EQUITY-DRIVEN LEADERSHIP: BRIDGING LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT GAPS THROUGH STRATEGIC HIGH-LEVERAGE PRACTICES

by

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(Under the Direction of Jami Royal Berry)

ABSTRACT

The ongoing literacy crisis in the United States, especially among fourth and eighth graders, presents challenges for diverse student demographics, particularly marginalized groups. Despite instructional methods to improve reading skills, only 37% of fourth graders are proficient, with just 9% of English Language Learners (ELLs) meeting proficiency standards (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). This study explored racial disparities in literacy, focusing on students of color and ELLs in a suburban elementary school struggling to close achievement gaps. Action research empowered teachers through high-leverage practices within professional learning communities and a Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) framework to implement effective literacy strategies. The findings highlight the need for culturally responsive teaching and ongoing professional development, emphasizing the importance of improving teacher capacity and addressing systemic inequities to support diverse learners and enhance literacy achievement.

INDEX WORDS: English Learners, High-Leverage Literacy Practices, Professional Learning Communities, Plan-Do-Study-Act

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DEDICATION

Sean Cavin, there are hardly enough words to describe my gratitude for the support you have shown me, not just during my enrollment in the doctoral program but throughout life. You have been my unwavering cheerleader, believing in me when I couldn't believe in myself and making it possible for me to "have it all." Thank you for taking the girls on trips or practice and not minding when I stayed up past our bedtime so I could write. Thank you for moving our family twice and supporting me through a new job transition during this program. I can't wait to finish our house projects, go on date nights, and attend football games with you and our buddies again! You are amazing, and I love you!

To Lily and Elliott, you are my greatest joy and the love of my life. Every late night or missed Saturday was fueled by the love and strength I find in you. This dissertation is a reflection of my journey and a promise that you can accomplish anything you set your heart to. May you always confidently chase your dreams, knowing you are capable, brilliant, and deeply loved.
xo, Mom

To my students-your perseverance, resilience, and commitment to learning inspire me daily. I have witnessed your struggles, triumphs, and the immense effort you put into improving as a reader, often in the face of tough challenges. Your voices matter, your dreams are important, and your potential is limitless.

I also dedicate this dissertation to you as a testament to your hard work and promise to continue advocating for equitable education, access, and opportunities. May you always believe in the power of your words and the strength of your stories.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Despite the availability of explicit, systematic instructional procedures to improve reading skills, the United States grapples with a deep-rooted literacy problem that affects millions of individuals, transcending age, socioeconomic status, and background (Joshi & Wijekumar, 2019). The literacy crisis is particularly acute for fourth and eighth-grade students in the final developmental stages, which are pivotal for building foundational reading and writing skills (Learning Without Tears, 2021). The Nation's Report Card reported that the average reading score among fourth-graders increased by four percentage points in 2022 compared to 2019, with only 37% of students performing at or above the proficient level (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Although an improvement from 2019, these results indicate that most of students do not comprehend grade-level materials, especially students of color in suburban and city schools whose scores dropped between five to eight percentage points (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

The literacy crisis in the United States takes on a unique dimension when considering the impact on English language learners (ELLs), a growing demographic in the country (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Only nine percent of fourth-grade ELLs were reading at or above proficient levels in 2022, consistent with the results from 2019. ELLs face a series of challenges that can exacerbate the broader literacy crisis, such as a lack of qualified teachers to provide specialized instruction, acquiring a new language while also learning basic literacy skills, insufficient language assistance programs, social and emotional factors associated with

language and cultural adaptation, and hindered parental involvement due to language barriers (Cho et al., 2021).

It is imperative to develop and use comprehensive, culturally sensitive strategies encompassing language acquisition and literacy skills to combat the literacy crisis among ELLs in the United States (Slavin & Cheung, 2005). This instruction includes targeted interventions focused on oral and written language development, adequate resources, professional development for educators, and a recognition of the diversity within the ELL population (Goldenberg, 2020). By addressing the challenges ELLs experience, the nation can work toward a more inclusive and practical approach to improving literacy for all students.

Statement of the Problem

Research has shown limited attention to effectively address racial disparities among students who are high achieving or minimally proficient, a long-standing issue impacting students of color in the United States. The same was true at Centennial Elementary School (CES, a pseudonym), the research site for this study (Olszewski-Kubilius & Steenbergen-Hu, 2017; Willis, 2019). Although the school earned 93 to 95 points out of 100 in three of the four domains on the State report card for college and career readiness, the school performed significantly lower than the district and state in closing achievement gaps. An analysis of the 2023 school performance data revealed significantly disproportionate academic achievement results among racial subgroups, especially when comparing the performance of black or African American, Hispanic students, and ELLs to the performance of white students.

These disparities resulted in a 52.8 out of 100 rating on the State report card for the Closing the Gaps component, about 30 points below the rating for Masters Public School District (MPSD, a pseudonym) and 14 points below the state average. Similar disparities existed on local

literacy benchmark assessments, showing a 22% difference in performance between black or African American and white students. At the time of this study, excellence gaps between students of color and White students enrolled in the gifted program were as high as 40% in 2024. Moreover, relative to the total population for their respective subgroups, the school enrolled 26% more black or African American students than White students in the Early Intervention Program (EIP) in 2023. The presence of these disparities in 2023, compared to the demographics of the total student population, was staggering. The disparities reinforced the call to action for improving conditions in public education for all students, not just the privileged majority that currently benefited. (Crabtree et al., 2019; Novack & Jones, 2020; Rambo-Hernandez et al., 2019; Willis, 2019).

Administrators and faculty members were pleased with the overall achievement status of their students. However, they were unsatisfied due to the glaring disparities among student subgroups in achievement and programming. Despite an average of 18 years of experience among the instructional staff, CES had opportunities for improvement, as evidenced by student achievement results and by its faculty members. The school needed established routines and structures for teacher collaboration, data analysis and use, and pervasive use of vetted curriculum resources to address the unique needs of a diverse student population.

Overview of the Research Site Context

Masters City (a pseudonym), located in the Southeastern United States, was the first planned city by a single developer in 1959 (Hartley, 1959). Home to over 39,000 residents, the city was ranked the safest in the state (News Staff, 2023). More than 100 miles of multi-use golf cart paths, a booming economy, and a school district ranked among the top two percent in the

state made Masters City a desirable place to live, learn, and play (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2019).

MPSD, located in a suburb 30 miles southeast of a major metropolitan area, served 20,000 students in 27 schools: 14 elementary schools, five middle, and five high schools. Three non-traditional learning environments provide high school students with an independent online learning environment, with a teacher, or through a combination of structured and non-traditional modes of instruction. The district comprised a racially and ethnically diverse student population representing 42% White, 31% Black, 7% Asian, 14% Hispanic, and 6% Multi-Racial. Approximately 8% of the student population are also English Language Learners, close to the National average (NCES, 2023). The district employed approximately 2,250 teachers and instructional staff comprising 82% White, 17% Black, 3% Hispanic, 1% Multi-racial, and 1% Asian, which does not mirror the racial demographics of the total student population.

Centennial Elementary (CES), established in 1968 by the developers of Masters City and one of the oldest schools in the MPSD, served approximately 461 students. The campus was a neighborhood school within several established neighborhoods and one small apartment complex. The community was highly social and home to several television and movie productions. During this study, CES comprised preschool to fifth-grade students from affluent and highly educated families. The school had an average household income of $111,850, an average home value of $435,300, and a poverty rate of 6% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Most CES families drove their children to school in golf carts, walked them to their classroom each morning, and were actively involved in the school.

When this study occurred, enrollment had remained steady since 2019, even during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when student enrollment in many public schools declined

(Dee & Murphy, 2021). An analysis of the student population indicated a near-even split between male and female students. The racial demographics of students were 9% Black or African American, 52% White, 19% Asian, 11% Hispanic, and 7% Multi-Racial. The total student count and population demographics have remained steady since 2018, with an average of 16% of students eligible for free or reduced meals yearly. CES had never qualified for Title I status. Therefore, the school relied heavily on fundraisers and donations from families and community partners to purchase supplementary resources.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this action research study was to develop teachers' capacity to integrate high-leverage practices to improve English Language Learners (ELLs) access and outcomes in a suburban elementary school. This study examined leader and teacher practices that result in more equitable outcomes for students within a suburban public elementary school.

Research Questions

1. How does the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) describe the process of facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs for literacy development in one suburban elementary school?
2. How do stakeholders describe the role of high-leverage practices in promoting ELLs' literacy development?
3. How do teachers articulate their role in the continuous improvement process for literacy development via professional learning communities?

Definition of Terms

For this study, the following key terms are defined:

- "Achievement Gap" is when a group of students significantly outperforms other student groups on average in their educational achievement (Hung et al., 2019).
- "Culturally Responsive Leadership" is "leadership behaviors that improve the lives of children through critical self-reflection, community advocacy and engagement, school culture and climate, and instructional and transformational leadership" (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018, p. 533).
- "High-leverage Practices" are "those that are essential to effective teaching and fundamental to supporting student learning" (McLeskey et al., 2019, p. 333).
- "Professional Learning Communities" are a collaborative model wherein teachers work together to ensure the success of every student through the exploration of three questions: "What do we want students to learn? How will we know when they have learned it? How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?" (DuFour, 2004, p. 8)

Theoretical Framework

This action research focused on building teacher capacity within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to implement high-leverage instructional practices and improve outcomes for English Language Learners. When leaders support rigorous and equitable forms of instruction with tools to help teachers make sense of instructional materials and articulate learning intentions and student success criteria, they are most likely to be successful (Billingsley et al., 2019; Frey et al., 2024). The theoretical framework of high-leverage practices as an instructional framework for teachers and leaders underpins the action research cycle for this study (Figure 1.1). High-leverage instructional practices also contribute to the theory of change as a core driver.

Figure 1.1

Framework for High-Leverage Instructional Practices

Note. Adapted from Billingsley et al. (2019); Council for Exceptional Children (2023)

Billingsley et al. (2019) identified 22 high-leverage practices (HLLPs) to "support teachers' effectiveness, improve their students' learning, and foster their retention" (p. 364). Four aspects of practice organize the HLLPs: collaboration, assessment, social, emotional, and behavioral, and instructional. With this model, Billingsley et al. (2019) aimed to specify instructional practices, foster a shared language about instructional practices needed to teach students with disabilities effectively, "advance a vision of (special education) teaching as complex work," and ensure school leaders "proactively support the development of collaborative relationships...and consistently communicate that (all) teachers have collective responsibility for students..." (p. 372). The framework is most successful when teachers have access to high-quality instructional materials, receive clear messages on what and how they should teach, and

have a master schedule that provides time for teachers to teach and collaborate (Billingsley et al., 2019; McLeskey et al., 2019; Windschitl et al., 2012).

Collaboration

Effective teachers collaborate with diverse colleagues and leaders to effectively design and implement instruction and related services to meet individual student needs. The collective wisdom provides educators with a more extensive understanding of academic needs to maximize student learning. Students make significant educational progress when general educators and instructional support specialists work closely to "diagnose what they need to do", coordinate curriculum delivery and interventions, and evaluate their effectiveness (Council for Exception Children, 2023, p.5).

A collaborative culture creates a sense of professional community and establishes collective responsibility for student outcomes. Clear meeting goals, an established agenda with ground rules, open and honest communication, and a shared "commitment to go above and beyond what is expected" create trusting partnerships and increase shared decision-making (Council for Exception Children, 2023, p. 9). To foster a collaborative culture, district and school leaders should provide professional learning experiences to "increase team members' collaborative skills and create schedules that support different forms of ongoing collaboration" (Council for Exception Children, 2023, p. 1).

Assessment

Educators must use multiple sources of information to comprehensively understand each student's strengths and needs (Council for Exception Children, 2023). Various assessment measures and an analysis of the school-based learning environment help determine the potential barriers and supports for academic progress (McLeskey et al., 2019). A synthesis of data

collected over time that includes multidisciplinary assessments, discussions with students' family members, curriculum-based measurement data, student interviews and surveys, student work samples, and classroom performance and behavior observation provides a comprehensive understanding of the student (Council for Exception Children, 2023). “Teachers who frequently collect and analyze curriculum-relevant data can adapt and modify their instruction in ways that promote the learning of (all) students” (Council for Exception Children, 2023, p. 4).

Social/Emotional/Behavioral

Teachers should establish consistent, organized, and respectful learning environments through constructive feedback and explicitly taught social behaviors (Billingsley et al., 2019; McLeskey et al., 2022). A respectful learning environment is the foundation for all other high-leverage practices as it increases the probability of students' social and academic success, increases educator opportunities to engage in effective instructional practices, and fosters caring and respectful interactions between educators and students (McLeskey et al., 2019). Students need multiple opportunities to practice targeted skills and positive feedback when demonstrating target behaviors. Similarly, when students display undesired behaviors, teachers should provide corrective feedback and explicitly teach appropriate behaviors, especially for students with disabilities.

Instruction

The most effective educators "maximize academic learning time, actively engage learners in meaningful activities, and emphasize proactive and positive approaches across tiers of instructional intensity" (Council for Exception Children, 2023, p. 1). They use their professional wisdom, evidence-based practices, and an understanding of students' individual needs and contextual constraints to make instructional decisions (McLeskey et al., 2022). They value

diverse perspectives and incorporate students' funds of knowledge and language into their instruction, which results in improved student outcomes across varied curriculum areas and in multiple educational settings (Council for Exception Children, 2023; Chen, 2021).

High-leverage literacy Practices (HLLPs) provide leaders with a set of effective practices that support their work as instructional leaders and a cohesive framework that leaders and teachers can use to support the learning of all students, including those with disabilities or who are learning English (McLeskey et al., 2022). McLeskey et al. (2022) recommended that principals begin with a focus on developing a shared understanding of what collaboration means as a strategy to support instruction for students across settings and support a collective responsibility for the success of all students in the school. Windschitl et al. (2012) asserted that HLLPs should be few to reflect equitable and effective teaching priorities and collectively selected by teachers rather than by an organization or administrator. McLeskey et al. (2022) emphasized that implementing HLLPs with culturally responsive practices is essential to their practical use. The HLLPs in use should evolve as research and teacher evaluation address their utility and effectiveness through the continuous improvement process.

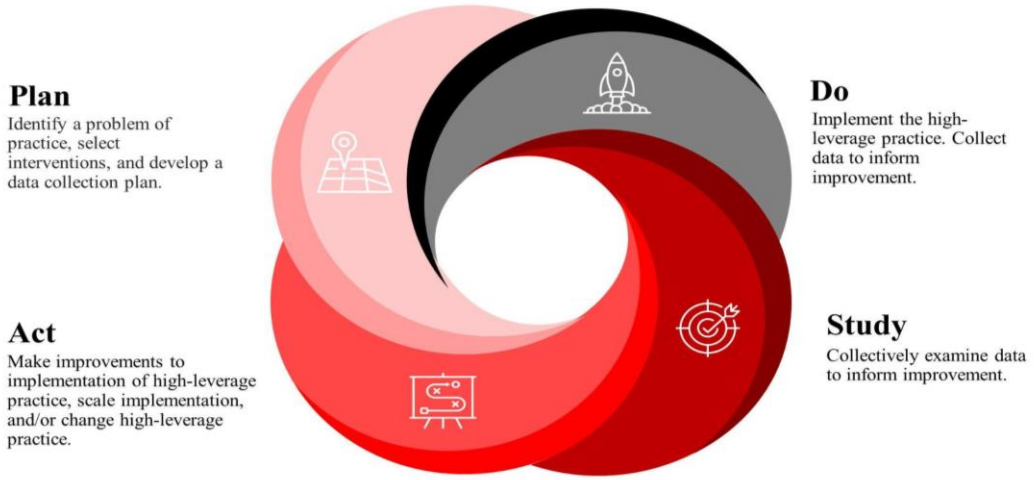
High-leverage instructional practices as a theoretical framework for this action research situated a school faculty as a group of learners who actively sought to improve academic outcomes. Rigorous and equitable learning is possible for every student when teachers and leaders engage in thoughtful discussion and interactions. Although McLeskey et al. (2022) designed this framework to improve outcomes specifically for students with disabilities, it highlights aspects of instructional practice that can impact student outcomes.

Logic Model

The logic model depicted in Figure 1.2 guided the study to examine how school leaders and teachers can engage in the continuous improvement process for literacy development. This model engages educators to focus on a specific problem of practice and, through a series of iterative cycles, identify and test change practices (Shakman et al., 2020). Through each cycle, teachers and leaders build their capacity to test change practices, refine them based on evidence, and increase the impact of the change practice over time.

Figure 1.2

Plan, Do, Study, Act



Note. Adapted from Shakman et al. (2020); Tichnor-Wagner, et al. (2017)

The Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA), a four-step process, established the foundation of the study, which promoted continuous improvement to test a change in practice within a school setting. The current study examined how school leaders and teachers engaged in this process to encourage rapid learning and impact literacy outcomes for ELLs and students of color.

Each PDSA cycle started within the PLCs composed of general education teachers, a teacher of English to speakers of other languages, and school administrators. Collectively, the

team analyzed literacy assessment results, identified a problem of practice and contributing factors, developed an action plan to address the problem, implemented a high-leverage practice, and studied the educational impact of each cycle. During the *study* phase of each cycle, the team evaluated whether they implemented high-leverage practice with fidelity and whether the team should adopt, adapt, or abandon the practice before embarking on the next PDSA cycle (Shakman et al., 2020). Each PDSA cycle focused on improving the problem of practice.

Overview of the Methodology

Action research within an educational context addresses common issues or problems, improves teaching practices, and develops research knowledge (Glanz, 2014). The methodology gained popularity because it links "action and reflection, theory and practice, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern" (Coghlan, 2019, p. 5). The direct involvement of teachers and supervisors in action research to improve schools distinguishes action research from other research methods (Glanz, 2014). In the context of this research study, the primary action researcher and an Action Research Design Team (ARDT) used the literature surrounding professional learning communities, continuous improvement, and equity-based leadership practices to create action steps addressing literacy achievement gaps. The ARDT sought to improve educational achievement gaps by exploring high-leverage practices for continuous improvement and equity-based leadership and instructional practices.

Action Research

Action research, a qualitative approach, was an appropriate methodology for this study because it allowed researchers to be "attentive to the dynamic of groups and interactions as they unfold[ed] and to learn to intervene appropriately" (Coghlan, 2019, p. 6). Throughout the study, the researcher worked collaboratively with ARDT and the Action Research Implementation

Team (ARIT) to improve learning conditions for learning for all CES students. The flexible structure of qualitative research enabled the action research team to use a wide lens when observing various student and teacher behaviors to identify patterns and effectively address the problem of practice (Glanz, 2014). The action research cyclical framework engaged the implementation team in planning, taking action, and fact-finding to "look for trouble" and better understand their work (Coghlan, 2019; Glanz, 2014; La Salle & Johnson, 2018). "Schools begin to change when their leaders recognize the disparities that exist in our schools and then intentionally raise issues of bias, preference, legitimization, privilege, and equity" (Lindsay et al., 2005).

Action research provided a structure for reflection, data collection, analysis, and action to ensure that every student received an excellent education at CES. The primary researcher and design team challenged what La Salle and Johnson (2018) called the "Inevitability Assumption," the idea that schools cannot positively impact negative patterns of achievement for some groups of students (p. 6). They denounced the normalization of the failure of students of color. The inquiry-based action research process prompted the teams to reflect carefully on practices, programs, and procedures within the school to achieve educational equity.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study incorporated numerous qualitative methods. These methods included:

1. Observational notes collected during classroom observations;
2. Individual interviews with teachers, leaders, and students at the beginning, middle, and end of the research process;
3. Observational notes collected during weekly PLC meetings;

4. Survey results collected at the beginning, middle, and end of the research process;
5. Academic benchmark assessment results were collected at the beginning and end of the research process.

The action research team analyzed the stakeholder survey, program enrollment, assessment results, and data collected during observations to create intervention strategies based on appropriate literature.

Interventions

The primary intervention of this study took place in the form of small group Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) comprised of elementary general education teachers, special educators, teachers of English to speakers of other languages, an instructional coach, administrators, and the researcher. The group focused on a continuous improvement process using the PDSA cycles aimed at increased student learning outcomes in literacy by implementing high-leverage instructional practices.

The ARIT, which included one general education teacher from each grade level, one special educator, and a teacher of English to speakers of another languages, facilitated the PLCs. The ARDT, comprised of the researcher, an administrator, and an instructional coach, developed and facilitated monthly professional learning activities for the implementation team focused on assessment literacy and high-leverage practices to build equity-based leadership capacity. The monthly sessions also provided time for collaboration and reflection on their role in the continuous improvement and the educational impact of high-leverage practices on literacy development.

The action research cycles provided time for implementation and reflection for the action research and implementation teams based on the results of the key interventions. The researcher

interviewed with implementation team members and school leaders at the beginning and end of each cycle to measure growth in educator thinking regarding HLLPs and the continuous improvement process. The researcher also conducted weekly observations and check-ins to provide continuous feedback and support and monitor the academic progress of ELs while gathering evidence to inform the direction of bi-monthly professional learning.

Other interventions included various professional learning activities for the faculty developed to meet emerging needs. The activities included peer observations, professional learning targeting specific content needs with lesson design, implementation, and debriefing. The design team designed interventions to meet the individual needs of teachers striving to improve their practice, enhance individual and collective efficacy among teachers, and improve student outcomes for literacy development.

Significance of the Study

During the decades following the United States Supreme Court 1954 ruling that state-sanctioned segregation of public schools was unconstitutional, reform efforts continuously failed to improve opportunities and outcomes for students of color (SOC) in education (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954; Mayger & Provinzano, 2022; Rambo-Hernandez et al., 2019; Weiler & Hinnant-Crawford, 2021). The misappropriation of federal funding and the federal government not addressing noncompliance, concentrated poverty, discriminatory standardized assessments, and an established pattern and fixation on the learning needs of White, English-speaking students among federally funded research are a few systemic problems that perpetuated academic and excellence gaps following the Supreme Court promising to no longer deny any child “the opportunity of an education…on equal terms” (Brown v Board of Education, 1954; Larry P. v Riles, 1979; Willis, 2019).

Still, even in the 21st Century, schools identify students of color for special education and intervention programs at substantially higher rates than their peers, according to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2020). Moreover, a 29% achievement gap in reading and mathematics exists between White and SOC (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022). Systemic practices must "transform a 300-year-old, reactive, deficit-based, and discriminatory system into a proactive, assets-based system" to ensure equitable and just student outcomes (Weiler & Hinnant-Crawford, 2021, p.852).

This study examined equity-based leadership strategies effective in developing teacher capacity to close achievement gaps between English Learners and Black or African American students and their peers. The study adds to the gap in research centered on closing achievement gaps in literacy for English language learners and students who are Hispanic or Black. This study will also add to the literature gap in outlining specific action steps school leaders can take to effectively address educational inequity.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 gives an overview of the study and unveils the research questions, the problem of practice, and the study methods. Chapter 2 reviews the related literature for the study, discussing the historical context of literacy in the United States, achievement gaps, equity-based leadership practices, professional learning communities, and high-leverage instructional practices. Chapter 3 explores the logic model that guided the study and explains the research design, data collection methods, data analysis, and a discussion of the reliability and validity of the study. Chapter 4 describes the implementation of the interventions, an analysis of the data collected, and highlights key action research findings. Chapter 5 analyzes the findings from the action research case, noting key patterns and themes that emerged during the analysis. Chapter 6

summarizes the findings, noting limitations, and provides implications and recommendations for practitioners and researchers.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States faced another crisis it had failed to address for decades: illiteracy. Evidence suggests that educational reform depends on teachers' individual and collective efficacy and capacity to promote positive student reading outcomes. Therefore, building capacity is critical. This review provides an overview of literacy in the United States, the economic and social impacts of illiteracy, and the history of literacy instruction in the United States. Additionally, the researcher defines and describes what is meant by "professional learning community," the characteristics of a high-performing professional learning community, and leader actions to engage, involve, and support teachers and their school communities to develop a shared purpose for making their school more effective in developing proficient readers. Teaching reading is complex yet critically important. Teachers must have extensive content knowledge and positive self-efficacy to teach all learners (Clark, 2020). Therefore, school leaders must create the conditions necessary for higher school effectiveness.

The purpose of this action research study was to develop teachers' capacity to integrate high-leverage practices to improve English Language Learners (ELLs) access and outcomes in a suburban elementary school. This study examined leader and teacher practices that result in more equitable outcomes for students within a suburban public elementary school.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How does the action research design team describe the process of facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs in one suburban elementary school?
2. How do stakeholders describe the role of high-leverage practices in promoting ELLs' literacy development define stakeholders?
3. How do teachers articulate their role in the continuous improvement process for literacy development via professional learning communities?

To examine the research questions, the researcher worked with an action research team to study the impact of teacher collaboration and culturally responsive practices on promoting literacy development among English Language Learners (ELLs). The Action Research Design Team (ARDT), comprised of school leaders and specialists, collaborated with an Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT), which included teachers, to implement and assess high-impact strategies for literacy development. The researcher used questionnaires, interviews, observations, field notes, and student achievement data to analyze the implementation and effectiveness of teacher collaboration within professional learning communities and culturally responsive instructional strategies in reading.

The researcher reviewed the literature on teacher collaboration and high-leverage teaching practices to achieve the objectives. The first section provides a historical overview of the national academic achievement gaps in literacy and the consequences of achievement gaps on people of color and English Learners. The second section provides a historical overview of the *Reading Wars*, related legislation, and current best practices in literacy. The third section describes equity-based leadership practices, professional learning communities, and culturally

responsive practices. The final section identifies literacy development practices that are high leverage for students, including English Learners.

Equity-Driven Leadership: Bridging Literacy Achievement Gaps through Strategic High-Leverage Practices

Horace Mann envisioned education as the "great equalizer of conditions of men," yet it is not (As cited in Growe & Montgomery, 2003). Even in the era of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), achievement gaps among White students and students of color continued to exist. These academic gaps existed when "a group of students significantly outperforms other student groups on average in their educational achievement" (Hung et al., 2019). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), a 28% achievement gap existed between White and Black fourth-grade students in mathematics and reading, which is only four percentage points lower than over two decades ago in 1990. Current-day explanations for such achievement gaps were rooted in housing discrimination, discrimination in employment opportunities, racism, and perpetuated by the resegregation of schools due to poverty (Henry et al., 2020; Hung et al., 2019).

Literacy Crisis in the United States

Despite the availability of explicit, systematic instructional procedures to improve reading skills, the United States grapples with a deep-rooted literacy problem that affects millions of individuals, transcending age, socioeconomic status, and background (Joshi & Wijekumar, 2019). The literacy crisis was particularly acute for fourth- and eighth-grade students during critical developmental stages, pivotal for strengthening foundational reading and writing skills (Learning Without Tears, 2021). According to The Nation's Report Card, the average reading score among fourth-graders increased by four percentage points in 2022 compared to

2019, with only 37% of students performing at or above the proficient level (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Although an improvement from 2019, these results indicate that most students do not comprehend grade-level materials, especially students of color in suburban and city schools whose scores dropped between five to eight percentage points (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Achievement Gaps

The literacy crisis in the United States is even more disquieting when considering the impact on students of color and English language learners (ELLs), a growing demographic in the country (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Only 17% of black fourth-grade students and 9% of fourth-grade ELLs were reading proficient in 2022, consistent with the 2019 results. ELLs face a series of challenges that can exacerbate the broader literacy crisis, such as a lack of qualified teachers to provide specialized instruction, acquiring a new language while also learning basic literacy skills, insufficient language assistance programs, social and emotional factors associated with language and cultural adaptation, and hindered parental involvement due to language barriers (Cho et al., 2021).

Teachers need comprehensive, culturally sensitive strategies encompassing language acquisition and literacy skills to combat the literacy crisis among ELLs in the United States (Slavin & Cheung, 2005). This instruction includes targeted interventions focused on oral and written language development, adequate resources, professional development for educators, and a recognition of the diversity within the ELL population (Goldenberg, 2020). By addressing the challenges faced by students of color and ELLs, the nation can work toward a more inclusive and practical approach to improving literacy for all students.

