support encouraged and sustained instructional improvement progress.

The finding of differentiated leader support surfaced during interviews as participants shared various methods of leader support, from the use of questionnaire data and meeting transcription analysis to guide future PLC content to the wide range of resources made readily available and the accessibility of expertise from school leaders both inside and out of the PLC meetings. The primary researcher analyzed data to reveal that the major code for research

question 3 was that the meetings were planned with participants' needs in mind with 25 occurrences. Minor codes for questions 1 and 2 included leaders' affirming practices (6) and providing reassurance (5).

Additionally, a broad spectrum of needed supports was articulated in the ARIT initial interviews, from leaders being easily approachable (4 of 7 participants), suggesting new ideas and resources (14 comments from 5 participants), to providing teacher autonomy for flexibility in the use of instructional resources (3 of 7 participants). These varied supports continued to emerge during Cycle I questionnaire responses: four participants articulated leader reassurance, while three mentioned cultivating a supportive environment.

In terms of providing differentiated support during the designing process of this PLC, leaders used questionnaire data and meeting transcription analysis to plan subsequent PLC content. In a Cycle I questionnaire, Allee Edwards was candid with feedback of that day's PLC meeting: "Today's PLC did not change anything that I am currently doing." Other participants provided more detail about their needs for future sessions. In a Cycle I questionnaire response, Kaden Ryle articulated her specific need for future PLC sessions:

> Continued planning/collaboration on small-group instruction, the possibility of other differentiated grouping ideas, researching scaffolded passages and paired texts/visual-auditory experiences, and any other planning strategies that could maximize meaningful learning during this [small group] time.

The design team sought to make the PLC meetings as meaningful as possible by placing the implementation team's needs at the forefront. All three design team members mentioned using the questionnaire data to guide planning during their final interviews. Adrian Shill responded, "We talked about the plan, and then we went through with the plan, and then discussed how to

make it better for the next time." Jeremy Jonas comprehensively described the process used by the design team to meet the needs of the implementation team:

> There was a lot of input from different stakeholders, suggestions, gathering of resources. And it wasn't just a matter of this new information [being] disseminated. It was, 'What do we need to work on?' You [considered] the weaknesses and areas of concern brought forth by those in the PLC, and then [said], 'Okay, what can we do to help meet those needs?'

Keeping the needs of the PLC participants at the forefront of all designing and implementing processes fostered increased instructional improvement.

Finding 8: Leaders believed that the refined, specific focus of the PLC made its work more successful.

Data collection supported this finding through responses collected during the ARDT focus group and ARDT and ARIT final interviews. During data analysis, planning sessions with a distinct focus emerged as a major code for research question 3 data collection with 13 occurrences. Instructional specialist Adrian Shill described previous professional learning as disjointed and unfocused. When asked in her initial interview about the impact of prior collaboration and professional learning sessions, she responded that they "created a lot of questions, and not as many answers." Thus, the design team decided to design the PLC with a specific focus on creating an actionable goal that could be achieved in the short period of the action research study. Based on perceived teacher needs, the design team decided that a small group reading lesson plan template was necessary to ensure all teachers provided robust reading instruction that included activities from all reading pillars endorsed by current best practices and research.

Collaborative lesson planning began with a template that RES leaders and teachers created during previous professional learning sessions held in the Spring of 2022. The ARDT collected additional templates from various places, including the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI). Adrian Shill and Mary Goddington both remarked that the previous RES small group lesson plan reflected the beginning of an instructional shift from guided reading practices to structured literacy. The ARDT presented an updated version to the participants in one of the first PLC meetings. The formal and informal professional learning and daily teaching practices of Adrian Shill and Mary Goddington guided the revisions.

The participants provided additional input to improve the template. Subsequent PLC meetings focused on improving instructional capacity around the reading pillars and collaboratively planning lessons with various leveled texts using the revised small group reading template. At the mid-point of the study, the primary researcher articulated the following revelation during the ARDT focus group: “We have so much, so many things, that we want to do [to improve instruction]. But like when we hyper-focused on the lesson plan, then a lot of stuff got impacted [by default].”

The intervention of collaborative planning using the lesson plan started in Cycle I continued during Cycle II. Additionally, the questionnaire responses and transcription analysis revealed the need for additional instructional support with vocabulary and morphology, so those items became the focus of Cycle II. The implementation team confirmed the importance of further learning and discussion. The PLC meetings were an opportune time to complete a vertical word list for third and fourth grades. Adrian Shill confirmed the importance of this work in the current collaborative structure:

> I like the idea of a split, like start [each PLC meeting] with an opener with the lesson plan, and then like, get it to some word [activity]. Because if we don't work on [the word list], then I really can't see when we would work on it.

When reflecting on the entire process, design team members believed the PLC sessions were more impactful because each cycle's intervention focused on one reading instructional product. In her final interview, the primary researcher asked Adrian Shill about the impact of the PLC on future collaboration and professional learning, to which she responded, "I think this will be the basis for everything going forward, like pick a pillar that we want to focus on and stay in that area until the PLC is complete." Due to the perceived success of this PLC design, the ARDT agreed to replicate the focused-based intervention process for future PLCs.

Theme 3: Differentiated Leader Support

Findings 7 and 8 merge into an overall theme of differentiated leader support. The primary researcher used participants' prior knowledge and experience, instructional needs, and emotional state to inform the overall focus of the PLC, as well as the support provided within meetings and outside during the action research study timeline. This theme and the two others will be explored in depth in the next section.

Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Improved Collaboration

Initial interviews, held in August 2023 before the PLC's first meeting, gave the primary researcher insight into current connections and collaborative relationships. Established connections were evident for each grade level and for the instructional specialists with the teachers from both grade levels. Additionally, collaboration was viewed positively by all interviewees. At this early point in the school year, teachers established grade-level relationships

and had familiarity with new faculty members in other grade levels. Several of the members of the ARIT had relationships with other members that extended beyond the classroom, while other members did not know each other.

The sentiments shared during the initial interviews served as a baseline for existing connections and collaborative practices at RES before the PLC began. The third-grade team at RES had the most new members on a single team, comprised of one returning third-grade reading teacher, one returning third-grade teacher new to teaching reading, and two new teachers to RES. Three of these four third-grade teachers were participating in the PLC. While these collegial relationships were just forming, McClain Chouser, the veteran reading teacher from the third-grade team, described the importance of collaboration for the three third-grade members as she exclaimed, "Collaboration is my jam! I love to figure out new ways to teach things, new ways to do things, new activities." Toni Lesse was a returning third-grade teacher but new to teaching reading. She shared feelings of uncertainty about teaching reading, but she said, "I have some teachers that I know in third grade can help me." Kaden Ryle, new to RES, further explained her established connection to third-grade collaborative relationships:

> It makes a tremendous difference to know what everybody else is doing, how they're doing it. I want to implement things in a similar way, but I know I can always learn from others. I want to see those who are the expert teachers, like what they're doing, how they get that across to their students, and how they remediate and differentiate it. I like to see all of that so that I can model that in my own classroom.

