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**A Case Study of Successful Early Literacy Instruction in a Texas  
Elementary School**

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**A Case Study of Successful Early Literacy Instruction in a  
Texas Elementary School**

**by**

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**Treatise**

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## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to my amazing family who have always supported and encouraged me. First and foremost, I dedicate this work to my mother, Olga. Her deep love for her family and stellar work ethic have set the example for me all my life. She has been my rock every step of the way. Next, this work is dedicated to my stepfather, Mir. His solemn reverence for education was instilled in me from a young age. To him, wealth was of little value, but it was education that was worthy of respect. He always encouraged me to do my homework and pursue education. In his eyes, meaningful study was essential in becoming the best version of oneself. This work is dedicated to my son, the purest joy in my life. Since the day he came into this world, he has given me reason to be a better person and to set a good example. I hope that my accomplishments will inspire him to pursue his dreams, fulfill his incredible potential, and achieve his goals. This work is dedicated to my father, John. His love, though it may have been from afar, was always true and offered gentle reassurance along the way. Finally, this work is dedicated to my little sister, Shanaz. She achieved the title of doctor before me and set a high bar, challenging me to move forward and never let my fears get in the way of my success. To my beautiful family, thank you for your guidance, love, and support, without which I would never have come this far. I love you all with all my heart!

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## **Abstract**

### **A Case Study of Successful Early Literacy Instruction in a Texas Elementary School**

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The problem of the reading achievement gap could be ameliorated by gaining an in-depth understanding of the practices implemented by educators on an elementary campus where achievement gaps have been eliminated and economically disadvantaged students excel academically. The challenge to reducing educational inequities among economically disadvantaged students is enormous due to the many factors associated with poverty as impeding educational achievement. However, successful, high performing schools serving high rates of economically disadvantaged students do exist. More information is needed about the practices of educators on elementary campuses where economically disadvantaged students thrive academically. The purpose of the study was to examine how elementary educators ensure third grade students in a school with at least 90% of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds achieve and sustain performance of at least 90% passing at the approaches grade-level reading performance on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) Reading assessment. One elementary school represented the case study for interviewing the principal and conducting four focus groups: (1) kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2 teachers, (2) Grade 3 teachers,

(3) central office staff, and (4) parents of students who attend the school. The qualitative study followed a case study design with one successful school. The interview and focus groups allowed for gathering data via open-ended questions with central office personnel, the principal, kindergarten through Grade 3 teachers, and parents about the campus's organization (or academic culture) and district-wide practices. Artifacts and documents were collected and coded to contribute to the findings. The multiple data sources offered the opportunity to triangulate data and ascertain themes. Two themes that emerged addressing the resources and supports that increase reading achievement were: (a) all-hands-on-deck academic support and (b) standardized curriculum resources. Three themes that emerged addressing educational practices that improved reading skills of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were: (a) connecting writing with reading, (b) use of assessment data, and (c) differentiating instruction. Finally, three themes that emerged about the aspects of academic culture that promote and sustain high reading achievement were: (a) community relationships built on trust and communication, (b) celebrating reading, and (c) COVID-19 affected school culture. Although COVID-19 was not explicitly mentioned in the research questions, several participants mentioned the global pandemic in their responses, and it was found to have affected the academic culture of the school. This case study of success by a single campus in one district could be used to guide elementary school leaders and superintendents striving to address the reading needs of their economically disadvantaged students. The findings contribute to understanding how school leadership, culture, curriculum, instruction, and teacher support affect high-poverty schools' third grade students' outcomes on state standardized reading tests. Statewide policies might be influenced in the future.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

The purpose of the study was to examine how elementary educators and principals ensure third grade students in schools with at least 90% of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds achieve and sustain performance of at least 90% passing rates at the approaches grade-level reading performance on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) Reading assessment. This chapter presents background information, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, definitions, assumptions, delimitations, limitations, significance of the research, and a summary of the chapter.

### **Background**

One of the most fundamental and important skills that children learn during their elementary years is how to read. Literacy is a skill that develops over time with repeated practice and guided instruction (Adler & Fisher, 2001; Graham & Hebert, 2011; Thompson, 2012). Adler and Fisher (2001) identified “compelling evidence that children who do not learn to read fluently and independently in the early grades have few opportunities to catch up to, and virtually no chance to surpass their peers who are reading on grade level” (p. 616). The challenge to reducing educational inequities among economically disadvantaged students is enormous. “While education is viewed by many as an important mechanism for social mobility, many scholars argue that schools reproduce rather than challenge social inequality” (Diamond & Spillane, 2004, p. 1145). Additionally, many factors associated with poverty can impede educational achievement and include a lack of “family resources, school environment, psychological health,

emotional and social challenges, acute and chronic stressors, and health and safety issues” (Padilla et al., 2020, p. 104). As a result, not all children acquire the literacy skills necessary for success in life while in elementary school (Buffum et al., 2010).

Historically, students of low socioeconomic status (SES) perform lower academically than students of other socioeconomic statuses (Adler & Fisher, 2001; Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Lee & Reeves, 2012). This disparity between economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers in America’s public schools has been identified as the achievement gap (Davis, 2019). The reading achievement gap between economically disadvantaged and other SES students exists in Texas, as it does in other states (Heilig et al., 2018). Despite the efforts of legislators, academics, and the best-intentioned educators, affluent students consistently outperform economically disadvantaged students (Lee & Reeves, 2012). In order to help ameliorate these inequities, educators must address students’ literacy needs, so that all students have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Effective literacy practices have been empirically shown to promote substantial reading growth that reduce educational inequities (Kennedy, 2010; Taylor, 2000; Thompson, 2012). When English language arts is made the cornerstone of elementary school instruction, teachers can ensure all students learn to read (Adler & Fisher, 2001). If educators can help the students who have historically underperformed achieve at higher levels of reading proficiency, they can work to close long-standing achievement gaps. More information is needed about the practices of educators on elementary campuses where economically disadvantaged students excel academically (Amendum & Fitzgerald,

2013; Keith, 2018). In summary, reading is a fundamental skill needed for life success. Effective literacy practices can make a substantial impact on students' reading growth. Thus, it is critical to understand how these practices work to support students who are economically disadvantaged.

### **Statement of Problem**

Learning to read is one of the most important skills children need to develop during their years in elementary school. Unfortunately, many economically disadvantaged children do not acquire the literacy skills necessary to keep pace with their peers. For years, academic achievement studies have consistently demonstrated that students who are economically disadvantaged do not learn to read with the same level of proficiency as their more affluent peers (Adler & Fisher, 2001; Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Lee & Reeves, 2012). Adler and Fisher (2001) concluded that “average early reading performance for a school tends to decrease as the proportion of students eligible for free and reduced-cost lunch increases” (p. 616). Research has shown that students who are not reading on grade level by the third grade fall behind and often face serious consequences throughout their school careers (Wanzek et al., 2013). Moreover, elementary economically disadvantaged students who do not learn to read become more likely to live in poverty, enter the prison pipeline, and unlikely to reach average life expectancies during adulthood (Buffum et al., 2010). For this reason, it is imperative that educators hone the skills of literacy instruction that meet all students' reading needs, ensuring that economically disadvantaged students have their opportunity to succeed in school and in life.

Given the importance of reading performance to students' long-term success, many school districts across the country include third grade literacy goals in their board-adopted strategic plans. For example, the Austin Independent School District in Texas presented the following goal in their district strategic plan, "The percentage of 3rd graders achieving the meets grade level (postsecondary readiness) standard on the STAAR reading assessment will increase from 49% to 59% by SY 21/22." In their 3-year strategic plan, Yonkers Public Schools in New York offered the following target for success: "By June 2022, 47% of students in Grade 3 will demonstrate mastery in ELA based on the NYSED assessment." Wichita Public Schools in Kansas promoted the following long-term goal: "By 2023, 3rd grade reading proficiency will increase from 21.93% to 44% on the Kansas State Assessments." These are but three examples that demonstrate the importance districts around the country put on students achieving reading proficiency by Grade 3. Grade 3 reading performance is also critical for school districts, because it is the first year in which student performance data is publicly available and has implications for federal accountability standards.

Nevertheless, only select school districts seem to achieve satisfactory results. This disparity is because, by and large, only high SES schools manage to achieve the fundamental goal of reading proficiency for all students by Grade 3. Nevertheless, successful, high performing schools serving high rates of economically disadvantaged students do exist. Schools serving a majority of economically disadvantaged students can achieve high academic performance in reading. These schools are the exception not the rule.

A small but relatively consistent strand of work on reading performance has focused on whole schools (Fletcher et al., 2013; Sonnenschein et al., 2010; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020). Gehsmann and Jiron (2005) promoted learning “more about the process of improving schools so all children in America have the chance to lead richly literate and productive lives” (p. 194). The problem of the achievement gap in reading could be ameliorated by gaining an in-depth understanding at the whole school level of the practices of educators on elementary campuses where economically disadvantaged students excel academically. Empirical research in how these campuses achieve high levels of reading success is necessary, because research and evidence of best practices continues evolving (Keith, 2018).

### **Purpose of the Study**

More information is needed about the practices of educators on elementary campuses where economically disadvantaged students excel academically. The purpose of the study was to examine how elementary educators and principals ensure third grade students in schools with at least 90% of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds achieve and sustain performance of at least 90% passing at the approaches grade-level reading performance on the STAAR Reading assessment. The study allowed for exploring the resources and supports that the case study elementary campus utilized, the educational practices conducive to reading achievement, and the case study elementary campus’s development of a school culture promoting and sustaining high reading achievement.

Douglas Reeves (2004) coined the phrase *90/90/90 schools*. These are schools in which 90% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch, 90% of the student body is identified as non-Anglo, and 90% of state assessments are passed. Reeves criteria guided the selection of the case study school. While the case study campus fits all 3 of Reeves' (2004) criteria, only two were the focus of this case study: percent economically disadvantaged and percent passing on the state reading assessment. As such, the case study campus would be considered a 90/90 campus.

The elementary school selected for participation in this study had to meet the following criteria. First, the school selected had to be a public elementary school (not charter school) for addressing early literacy instruction. Second, the elementary school selected for this study had to have at least 90% of the total student enrollment identified as qualifying for free and reduced lunch according to the Texas Academic Performance Report released by the Texas Education Agency for the 2018-2019 school year. The school year of 2018-2019 was selected, because it was the last school year with relevant reading achievement data. In 2020, the state waived standardized testing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, schools tested, however the participation rates were low and extenuating factors due to the continuing pandemic influenced the data. For these reasons, data from 2019 was utilized, as it was the last year that complete data was collected before the pandemic.

According to the Texas Education Agency, students who score at the approaches grade level standard are not required to retest and are considered to have satisfied grade level requirements. This is particularly evident at Grades 5 and 8, where students who



score at the approaches grade level standard are not required to retest, unlike those who score at the did not pass standard level. Approaches grade level can be construed as a misnomer because schools that have 90% of students at the approaches grade level standard attain satisfactory results on accountability measures (Texas Education Agency, 2017).

The first participant selected for the case study was the campus principal. An interview was conducted with the campus principal. Standard questions were asked pertaining to the role of principal in leading the literacy instruction of the campus. Participants were asked about the data points and intervention efforts in place campuswide for contributing to the school's success. Next, focus groups were conducted with teachers at the school. Teachers were interviewed regarding the literacy support they received and the campus supports that they found to be the most effective in helping students achieve reading proficiency. Following the school level interviews, the data collection proceeded sequentially with parents and then district personnel who were asked questions based on the initial themes emerging from the data. Parents contributed their input as to how the school involved them in supporting their children's reading progress.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions were developed to support the purpose of the study and after reviewing the literature and identifying a high performing, high poverty school in the state of Texas. The research questions are as follows:

1. What resources and supports do principals provide to increase reading achievement among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?
2. What educational practices are perceived to improve reading skills for succeeding on the third grade STAAR Reading assessment with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?
3. What aspects of school organization (or academic culture) are perceived to promote and sustain high reading achievement with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

### **Assumptions**

Five main assumptions were made. The first assumption was that the study participants would respond to interview questions truthfully. The second assumption was that the campus principal has an overarching understanding of what phenomena contribute to the school's third grade reading success. The third assumption was that elementary educators could articulate what actions and pedagogy support their students' reading assessment success. The fourth assumption was that study participants could identify how they incorporate literacy into the campus culture. Finally, the fifth assumption was that selected study participants could articulate the curricular and instructional supports that they believed contribute to their students' reading assessment success.

### **Significance of the Research**

Given the importance that learning to read has in the academic career of a young student, it is important that every child receive effective instruction in early literacy.

Unfortunately, economically disadvantaged students fail to perform at the same academic level as their more affluent peers. One of the fundamental goals of public education is to educate all students regardless of background or socioeconomic status. Unfortunately, even with extensive literacy research over decades, the achievement gap persists. This study added new knowledge to the literature by examining the success of elementary educators and principals who ensure third grade students in a case study school with 90% of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds achieved and sustained performance of at least 90% passing at the approaches grade-level reading performance on the STAAR Reading assessment.

In-depth understanding of the successful practices of schools serving economically disadvantaged youth and achieving satisfactory results on state reading assessments might benefit future educational leaders' efforts to replicate these results. This information could be used to guide elementary school leaders who have yet to ensure economically disadvantaged student success on standardized reading tests but are striving to address the reading needs of their economically disadvantaged students. The findings might contribute to understanding school leadership, culture, curriculum, instruction, and teacher support that characterize high poverty, high-performing schools. Based on data collected from a whole school approach in this research, policies might be influenced in the future. Any superintendent seeking improvements in student achievement across all levels could use the findings as a tool for building a long-term strategic plan that empowers economically disadvantaged students to gain literacy and show their achievement on state tests. Furthermore, any superintendent looking to

achieve success across all levels would do well to ensure the instruction at the elementary level is effective and builds the solid foundation for students' future academic and life success.

### **Delimitations**

To narrow the scope of the research, several delimitations set the boundaries of the study. First, to understand the measures put in place that led to students' proficiency on the third grade STAAR Reading assessment, this study was delimited to an elementary campus configured as prekindergarten through fifth grade in a Texas school district. A second delimitation was that the elementary campus selected had at least 90% of the student body qualifying as economically disadvantaged. Third, the case study campus had at least 90% approaches grade level passing rate on the 2019 third grade STAAR state reading assessment. Only the campus principal and educators teaching kindergarten through 3rd Grade were eligible for participation in the study's interviews. Only schools whose current principal was the campus principal in 2019 were included. These delimitations also represented the inclusion criteria for the case study.

### **Limitations**

There are inherent limitations in this qualitative research that should be noted. First, the economically disadvantaged students in the school district from which the elementary school was selected would not represent all economically disadvantaged students in Texas. Secondly, 2019 STAAR data was used to identify campuses eligible for participation. Although 2019 was not the most current STAAR data, it did represent the most current proficiency rates prior to the pandemic. By the time the study was

conducted, the COVID-19 pandemic had been ongoing since March of 2020.

Investigating gaps in learning due to pandemic-related issues was not specifically within the scope of this study. STAAR assessments were not administered in 2020, and STAAR 2021 student participation rates were significantly lower than they were during the pre-pandemic years, because testing was optional in 2021. Therefore, this data was not a true representation of all 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade students' reading performance. For these reasons, the decision was made to use 2019 STAAR data, suggesting a limitation to the data's current generalizability.

Another limitation is that policies about reading instruction differ from district to district in Texas and across the United States. The case study school could operate under policies that promote reading success in a way that could not easily transfer to other school districts or states. The likely lack of schools meeting the selection criteria within single districts could suggest a limitation to the generalizability or transferability of the findings as well.

### **Definitions of Terms**

**Approaches Grade Level.** Performance in this category indicates that students are likely to succeed in the next grade or course with targeted academic intervention. Students in this category generally demonstrate the ability to apply the assessed knowledge and skills in familiar context (Texas Education Agency, 2017).

**Campus or School Culture.** The beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and written and unwritten rules that shape and influence every aspect of how a school functions, but the term also encompasses more concrete issues such as the physical and

emotional safety of students, the orderliness of classrooms and public spaces, or the degree to which a school embraces and celebrates racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural diversity. Like the larger social culture, a school culture results from both conscious and unconscious perspectives, values, interactions, and practices, and it is heavily shaped by a school's particular institutional history. Students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other staff members all contribute to their school's culture, as do other influences such as the community in which the school is located, the policies that govern how it operates, or the principles upon which the school was founded (Great Schools Partnership, 2013).

**Elementary Educator.** This term refers to elementary classroom teachers assigned the professional activities of instructing pupils in self-contained classes or courses; usually expressed in full-time equivalents for Kindergarten through Grade 5 (KewalRamani et al., 2018).