Adverse Outcomes of Disproportionality

Henderson et al. (2019) identified a causal link between racial discrimination in the public school system and adverse academic and health outcomes for people of color. Feelings of alienation resulting from culturally unrelated curricula, exclusion from advanced academic programs, high suspension rates, and distrust toward adults in school lead to increased rates of dropouts, incarceration, and suicide (Henderson et al., 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024; Rovner, 2021). Although the dropout rate gap has narrowed between Black and White students since 2016, the dropout rate between other racial-ethnic groups and White students remains significantly high (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

Cultural expectations and familial pressures to succeed academically can create a substantial burden, leading to heightened stress and anxiety. The stigma associated with academic underachievement may also result in feelings of shame or inadequacy. According to the Suicide Resource Prevention Center (2020), suicide rates for Black youth between the ages of 15 and 34 peak compared to the overall United States population, when suicide rates peak between the ages of 45 and 54. Also alarming, Black youth are four times more likely to be incarcerated or committed to juvenile facilities than White youth (Rovner, 2021). “Research indicates young people who possess a positive racial identity are more likely to perform better in school and possess a high level of assuredness and confidence in their social relationships” (Henderson et al., 2019, p. 931).

The dire state of the health and overall well-being of students of color relies on educators to improve school culture and prepare staff to work in the best interests of *all* students. “Building a culture of health in schools for youth requires schools to uphold the ideal of racial equality and their stakeholders to hold them accountable in achieving this ideal” (Henderson et al., 2019, p.

931). The impact of racial disproportionality and academic failure on Hispanic and black youth is complex, with far-reaching consequences. By recognizing the intersectionality of factors contributing to academic setbacks within these communities, policymakers, educators, and society can work collaboratively to implement effective strategies and support systems. The first step is to dismantle systemic barriers to literacy development that disproportionately affect Hispanic and black students.

Reading Wars

Every student has the right to learn to read from knowledgeable and qualified literacy teachers in a supportive learning environment equipped with high-quality, equitable resources (International Literacy Association, 2019). However, there has been a long-standing and passionate debate in the United States over the methods and resources most effective for teaching reading. These differences trace back to the mid-nineteenth century when Horace Mann and William Gray, proponents of whole-language instruction, criticized phonics instruction (Kim, 2008). The whole language approach, called “Look-say,” taught children to recognize words by sight rather than use letter-sound knowledge to read words (Kim, 2008, p. 90).

Harvard professor Jeanne Chall challenged this approach and advocated for early code emphasis, rather than whole language, to produce better word recognition outcomes for students through fourth grade (Chall, 1983; Semingson & Kerns, 2021). While phonics instruction proved superior over whole language in almost 30 studies conducted by Chall (1983), Kenneth Goodman and Frank Smith, champions for whole language, challenged her work (Kim, 2008). Whole language became the prevailing instruction method from the 1980s until approximately 1994, when the National Assessment for Educational Progress released the first wave of data, showing a decline in reading scores among the nation’s fourth and eighth-grade students. The

decline was especially glaring among ethnic and socioeconomic groups (Campbell et al., 1996; Kim, 2008).

As a result of declining test scores and research funded by the state of California, a balanced literacy approach emerged as a means to end the reading wars and appease proponents of phonics-based and whole-language instructional methods (Kim, 2008). Balanced literacy emphasizes student choice and an instructional framework that includes shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, and word study (Chai et al., 2020). The National Reading Panel (2000) concluded in their report that balanced literacy, integration of phonics, and whole language instruction would address the needs of the nation's unique learners and prevent reading failure. The report strengthened with the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002), which outlined the goal for every student to read on or above grade level by 2014 and required federally funded programs to use research-based practices to ensure effectiveness for all students.

Although Jeanne Chall passed away just before the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) was signed, her legacy as a distinguished researcher and literacy advocate lives on in the current themes of the reading debate (Semingson & Kerns, 2021). In Learning to Read: The Great Debate, Chall (1996) asserted that "reading should 'follow the norms of science' by building on the past and raising new questions and hypotheses" (Kim, 2008, p. 105). The reading scores sustained from 1994 to 2022 indicate that not all students have learned to read and create a call to action for leaders and educators (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Considering the dismal Nation's Report Card data, an evidence-based approach to reading instruction draws upon extensive research from psychology, linguistics, neuroscience, and education (Gentry & Ouellette, 2019; Snowling et al., 2022). The Science of Reading is a

body of research emphasizing the importance of systematic and explicit phonics instruction, recognizing that phonological awareness and decoding skills are foundational for early reading development. Advocates claim it is a comprehensive approach to reading instruction that seeks to equip students with strong foundational reading skills, ensuring they are well-prepared for a lifetime of successful reading and learning. The research emphasized the importance of a solid grasp of phonics, phonological awareness, and decoding skills within a structured literacy framework (Snowling et al., 2022). At its core, the science of reading movement "aims for practitioners to use empirical evidence from scientific studies of reading to understand better how children learn to read and how reading should be taught" (Snowling et al., 2022, p. xvi).

Science of Reading literature for English language learners (ELLs) described effective and evidence-based approaches to support their language and literacy development. These strategies emphasize systematic and explicit phonics instruction, recognizing that ELLs benefit from a solid foundation in understanding the relationships between letters and sounds. The strategies also focus on building phonological awareness, which involves recognizing and manipulating the sounds in spoken language. Comprehension strategies, such as vocabulary development and text comprehension, are integrated into the instruction.

The Science of Reading approach acknowledges the importance of language-rich environments and encourages teachers to provide many opportunities for ELLs to engage in meaningful reading and writing activities (Evans, 2018; Nunez-Eddy et al., 2018; Swanson et al., 2017). The approach also emphasized individualized instruction to cater to the specific needs of ELLs, considering their linguistic background and proficiency level. These strategies are grounded in research and aim to ensure that ELLs acquire the essential skills to become

proficient readers and succeed academically (Goldenberg, 2020; McDonald et al., 2023; Schwartz, 2022).

Legislation

Lau v Nichols (1974) was one of the first cases to promote educational equity for all students by assigning schools the responsibility to address ELLs' academic needs. The United States Supreme Court ruled that denying students access to a meaningful education due to their inability to understand English violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This federal mandate compelled schools to take actionable steps to remove language barriers that interfere with equal participation in the educational system. Although the ruling established the mandate to provide language assistance programs to ELLs to access the curriculum and achieve academic success, schools still needed to work to improve learning experiences for ELLs.

Before 2016, California still mandated English-only instruction for English Learners as required by Proposition 227. However, in 2016, The California Education for a Global Economy Initiative, or Proposition 58 (2016), solicited parental input and allowed schools to establish multilingual programs. California passed legislation to significantly impact educational opportunities for ELLs and provide them with increased access to instructional programs that emphasize language development and academic achievement in multiple languages.

Three years later, Texas passed House Bill 3 (2019), which changed to the weighted funding formula used to provide funding to schools using one of the six ELL state-designed program models. The Bill incentivized school districts to integrate ELL and native English speakers into dual language programs and increased funding for students who are educationally disadvantaged or have limited English proficiency. Additionally, the Bill required identifying students who needed early language assistance and necessary support to develop English

proficiency and improve their native language skills. This crucial approach to early intervention recognized the unique needs of English language learners and aimed to ensure they had access to the resources necessary to succeed in school.

The Georgia Literacy Act (2019), enacted in 2023, was comprehensive legislation designed to address literacy challenges among students in Georgia. Ensuring that all students read at or above grade level by the end of the third grade, the Act recognized the critical importance of early reading proficiency for future academic success and strongly emphasizes early intervention through evidence-based reading instruction, particularly systematic and explicit phonics. Furthermore, the Act mandates regular assessment and progress monitoring to identify students needing additional support and encourage parental involvement in children's literacy development. Additionally, it allows local school districts to tailor their literacy programs while emphasizing data-driven measures to improve overall reading outcomes. The Georgia Literacy Act (2019) was committed to equipping students with essential reading skills and setting them toward academic achievement.

Revision of State Standards to Embed the Science of Reading

At least four states, including Georgia, passed laws to mandate changes in how schools teach early reading. The regulations prompted revisions to state curriculum standards. The updated Georgia Standards for English Language Arts reflected a significant shift towards the Science of Reading, an evidence-based approach to reading instruction (Georgia Department of Education, 2023). The standards strongly emphasized systematic and explicit phonics instruction, recognizing the critical role that phonological awareness and decoding skills play in early literacy development. By aligning with the Science of Reading, Georgia aimed to ensure that students developed foundational reading skills and the ability to comprehend and analyze

complex texts effectively. These standards reflect a commitment to equipping educators with the tools and strategies necessary to teach reading effectively, ensuring that all students in Georgia can become proficient readers and lifelong learners.

What makes the revised Georgia ELA standards particularly noteworthy is the incorporation of the World Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) (2020) standards, catering to ELLs. This integration recognizes the diverse linguistic backgrounds of the student population and aims to provide targeted support for ELLs. By integrating the WIDA language development standards with the English Language Arts standards, Georgia used a comprehensive approach to ensure that all students, including ELLs, had equitable opportunities to develop strong English language and literacy skills, fostering success in academic and real-world contexts. This incorporation enhanced a commitment to promoting language proficiency and academic achievement among its increasingly diverse student body.

The United States literacy crisis is deeply concerning, with many ELLs and non-ELL fourth and eighth-grade students grappling with achievement gaps, performance well below proficiency, and inadequate instruction and resources. Despite efforts to improve educational outcomes, several challenges persist, such as low proficiency levels, achievement gaps, lack of early intervention, and decreased student motivation and engagement, all potentially perpetuating a cycle of underachievement (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Addressing this crisis necessitates a multifaceted approach involving targeted interventions, equitable resources and instruction, and a commitment to improving elementary through secondary school literacy education.

Equity-based Leadership Practices

Before No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002), achievement and opportunity gaps were not measured or acknowledged as they are today; therefore, equity has become a fundamental aspect of school improvement. System and school leaders must "address equity issues by organizing coherent strategies that embrace the complexity of change" (Starr, 2022, p. 10). Starr (2022) outlined six entry points for leaders to take bold action and make difficult decisions for more equitable schools in a highly politicized and regulated environment: teaching and learning, values, decision-making, resource allocation, talent management, and culture. He emphasized that the way to help vulnerable students achieve at high levels is to raise expectations, not lower them, and he cautions leaders who are seeking to transform their school or system through an equity lens that they will face much opposition. Still, reviews of instructional audits and assessment results provide a context to engage community stakeholders in undoing the inequities of a school.

Culturally Responsive Leadership Dispositions

Brown (2018) defined "a leader as anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes and dares to develop that potential" (Aguilar, 2020). All educational leaders, regardless of position, are called to interrupt educational inequities and injustices in schools, and according to Fortner et al. (2021), that important work requires specific leadership dispositions (Aguilar, 2020). The authors identified four emerging dispositions for asset-based leadership: creating equity, creating democratic, equitable, and socially just environments, arguing for democracy, and addressing assumptions, biases, and stereotypes to affect change.

Leaders challenge inequities around barriers, embed equity into their vision and mission, and enact it. They use a village mindset to empower others to identify learning needs and address barriers that hinder students living in poverty from succeeding (Starr, 2022). They recognized inequitable distributions of power and created a culture where teachers, students, and parents have a voice (Aguilar, 2020). Finally, "the educational leader provides spaces for interactions that build trust and collaboration throughout the community, which dismantles harmful assumptions and biases that hinder high expectations for students" (Aguilar, 2020, p. 14). Fortner et al. (2021) also maintained that reflective leaders must know themselves, their school culture, and the communities they serve and consider the dispositions described above to effectively improve the behaviors and practices of all school personnel within an organization.

Transformational Leadership Practices

Transformational leadership can be "pivotal for fostering or constraining such organizational change" (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020, p.109). The literature on culturally responsive leadership highlighted values and routines that amend educational disparities for students of color. Such leadership necessitates routines that can create more equitable schools, such as facilitating authentic conversations about race, using data to make sense of race disparities, and "using restorative justice practices to repair harm and build community" (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020, p. 109). Transformational leaders who lead for equity define what it means to have an equitable system and create a vision and mission embedded with equity (Fortner et al., 2021; Pride, 2021). They facilitate courageous conversations to shift deficit thinking to an opportunity mindset, fostering a deeper understanding of oppressive systems rather than awareness (Brown, 2018; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020).

Top equity teams, comprised of teachers, administrators, and community members, are responsible for creating a culture of inquiry that improves student outcomes by examining classrooms and instructional practices (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020). “This core group of stakeholders integrates practices and routines built on common language, norms, and reference points to cultivate a collective community commitment and action to place race, racism, and the systems that sustain it at the center of their improvement efforts” (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020, p. 121). Without these practices in place, schools reinforce inequities.

Hiring Practices

Increasing diversity in the educator workforce is essential to creating a school community that values diversity. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2022), during the 2017-2018 school year, the educator workforce comprised 79% White, 7% Black or African American, 9% Hispanic, 1.8% Two or More Races, .5% American Indian, .2% Asian/Pacific Islander teachers. Lindsay et al. (2005) claimed that exposure to one Black teacher in grades 3-5 had a meaningful effect on long-term student outcomes, especially Black males from low-income households. Further, exposure to a Black teacher in elementary school decreased the high school dropout rate by 39% and raised college aspirations.

The Arkansas Department of Education developed the “Grow Your Own” program to support residents with aspirations to become educators with the resources and mentor support needed to gain licensure (Pride, 2021). The program resulted in a growing number of districts with a diverse group of aspiring educators who obtained licensure and committed to working in their local district to support teaching and learning. Successful recruitment programs like the one in Arkansas, coupled with the findings published by Lindsay et al. (2005), emphasized the need for school and district leaders to invest in programs that recruit Black teachers. All tenets of

equity-based leadership rise and fall on the leaders finding, developing, nurturing, supporting, and holding their team members accountable. High-quality education is the difference maker for students of color, ELLs, economically disadvantaged students, and students with special needs, who require highly skilled teachers. However, excellent teaching is not a happenstance. School leaders must create the conditions for excellent teaching through instructional leadership and talent management (Starr, 2022).

Starr (2022) alleged that the United States has an adult learning problem. He claimed that students know how to learn as they continuously learn, regardless of what they are being taught; adults need to "regularly learn new skills, content, and technologies to engage students and meet their needs" (p. 61). Adults must "constantly learn with and from each other to serve young people best" (Starr, 2022, p. 65). Collective learning is a means for leaders to distribute leadership, engage adults in learning, increase productivity, and retain effective teachers.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are a proven adult learning strategy for increasing knowledge and skills (DuFour et al., 2016; Jones & Thessin, 2017; Saputra et al., 2020; Starr, 2022). DuFour et al. (2016) described a PLC as an "ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in interactive cycles of collective inquiry and action research to improve outcomes for their students" (p. 10). This professional learning model was based on the business sector concept of a learning organization and emerged as a transformative force in education, fostering collaboration, shared expertise, and continuous improvement among educators (Vescio et al., 2008). The foundation of a PLC rests on four questions developed by DuFour et al. (2021), which guide a team toward a shared sense of purpose:

1. Why do we exist?

2. What must our school become to accomplish our purpose?
3. How must we behave to achieve our vision?
4. How will we mark our progress? (p. 83)

This shared sense of purpose, vision, and mission drives the culture. Collaborative teams serve as the building blocks of a PLC, and the school itself is the PLC. “When a school functions as a PLC, educators within the organization embrace high levels of learning for all students as both the reason the organization exists and the fundamental responsibility of those who work within it” (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 11). Therefore, the work of a PLC requires a schoolwide effort, impacting the structure and culture of the organization.Collaborative groups within a PLC are only effective when focused on *learning* rather than teaching. Teams committed to higher levels of learning for all students use four guiding questions:

1. What do we want our students to know and be able to do?
2. How will we know if each student has learned it?
3. How will we respond when some students do not learn it?
4. How will we extend the learning for students who have demonstrated proficiency? (DuFour et al., 2016)

These guiding questions ensure teachers are engaged in the issues most impacting student learning. Collaborative collective inquiry of teaching and learning promotes innovation and reflection, builds shared knowledge, facilitates shared leadership, and fosters a positive culture of continuous improvement that results in increased student achievement (Carpenter, 2014). Buttram and Farley-Ripple (2016) argued that collaboration alone is unlikely to change teacher practice or increase student achievement. School leaders must provide structured time and consistent professional development on effective PLC practices to “empower teachers to be

active participants in school improvement as a function of student achievement" (Carpenter, 2014, p. 685).

De Neve and Devos (2017) found that when schools provided scheduled time during the school day to support planning for differentiated instruction through PLCs, teachers implemented instruction more smoothly and profoundly, and they felt supported when facing instructional challenges, suggesting they were highly committed to their colleagues' growth. The results also revealed that cultural school conditions, such as high levels of trust, played an essential role in increasing the social capacity of developing PLCs (De Neve & Devos, 2017). Scholars outline common school conditions that can be considered essential steppingstones in the development of a school as a highly functioning professional learning community (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016; Carpenter, 2014; De Neve & Devos, 2017; DuFour et al., 2021; Jones & Thessin, 2017). All cite common values and a collective shared practice focused on increasing student achievement as central to a positive school culture.

Core Values

Clearly defined core values are essential for educational leaders who aim to change the status quo and bring about equitable change. Core values are deeply rooted personal beliefs that embody personal ethics. To hold firm to goals, leader behaviors and core values must align with one another (Aguilar, 2020).

While individual core values are essential, organizational values drive change. A values-driven culture generates internal accountability in which people throughout the organization create positive peer pressure to act per public commitments (DuFour et al., 2016). Like individual core values, organizational core values must reflect the organization's beliefs. Research has shown that solid core values are directly linked to the commitment and support of

employees in an organization (Dahlgaard-Park, 2012). The more transparent core values are in an organization, the more buy-in they receive from employees. When increased buy-in paves the way to align employee behaviors to their core values, organizations reach their goals.

Creating an improvement culture is an essential and monumental task that aims to offset the impact of systemic racial inequities within education. As such, leaders and organizations must have strong values supporting this vital mission. These core values must not only fully embody equity but also remain steadfast, especially in the face of backlash or criticism of the organization, which is all too common when attempting to disrupt the status quo. For true transformation to occur, where "equity becomes embedded into the DNA of the system," leaders must organize efforts to use shared values and ensure that adult actions reflect and reinforce those values in service of students (Starr, 2022, p. 25).

Culturally Responsive High-Leverage Literacy Practices

In education, "high leverage" instructional practices refer to strategies and methods that significantly impact student learning outcomes (Wei et al., 2023, p.3). Within the context of continuous improvement, high-leverage practices serve as interventions to address specific problems of practice identified by teachers. When applied to literacy development, these practices become powerful tools in shaping cognitive and linguistic growth, especially for English Language Learners. High-leverage practices, including culturally responsive practices, can have transformative effects on literacy for all students.

One of the paramount high-leverage practices in literacy development is explicit and systematic instruction. Educators empower students to build a solid understanding of language mechanics by providing clear, direct guidance on foundational reading skills. Explicit instruction ensures that learners acquire essential phonemic awareness, phonics, and decoding skills,

forming the foundation of proficient reading. Gillon (2023) suggested that among those components, phonological awareness and reading comprehension strategies may have a longer-term benefit for reading than other approaches.

Solari and Kehoe (2022) investigated the effectiveness of interventions for English Learners with word reading difficulties. They found that interventions designed to improve literacy outcomes for ELLs in the elementary grades were more effective than those implemented in upper elementary schools (Solari & Kehoe, 2022). A similar study by Gillon (2023) also supported this claim. However, Cho et al. (2021) contended that implementing reading interventions for ELLs should occur during the fourth or fifth grades or after the teacher exposes the students to the academic environment for an adequate timeframe and students sufficiently develop their language. However, there are very few current studies investigating instructional methods that foster future reading performance of ELLs to know for sure (Swanson et al., 2017).

Wei et al. (2023) studied the academic impact of high-leverage strategies, specifically teacher introspection, on English Learners with learning disabilities. They found that teachers who look inward and continuously analyze their practice are more prepared to create learning environments that are culturally responsive for students from diverse backgrounds. Teachers who acknowledged their own cultural experiences and limiting beliefs made connections with how their beliefs might emerge in the classroom instructional and management practices. Participants created connections with students by incorporating their voices and cultural perspectives. They used their knowledge of their students to address the inequality of traditional assessments and the cultural biases teachers hold about ELLs with learning disabilities. Teachers viewed student

knowledge through a culturally responsive lens, honoring lived experiences and tailored instruction to meet their needs.

According to the Council for the Great City Schools (2023), teachers should prioritize receptive and productive language development and use. Explicit foundational skills instruction to develop written and spoken language comprehension should occur within meaningful contexts and connect to grade-level content. Teachers should use various texts based on topics or themes related to the grade-level content and provide linguistic resources needed to make connections between texts. These strategies allow students to learn how phrases convey meaning and begin to see that distinct words form phrases and sentences (Council for Great City Schools, 2023).

Teachers should foster an understanding of the types of English used in various contexts and build the capacity of ELLs and other students to use “academic” or “standard” English (Council for the Great City Schools, 2023). However, students should understand that standard English is required for academic or formal settings and not believe or feel that mastering academic English means abandoning their first language or informal modes of communication. Teachers can encourage students to use academic English by highlighting “distinctions between vernacular and standard English and provide students opportunities to practice appropriately applying their English knowledge and skills to different contexts” (Council for Great City Schools, 2023, p. 34). ELLs benefit from skills instruction to build new vocabulary and decode print forms of English. Opportunities for students to practice listening and speaking English through read-aloud, discussions, and conversations with their teacher and English-speaking peers are a few strategies to incorporate in the classroom to extend word recognition and build comprehension.

Chapter Summary

Nationally, over half of the fourth-grade students are reading below grade level, and achievement gaps between students of color, English learners, and white students continue to exist despite the availability of explicit, systematic instructional procedures to improve reading skills (Joshi & Wijekumar, 2019). Achievement gaps, when unaddressed, can influence future educational and career opportunities, perpetuate socioeconomic disparities, and limit the opportunity for upward mobility for students as they become adults (Henderson et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2005; Rovner, 2021). Although school systems cannot fully address institutional and systemic barriers perpetuating racial disparities in the United States, school leaders and their fellow educators can employ high-leverage leadership and instruction practices to dismantle inequities in education (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016; Carpenter, 2014; De Neve & Devos, 2016; DuFour et al., 2021; Starr, 2022).

School leaders must engage stakeholders in collaborative change management processes focused on equity and improved student outcomes for all students. A collaborative culture built on shared values and purpose is the most critical component of continuous improvement. Schools that function as professional learning communities foster a climate of trust, collaboration, and shared leadership and actively engage in learning focused on improving student outcomes (De Neve & Devos, 2016; DuFour et al., 2021).

PLC members use the continuous improvement process to conduct action research within their classrooms to improve student outcomes. High-leverage instructional practices are targeted strategies designed to be effective across diverse learning environments and subject areas that positively impact student learning. The practices are effective with all students, especially ELLs, for literacy development, including explicit instruction, culturally relevant pedagogy,

differentiated instruction, and multiple opportunities to practice receptive and expressive language use. PLCs provide a forum for teachers to support one another in learning about effective, high-leverage practices and how to use them in their classrooms (McLeskey et al., 2022). The United States literacy rate demands that educators do more than provide students with a chance to learn to read; it signals a call to action for all educators to ensure high levels of learning for all students.

Chapter 3 details the action research methodology used in the study, highlighting the need to address racial disparities in academic achievement, particularly for Black, Hispanic, and ELL students. The chapter also presents the context of the study, including demographic information about the school and district, achievement data, and descriptions of the teaching staff, and explains the interventions.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research has shown limited attention to effectively address racial disparities among students who are high achieving or minimally proficient, a long-standing issue impacting students of color in the United States. The same was true at Centennial Elementary School (CES, a pseudonym), the research site for this study (Olszewski-Kubilius & Steenbergen-Hu, 2017; Willis, 2019). An analysis of the 2023 school performance data revealed significantly disproportionate academic achievement results among racial subgroups, especially when comparing the performance of black or African American, Hispanic students, and ELLs to the performance of white students. The presence of these disparities in 2023, compared to the demographics of the total student population, was staggering. The disparities reinforced the call to action for improving conditions in public education for all students, not just the privileged majority that currently benefited. (Crabtree et al., 2019; Novack & Jones, 2020; Rambo-Hernandez et al., 2019; Willis, 2019).

The purpose of this action research study was to develop teachers' capacity to integrate high-leverage practices to improve English Language Learners (ELLs) access and outcomes in a suburban elementary school. This study examined leader and teacher practices that result in more equitable outcomes for students within a suburban public elementary school.

1. How does the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) describe the process of facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs for literacy development in one suburban elementary school?

2. How do stakeholders describe the role of high-leverage practices in promoting ELLs' literacy development?
3. How do teachers articulate their role in the continuous improvement process for literacy development via professional learning communities?

To examine the research questions, the researcher worked with an action research team to study the impact of teacher collaboration and culturally responsive practices on promoting literacy development among English Language Learners (ELLs). The Action Research Design Team (ARDT), comprised of school leaders and specialists, collaborated with an Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT), which included teachers, to implement and assess high-impact strategies for literacy development. The researcher used questionnaires, interviews, observations, field notes, and student achievement data to analyze the implementation and effectiveness of teacher collaboration within professional learning communities and culturally responsive instructional strategies in reading.

Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

Leonard and Woodland (2022) conducted a qualitative study to examine how one urban school district leveraged Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to change teacher mindsets, increase equitable instructional practices, and end racism within the school community. The findings concluded that "educators who want to dismantle systemic racism in schools and improve student SEL need to be attentive to the conditions that enable strong adult learning networks to thrive," which implies the need for the replication of this study in other geographical contexts (Leonard & Woodland, 2022, p. 220).

Similarly, Auslander (2018) conducted a qualitative case study in a small urban high school over one academic year to investigate the impact of teacher practice and collaboration

with counselors around culturally and linguistically responsive instruction for newcomer English Language Learners (ELLs). The study explored instructional practices through observations, semi-structured interviews, school attendance records, and district survey data. Although the small number of participants limited the scope of the study, the findings provide insight into strategies effective for designing responsive interventions for ELLs and promoting positive change in school climate.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined Qualitative research as the study of "how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 15). Therefore, the focus of qualitative research is on meaning and understanding from the perspective of the research participants (Bloomberg, 2023). This study used action research to examine the leader and teacher practices development as they engaged in PLCs focused on using high-leverage instructional strategies. The researcher selected the qualitative approach because of the focus on the perspectives and experiences of participants in PLCs and the impact on their instructional practices to promote positive learning outcomes for students of color and speakers of other languages. The data collection methods, such as interviews, surveys, and teacher observations within collaborative planning sessions and in the classroom, explored the lessons learned about distributive leadership and high-leverage strategies to dismantle educational inequities at CES.

Overview of Action Research Methods

The purpose of action research within an educational context is to address common issues or problems, improve teaching practices, and develop research knowledge (Glanz, 2014). The method gained popularity because it brings together "action and reflection, theory and practice, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern" (Coghlan, 2019, p. 5). The direct involvement of teachers and supervisors in action research to improve schools

distinguishes action research from other research methods (Glanz, 2014). In the context of this research study, the primary action researcher and implementation team used the literature surrounding PLCs, continuous improvement, and equity-based leadership practices to create action steps addressing literacy achievement gaps. The support team sought to improve educational achievement gaps by exploring high-leverage practices for continuous improvement and equity-based leadership and instructional practices.

Action research, as a qualitative approach, was an appropriate methodology for this study because it allowed researchers to be "attentive to the dynamic of groups and interactions as they unfold[ed] and to learn to intervene appropriately" (Coghlan, 2019, p. 6). The flexible structure of action research enabled the researcher and implementation team to use a wide lens when observing various student and teacher behaviors to identify patterns and effectively address the problem of practice (Glanz, 2014). The cyclical framework of action research engaged the implementation team in planning and taking action to better understand their work (Coghlan, 2019; Glanz, 2014; La Salle & Johnson, 2018). "Schools begin to change when their leaders recognize the disparities that exist in our schools and then intentionally raise issues of bias, preference, legitimization, privilege, and equity" (Lindsay et al., 2005).