A similar new dynamic was present in fourth grade. Allee Edwards was the returning fourth-grade reading teacher, while Betty Mattison was new to fourth grade and returning to the classroom after many years as a district-level administrator. Allee Edwards and Betty Mattison

had never worked together as classroom teachers, but they were familiar with each other from interactions in previous years. It was evident to the ARDT that collaboration had enhanced connections quickly. Allee Edwards liked "just sharing ideas, just listening to other teachers talk about what works or what doesn't work for small group instruction." Betty Mattison further highlighted informal collaboration as she described hallway chats with Allee Edwards in the mornings and afternoons, where they share such sentiments as "This is what we're [going to] do" and "Oh, that's a great idea."

Additionally, comments indicated that teachers had established connections at RES and formed a collaborative environment beyond grade-level boundaries. Mary Goddington, one of the instructional specialists, highlighted her excitement about working with third- and fourth-grade teachers in the PLC due to the shift in reading instruction and the importance of comprehension, where the "rubber meets the road." The other instructional specialist, Adrian Shill, described a wide range of collaborative experiences prior to the PLC, from informal lunchtime conversations to more structured professional sharing sessions. Adrian Shill laughed as she remarked that increased collaboration "has created a lot of questions and not as many answers. But I think it's provided an environment where everybody feels like they can ask for help and what to do and where to get things. I think everybody knows that nobody knows it all. And we're working together to try to do what's best for each group." Later in the interview, Adrian Shill confirmed this belief that the school leaders had established an instructional community where collaboration was valued and encouraged to improve continually.

The PLC officially began meeting with its first meeting held a month into the 2023-2024 school year at RES. The teacher participants had been teaching in their new or returning roles for several weeks and had perceived strengths and challenges around small group reading

instruction. However, the ARDT aimed to establish the PLC as a community that could serve as a safe and non-judgmental space for instructional improvement. Thus, the first meeting of the ARIT as the PLC began with community building through conversation. Participants became vulnerable immediately, led by Betty Mattison's honest recollection of her own reading experiences as a student at RES. An entry in the researcher's journal included this description of the first meeting:

> The conversation was light, fun, jovial, and everyone shared. Some laughed; Betty Mattison cried about her second-grade experience at RES when her second grade teacher shamed her for not knowing the difference between "through" and "thorough." She uses this experience as foundation for her philosophy that no child should ever feel this way about themselves and reading. It is a full cyclical moment that Betty Mattison is now teaching reading to struggling readers when she was a struggling reader in this same building.

Betty Mattison's reflection served as a collective philosophy for reading teachers in this PLC: no child should ever feel shame for their perceived or actual lack of knowledge. The group agreed that once you know better, you can do better. Each teacher wanted to improve their instructional practices to learn how to best teach each student in their classroom.

As early as the mid-point of the study, participants' responses revealed that collaborative practices extended beyond the confines of the formal PLC meetings due to the enhanced connections fostered within the PLC meetings. As a result, collaboration had improved inside and outside the PLC meetings, within each grade level, across grade levels, and with the instructional specialists. In a questionnaire response during Cycle I, Betty Mattison said, "I think just having time to talk and mainly listen to other experts is a wonderful opportunity for me. I

want to be a fly on the wall and soak in as much knowledge as I can!" In a comment made during the ARDT focus group, instructional specialist Mary Goddington remarked:

> I think it's helped us [Adrian Shill and Mary Goddington] relationship-wise [with the teachers]. I mean, we feel comfortable talking to them. But I think the [teachers] feel more comfortable talking to us, like just kind of reached out a little bit more. And it's just opened up more conversations that we wouldn't have otherwise had [that] I think are helpful.

Data from the end of the study cemented this finding. Adrian Shill, the other instructional specialist, echoed Mary Goddington's belief of improved collaboration due to enhanced connections in her final interview:

> I think just the communication part and the collaboration [has been impacted because of the PLC] because once you open that door, then it's easier to collaborate on other things, it's easier to ask people, and it is easier for them to open up and [for them to] say, "Hey, this is what I need help with."

One of the teachers' responses confirmed the instructional specialists' beliefs about the impact of the PLC on connection and collaboration beyond the PLC. In her final interview, Toni Lesse said:

> Yeah, I love all the ideas, and love hearing Mary Goddington and Adrian Shill's ideas and I like hearing Betty Mattison's ideas too, because you can tell that they really know what they're talking about. So, I just like being able to talk to somebody, [to] talk through it outside of third grade. I love my third-grade people; [they] give me a lot of really good ideas.

This comment also revealed that the PLC had strengthened connections with teachers beyond grade-level confines. Betty Mattison agreed in a questionnaire response at the end of Cycle II: “I just want this group to continue. It’s so important! The bonds [that we] will build with each other will help make a change after the trust is built between grade levels.”

Theme 2: Increased Instructional Knowledge

At the beginning of the action research study, several teachers were concerned with their confidence in planning small group reading instruction that met their varied students’ needs. Statements made during initial interviews corroborated these teacher perceptions. For example, when asked about her reading instructional strengths, Toni Lesse responded, “I’m hoping to learn more strengths since this is my first year doing small group reading.” Mary Goddington, one of the instructional specialists, described her perceptions of current small group reading instruction at RES overall: “I think [the teachers] know where they need to get [the students] to, but they just don’t know exactly how to get [the students] there once they know how to read. And then third grade can also sometimes be that grade that’s got some students that are still learning to decode more fluently, and there’s bigger variation [in student need] there.”

Both Betty Mattison and Allee Edwards described overall feelings of inadequacy due to having a wide range of student needs within their reading small groups despite being veteran teachers with around twenty years of experience in various educational settings. Betty Mattison exclaimed, “We’re both lost together. That’s terrible to say. But we’re trying.”

Conversely, McClain Chouser articulated her specific need for lower-level reading instructional strategies: “I usually get the novel study group, but if I were given a lower-level group, I would need more professional learning on phonics instruction and just different strategies for that area.”

Specific to the first intervention, the group's work turned toward understanding the many elements of reading instruction and creating a common lesson plan template for small group reading instruction. To ensure all PLC participants had a shared understanding of reading instruction, the group read a professional article detailing the many elements of reading, including phonemic awareness, phonics, and comprehension, during the first meeting of the PLC (Duke, 2019). Notes from the researcher's journal included a description of a collective feeling of commiseration as reading teachers nationwide also struggle with the complexity of reading instruction. Betty Mattison said with relief, "It's not just me who feels overwhelmed."

The researcher's journal also included notes on some of the quieter members of the PLC, like Toni Lesse. In the first post-meeting questionnaire, remarks by Toni Lesse provided context to her demeanor during the meeting and supported the importance of this activity as she reflected, "It really hit me that I may not fully understand what it means to read. There are [so] many components that go into reading that I know I need to do a better job studying up on these before future lessons." She later remarked, "I need some time to digest all of the information." Thus, the ARDT made specific efforts to ensure that all elements of reading instruction were explained and modeled during future discussions, as well as giving enough time to process the new instructional information presented.