**Elementary Principal.** The highest-ranking administrator in an elementary school. Principals typically report directly to the school superintendent, but could report to the superintendent's designee, usually an associate superintendent, in larger school districts (Encyclopedia.com, 2019).

**Elementary School.** A school is classified as elementary by state and local practice and composed of any span of grades not above Grade 8 (KewalRamani et al., 2018).

**Low Socioeconomic Status.** This term refers to the student eligible for free or reduced-price lunch through the National School Lunch Program, a federally assisted meal program operated in public and private nonprofit schools and residential child care

centers. To be eligible for free lunch, a student must be from a household with an income at or below 130% of the federal poverty guideline; to be eligible for reduced-price lunch, a student must be from a household with an income between 130% and 185% of the federal poverty guideline (KewalRamani et al., 2018).

**STAAR.** State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness the state testing program that was implemented in the 2011-2012 school year. The Texas Education Agency, in collaboration with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and Texas educators, developed the STAAR program in response to requirements set forth by the 90th and 81st Texas Legislature. STAAR is an assessment program designed to measure the extent to which students have learned and are able to apply the knowledge and skills defined in the state-mandated curriculum standards, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). Every STAAR question is directly aligned to the TEKS currently implemented for the grade/subject or course being assessed. The STAAR program includes STAAR and STAAR Spanish. There are large print, braille, paper, and online versions of STAAR with and without designated supports (Texas Education Agency, 2018).

### **Summary**

Chapter One laid out the importance of literacy acquisition for young learners. It also highlighted the long-standing achievement gap and inequities existing in the nation's education system. The chapter introduced the purpose of the study as examining how elementary educators ensure third grade students in schools with at least 90% of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds demonstrate and sustain performance of

at least a 90% passing rate at the approaches grade-level reading performance on the STAAR Reading assessment. The research questions that supported the purpose were presented as well as the assumptions, delimitations, and limitations. The terms operationalized in the study were defined. The significance of the research was introduced. In Chapter Two, a review of the literature about early literacy instruction is presented. The presentation of empirical studies in the literature review are categorized into five sections based on the Texas Education Agency's (2021) Effective Schools Framework, as it relates to elementary literacy instruction. (It should be noted that the ESF was launched in 2018 as a pilot. In 2022, TEA revised the ESF. The literature review refers to the ESF that was current in 2021, at the time the literature was gathered and studied.)



## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

The purpose of the study was to examine how elementary educators in schools with at least 90% of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds achieve and sustain performance of at least a 90% passing rate at the approaches grade-level reading performance on the Grade 3 STAAR Reading assessment. This chapter begins with the conceptual framework. The peer reviewed literature regarding the topic of reading and reading achievement is organized according to the elements of the conceptual framework. The review of the literature is used to support the purpose of the study. After the literature for each major strand is presented, a summary completes the chapter.

### **Conceptual Framework**

When contemplating complex subjects such as teaching reading to young learners, concepts, frameworks, and conjectures help to explain complicated and multifaceted topics (Jensen, 2021). This conceptual framework involves merging school leadership as operationalized in the ESF (Texas Education Agency, 2021) and literacy instruction as applied in the three-pillar interconnected infrastructure by Woulfin and Gabriel (2020).

Woulfin and Gabriel (2020) ascribed to the notion that literacy instruction requires an interconnected infrastructure that ties together key pillars of success. The macrolevel pillars of leadership, campus climate, and professional development must work in concert to ensure the microlevel of curriculum and instructional techniques empower students to attain the goal of reading achievement. Quality literacy instruction

goes beyond a particular lesson or curriculum; instead, it encompasses the entirety of the school.

This three-pillar infrastructure begins with literacy leadership. Principals committed to their campuses focus the campus mission and goals on literacy achievement (Kearney et al., 2012). Principals should also serve as literacy leaders who have the background and expertise to offer teachers feedback that can help them to improve their literacy instruction (Kindall et al., 2018; McGeehan & Norris, 2020; Plaatjies, 2019). Finally, principals should be adept in developing the literacy practices and content knowledge of campus staff so that coaches and teacher leaders can build instructional capacity amongst the ranks of teachers across the campus (Zoch, 2015).

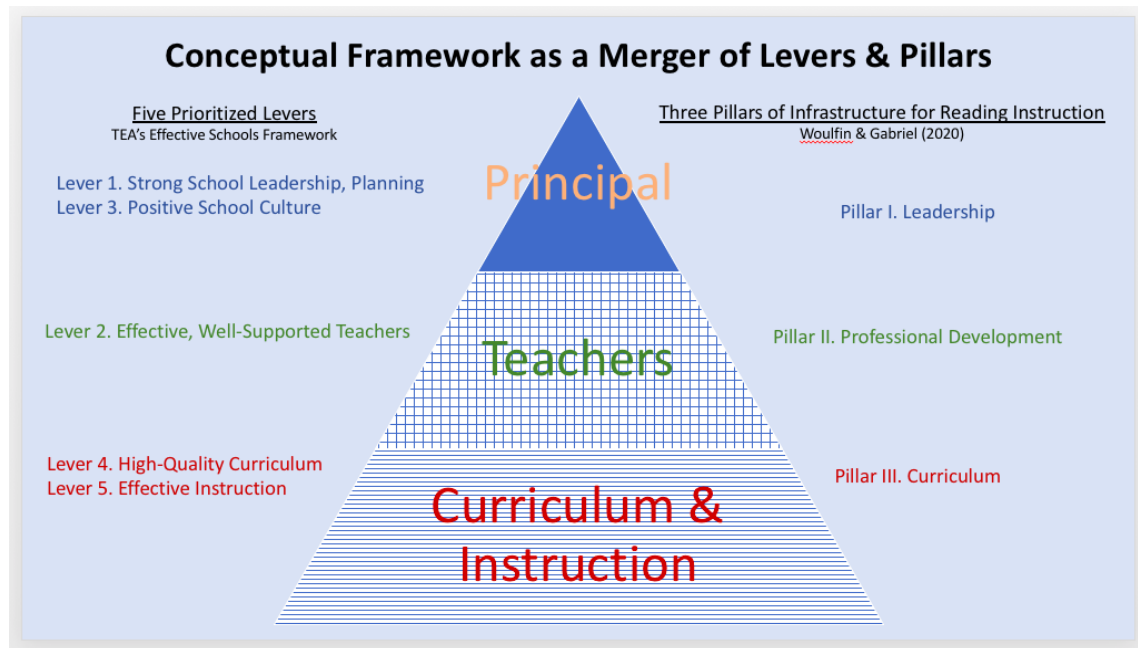
The principal uses leadership to ensure a positive school culture that supports literacy development and includes opportunities for teachers to collaborate with their peers and build their professional skills (Amendum & Fitzgerald, 2013; Reinhorn et al., 2017; Walpole et al., 2010). Teachers need professional support that builds their capacity to make efficacious instructional decisions when working with students (Amendum & Fitzgerald, 2013). Professional support that involves coaching teachers through the observation and feedback cycle can help them to gain the skills and strategies necessary to improve their reading instruction (Reinhorn et al., 2017). Thus, Woulfin and Gabriel (2020) can be applied alongside the Texas Education Agency's (2021) ESF that "was developed in conjunction with school and district leaders and included a national review of research about what makes high-performing schools excellent" (para. 2).

The ESF involves operationalizing five specific levers: (a) strong school leadership and planning, (b) effective, well-supported teachers, (c) positive school culture, (d) high quality curriculum, (e) effective instruction (Texas Education Agency, 2021). For the first lever of strong school leadership and planning, principals focus on developing a clear plan focused on student outcomes. Principals ensure that all members of the campus team, including assistant principals, counselors, and teacher leaders, understand their roles and responsibilities for implementing the plan and monitoring progress. For the second lever of effective, well-supported teachers, principals focus on recruiting, developing, training, and retaining a staff of highly qualified educators. They build teacher capacity through observation and feedback, and teachers are well supported and able to provide quality instruction to students. In operationalizing the third lever of positive school culture, principals focus on creating a shared vision with the whole school community. The principal concentrates on meeting the mission of the campus and establishing a safe school environment through high academic and behavioral expectations. In applying the fourth lever of high-quality curriculum, principals focus on developing a scope and sequence of curriculum and assessments that is aligned to state standards. This lever ensures that all students have access to curriculum at high levels of rigor. In the final lever of effective instruction, principals ensure teachers develop daily lesson plans that are focused on the objectives outlined in the state standards. This lever's implementation includes effective instructional strategies that are data informed based on diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments. The conceptual framework was

developed by merging the Texas Education Agency’s (2021) ESF with the three pillars for reading instruction by Woulfin and Gabriel (2020), as seen in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework*



By merging the ESF’s five levers with the three Woulfin and Gabriel pillars, the conceptual framework evolved as a pyramid to convey a solid structural approach to reading instruction. The peak pointing upwards signifies stability and efficacy of instruction. The top level of the pyramid is the principal who must be a solid, stable leader with a focus on reading instruction. This lead administrator establishes the positive school culture, sets the improvement plan for the year, and works to support the teachers. He or she also points the school in the right direction.

The next level of the pyramid is a well-supported teaching staff who have the training and resources necessary to clearly understand their work and effectively carry it out with accurate professional judgement (Fine et al., 2021; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020). The graph paper background was selected in order to represent the horizontal and vertical alignment that exists amongst an effective teaching staff. The base of the pyramid consists of high quality, effective curriculum focused on meeting state-standards and building in opportunities for diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments, as well as progress monitoring. The horizontal lines were chosen as the background for this level in order to represent the linear and logical progression that exists in high quality, effective curriculum.

According to this conceptual framework, all of these elements work in concert as educators on a campus build a successful, effective school in which students achieve their reading goals. By using an interconnected framework for understanding reading instruction and achievement in schools, the literature review was developed to examine how educators ensure students can gain reading skills and literacy success, particularly with students who are economically disadvantaged.

## **Presentation of the Literature**

### **School Leadership and Literacy**

The role of the principal in leading literacy practices on campus is key (Kerney et al., 2012). First, the principal directs the allocation of campus time and resources that can either support or deter from campus literacy efforts. According to the Texas Education Agency's (2021) ESF, the first lever of prioritized essential actions is strong school

leadership and planning. This lever focuses on developing administrators and leadership teams at every campus that have a clear plan focused on student outcomes in which all members of the team including principals, assistant principals, counselors, and teacher leaders understand their roles and responsibilities in both monitoring and implementing the plan. This is critical in establishing literacy achievement in elementary schools. Thus, these articles pertain to this strong leadership lever.

In a collective case study, Puzio et al. (2015) studied the role of the principal in supporting differentiated instruction which was identified as 60 minutes of Guided Reading instruction for students in the fourth and fifth grades. The researchers interviewed 15 teachers and 3 principals to examine how principals supported mutual engagement, alignment of instruction, and differentiated instruction among their teachers. Puzio et al. found that the principals “provided multiple opportunities for teachers to mutually engage, including time to share resources and observe other expert teachers” during their guided reading instruction (p. 141).

Taylor et al. (2019) made similar findings in a mixed methods study with quantitative data from two reading tests administered to students at 60 schools 9 months apart and qualitative data from a case study with educators at eight schools who participated in semi-structured interviews. Taylor et al. concluded that the educators’ knowledge and understanding of reading and the best methods for instruction functions as a compass by which school leaders deploy their other available resources school-wide to ensure effective reading instruction occurs campus wide.

Since the principal sets the academic priorities of the campus, the role of the principal is critical in making literacy a campus focus area. Consequently, Cosner (2011) did a longitudinal qualitative case study over a 3-year period (2006-2009) with three urban elementary schools. Data were collected through interviews with principals, assistant principals, literacy coordinators, and classroom teachers. According to Cosner (2011), teachers in the study reported that the principals consistently kept teachers informed about the academic priorities of the schools and the current statuses of their respective campuses. The principals also communicated regularly with the staff to keep everyone on track with the campus goals. Cosner (2011) concluded the following:

Principals played a key role in the support of evidence-based grade-level collaboration by either setting or maintaining a schoolwide literacy reform agenda that emphasized evidence-based grade-level collaboration as a primary reform strategy, providing key communication about evidence-based grade level collaboration, and reinforcing evidence-based grade-level collaboration as a central reform strategy. (p. 902)

The approaches of both Cosner (2011) and Puzio et al. (2015) are in keeping with the traditional view of the principalship, as principals are expected to set and consistently reiterate a campus's vision, mission, and goals.

In the role of instructional leader, principals have the responsibility of observing instruction as part of a teacher's annual appraisal. This process usually involves a pre-observation conference, formal observation, and post-observation conference. During this observation cycle, principals offer suggestions and feedback to help teachers improve

their literacy practice. In order for this process to offer benefits to the teachers, particularly in the area of literacy instruction, elementary principals should be adept in the developmental practices of reading instruction from the fundamental building blocks of language and phonics to the ultimate goal of reading comprehension and metacognition. In fact, Puzio et al. (2015) noted that their principals intentionally “conducted formal teacher evaluations during guided reading time” (p. 141).

In South Africa, Plaatjies (2019) studied principal capacity with a qualitative case study that included six schools and data collected through individual interviews with the schools’ six principals. Plaatjies found that principals in South Africa did not understand the role of literacy instructional leadership. These principals did not use classroom observations and did not understand the processes that would be effective for observing literacy instruction (Plaatjies, 2019).

Conversely, Kindall et al. (2018) distributed a questionnaire to kindergarten through Grade 6 teachers and collected information based on the teachers’ number of years of experience. Novice teachers with 5 or fewer years of experience reported that their principal’s content knowledge of literacy instruction made a significant impact on their instruction. McGeehan and Norris (2020) concluded that principals need to have knowledge and skills for promoting literacy education for effective decision making, feedback, and evaluations regarding literacy instruction in the classroom. However, when they reviewed 100 institutions of higher education offering a master’s degree in some form of education that included education administration, building level administration, or administration and education, McGeehan and Norris found that only 3 of the 100



institutions offered a course in which the course description included literacy as a specific content area, suggesting a weakness in principal training for literacy instructional leadership.

Finally, there is some disagreement in the literature between findings in qualitative and quantitative studies. According to Taylor et al. (2019), who studied literacy development in schools, qualitative research seems to point to the principal as a key factor in literacy instruction while quantitative research does not show relationships between principal leadership and student literacy data. Based on the need for principals to be proficient in building and monitoring campus systems for literacy instruction, McGeehan and Norris (2020) recommended “the educational community consider requiring educational leadership candidates to take courses in literacy in an effort to help them propel their teachers forward, prior to distributing principal certifications” (p. 19).

In addition to guiding the school mission and vision, effective leadership should ensure teachers are well-supported. This is discussed in the next section.

### **Well-Supported Literacy Teachers**

According to the ESF, well-supported teachers are highly qualified educators who possess the capacity to teach reading effectively through professional development, training, observation, and feedback. Well supported teachers are able to provide quality reading instruction to students. In reviewing the literature, several studies pointed to teacher professional support as a driving factor in the success of high poverty, high performing schools. For the purposes of this review, teacher support is defined as teacher

coaching, professional development opportunities, and mentoring (Texas Education Agency, 2021).

Teacher coaching has been recognized as essential to enhance literacy instruction. For instance, Walpole et al. (2010) designed a teaching observation protocol and coaching observation protocol to isolate factors in both teacher observation and coaching. These protocols were then used to focus the observations of teachers conducted at 117 schools in Georgia. Three factors were identified as important for teacher support by Walpole et al. First, teachers needed to have collaboration with colleagues. Secondly, teachers needed to be coached in a differentiated manner that is based on each teacher's strengths and areas of need. Finally, the campus leader needs to support the coaching of teachers by facilitating the coaching sessions. Five areas of practice were specifically identified for focused coaching and support: (a) collaboration with fellow teachers, (b) classroom management that allowed for small group classroom instruction, (c) effective reading instruction, (d) read-alouds, and (e) assessment. By providing teachers these coaching opportunities, teachers had the resources necessary to grow as professionals and provide sound instruction. In particular, the coaching observation protocol allowed the observer to note if the coach helped the teacher to interpret student data, to help the teacher create small groups for differentiated instruction, to formatively assess the teacher, or to model instruction for the classroom teacher.

A 2-year longitudinal study conducted by Amendum and Fitzgerald (2013) collected data from four sources: (a) reading assessments, (b) principal questionnaires, (c) professional development reading instruction reform, and (d) demographic information.

They indicated that school-wide educational reforms, which included strong teacher professional development components with effective follow-up addressing teachers' specific challenges, were most effective. Students with the greatest gains received low-structure content delivery but had value added experiences from the application of further overall school effectiveness characteristics. Amendum and Fitzgerald contended that support and encouragement of teachers empowers teachers to have the confidence necessary to make efficacious instructional decisions about reading instruction.