Action research provided a structure for reflection, data collection, analysis, and action to ensure that every student received an excellent education at Centennial Elementary School (CES). The primary researcher and implementation team challenged what La Salle and Johnson (2018) called the "Inevitability Assumption," the idea that schools cannot make a positive impact on negative patterns of achievement for some groups of students and denounced normalizing students of color failing academically (p. 6).

Action Research Design

Action research is an invaluable tool for teachers and supervisors to better understand their work (Glanz, 2014). Throughout this study, the ARDT spiraled through action research cycles of Plan, Do, Study, and Act (PDSA) to evaluate the effectiveness of high-leverage instructional practices on increasing student outcomes with literacy development. Action research allowed the participants to assess the state of literacy proficiency among Hispanic, black, and ELL students at CES, implement high-leverage practices for literacy development, and work together to understand the improvement of practice. The inquiry tool also enabled the researcher to assess the level to which PLC components were operational, implement high-leverage leadership practices, and better understand the improvement in school culture. The emphasis on evaluating high-leverage instructional practices in the action research process underscored the significance of high-leverage leadership practices for the ARDT and the ARIT.

The Spiraling and Iterative Nature of Action Research

The essential features of action research include a "spiral of planning, action, observation, reflection, and further action" and "are more than simply a process for engaging in research" (Burns & McPherson, 2017, p. 107). The purpose of action research is to investigate a social environment, such as the classroom, where researchers perceive a problem. The researchers and participants, through a "collaborative, systematic, and cyclical research process…work towards meaningful change, employing deliberate intervention through strategic action, and systematic data collection and analysis" (Burns, 2011, pp. 238-239).

The iterations of the PDSA phases of the action research cycles prompted the researcher and participants to spiral through an analysis, or study, of the impact of high-leverage practices

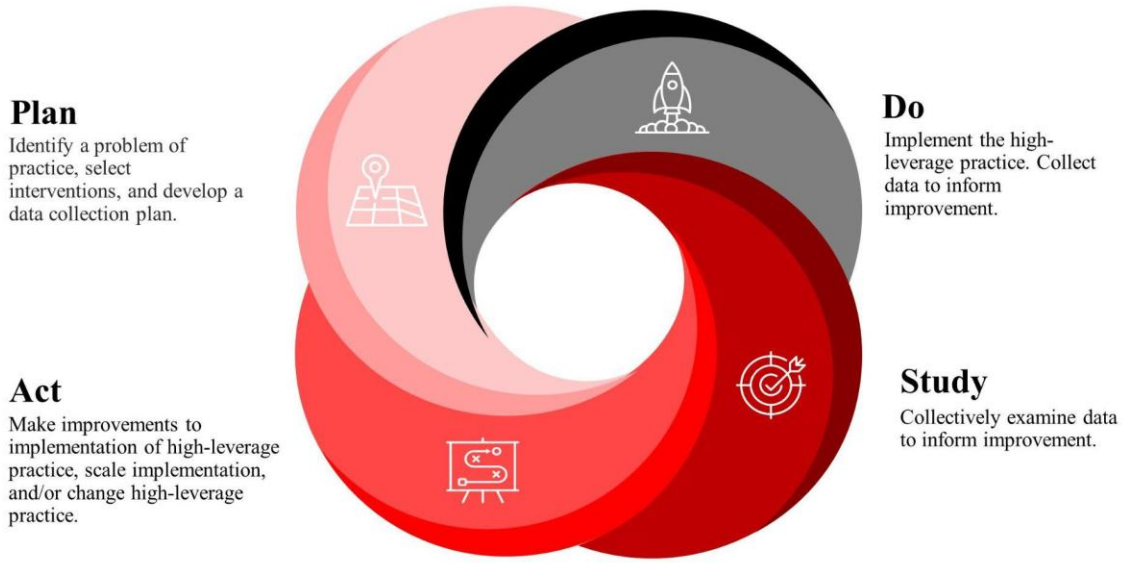
on student outcomes in literacy and teacher capacity building. The logic model defined the cycles for this study and provided a framework for the researcher and participants.

Logic Model

The logic model depicted in Figure 3.1 guided the study to examine how school leaders and teachers can engage in the continuous improvement process for literacy development. This model engages educators in a system to focus on a specific problem of practice and, through a series of iterative cycles, identify and test change practices (Shakman et al., 2020). Through each cycle, teachers and leaders build their capacity to test change practices, refine them based on evidence, and increase the impact of the change practice over time.

Figure 3.1

Plan, Do, Study, Act



Note. Shakman et al. (2020); Tichnor-Wagner, et al. (2017)

The Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA), a four-step process, established the foundation of the study, which promotes continuous improvement to test a change in practice within a school

setting. The study examined how school leaders and teachers can engage in this process to guide rapid learning and impact literacy outcomes for English Language Learners and students of color. For this study, each PDSA cycle began within PLCs composed of general education teachers, a teacher of English to speakers of other languages, and school administrators.

Collectively, the team analyzed literacy assessment results *(plan phase)*, identified a problem of practice and contributing factors *(plan phase)*, developed an action plan to address the problem *(do phase)*, implemented a high-leverage practice *(act phase)*, and studied the educational impact of each cycle *(study phase*). During the *study* phase of each cycle, the team evaluated whether the high-leverage practice was implemented with fidelity and, if so, if the team should adopt, adapt, or abandon the practice before embarking on the next PDSA cycle (Shakman et al., 2020). Each cycle focused on improvement toward the problem of practice.

Theory of Change

The purpose of this study was to develop teacher capacity to integrate high-leverage practices designed to improve access and outcomes for Hispanic and black students and English Language Learners at CES. Organizational learning and the concept that "people learn primarily through the socially embedded activities, behaviors, and practices they engage in" (Higgins et al., 2012, p. 7) was the bedrock of the study. Therefore, a collaborative approach through the PLC process was necessary to build teacher capacity to integrate high-leverage practices for improved student learning. In a PLC, "collaboration is a systematic process in which teachers work together, interdependently, to analyze, and *impact* professional practice to improve results for students" (DuFour et al., 2021, p. 14). The ARDT intentionally devoted time to observing PLC meetings, observing instruction, designing job-embedded professional learning

opportunities, and fostering a “collaborative culture with a focus on learning” (DuFour et al., 2021, p. 14).

Aligned with the purpose and the research questions, the theory of change was building teacher capacity to use high-leverage instructional strategies through involvement in highly functioning PLCs.

The Case

Due to a long history of teachers working alone, with little professional development at CES, the organizational learning theory helped guide this study as the ARDT worked with teachers to build PLCs to strengthen and support culturally and linguistically responsive curriculum and instruction, as well as equitable and inclusive learning opportunities.

Case studies are a mode of inquiry to generate understanding and “deep insights to inform professional practice, policy development, and community or social action” (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 83). A qualitative case study focuses on “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 52). The experiences an ARDT shared as they fostered a culture of collaboration through PLCs and improved student outcomes with high-leverage instructional practices bound the research as a case.

The Action Research Design Team

Action research is a systematic inquiry process that seeks effective solutions to complex problems within a communal context (Bloomberg, 2023). The ARDT comprised CES personnel, including the primary researcher, the assistant principal, the instructional coach, the English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher, and an ESOL paraprofessional.

Beginning in the 2024 school year, MPSD appointed a new CES principal with an educational specialist degree, six years of experience as a principal, and three years as an

assistant principal in another school district. She had twelve years of elementary classroom experience and one year of experience as an instructional coach. She also served as the primary researcher of this study. She was committed to strengthening the culture of CES through PLCs and improving student learning outcomes for all students, especially those historically underserved.

The assistant principal of CES was in her second year in the role, having previously worked for six years as an elementary teacher and ten years as a college instructor. She was an instructional leader and shared the commitment to enhancing the culture and increasing student learning opportunities. The instructional coach had served the CES faculty for two years before the study and leveraged her relationship with teachers to build the capacity for improved instruction.

An English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher and a paraprofessional were part of the ARDT. The ESOL teacher had over twenty years of experience as a classroom teacher and instructional specialist. The paraprofessional had an engineering degree from a prestigious local university, at least three years of experience working in her role in the elementary setting, and experience as a student who was an ELL newcomer. Her personal experience and admiration for her mother's role in the public school system as a liaison and advocate for ELL students and their families inspired her passion for supporting newcomers with access to a high-quality education. The ESOL teacher and paraprofessional contributed high-leverage instructional practices for the literacy development of ELL students that benefited all students and assisted with developing professional development planning and implementation.

Table 3.1

Action Research Design Team (ARDT)

Team Member	Primary Role at CES	Action Research Role
Primary Researcher	Principal, CES	Leads and conducts all research with the ARDT for data analysis. Brings 14 years of classroom instruction experience, 2 years of instructional coaching experience, and 8 years of administrative experience.
Ms. Sutton	Assistant Principal	Leads and assists with research with the ARDT for data collection and analysis. Brings 7 years of teaching and 2 years of school leadership experience.
Ms. Kendall	ESOL Teacher	Facilitates professional development on HLLPs, models implementation of practices, and teaches ESOL students in a resource setting. Brings over 25 years of teaching experience.
Ms. Harper	ESOL Paraprofessional	Assists with facilitation of professional development and implementation of HLLP in the classroom. Brings 2 years of experience in the classroom and is bilingual.

Action Research Implementation Team

The researcher invited all certified staff to participate in this study as a part of the ARIT, except for the physical education, music, and art teachers. The ARIT comprised 12 homeroom teachers. Table 3.2 lists the grade-level teams included in the ARIT and their combined teaching experience.

Table 3.2

Action Research Implementation Team

Grade Level Team	Teaching Experience
Third Grade	A combined experience of 68 years of experience. An average of 18 years at CES.
Fourth Grade	A combined 52 years of experience. An average of 6 years at CES.
Fifth Grade	A combined experience of 45 years of experience. An average of 6 years at CES.

Research Plan and Timeline

Bryk et al. (2015) asserted that change is context-specific, takes time, involves collective effort, and requires constant adjustment, data collection, and learning. This action research study occurred at CES during the 2024-2025 school year. The action research timeline in Table 3.3 outlines the reflection and action cycles used in the study.

Table 3.3

Action Research Timeline

	Action Research Activity	
Date	Action Research Design Team (ARDT)	Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT)
June 2024	• Secured consent to participate in the study • ARDT Monthly Meeting • Facilitated PD Session #1 • Collected Artifacts • Researcher's Journal-record	• Secured consent to participate in the study • Team Interviews #1 • Observations of PLC Meetings • Artifact Collection • Researcher's Journal-record
August 2024	• ARDT Monthly Meeting • Facilitated PD Session #2 • Collected Artifacts • Researcher's Journal-record	• Feedback Survey #1 • Observations of PLC Meetings & Classroom Instruction • Artifact Collection

	Action Research Activity	
Date	Action Research Design Team (ARDT)	Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT)
		• Researcher's Journal-record
September 2024	• ARDT Monthly Meeting • Facilitated PD Session #3 • Collected Artifacts Researcher's Journal-record	• Feedback Survey #1 • Observations of PLC Meetings & Classroom Instruction • Artifact Collection • Researcher's Journal-record
October 2024	• ARDT Monthly Meeting • Facilitated PD Session #4 • Collected Artifacts (45-Day Review) • Researcher's Journal-record	• Team Interviews #2 • Observations of PLC Meetings & Classroom Instruction • Artifact Collection • Researcher's Journal-record
November 2024	• ARDT Monthly Meeting • Facilitated PD Session #5 • Collected Artifacts • Researcher's Journal-record	• Feedback Survey #2 • Observations of PLC Meetings & Classroom Instruction • Artifact Collection • Researcher's Journal-record • Team Interviews #3 • Post Survey

Context of the Study

Masters Public School District (MPSD), located in a suburb 30 miles southeast of a major metropolitan area, served 20,000 students in 27 schools: 14 elementary schools, five middle, and five high schools. Three non-traditional learning environments provide high school students with an independent online learning environment, with a teacher, or through a combination of structured and non-traditional modes of instruction. The district comprised a racially and ethnically diverse student population representing 42% White, 31% Black, 7% Asian, 14% Hispanic, and 6% Multi-Racial. Approximately 8% of the student population are

also English Language Learners, close to the National average (NCES, 2023). The district employed approximately 2,250 teachers and instructional staff comprising 82% White, 17% Black, 3% Hispanic, 1% Multi-racial, and 1% Asian, which does not mirror the racial demographics of the total student population.

CES, established in 1968 by the developers of Masters City and one of the oldest schools in the MPSD, served approximately 461 students. When this study occurred, enrollment had remained steady since 2019, even during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when student enrollment in many public schools declined (Dee & Murphy, 2021). During this study, CES was comprised of students from preschool to fifth grade who came from affluent and highly educated families. An analysis of the student population indicated a near-even split between male and female students. The racial demographics of students were 9% Black or African American, 52% White, 19% Asian, 11% Hispanic, and 7% Multi-Racial. The total student count and population demographics have remained steady since 2018, with an average of 16% of students eligible for free or reduced meals yearly. CES had never qualified for Title I status. Therefore, the school relied heavily on fundraisers and donations from families and community partners to purchase supplementary resources.

Study Body Characteristics

CES enrolled a diverse population of students, as reflected in the previous demographic data. Among the 467 students, 11% are Hispanic, 19% Asian, 9% Black or African American, 52% White, and 7% are Multi-Racial. The staff plans opportunities throughout the year to celebrate the cultural diversity of the student body and learn what makes each cultural heritage unique.

In addition to cultural diversity, students were a diverse group of learners. The 2024-2025 student cohort comprised 24% Gifted, 14% Exceptional, 6% served through the Early Intervention Program (EIP), and 3% with accommodations protected through Section 504. These students also had various interests. They were active in various clubs and organizations, including the Science Olympiad Team, Math Bowl Team, Technology Competition Team, Origami Club, Chess Club, Running Club, Garden Club, and Student Ambassadors.

Academic Achievement

CES had a reputation for excellence and was a desired school within the community. During the 2018-2019 school year, CES was the highest-performing school in MPSD, as defined by the State performance report. While comparable data were unavailable for three subsequent years due to the state suspending the overall accountability measure during the COVID-19 pandemic, CES students continued to perform among the top four of 14 elementary schools in the district, according to the Content Mastery and Readiness component scores on the State performance report.

Although a historically high-performing school, CES has several areas for improvement. The 2023 Georgia Milestones results revealed that an average of 48% of third through fifth-grade students needed remediation in key ideas, details, and vocabulary in literacy. Similarly, an average of 40% of students in third through fifth grades needed remediation in Numbers and Operations: Fractions. An analysis of the end-of-unit language arts, mathematics, and science district assessment results indicated that students showed deficits in the same areas throughout the school year.

At first glance, the literacy program at CES served third through fifth-grade students exceptionally well, given that 85% of students read at or above grade level in 2023. However,

the information in Figure 3.1 tells a different story, highlighting the reading status of three cohorts since the 20-21 school year. Apart from the 20-21 fourth-grade cohort, the percentage of students reading on or above grade level declined each subsequent year.

Figure 3.1

CES Reading Status Trend Data

Centennial ES	Year	% Below Grade Level	% Grade Level or Above
3rd Grade	2020-2021	11%	89%
	2021-2022	12%	88%
	2022-2023	15%	85%
4th Grade	2020-2021	18%	82%
	2021-2022	13%	87%
	2022-2023	28%	72%
5th Grade	2020-2021	14%	86%
	2021-2022	9%	91%
	2022-2023	17%	83%

Class of 21-22 Cohort Class of 22-23 Cohort Class of 23-24 Cohort

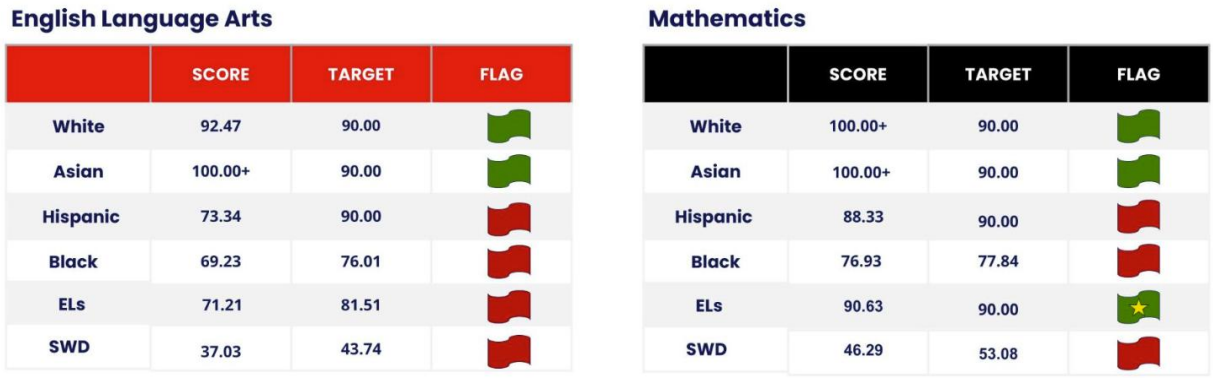
Note. Source: State Department of Education (2023)

The most glaring concerns were within the Closing Gaps component of the State report card, which sets the expectation that "all students and all student demographic groups make improvements in achievement rates" (GaDOE, 2023). Out of 100 points, the Closing Gaps score was 52.8, 28.7 points lower than the district and 14 points lower than the state score. Figure 3.2 highlights student achievement data for each racial and program demographic and provides insight into the significantly lower component score for Closing Gaps. In 2023, a 20-point achievement gap existed between White or Asian students and the performance of Black, Hispanic, and English Learners. Additionally, there was a 55-point achievement gap between

students with special needs and the performance of students in all other demographic groups. Similarly, statistically significant achievement gaps existed in mathematics.

Figure 3.2

CES Achievement Gaps



English Language Arts

	SCORE	TARGET	FLAG
White	92.47	90.00	
Asian	100.00+	90.00	
Hispanic	73.34	90.00	
Black	69.23	76.01	
ELs	71.21	81.51	
SWD	37.03	43.74	

Mathematics

	SCORE	TARGET	FLAG
White	100.00+	90.00	
Asian	100.00+	90.00	
Hispanic	88.33	90.00	
Black	76.93	77.84	
ELs	90.63	90.00	
SWD	46.29	53.08	

Note. Source: State Department of Education (2023)

Teaching Staff

In 2023, CES staff comprised 36 teachers and support staff, including one counselor, a part-time instructional coach, and a special education coach. The school year before the study occurred, several staff members retired, including the CES principal of 15 years, causing the historically high staff retention rate to decrease from 98% to 78%. The racial demographics of the staff have remained consistent, comprising 9% Persons of Color and 91% White, which does not match the student body. The staff is 97% female with an average of 19 years of experience. The staff had a clear and renewable certification and primarily pursued advanced degrees, with 90% having a Master's degree or higher.

Leadership

The leadership team consisted of a principal, assistant principal, counselor, part-time instructional coach, a special education coach, and a teacher from each grade level or

connections team. The team comprised 14 females and one male; four Black or African American teachers and 11 White teachers. At the time of this study, three team members had been on staff with the school for at least a decade, three joined in 2023, and the rest of the team had been a part of CES for an average of five years. They convened monthly to develop or monitor the School Improvement Plan, which focused on implementing PLCs.

Professional Development

MPSD classified CES as a high-performing school. As a result, the previous principal rewarded teachers with "protection" for high performance on local benchmarks, standardized tests, and the State report card, as some staff members described. Protection meant staff were not required to attend professional development sessions offered by the county, the school did not invite coordinators or instructional coaches to conduct walkthroughs or facilitate professional development, and teachers were "left alone" if their instruction resulted in favorable student outcomes.

Before 2023, the instructional staff at CES participated in professional development provided by district leadership two to three times a year. Professional development, facilitated at the school level, was limited and provided by the part-time instructional coach at the request of only a few teachers. Following an analysis of student achievement data, leadership team members expressed the need for consistent collaboration practices among grade level and department teams and the need for consistent use of district-provided curriculum resources among school teams. Teachers with one to three years of experience at CES stated they felt isolated from their teammates, often working alone to develop lesson plans and analyze achievement data. They also expressed concern that analyzing school-level data sets was not regular practice and requested additional opportunities to do so in the future.

Data Sources

Teacher and leader involvement in the continuous improvement process is crucial in determining the underlying needs of a school community to ensure equitable learning outcomes for every student. Therefore, this action research study aimed to develop teacher capacity to integrate high-leverage practices to improve access and outcomes for English Language Learners and students of color. This study examined leader and teacher practices that result in more equitable student outcomes.

Participants

General education, a teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and a paraprofessional participated in this study. Although an integral part of education, the researcher did not invite educational specialists, such as music and art teachers, to participate in this study because resources were unavailable to provide time for them to collaborate with the teacher and paraprofessional of ESOL on instructional practices. However, they did participate in monthly professional learning sessions focused on strategies for teaching ESOL and cultural responsiveness.

Selection Criteria

Class rosters at CES were heterogeneous, meaning all teacher rosters were diverse based on race, ethnicity, and current performance levels. Therefore, the researcher selected all homeroom teachers, kindergarten paraprofessionals, special education-general content teachers, teachers, and paraprofessionals of ESOL to participate in this study, regardless of teaching experience or degree status.

Data Collection Methods

This study used a qualitative data collection and analysis approach to deeply understand the role of teachers in the school improvement process and within a PLC focused on implementing high-leverage instructional practices for ELLs. Data were collected from the participants to achieve this and to allow the researcher to "authentically describe the meaning of the findings from the perspective of the research participants" (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 75). The theoretical framework of the study, the problem, and the purpose determined the data collection techniques used by the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher obtained data from multiple sources, including interviews, surveys, observation notes, journals, and artifacts.

Data collection for this study incorporated various qualitative methods. These methods included:

1. Individual interviews with teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators at the beginning and the end of the research process;
2. Surveys were administered to teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators at the beginning and end of the study to determine readiness for organizational learning and measure the level to which PLC functioned;
3. Observations of PLC meetings conducted by teacher-leaders;
4. Researcher journal notes based on observations during classroom instruction, observations of professional learning sessions conducted by the English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher, and observations during PLC meetings;
5. Documents like teaching artifacts provided additional context to corroborate observations and other data.

The researcher analyzed the qualitative data from numerous data collection methods using software programs Otter.ai and Delve to identify patterns and generate themes.

Interviews

The researcher used interview feedback with the teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators to determine how they described implementing and facilitating PLCs and the role of high-leverage instructional practices in promoting ELL literacy development. Interviews, often the primary method of data collection in qualitative research, capture "perceptions, attitudes, and emotions" of participants and "gain access to their experiences, feelings, and social worlds" (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 281).

A semi-structured interview protocol allowed the researcher flexibility with question types and those used during the interview. Additionally, the semi-structured format enabled the participants to describe their perspectives without limitation. The researcher crafted interview questions derived from the overall research questions to understand the experiences of teachers and leaders. Individual interviews for the teachers provided them privacy to speak freely and not be influenced by other team members. Table 3.4 illustrates a sampling of interview questions. The full interview protocol is in Appendices F and G.

Table 3.4

Interview Question Sample

Research Question	Interview Questions
Q1: How does the action research design team describe the process of facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs for literacy development in one suburban elementary school?	After reviewing the survey data and artifacts collected, what interventions do you think will be beneficial in enhancing school-level instructional leadership support structures for teachers?

Research Question	Interview Questions
	What do you see as the school's role in developing structures to support teachers as instructional leaders? What do you see as the biggest challenges for teacher-leaders in supporting instruction? Designing, implementing, and monitoring professional learning? Other?
Q2: How do stakeholders describe the role of high-leverage practices in promoting ELLs' literacy development?	What is the relationship between high-leverage practices and teacher value-added models? After reviewing achievement data, what do you notice? What do you wonder? After reviewing achievement data and artifacts collected, what interventions do you believe are beneficial in enhancing instruction for English Learners?

Surveys

The researcher administered surveys to teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators to determine the level of readiness for organizational learning and the level to which each team functioned as a PLC at the start and end of the study. The survey was an adapted version of The Readiness for Organizational Learning Evaluation (ROLE) instrument, developed by Preskill et al. (1999), to measure the readiness for organizational learning at the start and end of the study. The original instrument helped the researcher identify learning organization characteristics and relative areas of strength and need for organizational change and development. The researcher modified to the original instrument to reduce the number of items to which participants responded, ensure that only the items related to the overall research questions remained, and

reduce obstacles to survey completion (Bloomberg, 2023). A copy of the modified instrument is in Appendix C.

A digital format of the PLC Survey, created by Solution Tree (2010), was used to measure the extent to which teams collaborated as a PLC, as indicated by participant responses in two domains: Meeting Management and Teaching and Learning Tasks. The survey contained a Likert scale ranging from one to four to indicate if a statement was "not true" or "very true" (Solution Tree, 2010). At the end of the survey, participants indicated a percentage of the time engaged in PLC-related activities during each session. A copy of the survey is in Appendix D.

Observation Notes

The researcher also collected data by observing teachers during the PLC meetings and in the classroom as they implemented high-impact strategies. Observations were essential to include as they "represent a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account of the world obtained in an interview" (Merriam, 2016, p. 137). In-person observations enabled the researcher to observe the extent to which teachers implemented the intervention following professional learning within a PLC and how the actions observed correlated to participant perspectives. Additionally, observations were made of the interactions between the ESOL teacher and other teachers as she facilitated professional learning during the PLC sessions. It was important for the researcher to acknowledge the position of observer as a participant, taking field notes to document what was observed.

Researcher's Journal

A researcher's journal was used as a reflection tool on issues arising during the data collection phase of the study. "Reflexivity emphasizes an awareness of the researcher's own presence in the research process, with the aim of improving the quality of the research" (Annink,

2016, p. 3). This method provides an opportunity to show relevant findings that may not be present in other data sets. The journal allowed the researcher to capture thoughts and relevant information related to the actions of the ARDT and ARIT. The researcher's journal captured all reflective thoughts and ideas formed during the data analysis phase.

Artifacts

Bloomberg (2023) asserted that the "analysis of documents is potentially very rich in portraying the values and beliefs of participants in the setting" (p. 290). Therefore, the researcher used various documents teachers created during the study for instructional planning and professional learning, such as lesson plans, meeting agendas, data analysis protocols, and meeting minutes. The researcher analyzed documents and contributed to the overall findings of the study.

Interventions supported teacher-leaders who facilitated PLC sessions and teachers who implemented high-impact instructional strategies. The following section provides an examination of interventions.

Interventions

Coghlan and Lindhult (2019) viewed action research as “experience-based and value-oriented inquiry by people into issues that concern them with an ambition to involve everyone in improving the systems in which they participate” (p. 42). This collective inquiry type is also called an organizational development (OD) intervention (Cummings & Worley, 2009). An OD is a “range of planned, programmatic, and systematic activities intended to help an organization increase its effectiveness” (Coghlan & Shani, 2013, p. 443). Glanz (2014) defined intervention as a “specific instructional practice, program, or procedure that is implemented by a researcher in order to investigate its effect on the behavior or achievement of an individual or group” (p. 64).

"OD-focused programs tend to integrate specific content-knowledge expertise in the intervention process, seem to be facilitated by a combined team of internal and external practitioners, and require a combined technical and system-wide knowledge" (Coghlan & Shani, 2013, p. 449).

This study aimed to develop teacher capacity to integrate high-leverage practices to improve access and outcomes for English Language Learners in a suburban elementary school. Therefore, the action research team implemented and analyzed specific interventions to increase teacher capacity to improve student literacy achievement.

Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Model

The PDSA model was the logic model and an instructional intervention in this study. Before the study, CES teachers commonly reviewed and analyzed achievement results used data to reflect on their practice, and informed immediate instructional decisions. However, they had yet to use PDSA as a structure for improvement within their collaborative planning teams. Teacher teams used the PDSA model for this study to guide weekly instruction using common formative assessment data. Lesson plans, assessment protocols, meeting agendas, and the researcher's journal documented each stage of the PDSA cycle.