By the end of Cycle I, several other teachers mentioned the work of the PLC as improving their instructional knowledge. Allee Edwards commented during a post-meeting questionnaire: "I think this PLC impacted that by causing me to realize that I need to incorporate more intentional instruction of reading (skills)." Similarly, Kaden Ryle commented during the focus group that the PLC has "helped a lot to kind of restructure the approach to reading group

instruction because, you know, I came from second grade." The work of the PLC impacted instruction beyond the first cycle.

Teachers continued to grow during the second cycle of the study. In a questionnaire completed after a Cycle II meeting, Betty Mattison said, "I have really been able to see areas of strength and weakness the last several weeks by meeting with students who are showing needs for extra help in specific areas: using imagery, using connotation, and author's point of view." In her final interview, Toni Lesse responded, "I am still trying to find my strength at small group reading instruction because I'm trying to create that backbone of knowledge and understanding for reading and writing." Other participants' responses supported her final sentiments: "I'm getting a huge wakeup call this year. Not in a bad way." All participants acknowledged the need for continual growth and improvement in reading instruction. For the majority, the PLC met their needs.

Theme 3: Differentiated Leader Support

During her initial interview, instructional specialist Adrian Shill explained that Reese Elementary School was not previously or currently functioning as a Professional Learning Community. When asked what would transform professional learning experiences into a PLC, Adrian Shill said teachers' passions and ownership would turn professional learning into a true professional learning community. Thus, the study sought to create a PLC to be a community where the participants took ownership to explore their collective passion for improving reading instruction. To support this central goal of the PLC, the leaders charged with designing and implementing the process kept the individual and collective differentiated needs at the forefront of all related decisions.

To that end, the ARDT designed and implemented various elements of establishing community within this new PLC. The first meeting of the PLC included activities for relationship building and created norms and goals to guide the subsequent PLC meetings. However, during planning the second PLC meeting, the ARDT determined it unnecessary to allot more time to additional community-building activities, as a strong collaborative community was already evident after the first meeting. In her final interview, Adrian Shill confirmed this thought: “It [the first PLC meeting] was more comfortable than I thought it was [going to] be from the beginning. Everybody was receptive of it. And I felt like everybody wanted to do better.” Adrian’s comments illustrated the first element of differentiated leader support; the ARDT abandoned the design plan of multiple community-building activities after they were deemed unnecessary. The PLC could spend more time improving instructional knowledge and less time building community among the teachers since teachers had already established a community outside the PLC and quickly inside the PLC during the first meeting.

The ARDT reviewed post-meeting questionnaires after each ARIT PLC meeting in the subsequent ARDT planning meeting. The responses to these questionnaires guided the design by the differentiated needs of the participants. A pervasive culture of leader support undergirded this responsive design plan. At the beginning of the study, many participants highlighted the established support from the two instructional specialists, Adrian Shill and Mary Goddington, as current and active practitioners. Kaden Ryle explained, “They’re well-versed in targeting these needs for these different students and the different ways that we can kind of reach them where they are and push them further.” Betty Mattison said, “I feel like I would benefit from Adrian Shill or Mary Goddington just sitting down with me and saying, ‘This is what you need to do. Do this.’” Toni Lesse described having those exact conversations when she said, “I can go straight to

them and ask them specifics and they'll give them to me. And Adrian Shill's been like, 'Okay, start with this.' Because I'm very honest [with what I need]."

Likewise, McClain Chouser highlighted immediate feedback by administrators as she described the actions of the primary researcher in her role as principal "coming in and being hands-on. So, really helping with the lesson versus simply sitting and watching. Really getting into the lesson and helping students. Adding to my lesson if there's something I didn't think of. And [the primary researcher/principal has] done that a couple of times. So that was appreciated." Toni Lesse said, "I come to you [the primary researcher] because you're strong [with reading instruction]. You're good at giving me ideas."

The collaborative relationship established between the leaders and teachers continued within the PLC meetings. Toni Lesse knew she was receiving differentiated content to ensure her understanding: "I appreciate the fact that you all break down the acronyms for me."
Kaden Ryle's comments during the final interview gave insight into the different support provided by the three leaders during PLC meetings:

> I think it's been supportive, having your [primary researcher] guidance and kind of like keeping us in the right direction and focused during our meetings and kind of going over things. But also [Mary Goddington and Adrian Shill], I still think of them [in] another leadership role. So, they've definitely been supportive and provided excellent resources and examples of things that have worked for different ages and needs and things like that. So that's helped a lot.

In her final interview, Toni Lesse articulated similar feelings about support from leaders:

> So y'all [primary researcher, Mary Goddington, Adrian Shill] have always been easy to answer any questions that I have. And I like that I can feel comfortable to ask you

> questions without you feeling like I have no idea what I'm doing, even if I perceive it that way. Like, y'all are flexible, and you help me, [and] you give me resources. I'm not scared to ask anything.
>
> I [also] feel comfortable with [the instructional specialists]. I know that I can ask them anything. Adrian Shill actually gave me a lot of plans in the very beginning. And goals. And since they're working with one of my children, specifically, I give them things back and forth. [We discuss,] 'What's going on with that child?'

The differentiated support surpassed instructional content as teachers' emotional needs were considered and supported. In her final interview, Toni Lesse said, "When we start getting overwhelmed, you [primary researcher] calm us down." Likewise, in her final interview, Kaden Ryle articulated her opinion of the primary researcher's calming presence, both in the PLC meetings and outside, that allows her to refocus:

> When we're getting really, really bogged down by like, the nitty gritty and how we're [going to] get through this day to day and [the primary researcher is] just kind of like, 'Calm down and think about the big picture, like, zoom out a little bit; it's [going to] be fine.'

Thus, supportive leadership encompasses a wide range of beliefs, actions, and dialogue that allow teachers to improve their instructional learning in a culture of continuous improvement.

Major Findings Related to the Research Questions

The findings from this qualitative action research study addressed the action research problem, stating that professional learning opportunities to improve reading instruction are limited in rural elementary schools. Through supportive leadership that created and sustained a professional learning community that harnessed existing relationships, school leaders created a

collaborative community to improve reading instruction. Table 5.12 summarizes the findings aligned with each research question.

Table 5.12

Summary of Findings Connected to Research Questions

Research Question	Findings
RQ 1: How do teachers describe the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?	Finding 1: Participants indicated that the PLC improved collaboration between ELA teachers within the PLC meetings. Finding 2: Participants indicated that the PLC improved collaboration outside the PLC meetings. Finding 4: Teachers revealed that participation in the PLC improved their curricular understanding and, as a result, their classroom instruction. Finding 5: Teachers believed they had an improved vertical instructional understanding across grade levels.
RQ 2: What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?	Finding 3: Participants indicated that the PLC fostered increased collaboration between teachers and school leaders. Finding 7: Participants acknowledged the differentiated support provided by school leaders inside and outside PLC meetings. This support encouraged and sustained instructional improvement progress.
RQ 3: How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?	Finding 6: Leaders indicated that their own professional learning impacted the design and implementation of the PLC. Finding 7: Participants acknowledged the differentiated support provided by school leaders inside and outside PLC meetings. This support encouraged and sustained instructional improvement progress. Finding 8: Leaders believed that the refined, specific focus of the PLC made its work more successful.