During instructional coaching sessions that follow the observation-feedback cycle, teachers have the opportunity to be observed often by administrators or campus coaches who can offer detailed feedback for improving their teaching practice. In a qualitative study, Reinhorn et al. (2017) interviewed 142 teachers and administrators at six high-performing, high-poverty schools. The teachers affirmed their principals' commitment to develop their instructional practices and reported receiving frequent, useful feedback about their instruction. One theme that emerged from the study was the vision of the school as focused on the systematic development of human capital from students to teachers to administrators. Schools successful in literacy establish a culture of continuous improvement not only through coaching but also through professional development suggesting a culture of trust among the teachers and administrators. Reinhorn et al. noted that teachers recognized that poor performance and a failure to improve might lead to dismissal, but they widely expressed confidence in the validity and fairness of their evaluator's summative assessments, largely because the evaluations were

grounded in frequent observations by evaluators who had deep knowledge of instruction and offered detailed feedback and professional support.

Teacher collaboration is another form of professional development that contributes to teacher improvement and student achievement. Reinhorn et al. (2017) found that a teacher's ability to collaborate with colleagues on common assessments was a significant predictor of academic achievement gains across reading. Collaboration about instructional strategies and curriculum also predicted student reading achievement gains. By coordinating master schedules to facilitate teacher collaboration, elementary schools ensure that their teachers have time to learn from each other and examine each other's practices to improve instruction. Schools and teachers with better quality collaboration across instructional domains display higher achievement gains usually at statistically significant and meaningful levels (Reinhorn et al., 2017).

Huang and Moon (2009) conducted a quantitative study by collecting reading achievement scores on state tests and distributing surveys to teachers, reading coaches, and administrators. They found a significant positive correlation between teachers with 5 or more years of experience in a particular grade level and higher student achievement, even though total years of teaching experience was not a significant predictor of increased student reading achievement. Zoch (2016) conducted an ethnographic study that included the approaches and responses of an elementary literacy coach at one campus. Based on field notes, observations of classroom instruction, audio/video recordings, and transcribed interviews, Zoch found that leading teacher-centered inquiry groups supported teachers and helped them to respond to student needs. These two

studies' findings support Ronfeldt et al.'s (2015) contention that teacher-learning support is especially important for new and novice teachers and teachers who are new to a particular grade level.

Clearly, teachers need opportunities to collaborate with their peers and build their professional skills (Amendum & Fitzgerald, 2013; Reinhorn et al., 2017; Walpole et al., 2010). Student achievement is unlikely to come from rote implementation of boxed curriculum. Instead, it comes when teachers have the polished teaching skills required to ascertain students' literacy strengths and weaknesses and the strategies to proactively provide literacy interventions as needs arise. Through coaching, mentoring, and professional development, teachers can enhance their teaching skills and become better prepared to attend to the social, emotional, and academic needs of their students (Reinhorn et al., 2017; Walpole et al., 2010).

### **School Culture and Literacy**

The culture of any campus has implications for its success. This is the premise embedded in the third lever of the ESF (Texas Education Agency, 2021). The principal creates a shared vision with the school community and establishes a safe school environment with high academic and behavioral expectations to achieve the school's mission. Literature that studied the relationships between school culture and literacy were reviewed.

In Turkey, Türkel et al. (2017) developed a 51-item assessment to measure reading culture. The items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, and a sample of 379 preservice teachers formed the sample group used for validating the new instrument.

The items measured reading attitude, reading perception, reading habits, and reading skills. These items were included in the final scale after factor analysis for a 30-item instrument as a comprehensive scale with 0.90 reliability in measuring a school's reading culture. Even though no further uses of this scale have been found in subsequent publications, the topics of the items can be adapted for supporting qualitative interviews about literacy culture.

Merga and Gardiner (2018) conducted content analysis of school plans, policies, and agreement documents (PPAD) to determine if these documents supported student reading engagement. The PPAD of 34 schools were analyzed to determine if their language specifically supported student reading engagement. Of the 34 schools whose documents were analyzed only 11 were found to include support of reading engagement. With only about a third of the schools specifically supporting reading engagement in their PPAD, Merga and Gardiner found “that few schools promoted reading engagement strategies as a whole-school priority, and where strategies did feature, these varied widely” (p. 37). Merga and Gardiner recommended a “deeper inquiry into school based policy making, how it is mediated by broader policy processes, and how global and local policy processes might foreground reading engagement” (p. 47).

Ho and Lau (2018) also examined aspects of school climate and literacy through questionnaires distributed to 35 students from each of 151 schools. The researchers sought to find how various factors, such as teaching and classroom climate, related to students' reading engagement and reading performance. Ho and Lau found that policies can be implemented to nurture a positive reading climate and improve students' reading

performance. Furthermore, Ho and Lau recommended that teachers should increase student participation and promote reading engagement through scaffolding strategies. Finally, Merga and Gardiner recommended a “deeper inquiry into school based policy making, how it is mediated by broader policy processes, and how global and local policy processes might foreground reading engagement” (p. 47) to produce better connections between school culture and literacy.

### **High Quality Literacy Curriculum**

When a small child is read to, they begin to make connections that lead to literacy. These connections include sounds, words, meanings, and thoughts. Although literacy is a component of every other content area, it is fundamentally taught through language arts. There are four areas of language arts: listening, speaking, writing, and reading. A high-quality literacy curriculum ensures that all four areas are addressed, monitored, and developed. Therefore, the early identification of students in need of intervention is key to an effective reading program (Adler & Fisher, 2001). This logical progression of skills is included in the fourth lever of the ESF in which the focus is on developing a scope and sequence of curriculum and assessments aligned to the state’s standards (Texas Education Agency, 2021). In the primary grades, pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first and second grades, this effort can be very challenging due to a need to tailor instruction based on the skill set of each student (Sonnenschein et al., 2010).

In a meta-analysis study, Jeynes (2008) gathered data from 22 studies published from 1966 to 2000 and examined the findings about the relationship between phonics and

the academic achievement of urban minority elementary school children. Jeynes found a significant relationship between phonics instruction and higher academic achievement. Furthermore, Jeynes recommended that phonetic basic skills should be emphasized to raise the scholastic reading outcomes of minority students because once students have learned to decode words, they must be taught how to encode words. Educational implications of Jeynes's meta-analysis suggest support for using encoding instruction to increase the literacy performances of at-risk primary grade students. Weiser and Mathes (2011) agreed that encoding instruction can be successful in improving the reading and spelling performances of older students with learning disabilities. Programs that emphasize explicit encoding and decoding instruction in learning grapheme-phoneme relationships have advantages over other early reading programs that do not (Ronfeldt et al., 2015). Sonnenschein (2010) agreed that instruction in phonemic awareness is beneficial to children of all ages and backgrounds and particularly beneficial for preschoolers and kindergarteners.

Ronfeldt et al. (2015) found in the United Kingdom, that students who were provided with phonics interventions, after initially failing a phonics screener, were able to outperform students who did not receive sufficient phonics intervention on the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study. Ronfeldt et al. also found support for the use of oral reading fluency in the context of reading initiatives. Essentially, oral reading fluency can be part of comprehensive assessment systems that schools develop for the purpose of making a range of decisions about students' reading. Schools are expected to identify, as soon as possible, students who may have or may develop reading problems. Beginning in



first grade, oral reading fluency can provide valuable information regarding who is on track for successful reading achievement and who is struggling.

Listening and speaking are precursors to reading and writing. A few studies in this literature review focused on these two areas. Greenfader et al. (2014) examined the effect of a performing arts program on the oral language skills of emergent bilingual students. Researchers implemented a Teaching Artist Project (TAP) that promoted classroom oral language practice. The curriculum involved lessons that incorporated movement, gestures, and expression to build English vocabulary comprehension and was particularly important for students whose first language is not English. Greenfader et al. found that students who received TAP outperformed students who did not receive TAP lessons on speaking assessments. Additionally, they showed that students who had the most limited English-speaking skills showed the greatest gains. Their findings suggest that utilizing teaching strategies that engage learners in multi-sensory experiences can help to close achievement gaps for emergent bilingual students. Along with this finding, there is a need for differentiated instruction focused on both explicit phonics skills, as well as reading instruction based on student needs.

One important skill that developing readers may need to be taught explicitly is phonics. Weiser and Mathes (2011) performed a best-evidence synthesis of 11 studies that met 10 criteria including an experimental or quasi-experimental treatment contrast design with children in Grades 1, 2, and 3 to measure effects of encoding on reading ability. Children in kindergarten benefit from a direct instructional focus on phonics acquisition (Weiser & Mathes, 2011). Additionally, for this instruction to be effective, it

must be taught systematically and sequentially. Amendum and Fitzgerald (2013) found that a higher degree of content delivery structure was associated with students making more progress in phonics knowledge, which is not likely to happen when teachers generate the curriculum on their own or do not have a background in phonics instruction. Once students have been given systematic and explicit instruction in decoding and encoding, they need plenty of opportunities to practice these new skills and develop reading automaticity or reading fluency (Baker et al., 2008; Weiser & Mathis, 2011).

Classroom instruction and intervention that incorporate elements to encourage comprehension proficiency, such as reading fluency and oral language, will likely be more effective at remediating reading comprehension difficulties (Reinhorn et al., 2017). Literacy activities help students develop their speaking and oral language abilities, while building their reading fluency. One intentional approach to building reading fluency is through repeated reading of text. A teacher can measure a student's gain in reading fluency by taking a running record through daily read alouds. For this measure, the teacher has the student read a leveled text for 1 minute, after which time the teacher counts the number of words read correctly for a Words per Minute (WPM) score. This allows the teacher to assess the student's reading level and track their progress over time. Calculating WPM is a key measure of oral reading fluency.

Baker et al. (2008) examined oral reading fluency in the context of a large-scale federal reading initiative conducted in high poverty schools. Results showed that the oral reading fluency slope added to the accuracy of predicting performance on specific high-stakes tests in Year 2, more than the information provided by level of performance alone.

Oral reading fluency was more strongly related to comprehension than decoding, a pattern that has been replicated in other studies (Huang & Moon, 2009).

Another instructional practice of an effective literacy program is explicit instruction of the reading-writing connection. This language arts integration allows students to better comprehend text and develop understanding of the written word. In a meta-analysis of true experimental and quasi-experimental studies, Graham and Hebert (2011) found that increased writing improves reading comprehension, reading fluency, and word reading. Teachers should be deliberate about the writing assignments they assign to students. In short, teachers can enhance students' understanding of the text being read by having their students write about it (Graham & Hebert, 2011). Teachers should also direct students to analyze the writing structures within the text being read and use writing purposefully. Graham and Hebert found the four specific types of writing activities effective for high quality curriculum to be extended writing, summary writing, note taking, and answering and generating questions.

Several other researchers noted the effect that writing instruction has on reading proficiency. Downer and Pianta (2006) found that writing instruction enhances students' reading. Researchers in Canada showed that teaching reading and writing of informational texts in an integrated manner had a larger effect size on reading comprehension than teaching reading and writing in isolation (Turecotte & Caron, 2020).

The literature's findings suggest that schools with successful literacy programs take time to develop students' language arts through high quality literacy curriculum that includes explicit phonics instruction for the primary grades with reading fluency practice,

reading-writing connection, and oral language development. Although these practices were proven to be successful in the studies included in this literature review, these studies were not conducted specifically at economically disadvantaged campuses. Therefore, it is not clear if these specific literacy instruction practices contribute to the success of high performing, high poverty schools, even though there was evidence of success with English learning students. Taken as a whole, these studies clearly indicate that explicit phonics instruction in the early grades leads to improved reading comprehension in subsequent years (Amendum & Fitzgerald, 2013; Graham & Hebert, 2011; Jeynes, 2008; Reinhorn et al., 2017; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Sonnenschein et al., 2010; Weiser & Mathes, 2011).

### **Effective Literacy Instruction**

In order for instruction to be effective, it must be systematic and intentional. There is planning and forethought that must go into effective teaching. This is particularly true in schools that serve historically marginalized students (Chenoweth, 2010). The school environment must provide the routines and procedures that facilitate effective teaching. The school day should be orderly and focused on learning (Chenoweth, 2010).

Once this foundation is set, classroom teachers can begin to put into practice the instructional elements that build students' reading proficiency. These parameters for effective instruction are outlined in the ESF's fifth lever that is focused on developing daily lesson plans that meet the objectives outlined in the state standards. Moreover,

effective instructional strategies should be data informed and based on formative, summative, and diagnostic assessments (Texas Education Agency, 2021).

Differentiation is a key practice in achieving high levels of literacy proficiency. Learning styles and instructional needs vary from student to student. Therefore, educators must provide each child targeted literacy instruction-teaching practices designed to meet his or her individual learning needs (Buffum et al., 2010). In a meta-analysis of studies of classroom level differentiation, Puzio et al. (2020) found a variety of examples of content, process, and product differentiation in the context of literacy instruction. After reviewing more than 20 years of literacy research, Puzio et al. concluded that differentiated literacy instruction is an effective, evidence-based practice at the elementary level, leading to significantly higher literacy achievement scores. They also recommended additional in-depth study was needed to address rationales for the literacy instructional decisions and strategies applied in classrooms.

Reis et al. (2011) investigated whether the use of engagement and differentiation strategies produced higher, similar, or lower reading scores for students who participated in the intervention as compared to those who did not. Results showed that the use of both differentiated instruction and enrichment teaching methods, including high interest, self-selected books that are above students' current independent reading levels, resulted in higher reading fluency and comprehension in some students. This study was significant, because the targeted, differentiated instruction eliminated up to 5 hours of whole group instruction each week. If classroom teachers could save up to 5 hours of instructional time each week, while achieving higher levels of literacy proficiency, they could increase

student productivity, and teachers would gain more time to provide tailored instruction to individual students.

The literature also shows that teachers need to take the time to explicitly teach reading comprehension skills. Klinger et al. (2004) found that students who received instruction in collaborative strategic reading outperformed students who had not received the specialized instruction on reading comprehension tests. Collaborative strategic reading is an instructional strategy that teaches students to go through a step-by-step approach to reading comprehension. Students learn to brainstorm, make predictions, monitor understanding, find the main idea, ask questions, and review key points. Once students are familiar with this reading comprehension process, they work together in small groups of about four students to discuss and extract meaning from informational text. Given this explicit instruction, students are better prepared to make meaning from text.

Given the critical need for students to acquire reading proficiency, it is essential that elementary educators serving economically disadvantaged students be adept in the science and art of literacy instruction, with particular emphasis on primary reading instruction. This work must be done in the early grades, because beyond third grade, the emphasis on instruction about how to read begins to recede from general education classrooms. Academic instruction shifts in third grade from learning to read to reading to learn, “meaning students who do not read proficiently by the end of Grade 3 may face serious consequences in their academic achievement” (Wanzek et al., 2013, p. 165). Other studies have also shown that schools have somewhat of a limited window of time

in which to address students' reading difficulties. Accelerating reading growth in the upper grades may be more challenging than in the earlier grades, even when extensive interventions are implemented (Adler & Fisher, 2001).

Regarding effective literacy instruction with students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, Kennedy (2010) made the following conclusion in a mixed methods study:

A systematic, coherent, integrated, and cognitively challenging curriculum is especially important in a high poverty context. The design of the balanced literacy framework allowed for the development of students' creativity and agency, capitalized on their interests, and offered them choice and control over activities. A focus on the metacognitive aspects of literacy learning instilled self-regulation, persistence, and reflection. (p. 386)

By all accounts, schools that successfully teach literacy skills to economically disadvantaged students are outliers (Chenoweth, 2010). Chenoweth (2010) recommended additional study of schools serving economically disadvantaged students because:

These schools succeed by doing just about everything right, from classroom management to curriculum to assessment to discipline. It isn't easy to do everything right. But the educators in these schools know that their students are particularly vulnerable to sloppy or inadequate instruction in a way that many middle-class children are not. As a result, they operate on a higher plane than many middle-class schools that can count on their students' families to make up for deficiencies in teaching or curriculum. Truly, they have managed to do what

many have found to be impossible. As such, the work high achieving, high poverty schools are accomplishing is commendable and worthy of careful study (p. 17).

A blend of research-based best practices can make a positive impact in narrowing the achievement gap in students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the area of language arts (Keith, 2018). Overall, the research presented here indicates that structural practices of literacy instruction at the elementary level should include substantial class time dedicated to differentiated and strategically selected language development activities.