ESOL and General Education Teacher Collaboration

Auslander (2018) studied teacher and counselor collaboration to build culturally and linguistically responsive classrooms. Inspired by the study, the teacher of English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) and grade-level department teachers collaborated weekly to strengthen their capacity for implementing high-impact instructional practices for English learners (ELL) and enhance instruction. Each month, the ESOL teachers facilitated professional learning sessions focused on high-impact strategies for ELLs and assisted teachers with implementation during collaborative planning sessions within the professional learning community. Additionally,

she or an ESOL paraprofessional modeled the strategy in the classroom and provided teachers feedback on their implementation in real time.

High-Impact Strategies for English Language

Before the study, the ESOL teacher provided most instructional strategies that benefit ELLs in small groups outside the general education classroom. Since all educators are responsible for educating ELLs, it was important for all teachers to integrate a high-leverage approach to assist all learners, especially ELLs. Neri et al. (2016) identified four principles for effective instruction for English learners:

- Principle 1: Understand and address the academic language demands of the lesson.
- Principle 2: Build upon background knowledge.
- Principle 3: Design and scaffold learning opportunities in every lesson that integrates listening, speaking, reading, and writing domains.
- Principle 4: Provide opportunities for student participation through meaningful discourse and structured collaboration.

These principles addressed language and content-area learning for all students, especially ELLs. Using these principles, the ESOL teachers guided teachers in designing and implementing instruction focused on increasing participation, “meaning-making practices,” and achievement of ELL students (Neri et al., 2016, p. 5). Classroom observation notes, meeting agendas, and lesson plans documented the professional development and coaching support provided by the ESOL teacher and paraprofessional.

The researcher collected and analyzed data throughout the study using qualitative research analysis methods. The data analysis led to the development of emerging themes, consistent patterns, and detailed case descriptions.

Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis is making sense of collected data through the lens of research questions (Glanz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers should conduct qualitative analysis and data collection simultaneously to organize and refine data sets during the study rather than risk the possibility of undermining the study after data are collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data analysis within the construct of the theoretical or conceptual framework leads to identifying themes and patterns assigned to categorical codes (Bloomberg, 2023; Glanz, 2014). This study followed three analytic procedure phases: data organization, pattern recognition, and "grounded theory" (Glanz, 2014, p. 168).

The researcher collected, analyzed, and made sense of the data throughout the study, curating a thick description of the process, which led to the identification of a coding scheme (Bloomberg, 2023). The analytic procedure used in the study, coupled with the generation of a thick description, increased trustworthiness (Bloomberg, 2023).

Coding

Bloomberg (2024) claimed that the "iterative process of open coding leads to the ongoing refinement of what will become the final coding scheme or coding legend" (p. 299). Over time, the researcher assigned pieces of data to codes and then constructed categories that fit within the theoretical or conceptual framework construct (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, the literature, the researcher, and the exact words expressed by participants generated categories of data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Thematic Analysis

Morgan and Nica (2020) defined a theme as "a meaningful, recurring pattern that researchers first develop from the data and then use to interpret that data for an audience" (p. 2).

The elements of this definition underscore the active role of the researcher in generating themes that speak to an intended audience and the use of themes as an "effective way to summarize the results of qualitative research" (p. 2). This study followed an adapted version of the six-step approach to conducting collaborative qualitative analysis (CQA) (Richards & Hemphill, 2018), grounded in thematic analysis. Research teams engaged in CQA develop a codebook through open and axial coding. The CQA process "embraces the tradition of constant comparison as newly coded data are compared with existing coding structures and modifications are made to those structures through the completion of the coding process" (p. 226). Table 3.2 shows an adapted version of the CQA framework for thematic analysis.

Table 3.5

Phases of Collaborative Qualitative Analysis and Enhancing Trustworthiness

Phases of Collaborative Analysis	Means of Enhancing Trustworthiness
Phase 1: Preliminary Organization and Planning	● Peer Debriefing: Research questions and theoretical framework are discussed, and a timeline for data collection is established.
Phase 2: Open and Axial Coding	● Researcher and Data Triangulation ● Peer Debriefing: Open and axial coding are used to identify patterns in the data and the connections between them. ● Audit trail and researcher journal
Phase 3: Development of a Preliminary Codebook	● Peer Debriefing: Initial Coding ● Researcher and Data Triangulation
Phase 4: Pilot Testing the Codebook	● Researcher and Data Triangulation: A preliminary codebook is developed and tested

Phases of Collaborative Analysis	Means of Enhancing Trustworthiness
	against previously uncoded data. ● Peer Debriefing: Meet regularly to discuss and amend the codebook.
Phase 5: Final Coding Process	● Researcher and Data Triangulation: Codebook applied consensus or split coding to the entire dataset. ● Peer Debriefing: Discuss and adjust the codebook.
Phase 6: Review the Codebook and Finalize the Themes	● Researcher and Data Triangulation: Coded data reviewed and discussed. ● Peer Debriefing: A thematic structure is developed to describe the study results concisely.

Note. Adapted from Richards and Hemphill (2018).

Richards and Hemphill (2018) asserted that "regardless of the particular approach taken, all qualitative researchers are challenged to ensure methodological rigor and transparency" (p. 230). The CQA approach highlights themes as a "fundamental mechanism" for expressing meaningful findings in qualitative research conducted by researchers (Morgan & Nica, 2020, p. 10). A single researcher, who collaborated with an ARDT to identify themes and create a codebook, conducted this study. The CQA approach within the ARDT enhanced trustworthiness and effectively communicated the findings.

Reliability, Validity, and Generalizability

The purpose of action research is to affect positive changes in specific contexts, such as educational leadership in elementary education, and generate knowledge. The method is about research and empowerment. By involving participants as co-researchers, we bridge the gap between theory and practice, empowering them to be part of the solution. Action research is a

powerful tool for sustainable development and continuous improvement in various professional and community settings (Bloomberg, 2023; Glanz, 2014; Kakar et al., 2023).

Qualitative research can be as trustworthy as quantitative methods by following strict criteria for its nature and goals. Unlike quantitative research, which establishes reliability through statistical validity and consistency, qualitative research ensures trustworthiness through criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Kakar, 2023). In qualitative research, researchers achieve credibility through prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking, where participants validate findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Rich, thick descriptions that allow other researchers to assess the relevance of results to other contexts improve the usefulness of qualitative research (Bloomberg, 2023; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Dependability is assured through detailed audit trails documenting the research process, enabling an external reviewer to examine its thoroughness and consistency (Glanz, 2014). Researchers address confirmability by maintaining reflexive journals that help researchers reflect on and disclose their biases and assumptions. By rigorously applying these criteria, qualitative research provides depth and nuance to understanding human behavior and social phenomena as robustly and rigorously as the statistical analysis used in quantitative methods, thus establishing its trustworthiness equivalently (Kakar, 2023).

Multiple data sources for this study were intentionally collected and analyzed using qualitative research strategies to ensure trustworthiness and authenticity. The strategies used in the study included:

1. Triangulation: The ARDT used multiple data sources and collection methods to confirm emerging findings (Bloomberg, 2023; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

2. Researcher's Position or Reflexivity: Biases and the researcher's relationship to the study that may have impacted the study were highlighted in the researcher's journal and communicated in a subjectivity statement (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)
3. Detailed, Thick Descriptions: Thick descriptions provided context to the study, helping practitioners connect their situation to the research context and determine if the findings were transferrable. This approach ensures comprehensive research and considers the audience's needs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Table 3.6

Triangulation of Research Methods

Research Questions	Methods of Data Collection	Methods of Data Analysis	Approximate Timeline
RQ1: How does the action research design team describe the process of facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs for literacy development in one suburban elementary school?	ARDT Meetings Focus Group Semi-Structured Interview (Pre and Post) Organizational Learning Survey (Pre and Post) PLC Survey (Pre and Post) Document Analysis/Collected Artifacts Researcher's Journal-record data/reflections	Coding Analysis of Themes Researcher Reflection	July 2024 August-November 2024
RQ2: How do stakeholders describe the role of high-leverage practices in promoting ELLs' literacy development?	ARDT Meetings Focus Group Semi-Structured Interview (Pre and Post) Document Analysis/Collected Artifacts	Coding Analysis of Themes Researcher Reflection	July 2024 August-November 2024

Research Questions	Methods of Data Collection	Methods of Data Analysis	Approximate Timeline
	Researcher's Journal-record data/reflections		
RQ3: How do teachers articulate their role in the continuous improvement process for literacy development via professional learning communities?	ARDT Meetings Focus Group Semi-Structured Interview (Pre and Post) Organizational Learning Survey (Pre and Post) PLC Survey (Pre and Post) Document Analysis/Collected Artifacts Researcher's Journal-record data/reflections	Coding Analysis of Themes Researcher Reflection	July 2024 August-November 2024

Subjectivity Statement

The researcher, who was also the principal of the research site, held dual roles and brought an inherent subjectivity to the research process. The deep familiarity with the school environment, staff, students, and community may have influenced interpretations and interactions during the study. The researcher had established long-standing relationships with many participants, which could have affected data collection and analysis through preconceived notions or biases about their behaviors and responses. They committed to rigorous reflexivity practices to address these challenges, continuously examining and documenting how their experiences, beliefs, and relationships influenced the research. The researcher engaged in member checking with participants to validate findings and rely on external auditors to review and critique the research methodology and conclusions. The process, designed to enhance the

transparency and credibility of the study, minimized the impact of subjectivity while comprehensively understanding and depicting the complexities of the school environment.

Chapter Summary

This chapter describes the data collection and analysis methods used in this action research study. Action research was the preferred qualitative method because of the focus on action and reflection. School leaders, specialists, and homeroom teachers worked together to analyze data, identify high-impact strategies to address student needs, monitor student progress, and reflect on their practice. The study included interviews, observational data, surveys, and researcher reflections as data sources. The researcher used student achievement data and interviews with homeroom teachers to capture perspectives on the impact of high-leverage practices and how they felt school leaders could support them with instruction. The researcher's journal captured the ongoing analysis throughout the study. The researcher collected, coded, and analyzed all data for themes and patterns related to the high-impact literacy strategies for ELLs and PLCs.

The next chapter of this dissertation presents the findings of the study at CES. It also details the case study for implementing high-leverage literacy strategies for ELLs and PLCs. The interventions and action cycles are also detailed.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE

Despite the availability of explicit, systematic instructional procedures to improve reading skills, the United States grapples with a deep-rooted literacy problem that affects millions of individuals, transcending age, socioeconomic status, and background (Joshi & Wijekumar, 2019). The literacy crisis is particularly acute for fourth and eighth-grade students in the final developmental stages, a time when building crucial foundational reading and writing skills is pivotal (Learning Without Tears, 2021). According to The Nation's Report Card, the average reading score among fourth-graders increased by four percentage points in 2022 compared to 2019, with only 37% of students performing at or above the proficient level (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Although an improvement from 2019, these results indicated that most students did not comprehend grade-level materials, especially students of color in suburban and city schools whose scores dropped between five to eight percentage points (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

The literacy crisis in the United States is even more disquieting when considering the impact on students of color and English language learners (ELLs), a growing demographic in the country (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Only nine percent of fourth-grade ELLs read at or proficient levels in 2022, consistent with the results from 2019. ELLs face a series of challenges that can exacerbate the broader literacy crisis, such as a lack of qualified teachers to provide specialized instruction, acquiring a new language while also learning basic literacy skills, insufficient language assistance programs, social and emotional factors associated with

language and cultural adaptation, and hindered parental involvement due to language barriers (Cho et al., 2021). It is imperative to develop and use comprehensive, culturally sensitive strategies encompassing language acquisition and literacy skills to combat the literacy crisis among ELLs in the United States (Slavin & Cheung, 2005). This instruction includes targeted interventions focused on oral and written language development, adequate resources, professional development for educators, and a recognition of the diversity within the ELL population (Goldenberg, 2020). By addressing the challenges ELLs face, the nation can work toward a more inclusive and practical approach to improving literacy for all students.

The purpose of this action research study was to develop teachers' capacity to integrate high-leverage practices to improve English Language Learners (ELLs) access and outcomes in a suburban elementary school. This study examined leader and teacher practices that result in more equitable outcomes for students within a suburban public elementary school.

1. How does the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) describe the process of facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs for literacy development in one suburban elementary school?
2. How do stakeholders describe the role of high-leverage practices in promoting ELLs' literacy development?
3. How do teachers articulate their role in the continuous improvement process for literacy development via professional learning communities?

Chapter 4 highlights the data directly addressing the research questions and the study's main findings.

Context of the Study

This study focused on Centennial Elementary School (CES; a pseudonym), a high-performing school within the Masters Public School District (MPSD; a pseudonym), which served a diverse student body of approximately 21,000 across 24 schools in a suburb southeast of a major metropolitan area in the United States. CES, built in 1968, enrolled approximately 463 students from preschool through fifth grade, maintaining a steady enrollment even during the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, as indicated by the 6% mobility rate (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2023).

The demographics reflected a diverse school community, comprising 52% White, 19% Asian, 9% Black, 11% Hispanic, and 7% Multi-Racial students. Historically, the percentage of students who were economically disadvantaged (ED) was less than 16%; however, a 2023 revision to the State classification of ED included students who qualified for Medicaid, prompting an increase to 22%. The following year, the percentage dropped slightly to 18%, 11% lower than the district and 45% lower than the state. Despite the community affluence, characterized by low percentages of students eligible for free or reduced meals, a notable disparity existed between the racial composition of the student body and that of the teaching staff, which was predominantly White.

In 2024, CES faculty included one pre-kindergarten teacher, three teachers on each team in kindergarten through second grades, four teachers on each team in third through fifth grades, three special education teachers, two early intervention teachers, one speech-language pathologist, one English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) teacher, two gifted resource teachers, one media specialist, four education specialists (computer science, art, music, physical education), one counselor, one lead teacher for special education, one part-time school

psychologist, and seven paraprofessionals, for a total of 45 members. The gender and racial composition of the teacher population comprised 93% female, 6% male, 4% Black or African American, 4% Hispanic, and 92% White. With an average of 18 years or more of teaching experience, most of them at CES, the faculty demonstrated tremendous pride in the CES achievement history and their role in its success.

Before the pandemic, MPSD recognized CES as the highest-performing school in the district, revealing a strong academic reputation for excellence. However, assessments conducted just before the study indicated that many students required remediation on key literacy and mathematics skills, particularly in grades three through five. According to the 2023 State Milestones Assessment, 48% of students needed support understanding key ideas and details in literacy, while 40% struggled with fractions in mathematics. Furthermore, data highlighted achievement gaps, particularly between White and Asian students and their Black, Hispanic, and English Learner counterparts, underscoring challenges that warranted further investigation.

Problem Framing Based on the Site

Despite its reputation for academic excellence and high overall scores on state assessments, Centennial faced significant challenges related to racial disparities in student achievement. Attention to the performance gaps between high-achieving students and those who were minimally proficient, particularly among students of color, had historically been insufficient, a trend evident at CES at the time of the study (Hung et al., 2019; Weiler & Hinnant-Crawford, 2021). In 2023, the school scored 52.8 out of 100 on the Closing the Gaps State component, considerably lower than the district and state averages. This low score highlighted a persistent issue where Black or African American, ELLs and Hispanic students performed significantly lower than their White peers, evidenced by a 22% difference in literacy

benchmark assessments and a 23% difference in state-standardized English Language Arts assessments.

Despite a supportive socioeconomic environment, with an average home value of $544,063 and low poverty rates, CES saw alarming disparities in student programming (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Although the demographics for special education and early intervention programs were appropriate for the overall student population in 2023, excellence gaps in gifted programming reached as high as 50%. Faculty members expressed satisfaction with the overall student achievement but recognized the urgent need for improvement in addressing the disparities between racial demographic groups. To answer the call for systemic change in public education and ensure equitable outcomes for all students, CES required structured routines for teacher collaboration, data analysis, and consistent use of effective curriculum resources (Henderson et al., 2019; International Literacy Association, 2019).

At the end of the 2023 school year, the CES principal of 15 years and assistant principal retired. A new principal and assistant principal, with the assistance of a part-time instructional coach and an inherited leadership team, were named to lead the work of continuous school improvement at CES. While the new principal was in her sixth year of the principalship, her previous experience had been in another school district. Although the new assistant principal was new to the school and in her role as an administrator, she had established a reputation within the county as a highly effective teacher. She was named one of the MPSD Teacher of the Year Award finalists a year before her appointment. The previous experience of the principal and assistant principal in leading positive change in an established school community, coupled with extensive instructional knowledge, made for an opportunity for transformation and growth.

The principal and the instructional leadership team outlined a vision for improvement that embraced the challenges ahead to increase student achievement. Throughout the first year, the leadership and professional development practices at CES evolved in response to the existing academic challenges. Historically, staff members operated with considerable autonomy due to past academic performance, which resulted in minimal oversight and professional development. The leadership shifts and a growing recognition of needing collaborative practices among teachers prompted discussions around enhancing professional development and data analysis practices. The leadership team, consisting primarily of experienced educators, strived to implement structured collaboration opportunities and ensure consistent curriculum usage across all grade levels, highlighting a proactive approach to addressing academic performance and equity within the school community.

In the first year as a team under new leadership, the improvement efforts resulted in outstanding success, particularly in reading and mathematics. The percentage of students reading on or above grade level in mathematics in third grade was 91%, and the percentage of fourth and fifth-grade students reading on or above grade level increased by 12% and 14%, respectively, on the state standardized assessment for English Language Arts. The State superintendent recognized the increase in performance as a Literacy Leader School, demonstrating a commitment to excellence. According to the State standardized assessment, 81% of third and fourth-graders scored Proficient and Distinguished in mathematics. Moreover, achievement gaps narrowed between 10% and 24% in reading and mathematics, thereby increasing the Closing the Gaps component score on the State report card from 52.7 to 100 points.

Subsequently, Progress, Readiness, and Content Mastery component scores increased to near-perfect scores. These accomplishments not only highlighted the dedication of the staff but

also fostered a strong sense of collective efficacy. The faculty embraced the benefits of collaboration, facilitating the effective implementation of common curriculum resources and formative instructional practices. As a result, the school culture became more collaborative and focused on student success. The principal and CES Leadership Team wanted to build on the momentum gained from increased student growth and achievement to close achievement gaps further. The qualitative action research study included an Action Research Design Team (ARDT) and an Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT).

Action Research Design Team

The ARDT was essential to this study. The principal, assistant principal, ESOL teacher, and ESOL paraprofessional comprised the CES design team. The primary researcher served as the CES principal and committed to strengthening the culture of CES through PLCs and improving student learning outcomes for all students, especially those historically underserved. The assistant principal served on the ARDT because she was an instructional leader and shared the commitment to enhancing the culture and increasing student learning opportunities. The instructional coach had served the CES faculty for two years before the study and leveraged her relationships with teachers to build the capacity for improved instruction. The ESOL teacher and paraprofessional contributed high-leverage instructional practices for the literacy development of ELL students that benefited all students and assisted with developing professional development planning and implementation.

After the primary researcher obtained consent from all participants, discussion and planning for the research study began in August 2024. The ARDT played a critical role in enhancing teacher capacity within a PLC, enabling the effective implementation of HLLPs and ultimately improving literacy outcomes for EL students throughout the action research process.

The primary focus of the ARDT was to strengthen the collaborative culture to increase literacy among ELLs and close existing achievement gaps. The team monitored the effectiveness of PLCs and HLLPs using the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle. The ARDT met weekly between ARIT PLC meetings and classroom observations to discuss individual perceptions, debrief after the PLC meetings, and determine the next steps for supporting teachers participating in the PLC focused on HLLPs. The ARDT reviewed interview transcripts, survey results, observation notes, and student achievement data from formative assessments to plan and implement interventions to address perceived needs teachers expressed and those identified in the data sets. The reflective and cyclical nature of the study allowed the ARDT to continually review the provision of support to ensure the resources and strategies met the unique needs of the participating PLC members and their students.

Individual Roles

The ESOL teacher and paraprofessional were key members of the ARDT. As instructional specialists and support members, these two team members served as ELL support instructional leaders at CES. The ESOL teacher co-taught reading to students in first to fifth grades and facilitated math instruction with a small group of fifth-grade students to pre-teach key concepts and scaffold learning (Arlinda, 2019). She served on the CES Leadership Team, actively participated in PLC meetings to analyze student data, and contributed to planning and leading professional learning sessions focused on HLLPs within the PLC and the individual teachers with whom she co-taught as needed.

The principal used creative scheduling with staff allotment points to assign the paraprofessional solely to support ELLs, as this was not a position funded through Title III of the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). She supplemented the instruction provided by the ESOL

teacher in reading by working with students in first through fifth grades in the classroom or a small group setting during another portion of the English Language Arts segment. Both team members modeled implementation for homeroom teachers and supported teachers with planning and interventions.

Action Research Implementation Team

The Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) is comprised of two members of the ARDT, the ESOL teacher and paraprofessional, and four fourth- and four fifth-grade homeroom teachers. During an in-person meeting, the primary researcher invited study participants based on their classroom assignment, specifically reading teachers in mid- to upper-elementary grades, as that was the population of students the state and nation used to measure literacy rates (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022). While all teachers provided consent to participate, the researcher chose to focus on fourth and fifth grades due to the willingness of the fourth and fifth-grade team to meet with the ESOL teacher outside of regularly scheduled instructional planning PLC meetings.

The researcher obtained consent from all participants within one week in August 2024 (Appendix A). This team had members with varying years of experience teaching reading in various grade levels, as highlighted in Table 4.1. The goal of the ARIT was to establish a high-performing professional learning community to learn, discuss, plan, implement, and evaluate HLLPs for English Learners. The ARIT provided the researcher and ARDT feedback through initial group interviews and pre-cycle questionnaires, during PLC meetings, post-cycle group interviews, and questionnaires.

Table 4.1

Action Research Implementation Team: Endorsements and Reading Instructional Experience

Member	ESOL Endorsement Yes/No	Years of Reading Instructional Experience
Primary Researcher	No	14
ESOL Teacher	Yes	25
ESOL Paraprofessional	No	2
Fourth Grade Teacher 1	Yes	2
Fourth Grade Teacher 2	No	15
Fourth Grade Teacher 3	No	7
Fourth Grade Teacher 4	No	16
Fifth Grade Teacher 1	Yes	19
Fifth Grade Teacher 2	No	7
Fifth Grade Teacher 3	No	9
Fifth Grade Teacher 4	No	27

Further, Table 4.2 shows the timeline of the action research study from March to November 2024.

Table 4.2

Action Research Timeline of Events

Action	Audience	Materials	Data Completed
Seek IRB Approval from Master's School District	MCPS Assistant Superintendent of Student Achievement	IRB Email	March 29, 2024
Seek IRB Approval from the University	IRB Committee	IRB Application Packet	April 3, 2024

Action	Audience	Materials	Data Completed
Initial Research Study Presentation	3rd-5th Homeroom Teachers, ESOL Teacher, Paraprofessional, Assistant Principal	IRB/UGA Presentation	August 13, 2024
Obtain Consent	ARDT, ARIT	IRB Consent Form	August 16, 2024
Initial Interviews & Surveys	ARDT, ARIT	Interview Protocol, Organizational Learning Survey, PLC Survey	August 20, 2024
Cycle 1: Interventions and Observations	ARDT, ARIT	Theoretical Framework; Logic Model; Research-Based Interventions; Observation Notes; Student Achievement Data	November 1, 2024
Cycle 2: Interventions and Observations	ARDT, ARIT	Theoretical Framework; Logic Model; Research-Based Interventions; Observation Notes; Student Achievement Data	November 22, 2024
Final Group Interviews & Surveys	ARDT, ARIT	Interview Protocol, Organizational Learning Survey, PLC Survey	December 3, 2024

The Story and Outcomes

Initial Interviews

The researcher held initial group interviews with third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teacher teams and the ARDT in August 2024 before the start of Cycle 1. The in-person interviews took place in each grade-level chairperson's classroom. The researcher and interviewees met during their regularly scheduled weekly common planning time as the time frame allowed time for both the interviews and instructional planning. The researcher emailed each grade level chairperson and ARDT participant to schedule the interviews and confirmed the date and time via Google Calendar. Initial interviews began on August 20, 2024, and concluded on August 22, 2024.

The primary researcher used an interview protocol with approximately 11 questions (Appendix B). The questions targeted teachers' perceptions of PLCs, such as their perceptions of their PLC's current level of performance, instructional leadership, understanding and use of HLLPs for English Learners, and the impact of the PDSA cycle on student achievement in literacy. Each interview ended with an open-ended opportunity for participants to provide additional information they did not share in their responses to the questions.

The primary researcher led the ARDT members through an analysis of the interview questions and survey results, and then she asked the members eight questions from the ARDT Interview Protocol (Appendix C). The ARDT Interview Protocol questions focused on the analysis and identification of instructional needs based on ARIT interview and survey responses, self-efficacy, student achievement data analysis, and high-leverage literacy strategies for English Learners and teacher leadership. The primary researcher also asked the participants how they perceived their unique background and experience contributing to the work and success of the

ARDT. Like the ARIT interview protocol, the session ended with an open-ended opportunity to provide additional information they could not share in the question set.

The interview sessions lasted up to thirty minutes. The researcher used an application, Otter.ai, to record and transcribe the interviews. Following the interviews, the researcher shared transcriptions with the ARDT members in printed form, following the interviews to review for accuracy and clarity. The primary researcher used the ARDT feedback to revise the transcripts as necessary.

In the reflective interview responses, each team articulated the benefits of working within a PLC and using the PDSA model for continuous school improvement. The interview process gave insight into how teachers used the PLC strengths and challenges related to teaching ELLs, connections between their unique backgrounds and experiences and enhancement of their PLC, and the challenges in supporting teacher leaders with implementing effective instructional practices. The primary researcher shared the pre-interview data and her analysis with the ARDT before their meeting. ARDT members independently analyzed the data, identified themes, and shared their findings with the team. The team used the themes to outline a leader support plan and facilitate a professional learning session focused on high-leverage literacy strategies to address the needs of fourth and fifth-grade students. The ARDT completed two action research cycles over three months.

Action Research Cycle 1 and Intervention

Action Research Cycle I lasted six weeks, beginning September 23, 2024, and ending November 1, 2024. The overarching intervention within this action research was to build teacher-leader capacity to facilitate highly effective PLCs focused on implementing high-leverage literacy strategies. Leaders facilitated job-embedded professional learning on high-

impact literacy strategies for ELLs and engaged teachers in using the PDSA model to measure their effectiveness in increasing student achievement.

ARDT and ARIT Meetings

Before the first PLC meeting, the ARDT used interview and perception data to plan a professional development session focused on HLLPs for ELLs. The purpose of the initial session was to identify and operationalize HLLPs and develop a common understanding of the supporting resources available through the district. Following the initial session, the ARDT met weekly before each PLC meeting to engage in the pre-work necessary to support instructional leadership.

ARDT members reviewed the standards of focus for the reading unit, previewed curriculum resources, and analyzed formative assessment data with a specific focus on ELL performance. The ARDT also met following each PLC meeting to debrief about the PLC observation, describe the support given to teachers during and between PLC meetings, describe classroom observations, and plan the upcoming PLC meeting. The researcher held these PLC meetings with the ARIT each week for approximately 45 minutes. Table 4.3 visually represents the meeting schedule and describes the focus of each meeting.