The first research question, “How do teachers describe the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?” aligned to findings 1, 2, 4, and 5. The primary researcher collated responses made by teachers during initial and final interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and meeting notes and transcriptions to support these findings to answer question 1. The ARDT, led by the primary researcher, determined that teachers described increased collaboration inside and outside PLC meetings as the main impact of the PLC. This improved collaboration further positively impacted their classroom instruction by increasing new knowledge, vertical knowledge of reading developmental processes, and vertical knowledge of other teachers’ practices.

The second research question, “What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?” aligned to findings 3 and 7. School leaders supported the PLC by creating a vehicle for increased collaboration between reading teachers. Additionally, during the PLC, leaders provided differentiated instructional knowledge and moral support that cultivated a culture of continuous improvement for teachers of all levels of reading instructional experiences.

The third research question, “How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?” aligned to findings 6, 7, and 8. The ARDT describes the design and implementation process as being impacted by the professional learning journeys of each member of the ARDT, who were each engaged in various professional learning opportunities outside the PLC. This outside professional learning impacted the content provided to the PLC members. Additionally, the ARDT considered each ARIT participant’s unique needs in the design and implementation phases to ensure that the PLC was impactful for each

participant and the group. To further illustrate the importance of meeting the participants' differentiated needs, the ARDT implemented a highly focused plan for the PLC, focusing on a specific product during the two action research cycles. The ARDT used this defined focus to refine the work of the PLC on an actionable goal to maximize the short meetings and period of the PLC.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented eight findings from two action research cycles, data triangulation, and coding. The primary researcher derived these findings from data collection from initial and final interviews, focus group meetings, meeting transcripts, and questionnaires completed by both the Action Research Design and Implementation Teams. The theoretical framework of organizational learning theory informed the creation of the findings and the themes. Additionally, the researcher aligned the findings to the three research questions. A deeper analysis of the findings and the alignment to the research questions led to three themes, explained in detail in this chapter.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONNECTIONS TO LEADERSHIP

Rural leaders face many unique contextual challenges (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Schreuder, 2010; Wallin, 2003), including providing systems of support for teachers, such as professional learning and supportive, relevant professional learning communities. Professional learning in a rural setting has the potential to overcome situational challenges by improving teacher content knowledge and pedagogy, as well as teacher retention (Banghart, 2021; Barton, 2012). The literature on the importance of professional learning to improve teacher instructional capacity is robust (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009, 2011; Wei et al., 2010; Zepeda, 2019). Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are frequently used to improve teacher instructional capacity overall (DuFour, 2004a, 2004b, 2014; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Hord, 1997, 2004), as well as specifically with reading instruction (D'Ardenne et al., 2013; Main et al., 2020; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020). Further, fostering shared leadership within PLCs allows rural schools to maximize resources for school improvement by increasing teacher leadership (Sharif, 2020; Shen et al., 2020; Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019).

Purpose of the Study

This study examined how leaders within a rural, public elementary school setting supported teachers by developing and implementing a PLC to improve reading instruction.

Research Questions

The following research questions addressed the purpose of this action research study and guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?
2. What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?
3. How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?

Chapter 6 provides a summary of the findings and themes. This chapter will describe the major findings and themes related to the literature reviewed and the research questions. The primary researcher will also detail the current study's limitations, implications, and recommendations for practitioners, researchers, and policy makers. The chapter closes by offering concluding thoughts related to the study and the descriptions provided in this dissertation.

Summary of the Findings and Themes

Eight findings emerged from the study after data analysis and researcher reflection. Chapter 5 detailed the process of extrapolating these findings by describing the coding and analysis process. Additionally, the researcher supported the creation of these themes through data gathered during initial and final interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, meeting transcriptions, and the researcher's journal notes. The primary researcher used the participants' thoughts and reflections via direct quotations to confirm the findings further. The first finding from the study

showed that participants indicated that the PLC improved collaboration between ELA teachers within the PLC meetings. The second finding was that participants indicated that the PLC improved collaboration outside the PLC meetings. The third finding articulated that the participants noted that the PLC fostered increased collaboration between teachers and school leaders. The fourth finding was that teachers revealed that participation in the PLC improved their curricular understanding and, as a result, their classroom instruction. The fifth finding indicated that teachers believed they had improved vertical instructional knowledge across grade levels. The sixth finding revealed that leaders indicated that their professional learning impacted the design and implementation of the PLC. The seventh finding was that participants acknowledged the differentiated support provided by school leaders inside and outside PLC meetings. This support encouraged and sustained instructional improvement progress. The eighth and final finding was that leaders believed that the refined, specific focus of the PLC made the work of the PLC more successful.

The primary researcher grouped the findings into three themes that further articulated the learning gleaned from the study. Additionally, the theoretical framework of organizational learning theory and the three critical elements of this theory, as described by Milway and Saxton (2011), were used to create the three themes. The three themes demonstrated through the collection and analysis of the data were improved collaboration, increased instructional knowledge, and differentiated leader support.

Major Findings Related to the Literature Reviewed

The primary researcher supported the study's major findings with professional literature on rural school complexities and rural teachers and leaders, shared leadership and its

implementation in rural schools and counties, professional learning communities, and reading instruction.

While rural schools face unique challenges, many positive implications are associated with teaching and leading in rural schools. Literature confirmed Findings 1 and 2 in that collaboration improved inside and outside the PLC meetings. The influence of an existing community cannot be understated. Community is at the center of the PLC concept (Stoll et al., 2006), as establishing trusting, collegial relationships create a foundation for collaborative interactions and improvement (Leclerc et al., 2012). Miller (2012) describes the commonality of an existing close-knit community in many rural schools. This research study was undergirded with the belief that a community was characterized by strong bonds between teachers and leaders at Reese Elementary School before the study began. The RES community provided a core foundation for developing a PLC centered around collaboration.

As a result, collaboration increased at RES inside and outside of PLC meetings. The work of Chance and Segura (2009) supported these findings, as an already-established community in a rural high school improved communication and trust. Thus, the strength of the community within a rural school and in the rural school community can benefit professional learning communities (Klar & Huggins, 2020).

This improved collaboration served as a solution to combat "professional isolation" (Johnston et al., 2018, p. 57) and a lack of time for collaborative interactions (Harmon, 2018), which are common issues faced by rural schools. The structure of support created by the PLC mitigated obstacles to organizational learning as the PLC allowed participants to "interact and develop shared understandings" (Fauske & Raybould, 2005, p. 35). Further, the findings surrounding participants' perceived improvement in curricular understanding of their and other

grade levels through participation in the PLC (Findings 4 and 5) are supported by literature on the importance of professional learning and professional learning communities in reading instruction. Woulfin and Gabriel (2020) found that embedded professional learning, like PLCs, could improve reading instruction and achievement through educators' collaborative dialogue about students and reading instructional practices. Thus, creating a PLC was essential to improving reading instructional practices at RES.