### **Summary**

The challenge educators face in trying to address the long-standing literacy achievement gap for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds can seem overwhelming. However, the evidence illustrated in this chapter suggested there are multi-pillar and multi-lever pragmatic approaches that educators can take to ensure that they are building an interconnected infrastructure for improved reading instruction (Texas Education Agency, 2021; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020). The conceptual framework included the Texas Education Agency's (2021) ESF that identifies how school efficacy occurs through the five levers of school leadership, well-supported teachers, school culture, high quality curriculum, and effective instruction, as well as the key pillars of success necessary for successful literacy instruction by Woulfin and Gabriel (2020). This framework, as applied in this study, can be used to meet the needs of all learners, particularly those of economically disadvantaged backgrounds.



Even though the principal should be the instructional leader of the school, the literature is scant, regarding how school leaders make the direct connection between literacy, school achievement, and positive school culture. When looking at this particular connection between leadership and literacy, the gaps in the literature suggest a need to explore how aspects of a principal's training and background in literacy instruction affect their leadership, how the administrative team observes teachers' literacy instruction, and what are the standards set by school leaders for literacy instruction on campus. These phenomena can be explored while examining the work of whole schools that have demonstrated literacy achievement with economically disadvantaged student populations.

When examining the connection between literacy and school culture, I did not find more concrete evidence of the specific ties between literacy and school culture. Merga and Gardner (2018) made the same observation about "the paucity of research literature exploring reading engagement as part of a whole-school literacy policy or plan" (p. 39). Consequently, more research is needed to understand how school principals build a school culture that promotes literacy, particularly in schools with literacy success despite serving historically underserved populations.

Instead of relying on boxed curriculum, teachers must have the skills and strategies to respond effectively to students' differentiated literacy needs. A look at the research reveals key curricular components that elementary schools can focus on to ensure their students receive a high-quality literacy curriculum. The first of these is phonics instruction (Jeynes, 2008; Ronfeldt et al., 2015). The literature revealed that students need early reading intervention during prekindergarten, kindergarten, and first

grade to address literacy gaps that begin to occur as early as prekindergarten (Adler & Fisher, 2001; Sonnenschein et al., 2010; Weiser & Mathes, 2011). Additionally, students need a systematic curricular approach to oral reading fluency to build their reading speed and prosody (Baker et al., 2008; Huang & Moon, 2009). As students learn the fundamental building blocks of language and work on their reading fluency, they should have a curriculum that approaches reading and writing as reciprocal processes that allow them to make connections between what they read and what they write (Downer & Pianta, 2006; Graham & Hebert, 2011; Turecotte & Caron, 2020). These processes encourage the development of reading comprehension skills (Klinger et al., 2004). Finally, students benefit from instruction that is differentiated and tailored to their particular literacy needs (Buffum et al., 2010; Reis et al., 2011).

In building a literacy infrastructure, the literature showed that teachers need opportunities to collaborate with their peers and build their professional skills (Amendum & Fitzgerald, 2013; Reinhorn et al., 2017; Walpole et al., 2010). Teachers need professional support that builds their capacity to make efficacious instructional decisions when working with students (Amendum & Fitzgerald, 2013). Professional support that involves coaching teachers through the observation and feedback cycle can help them to gain the skills and techniques necessary to improve their reading instruction (Reinhorn et al., 2017).

After considering the implications of these studies, the curriculum employed by a school to achieve student literacy is worthy of careful examination. This would be of particular interest to schools that consistently achieve student success with students from

economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Keith, 2018). The scarcity of the literature regarding leadership in the context of literacy and school culture reveal new horizons of research. By the same token, established research areas of literacy, such as teacher professional development, phonemic instruction, and the reciprocity of reading and writing, should be included in the overall schema of examination, as these fundamentals are key components of student achievement.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

The purpose of the study was to examine how elementary educators ensure third grade students in schools with at least 90% of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds achieve and sustain performance of at least 90% passing at the approaches grade-level reading performance on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade STAAR Reading assessment. The study allowed for exploring the resources and supports that the case study elementary campus utilized, the educational practices conducive to reading achievement, and the case study elementary campus's development of a school culture that promoted and sustained high reading achievement. This chapter contains detailed information as to how the study was conducted. The chapter begins with the research design. Next, the rationale for the setting and participant selection is explained. The instruments developed to collect qualitative data from the principal, primary teachers, Grade 3 teachers, central office staff, and parents are described. Data collection methods and data analysis are outlined. Ethical considerations, as well as study limitations, are defined. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary.

The following research questions guide this study.

1. What resources and supports do principals provide to increase reading achievement among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?
2. What educational practices are perceived to improve reading skills for succeeding on the third grade STAAR Reading assessment with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

3. What aspects of school culture are perceived to promote and sustain high reading achievement with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

The target population was an elementary campus in the state of Texas with at least 90% of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch whose performance on the third grade reading STAAR scored at least 90% passing at the approaches grade level standard for the 2018-2019 academic year. (State accountability scores for the 2019-2020 were not used due to Covid-19 pandemic and its skewing effect on academic achievement data statewide.)

### **Research Design**

In order to determine the most appropriate research design, the purpose of the study was first considered. As mentioned in Chapter One, the purpose of the study was to examine how elementary educators and principals ensure third grade students in schools with at least 90% of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds achieve and sustain performance of at least 90% passing at the approaches grade-level performance on the STAAR Reading assessment. Douglas Reeves (2004) coined the phrase *90/90/90 schools*. These are schools in which 90% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch, 90% of the student body is identified as non-Anglo, and 90% of state assessments are passed. Reeves criteria guided the selection of the school that could represent the desired criteria, however the study focused on only 2 factors: percent of economically disadvantaged students' and passing rates on the state standardized Grade 3 reading assessment.

In short, the focus of the study was to answer the research questions. The findings would express the “how” behind the elementary school’s quantifiable reading achievement results within a single district. In order to glean this information, Yin (2003) stated that case studies can be effective “when the investigator has little control over the events and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (p. 1).

When considering the most appropriate approach in achieving the purpose of this study, a variety of methods were considered. First, an experiment was considered. This approach would not have been appropriate, I sought to explain past events and not affect outcomes of future events. A survey was considered as an approach to collect data on participants’ instructional routines, behaviors, and school culture. However, it was determined that a survey offered limited opportunity for participant feedback and data collection. For this reason, I determined that interviews and focus groups would be incorporated into the research design. By following this method, the participants who were directly involved in creating the phenomenon were given the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences and offer rich data on how the campus achieved such commendable results.

A computer-based analysis of archival records was also considered. Although this method could provide a wide variety of in-depth quantitative data, it would not have provided the qualitative data, particularly as it related to school culture, an element specifically mentioned in the conceptual framework. Due to the purpose of the study and the nature of the overarching research questions, an experiment, a survey, and a

computer-based analysis of archival records were eliminated as possible research design methods. Instead, I determined that a case study was the most appropriate research design.

Furthermore, the case study design could most appropriately achieve the purpose of the study. For understanding how an elementary school achieved reading success despite the challenges of serving economically disadvantaged students, a district with a campus meeting the 90% success on the third-grade reading STAAR could offer rich data that could be compared and contrasted with the model offered in the conceptual framework. This case study design allowed for the investigation of a unique school context as well as the alignment between the school and its district policies that satisfied particular parameters not often seen across the state of Texas.

Precisely because of the uniqueness of the campus meeting the criteria to participate in the study, the rationale for a case study design was selected. The unique situation involved an elementary campus that achieved 90% approaches grade level on the Grade 3 Reading STAAR and served a school population where 90% or more of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. The school also met the third criteria of Reeves (2004) definition, since 99% of students identified as Hispanic. However, this study focused on socioeconomic status and high reading achievement.

Few schools can achieve these impressive results because, by and large, it is only high SES schools that manage to achieve the fundamental goal of reading proficiency for all students by Grade 3. The elementary campus selected represented an outlier of success in which a majority of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch achieve high

academic performance in reading. A case study method was the most appropriate method to follow because of the unique and rich context of the school environments. Yin (2003) defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry in which the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13) but can be identified through deep inquiry.

The participants supplied first-hand data to the researcher regarding the school context they themselves created. This unique relationship between participants and phenomenon further justified the use of a case study design. Finally, the use of the case study design allowed for timely feedback from the participants. I asked participants to review transcriptions of their responses as a strategy to encourage them to expand and clarify their answers, allowing for more complete qualitative data, as it related to answering the research questions. Case study design can be implemented in a sequential data collection process in which the school level personnel provide data that are analyzed and used for interviewing the district level personnel and parents of students who attend the school.

The Texas Education Agency’s (2021) Effective School Framework (ESF) was used as a framework to understand the work of the principal, teachers, and district personnel leading the school toward successful reading achievement. The ESF provides detailed levers and actions for campuses and districts to ensure academic success of schools. The ESF allowed the researcher to analyze the planning and action steps taken at the elementary school that are the focus of the case study. By utilizing both the ESF and Woulfin and Gabriel’s (2020) interconnected infrastructure for improving reading



instruction, the researcher could analyze the data at the principal, teacher, parent, and central office staff level and how each group contributed to the unique success of the campus.

The case study design allowed for collecting data from multiple sources and through multiple methods (Yin, 2013). By studying a successful school that served a high percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch, I generated rich, in-depth qualitative data about the strategies and actions that contribute to the campus's success. The approach to the research was holistic to support the systems-thinking approach of the conceptual framework (Texas Education Agency, 2021; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020).

### **Case and Participant Selection**

The case study school was chosen using the following criteria. First, the public elementary school was in the state of Texas. Secondly, the school selected had to be a traditional public elementary school in which early literacy instruction occurs. The school selected had to meet the state-level criteria for showing literacy achievement among their students. Thirdly, the elementary school selected for this study had to have at least 90% of their total student demographic identified as qualifying for free and reduced lunch according to the Texas Academic Performance Report released by the Texas Education Agency for the 2018-2019 school year. Fourth, the elementary school was selected based on performance on the 2018-2019 STAAR third grade reading assessment. The participating school had to have at least 90% of Grade 3 students achieving at the approaches grade level standard or higher according to the Texas Academic Performance Report released by the Texas Education Agency for the 2018-2019 school year. The

approaches grade level standard was used because it is considered passing, while the “Did Not Meet” standard is considered failing.

Participants selected at the case study elementary school for this study included the principal, as one area specifically mentioned by the ESF is school leadership. Next, teachers of kindergarten, Grade 1, Grade 2, and Grade 3 were recruited. The kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2 teachers provide the early literacy instruction so that students who enter Grade 3 are on level when they take the Grade 3 reading STAAR. Central office staff offer guidance and support regarding district initiatives and contribute to the campus. Finally, parents are integral parts of a positive school culture and support their children at home with schoolwork. These multiple sources of information at the case study site were particularly useful for contributing to the literature regarding whole-school literacy (Merga & Gardiner, 2018).

### **Data Collection Instruments**

A one-on-one interview was conducted with the campus principal. Four focus groups were conducted: (a) one with primary teachers (Grade Kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2 teachers), (b) one with Grade 3 teachers, (c) one with central office staff, and (d) one with parents. The interview and focus groups allowed for gathering data directly from key members of the school community to explore how the school has achieved reading success through the third grade. Open-ended questions were utilized to allow participants to offer their unique input and perspectives. All groups were asked about the campus culture and school-wide practices. Similar questions were asked of the key stakeholders including the principal; teachers of kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2;

teachers of Grade 3; central office staff; and parents. The semi-structured guides offered the opportunity to triangulate data and ascertain themes from the data.

### **Principal Interview**

The principal was interviewed individually, because of his unique position and school-wide campus perspective. Principals also have knowledge of key differences between district initiatives and campus initiatives. As the campus principal had an overarching understanding of what phenomena contribute to the school's third grade reading success, I conducted the first interview with the campus principal. A semi-structured interview format was utilized allowing for the participant to share additional information, as it pertained to the research questions. Standard questions were asked about the role the principal takes in leading the reading instruction of the campus. The principal was asked about the data points and intervention efforts in place campuswide that contributed to the school's success. There were opportunities for asking follow-up questions to gain clarity and in-depth understanding of his perspective.

### **Grade 3 Teacher Focus Group**

I conducted a focus group with teachers who teach Grade 3 and whose students took the Reading STAAR in 2019. The teachers were asked questions to discover information pertaining to the three research questions. Grade 3 teachers were given the opportunity to articulate what actions and pedagogy support their students' reading assessment success. There were opportunities for asking follow-up questions to gain clarity and in-depth understanding of their perspectives.

### **Kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2 Teachers Focus Group**

I conducted a focus group with classroom teachers at the school who taught reading in kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2 and had been working at the school since at least 2019. The questions asked of the primary teachers were designed to elicit information for answering the research questions. These questions offered the opportunity to explore the primary elements of reading instruction that allowed students to achieve reading success at higher grade levels. Study participants were able to articulate the curricular and instructional supports that they believed contributed to their students' reading achievement. There were opportunities for asking follow-up questions to gain clarity and in-depth understanding of their perspectives.

### **Central Office Focus Group**

I conducted a focus group with central office staff who support the campus in implementing its language arts program. Only central office staff who were supporting the campus since at least 2019 were included. The questions asked of the central office staff were designed to elicit information for answering the research questions. These questions offered the opportunity to explore the primary elements of reading instruction that allow students to achieve reading success at higher grade levels. Study participants were able to articulate the curricular and instructional supports that they believed contributed to the campus' reading achievement. There were opportunities for asking follow-up questions to gain clarity and in-depth understanding of their perspectives.

## **Parent Focus Group**

I conducted a focus group with parents of students at the school who had their children enrolled at the school since at least 2019. The questions asked of the parents were designed to elicit information for answering the research questions. These questions offered the opportunity to explore the primary ways the school involved the parents in the reading progress of their children for achieving reading success at higher grade levels. Study participants were able to articulate their role, be it through homework, parent-teacher conferences, etc., that the parents believed contributed to their children's reading achievement. There were opportunities for asking follow-up questions to gain clarity and in-depth understanding of their perspectives.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

The main sources of data for this study were as follows: interview with the campus principal, focus group interview with Grade 3 reading teachers, focus group interview with primary reading teachers, focus group interview with central office staff, and focus group interview with parents whose children attend the case study school. Artifacts and documents were collected, as related to reading achievement and the demographic data of the campus, district, and state that are publicly available documents, such as TAPR reports. Questions were designed to gain information about the practices that the campus employs to address students' reading needs and that contribute to the school's reading success on Grade 3 standardized testing. During both the focus group sessions and principal interview, I utilized the semi-structured interview guides with their

open-ended questions to allow for specific data collection, as well as information related to the topic but beyond the scope of the interview or focus group questions.

Data collection took place over 30 days. Although I would have preferred to conduct the interviews in person, all participants elected to conduct the interviews and focus groups via videoconferencing for the sake of convenience. Therefore, all interviews were conducted via teleconferencing methods and scheduled at a time that was convenient for the participants. The one-on-one interview was approximately 45 minutes in length. All focus groups were approximately 1 hour in length. All interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed.

The campus principal and two focus groups of teachers were asked about the perceived support they received, the curriculum utilized on the campus, the campus culture of literacy, and the instructional practices implemented with regard to literacy instruction. After each interview and focus group session, I wrote a reflective journal entry with observations about the session and the overarching patterns I observed during the interactions. All interviews, focus group sessions, and documents collected provided information related to the campus reading culture and methods for ensuring the Grade 3 students' reading STAAR success.

After each interview and focus group, each participant was provided a transcript of the interview or focus group for their review. Interviewees were asked to provide any clarifications based on their review of the transcribed interviews and discussions. Participants could use this opportunity to add to the data they already provided by asking

for an additional interview, which I would grant as an unstructured interview focused on the participant's interest in sharing further data.

Following the school level interviews, the data collection proceeded sequentially with parents and then district level personnel. Parents were asked questions based on the initial themes emerging from the data. I anticipated conducting semi-structured interviews with the district personnel in which I asked a few preplanned questions and questions based on the data analyzed from the school level. I expected to interview the district administrators responsible for principal supervision as the instructional leader. The principal supervisor did not have to be the superintendent of the district. Further, I interviewed parents through a focus group format to enable more parents to participate at a convenient time. I recruited parents at the direction of the school principal. If I did not receive enough interest, I would have used snowball sampling by asking school personnel to recommend parents who might be interested in speaking with me.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Once the qualitative data were collected via interview and focus group discussions and study participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts and offer clarification and/or additional information, I reviewed all notes, documents, and transcripts with the goal of identifying themes and patterns in the data. I identified keywords and trends in participant responses to organize the data during analysis. All documents were coded and categorized to find similarities and differences in the documents between and within participant responses. The documents contributed to the thematic findings. These data were triangulated to develop a consensus amongst

participants regarding the contributing factors that have led to the school's reading success via Approaching Grade Level scores in third grade on the reading STAAR. Data coding allowed for discovering the themes that presented how successful reading instruction occurred at the campus serving a majority of economically disadvantaged children. Themes that emerge in answer to the research questions were used to write a final report.