Table 4.3

Action Research Cycle I Meetings

Date	Meeting Title	Meeting Focus
August 20, 2024	ARDT Pre-Cyle	Establish Norms & Roles, Review Pre-Cycle Data
September 17, 2024	ARDT 1.1	Planning for PLC ARIT 1.1
September 24, 2024	ARIT 1.1	PLC ARIT 1.1: Implement Interventions 1, 2, and 3
September 26, 2024	ARDT 1.2	Planning for ARIT 1.2

Date	Meeting Title	Meeting Focus
October 1, 2024	ARIT 1.2	PLC ARIT 1.2: Continue Implementation of Interventions 1, 2, and 3
October 3, 2024	ARDT 1.3	Planning for ARIT 1.3
October 8, 2024	ARIT 1.3	PLC ARIT 1.3: Continue Implementation of Interventions 1, 2, and 3
October 10, 2024	ARDT 1.4	Planning for ARIT 1.4
October 15, 2024	ARIT 1.4	PLC ARIT 1.4: Continue Implementation of Interventions 1, 2, and 3
October 17, 2024	ARDT 1.5	Planning for ARIT 1.5
October 22, 2024	ARIT 1.5	PLC ARIT 1.5: Continue Implementation of Interventions 1, 2, and 3
October 24, 2024	ARDT 1.6	Planning for ARIT 1.6
October 29, 2024	ARIT 1.6	PLC ARIT 1.6: Continue Implementation of Interventions 1, 2, and 3
October 31, 2024	ARDT 1.7	Planning for ARIT 1.7
November 1, 2024	ARIT 1.7	PLC ARIT 1.7
November 5, 2024	ARDT 1.8	Review of transcripts and observation notes for open and axial coding.
November 6-7, 2024	ARDT 1.9	Development of Preliminary Codebook

Once all participants responded to the initial surveys and engaged in the group interviews in August 2024, the ARDT met to prepare for the first intervention cycle. The focus of the initial meeting was to establish meeting norms, clarify roles in the study, analyze qualitative and

quantitative data, and identify common themes. The ARDT members agreed that the data sets revealed the need to strengthen PLC structures to increase productivity and establish psychological safety. The members also discussed the misconceptions of some teachers around HLLPs for ELLs. The ARDT reviewed the research about organizational learning, PLCs, HLLPs for ELLs, and the literacy needs of third through fifth-grade students.

The ARDT also enlisted the assistance of teacher leaders in developing communication templates, PLC meeting templates, PLC team roles, and documents, as well as selecting a norm development protocol to support PLC facilitators at CES. This leadership move aimed to empower teacher leaders to "establish systemic structures and procedures for teachers to collectively think out and share information on a regular basis" (Schechter et al., 2022, p. 86). Since all grade level and department teams met within a PLC, teacher leaders shared templates and protocols with the whole school during a faculty meeting. In addition to the PLC structures, the ARDT adopted a set of HLLPs for ELLs outlined by Neri et al. (2016) for the implementation team to use during Cycles I and II.

ARDT Meetings

The ARDT convened for Cycle I on September 17, 2024. The purpose of this meeting was to review the results of the ARIT Pre-Cycle Survey (Appendix D) and plan professional learning on high-leverage literacy strategies for the first Cycle I PLC meeting. The ARIT pre-cycle survey results revealed that some participants emphasized the importance of vocabulary, student discussions, and instructional scaffolding to increase literacy achievement. However, others could not name specific high-leverage instructional strategies for ELLs.

Based on this feedback, ARDT members created a PLC meeting agenda that included a list of high-leverage practices and opportunities for ARIT members to operationalize each

practice (Neri et al., 2016). ARIT members also outlined related action steps for PLCs or instruction and identified supporting resources provided by the MPSD (Appendix E). The ESOL teacher, who served on the ARDT and ARIT, facilitated the professional learning sessions during the fourth and fifth-grade PLC meetings on September 24, 2024.

ARIT Meetings

The English Language Arts PLC facilitator and ESOL teacher facilitated the first Cycle I ARIT meeting for each grade level. The PLC facilitator used the CES protocol to establish group norms and explained how and when the PLC agenda and pre-work assignments would be shared weekly. The ESOL teacher then facilitated professional learning focused on high-leverage literacy practices (HLLPs) using the outline created by the ARDT. During the session, a few implementation team members expressed concern that they would be required to implement every strategy during the reading segment each day; however, the ESOL teacher clarified how to select the strategies for instruction, which put the concerned teachers at ease.

The ESOL teacher guided the team in operationalizing each strategy with a list of teacher and student literacy-related actions. She also prepared a list of resources the county provided teachers to support implementation and enhance their practice. The ARIT members made thoughtful connections between practices they already used and the HLLPs and expressed appreciation for the ESOL teacher, highlighting resources provided by the county. They agreed to begin by previewing academic vocabulary and using vocabulary routines and provide students with multiple and varied opportunities to use academic vocabulary when speaking, writing, listening, and reading (Voyager Sopris Learning, 2018).

Additionally, ARIT members agreed that implementation evidence would be found in their weekly lesson plans and observed by ARDT members during planning sessions and

instruction. Once the implementation team established norms and expectations, the primary researcher and assistant principal observed PLC meetings weekly. The ARDT members then conducted classroom observations at least once weekly to collect qualitative data focused on implementing HLLPs and using PLC structures to increase productivity and effectiveness.

PLC Observations

The primary researcher and the ARDT members observed the PLC meetings during seven sessions. Anecdotal notes, taken in the researcher's journal, about the PLC revealed consistent use of student data for analysis and instructional planning, the use of district provided curriculum resources, and active engagement in professional learning sessions. Notes also revealed significantly more instances of candor, vulnerability, and independence among one grade-level team than the other.

One fourth-grade teacher, who completed the MPSD teacher leader cohort the year of the study, frequently advocated for revised practices among the PLC. For example, she suggested the team meet in a neutral space rather than a teammate's classroom, and she candidly identified "lack of rigor" as a cause for academic underperformance. Moreover, she expressed the need for her teammates to model instructional strategies for each other more often. She also praised her teammates for their specific contributions, highlighting them for their expertise. Her vulnerability and candor strengthened the team and gave her teammates the courage to speak up when they agreed or disagreed with a strategy or resource during planning sessions and when they had new ideas or resources to share with their colleagues.

While the fifth-grade team consistently analyzed data and instructional planning and used district provided curriculum resources, they were not as collaborative as the fourth-grade team. On the fifth-grade team, one team member was responsible for creating lesson plans for the

whole team to review and create scaffolds to address the learning needs of the students in their class. Classroom observations showed that three of four teachers followed the plans agreed upon by the team, while one teacher often used her resources and followed a different version of the plans. This inconsistency concerned the primary researcher as it created difficulty for CES students to access equitable learning experiences in fifth grade.

ESOL-Homeroom Teacher Planning Meetings.

Outside of PLC meetings, the ESOL and grade level teachers, the teachers of record for students receiving services through ESOL in reading, met weekly to plan instruction. Although students were grouped heterogeneously by homeroom, ELLs receiving services in reading changed classes for one segment, creating a more homogenous learner population. This schedule enabled the ESOL and homeroom teachers to co-teach reading to ELLs. They met during a 45-minute planning block on Thursdays to outline instructional strategies to teach content and assign roles for each teacher during the learning and teaching segment. Observation notes revealed a highly collaborative relationship between the fourth- and fifth-grade teachers and the ESOL teacher, resulting in productive planning sessions focused on student learning.

Collaborative Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data collected during the observations and recorded in the researcher's journal provided information to the ARDT members about intervention planning for Cycle II. Cycle I took place over seven weeks and concluded with a review of student achievement data using two formative and one summative assessment and an informal reflection of practices that had a positive, negative, or null impact on student achievement. The primary researcher facilitated the conversation in which participants discussed successes and challenges during the first intervention cycle and prepared for the next round.

Following the debrief session with the ARIT, the ARDT met to review the transcripts and observation notes and identify initial codes. The following day, the team met again to review the codes and develop a preliminary codebook. The team agreed that, during Cycle II, they would meet more regularly to test the codebook against new, uncoded data and amend the codebook as needed. The team found that reviewing all the Cycle I data collected while performing their daily duties as an assistant principal or teacher was overwhelming. Hence, the team agreed to meet every other week to engage in the final coding process.

Action Research Cycle II and Interventions

Action Research Cycle II began on November 4, 2024, and concluded on November 22, 2024, lasting three weeks. Again, the ARDT met weekly to debrief the previous PLC meetings, plan for the upcoming meetings, discuss the support given to teachers during and between PLC meetings, and, this time, test the codebook against new data collected during Cycle II. Due to the conclusion of Cycle II on the Friday before the Thanksgiving holiday, the primary researcher scheduled the interviews and survey administration to take place when the ARDT and ARIT members returned to work. Table 4.6 visually represents the weekly meetings and briefly describes the focus of each meeting.

Table 4.4

Action Research Cycle II Meetings

Date	Meeting Title	Meeting Focus
November 7, 2024	ARDT 2.1	Planning for PLC ARIT 2.1
November 12, 2024	ARIT 2.1	PLC ARDT 2.1: Implement Interventions 1, 2, and 3
November 14, 2024	ARDT 2.2	Planning for ARIT 2.2, Test Codebook Against New, Uncoded Data

Date	Meeting Title	Meeting Focus
November 19, 2024	ARIT 2.2	PLC ARIT 2.2: Continue Implementation of Interventions 1, 2, and 3
November 21, 2024	ARDT 2.3	Review of data sets, final coding process.

The focus of the PLC intervention was to sustain the performance of the fourth-grade team and elevate the performance of the fifth-grade team. Additionally, the focus was to sustain the use of the PDSA model within PLCs among both teams and sustain the use of HLLPs in the classroom. The primary intervention during Cycle II focused on the continued use of vocabulary routines and student discussion with academic vocabulary in daily practice. The secondary intervention during Cycle II focused on the highly effective PLC structure. The grade-level PLC facilitator and school leadership team chairperson made additional observations to provide coaching and feedback on their leadership practices when working with their team. Data collected from the initial interview, surveys, classroom, and PLC observations provided the ARDT with information to inform action steps for the second action research cycle.

The goal of a PLC is to engage in continuous improvement through ongoing cycles of research, idea development, implementation, analysis, and application (DuFour et al., 2021). Successful team engagement centered on collaboration and collective inquiry is challenging when some members are not committed to the processes, as with one of the teams. Therefore, additional classroom observations of one fifth-grade teacher's instructional practices were necessary as they did not align with those outlined during the professional learning session in Cycle I and agreed upon by her teammates during PLC meetings. The ARDT provided coaching and feedback following each observation to improve HLLP implementation.

The ARDT members met on November 7, 2024, to act on trends identified at the end of Cycle I and plan professional learning for the PLC facilitators, grade-level chairpersons, and the ARIT on HLLPs. The ARDT identified two aspects of high-performing PLCs on which to focus with the ARIT: teachers share successful strategies they have implemented and discuss challenges faced, seeking advice from colleagues. For HLLPs, the focus was on vocabulary development with a targeted focus on developing a common understanding of why vocabulary is so important, explicit teaching strategies, and instructional routines to introduce new words.

The ARDT selected research-based resources to create professional learning experiences for the PLC facilitators and grade-level chairpersons and arranged to meet with them during a planning period at their request. For the HLLPs, the ARDT enlisted the assistance of a district-level instructional coach to lead research-based professional learning on vocabulary development. She met with ARDT members once a month, checking in with PLC facilitators in between sessions.

All ARIT members participated in the professional learning sessions focused on PLC enhancement or HLLPs. The researcher conducted observations following the professional learning sessions during PLC meetings to monitor the implementation of new practices by facilitators and teachers in the classroom. The primary researcher recorded anecdotal notes and reflections in the researcher's journal.

Researcher Notes of Participant Observations

The primary researcher conducted observations throughout the research cycles to collect anecdotal information about the effectiveness of PLCs and the implementation of HLLPs in the classroom. The observation notes, recorded in the researcher's journal, focused on how teachers implemented HLLPs in the classroom, what the teaching partnership looked like in the

classrooms where the ESOL teacher and homeroom teacher taught together, the use of PDSA within PLCs, and the effectiveness of PLCs.

PLC Meeting Observations

The researcher recorded anecdotal information during weekly PLC meetings and added them as notes during the weekly debrief with the ARDT. The goal of each meeting varied according to where within the unit progressions the teachers were planning and ranged from professional learning, instructional planning, data analysis, assessment administration, and student work sample analysis. Due to the varying goals for each meeting, the researcher focused on the habits and practices of each team member as they engaged in instructional planning and formative assessment practices to address the needs of ELLs. The researcher measured the effectiveness of professional learning during classroom observations. The ARDT members reviewed the observation notes during team meetings to triangulate classroom observation notes, student achievement data when available, and interview survey responses.

Classroom Observations

The researcher conducted classroom observations weekly focusing on the specific HLLPs targeted in the professional learning session offered on September 24, 2024, and reinforced during weekly PLC and ESOL-homeroom teacher planning meetings. Anecdotal notes revealed that all participants explicitly taught new vocabulary, used vocabulary routines, and built upon background knowledge. Although a teacher used vocabulary routines, she taught only one vocabulary word within a 20-minute to six students before repeating the same word, using the same routines, to another group of students in the same class. This limited the exposure students had to other essential vocabulary words and access to complex text. While the ARDT provided feedback to all teachers within three days of the observation, the team offered additional

feedback and coaching support to the teacher who taught only one vocabulary word during the entire learning segment and taught the same lesson twice in a small group setting.

Post-Cycle II Interviews

Final interviews took place on December 3, 2024, with each ARIT member and each ARDT member. Interviews occurred at CES during each grade level team's extended planning session and the weekly ARDT planning session. Three interviews, each lasting approximately 45 minutes, were recorded using the Otter.ai application. The ARIT members responded to 10 open-ended questions (Appendix F), and the ARDT members responded to nine open-ended questions (Appendix G).

The interview gave insight into teacher perceptions of support for CES teacher leaders, challenges of teacher leaders, the impact of HLLPs on literacy achievement among ELLs, the role of PDSA on student achievement, and the strengths and challenges of the PLC. Interviews also gave the researcher insights into how the ARDT members perceived school leadership support structures for teacher leaders at CES and the impact of HLLPs on literacy outcomes for ELLs. All interviews ended with an opportunity for participants to share information they could not share in their responses to scripted interview questions. The final interview served as a comprehensive summary of the participants' experiences during this two-cycle action research study.

The Otter.ai application generated interview transcriptions, and the researcher shared them with each participant to ensure accuracy and clarity. The researcher also reviewed the transcripts for accuracy, removed personal identifiable information from the transcripts, and provided the responses to the ARDT for review, manual coding, and thematic analysis to use against the codebook. The researcher completed additional coding using the Delve software

alongside the final survey responses, observation notes, and anecdotal information from the researcher's journal (Ho & Limpaecher, 2022).

Post-Cycle II Surveys

Participants submitted responses to 36 survey items for professional learning communities and HLLPs for ELLs (Appendix H and Appendix I). The survey for PLCs aimed to gain insight into meeting management and teaching and learning tasks, as well as an understanding of the time spent on tasks during PLC meetings. The survey on HLLPs aimed to measure if teachers understand HLLPs for ELLs and how to use HLLPs in the classroom from the start of the study.

The primary researcher compiled the responses by item and removed personally identifiable information. The ARDT analyzed the responses during a regularly scheduled weekly planning meeting. Survey responses, triangulated with final interview transcripts and observation notes, revealed the impact of schools supporting teachers as instructional leaders and high-leverage literacy strategies for increasing academic outcomes for ELLs.

Action Research Team Artifacts

Throughout the four-month study, the primary researcher met with the ARDT and ARIT weekly to identify and implement interventions, strengthen existing PLCs, and improve instruction for ELLs. The ARDT and ARIT used Organizational Learning Theory (Higgins et al., 2012; Schechter et al., 2022) and HLLPs (Billingsley et al., 2019; Frey et al., 2024) as the theoretical framework to guide the action research process. The logic model of PDSA (Shakman et al., 2020; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2017) guided the study to examine how school leaders and teachers can engage in the continuous improvement process for literacy development (Figure 1.2). As such, ARDT artifacts included the theoretical framework and logic model.

The researcher collected various artifacts and data sources throughout the study as evidence of intervention implementation or to support the action research study in another capacity. Artifacts included survey responses, meeting and semi-structured interview transcripts, anecdotal observation notes, and the researcher's journal. Other artifacts collected include the IRB application, signed consent forms, and ARDT and ARIT meeting agendas and minutes. Table 4.5 summarizes the alignment between the research questions, collected data sources, and the theoretical framework.

Table 4.5

Alignment of Research Questions and Data Sources to Theoretical Framework

Research Questions	Collected Data Sources	Alignment to Theoretical Framework Components
RQ1: How does the action research design team describe the process of facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs for literacy development in one suburban elementary school?	ARIT and ARDT Meeting Transcripts Semi-Structured Interview Transcripts HLLP Survey Responses PLC Survey Responses Researcher's Journal-record data/reflections	Culture of Learning & Trust Collaboration Instruction
RQ2: How do stakeholders describe the role of high-leverage practices in promoting ELLs' literacy development?	ARIT and ARDT Meeting Transcripts Semi-Structured Interview Transcripts HLLP Survey Responses Researcher's Journal-record data/reflections	Instruction Assessment
RQ3: How do teachers articulate their role in the continuous improvement process for literacy development via	ARIT and ARDT Meeting Transcripts Semi-Structured Interview Transcripts HLLP Survey Responses	Culture of Learning & Trust Collaboration Assessment

Research Questions	Collected Data Sources	Alignment to Theoretical Framework Components
professional learning communities?	PLC Survey Responses Researcher's Journal-record data/reflections	

Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed the four-month, two-cycle qualitative action research study and the data artifacts collected, including initial and final interviews, classroom and PLC observation notes, and reflective questionnaires. The chapter further described and framed the problem within the context of CES and explained the alignment between the research questions and theoretical framework.

Chapter 5 will present the case findings chronologically as the study unfolded during two action research cycles, with perspectives of the action research design and implementation teams highlighted to illustrate the findings. The chapter will also provide an in-depth description of data collection, findings, and analysis. Triangulation of multiple data sources, including responses from initial and final interviews, observation notes, meeting transcriptions, and the researcher's journal, will be used to identify themes. The researcher will revisit three action research questions regarding the findings presented in the chapter.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE

Despite the availability of explicit, systematic instructional procedures to improve reading skills, the United States grapples with a deep-rooted literacy problem that affects millions of individuals, transcending age, socioeconomic status, and background (Joshi & Wijekumar, 2019). The literacy crisis is particularly acute for fourth and eighth-grade students in the final developmental stages, which are pivotal for building foundational reading and writing skills (Learning Without Tears, 2021). According to The Nation's Report Card, the average reading score among fourth-graders increased by four percentage points in 2022 compared to 2019, with only 37% of students performing at or above the proficient level (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Although an improvement from 2019, these results indicated that most students do not comprehend grade-level materials, especially students of color in suburban and city schools whose scores dropped between five to eight percentage points (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

The literacy crisis in the United States is even more disquieting when considering the impact on English language learners (ELLs), a growing demographic in the country (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Only nine percent of fourth-grade ELLs read at proficient levels in 2022, consistent with the results from 2019. ELLs face a series of challenges that can exacerbate the broader literacy crisis, such as a lack of qualified teachers to provide specialized instruction, acquiring a new language while also learning basic literacy skills, insufficient

language assistance programs, social and emotional factors associated with language and cultural adaptation, and hindered parental involvement due to language barriers (Cho et al., 2021).

It is imperative to develop and use comprehensive, culturally sensitive strategies encompassing language acquisition and literacy skills to combat the literacy crisis among ELLs in the United States (Slavin & Cheung, 2005). This instruction includes targeted interventions focused on oral and written language development, adequate resources, professional development for educators, and a recognition of the diversity within the ELL population (Goldenberg, 2020). By addressing the challenges ELLs face, the nation can work toward a more inclusive and practical approach to improving literacy for all students.

The purpose of this action research study was to develop teachers' capacity to integrate high-leverage practices to improve English Language Learners (ELLs) access and outcomes in a suburban elementary school. This study examined leader and teacher practices that result in more equitable outcomes for students within a suburban public elementary school.

1. How does the action research design team describe the process of facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs for literacy development in one suburban elementary school?
2. How do stakeholders describe the role of high-leverage practices in promoting ELLs' literacy development?
3. How do teachers articulate their role in the continuous improvement process for literacy development via professional learning communities?

Chapter 5 examines findings from this study aimed at improving teachers' use of high-leverage practices (HLLPs) to benefit English Language Learners (ELLs) at a suburban elementary school. The study used the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) model over two research

cycles. Data were collected qualitatively through interviews, observations, a survey, and researcher's journal notes. Quantitative data were also collected through the Organizational Learning Survey and PLC Survey, leading to eight major themes. Four key themes emerged from the data collected: culture of learning and trust, data-driven instruction within a collaborative framework, using explicit instructional strategies to enhance literacy development, and the importance of teacher leadership in facilitating and sustaining PLCs. The chapter describes the findings as they relate to each of the three research questions and concludes with a summary of each.

Overview of Key Findings and Themes

Through processes described in greater detail in this chapter, the researcher identified three key findings:

1. The process of facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs for literacy development is a dynamic and iterative cycle that emphasizes data-driven instruction, embraces collaborative structures, and empowers teacher leaders to cultivate a culture of continuous learning and improvement.
2. A learning environment that values meaningful student engagement, targeted and explicit instruction, connections between academic language and student background knowledge and experiences, and ownership in their learning is crucial to promoting literacy development among ELLs.
3. Teachers are active participants in a collaborative and data-driven cycle where they analyze student data, share insights and resources, refine instructional practices, and collectively strive to create a supportive learning environment that fosters student growth.

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

1. Culture of Learning and Trust
2. Teacher Leadership
3. Data-Driven Instruction
4. Explicit Instructional Strategies

This chapter presents the processes used to extract the themes and descriptions.

Introduction to Analysis

This action research study examined how school and teacher leaders build teacher capacity to integrate HLLPs to improve outcomes for ELLs. The researcher invited grade 4 and grade 5 reading teachers, an ESOL teacher, and an ESOL paraprofessional to participate in the study. Although three of the nine teachers were new to teaching fourth and fifth grades, they had prior experience teaching reading to kindergarten through third-grade students. Six teachers completed learning modules on content and effective language and literacy instruction principles aligned to the Science of Reading (Moats et al., 2023). While the other two teachers had not completed the Moats et al. (2023) modules, they had extensive experience teaching reading effectively and demonstrated a commitment to improving their instructional practices that benefited students.

This group of teachers served as the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT), comprised of four fifth and four fourth-grade teachers, one ESOL teacher, and one ESOL paraprofessional. The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) included the primary researcher, assistant principal, and ESOL teacher. All participants participated in initial interviews within

their grade level group at the start of the study. Before the study, the teams had only worked together for approximately five weeks. With that consideration, the primary researcher conducted the interviews in a group setting as participants may have had difficulty sharing their experiences and perspectives individually due to limited experience working together.

The ARDT met to discuss interview data, which guided the design and implementation of a PLC focused on literacy development at CES. PLC Meetings with the ARIT were held weekly for approximately 45 to 80 minutes throughout the fall of 2024. The ARDT met to debrief and plan each week following the ARIT meeting. In total, Cycle I contained seven ARDT meetings and six ARIT meetings. Cycle II included three ARDT meetings and one ARIT meeting. After the study, the ARDT and ARIT participated in final interviews, respectively. The data reflected the high ability of fourth and fifth-grade teachers, in collaboration with their ESOL teacher, to enhance literacy instruction and improve outcomes for ELLs in their suburban elementary school. Their collaboration on implementing HLLPs and data-driven instruction led to several key findings. The following sections detail the findings of the action research process.

The researcher identified key findings using a coding process to analyze responses from initial and final interviews, weekly meeting transcriptions, observation notes, the researcher's journal, and surveys completed before and after the study. The researcher's journal notes confirmed the themes from the coding process and informed the findings. As a result, three key findings emerged from the study after data analysis:

The process of facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs for literacy development is a dynamic and iterative cycle that emphasizes data-driven instruction, embraces collaborative structures, and empowers teacher leaders to cultivate a culture of continuous learning and improvement. A learning environment that values meaningful student engagement,

targeted and explicit instruction, connections between academic language and student background knowledge and experiences, and ownership in their learning is crucial to promoting literacy development among ELLs. Teachers are active participants in a collaborative and data-driven cycle where they analyze student data, share insights and resources, refine instructional practices, and collectively strive to create a supportive learning environment that fosters student growth. The ARDT analyzed quantitative data collected through the Organizational Learning and PLC Surveys using Google Forms Results and Notebook LM. ARDT members calculated statistical means for each process or practice in the survey. They compared the means from the pre-survey results in August 2024 to those from the post-survey results in December 2024. Copies of each survey are located in Appendices I and J.

The qualitative data collected through group interviews with teachers and ARDT members, meetings, and classroom instruction observations provided thick, rich descriptions necessary for qualitative action research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thick, rich descriptions allowed the ARDT to "understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" as they progressed through the action research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24).

The ARDT identified the findings using a modified thematic coding process initially created by Morgan and Nica (2020) (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). Before the ARDT analyzed any data, they made a list of preconceived themes they expected to emerge from the data for each research question. The five initial themes the team expected to emerge were time constraints, data-driven practices, differentiation, teacher and student collaboration, and vocabulary routines. The list became the "codebook" that would help the researcher and other ARDT members

actively reflect on the “extent to which ultimate conclusions arise from the data or the preconceptions” (Morgan & Nica, 2020, p. 4).

A transcription program known as Otter.ai allowed the researcher to record and transcribe each interview digitally. The researcher downloaded copies of each group interview transcription as PDFs and distributed them to each ARDT member. Members individually reviewed the transcripts, identified new codes when appropriate, affirmed and adjusted preconceived themes, and met to update the codebook with a standard list of themes. The members repeated the process during both cycles using observation notes and survey results.

After reviewing the thematic code detailed in the ARDT codebook, the researcher used Notebook LM to upload all transcripts, observation notes, survey results, and the researcher's notes to organize the data further. The researcher used the software to assign codes and count the number of occurrences of each code. Initially, the ARDT identified 17 codes. 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	PLC Structures (42)	Needs of English Language Learners (24)	Self-Reflection & Focus on Student Learning (25)
	Data-Driven Instruction & Assessment (71)	Scaffolding (19)	Data-Driven Instruction & Assessment (71)
	Integrating Language Domains (16)	Explicit Vocabulary Instruction (17)	PDSA Cycle (12)
	Shared Knowledge and Pedagogy (15)		

Codes	RQ 1	RQ 2	RQ 3
Minor Codes	Vertical Planning (4) Psychological Safety (5)	Student Engagement (13) Range of Student Abilities (5)	Teacher Leadership (18) Vertical Planning (4) Psychological Safety (5)

Initial themes emerged through collapsing, combining, and refining codes. Table 5.2 summarizes these data.

Table 5.2

Codes Used in Data Analysis

Name of Code	Number of Occurrences
PLC Structures	42
Assessment	43
Reflection & Focus on Student Learning	31
Data Driven Instruction	28
Collaboration	25
Teacher Leadership	18
Explicit Vocabulary Instruction & Scaffolding	17
Psychological Safety	12

The researcher then used triangulation to confirm themes across various data sources. Table 5.3 shows data sources in triangulation.

Table 5.3

Triangulation Matrix

Research Question	Source 1	Source 2	Source 3
RQ 1	Initial and Final ARDT Interviews	PLC and Organizational	Researcher's Journal, PLC Meeting and

Research Question	Source 1	Source 2	Source 3
		Learning Pre and Post-Survey Results	Classroom Observation Notes
RQ 2	Initial and Final ARDT and ARIT Interviews	High Leverage Literacy Practices for English Learners Pre and Post-Survey	Researcher's Journal, PLC Meeting and Classroom Observation Notes
RQ 3	Initial and Final ARIT Interviews	PLC and Organizational Learning Pre and Post-Survey Results	Researcher's Journal, PLC Meeting and Classroom Observation Notes

The theoretical framework and research questions guided the data analysis and development of four major themes. The primary researcher consulted with the ARDT members to confirm reoccurring themes. Following Cycle II, coding and overall analysis led to final themes and findings that informed the answers to the research questions. Table 5.4 demonstrates the connections between the theoretical framework grounded in the Organizational Learning Theory and a modified version of the Framework for High-Leverage Instructional Practices (Billingsley et al., 2023). The researcher aligned the themes with the four aspects of the frameworks highlighted in this study: culture of learning and trust (LT), collaboration within a PLC (PLC), assessment cycles (AC), and targeted instruction (TI).