Further, the primary researcher examined school leaders' roles in creating this PLC. Literature around rural leaders' roles and responsibilities and shared leadership supported Finding 3, where participants indicated that the PLC fostered increased collaboration between teachers and school leaders, and Finding 7, where participants acknowledged the differentiated support provided by school leaders inside and outside PLC meetings. Rural leaders have multiple roles and responsibilities (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Herrenan & Longmuir, 2019). One of these roles is to provide support for professional learning. As such, rural leaders create PLCs to help rural teachers combat "professional isolation" (Johnston et al., 2018, p. 57), a lack of time for collaboration (Harmon, 2018), and limited resources (Freeman & Randolph, 2013; Glover et al., 2016; Howley & Howley, 2005; Wei et al., 2010; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

A singular leader cannot support professional learning alone. In this study, the primary researcher enlisted the support and knowledge of the assistant principal and two instructional specialists to implement and design this PLC. The design and implementation of this entire research study were undergirded by the principal researcher's professional learning in her doctoral program. Consistent with Finding 6, the researcher's professional learning impacted the PLC. She could use her knowledge of staff strengths and expertise (Preston & Barnes, 2017),

specifically the instructional specialists, and their relationships in their school community and community overall (Howley & Howley, 2005), as foundations for the PLC in this rural setting. Poekert (2016) found that as teachers become leaders within PLCs, professional learning improves for colleagues and the teacher-leaders. The primary researcher found this to be the case by leveraging the strengths, instructional knowledge, and experiences of the two instructional specialists as leaders in the action research study.

Further, the ARDT consulted the work of D'Ardenne et al. (2013) for the design and implementation process. D'Ardenne et al.'s (2013) description of collaborative lesson planning with four parts: decoding, vocabulary development, comprehension strategies, and responding to standardized test questions influenced the implementation of a specific lesson planning focus for the RES PLC. Further supporting this focus was the work of Clark et al. (2017), who found that collaborative lesson planning was the most impactful professional development practice. The primary researcher shared this work with the ARDT. The team used their current professional learning, and these works to design the content and focus the learning in the PLC. The work of Gwinn and Watts-Taffe (2017) confirmed the effectiveness of PLCs with "a clear content focus based on current student learning and goals for improvement" (p. 6), consistent with Finding 8.

Differentiated support for the members of the ARDT, Finding 7, was provided through the implementation of shared leadership practices. The primary researcher acknowledged the need for the contributions of other educators (Lambert, 2002; Shen et al., 2020; Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019). During this study, the primary researcher sought further to develop the leadership skills of the two instructional specialists. To meet the differentiated needs of the two teacher-leaders, the primary researcher implemented a gradual release of responsibility model in the

design and implementation phases of the PLC detailed by Leclerc et al. (2012): Initiation, Implementation, and Integration.

At the beginning of the study, in the initiation stages, the primary researcher was responsible for the design of the PLC and content delivery within the PLC. Upon implementation, the PLC participants recognized the two instructional specialists as instructional leaders as in-the-trenches, practicing teachers. By the end of the study, the two instructional specialists facilitated all aspects of the PLC and cultivated teacher leadership with the other participants in the integration phase. The support for this finding also circles back to Findings 4 and 5, which are about improved instructional understanding. Poekert (2016) found that as teachers become leaders within PLCs, professional learning improves for colleagues and the teacher-leaders.

Major Themes Related to the Research Questions

Chapter 5 presented the findings of the research questions, which were reviewed and analyzed by the researcher within this chapter to construct overarching themes. Table 6.1 summarizes the themes connected to the research questions and theoretical framework of Organizational Learning Theory. The three themes articulated were improved collaboration, increased instructional knowledge, and differentiated leader support. The three aspects of Organizational Learning Theory detailed by Milway and Saxton (2011): supportive leaders (SL), a culture of continuous improvements (CCI), and defined learning structures (DLS) align with this study's themes.

Table 6.1

Summary of Themes Connected to Research Questions and Theoretical Framework

Research Questions	Alignment to Theoretical Framework	Major Themes
RQ 1: How do teachers describe the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?	Defined Learning Structures (DLS) Culture of Continuous Improvements (CCI)	Theme 1: Improved Collaboration Theme 2: Increased Instructional Knowledge
RQ 2: What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?	Culture of Continuous Improvements (CCI) Supportive Leaders (SL)	Theme 2: Increased Instructional Knowledge Theme 3: Differentiated Leader Support
RQ 3: How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?	Defined Learning Structures (DLS) Culture of Continuous Improvements (CCI)	Theme 1: Improved Collaboration Theme 2: Increased Instructional Knowledge Theme 3: Differentiated Leader Support

Research Question 1 asked, “How do teachers describe the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?” Theme 1 (Improved Collaboration) and Theme 2 (Increased Instructional Knowledge) considered the Organizational Learning Theory theoretical framework aspects of defined learning structures (DLS) and culture of continuous improvements (CCI) aligned with this research question. Teacher participant data analysis revealed that the PLC created at Reese Elementary School during the fall of 2023 provided a defined structure to improve collaboration

between grade-level colleagues, teachers of other grade levels, instructional specialists, and school leaders. Further, the PLC provided a setting for collaborative discussion to improve reading instructional practices. The work of the PLC focused on sharing instructional practices from individual teachers and grade levels. The ARDT and ARIT disbanded the notion of isolated classroom instructional practices and individual learning. Teachers, teacher-leaders, and school leaders openly shared instructional practices and professional learning experiences that improved these practices in hopes of improving instructional practices in other classrooms, grade levels, and at Reese Elementary School.

Research Question 2 asked, "What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?" The theoretical framework elements of supportive leaders (SL) and culture of continuous improvements (CCI) influenced the alignment of Theme 2 (Increased Instructional Knowledge) and Theme 3 (Differentiated Leader Support) to this research question. The primary researcher considered this question from two lenses: the teachers' views of the role of school leaders and the school leaders' views of their role.

During the study, the teacher participants articulated that the leaders created a culture of continuous improvement through differentiated support provided in and beyond the PLC meetings. The PLC created a structure for improved and increased teacher self-reflection. The primary researcher captured these reflections through participants' direct quotations in interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and meeting transcriptions at the study's beginning, middle, and end. Because they could articulate their strengths and areas of improvement more clearly, the school leaders could provide differentiated support and content to meet individual needs.

Likewise, the school leaders on the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) articulated their role of support as responsive and differentiated. The bi-weekly meetings of the ARDT provided a setting for constant review and collective reflection on the happenings inside and outside of the PLC meetings. In turn, the ARDT planned to share content to meet immediate instructional needs and ways of supporting teachers' instructional and emotional well-being.

Research Question 3 asked, "How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?" The primary researcher used the theoretical framework aspects of defined learning structures (DLS) and culture of continuous improvements (CCI) to answer this question. Additionally, all three themes emerged as essential to answer this question: Theme 1: Improved Collaboration, Theme 2: Increased Instructional Knowledge, and Theme 3: Differentiated Leader Support.