### **Researcher Positionality**

At the time of conducting the study, I had worked in public education for 22 years. During my time in education, I served as a classroom teacher, a bilingual instructional specialist, a math and science coach, and a campus administrator. For the last 9 years, I served in my current role as the building principal of an elementary campus in which 90% of students qualified for free and reduced lunch. This background could have influenced my frame of reference. In order to account for any unintended influence, I conducted the study in a district approximately 250 miles from my district of employment. I had no previous interactions with any of the participants and met with them solely in regards to the study. I also provided each participant with a copy of the transcribed questions and answers to ensure that the participants' answers were captured completely and to allow them an opportunity for follow-up or clarification of any particular questions.

As an educator for the last 2 decades, the primary focus in every role in which I served was to improve the lives of my students through education and promoting the well-being of the whole child. The essence of my work involved a social justice mindset,



believing that America's public schools hold the promise for every child and the nation's future. I hoped, as a researcher, that the findings could be applied to other settings, so that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, would be able to fulfill their full potential.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study was subject to the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) as required by the University of Texas at Austin. After receiving IRB permission, I identified an elementary school meeting the selection criteria and sought permission from the school district in which the elementary school was located. With district permission, I contacted the selected elementary school's principal. Prior to meeting with any participants, I met with the campus principal to provide an overview of the research study and the processes that would be implemented when conducting the study. Interviews and focus groups were scheduled at times that did not interfere with the daily operations of the school and were convenient for study participants.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants that explained the purpose and processes of the study. Participation in the study was voluntary. No monetary payments were offered to any participants, although a modest coffee gift card was gifted to participants in appreciation of their time and participation. I took all necessary steps to protect the privacy of individual participants and participating schools and maintain the confidentiality of the data. All electronic information was kept on password protected software, and paper copies of data were stored in a secure file cabinet to which only I had a key. All electronically stored data and recordings were destroyed at the conclusion of

the study according to the guidelines of the IRB. All paper copies of the data were shredded at the conclusion of the study. All identifying information of the participants was kept strictly confidential, and pseudonyms were used to mask the names of participants, the elementary campus, and the school district.

### **Summary**

This chapter began with an introduction to the purpose of the study. The research questions of the study were outlined. Next, the rationale and research design were explained. The participant selection and settings were defined. Data collection instruments were included along with an explanation of the groups that would be interviewed. Data collection procedures were discussed. Ethical considerations for the research study were delineated. Data analysis procedures were outlined that explained how the research questions would be answered. Specific limitations of the study were described. Finally, the chapter concluded with a summary of the methodology. Chapter Four presents the findings.

## **Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis**

More information is needed about the practices of educators on elementary campuses where economically disadvantaged students excel academically. The purpose of the study was to examine how elementary educators and principals ensure third-grade students in schools with at least 90% of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds achieve and sustain performance of at least 90% passing at the approaches grade-level reading performance on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade STAAR Reading assessment. The study allowed for exploring the resources and supports that the case study elementary campus utilized, the educational practices conducive to reading achievement, and the case study elementary campus's development of a school culture promoting and sustaining high reading achievement.

This chapter explains the findings and analysis that emerged when studying the context of the elementary campus that served as the case study of this work. The research findings presented are derived from qualitative data collected through interview and focus group sessions, in accordance with the methods set forth in Chapter Three. Additional quantitative data were collected through data sources available to the public through the Texas Education Agency and the district and campus website. In all, 10 people participated in this study. The participants were two central office administrators who supported the campus, the principal of the case study campus, two parents whose children attend the school, three teachers each of which taught kindergarten, Grade 1 and Grade 2, and two teachers of Grade 3. The themes that were developed when analyzing

the data and answered the following three research questions are presented in this chapter:

1. What resources and supports do principals provide to increase reading achievement among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?
2. What educational practices are perceived to improve reading skills for succeeding on the third grade STAAR Reading assessment with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?
3. What aspects of school organization (or academic culture) are perceived to promote and sustain high reading achievement with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

### **Case Study Site and Participant Information**

To provide context for the study, this section provides a summary of the role and relevant experience of the participants, as well as key information regarding the case study site. The participants' profiles are factually presented, but pseudonyms are used to ensure that participants remain anonymous. Pseudonyms were also assigned to the case study school and district. Finally, any information that did not significantly add to the context of the site, participants' roles or experience levels, or gathered themes was considered extraneous information and omitted.

Karson Elementary School is one of 20 elementary schools in the Loretta Independent School District (ISD) located in the state of Texas. At the time of the study, the school's enrollment was 428 students, of which 99.8% were Hispanic and 0.2% were African American. The percentage of students identified as economically disadvantaged

was 99.1%, significantly above the state average of approximately 60.3%. According to data available at the Texas Education Agency, the elementary school employed 39 professional staff members and 11 educational aides. The campus employed 1 full-time librarian, 1 full-time counselor, 1 part-time counselor, 31 classroom teachers, and 6 professional support staff.

Most of the staff had between 11 and 20 years of experience, accounting for more than half of the professional staff. The years of experience of the staff were higher than state averages. For example, the campus had 3.0% of teachers in their first year of teaching, as compared to the state average of 6.7%. Teachers who had 1 to 5 years of experience were 12.9%, less than half of the state average of 27.8%. With the next category recognized by the state, teachers with 6 to 10 years of experience, the campus had 3.2% of teachers, far less than the state average 20.3%. In the categories of experience at the top of the scale, the campus had more experience than the state average. Teachers with 21 to 30 years of experience averaged at 22.6%, significantly higher than the state average of 13.0%. In the most experienced category recognized by the state, teachers with over 30 years teaching experience, Karson Elementary had 6.4% 's of the teaching staff in this category, while the state average was about half that at 3.1%. These figures indicated that the Karson elementary faculty was a as seasoned, experienced group of professionals who invested many years into education and their professional craft.

According to the 2018-2019 Texas Academic Performance Report, Karson Elementary was an A-rated campus. In addition, the campus received five academic

distinctions in the following areas: (a) Academic Achievement: Achievement in ELA/Reading, (b) Academic Achievement: Achievement in Mathematics, (c) Top 25 Percent: Comparative Academic Growth, (d) Top 25 Percent: Comparative Closing the Gaps, and (e) Postsecondary Readiness. These accolades are awarded to campuses based on their academic performance compared to 39 other campuses in the state with similar enrollment and demographics.

Data after 2019 were limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic in which Texas Education Agency listed all campuses as “Not Rated: Declared State of Disaster.” Additionally, at the time of collecting the data, the information for 2021-2022 had not been made available by the Texas Education Agency. When looking specifically at the reading and writing data published by the state in 2019, the campus outperformed state averages at every grade level. Grade 3 reading data showed that 97% of Karson’s students performed at approaches grade level, while the state average was 76%. For Grade 4, 95% of Karson’s students performed at approaches grade level, while the state average was 75%. For Grade 5, 99% of Karson’s students performed at approaches grade level, while the state average was 86%. Finally, for Grade 4 writing, Karson elementary had 93% of students performing at approaches grade level, which was much higher than the state average of 67% performing at approaches grade level. The data clearly showed that the school outperformed state averages for all reading and writing exams, despite significantly exceeding state averages of students identified as economically disadvantaged. Based on these data, Karson elementary demonstrated a commitment to academic excellence for all students.

Participants in the study included the campus principal, two central office staff members who provided direct support to the campus, two parents with children who attended the school and volunteered at the campus, one kindergarten teacher, one Grade 1 teacher, one Grade 2 teacher, and two Grade 3 teachers. The next section of the paper provides a brief description of the 10 study participants in the order in which they are listed above.

**Alex Ramirez, Karson Elementary Principal**

Alex Ramirez had been the principal of Karson Elementary for the last several years, and before that, he served as the Assistant Principal of the school. All his teaching and administrative experience occurred in the state of Texas. He entered the field of education by way of an alternative certification program. His first teaching position was as a high school chemistry teacher. With his science background, Mr. Ramirez believed that decisions at Karson should be made based on data. This included decisions regarding literacy instruction and academic progress monitoring. Mr. Ramirez said, “A secret [to ensuring and sustaining student reading success] is progress monitoring. I’m a science guy. The data [allow you to] keep a pulse on progress and hold people accountable and have courageous conversations with certain people.” At the time of the study, Mr. Ramirez was pursuing a doctorate degree in educational leadership.

**Mary Rosalez, Executive Director of Elementary Education, Loretta ISD**

Ms. Rosalez has served the Loretta ISD community for more than 30 years. At the time of data collection, she served in the role of Executive Director of Elementary Education. With her many years of service to the district and her central office

perspective, Ms. Rosalez was knowledgeable about the efforts the district made to meet the elementary literacy needs of students. She offered insight into the different departments across the district that contribute to the success of the district. For instance, in her interview Ms. Rosalez mentioned the work of the Parent Involvement Office that hosted several “reading academies and sessions” to teach parents “how to support reading at home” and “make sure that we’re pushing the kids to want to not only enjoy reading but also be successful at it.” Ms. Rosalez added, “We’re very lucky because our 20 elementary schools and our middle and high schools have a [parent support person] in charge of making invitations and activities.”

**Valerie Castro, Elementary Reading Dean, Loretta ISD**

Ms. Castro served in Loretta ISD as the Elementary Reading Dean. Before this role, she served as a classroom teacher in the district. Because of her classroom teaching experience, Ms. Castro could provide detailed information about the specific practices that support campus achievement in reading and writing. For example, in her interview, Ms. Castro mentioned, “We have what’s called the *red folder* in kinder[garten], first, and second, which is a folder that goes home to support the reading for the parent and the child.” Ms. Castro provided a district-wide perspective by offering the contributions of district departments in supporting the reading achievement of campuses:

We have family reading night. That’s like a really big event that comes out of our library and media department, where our director for the department has campuses host different activities where parents come in and you know,



someone's either a guest speaker reading a book or event teachers themselves or high school students come in and they read.

**Sonja Cabrera, Parent and Volunteer at Karson Elementary**

Sonja Cabrera had been a parent volunteer at Karson Elementary for the past 22 years. She had four children, and her three oldest children attended Karson. (The oldest child is 24 years old.) At the time of the interview, her youngest child was enrolled in Grade 5 at Karson Elementary. With her unique perspective as a parent and school volunteer, Ms. Cabrera could offer a different viewpoint into the reading practices of Karson Elementary, and since her children had attended the school for the past 2 decades, she offered a personal, historical, and developmental perspective. Ms. Cabrera explained:

My daughter loves books. She will always make me take her to the library. The librarians are the ones that put in the effort for them to read every day and make us read with them every day. They give us the resources to start with them since Kinder[garten].

**Alicia Hernandez, Parent and Volunteer at Karson Elementary**

Ms. Hernandez was a parent of a Grade 2 student at Karson Elementary and served as a parent volunteer at the school. With her unique perspective as both a parent and volunteer, Ms. Hernandez offered her insight into the practices of the school that she found particularly helpful for her family. For example, during the interview, she mentioned how the school emphasized the importance of reading:

They ask that we read a book with them [their children] every day. There's like a calendar that ... has a little QR code. You just scan it based on the day, and there

a little book pops up. And I think that once you engage the students in that ... they do start with them since kinder[garten]. But I just think that since they do start with them at such a very young age, you know, I think it builds our confidence as well.

Ms. Hernandez explained how her work as a volunteer allowed her to do more than caring for the needs of her own child by allowing her to care about all the children in the school community:

Other parents on the outside know who the volunteers are: The ones who are always on campus. They will call us like, “Hey, can you go check on [a student] and see what’s going on?” Or “she didn’t have a good day this morning. Can you just keep an eye on her? Pass by her class.”

With this parent perspective, the role of the entire school community in supporting the reading and writing efforts of the school are illustrated.

**Ester Villarreal, Kindergarten Teacher at Karson Elementary**

Ester Villarreal had been a classroom teacher for the last 17 years. For the last 10 years, she worked at Karson Elementary. During those years, she taught Kindergarten, Grade 1, Grade 2, and Grade 3. Ms. Villarreal was passionate about her work and shared the following:

I think what I like teaching the most is reading. That’s why I like kinder[garten] because I’m like the first even though they come with some prior reading prerequisites. But this is where we kind of like teach how to read. And that’s like

my favorite part of teaching, teaching the reading and seeing those lightbulbs. I think I'm going to stay here [with kindergarten].

With her many years of teaching experience and a broad understanding of literacy development through the primary years, Ms. Villarreal was poised to offer a keen perspective into the reading practices that contributed to the exemplary success of Karson Elementary.

### **Blanca Gonzalez, Grade 1 Teacher at Karson Elementary**

Ms. Blanca Gonzalez had been a teacher at Karson for the past 8 years. She began by teaching prekindergarten and had been teaching first grade for the last 7 years. With her experience, Ms. Gonzalez had a working knowledge of the developmental steps that students undergo on their path from nonreaders to readers. She spoke about the high expectations of the campus reading programs:

AR [Accelerated Reader] is huge in our campus. We all must meet those 100%. So, we have kids who are reading level in prek[indergarten] and kinder[garten]. They do it with the teacher, but they're already getting that introduction that we need to read and be able to answer comprehension questions."

She told her students they had no excuses for not reading at home:

You can't go home, and say that, you know, no one can read with you because I'm reading to you through Google Classroom. Like, I posted all those videos. I would always emphasize to them: "You have to help yourself at home too."

### **Eva Urbina, Grade 2 Teacher at Karson Elementary**

Ms. Urbina had been teaching for the last 20 years. During that time, she taught kindergarten for 9 years, and the rest of her experience has been in second grade. Originally, Ms. Urbina graduated with a degree in business administration but decided that her true passion was education. She was enthusiastic about her profession and the impact that she could make in her students' lives. Ms. Urbina explained:

They love learning stations. I post my words from the text that we're reading that week. So, they'll get their book. That's the word that's on the board. I know it! So, they get all excited about that. So, they love to go together with another student and partner read. So, they'll help out my lower kids. And it's like look, look, you try reading, and I'll help you figure out the word. Centers really does work.

In interviewing Ms. Urbina, it was evident that seeing her students work together to achieve reading success afforded her real job satisfaction.

### **Leticia Aleman, Grade 3 Teacher at Karson Elementary**

Ms. Aleman had been an elementary teacher for 15 years. She taught at Karson Elementary for her entire teaching career. In interviewing Ms. Aleman, her dedication to both her students and her profession resonated loud and clear. When asked about the secret to ensuring and sustaining students' reading success, Ms. Aleman was candid in her response:

There is actually no secret. And every year is different. Every class is different. What I do for one class might not work for the other. You have to get to know

your students. First, you have to know their abilities. You have to know where they struggle, and you just have to find the midpoint that works for the students. We tend to not focus on our needs, because it's not about us. What might be easier for the students, might be harder for us. But at the end of the day, if it's going to get the job done, we'll do it because it's for the kids.

### **Delia Herrera, Grade 3 Teacher at Karson Elementary**

Ms. Herrera had been teaching for 12 years, all of which occurred at Karson Elementary. At the time of her interview, Ms. Herrera taught Grade 3 and was responsible for teaching the writing content across the grade level, since the grade level was departmentalized. The passion and dedication that Ms. Herrera brought to her work was evident. In her interview, she conveyed the importance of building relationships with her students and serving as a coach and mentor for student success:

It's very important to like to get to know them at the beginning; find what it is that they like. We try to reward them as much as possible, because at the end of the day, they are producing... slowly, but they will get there.

The sentiments expressed by Ms. Herrera were echoed by many of those who participated in the case study. They see themselves as cheerleaders for their students, willing to do whatever is necessary to ensure students' academic success. The next section provides the findings reached after conducting interview and focus group sessions with the ten participants outlined above.

## **Findings**

Qualitative data obtained from an interview and focus group sessions were analyzed and categorized by themes. The themes were organized based on their relevance to the research questions. After exchanging cordial introductions and briefly explaining their background in education, participants were asked a series of targeted questions developed to provide insight into the three research questions from the unique perspective of each participant: campus principal, central office support personnel, parent volunteer, primary (K-2) teacher, and third-grade teacher. Responses from each participant were audio and video recorded, then transcribed. A copy of the transcript was provided to each participant for verification. Participants were given an opportunity to review the transcript and provide additional information that may not have been included in the original responses. One participant elected to provide additional information via email to supplement her original responses.

The transcripts and additional text were then coded. Emerging themes were developed based on key phrases of text, and a list was compiled of themes, as related to the three research questions. Quotes were collected that typified themes and participant sentiments. The themes were organized as they were related to the three research questions and a list was compiled to record the frequency of certain themes in participant feedback. These lists were organized by research question and the themes were then ordered from greatest to least frequency in participant interviews. The qualitative data were then collated according to their relation to the three research questions. The codes

and themes that emerged in response to the three research questions are discussed in the findings' subsections.