Table 5.4 *Connection to Theoretical Framework*

Research Questions	Alignment to Theoretical Framework	Major Themes
1. How does the action research design team describe the process of facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs for	• Culture of Learning and Trust • Collaboration within a PLC	Theme 1: Culture of Learning and Trust Theme 2: Data-Driven Instruction

Research Questions	Alignment to Theoretical Framework	Major Themes
literacy development in one suburban elementary school?		Theme 4: Teacher Leadership
2. How do stakeholders describe the role of high-leverage practices in promoting ELLs' literacy development?	• Assessment Cycles • Targeted Instruction	Theme 3: Explicit Instructional Strategies
3. How do teachers articulate their role in the continuous improvement process for literacy development via professional learning communities?	• Culture of Learning and Trust • Collaboration within a PLC • Assessment Cycles • Targeted Instruction	Theme 1: Culture of Learning and Trust Theme 2: Data-Driven Instruction Theme 4: Teacher Leadership

The research findings directly link to the purpose of this study, which was to develop teacher capacity to integrate high-leverage practices designed to improve access and outcomes for ELLs and students of color. The following section analyzes the findings of each research question, supported by the four major themes.

Major Findings Related to the Research Questions

Research Question 1: *How does the action research team describe the process of facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs for literacy development in one suburban elementary school?*

Key Finding: Facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs for literacy development is a dynamic and iterative cycle that emphasizes data-driven instruction, embraces collaborative structures, and empowers teacher leaders to cultivate a continuous learning and improvement culture. Data collected related to the first research question indicates that the processes of

facilitating and supporting PLCs are multi-faceted and require careful attention to structure, data analysis, collaborative practices, and the cultivation of strong leadership. The following themes emerged through group interviews and observations:

1. Culture of Learning and Trust
2. Data-Driven Instruction
3. Teacher Leadership

Culture of Learning and Trust

ARDT members reported an observable change in the culture over time. Both grade levels welcomed two new teachers to the team, which meant half of the team had prior teaching experience in the respective grade level, and the other two were new to the grade level. Even so, school leaders recognized the power of collective expertise within PLCs, where teachers leveraged their strengths to support the team. Ms. Morgan highlighted shared responsibility as a key PLC component: *"We all have defined roles…knowing our roles, I think, will help us [to] be successful in our PLCs, and …with our instruction."* Open communication and psychological safety, or the ability to express ideas, ask questions, and seek guidance without fear of judgment, were also observed among the PLCs. Ms. Boyle, a fifth-grade teacher, described her experience:

> *I don't really like being vulnerable and asking for help, but over the last few weeks, I've kind of gotten over my feeling of asking silly questions. I try not to preface my questions with 'this is a stupid question, but' because I know that the team is going to support me and not make me feel silly for asking the question, but rather support me and support my kids as well.*

Collaboration positively impacts teacher growth and development, as evident during classroom observations and PLC meetings. Teachers learned from one another, gained new

perspectives, and refined their practice through shared ideas and strategies during meetings. Ms. Boyle elaborated: *"I enjoy the conversations that we have about the standards because I might feel one way about it, but then hearing other people's [perspectives], you know, challenges me, which I enjoy."* She added, *"I'm really appreciative when people challenge my understanding of the standard because that is going to better my students as well."*

Classroom observations conducted when the ESOL and homeroom teachers facilitated instruction further demonstrated the power of collective expertise in PLC success. In both the fourth and fifth-grade classes, the ESOL and homeroom teacher co-taught lessons with a seamless transition from one person to the other. During all observations, it was clear that the two teachers had collaboratively planned the lesson, as indicated by the shift of responsibility during the segment.

The teachers introduced and modeled the skill or concept, and both teachers facilitated guided practice. In all cases, teachers worked with specific students during the independent practice portion of the segment. The strategies most frequently observed in practice were the ones agreed upon by the team for implementation: addressing the academic language demands of the lesson and building upon student background knowledge. In the fourth-grade classroom, the homeroom teacher routinely provided opportunities for ELLs to engage in meaningful discourse with non-ELLs even when the ESOL teacher was absent.

Between Cycle 1 and Cycle II, the ARDT noticed a shift where teachers moved beyond focusing solely on how their class performed to embrace a shared commitment to student success. After initially analyzing benchmark data in the fall, teachers expressed concern that they would have difficulty addressing the various literacy needs revealed in the set. The ARDT asked probing questions to guide teachers in reflecting on their instructional strengths related to the

needs shown in the STAR and state assessment data from the previous school year (Renaissance Learning, 2025). As they shared their strengths, the team brainstormed ways to increase reading performance collectively and decided to create flexible student groups across the grade level.

Each teacher taught targeted lessons to their assigned group during a 50-minute segment of the 100-minute ELA instructional block. The teams monitored student progress and adjusted the student groups every three and a half weeks as necessary. As a result of their commitment to student learning, the fourth and fifth-grade teams increased the percentage of students reading on or above grade level by 10% and 13%, respectively, from September to December 2024, according to the STAR Reading assessment (Renaissance Learning, 2025). Prioritizing collaboration and cultivating a collective expertise culture empowered teachers to work together to create transformative learning experiences for all students.

When asked to describe what was beneficial in enhancing instructional leadership support for teachers, school leaders repeatedly mentioned the need for protected time to engage in the work of a highly effective PLC. During the study, the school's master schedule designated 260 minutes for teacher planning: 80 minutes for one PLC meeting and 45 minutes every other day for planning. As part of the CES continuous improvement plan, professional learning was job-embedded, requiring teachers and staff to convene once a month with the math and language arts coordinators for about 40 minutes each (ESSA, 2015; Zepeda, 2019). Additionally, district and school-level information regarding assessment administration, multi-tiered systems of support, or the State teacher evaluation system were presented during the time designated for PLCs as needed. Although the informational sessions were scheduled during PLC time to minimize the occurrence of meetings held after school, they interfered with the focus on the actual work of a PLC.

ARDT members acknowledged the challenges associated with the master schedules. They understood that time constraints could significantly hinder teachers from engaging in meaningful collaboration, data analysis, and instructional planning. One teacher commented:

> *We have (planned) each week on our PLC agenda to discuss student learning, rubric, and assessment results. However, there is often little to no time to discuss these items due to other school and county members leading the meeting.*

One ARDT member agreed and noted they often felt rushed to facilitate professional learning and address needs in two subject areas. Over-planned sessions often led to a lack of time for in-depth data analysis and discussion of instructional strategies. One colleague explained, *"When it comes to analyzing or sharing data and work samples, we often prepare and have the data, but meeting time is dominated by other scheduled trainings, meetings, and other [tasks]."* This sentiment indicates the need for school leaders to explore alternate strategies for engaging teachers in instructional work without impeding the time designated for teacher-led PLCs.

While dedicated time is fundamental, establishing clear structures within PLCs is equally important for success. Agendas, norms, and protocols provide a framework for focused discussions and collaborative work. Teachers and leaders indicated they value and routinely follow common meeting norms to guide their interactions and maximize productivity. The norms used by the grade-level teams outlined expectations for participation, communication, and decision-making.

One meeting norm included using a weekly agenda to outline meeting goals and the pre-work teachers needed to complete beforehand. Clearly defined goals and agendas helped keep the meetings on track and ensured the ARIT efficiently addressed key topics or tasks. When shared in advance, the agendas were also helpful to school leaders who prepared for meetings

ahead of time by reviewing curriculum materials and data analysis. An example of the agenda is included in Appendix J.

While dedicated time and clear structures are crucial for productive PLCs, effective facilitation and strong leadership maximize the impact of collaborative efforts. Effective facilitation by a designated team member or school leader ensures that meetings stay focused, equitable participation is encouraged, and a sense of shared ownership exists among team members.

School leaders are important in cultivating a collaboration and continuous improvement culture within PLCs. ARDT member responses indicated an understanding of their role in creating a collaborative environment and a culture that fosters candid conversations about data. Responses also indicated they understand the value of clear communication, active listening, and modeling vulnerability in cultivating psychological safety. When surveyed, teachers acknowledged the importance of leadership that takes on the role of coaching, mentoring, and facilitating adult learning. In an open survey, a teacher commented that this aspect of leadership *"empower[ed] us to take risks, share our struggles, and learn from one another."* Table 5.4 demonstrates the shifts in how teachers perceive administrator support of a collaborative culture.

Table 5.4

Organizational Learning Survey: Leadership Pre-Survey and Post-Survey Comparison

Survey Item	Pre-Survey % Strongly Agree	Post-Survey % Strongly Agree	Difference
Administrators take on the role of coaching, mentoring, and facilitating employees' learning.	27.3%	83.3%	+56%
Administrators help employees understand the value of experimentation and the learning that can result from such endeavors.	45.5%	83.3%	+37.8%

Survey Item	Pre-Survey % Strongly Agree	Post-Survey % Strongly Agree	Difference
Administrators model the importance of learning through their own efforts to learn.	36.4%	83.3%	46.9%
Administrators believe that our success depends upon learning from daily practices.	36.4%	83.3%	+46.9%
Administrators support the sharing of knowledge and skills among employees.	45.5%	83.3%	+37.8%
Administrators use data/information to inform their decision-making.	63.6%	83.3%	+19.7%
Employees are recognized or acknowledged for learning new knowledge or skills.	27.3%	66.7%	+39.4%
Employees are recognized or rewarded with helping each other learn.	18.2%	66.7%	+48.5%
Employees are recognized or rewarded for helping solve school-related problems.	18.2%	66.7%	+48.5%
Employees are recognized or rewarded for experimenting with new ideas.	18.2%	66.7%	+48.5%

However, there was some confusion about the roles of the content coordinators and specialists within PLC meetings. The ambiguity often led to confusion about responsibilities and limited the effectiveness of collaboration. Content coordinators used teacher teams when formally facilitating professional learning sessions, so they were unclear on how to use their

support within a PLC. Once the ARDT clarified the roles, the teachers valued the learning sessions to improve their teaching. Regarding high-impact literacy strategies, teachers valued the ability of the ESOL teacher to *"marry strategies we [already] know with new strategies."*

While designated PLC facilitators and school and district leaders play important roles, effective PLCs ultimately rely on shared responsibility among all team members. Teachers and leaders emphasized the value of working as a team and collective responsibility. PLCs can function at their highest potential when all team members feel empowered to contribute and hold one another accountable.

Data-Driven Instruction

CES leaders understood the value of student data in driving instruction within PLCs. ARDT members saw data analysis as a means for collective inquiry where teachers have meaningful discussions about what the data reveals about student needs and areas for improvement. When reviewing the High-Impact Strategies pre-administration results, one administrator pointed out, *"Teachers do not explicitly name data discussions in their responses; however, data usage is integrated in their description of classroom practices."* This finding prompted the ARDT to equip teachers with the skills and tools to analyze and interpret data effectively and efficiently. They provided professional learning to strengthen data literacy by showing teacher teams the reports available on the MPSD assessment platform and how to interpret them.

ARDT members helped teachers translate the data into action using an assessment protocol and unit planning template. Although teachers analyzed their class data prior to the PLC meeting, they did not always identify strategies to address the needs identified beforehand effectively; therefore, it was challenging to evaluate which high-impact literacy strategy would

appropriately address student needs and plan for implementation within the time designated for a single PLC session.

Teacher Leadership

The ARDT acknowledged that a continuous improvement culture relies on teacher leaders. A collaborative environment that benefits students and teachers thrives when schools empower teachers with necessary resources and support (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020; Vescio et al., 2008). In addition to establishing psychological safety, teacher leaders provided mentorship and guidance to support their colleagues when implementing HLLPs (Neri et al., 2016). The PLC facilitators effectively facilitated discussions and provided support during the meetings. A teacher explained, *"[PLCs have] really helped to build a stronger team. We each have value and recognize and respect that trait in our teammates."*

The ARDT also observed teacher leaders guiding their teams to use data effectively to inform instruction. They facilitated data analysis discussions, helped their colleagues interpret results, and guided them to make instructional decisions. When the team did not get the expected results, the facilitator asked, *"Some of our students didn't learn this. Why is that, and what are we going to do about it?"* When the team noticed students demonstrated mastery or showed growth, the facilitator asked, *"We mentioned pockets of success and noted students who have mastered this skill. What did we do that made this impact? What will we do next for the ones who have already shown mastery?"*

Educators develop a deep understanding and improve instruction when teacher leaders foster a culture of respect, an environment where all questions and ideas are valued and challenge their thinking.

Research Question 2 *How do stakeholders describe the role of high-leverage practices in promoting ELLs' literacy development?*

Key Finding: A learning environment that values meaningful student engagement, targeted and explicit instruction, connections between academic language and student background knowledge and experiences, and ownership in their learning is crucial to promoting literacy development among ELLs.

The second research question focused on the impact of HLLPs on ELLs, which teachers viewed as essential for promoting literacy development and creating a supportive learning environment where ELLs can thrive. Theme Four, Explicit Instructional Strategies, emerged through group interviews, surveys, and observations.

Explicit Instructional Strategies

Student achievement data from multiple sources, including local benchmark assessments and unit tests, indicated that HLLPs benefited all students, including ELLs. Previously, teachers viewed high-impact literacy strategies as specialized ELLs practices. This perception may have formed because of the professional learning offerings the year before the study when the ESOL teacher presented a 15-minute session each month on a strategy for ELLs. As the ESOL teacher described, *"Teachers sometimes viewed ESOL strategies as separate from other high-leverage practices, rather than 'good teaching practices' that support all learners."* Providing job-embedded professional learning focused on HLLPs rather than at the end of the school day created a shift in perspective necessary for a more inclusive and equitable learning environment for all students.

Targeted and explicit instruction, particularly in vocabulary development, is another key aspect of HLLPs that benefits many learners. Teachers and ARDT members agreed that ELLs needed clear definitions and opportunities to use new vocabulary in various contexts. Ms. Smith described her approach to vocabulary instruction: *"At the beginning of each lesson, I intentionally introduce key academic language that students need to grasp and apply. Vocabulary is explicitly taught using visual aids such as pictures and diagrams to enhance understanding."*

This intentional and targeted approach gave ELLs the foundational language skills necessary for comprehension and participation. Ms. Morgan highlighted the importance of breaking down complex words and concepts: *"Í use the vocabulary routines outlined in the Science of Reading to make sure students [understand] words in all subject areas."* Ms. Boyle described the strategies she used in her classroom:

> *I teach vocabulary explicitly, including morphology and opportunities to speak, listen, read, and write. Those are all regular parts of my lessons. I also use modeling, guided practice, and graphic organizers to scaffold students' learning. Helping students build background knowledge about a topic also supports their comprehension of texts.*

When teachers explicitly taught morphology and word analysis skills, they equipped students with the tools to decode unfamiliar words independently and increased their comprehension (Bhattacharya, 2020).

In a survey of HLLPs, fourth and fifth-grade teachers emphasized connecting academic language to student backgrounds and experiences as an effective way to increase student comprehension. They recognized that activating and expanding the existing knowledge base for ELLs is critical for successfully navigating complex texts and making meaningful connections

with the content. In classroom observations, teachers related new concepts to prior knowledge, making learning more relevant and relatable. Ms. Lumpkin explained her strategy for helping students internalize new vocabulary: *"I also try to get them to…come up with a sentence of their own and put it into personal [context] to make it their own."*

An HLLP that emerged most frequently during classroom observations was an intentional connection between learning and students' prior experiences. For instance, a teacher shared her approach: *"Throughout the lesson, I make specific and intentional connections to students' prior knowledge, helping them link new concepts to what they already know."* Her efforts to bridge the gap between what students already know and what they are learning facilitates meaningful understanding. ARDT members observed that most teachers encouraged students to personalize their learning and connect vocabulary and story elements to their lives.

Ms. Smith highlighted the importance of incorporating visuals to build background knowledge, *"Before beginning a new text or introducing a new concept, I use photos or texts to build the students' background knowledge."* Photos provided a concrete representation of abstract concepts and served as a valuable tool for pre-teaching vocabulary and encouraging discussions (Nawaz et al., 2021).

Collective insights from teachers and ARDT members highlighted the understanding that building background knowledge is not an isolated skill but an integral part of a comprehensive approach to literacy development for all students, not just ELLs. When teachers intentionally connected to students' prior experiences using visuals and incorporating diverse text types, they empowered ELLs to become active, engaged readers who confidently tackled challenging texts (Kim & Wynne, 2021).

Findings Related to Research Question 3: *How do teachers articulate their role in the continuous improvement process for literacy development via professional learning communities?*

Key Finding: Teachers are active participants in a collaborative and data-driven cycle where they analyze student data, share insights and resources, refine instructional practices, and collectively strive to create a supportive learning environment that fosters student growth.

The third research question focused on the teacher's role in PLCs on literacy development. The following themes emerged through group interviews, observations, and observations:

1. Culture of Learning and Trust
2. Data-Driven Instruction
3. Teacher Leadership

Culture of Learning and Trust

Teachers described PLCs as essential opportunities, rather than mandated meetings, to collectively analyze student data and learn from one another. PLC survey data and interviews indicated that teachers appreciated opportunities to garner diverse perspectives and expand their repertoire of instructional approaches. Over 27% of teachers reported that they would continue the PLC meetings if they were given the option of no more extended meetings than was reported at the start of the study. Regarding HLLPs, Ms. Lumpkin shared:

> *High-leverage practices are all teachers do to enhance and elevate their teaching to reach all students. Teachers collaborate with each other and share ideas, and this helps English Learners have a consistent education because all their teachers are on the same page and working together. Teachers also use assessment data and share the results with the ESOL*

> *teachers so they know which concepts must be re-taught during the class. Collaborating is a high-leverage practice that helps English Learners gain knowledge at a faster rate and with more in-depth knowledge.*

Teachers also highlighted the benefit of planning with service providers within PLCs and the impact of planning on instruction in a co-teach model. Ms. Lumpkin shared her experience co-teaching with the ESOL teacher to provide vocabulary instruction: *"Students can see the cohesiveness between what she's teaching and what I'm teaching, and I mean, she's challenged me to better my explicit vocabulary instruction…I think it's really great to have two teachers feeding off one another in the same classroom."* Her experience illustrated how instructional specialists' involvement in PLCs can lead to tangible improvements in instructional practices and foster a culture of shared accountability.

A prevalent sentiment among teachers was the lack of adequate time for meaningful collaboration. They described a constant tension between their obligation to comply with county or school leader requests and the desire to engage in deep, collaborative work with their colleagues during their planning segment. A PLC facilitator captured this frustration:

> *"There's time constraints trying to get everything done, and so sometimes it's hard to carve out. When a teacher says, 'I'm really struggling with … the standard or trying to implement word study,' trying to figure out a time to help them [is challenging] when you're trying to check off all the other things you have to do."*

Also noted in an interview,

> *I think it can be difficult to support each other in individual instruction because we don't have many opportunities to see each other implementing the strategies that we learn in professional learning…So, even though we can go through professional development*

together and we talk about how we've implemented the strategies, it's hard to give each other specific feedback on how that strategy is going because we are not able to see each other teaching and implementing the strategies as much as we would like.

The ARDT observed time constraints as well during PLC observations. Although the PLCs had 80 minutes designated for the work, teams often ran out of time to determine the next steps following data analysis, especially when analyzing student writing samples. The challenges of time constraints supported the need for changes to create a more supportive environment for collaboration and professional learning. The ARDT recognized the need to avoid scheduling meetings unrelated to the grade level goals to prevent interruptions to the actual work of PLCs.

Overall, the PLC structure improved productivity and strengthened the collaborative culture. Table 5.5 demonstrates the shifts between the start and the end of the study related to how teachers valued PLC work and the trust among their teammates.

Table 5.5

Organizational Learning Pre-Survey and Post-Survey Results

Survey Item	Pre-Survey % Agree or Strongly Agree	Post Survey % Agree or Strongly Agree	Difference
Employees respect each other's perspectives and opinions.	63.7%	83.3%	+19.6%
Employees operate from a spirit of cooperation, rather than competition.	63.6%	100%	+36.4%
I feel safe explaining to others why I think or feel the way I do about an issue.	63.7%	83.3%	+19.6%

Survey Item	Pre-Survey % Agree or Strongly Agree	Post Survey % Agree or Strongly Agree	Difference
Teams are an effective way to meet the school's goals for improvement.	81.8%	100%	+18.2%

Data-Driven Instruction

Ms. Lumpkin explained that the PLC process, especially the *study* state of the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA), *"holds (her) accountable for really deeply looking at student data and making sure (she is) making reflective decisions on the day-to-day"* (Shakman et al., 2020). The first phase of the PDSA (*plan)* hinged on baseline data analysis. Teachers examined and evaluated various assessments to discern patterns and trends in student performance. The meticulous analysis identified specific areas of strength and opportunity and informed the selection of HLLPs. As Ms. Boyle emphasized:

> *…in my opinion, there's only room for improvement using the PDSA cycle because you make your plan, and that's great. And, unlike education in the past… we're continually doing, studying, and acting upon [data]. You keep what's working, and then you find ways to make it better.*

During the *do, study,* and *act* phases, teachers implemented the HLLPs and remained vigilant in collecting formative assessment data and monitoring student progress as they engaged during instruction. They used various assessment methods, such as exit tickets, observations, and formative assessments, to gather real-time feedback on student understanding. The ESOL and homeroom teacher used the information to make timely adjustments to instruction to address student needs. They convened as collaborative teams, shared their observations, compared findings, and engaged in discussions to interpret data and evaluate the effectiveness of

implementing HLLPs. Ms. Boyle articulated her team's commitment to data-informed instruction and shared responsibility for student success: *"…if something's not working, you're collaborating with other teachers. You're getting input from specialists, whether that's the gifted teachers or other support staff, and then executing the model again."* Data analysis within PLCs empowered teachers to leverage peer expertise to refine instruction. Table 5.6 highlights the shifts in teacher practice because of their data use within the PLC.

Table 5.6

PLC Pre-Survey and Post-Survey Results

Survey Item	Pre-Survey % Very True	Post-Survey % Very True	Difference
As a PLC team, we regularly (at least monthly) make adjustments to our instructional practices across all classrooms based on students' performance on common assessments.	30%	57.1%	+27.1%
As a PLC team, we regularly discuss how our specific instructional practices affect student learning and how changes in our instructional practices might lead to changes in student learning.	30%	71.4%	+41.4%
I adjust the instructional practices in my classroom based on my students' performance on common assessments.	70%	85.7%	+15.7%
I have improved as a classroom teacher as a result of the conversations and work we have done in our PLC.	20%	71.4%	+51.4%
I have made changes to my teaching practices as a result of the work that we have done as a PLC.	20%	71.4%	+51.4%

Teacher Leadership

One of the most significant benefits of participating in a PLC is the development of collective teacher efficacy. As teachers collected data, reflected on their practices, and researched solutions, they developed a collective belief in their ability to make a difference for every student in their care. Their shared sense of purpose removed barriers that prevented them from being transparent with one another and empowered them to embrace challenges. Ms. Boyle expressed:

> *We set our school improvement plan and broke those action steps down for what that would like for fourth grade, and then began specifically planning how we were going to target that and grow in our professional knowledge in areas we felt we could grow in…think that the planning piece is super important because of the collective teacher efficacy. We use the roadmap to really get into the standards and make sure that we understand what we're being asked to do, but also what the students are being asked to do.*

Teachers connected the iterative nature of the PDSA cycles, the foundation of their PLC work, to their continuous self-reflection and evolving growth mindset. They seemed compelled to constantly examine the impact of their practice on student learning, particularly ELLs, rather than deliver instruction. The constant cycle of PDSA fostered a spirit of inquiry and a willingness to try the HLLPs. A fifth-grade teacher affirmed, *"…it allows me to self-reflect on things that I thought I may have been an expert at, that I am still a novice in…I think that the PLC actually helps me to better understand the standards, especially that they are changing, and make sure the resources and activities we are doing are at the level of rigor to help students perform…Also, it gives me a change, just personally, to see things that I need to improve."*

Teachers also credited their PLC for helping them become more proficient at identifying and addressing the needs of ELLs through a shared language and understanding of high-leverage practices. Ms. Lumpkin noted, *"...you get in this meeting and someone says, 'Oh, that's not how I was teaching them to do word analysis.' Or, 'That's not how I was teaching theme.' It gives me an opportunity to see what I need to do better..."* Their reflective practices helped them to embrace vulnerability, cultivate collective efficacy, refine their practice, and emerge as more confident, competent educators.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented three findings from qualitative data analysis throughout two action research cycles:

1. The process of facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs for literacy development is a dynamic and iterative cycle that emphasizes data-driven instruction, embraces collaborative structures, and empowers teacher leaders to cultivate a culture of continuous learning and improvement.
2. A learning environment that values meaningful student engagement, targeted and explicit instruction, connections between academic language and students' background knowledge and experience, and ownership in their learning is crucial to promoting literacy development among ELLs.
3. Teachers are active participants in a collaborative and data-driven cycle where they analyze student data, share insights and resources, refine instructional practices, and collectively strive to create a supportive learning environment that fosters student growth.

Data gathered throughout the study from surveys, interviews, researcher's journal notes, and observations provided insight into the minor and major codes in the results. Continued analysis and reflection led the researcher and her ARDT to identify four significant themes aligned with three research questions. Chapter 6 details the connection of the findings with the study's conclusions, implications, and connections to leadership practices.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONNECTIONS TO LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

Despite the availability of explicit, systematic instructional procedures to improve reading skills, the United States grapples with a deep-rooted literacy problem that affects millions of individuals, transcending age, socioeconomic status, and background (Joshi & Wijekumar, 2019). The literacy crisis is particularly acute for fourth and eighth-grade students in the final developmental stages, which are pivotal for building foundational reading and writing skills (Learning Without Tears, 2021). According to The Nation's Report Card, the average reading score among fourth-graders increased by four percentage points in 2022 compared to 2019, with only 37% of students performing at or above the proficient level (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Although an improvement from 2019, these results indicated that most students do not comprehend grade-level materials, especially students of color in suburban and city schools whose scores dropped between five to eight percentage points (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

The literacy crisis in the United States takes on a unique dimension when considering the impact on English language Learners (ELLs), a growing demographic in the country (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Only nine percent of fourth-grade ELLs read at proficient levels in 2022, consistent with the results from 2019. ELLs face a series of challenges that can exacerbate the broader literacy crisis, such as a lack of qualified teachers to provide specialized instruction, acquiring a new language while also learning basic literacy skills, insufficient

language assistance programs, social and emotional factors associated with language and cultural adaptation, and hindered parental involvement due to language barriers (Cho et al., 2021). It is imperative to develop and use comprehensive, culturally sensitive strategies encompassing language acquisition and literacy skills to combat the literacy crisis among ELLs in the United States (Slavin & Cheung, 2005). This instruction includes targeted interventions focused on oral and written language development, adequate resources, professional development for educators, and a recognition of the diversity within the ELL population (Goldenberg, 2020). By addressing the literacy challenges ELLs encounter, the nation can work toward a more inclusive and practical approach to improving literacy for all students.

The purpose of this action research study was to develop teachers' capacity to integrate high-leverage practices to improve English Language Learners (ELLs) access and outcomes in a suburban elementary school. This study examined leader and teacher practices that result in more equitable outcomes for students within a suburban public elementary school.

1. How does the action research design team describe the process of facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs for literacy development in one suburban elementary school?
2. How do stakeholders describe the role of high-leverage practices in promoting ELLs' literacy development?
3. How do teachers articulate their role in the continuous improvement process for literacy development via professional learning communities?

Chapter 6 reflects the "contribution the researcher has made to the knowledge, practice, and policy" in high-leverage practices to improve literacy outcomes for ELLs (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 19).