During this action research study, the bi-weekly meeting cycle provided a defined learning structure for the ARDT to design and implement the PLC. The ARDT would meet to debrief the previous PLC meeting and plan for the upcoming meeting. Each one of these meetings had a spirit of continuous improvement as the team sought to answer, "What went well at the last meeting, and what can we do to make the next meeting better?" This highly focused meeting improved collaboration between the school leaders as a meeting set apart for the sole purpose of improving the design and implementation of the PLC.

The leaders involved in these meetings also improved their instructional knowledge as each of the four members shared what they learned from their own professional learning and graduate courses. The meetings of the ARDT responsible for planning the ARIT PLC meetings turned into a separate PLC for the ARDT members. These meetings were collaborative and

differentiated, increasing instructional knowledge for the leaders present. Just like the ARDT members provided support for the ARIT during PLC meetings, the ARDT members provided support for each other during the six meetings intended to design and implement the ARIT PLC. This study intended to improve the problem of practice of limited professional learning opportunities for teachers in rural schools. However, through the design and implementation process for a teacher PLC, the study provided a solution for an unconsidered problem of practice of limited professional learning opportunities for rural school leaders.

Limitations of the Current Study

While the researcher designed and implemented this study with detailed planning and consideration, there were some limitations. First, the context of the study impacted the results. The researcher acknowledged the small number of teachers and teacher-leaders involved. The teachers in the study were a homogenous sample, being from the same school and the same two grade levels. The study took place over four months, a short time for an action research study. This homogenous, purposeful sample and short duration may have impacted the trajectory and findings of the study. The unique time, place, and use of PLC in this research study provided a layered context to study the impact of a PLC on reading instructional methods implemented by third- and fourth-grade teachers in one rural elementary school at a specific time.

This study took place in a small, rural elementary school, with the primary researcher employed as the school's principal during the research study. As such, the researcher was in a position of power over the participants in the study, which potentially impacted participation in the study and participant responses. To counteract this power dynamic, all participants consented to participate with no repercussions if they opted not to participate or to decline participation at any point in the study. Participants also acknowledged that participation in the study would not

provide additional benefits regarding evaluations or remuneration. The researcher continually reviewed her actions for the duration of the study to ensure the position of power had minimal impact on the study and its results.

During the study, participants were allowed to review data and results to reduce the bias inherent in the primary researcher as an invested member of the school community and its instructional program. The researcher and participants created group norms to counteract the negative implications of sharing beliefs and opinions. The primary researcher asked participants to review their responses during initial and final interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and meeting transcriptions and revise them as desired. The researcher acknowledged that familiarity and existing relationships may have impacted the thoughts shared during interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and meetings. Throughout the study, the participants reviewed the ongoing data analysis to ensure the findings were accurately represented.

Despite these mitigating efforts, the primary researcher acknowledged additional limitations and biases not considered in this section. Following the limitations of all qualitative action research studies, the results of this research study cannot be applied and generalized to other contexts. However, the participants in this study gained greater clarity and understanding within this specific context through participation in this qualitative action research study (Stringer & Aragón, 2020).

Implications and Recommendations for Practitioners

The researcher offers recommendations consistent with the research findings and themes and alignment with the literature reviewed. This section provides implications and recommendations for rural school leaders as current practitioners.

Reading instructional improvement should be a priority for professional learning as students who are not proficient readers by third grade face many negative consequences. These students are more likely to remain poor readers in high school (Fiester, 2010) and experience higher retention rates (Miles & Stipek, 2006). While there is no one specific, agreed-upon approach to teaching students how to read (Pressley et al., 2023; Thomas, 2022), teachers must participate in professional learning activities to translate reading research into practice that best meets their students' individual and varied needs (Clark et al., 2017; Pressley et al., 2023). Rural school leaders lead this charge for professional learning.

Consistent with the research, many rural school leaders are overwhelmed with multiple roles and responsibilities, ranging from human resources to instructional leadership and professional learning coordinator. Rural school leaders may find it beneficial to increase measures to better understand the school community and the community at large, paying specific attention to the strengths and needs of the rural teachers working within the school. Implementing a few high-leverage leadership activities, like shared leadership practices, can impact multiple areas.

Rural school leaders could first acknowledge that one rural leader cannot succeed in all aspects expected of them. Thus, implementing shared leadership practices is essential in reducing leader workload and increasing school improvement efforts. As many rural teachers tend to be retained at rural schools, cultivating the leadership strengths of teacher leaders could increase teacher satisfaction, teacher self-efficacy, and school improvement efforts.

Creating a culture of continuous improvement starts with the school leader. Sharing one's professional learning can empower and encourage teachers to continue their professional learning. Leaders can help create and sustain PLCs that meet collective teacher needs while

allowing teacher-leaders to take on more instructional leadership roles, specifically in leading reading instructional improvement efforts.

Implications and Recommendations for Researchers

The limitations and subjectivity statement must be considered in this section regarding implications and recommendations for researchers. The primary researcher conducted this study with a small sample of third- and fourth-grade teachers at one rural school. Future researchers could replicate the study in other rural schools with large numbers of teachers, in non-rural schools, with teachers from various grade levels, in different school levels besides elementary, and for a more extended period. There is limited research on rural professional development (Glover et al., 2016) and rural teacher support regarding early reading instruction (Glover, 2017). More research is necessary to determine the essential characteristics of establishing and supporting PLCs to improve reading instruction in rural settings.

Although this study centered around rural schools, future research studies could be replicated in other contexts. It would be of great interest to the researcher to conduct research in non-rural schools with more personnel and leaders available to guide PLC and shared leadership practices. Many teachers may also benefit from creating PLCs to improve reading instructional practices.

There is still much to explore within the confines of reading instructional improvement, especially in the current contentious educational environment. In rural and non-rural contexts, all school leaders must wade through the myriad of reading theories and debates to implement and sustain successful reading instructional practices. Leaders and teachers must be able to turn theory into practice, as teachers must be versed in various theories, methods, and instructional strategies to meet their students' unique reading needs. Additional research in this area would

highlight the processes of planning and implementing PLCs designed to translate research into classroom practice.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy Makers

With over a quarter of the country's schools defined as rural schools (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018), policy makers could spend more time in rural schools to learn about the unique challenges and benefits of rural schools. Recent literacy legislation in Georgia, like the Georgia Early Literacy Act (House Bill 538), is a step toward improving reading instructional methods. Legislators could revisit state school funding in Georgia and other states to ensure appropriate funds are allocated to instructional resources and personnel to ensure rural school students receive an education like non-rural schools, especially considering these legislative advances.

Professional learning is essential to meeting the requirements outlined in recent literacy legislation. Most participants in this study indicated positive impacts of a PLC intended to improve reading instruction. However, the ARIT attended this PLC outside of contract hours, and teachers were not financially compensated for their time. Other larger and non-rural districts can use additional personnel to provide teacher coverage so that professional learning can happen within the contracted day. However, this is impossible in most rural schools with minimal faculty and staff members. Additionally, substitute funding for all state schools could be considered for revision. Rural schools have difficulty securing and compensating substitutes appropriately. Limited resources and professional development impact teacher instructional practices (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Eckert, 2019; Glover et al., 2016; Glover, 2017; Johnston et al., 2018; Willis & Templeton, 2018). Thus, rural teachers do not have as many opportunities to

participate in professional learning during the school day as their non-rural counterparts. All students deserve to be taught by knowledgeable educators, no matter the setting of their school.