### **Resources and Supports that Increase Reading Achievement Among Students from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds**

To address the first research question, I asked participants questions regarding the resources and supports that the participant believed contributed to the reading achievement of students at Karson Elementary. The themes that developed across respondent data appear in Table 1. The numbers of participants who cited a resource or support that led to school success are included in the table. An explanation of the themes that emerged in response to the first research question are then described.

**Table 1**

*Themes Addressing the Resources and Supports That Increase Reading Achievement (n = 10)*

Theme	Participant <i>n</i>
All-hands-on-deck academic support	6
Standardized curriculum resources	6

#### ***Theme 1. All-hands-on-deck Academic Support***

When asked about resources and support that contributed to the reading success of the campus, six participants mentioned campus personnel who contributed to the academic reading success of the campus. Key personnel were mentioned at both the campus and district level. Academic deans, teacher's assistants, and district personnel were all mentioned by participants as staff whose help was available and made a

difference in the school's reading achievement. Elementary Reading Dean Valerie Castro explained the support of personnel in this way, "Our deans provide support to teachers by providing like, pre-recorded videos which can be uploaded to Google Classroom. From there, it can be shared with parents." Teachers reported that they received support from the academic deans. Leticia Aleman, Grade 3 Teacher, explained how supported she felt by the academic dean on her campus:

Our reading dean, which is also the writing dean, she constantly will be checking up on us, you know, did you have any questions on this prior lesson? Or this is something that you can use. Then she'll email us everything that we need, or she'll come by, and she'll drop it off herself. And she does this very often throughout the year.

At all levels of the district, the support of personnel seemed to be valued by participants. There seemed to be an all-hands-on-deck mentality regarding academics. Ester Villarreal, a Kindergarten Teacher at Karson Elementary, explained the school's tutoring program that occurred during the instructional day and relied heavily on additional personnel:

We had something called Armadillo Time. It was tutorials embedded in the middle of the day within our school. So, like they would call out Armadillo Time [on the public address system], and all the teachers, everybody, we would kind of help out the upper grades. That helped me a lot because other teachers would come in. Everybody would get a small group, and we would just read, like that



was the focus. And it was like a guided reading. But the student would not only get the guided reading with me daily, but they would do the Armadillo Time.

This attitude of all-hands-on-deck was echoed by Alex Ramirez, the principal of Karson Elementary:

We would identify, every 6 weeks, the kiddos that needed the help based off of the different locations, and the teachers were provided with the paraprofessionals to assist with that as well. So, even the coaches, we have two coaches. I had to split them up amongst the campuses and turns out they had a lot of free time. So, you know, they are certified teachers. And so, I worked with them to place them into different classrooms. Actually, it was something that we really saw a lot of gains with.

Personnel provided support at both the campus level and the district level.

Principal Ramirez explained that the same support that he offered to his teachers at the campus he felt like he, himself, had at the district level. In relaying the support that he received as an administrator from central office personnel, Principal Ramirez explained the following,

Honestly, for myself, at least is the principal having the support of Dr. Rosalez, my Assistant Superintendent. You know, if I ever need anything I know I can call to say, “Ma’am, I have this situation.” She’s great. She won’t, you know, she doesn’t judge you. She’s okay. Well, she always tells me, “What do you need? Okay, let’s get through this problem.” Whatever and you find a solution. So, I have the support too. And that’s kind of what I like to model with my teachers as

well- that I am here to help. Just because I'm the principal doesn't make me any better than anyone else, from my personal perspective.

All-hands-on-deck support included utilizing the resources and supports made available through the Reading Academies, a professional development program provided by the Texas Education Agency that provides teachers with information, techniques, and methods for reading instruction. Participation in and completion of the Reading Academies program is required for all teachers in the state of Texas kindergarten through Grade 3, as well as campus administrators at the elementary level. This online course covers 12 modules focused on the science of teaching reading. It includes such topics as establishing a literacy community; oral language and vocabulary; phonological awareness; decoding, encoding, and word study; reading fluency; reading comprehension; and written composition. Several study participants mentioned that the information explained and reviewed in these modules helped them improve their teaching. Valerie Castro, elementary reading dean at Loretta ISD explained the value of the support from Texas Reading Academies this way:

All our third-grade teachers have attained their reading academy certification, which is a mandate of the state of Texas. They have been trained on how to use the phonics walls, on how to understand decoding and encoding. Of course, as they learned these strategies, we're also including them when we do our walkthroughs to make sure that they're being implemented.

Leticia Aleman, third-grade teacher, commented on how the information gleaned from the Texas Reading Academies has contributed to her students' reading achievement.

She explained how the Texas Reading Academies improved her practice in the following way:

We now have this new program that we're all reading about or working on, which is the Reading Academy. We are taking those online courses, and this is totally on our own time. We have to go ahead and go in and take courses like it's like a full college course. But it helps you target certain areas for reading and writing and things that we just might not be aware of with the students in the classroom and how to detect new strategies. They've introduced new strategies on how to do the reading. It has definitely helped. And slowly I believe the district wants all teachers to be certified with the Reading Academies. It's something rather new. We just started by like, 2 years ago. And I've already completed my course. And some of the things that I learned on there, I applied it, and it's working. The students are more comfortable. When we say reading passages before, it was like, you know, [sigh] because it was a reading passage is like three pages long. And the students right away would go and start counting like, oh, how many pages and now we've learned strategies that we know focus on this area, focus on that area, and they're more relaxed.

While all-hands-on-deck academic support was important, the participants also reflected on the importance of having standardized curriculum resources.

### ***Theme 2: Standardized Curriculum Resources***

Offering students vastly different instruction from classroom to classroom leads to unpredictability and variance in performance (Amendum & Fitzgerald, 2013). Loretta

ISD and Karson Elementary, in particular, mitigated this variance by providing teachers with standardized curriculum resources that served as the baseline for instruction. Leticia Aleman, Grade 3 teacher at Karson Elementary, explained how standardized curriculum resources supported reading achievement when she recounted the following:

We use the same resources, which is something that I think is helping the students out because prior to that, every campus had a different reading basal book. We would use one, and it was left up to the campuses to choose their own reading book. Then we went ahead, and we just vouched for having one basal reader throughout the district. And ever since then, I've seen an increase in the reading.

Standardized curriculum resources were not only found in the use of one basal reader across the school district but in the use of supplemental resources that guide reading instruction. For example, Delia Herrera, Grade 3 teacher at Karson, explained the benefit of standardized curriculum resources in this way:

For the past years, we've been using the DMRs [daily material for reading]. There was a training that we attended, and it kind of gives you an idea as to how you can motivate the students to jump into the reading instead of just the story that we're going to read this week. The DMRs are graphic organizers that guide the students. They gear them toward the strategy that we're going to learn. Then, you, kind of, just slowly develop the strategy into the story.

Principal Ramirez recounted the benefit and use of standardized curriculum resources. When asked a clarifying question about the Fundamental Five, he responded with the following,

I actually have a poster right here. We actually have that all over [the school], in every classroom, and in the hallways. Everybody needs to know what it is. The first one is *framing the lesson*. Students have said, “I will learn ...” They have to have what product they’re going to make. It’s important for them to have some sort of an artifact or product at the end that shows that they actually mastered the objective of the day. Then, it’s working in the *power zone*, and that’s really just keeping proximity with the kiddos. If you’re, you know, if you’re at one corner of the room, obviously, the kiddos are going to start veering off. So, that actually helps with classroom management. Also, we have *purposeful talk*; that’s the third component, and it’s just really being able to have small groups and incorporating the kids speaking to one another explaining to one another in the lesson. They have to be able to speak, because if you can speak it, you learn it. You know it. And especially that they can teach each other, you know. The high performing kid already understands that. He teaches it to the low performing kid, and so that way, both of them get reinforced. And then, there’s *recognize and reinforce*, and so that’s basically the teacher being able to assess: Hey, this kid did not understand. So, you have to recognize that and then reinforce. This is part of the lesson. What we’re looking for is that they recognize the fact that they [the students] didn’t know it, and what did you do about it? So, that’s the fourth part. And then the last part is *writing critically*.

By having the teachers and administrators take a standardized approach to supporting student learning, students can become familiar with and internalize the learning process.

Five participants reported that Accelerated Reader contributed to the reading success of the campus. “Accelerated Reader is a computer-based program that schools may use to monitor reading practice and progress” (Rosen, 2022, “At a Glance,” para. 1). Accelerated Reader enabled teachers to “guide kids to books that are at kids’ individual reading levels. Kids take short quizzes after reading a book to check if they’ve understood it” (Rosen, 2022, “At a Glance,” para. 2-3). Rosen (2022) added the following:

Accelerated Reader (AR) is a popular reading program used in schools. AR helps teachers track students’ independent practice and progress with reading. It’s not specifically designed for kids who learn and think differently. But teachers can use it to help guide struggling readers to books they can read successfully. AR empowered children to enjoy reading by choosing the books they read to meet their reading goal. They could also choose the pace at which they read and could read independently. Teachers helped children set goals and monitor AR reading progress through online quizzes, known as *AR tests*.

Participants indicated that AR contributed to the reading success of the campus. Third-grade teacher Delia Herrera explained that the program was used as a motivator for students. She explicated:

We set a goal every 6 weeks, and we try to implement it on a daily basis where we do you know a quick look at the beginning of each class, or maybe at the end of the day, so that we can make sure that we’re incorporating the reading. AR is

doing the comprehension because they have to do a quiz at the end. So, it is doing, you know, the reading and the comprehension at the same time.

Laura Alvarado further expressed:

It's a friendly competition. At the end of the year, there's a goal that the students strive for, they want to be the top AR reader for the year, because they get rewarded for it. So, the students and it's throughout the grade levels starting at kindergarten. Kinder students are already taking AR quizzes, and their goal is to be able to take the test on their own, not teacher guided or read-to, because they have the option of the computer reading it to you. So, their goal is just to be able to read on their own. That's more than enough for the upper grades. For them, it's to reach the goal of being the top AR reader.

First-grade teacher Blanca Gonzalez agreed that AR was a critical component of the campus success. She expressed the following:

AR is huge in our campus, like we all have to meet those 100%. So, the kids who are in prek[indergarten] and kinder[garten], they do it together with the teacher, but they're already getting that introduction that we need to read and be able to answer comprehension questions. In first grade, I do help them at the beginning, but little by little they start testing on their own, and by second grade, Ms. Urbina already has students taking the quiz on their own. And it's just that ability for them to know that we're reading for a reason, because we need to get those AR points.

Ester Villarreal, Kindergarten Teacher at Karson noted that Accelerated Reader contributed to the school's reading achievement. She explained the following:

Teachers have the opportunity to teach this is why it's so important to read with the little ones. They do it as a whole group, but we start off since Kinder. Once they get to a certain level in reading, they already start practicing doing their AR quizzes and stuff on their own. But it really doesn't count until first grade, but we do it for those readers.

Parents at Karson mentioned that reading and taking quizzes on AR begins in the early grades. Alicia Hernandez, parent volunteer, shared the following, "They ask where we read a book every day. They do start with them since Kinder, well, some are before. They do start with them at such a very young age. It builds our confidence."

Four participants mentioned the use of the district's CARES [Children Advocates for Raising Education Standards] curriculum as a resource and support that contributed to reading achievement on the campus. This curriculum is a scope and sequence of specific learning activities provided to teachers. These four participants mentioned that this curriculum allowed their students to have continuity of instruction from classroom to classroom across the district. Additionally, students who transferred from one elementary school in Loretta ISD to another had the benefit of a smoother learning transition.

The teachers mentioned that the CARES curriculum was embedded with the literacy activities that were expected on the state standardized assessments. This embedded curriculum allowed students to become familiar with the question types that



would be asked on the state assessment. Elementary Reading Dean, Valerie Castro, explained the CARES curriculum in the following way:

We have designed our CARES curriculum guide where we have started embedding short response, because it's part of the STAAR redesign. Our second grade dean is already embedded something so that our teacher can start getting our student exposed to that type of writing, so when they get to third grade, they're just building on it. That way, they're ready, you know, for the STAAR test.

The CARES curriculum allowed the district to offer standardized curriculum resources, providing a standard of instruction across the district that contributes to the reading achievement of all students. These standardized curriculum resources are further explained in the following section.

### **Educational Practices that Improve Reading Skills of Students from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds**

The second research question was designed to understand what educational practices contributed to students' reading achievement. All participants were asked for their unique perspective on the educational practices that led to the exemplary performance of Karson Elementary. Teachers of kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2 were asked about the educational practices implemented as the students progressed developmentally and building up to the state reading assessment. Grade 3 teachers were asked about the educational practices that improved their students' reading skills, particular to the STAAR reading test. The themes that developed across respondent data

are listed in Table 2. The number of participants who cited the educational practice as leading to school success is included in the table. An explanation of the themes that emerged in response to the second research question are then described.

**Table 2**

*Themes About the Educational Practices that Improve Reading Skills (n = 10)*

Theme	Participant <i>n</i>
Connecting writing with reading	6
Use of assessment data	5
Differentiating instruction	7

***Theme 1: Connecting Writing with Reading***

At Karson Elementary, participants commented on how a focus on writing instruction led to academic achievement in reading. When asked about the educational practices that most improve the reading skills of students, several participants mentioned an emphasis on the connection between reading and writing. The emphasis on writing instruction began in the early grades. Delia Herrera, third grade teacher, explained how writing instruction was approached at Karson Elementary.

We take multiple trainings throughout the year on the writing process, and whenever they want to integrate something new, or they want to try a new strategy that they want to work with the kids. We are having the kids starting the writing process since first grade. I know that in first grade they are starting with maybe writing a composition, in the classroom, but they do go through the entire

process of prewriting, drafting and all of that. And then as they get older, you know, they are, you know, they are more geared towards writing on their own.

Elementary Reading Dean Valerie Castro relayed that the writing process was integrated, even at the early grades of “kindergarten and first grade; it’s still more reflective journaling, kind of getting the kids, you know, just used to writing and making those connections to literature. I know for second-grade teachers they do that through a journal.”

Not only was writing explicitly taught at every grade level, but the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing was demonstrated through lessons that highlight the reading-writing connection. Leticia Aleman explained this practice in the following way:

The prompts for the writing are also geared towards the skill for reading for that week. Or sometimes it’s also geared towards the story of the week. It must do either with the skill or the story that they’re reading. So, it’s kind of all correlated.

By ensuring that students were reading and writing with purpose and in a way that demonstrated the reciprocal nature of literacy, student reading achievement was improved. Principal Ramirez emphasized the importance of the reading-writing connection in the educational practices at Karson:

We always try to incorporate writing. That’s one of the Fundamental 5: *writing critically*. We have journals. It doesn’t matter what discipline you’re talking about. You’re always going to use writing, so writing must be incorporated into everything that they do daily. That helps us out.

Since about 37% of the students at Karson Elementary were identified as emergent bilingual students according to the Texas Education Agency, the teachers made special efforts to address the language needs of these students. Quite notably, however, they used the reading-writing connection as an educational practice not only for emergent bilingual students but with all students. Principal Ramirez explained the following about the school's use of the reading-writing connection as a campus-wide educational practice that leads to student achievement in reading:

“TELPAS [Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System] Tuesday.”

So, every Tuesday, the kiddos have to write a little journal article based off of how the TELPAS would ask. Like something that tells me about a personal experience or something like that. So, the kiddos in all of school, not just our bilingual kiddos, they have to write it. And the teacher will look at it. They'll, you know, determine where the kiddos are at. And that goes hand in hand with the Fundamental Five- the *writing critically* part. It works. At the end of the day, you have kids performing well.

At Karson, the staff take measures to connect writing instruction with reading instruction. As a campus, they provided the students with weekly opportunities to practice the writing process as a school community and regularly integrated their reading and writing instruction. By connecting the reading and writing, students better understood the reciprocal nature of literacy. Another educational practice utilized by Karson educators was the use of assessment data to drive instruction. This will be discussed in the next section of the chapter.

## ***Theme 2: Use of Assessment Data***

Five participants mentioned the use of assessment data to improve students' reading skills at Karson elementary. Principal Ramirez was clear to point out that he valued not only quantitative data but also qualitative data in driving reading instruction. Victoria Camacho, Elementary Reading Dean of Loretta ISD, mentioned the use of Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) in kindergarten through second grade, which operates as the following:

A set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of literacy skills. They are designed to be short (one minute) fluency measures that can be used to regularly detect risk and monitor the development of early literacy and early reading skills in kindergarten through eighth grade.