Summary of Research Design

Action Research

Action research, as a qualitative approach, was an appropriate methodology for this study because it allowed researchers to be "attentive to the dynamic of groups and interactions as they unfold[ed] and to learn to intervene appropriately" (Coghlan, 2019, p. 6). The flexible structure enabled the action researcher and design and implementation teams to use a wide lens when observing various student and teacher behaviors to identify patterns and effectively address the problem of practice (Glanz, 2014). The cyclical action research framework engaged the design and implementation teams in planning, taking action, and fact-finding to "look for trouble" and better understand their work (Coghlan, 2019; Glanz, 2014; La Salle & Johnson, 2018). "Schools begin to change when their leaders recognize the disparities that exist in our schools and then intentionally raise issues of bias, preference, legitimization, privilege, and equity" (Lindsay et al., 2005).

Action research provided a structure for reflection, data collection, analysis, and action to ensure that every student received an excellent education at Centennial Elementary School (CES). The primary researcher and action research team challenged what La Salle and Johnson (2018) called the "Inevitability Assumption," the idea that schools cannot make a positive impact on negative patterns of achievement for some groups of students (p. 6). They denounced the normalization of the failure of students of color. The inquiry-based action research process prompted the teams to reflect carefully on practices, programs, and procedures within the school to achieve educational equity.

Theoretical Framework

This action research focused on building teacher capacity within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to implement high-leverage instructional practices and improve outcomes for ELLs. When leaders support teachers efforts to incorporate rigorous and equitable forms of instruction with tools to help them make sense of instructional materials and articulate learning intentions and student success criteria, they are most likely to be successful (Billingsley et al., 2019; Frey et al., 2024). The theoretical framework of High-Leverage Learning Practices (HLLPs) as an instructional framework for teachers and leaders underpins the action research cycle for this study (Figure 6.1). High-leverage instructional practices also contributed to the theory of change as a core driver.

Figure 6.1

Framework for High-Leverage Instructional Practices

Note. Billingsley et al., 2019; Council for Exceptional Children, 2023

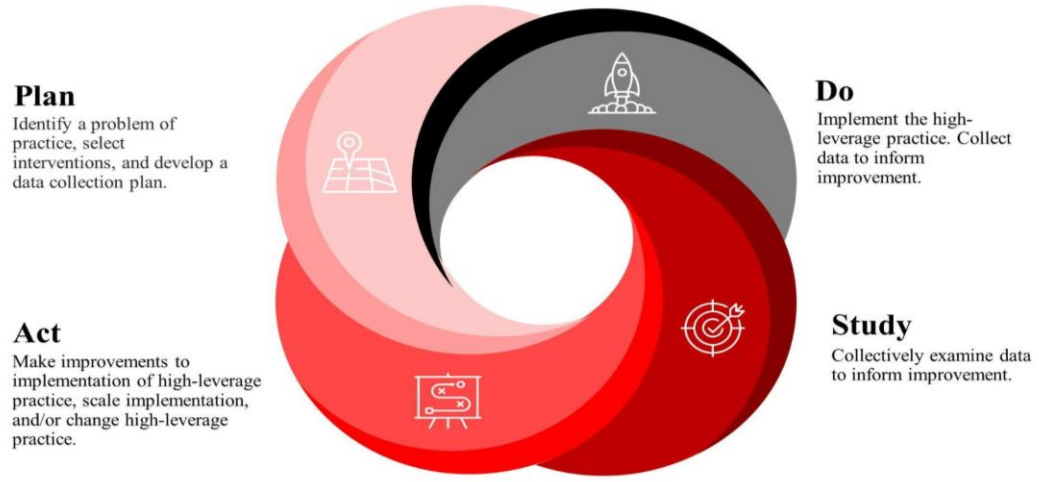
Billingsley et al. (2019) identified 22 HLLPs to "support teachers' effectiveness, improve their students' learning, and foster their retention" (p. 364). The HLLPs are organized around four aspects of practice: collaboration, assessment, social, emotional, and behavioral, and instructional. With this model, Billingsley et al. (2019) aimed to specify instructional practices, foster a shared language about instructional practices needed to teach students with disabilities effectively, "advance a vision of (special education) teaching as complex work," and ensure school leaders "proactively support the development of collaborative relationships...and consistently communicate that (all) teachers have collective responsibility for students..." (p. 372). The framework is most successful when teachers have access to high-quality instructional materials, receive clear messages on what and how they should teach, and have a master schedule that provides time for teachers to teach and collaborate (Billingsley et al., 2019; McLeskey et al., 2019; Windschitl et al., 2012).

Logic Model

The logic model depicted in Figure 6.2 guided the study to examine how school leaders and teachers can engage in the continuous improvement process for literacy development. This model engages educators in a system to focus on a specific problem of practice and, through a series of iterative cycles, identify and test change practices (Shakman et al., 2020). Through each cycle, teachers and leaders build their capacity to test change practices, refine them based on evidence, and increase the impact of the change practice over time.

Figure 6.2

Plan, Do, Study, Act



Note. Shakman et al., 2020; Tichnor-Wagner, et al., 2017

The four-step process known as Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) established the foundation of the study. This process helped guide continuous improvement to test a change in practice within a school setting. This study examined how school leaders and teachers engaged in this process to guide rapid learning and impact literacy outcomes for ELLs and students of color.

Summary and Discussion of the Findings

Three findings emerged from the study after data analysis and reflection. Chapter 5 outlined the coding and analysis process of determining the findings. The researcher supported theme identification through data gathered during initial and final interviews, surveys, observation notes, and the researcher's journal notes. The primary researcher used direct quotations of the thoughts and reflections shared by participants to establish the findings further. The first finding indicated that facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs for literacy development empowered teacher leaders to cultivate a continuous learning and improvement culture. The second finding was that learning environments that valued meaningful

student engagement, targeted and explicit instruction, connections between academic language and students' background knowledge and experience, and ownership in their learning increased literacy development for ELLs. The third finding was that teachers who collaborated and actively participated in a student data analysis cycle, shared insights and resources, refined instructional practices, and collectively created a supportive learning environment fostered student growth.

After continual review and analysis of the findings and their alignment with the research question, the researcher identified four themes connected to each research question: culture of learning and trust, teacher leadership, data-driven instruction, and explicit instructional strategies. The themes linked to the theoretical framework conceived from the Organizational Learning Theory and a modified version of the Framework for High-Leverage Instructional Practices (Billingsley et al., 2023).

Major Findings Related to the Literature Reviewed

The primary researcher supported the major findings with professional literature on the literacy crisis in the United States, the reading wars, equity-based leadership practices, PLCs, and culturally responsive HLLPs.

With only 33% of fourth-grade students reading on or above grade level and half identifying as Black or Hispanic performing below Basic, the United States had a reading and equity crisis (Cervetti & Hinchman, 2024; NAEP, 2022). "Schools represent a critical point of intervention in the (re)production of inequities" (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020, p. 109); therefore, school leaders must "guide their teams and engage stakeholders in collaborative change management processes that align the work of adults around a clear set of nonnegotiable equity and student achievement goals. Their focus must be on adult practice" (Starr, 2022, p. 9).

Literature confirmed Findings 1 and 3 that teacher and leader collaboration, collective inquiry, data analysis, and instructional practice improved within the PLC and classrooms.

Bailey and Jakicic (2022) asserted that designating protected time within the master schedule for collaborative teams to meet is one of the first actions a school principal should take in transforming a school into a PLC. The primary researcher, who served as the principal at the research site, and the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) designated 80 minutes each week for an extended planning time for each grade level and ESOL teacher to engage in PLC work. Grade-level teams established meeting norms and used four critical questions to guide their work (DuFour et al., 2016). The principal and assistant principal actively participated in the PLC, modeling "formative leadership practices" to gather evidence around PLC implementation and effectiveness to inform school improvement efforts toward increased literacy achievement among ELLs (Bailey & Jakicic, 2022, p. 1).

As a result, collaboration, collective inquiry, data analysis, and instructional practice improved within the PLC and CES classrooms. Auslander (2018) supported these findings, as weekly teacher and counselor collaboration within a PLC improved teacher practice and student success. The same was true for CES because of the partnership between the homeroom and ESOL teachers in and out of the classroom.

Leaders challenge inequities around barriers, embed equity into their vision and mission, and enact it. They use a village mindset to empower others to identify learning needs and address barriers that hinder students living in poverty from succeeding (Starr, 2022). Although this study focused on ELLs, Starr (2022) supported Findings 1, 2, and 3. The CES principal empowered teachers to address literacy achievement gaps between ELLs, Black or African American students, and their White peers through active participation in PLCs and using HLLPs.

Robust equity teams, comprised of teachers, administrators, and community members, are responsible for creating a culture of inquiry that improves student outcomes by examining classrooms and instructional practices (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020). “This core group of stakeholders integrates practices and routines built on common language, norms, and reference points to cultivate a collective community commitment and action to place race, racism, and the systems that sustain it at the center of their improvement efforts” (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020, p. 121). Without these practices in place, schools reinforce inequities.

Starr (2022) alleged that the United States has an adult learning problem. He claimed that students know how to learn as they continuously learn, regardless of what teachers instruct them; adults need to “regularly learn new skills, content, and technologies in order to engage students and meet their needs” (p. 61). Adults must “constantly learn with and from each other to serve young people best” (p. 65). Collective learning is a means for leaders to distribute leadership, engage adults in learning, increase productivity, and retain effective teachers.

Creating an improvement culture is an essential and monumental task that aims to offset the impact of systemic racial inequities within education. As such, leaders and organizations must have strong values supporting this vital mission. These core values must not only fully embody equity but also remain steadfast, especially in the face of backlash or criticism of the organization, which is all too common when attempting to disrupt the status quo. For true transformation to occur, where “equity becomes embedded into the DNA of the system,” leaders must organize efforts to use shared values and ensure that adult actions reflect and reinforce those values in service of students (Starr, 2022, p. 25).

Vales, or collective commitments, help high-performing organizations achieve a shared vision (DuFour et al., 2016). At CES, the team collectively committed to narrowing the existing

achievement gaps in literacy between ELLs, Black or African American students, and White students. The fourth- and fifth-grade teams committed to achieving this goal through active participation in a PLC and implementing HLLPs.

In education, “high leverage” instructional practices refer to strategies and methods that significantly impact student learning outcomes (Wei et al., 2023, p.3). Within continuous improvement, high-leverage instructional practices serve as interventions to address specific problems of practice identified by teachers. When applied to literacy development, these practices become powerful tools in shaping cognitive and linguistic growth, especially for ELLs. High-leverage instructional practices, including culturally responsive practices, can have transformative effects on literacy for all students, which supports Finding 2.

Neri et al. (2016) outlined four key principles to support ELLs in meeting rigorous academic standards by addressing language and content learning. Neri et al. (2016) supported the second study finding and was the primary source for identifying HLLPs. The first principle emphasized understanding and addressing the academic language demands of a lesson. To accomplish this, teachers identified specific vocabulary, sentence structures, discourse patterns, and language functions required for academic engagement. Academic language demands are how students use language in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Teachers must consider how these language features work together to create meaning within a discipline. For instance, science teachers would focus on the language of explanation, and math teachers would focus on justifying a solution. These language features should be taught within the content rather than separately. Academic language features include word, sentence, and discourse levels, encompassing vocabulary, grammar, syntax, text organization, and

cohesive devices. Academic language functions are how students use language for different purposes like describing, citing evidence, analyzing, or constructing arguments.

The second principle highlighted the need to build upon students' background knowledge. In practice, teachers would recognize the value of diverse experiences, prior education, content knowledge, language development, and cultural resources that ELLs bring to the classroom. Teachers can connect to existing knowledge, funds of knowledge, and community experiences to make lessons more relevant.

The third principle focused on designing and scaffolding learning opportunities that integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing domains (Neri et al., 2016). Instruction should provide opportunities for students to use oral and print-based literacy skills, as oral language development is critical to literacy. Scaffolding, such as visual aids, graphic organizers, and sentence frames, should support students as they interact with content and language without oversimplifying the learning experience.

The fourth principle emphasizes the importance of providing opportunities for student participation through meaningful discourse and structured collaboration (Neri et al., 2016). To promote meaningful discourse, teachers should create chances for students to collaborate, share ideas, and collectively build understanding. They should also consider group structures that best support ELLs acquiring language and content development. Collaborative activities can assist students in constructing meaning, demonstrating content comprehension, and developing language.

Teachers can encourage students to use academic English by highlighting "distinctions between vernacular and standard English and provide students opportunities to practice appropriately applying their English knowledge and skills to different contexts" (Council for the

Great City Schools, 2023, p. 34). ELLs benefit from skills instruction to build new vocabulary and decode print forms of English. Opportunities for students to practice listening and speaking English through read-aloud, discussions, and conversations with their teacher and English-speaking peers are a few strategies to incorporate in the classroom to extend word recognition and build comprehension.

Major Themes Related to the Research Questions

Chapter 5 presented the findings of the research questions, which the researcher reviewed and analyzed to construct comprehensive themes. Table 6.1 demonstrates the connections between the theoretical framework grounded in the Organizational Learning Theory and a modified version of the Framework for High-Leverage Instructional Practices (Billingsley et al., 2023). The researcher aligned the themes with the four aspects of the frameworks highlighted in this study: culture of learning and trust (LT), collaboration within a PLC (PLC), assessment cycles (AC), and targeted instruction (TI).

Table 6.1

Connection to Theoretical Framework

Research Questions	Alignment to Theoretical Framework	Major Themes
1. How does the action research design team describe the process of facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs for literacy development in one suburban elementary school?	• Culture of Learning and Trust • Collaboration within a PLC	Theme 1: Culture of Learning and Trust Theme 2: Data-Driven Instruction Theme 4: Teacher Leadership
2. How do stakeholders describe the role of high-leverage practices in	• Assessment Cycles • Targeted Instruction	Theme 3: Explicit Instructional Strategies

Research Questions	Alignment to Theoretical Framework	Major Themes
promoting ELLs' literacy development?		
3. How do teachers articulate their role in the continuous improvement process for literacy development via professional learning communities?	• Culture of Learning and Trust • Collaboration within a PLC • Assessment Cycles • Targeted Instruction	Theme 1: Culture of Learning and Trust Theme 2: Data-Driven Instruction Theme 4: Teacher Leadership

Research Question 1 asked, "How does the action research design team describe the process of facilitating and supporting the implementation of a professional learning community (PLC) for literacy development in one suburban elementary school?" Theme 1 (Culture of Learning and Trust), Theme 2 (Data Driven Instruction), and Theme 4 (Teacher Leadership) considered the Organizational Learning Theory, an adapted version of the Framework for High-Leverage Instructional Practices (Billingsley et al., 2019), and aspects of the culture of learning and trust (CLT) and collaboration within a PLC aligned with this research question (Council for Exceptional Children, 2023). Leader participant data analysis revealed that facilitating PLCs for literacy development is an iterative cycle that includes data analysis and collaborative structures. It relies on teacher leaders whom their school leaders empower to cultivate a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

In a post-survey, one ARDT member, the assistant principal, articulated that the school leader's role was to *"establish a shared vision, provide professional development opportunities, time and structures for planning and collaboration, and administrative support where needed."* Each ARDT member demonstrated those leadership responsibilities throughout the study through their communication practices, development and implementation of professional

learning, and active participation during weekly PLC meetings. Although leaders aimed to protect the time designated each week for PLC meetings, they frequently scheduled school-level professional learning for a portion of the planning segment, interfering with teachers' collaborative work time.

Even still, leaders were able to cultivate a collaborative environment with candid data conversations. Teachers acknowledged the leaders' role in modeling vulnerability to establish psychological safety, ultimately empowering teachers to take risks, share their struggles, and learn from one another. The primary researcher captured participant reflections through direct quotations in interviews, surveys, and meeting transcriptions at the beginning and end of the study.

School leaders on the ARDT described their support role as an unwavering focus on learning. The weekly ARDT meetings provided a setting for review and reflection on teacher actions within the PLC and classroom and planning for professional development sessions and PLC meetings.

Research Question 2 asked, "How do stakeholders describe the role of high-leverage practices in promoting ELLs' literacy development?" The theoretical framework elements of assessment cycles (AC) and targeted instruction (TI) influenced the alignment of Theme 3 (Explicit Instructional Strategies) to this research question. The primary researcher captured participants' reflections through direct quotations in group interviews and individual surveys.

At the start of the study, teachers participated in job-embedded professional learning focused on HLLPs for ELLs within their PLC rather than the end of the school day as historically offered at the school (Neri et al., 2016). During the initial session, teachers identified and operationalized HLLPs and developed a common understanding of the supporting resources

provided by the district. Teachers then used the operationalized HLLPs for planning and implemented them in their classrooms during the study. During the study, ARDT members observed teacher implementation of vocabulary routines, incorporating students' background knowledge and experiences, scaffolding, and student discourse as the most frequently observed HLLPs in practice. Teachers acknowledged each HLLP as critical to supporting comprehension and literacy development among all students, not just ELLs.

Research Question 3 asked, "How do teachers articulate their role in the continuous improvement process for literacy development via professional learning communities?" The primary researcher used the theoretical framework aspects of a culture of learning and trust (CLT) and collaboration within a PLC, assessment cycles (AC), and targeted instruction (TI) to answer this question. The research question aligns with Theme 1 (Culture of Learning and Trust), Theme 2 (Data Driven Instruction), and Theme 4 (Teacher Leadership).

Teachers valued their PLC as essential for collaborative analysis of student data and mutual learning, rather than mandatory meetings, as almost 60% of teachers indicated they would continue PLC meetings even if they were optional. Their work in the PLC fostered a strong culture of learning and trust through opportunities to learn from each other, share constructive feedback, and expand their instructional approach to literacy. Additionally, using the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle enabled them to identify student strengths and needs, informing the selection of HLLPs. As a result of their PLC participation, they developed their leadership skills and a shared belief in their ability to make a difference for every student, especially ELLs.

Limitations of the Current Study

Although the researcher designed and implemented this study with detailed planning and consideration, there were limitations. First, the study context may have limited the scope of the findings. The study setting at a suburban elementary school presents a constraint, as the unique characteristics, student demographic, and specific professional scenarios might not be ubiquitous across other educational settings. The researcher acknowledged that the small selection of participants focused mainly on fourth- and fifth-grade teachers. Although the study aimed to improve literacy outcomes for all ELLs, focusing on two grade levels may not represent the elementary school population.

Second, the duration of the study was short, spanning only four months with two action research cycles. Although the study captured the initial impact of PLCs and HLLPs, the long-term effects on teacher efficacy and student achievement remain unexamined. A longitudinal study could reveal more enduring patterns of change and establish the durability of the positive trends.

Third, this study took place in a small, suburban elementary school, with the primary researcher employed as the 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 minimize the position of power as a negative factor in the study, all participants consented to participate with no repercussions if they opted not to participate or to decline participation at any point. Participants acknowledged that participation in the study would not provide additional benefits regarding evaluations. The researcher reviewed her actions for the study to ensure the position of power had minimal influence on the study and its results.

Despite the efforts to address potential issues, the primary researcher acknowledged other limitations and biases that this section did not discuss. As is common in qualitative research studies, the findings of this research cannot be extended or generalized to different contexts (van den Boom-Muilenburg et al., 2021). Still, participants involved in this study achieved a greater understanding and deeper insight within this specific context by engaging in this qualitative action research study.

Implications for Practitioners

The study highlighted the effectiveness of using PLCs to foster teacher collaboration and implement HLLPs. Practitioners could replicate the study, incorporating the PDSA framework, to promote continuous improvement in their schools, regardless of their locale classification (Geverdt, 2024). In this study, teacher leadership was essential in sustaining a school-wide improvement culture. Practitioners should seek to empower teachers with the resources and support they need to lead professional learning and facilitate collaboration within their teams.

The primary researcher conducted this study with a small sample of fourth and fifth-grade teachers at one suburban elementary school. Future researchers could replicate this study with teachers of various grade levels, teachers in other school levels, and for a more extended time. Leaders and future researchers attempting to transform a school into a PLC should also include instructional support specialists in grade-level meetings, as there is limited research on teacher and specialist collaboration (Auslander, 2018).

Although the study focused on ELLs, future studies should replicate it with a focus on students in other demographic groups with achievement gaps and a continued focus on ELLs. HLLPs benefit all students, and this study emphasizes the need for culturally responsive teaching that integrates students' backgrounds and experiences (Neri et al., 2016). Practitioners are

encouraged to develop practices that acknowledge and incorporate diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to promote academic success.

Implications for Policy

The number of students served through ESOL programs is increasing, prompting the need for educators to develop a swift and comprehensive understanding of the challenges ELLs face when developing reading and writing skills (NCES, 2024). ELLs consistently lag behind their English-speaking peers in literacy achievement, leading to disparities in academic outcomes and long-term opportunities (Umansky & Porter, 2020). This persistent gap significantly impacts achievement, raising concerns about their overall journey through the educational system and within society. Therefore, the immediate examination of the root causes and potential interventions for literacy achievement gaps between ELLs and their native English-speaking peers is crucial for promoting educational equity.

The Science of Reading is pivotal in understanding and addressing ELLs' challenges in acquiring literacy skills. Goldenberg (2020) and Ortiz et al. (2021) emphasized the potential of evidence-based practices grounded in reading science for supporting ELLs in their literacy development. The research underscores the significance of explicit and systematic instruction for all students, and by integrating these evidence-based practices into instructional approaches, educators can better support ELLs in achieving literacy proficiency and narrow the achievement gap. Understanding the Science of Reading in the context of ELLs is essential for educational equity for all students, regardless of language background, and ensures they have access to high-quality literacy instruction that aligns with scientific evidence (Cox & Johns-O'Leary, 2024; Goldenberg, 2020; Ortiz et al., 2021).

By identifying and highlighting effective teaching strategies tailored to the needs of ELLs, this study offers practical applications for educators. The findings can inform instructional approaches that specifically address the literacy development of ELLs, emphasizing evidence-based practices rooted in the Science of Reading. These insights can support educators in implementing explicit and systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension, which are essential for ELLs to achieve literacy proficiency. Additionally, the research study emphasizes the importance of integrating these evidence-based practices into instructional approaches to narrow the achievement gap between ELLs and their native English-speaking peers. Such research can empower educators to meet diverse learning needs better and promote educational equity within the classroom.

Implications for Researchers

This study provided a relevant model that focused on PLCs to build teacher capacity for implementing HLLPs provided a relevant model. Researchers could further investigate how PLCs, when intentionally structured, support the continuous improvement of instruction and foster a culture of learning and trust among educators. Additionally, the study relied on teacher leadership to promote continuous improvement through an equity lens. Researchers could investigate how equity-based leadership structures and support systems enable teachers to embrace new practices and foster a learning culture within their school communities.

The study findings on the importance of HLLPs for ELLs are relevant for researchers. Teachers who use high-leverage strategies such as explicit vocabulary instruction, connecting academic language to students' background knowledge, student discourse, and visuals significantly impact language and content development. Researchers should replicate the study to examine how these strategies can be adapted and implemented across different contexts to

improve literacy outcomes for all students, including ELLs. Researchers can also use the findings to examine how teachers learn to interpret assessment data and adapt their instruction with HLLPs accordingly, using frameworks like the PDSA cycle.

Finally, addressing literacy achievement gaps for students of color and ELLs is crucial for researchers seeking to promote educational equity. The findings indicate the potential of HLLPs and PLCs to improve outcomes for historically marginalized students. Future research should explore the intersectionality of these factors further to create even more inclusive and effective learning environments.

Concluding Thoughts

Nationally, over half of the fourth-grade students are reading below grade level, and achievement gaps between students of color, English learners, and white students continue to exist despite the availability of explicit, systematic instructional procedures to improve reading skills (Joshi & Wijekumar, 2019). Achievement gaps, when unaddressed, can influence future educational and career opportunities, perpetuate socioeconomic disparities, and limit the opportunity for upward mobility for students as they become adults (Henderson et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2005; Rovner, 2021). Although school systems cannot fully address institutional and systemic barriers perpetuating racial disparities in the United States, school leaders and their fellow educators can employ high-leverage leadership and instruction practices to dismantle inequities in education (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016; Carpenter, 2014; De Neve & Devos, 2016; DuFour et al., 2021; Starr, 2022).

School leaders must engage stakeholders in collaborative change management processes focused on equity and improved student outcomes for all students. A collaborative culture built on shared values and purpose is the most critical component of continuous improvement.

Schools that function as PLCs foster a climate of trust, collaboration, and shared leadership and actively engage in learning focused on improving student outcomes (De Neve & Devos, 2016; DuFour et al., 2021).

The United States literacy rate demands that educators do more than provide students with a chance to learn to read; it signals a call to action for all educators to ensure high levels of learning for each student.

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APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM

University of Georgia
Consent Form

EQUITY-DRIVEN LEADERSHIP: BRIDGING LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT GAPS THROUGH STRATEGIC HIGH-LEVERAGE PRACTICES

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:

Amanda Cavin
UGA Researcher
Peachtree City Elementary
Phone: 770-631-3250
Email: ascavin@uga.edu

The purpose of this study is to examine leader and teacher practices that result in more equitable outcomes for students within a suburban public elementary school. The researcher would like to learn how to develop teachers' capacity to integrate high-leverage practices designed to improve access and outcomes for English Language Learners. The following research questions are the focus of this study:

1. How does the action research design team describe the process of facilitating and supporting the implementation of PLCs for literacy development in one suburban elementary school?
2. How do stakeholders describe the role of high-leverage practices in promoting ELLs' literacy development?

3. How do teachers articulate their role in the continuous improvement process for literacy development via professional learning communities?

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an employee at the school where the study is to be conducted and a member of the focus population for the study.
If you agree to participate in this study:

- We will collect information about the process of facilitating and supporting Professional Learning Communities (PLC) for literacy development, the role of high-leverage practices in promoting literacy development among English language learners, and the role of the teacher in the continuous improvement process for literacy development via PLCs.
- We will ask you to complete two surveys twice during the first semester, which should take approximately 10 minutes to complete per survey. (Two in August and two in November)
- We will ask you to participate in an interview twice during the first semester, which should take approximately 30 minutes of your time. (Once in August and once in November)

Participation in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty. Your decision to participate, or not, will have no impact on your TKES rating or employment status.

The risks associated with participating in this study include:

- There is a risk of someone outside the research team overhearing the interview processes between you and the researcher. To minimize this risk, interviews will be conducted in a secure location on campus.
- There is a risk of someone outside of the research team seeing the staff members participating in the interview sessions. If that were to happen, it could lead to unintended identification of you beyond the scope of this project. To minimize this risk, interviews will be conducted in a location on campus with limited visibility.

- There is a risk of other participants discussing the information shared during interviews with other staff members. This risk will be minimized through conversations held with all staff members and a confidentiality agreement between the researcher and participants.
- The researcher could not identify any reasonably foreseeable risks associated with participation in the surveys. However, if there are questions on the surveys or asked during the interviews that make you feel uncomfortable, you may skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them.

High-leverage instructional practices have the potential to build capacity in teachers for greater effectiveness and improve literacy rates among all students, especially those who are historically disadvantaged. Your responses may help us understand effective leader and teacher practices that promote the implementation of high-leverage instructional practices in an elementary school. We will provide you with a report of the results of the surveys and questionnaires. We will also share with you resources on strategies most effective in increasing literacy among Hispanic, Black, and English learners and on how teachers are supporting these students in the classroom at your school.

Privacy/Confidentiality: The information collected from you will include information that identifies you directly and indirectly. Information such as your email address will be used to notify you of the interview sessions and to distribute surveys. A coding system will be used to assign a number for each participant and after scheduling the session, all information will be identified by the number codes. Identifying information, master list of codes, and all data will be stored separately. Once the initial data collection phase is completed, all identifying information will be destroyed. Until that time, the principal investigator will have access to identifiable data. Research team members will only have access to the data devoid of any identifying information and the codes associated with the files.

The project's research records may be reviewed by the Office for Human Research Protections and by departments at the University of Georgia responsible for regulatory and research oversight. Researchers will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law (e.g.,

subpoenaed data files). An exception to the confidentiality assurance is if there is reasonable cause through study interactions to suspect child maltreatment, the researchers are mandatory reporters of suspected child abuse or neglect.