Chapter Summary and Final Thoughts

While teaching and leading in a rural school has different challenges than non-rural schools, leaders should not consider these challenges from a deficit perspective. There are many benefits of teaching and leading in rural schools, including the established community and collective understanding of organizational learning to improve the education of all rural students served in rural schools. Opportunities for professional learning may be restricted in rural schools due to limited resources and personnel, but rural school leaders can mitigate this challenge through creative solutions. Leaders should prioritize sending teacher leaders to outside professional learning courses and conferences and encourage continuing education. Through this continuous learning, rural leaders, teacher leaders, and teachers share their individual learning, leading to organizational learning. Leader-supported informal and formal collaborative structures cultivate continuous improvement.

The most impactful structure of support leaders can create for teachers is a culture of continuous improvement. In this study, the PLC intended for teachers also inadvertently created a PLC for school leaders. Actions speak louder than words. Leaders must model their continuous efforts at improvement to encourage and enhance teacher improvement. It is essential to include shared leadership in this culture of continuous improvement. A rural school leader cannot be successful with the multiple roles and responsibilities expected of them without enlisting the support of the community.

All children deserve a quality education. Rural school students are no different. Rural teachers are dedicated to their professional growth and improvement. While the opportunities for

professional learning in a rural school are limited, do not underestimate the impact of a singular PLC. One of the teachers from the PLC said it best: “Just having time to talk and mainly listen to other experts is a wonderful opportunity for me. I want to be a fly on the wall and soak in as much knowledge as I can!”

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Appendix A

University of Georgia Consent Form: Action Research Design Team

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator:
Dr. Jami R. Berry, Clinical Associate Professor
Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy
Co-Investigator:
Stephanie Goldman, Doctoral Candidate,
Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy

We are doing this research study to examine how leaders within a rural, public elementary school setting support teachers through the development and implementation of a PLC to improve reading instruction.

The research questions are as follows:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?
2. What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?
3. How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?

You are being invited to be in this research study as a member of the Action Research Design Team because you are a school leader at Lincoln County Elementary School.

If you agree to participate in this study:

- We will collect information about your perceptions about the impact of a PLC on reading instruction, as well as your perceived impact of the role of the school leaders on the PLC. We will also ask you to describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC to improve reading instruction.
- We will ask you to participate in two meetings a month. It will take about 60 minutes for each meeting. The meetings will be held during or after school at Lincoln County

Elementary School. The meetings may be recorded via Google Meet, Zoom, iPhone voice recording, and/or other audio/visual methods. These recordings will be used to review for accuracy and completeness of data. The recordings will be archived after transcription.

- We will follow up about the conclusion of the study by the end of the 2023-2024 academic year via email.

Participation is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. Your choice about participating in the study will not impact your employment or employment evaluations.

There are questions, conversations, or activities during the PLC and study overall that may make you uncomfortable. You can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them or ask to be excused from the meeting or activity.

Even though the investigator will emphasize to all participants that comments made during the focus group session should be kept confidential, it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside of the group at some time in the future.

Your participation may help us understand how collaborative learning in a PLC impacts reading instruction, which in turn impacts student reading achievement. Your participation may positively impact reading instructional methods and students' reading achievement.

We will take steps to protect your privacy, but there is a small risk that your information could be accidentally disclosed to people not connected to the research. To reduce this risk we will use a pseudonym for each participant in the study. The pseudonym code will be kept in a password-protected Microsoft Word document. We will only keep information that could identify you for five years. This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed.

Please feel free to ask questions about this research at any time. You can contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Berry at jamiberry@uga.edu or the Co-Investigator, Stephanie Goldman, at stephanie.goldman@uga.edu. If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB at 706-542-3199 or by email at IRB@uga.edu.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.

Appendix B

University of Georgia Consent Form: Action Research Implementation Team

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator:
Dr. Jami R. Berry, Clinical Associate Professor
Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy
Co-Investigator:
Stephanie Goldman, Doctoral Candidate,
Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy

We are doing this research study to examine how leaders within a rural, public elementary school setting support teachers through the development and implementation of a PLC to improve reading instruction.

The research questions are as follows:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on their reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?
2. What role do school leaders play in supporting a professional learning community (PLC) designed to improve reading instruction in one rural elementary school?
3. How do action research design team members describe the process of designing and implementing a PLC designed to improve reading instructional practices in one rural elementary school?

You are being invited to be in this research study as a member of the Action Research Implementation Team because you are a reading teacher at Lincoln County Elementary School.

If you agree to participate in this study:

- We will collect information about your perceptions of the impact of a PLC on your reading instruction, as well as your perceived impact of the role of the school leaders on the PLC.
- We will ask you to participate in two meetings a month. It will take about 60 minutes for each meeting. The meetings will be held after school at Lincoln County Elementary School. The meetings may be recorded via Google Meet, Zoom, iPhone voice recording, and/or other audio/visual methods. These recordings will reviewed for accuracy and completeness of data. The recordings will be archived after transcription.
- We will ask you to implement a minimum of two interventions during the Fall of 2023, as decided by the Action Research Design Team.
- We will follow up with the conclusion of the study by the end of the 2023-2024 academic year via email.

Participation is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. Your choice about participating in the study will not impact your employment or employment evaluations.

There are questions, conversations, or activities during the PLC and study overall that may make you uncomfortable. You can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them or ask to be excused from the meeting or activity.

Even though the investigator will emphasize to all participants that comments made during the focus group session should be kept confidential, it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside of the group at some time in the future.

Your participation may help us understand how collaborative learning in a PLC impacts reading instruction, which in turn impacts student reading achievement. Your reading instructional methods may improve, and your students' reading achievement may improve.

We will take steps to protect your privacy, but there is a small risk that your information could accidentally be disclosed to people not connected to the research. To reduce this risk, we will use a pseudonym for each participant in the study. The pseudonym code will be kept in a password-protected Microsoft Word document. We will only keep information that could identify you for five years. This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed.

Please feel free to ask questions about this research at any time. You can contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Berry at jamiberry@uga.edu or the Co-Investigator, Stephanie Goldman, at stephanie.goldman@uga.edu. If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB at 706-542-3199 or by email at IRB@uga.edu.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.

Appendix C

Interview Protocols

Action Research Design Team Interviews Round 1 (Pre-Cycle 1)

Interviewer may probe for specifics after each/any question as necessary.

1. Describe your perception of small-group reading instruction in each grade level and at RES overall. RQ1, RQ2
2. What are areas of strength in small-group reading instruction in grades 3 and 4? RQ1, RQ2
3. What are the challenges of small-group reading instruction in grades 3 and 4? RQ1, RQ2
4. How have you typically supported reading teachers in grades 3 and 4? RQ2
5. What barriers, if any, are there to support reading teachers? RQ2
6. What support would you like to provide to reading teachers this semester? RQ2
7. How has past professional learning impacted small-group reading instruction in grades 3 and 4? RQ1, RQ2
8. How has collaboration impacted reading instruction? RQ1, RQ2
9. How have past professional learning communities impacted small-group reading instruction in grades 3 and 4? RQ1, RQ2
10. Is there anything else you'd like to share that would shed light on this topic?