The University of Oregon (2022) described DIBELS as follows:

Developed to measure recognized and empirically validated skills related to general reading outcomes. Each subtest has been thoroughly researched and demonstrated to be a reliable and valid indicator of early literacy development. When implemented as recommended, DIBELS results can be used to evaluate individual student development as well as provide grade-level feedback toward validated instructional objectives.

The research-based subtests are predictive of later reading proficiency and contribute to a composite score that is the single best predictor of later reading development. The measures are consistent with many of the Common Core State Standards in Reading, especially those for Foundational Skills. Combined, the

measures form an assessment system of early literacy development that allows educators to readily and reliably determine student progress in kindergarten through eighth grade. (paras. 2-3)

In addition to the DIBELS assessment, which is recommended by the state and used to identify students who are at risk, participants mentioned the use of benchmark assessments. Principal Ramirez outlined the assessments that the district relied on to make data-driven decisions for both primary and intermediate students:

They're constantly monitoring. We always have the Curriculum Based Assessments. We call them CBAS. And the district benchmark to be able to see where they would be, for example, for third through fifth, you know, STAAR-wise how they would do on STAAR. I guess you could say. And for the little ones, we have the DIBELS and the TRC (Text Reading and Comprehension). And so, we use that data also to be able to map out, you know, which kids need the interventions, along with also what, you know, what areas that they need. Also, whatever the teachers say. "Hey, I have this kid, he's scoring, okay, however, I feel he might go, you know, a little lower." We include those kids as well. We try. We always try to find a way to help them out.

Principal Ramirez explicitly mentioned the frequency of collecting assessment data and how this led to continuous progress monitoring and regrouping of student intervention groups based on the most current data. "And then we always assess at the end of every six weeks to see where the kiddos are at. And we analyze the data. We don't

just say, ‘Oh, this many kids passed.’ No, we look at the TEKS, what type of TEKS, which ones could have been better or worse.”

Leticia Aleman, third-grade teacher, explained how the use of assessment data supported students’ reading achievement:

We’ve adapted towards DMAC [Data Management for Assessment and Curriculum], which is a system within our school district that allows the students to view their scores. They’re doing the same reading passages, but they’re doing them online. And the students themselves can see their data. They can see how many questions they got wrong, what percentage they got wrong, or which TEKS is it that they’re doing well in or vice versa, doing really bad in so then they themselves have access to that. So that helps them keep track of their own scores, and of course, only wanting them to do better. And it does the same for writing as well, because they also have reading language arts on there.

Delia Herrera, third-grade teacher explained the use of assessment data to drive instruction in this way, “Small group instruction is something they [the students] really benefit from, especially when we use our data to go ahead and group them by ability.”

Kinder teacher Ester Villarreal addressed the benefits of using assessment data to guide instruction. She explained how providing her students leveled readers was a critical component for her students’ success:

I think my favorite resource for teaching is really my leveled readers. Library books is one thing, but leveled readers is another. It was just so much easier for me as a teacher. That’s like my main thing. If I don’t have leveled readers, I can’t

teach reading. I can, but I don't think that I'll see as much growth, and I won't be as successful, if I don't have leveled readers.

Second-grade teacher, Eva Urbina, explained how assessment data allowed her to support her students' reading achievement in the following way,

Those tests [running records] help us decide what kind of stations we need, not only for the daily stations but for our tutorials. So, we already know: "Okay, this is what we need to hit this week. This is what we need to work on. This is what I need to pull out and set those students that Group A with this and Group B with that." So, that's how we use the data.

Not only did teachers and administrators convey their use of assessment data to inform reading instruction, but the parents who were interviewed explained how they were informed about their children's reading progress and the work to spur their children's reading development. Parent volunteers explicitly mentioned the importance of knowing their children's reading levels and reading with them at home. Sonja Cabrera, a parent volunteer at Karson Elementary explicitly mentioned the use of data to drive reading in the following way, "Parents need to be involved in reading with them [their children] every day, asking them if they read a book or what their reading level is, so they can read at home." The use of assessment to drive instruction leads to differentiation of student instruction. This will be explained in the next section.

### ***Theme 3: Differentiating Instruction***

When asked about the education practices that led to the reading achievement of their students, six participants expressly mentioned using differentiated alongside guided



reading and small group instruction. Differentiated instruction modifies classroom activities based on the students' strengths, areas of growth, and interests. Leticia Aleman, third-grade teacher at Karson Elementary, explained how she incorporated differentiated instruction into her class: "We've been using HMH [Houghton Mifflin Harcourt] for a couple of years. It has leveled readings that help us for students that have beginning, middle, frustration, advanced, all levels." Thus, Ms. Aleman offered her students readings that appropriately challenged them to keep making developmental progress.

Another method of offering differentiated instruction mentioned by participants was the practice of grouping high achieving students by grade level in the same classroom so that students were placed with peers who could challenge them and spur their progress. Leticia Aleman, third-grade teacher, explained the practice of grouping high achieving students as follows:

We also have a classroom that we call the Trailblazing Class. That's where we go ahead, and we put in all of the highly academic performing students. We put them all in one classroom, and it's kind of another friendly competition. They compete within the higher achievers.

Additionally, the principal and teachers commented on the benefits of students working with their peers. School personnel looked to student leaders as sources of support for their fellow classmates. Principal Ramirez notably mentioned that lessons are designed to encourage students to talk with each other and share their learning and said, "They must discuss with one another. They can teach each other. The high performing

kid already understands. He teaches it to the low performing kid, and so that way, both get reinforced.”

Teachers who participated in the study extolled the benefits of strategically utilizing peer tutors for reading achievement. Eva Urbina, second-grade teacher at Karson, explained how peer tutors contributed to her classroom culture:

I do have a mixed group. They love to go and get together with another student and partner-read, so they’ll help out my lower kids. And it’s like, you try reading and I’ll help you. I’ll help you figure out the other word, so centers really does work.

As another example of differentiated instruction, the spelling program used in Karson Elementary involved not giving all students in the same grade level the same list of spelling words for the weekly spelling test. Instead, teachers provided students a differentiated list of spelling words. Leticia Aleman explained how the spelling program related to the reading program and was differentiated based on student needs when she offered the following about the academic deans:

They’ve organized it [the spelling program] to where it matches the reading [unit]. So, the skill kind of goes with what the reading is implementing. So, the spelling list does correlate with it. Zaner Bloser [the spelling program] also differentiates their spelling list. ... We have a list for our lower group, our, you know, on level, and then, of course, our high achievers.

In addition to differentiated instruction at Karson, the participants expressed finding benefits in small group instruction. Ester Villarreal, kindergarten teacher, shared the following,

When we have small group, that's where I feel the "most light bulbs" turn on. I do the lesson as a whole group, but it's not until I go into the small group that you'll see those light bulbs turn on. I won't do more than three kids in a small group. Every 6 weeks, I'm changing reading groups. So, when I do that guided reading or that small group that's when I see the most growth. I see that they picked it up. They didn't pick up in that whole group. Sometimes it takes a whole 6 weeks of that small group, but that's when I see the growth. I guess that would be my best strategy, that small group.

Leticia Aleman explained the benefits of knowing students through differentiation this way:

Every year is different. Every class is different. They might be in the same campus, but we rotate three ways, because we're three teachers in the third grade. And we all see each of the three classes. And what I do for one class might not work for the other. Yeah, so there is no secret, it's, you know, you have to get to know your students. First, you must know their abilities, you have to know where they struggle, and you just find a midpoint that works for the students. We tend to not focus on our needs, because it's not about us. What might be easier for the students might be harder for us. But at the end of the day, if it's going to get the job done, we'll do it because it's for the kids.

By finding ways to offer their students a more personalized educational experience, Karson Elementary ensures that all students are making strides in their reading development. Karson teachers shared that getting to know their students and offering differentiated instruction was a key component of success.

In studying the Karson school community, there were three overarching themes that emerged in regard to the educational practices employed by the campus to spur student reading achievement. The first of these was connecting writing to reading in ways that allowed students to be continually engaged in literacy activities that were meaningful and reciprocal. The second theme was the use of assessment data to inform instruction. This led to the third theme of differentiating instruction based on student needs. The next section of the paper focuses on the academic culture of the campus community and the aspects of culture that the school community assert leads to the strong academic performance of the campus.

### **Academic Culture to Promote and Sustain High Reading Achievement with Students from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds**

The third research question was designed to understand the academic culture that participants believed contributed to promoting and sustaining students' reading achievement. All participants were asked for their unique perspective on the elements of academic culture that led to the exemplary performance of Karson Elementary. The themes that developed across respondent data are listed in Table 3. The number of participants who cited the educational practice as promoting and sustaining high reading

achievement is included in the table. An explanation of the themes that emerged in response to the third research question are then described.

**Table 3**

*Themes About Aspects of Academic Culture that Promote and Sustain High Reading Achievement (n = 10)*

Theme	Participant <i>n</i>
Community relationships built on trust and communication	10
Celebrating reading	8
COVID-19 affected school culture	5

***Theme 1: Community Relationships Built on Trust and Communication***

Quite notably, every participant in the study discussed the trusting relationships that existed amongst the school community built from open communication and collaboration. These relationships could be characterized as caring, supportive, and allowing for flexibility in times of difficulty. These relationships were built over years, even decades. Principal Ramirez explained Karson’s high teacher retention:

The staff, honestly, it’s rare that they leave. Since I’ve been here, we have a lot of teacher retention. Frankly, the ones that leave, it’s just that they’re retiring. And there’s a few that have gotten promoted to counselor or different things on other campuses, but since I’ve been here, I don’t think I’ve had any teacher leave because they didn’t like the profession.

State data supported the principal’s assertion because Karson had teachers with above average years of experience, suggesting teamwork was a critical aspect of the culture at

Karson and a success in retaining teachers. Teachers and administrators shared a sense of working together for a common goal as part of the school's culture. Not just the staff stay at Karson for years but the parents too. Sonja Cabrera had been a parent volunteer at Karson for 22 years.

Alicia Hernandez, a parent volunteer at Karson, shared that "I think it's teamwork. The teachers enjoy being there, because they know that they have our support." Principal Ramirez underscored this team spirit when he said, "The whole staff knows. We're all here to help, and it's one community, and they help, you know, they help each other out at the end of the day. We're here for the kiddos." Principal Ramirez elaborated on the theme of community relationships built on trust and communication when sharing the following:

The culture really has a lot to do with it, because you create a sense of unity. I mean, we are here longer than we are at home. Frankly, it may sound cheesy, but these are like your family members. Sometimes you laugh; sometimes you fight with them; sometimes you don't. But knowing that me, as their principal, [I am] behind them. They know that I'm rooting for them. I'm here to provide what you need to be able to service the kids, because at the end of the day, you have to ask yourself. Is this in the best interest of the students? Is what I'm doing in the best interest of the kid? And that's the goal. So, it's really just building up the community.

The team spirit was culturally embedded with parent-teacher collaboration. The partnership between school and home was regarded as a fundamental piece of the

school's reading achievement and promoted through a variety of avenues including parent events, parent education, and parent support. Dr. Mary Rosalez, Executive Director of Elementary Education at Loretta ISD explained parent-teacher collaboration by sharing the following:

We have our Parent Involvement Office which they host a number of reading academies and sessions where parents are involved on how to support reading at home. We also have the red folder which is a folder that goes home to support the reading for parent and child. We have report card night, and then of course, we have our AR night. So, our [parent involvement office] is in charge of making invitations and activities to involve parents.

Dr. Rosalez explained that the district's Parent Involvement Office supported the literacy efforts of the campus by bringing families into the school and planning reading and writing activities that demonstrated how parents could help their children to read at home. These events allowed parents to see, firsthand, the reading programs that were utilized at school, so parents could collaborate with teachers, using the same programs at home. Valerie Castro, Elementary Reading Dean, provided the following context:

Our reading deans provide support to teachers by providing pre-recorded videos which can be uploaded to the Google Classroom. And then from there it can be shared with the parents. So, there is a parent who is struggling, maybe doesn't know English very well or a parent who wants to help their child, they can do so by playing this video and watching us do it. And that way the parent can in turn, you know, not only, you know, mimic, but maybe even learn, you know, a little

bit of the language. So, it's just a way to kind of make sure that we let our parents know that we want them to be involved, and that there's no reason why they shouldn't be involved, just because maybe they're limited with their language. And I do know that we have also when it comes to the phonological, we've always told parents, you know, the basics is listening. So, we tell the parents, it's okay if it's in Spanish, as long as the child is learning to listen to sounds and differentiate sounds. So that's where the parent office or Parent Involvement Office comes in. And we'll go in and we'll provide sessions for the parents explaining this. We have family reading night. That's like a really big event that comes out of our library and media department where our director for that department has campuses host different activities where parents come in and you know, someone's either there's a guest speaker reading a book or even teachers themselves or high school students come in, and they read, and then you have Title I parent meetings. During the *Week of the Young Child*, campuses are required to set aside 1 day in that week of celebrating young children's learning, where parents have to be involved, but it has to be a reading activity, whether they come dressed as their favorite character or they have to maybe put on a little play, or make something like a snack, when presenting the story. The parents are involved with that.

Karson's teachers were directly involved in promoting a culture of parent-teacher collaboration. Kindergarten teachers explained that they make a special effort to include parents in their children's learning. One way of doing this is by hosting "make and take



sessions” for parents. The kindergarten team invited parents to a campus event and showed them how to do hands-on activities focused on literacy with their children. Parents could use these activities at home to promote their children’s reading progress. Principal Ramirez spoke fondly of these opportunities to collaborate with parents when he shared the following:

The parents come in. We treat it as a professional development session, but the teachers are the ones teaching the parents how to learn, what to look for, how to teach it. They’re awesome [the sessions]. The parents come in. We provide them breakfast, buy them breakfast tacos or sweet bread and coffee. They love it! It just gives us an opportunity really, just to get everybody involved. We’re a small community. Everybody’s very close knit. So, I mean, you feel it. So, it’s really a group effort.

The team spirit embodied by the campus and district staff to bring in parents as part of a collaborative culture supporting student reading achievement was highlighted throughout the interviews. The parents extolled the effort of the campus staff to bring in parents as partners in their children’s education. Sonja Cabrera, parent volunteer at Karson Elementary shared about her experience at the school: “They put in the effort to read every day and make us read to them every day. They give us the resources to start them since Kinder.” Ms. Cabrera added that she oftentimes met with other parents at the school to ask them if they read with their children or about their children’s reading levels, demonstrating that parents were true collaborative partners in their children’s reading development.

Several communication avenues were discussed by participants and cut across all facets of the school community that included teachers with parents, teachers with colleagues, teachers with administrators, and school administrators with central office. Delia Hernandez, Grade 3 teacher at Karson, explained the importance of teachers having clear and regular communication with parents:

More than anything, communication with the parents- being in constant communication, you know, having the parents work with the kids. Sometimes it's difficult because the parents, you know, themselves maybe never graduated or didn't go to school, but we provide them with as much as we can, so that they can assist their children at home.

Alicia Hernandez, a parent volunteer at Karson Elementary shared that she talked to her child's teacher daily. Sometimes this communication centered on the child, such if the child was having a hard day or stressed about something. Other times, the communication focused on the use of technology, such as a parent's lack of familiarity with a new computer application or how to use a QR code. Overall, parents expressed that they valued being part of the team with regular communication with their children's teacher.

Multiple times, Principal Ramirez emphasized the importance of trusting relationships in supporting the reading achievement of students. He recounted the following about building trusting relationships across the community:

We listen to each other. Sometimes the teachers will come. They'll complain about whatever. And it's about I hear them out. And I mean, sometimes it has to

be a little frustrating. But it's always respecting them. And you know, hey, this is how they're feeling. And then just talking about it and just being frank. Like, we're going to do this. I don't like to be a tyrant. And you're going to do this, this, this, because I feel that when you talk to people, and they feel that you actually care for them. You know, like, hey, how's your husband doing? Or how are your kids? That really, really makes a difference. And listening to them. I mean, that goes for any, you know, people will work for you. If, I mean, if they feel that you care about them, you know what I mean? We work with people. We don't work with machines. I'm not saying that people must like you all the time, but you have to be personable, approachable. And that's a huge thing. At least for me, that's something that I feel is helpful.

Principal Ramirez fostered trusting relationships with the teachers in the following way:

It's really just providing support at the end of the day, whatever the teachers need. And they already know, you know, we have a good community. If they need anything, they come in. They ask myself, my assistant principal. There really is nothing that we can't try to get. You know what I mean? So, it's just keeping a pulse on it. And having trust between each other that they can come talk to me and say, "Hey, this is what I need." You know, sometimes we agree. Sometimes we don't. But the trust is there. And that is something that, you know, is great.

The importance of relationships was not only mentioned by the school leadership but also was mentioned by the parent volunteers who were interviewed. Alicia

Hernandez, parent of a child at Karson, shared how trusting relationships contributed to the reading achievement of the school.