If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

Please feel free to ask questions about this research at any time. You can contact the Principal Investigator, Amanda Cavin, ascavin@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

APPENDIX B

ARIT Interview Protocol

Pre-Implementation Researcher Questions:

Research Question 1:

- What do you see as the school's role in developing structures to support teachers as instructional leaders?
- What do you see as the biggest challenges for teacher-leaders in supporting instruction? Designing, implementing, and monitoring professional learning? Other?
- What interventions do you feel would be helpful in supporting teachers as instructional leaders?

Research Question 2:

- What is the relationship between high-leverage practices and teacher value added models?
- After reviewing achievement data, what do you notice? What do you wonder?
- After reviewing achievement data and artifacts collected, what interventions do you believe are beneficial in enhancing instruction for English Learners?

Research Questions 3:

- How do you perceive your unique background and experience will contribute to the work and success of your students?
- What impact do you perceive the PDSA cycle will have on student achievement in literacy?
- What benefits, both personally and professionally, do you expect to see from participating in a PLC?
- Describe the stumbling block that is currently holding your learning team back. What could your group be doing better?
- Describe the processes your learning team is most comfortable with. What has your team already mastered?

APPENDIX C

ARDT Interview Protocol

Pre-Implementation Researcher Questions:

Research Question 1:

- After reviewing the survey data, what do you notice? What do you wonder?
- After reviewing the survey data and artifacts collected, what interventions do you think will be beneficial in enhancing school-level instructional leadership support structures for teachers?
- How will your unique background and experience contribute to the work and success of the design team? Is there anything else you would like to share?

Research Question 2:

- After reviewing student achievement data, what do you notice? What do you wonder?
- After reviewing achievement data and artifacts collected, what interventions do you think will be beneficial in enhancing instruction for English Learners?
- How will your unique background and experience contribute to the work and success of the design team? Is there anything else you would like to share?

Post-Implementation Researcher Questions:

Research Question 1:

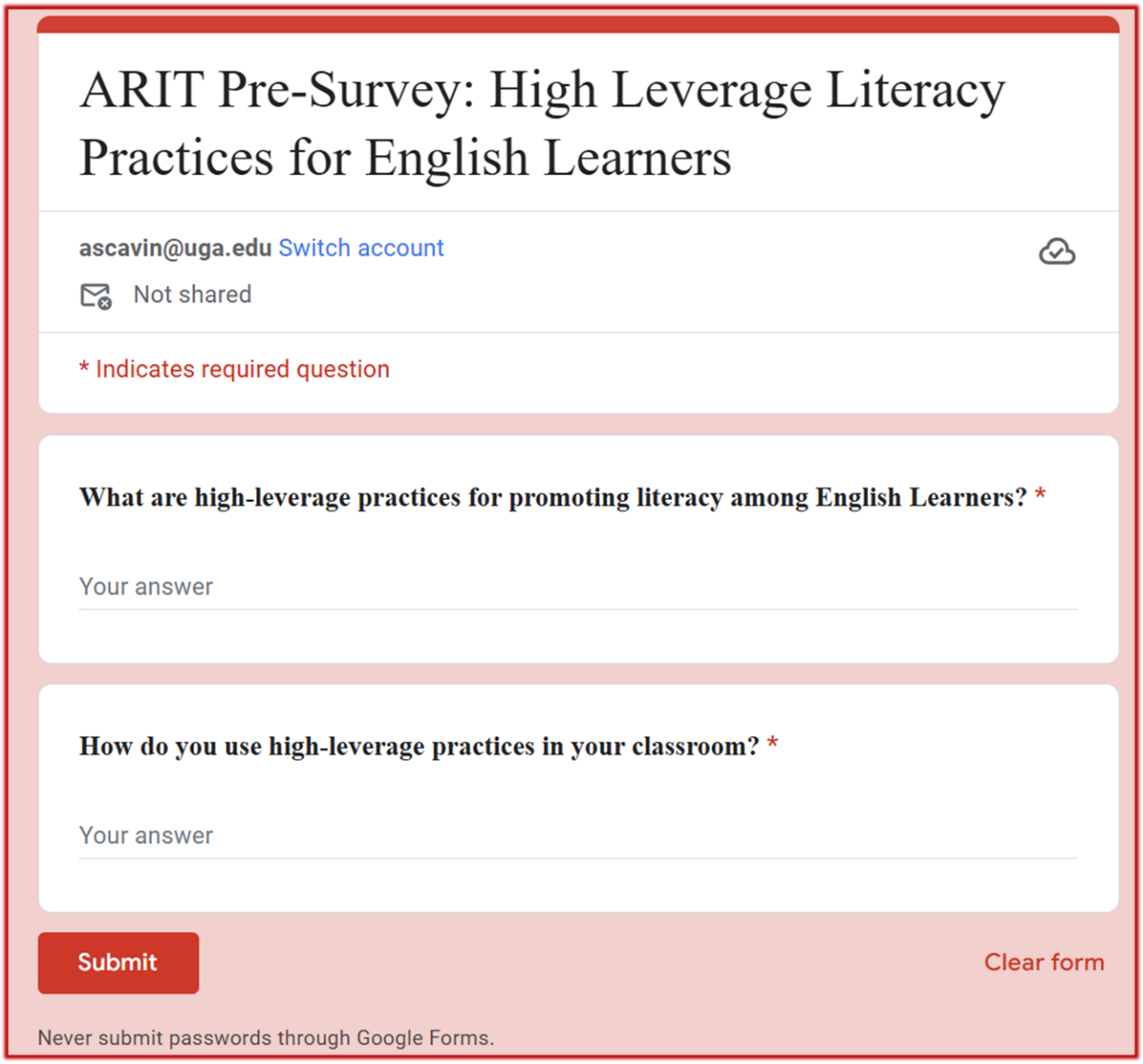
- After reviewing the survey data, what do you notice? What do you wonder?
- After reviewing the survey data and artifacts collected, what interventions do you think have been beneficial in enhancing school-level instructional leadership support structures for teachers?
- How has your unique background and experience contributed to the work and success of the design team? What benefits have you seen personally and professionally from participating with this design team?
- Is there anything else you would like to share?

Research Question 2:

- After reviewing achievement data, what do you notice? What do you wonder?
- After reviewing achievement data and artifacts collected, what interventions do you believe are beneficial in enhancing instruction for English Learners?
- How has your unique background and experience contributed to the work and success of the design team? What benefits have you seen personally and professionally from participating with this design team?

APPENDIX D

ARIT Pre-Survey: High Leverage Literacy Practices for English Learners



APPENDIX E

Cyle 1 Meeting: Professional Learning on High Leverage Strategies for English Learners

4th Grade Team

High-Impact Literacy Practices for English Learners
1. Understand and address the academic language demands of the lesson. 2. Build upon students' background knowledge. 3. Design and scaffold learning opportunities in every lesson that integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing domains. 4. Provide opportunities for student participation through meaningful discourse and structure Neri, R., Lozano, M., Chang, S., & Herman, J. (2016). High-leverage principles of effective instruction for english learners. The Center on Standards and Assessment Implementation.
Operationalize: Understand and address the academic language demands of the lesson.
Definition: Identify specific vocabulary, sentence structures, and conversations required for students to fully participate and succeed in the lesson. Team Steps during Planning/PLCs: 1. Preview planning document 2. Unpack the standard 3. Use ReadyGen TE to look at ELL misconceptions 4. Explicitly teach the language in the standard (apply, concept, etc.) 5. Identify vocabulary 6. Teach sentence structures 7. Provide scaffolding and supports 8. Preview anchor text and identify potential vocabulary or phrases that will be barriers to language acquisition
Operationalize: Build upon students' background knowledge.
Definition: Intentionally linking prior knowledge, text to self, text to world, to pictures, videos Team Steps during Planning/PLCs: 1. Using conversations, pictures, videos, realia (ex: Skeletons) to access background knowledge prior to units across content areas

2. Multiple exposures to vocabulary
3. Multiple opportunities for students to use vocabulary in Speaking, Writing, Listening, and Reading (SWRL).
4. Opportunities for Generative Language (ex: protect, protects, protecting, protective, etc)
5. Contextual learning
6. Explicit instruction
7. Utilize multiple resources for instruction
8. Active engagement
9. Visual/kinesthetic support
10. Pre-teaching vocabulary
11. Exposure to text collections (such as in ReadyGen or in SS)

Supporting Master's County Resources

- Active Vocabulary Routines
  - Vocabulary Routine-Detailed
  - LETRS Routine to Introduce a New Word
- Unit Specific ESOL Strategies in Ready Gen Teacher Manual
- Background Knowledge Routine
- Background Knowledge Strategies
- Academic Vocabulary

5th Grade Team

High Impact Literacy Practices for English Learners

1. Understand and address the academic language demands of the lesson.
2. Build upon students' background knowledge.
3. Design and scaffold learning opportunities in every lesson that integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing domains.
4. Provide opportunities for student participation through meaningful discourse and structure

Neri, R., Lozano, M., Chang, S., & Herman, J. (2016). High-leverage principles of effective instruction for english learners. The Center on Standards and Assessment Implementation.

Operationalize: Understand and address the academic language demands of the lesson.

Definition: Prior to the start of a unit, preview vocabulary to identify essential vocabulary.

Teacher Actions:

1. Active vocabulary routines with
2. Morphology of words and making connections/prefixes and suffixes
3. Preview vocabulary
4. Vocabulary routines: pictures/synonyms/antonyms/sentences/generative language

5. Draw and guess
6. Quiz quiz share
7. Add an action for the word
8. Word web
9. Frayer model
10. Possum model

Operationalize: Build upon students' background knowledge.

Definition: Predetermine possible misconceptions and ways to increase connections to content (text to text, text to world, and text to self.

Teacher Actions:

1. Pictures and realia to activate knowledge
2. Video clips
3. Turn and talk
4. Understand what background knowledge is needed for students to have ability to infer
5. Teacher talking about sentence complexity during read-alouds

Supporting Master's County Resources

- Active Vocabulary Routines
  - Vocabulary Routine-Detailed
  - LETRS Routine to Introduce a New Word
- Unit Specific ESOL Strategies in Ready Gen Teacher Manual
- Background Knowledge Routine
- Background Knowledge Strategies
- Academic Vocabulary

APPENDIX F

ARIT Post-Cycle II Interview Questions

Post-Implementation Researcher Questions:

Research Question 1:

- What do you see as the school's role in developing structures to support teachers as instructional leaders?
- What do you see as the biggest challenges for teacher-leaders in supporting instruction? Designing, implementing, and monitoring professional learning? Other?
- What interventions do you feel have been helpful in supporting teachers as instructional leaders?

Research Question 2:

- What is the relationship between high-leverage practices and teacher value added models?
- After reviewing achievement data, what do you notice? What do you wonder?
- After reviewing achievement data and artifacts collected, what interventions do you believe are beneficial in enhancing instruction for English Learners?

Research Question 3:

- How has your unique background and experience contributed to the work and success of your students?
- How has your unique background and experience contributed to the work and success of your students?
- What impact did your use of the PDSA cycle have on student achievement in literacy?
- What benefits have you seen personally and professionally from participating in a PLC?
- Describe the stumbling block that is currently holding your learning team back. What could your group be doing better?
- Describe the processes your learning team is most comfortable with. What has your team already mastered?

APPENDIX G

ARDT: Post-Cycle Interview Questions

Post-Implementation Researcher Questions:

Research Question 1:

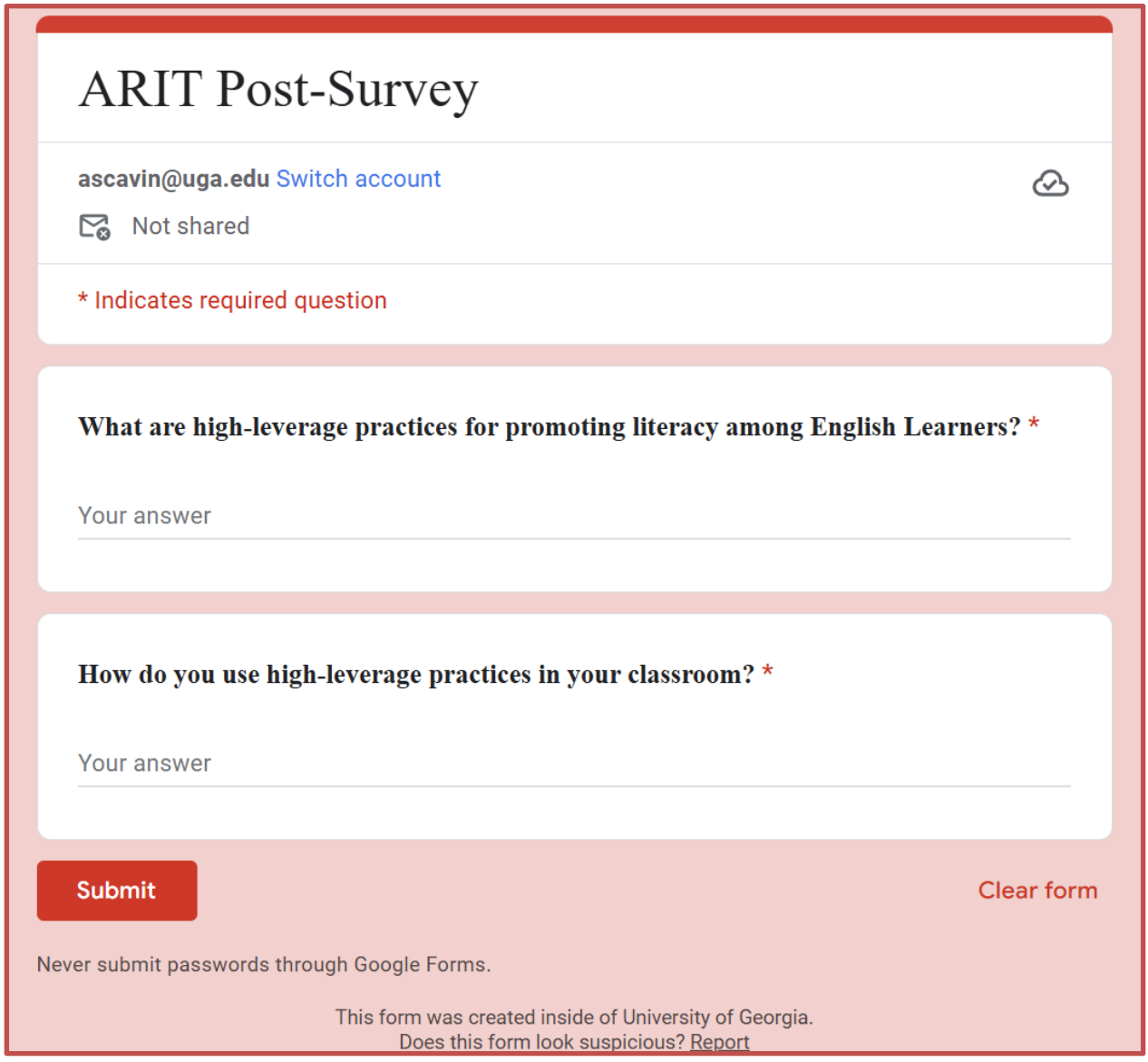
- After reviewing the survey data, what do you notice? What do you wonder?
- After reviewing the survey data and artifacts collected, what interventions do you think have been beneficial in enhancing school-level instructional leadership support structures for teachers?
- How has your unique background and experience contributed to the work and success of the design team?
- What benefits have you seen personally and professionally from participating with this design team?
- Is there anything else you would like to share?

Research Question 2:

- After reviewing achievement data, what do you notice? What do you wonder?
- After reviewing achievement data and artifacts collected, what interventions do you believe are beneficial in enhancing instruction for English Learners?
- How has your unique background and experience contributed to the work and success of the design team?
- What benefits have you seen personally and professionally from participating with this design team?

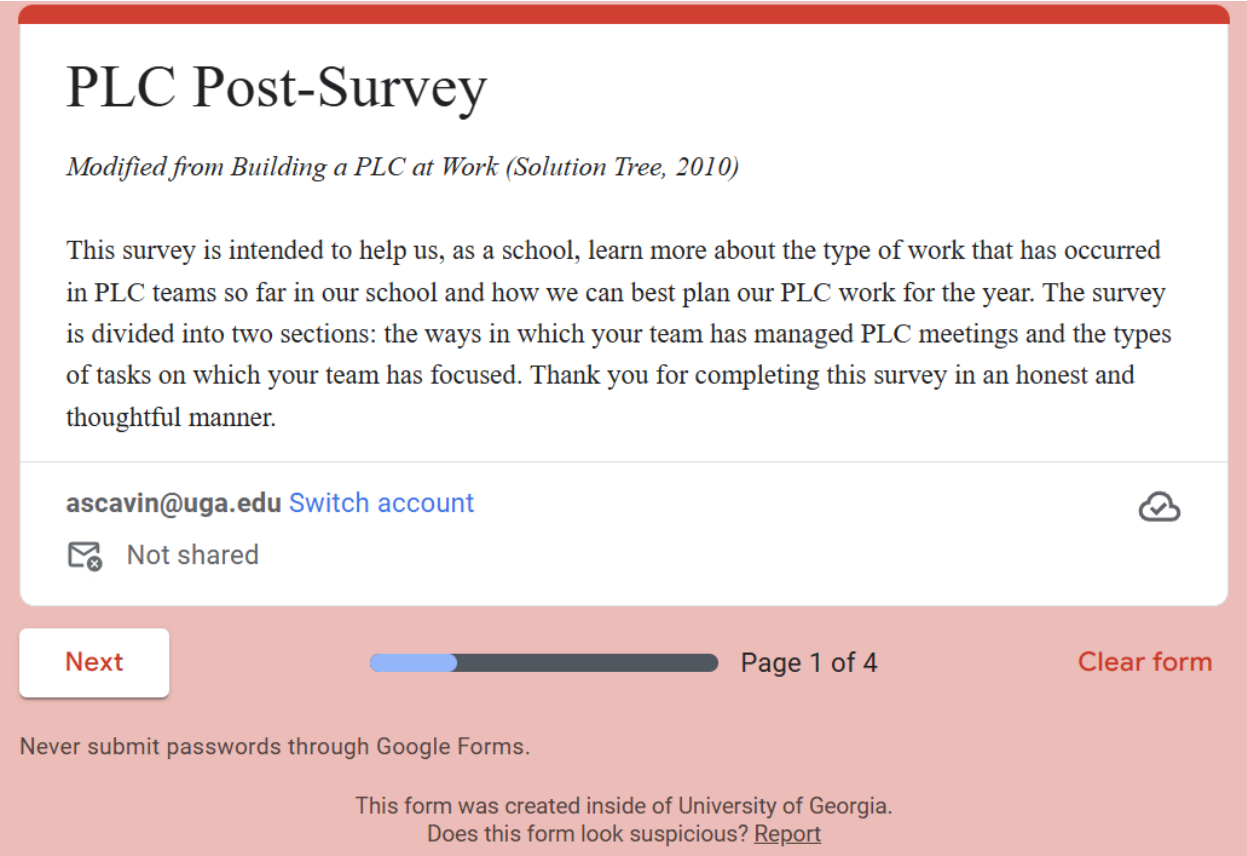
APPENDIX H

Survey: High Leverage Literacy Practices



APPENDIX I

Survey: PLCs



PLC Post-Survey

Modified from Building a PLC at Work (Solution Tree, 2010)

This survey is intended to help us, as a school, learn more about the type of work that has occurred in PLC teams so far in our school and how we can best plan our PLC work for the year. The survey is divided into two sections: the ways in which your team has managed PLC meetings and the types of tasks on which your team has focused. Thank you for completing this survey in an honest and thoughtful manner.

ascavin@uga.edu Switch account

Not shared

Next

Page 1 of 4

Clear form

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

This form was created inside of University of Georgia.
Does this form look suspicious? Report

PLC Post-Survey

ascavin@uga.edu Switch account

Not shared

* Indicates required question

Team-Based Collaboration: Meeting Management

Please indicate the extent to which each of the statements below is true by circling one of the four numbers using the following scale:

We have an agreed-upon set of meeting norms in our PLC team (for example, expectations for participant behaviors during meetings). *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very True

We follow our meeting norms consistently at PLC meetings. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very True

Our norms help us to have productive, effective conversations. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very True

We have clear tasks to perform at our PLC meetings *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

Our tasks relate directly to student learning goals. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

Our tasks are determined by consensus among our team members *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

A large majority of our PLC time (80 percent or more) is spent on tasks related to student learning goals. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

During PLC conversations, team members sometimes disagree about ideas or practices. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

When team members disagree about ideas or practices, we tend to discuss those disagreements in depth. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very True

When I disagree with something a member of my PLC has said, I almost always voice that disagreement. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very True

Within PLC meetings, we try to avoid emotionally charged or difficult topics or conversations. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very True

I feel a strong sense of attachment to my team. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very True

If we were given the option of no longer meeting as a PLC, I would still want to continue the meetings *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very True

I have improved as a classroom teacher as a result of the conversations and work we have done in our PLC. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

I have made changes to my teaching practices as a result of the work that we have done as a PLC. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

Comments:

Your answer

Back Next Page 2 of 4 Clear form

Team-Based Collaboration: Meeting Management

Please indicate the extent to which each of the statements below is true by circling one of the four numbers using the following scale:

We have an agreed-upon set of meeting norms in our PLC team (for example, expectations for participant behaviors during meetings). *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

This is a required question

We follow our meeting norms consistently at PLC meetings. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

Our norms help us to have productive, effective conversations. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

We have clear tasks to perform at our PLC meetings *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

Our tasks relate directly to student learning goals. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

Our tasks are determined by consensus among our team members *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

A large majority of our PLC time (80 percent or more) is spent on tasks related to student learning goals. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

During PLC conversations, team members sometimes disagree about ideas or practices. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

When team members disagree about ideas or practices, we tend to discuss those disagreements in depth. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

When I disagree with something a member of my PLC has said, I almost always voice that disagreement. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

Within PLC meetings, we try to avoid emotionally charged or difficult topics or conversations. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

I feel a strong sense of attachment to my team. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

If we were given the option of no longer meeting as a PLC, I would still want to continue the meetings *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

I have improved as a classroom teacher as a result of the conversations and work we have done in our PLC. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

I have improved as a classroom teacher as a result of the conversations and work we have done in our PLC. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

I have made changes to my teaching practices as a result of the work that we have done as a PLC. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

Comments:

Your answer

Back Next Page 2 of 4 Clear form

Team-Based Collaboration: Teaching and Learning Tasks

Please indicate the extent to which each of the statements below is true by circling one of the four numbers using the following scale:

My PLC team has worked to define the most important student learning goals in our content areas. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very True

If you were to ask each of the members of my PLC team to list the most important student learning goals in our content areas independently, we would all come up with nearly identical lists. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very True

I could explain to a parent, in simple language, the most important grade level learning goals for his or her child in the content areas I teach. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very True

In my PLC team, we regularly (at least monthly) administer common assessments to our students (in other words, all students complete the same assessment). *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

In my PLC team, we regularly use rubrics to score students' common assessments. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

As a PLC team, we regularly (at least monthly) assess student work samples as a team. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

As a PLC team, we regularly (at least monthly) analyze data from students' common assessments. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

As a PLC team, we regularly (at least monthly) analyze data from students' common assessments. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

I adjust the instructional practices in my classroom based on my students' performance on common assessments. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

As a PLC team, we regularly (at least monthly) make adjustments to our instructional practices across all classrooms based on students' performance on common assessments *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

I have implement numerous academic interventions in my classroom for struggling students. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

As an individual teacher, I regularly think about how my specific instructional practices affect student learning and how changes in my instructional practices might lead to changes in student learning. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not True	○	○	○	○	○	Very True

As a PLC team, we regularly discuss how our specific instructional practices affect student learning and how changes in our instructional practices might lead to changes in student learning. *

1	2	3	4	5

Review the tasks in the following chart and list the percent of time your PLC team spent on each of these tasks during the past semester. (Your total should add up to 100 percent.)

Percent of Time Spent on Task at PLC Meetings: Analyzing, comparing, or scoring student work samples. *

Your answer

Percent of Time Spent on Task at PLC Meetings: Developing or reviewing common assessments. *

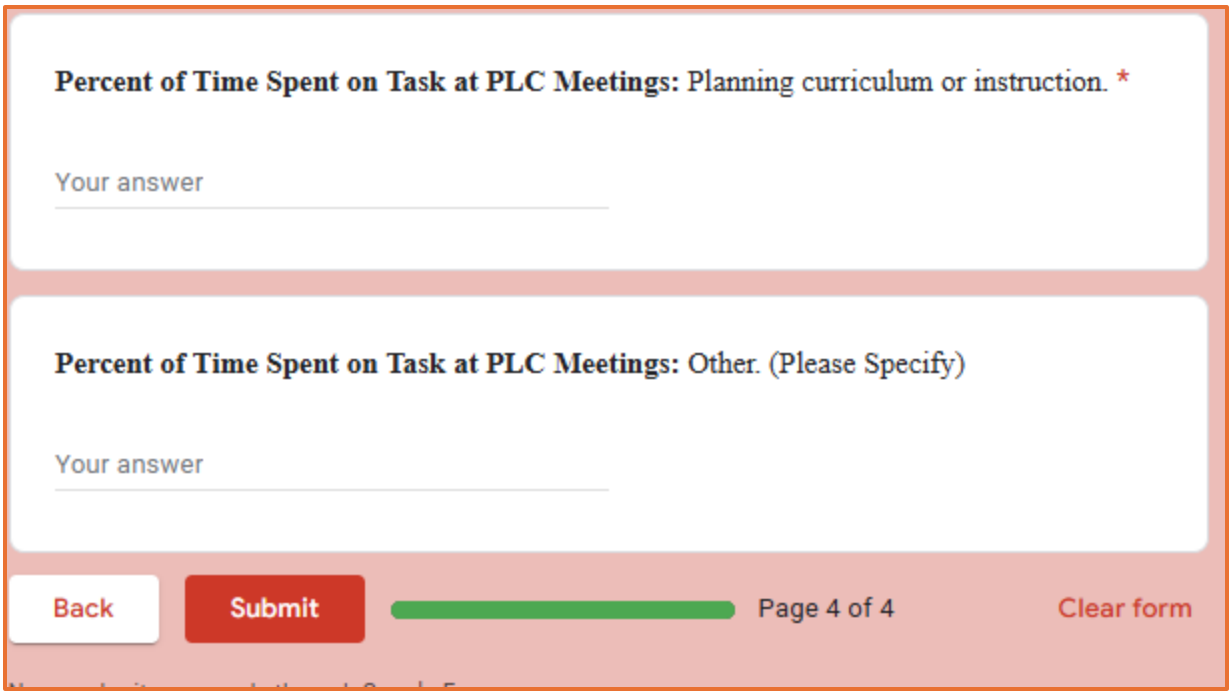
Your answer

Percent of Time Spent on Task at PLC Meetings: Analyzing assessment data. *

Your answer

Percent of Time Spent on Task at PLC Meetings: Discussing grade-level or school business priorities (for example, discussing recorded lessons, field trips, recess scheduling, and so on.) *

Your answer


Percent of Time Spent on Task at PLC Meetings: Planning curriculum or instruction. *
Your answer
Percent of Time Spent on Task at PLC Meetings: Other. (Please Specify)
Your answer
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APPENDIX J
Sample PLC Agenda: Fourth Grade

Date: November 12th, 2024
Visitors:
-[redacted] Math Coordinator
-Article: Positioning Students as Thinkers in Mathematics (NCTM)
Where have we been?

- ELA: Finished 1A, moving into 2A
- Math: Finishing Unit 3

Where are we going?

- ELA: Unit 2A
- Math: Unit 4

Where are we now?

- ELA Data Protocol DSC Unit 1 Interim
    - Student Performance Data:
        - What are we noticing any similarities?

How will we move learning forward?

- Sharing Best Practices:
    - Teachers share successful strategies they have implemented.
        -
    - Discuss challenges faced and seek advice from colleagues.
        -
- Interventions:
    - Discuss intervention strategies for students who are struggling.
        -
    - Plan for differentiation to meet diverse student needs.
        -
- Resource Sharing:
    - Introduce new materials, technology, or resources that can support instruction.

What did we learn today?