Action Research Design Team Interviews Round 2 (Post-Cycle 2)

Interviewer may probe for specifics after each/any question as necessary.

1. Describe your perception of small-group reading instruction in each grade level and at RES overall. RQ1, RQ2
2. What are the areas of strength in small-group reading instruction in each grade level and at RES overall? RQ1, RQ2
3. What challenges remain in small-group reading instruction in each grade level and at RES overall? RQ1, RQ2
4. Describe how you have supported reading teachers since the beginning of this year. RQ1, RQ2
5. Describe your planned supports for the future. RQ2
6. How has this PLC impacted the support you have or will provide? RQ2
7. Describe the process of designing this PLC. RQ3
8. Describe the process of implementing this PLC. RQ3
9. How will your learning from this process impact future PLCs at RES? RQ2, RQ3
10. Describe the impact of this PLC on reading instructional improvement at RES. RQ1
11. Is there anything else you'd like to share that would shed light on this topic?

Action Research Implementation Team Interviews Round 1 (Pre-Cycle 1)

Interviewer may probe for specifics after each/any question as necessary.

1. Describe your current small-group reading instruction. RQ1
2. Describe your perceived strengths in small-group reading instruction. RQ1
3. What have been the biggest challenges for implementing small-group reading instruction? RQ1, RQ2
4. What supports do you feel would help you address those challenges? RQ1, RQ2
5. Describe actions of school leaders that have supported your small-group reading instruction in the past. RQ1, RQ2
6. Describe previous professional learning that has impacted your small-group reading instruction. RQ1, RQ2
7. How has collaboration impacted your reading instruction? RQ1, RQ2
8. Is there anything else you'd like to share that would shed light on this topic?

Action Research Implementation Team Interviews Round 2 (Post-Cycle 2)

Interviewer may probe for specifics after each/any question as necessary.

1. Describe your current small-group reading instruction. RQ1
2. Describe your small-group reading instruction prior to this PLC. RQ1
3. Describe your perceived strengths in small-group reading instruction. RQ1
4. How have your strengths changed since the beginning of this semester? RQ1, RQ2
5. Looking back to the beginning of the year until now, is there anything you wish would be different, in terms of small-group reading? RQ1, RQ2
6. How has collaboration impacted your reading instruction? RQ1, RQ2
7. Describe the impact of this PLC on your reading instruction. RQ1
8. What role have school leaders played in supporting you during this PLC? RQ2
9. What are your current challenges relating to small-group reading instruction? RQ1, RQ2
10. What supports can leaders put in place to address those challenges? RQ2
11. Is there anything else you'd like to share that would shed light on this topic?

Appendix D

Focus Group Protocols

Action Research Design Team Focus Group Interviews (Pre-Cycle 2)

Interviewer may probe for specifics after each/any question as necessary.

1. Describe your perception of small-group reading instruction in each grade level and at RES overall. RQ1, RQ2
2. Describe how you have supported reading teachers since the beginning of this year. RQ1, RQ2
3. How has reading instruction changed since the beginning of the year? RQ1, RQ2
4. Why has reading instruction changed? RQ1, RQ2
5. How has this PLC impacted reading instruction? RQ1
6. How do you envision supporting reading teachers for the remainder of the semester? RQ2
7. Describe your planned supports for the future. RQ2
8. Describe the impact of this PLC on your reading instruction. RQ2
9. Describe the process of designing this PLC. RQ3
10. Describe the process of implementing this PLC. RQ3
11. Describe the impact of this PLC on reading instructional improvement at RES. RQ1
12. Is there anything else you'd like to share that would shed light on this topic?

Action Research Implementation Team Focus Group Interviews (Pre-Cycle 2)

Interviewer may probe for specifics after each/any question as necessary.

1. Describe your current small-group reading instruction. RQ1
2. What have been the biggest challenges for implementing small-group reading instruction? RQ1, RQ2
3. How has your small-group reading instruction changed since the beginning of the semester? RQ1, RQ2
4. What area/s still need improvement? RQ1
5. What supports can be put in place to help the areas of improvement? RQ1, RQ2
6. How has collaboration impacted your reading instruction? RQ1, RQ2
7. Describe the impact of this PLC on your reading instruction. RQ1
8. How have school leaders supported you thus far in the year? RQ2
9. How can school leaders support you for the remainder of the semester? RQ2
10. Is there anything else you'd like to share that would shed light on this topic?

Appendix E

Questionnaire Prompts

Action Research Design Team Questionnaire Prompts (Completed after each ARIT meeting.)

1. Describe the planning session for this PLC session for intended outcomes and then how the actual implementation of the PLC session went. (RQ3)
2. What support have you provided from last PLC session to today's PLC session? (RQ2)
3. Describe any impact between last PLC session and today's session. (RQ3 implementing)
4. Describe any new learning and/or "Aha!" moments for participants. (RQ3 implementing; RQ1 documenting)
5. Describe any themes that were prevalent in today's session. (RQ3 implementing; RQ1 documenting)
6. What are perceived questions/supports needed after today's session? (RQ3 designing, RQ 2)
7. What support will you provide until the next session? (RQ2)
8. What topics will be beneficial for the next session? (RQ3 designing)

Action Research Implementation Team Questionnaire Prompts (Completed after each ARIT meeting.)

1. How has the last PLC session impacted your reading instructional practices? (impact from last session to today's session) (RQ1)
2. How will today's PLC session impact your reading instructional practices? (impact from today to future instruction) (RQ1)
3. Has today's PLC impacted your perceived small group reading instructional strengths? If so, how? (RQ1)
4. Has today's PLC impacted your perceived small group reading instructional challenges? If so, how? (RQ1)
5. Describe any questions you have after today's session. (new learning/clarification from this PLC session) (RQ1, 2)
6. What support do you need before the next PLC meeting? (support needed for new learning from this PLC session) (RQ2)
7. What would you like the next PLC meeting to address? (support provided at next PLC session) (RQ2, RQ3)

Appendix F

Researcher's Journal Response Prompts

1. What support has Jeremy Jonas provided between this ARDT/ARIT meeting and the last meeting? (RQ2)
2. What support has Mary Goddington provided between this ARDT/ARIT meeting and the last meeting? (RQ2)
3. What support has Adrian Shill provided between this ARDT/ARIT meeting and the last meeting? (RQ2)
4. Describe today's ARDT/ARIT session. (RQ3 implementing)
5. Describe participants' new learning and/or "Aha!" moments. (RQ3 implementing; RQ1 themes)
6. Describe any themes that were prevalent in today's session. (RQ3 implementing)
7. What are perceived questions after today's session? (RQ3 designing, RQ 2)
8. Describe the plan for the next PLC meeting. (RQ3)