I think what helps is the environment. In the mornings when I drop off the kids, the staff already know them by first name. It could be the crossing guard, and they'll know. It's that type of relationship that you build with people within the school. And I think the staff is always very, very open. And they've always had a good open-door policy when it comes to parents. And I think that's also important, because sometimes there's, you know, like, something between parents and administration. And, you know, I think here you can tell that there's that comfort. It's like family, and we're all okay. We're in this together, and it's going to be okay. The kids see that; and they feel it.

Overall, the overarching theme that emerged from studying the Karson school community was the relationships built on trust and communication. Between the principal and teachers, parents and teachers, primary teachers and intermediate teachers, and central office staff and campus administration there was a sense of collaboration and teamwork. In the next section, the theme of celebrating reading achievement is discussed.

### ***Theme 2: Celebrating Reading***

As a campus, Karson Elementary celebrated reading and reading achievement. Accelerated Reader was a central component used to track time spent reading and reward reading achievement. The parents, administration, and teachers reported that AR was more than just a program used by the campus. Instead, celebrating reading through the use of AR was integrated into the campus culture. Students were motivated to engage in

reading and set reading goals. Leticia Aleman explained the campus culture towards celebrating reading via AR in the following way:

It's a friendly competition. Also, because at the end of the year, there's a goal that the students strive for, they want to be the top AR reader for the year because they do get rewarded for it. So, the students and it's throughout the grade levels.

Kinder students are already taking AR quizzes and their goal is kinder[garten students are] able to take the test on their own, not teacher guided or read to [the students] because they have the option of the computer reading it to you. So, their goal is just to be able to read on their own and to do them. That's more than enough. For the upper grades, it's to reach that goal of being the top AR reader.

With AR embedded in the campus culture of reading and incorporated into many facets of campus life, reading skill development allowed for providing students with celebrations of their milestones. Delia Herrera gave the following example of celebrating reading:

We usually have a big AR parade at the beginning of the school year. We do, you know, we motivate the kids. We set a goal every 6 weeks. And we try to implement it daily. We do a quick look at the beginning of each class or maybe at the end of the day so that we can make sure that we're incorporating the reading. At the same time, AR is also doing the comprehension, because they do have to do a quiz at the end. So, it is doing the reading and the comprehension at the same time.

Not only did teachers mention the importance of AR in the school's reading culture, Principal Ramirez explained how Karson Elementary's reading celebrations were shaped by the AR program:

We have AR. That's a huge thing! That's actually a district thing. And it's a huge thing. We have a whole week dedicated to it at the beginning. We do a little parade. You know, the kids dress up in different characters, storybook characters. We'll have different authors. Children's book authors come. We'll have Zoom calls with them. By the end, the district actually sets them up for us. So that's really cool, because we've gotten to meet, you know, the, you know, the people who actually write the books. The kids love it. And they're like, "Did you write? Were you the illustrator?" Things like that, especially little ones are so cute. You know, they just really get excited about it. We have the Superintendent's Advisory Council, which is made up of high school students. And those kiddos will come in. They'll read to our second-grade kiddos like every 9 weeks. And they come in, and the kids get excited because, you know, they see their peers. Sometimes it's their, you know, cousin or their brother. So, it's about really getting the whole community involved.

One aspect of the data that was difficult to show through participant quotes involved the enthusiasm and excitement shared by the Karson community regarding reading. When asked to share about the school, many participants became visibly animated with big smiles as they described the campus events associated with reading. When participants mentioned the reading kick off or parent reading nights, they

genuinely displayed enthusiastic body language about the reading culture that had been created; they appeared proud to share their traditions.

Although this study did not explicitly look at the effects of COVID-19, many of the participants mentioned the effects of the pandemic on teaching and learning. For this reason, the theme of COVID-19 is included. As such, the final theme that emerged related to the reality of the pandemic, which has been a predominant environmental factor in shaping school culture since March of 2020.

### ***Theme 3: COVID-19 Affected School Culture***

Given the impact of COVID-19 on education since March of 2020, the participants often spoke about how they adapted the academic culture to account for the new set of needs presented in the school community during the pandemic. The participants mentioned that due to the global pandemic the needs of both students and adults on the campus increased. The participants indicated that the entire community was taken aback by COVID-19. Everyone needed special attention to address the new challenges presented by the pandemic. The participants explained how the pandemic made them more aware of students' needs at home, particularly during the time when students could only participate via remote learning. Principal Ramirez explained how the pandemic shined a light on the needs of students when he explained:

Before [the pandemic], we really weren't so cognizant of the resources that the kiddos had. We must make sure that we provide them those resources. And that's really something that I hadn't really thought about, until after [the pandemic began]. What did these kids have? What do they need? We find them a tablet, so

they can compete. They're not to compete but be on the same playing level. And I feel that's important. I feel that's something that we really have been focusing a lot. What resources can we give our kids?

Other participants shared the changes they noticed since the pandemic. Leticia Aleman, third-grade teacher, shared the following,

This [pandemic] was a struggle for us. Students want everything quick. We've noticed that with the students, it's like, "You want me to do what now?" They're expecting themselves to do everything quick. And now that we're getting them back into the classroom, it's having to teach again like Day 1. We must focus on their needs. They need our patience. We must focus a lot on stamina. Stamina is something that we've noticed that they lost due to the pandemic.

Delia Herrera added:

To get them to pick up a pencil, it's just very, very hard. So that's why it's very important to like, get to know them at the beginning, find what it is that they like. We try to reward them as much as possible. Because I mean, at the end of the day, you know, they are producing slowly, but they eventually get there.

Other participants shared that federal grant funds from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding program helped the school community provide additional resources to address the added needs brought about by the pandemic. Some participants referred to additional personnel being hired because of the ESSER funds. For example, Principal Ramirez, explained the following:



We're really blessed now with our extra funds, which I guess will be post pandemic. I have a math practitioner and a reading practitioner. These are teachers that will pick up [students] what they identify based off of the data on the DIBELS or their curriculum-based assessments. Children that are low performing or that need extra help with the TEKS. And they pick them up, they do small groups with them, I also incorporate them into our tutorial groups.

Parents who were interviewed expressed how they had adapted because of the challenges presented during the pandemic. Sonja Cabrera, parent volunteer at Karson, shared that she helped other parents learn how to use a computer, because some did not have personal computers in their homes. She taught parents how to use the various forms of technology incorporated into the school's operations after the pandemic, such as websites or applications. Other times, she just encouraged parents and explained how parents could read with their children at home.

Principal Ramirez noted that encouraging the school community during the pandemic was a challenge, but the staff found ways to motivate the teachers by celebrating and connecting as a community:

We'll find ways to celebrate things. We'll throw little parties for Teacher Appreciation. When it was during the pandemic, we had the teachers drive by, and we gave them all their gifts. We would make signs for them to put outside their house [like] a rock star teacher lives here! It's just being able to celebrate when you can.

Clearly, the pandemic affected all the participants and the Karson Elementary students, but the data suggest they problem solved and showed care and concern so that all students could learn.

### **Summary**

Chapter Four began with an introduction of the site of the case study and a description of the study participants. The following sections addressed each of the three research questions by sharing the themes that emerged from the interview transcripts and campus demographic data obtained from information available to the public from the Texas Education Agency. Through analyzing qualitative and quantitative data, I organized key themes by each research question. These data answered the three research questions and provided a holistic picture of an elementary campus that achieved and sustained high reading achievement, despite serving a student body in which the vast majority (99%) of students were economically disadvantaged. The two themes addressing the resources and supports that increase reading achievement were: (a) all-hands-on-deck academic support and (b) standardized curriculum resources. The three themes addressing the educational practices that improve reading skills of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were: (a) connecting writing with reading, (b) use of assessment data, and (c) differentiating instruction. Finally, the three themes regarding the aspects of academic culture that promote and sustain high reading achievement were: (a) community relationships built on trust and communication, (b) celebrating reading, and (c) COVID-19 affected school culture. Chapter Five concludes with a summary

presentation of the findings, as they correlate to the relevant literature, and suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter Five: Summary, Conclusions, and Implications**

The purpose of the study was to examine how elementary educators ensure third grade students in schools with at least 90% of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds achieve and sustain performance of at least 90% passing at the approaches grade-level reading performance on the Grade 3 STAAR Reading assessment. The Texas Education Agency's (2021) Effective Schools Framework (ESF) was used as a framework to understand the work of the principal, teachers, and district personnel leading the school toward successful reading achievement. The ESF provided detailed levers and actions for campuses and districts to ensure academic success of schools. The ESF allowed the researcher to analyze the planning and action steps taken at the elementary school that are the focus of the case study. By utilizing both the ESF and Woulfin and Gabriel's (2020) interconnected infrastructure for improving reading instruction, the researcher could analyze the data at the principal, teacher, and campus level that contributed to the unique success of the campus.

This chapter contains a summary of the study and of the major findings regarding the literacy practices of a high performing, high poverty elementary school in the state of Texas. Conclusions about the campus and district level contexts, resources, supports, instructional practices, and reading culture are included and connections between the findings and relevant literature are presented. This chapter also provides implications for practice and future research. The chapter ends with concluding thoughts regarding the study.

## Summary of the Study

### Restatement of the Problem

Reading is an essential skill for academic success. Unfortunately, children who are economically disadvantaged oftentimes do not acquire the same literacy skills achieved by their more affluent peers. Unfortunately, academic achievement studies have consistently demonstrated that students who are economically disadvantaged do not perform at the same proficiency levels as their more affluent peers (Adler & Fisher, 2001; Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Lee & Reeves, 2012). Research has shown that students who are not reading on grade level by the third grade fall behind and often face serious consequences throughout their school careers (Wanzek et al., 2013). Moreover, elementary economically disadvantaged students who do not learn to read become more likely to live in poverty and enter the prison pipeline and unlikely to reach average life expectancies during adulthood (Buffum et al., 2010).

Given the importance of reading performance to students' long-term success, it is imperative that students who are economically disadvantaged receive effective reading instruction based on proven best practices. There are schools in the state of Texas whose work over the years demonstrates they have achieved what many have found to be elusive- high performance despite high poverty. Successful, high performing schools serving high rates of economically disadvantaged students offer the opportunity to study best practices, so that all students have the same opportunity for academic success.

Although there are scores of studies that focus on the disparate parts of reading instruction, there is a small but relatively consistent strand of work on reading

performance focused on whole schools (Fletcher et al., 2013; Sonnenschein et al., 2010; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020). The problem of the achievement gap in reading could be ameliorated by gaining an in-depth understanding at the whole school level of the literacy practices of educators on elementary campuses where economically disadvantaged students excel academically. Empirical research in how these campuses achieve high levels of reading success is needed because research and evidence of best practices continues evolving and all students deserve the same right of a good education (Keith, 2018).

### **Summary of the Literature Review**

The literature review included empirical studies regarding effective reading instruction and were organized into five areas: school leadership and literacy, well-supported literacy teachers, school culture and literacy, high quality literacy curriculum, and effective literacy instruction. The section on school leadership and literacy presented the role of the principal in leading literacy practices on campus (Kerney et al., 2012). Taylor et al. (2019) found that a school leaders' knowledge and understanding of reading and the best methods for instruction function as a guiding compass by which they deploy their available resources to ensure effective reading instruction occurs campus wide. School leaders also conduct the annual appraisals of the teachers on campus. McGeehan and Norris (2020) concluded that principals need to have knowledge and skills for promoting literacy education for effective decision making, feedback, and evaluations regarding literacy instruction in the classroom.

The second area addressed in the literature review was well-supported literacy teachers. Several studies pointed to teacher professional support as a factor in reading achievement. The review defined teacher support as teacher coaching, professional development opportunities, and mentoring (Texas Education Agency, 2021). Walpole et al. (2010) designed a teaching observation protocol and coaching observation protocol to isolate factors for teacher coaching. Instructional coaching that follows the observation-feedback cycle offers teachers the opportunity to be observed often by administrators who offer detailed feedback for improving their teaching practice (Reinhorn et al. 2017). Another form of teacher support cited in the literature focused on opportunities for teachers to collaborate and learn from each other. (Amendum & Fitzgerald, 2013; Reinhorn et al., 2017; Walpole et al., 2010).

The third area addressed in the literature review focused on school culture and literacy. Merga and Gardiner (2018) conducted content analysis of school plans, policies, and agreement documents to determine if these documents supported student reading engagement. Ho and Lau (2018) examined aspects of school climate and literacy through questionnaires and found that policies can be implemented to nurture a positive reading climate and improve students' reading performance. Merga and Gardiner recommended further study on how broader policy issues affect connections between school culture and literacy (2018).

The next section of the literature review focused on high quality literacy curriculum. In a meta-analysis study, Jeynes (2008) gathered data from 22 studies published from 1966 to 2000 and examined the findings about the relationship between

phonics and the academic achievement of urban minority elementary school children. Jaynes found a significant relationship between phonics instruction and higher academic achievement. Ronfeldt et al. (2015) found that programs which emphasize explicit encoding and decoding instruction in learning grapheme-phoneme relationships have advantages over other early reading programs that do not. Sonnenschein (2010) agreed that instruction in phonemic awareness is beneficial to children of all ages and backgrounds and particularly beneficial for preschoolers and kindergarteners. A few studies in the literature review focused on listening and speaking as precursors to reading and writing. Greenfader et al. (2014) found a performing arts program affected the oral language skills of emergent bilingual students.

Baker et al. (2008) examined oral reading fluency in the context of a large-scale federal reading initiative conducted in high poverty schools and showed that the oral reading fluency slope added to the accuracy of predicting performance on specific high-stakes tests. Explicit instruction of the reading-writing connection was another component of high-quality literacy instruction. Graham and Hebert (2011) found that increased writing improves reading comprehension, reading fluency, and word reading. The literature reviewed suggested that schools with successful literacy programs take time to develop students' language proficiency through high quality literacy curriculum that includes explicit phonics instruction for the primary grades with reading fluency practice, reading-writing connection, and oral language development.

The last section of the literature review included studies on effective literacy instruction. Klinger et al. (2004) found that students who received instruction in



collaborative strategic reading outperformed students who had not received the specialized instruction on reading comprehension tests. Buffum et al. (2010) found that educators must provide each child targeted literacy instruction-teaching practices designed to meet his or her individual learning needs. Reis et al. (2011) found that the use of both differentiated instruction and enrichment teaching methods, including high interest, self-selected books that are above students' current independent reading levels, resulted in higher reading fluency and comprehension in some students. Teachers need to take the time to explicitly teach reading comprehension skills. Overall, the research presented indicated that structural practices of literacy instruction at the elementary level should include substantial class time dedicated to differentiated and strategically selected language development activities.

### **Summary of Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of the study was to examine how elementary educators ensure third grade students in schools with at least 90% of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds achieve and sustain performance of at least 90% passing at the approaches grade-level performance on the Grade 3 STAAR Reading assessment. The study allowed for exploring the resources and supports that the case study elementary campus utilized, the educational practices conducive to reading achievement, and the case study elementary campus's development of a school culture promoting and sustaining high reading achievement. The researcher also gathered data from community members, including parents, to ascertain how the school culture leads to reading achievement as part of answering the research questions.

The research questions were developed to examine the practices employed at a campus that has achieved reading success with students who are economically disadvantaged. Two research questions were developed to isolate the resources, supports, and educational practices that educators at high performing, high poverty schools maintain leads to their proven reading success, as demonstrated by standardized state assessments. A third research question was developed to ascertain the reading culture developed by the school community. The research questions were developed to support the purpose of the study, after reviewing the literature and determining the gaps in the literature. The research questions for the study were as follows:

1. What resources and supports do principals provide to increase reading achievement among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?
2. What educational practices are perceived to improve reading skills for succeeding on the third grade STAAR Reading assessment with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?
3. What aspects of school organization (or academic culture) are perceived to promote and sustain high reading achievement with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

The methods for conducting the study were developed according to the research questions.

### **Summary of the Research Design**

The research design was a single case study because the focus of the study was to express how one elementary school's quantitative reading achievement results within a

single district remained high performing. The case study design was appropriate for examining one elementary school's practices for ensuring economically disadvantaged students were successful at reading, which represented a contemporary phenomenon operating in the context of the school (Yin, 2003). The unique situation that supported applying the case study design involved an elementary campus that achieved 97% passing at the approaches grade level on the Grade 3 Reading STAAR and served a school population where 99% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. This situational choice was based on Douglas Reeves's (2004) 90/90/90 schools concept in which 90% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch, 90% of the student body is identified as non-Anglo, and 90% of state assessments are passed, although the case study did not focus on the racial identity of the students.

For understanding how one elementary school achieved reading success despite the challenges of serving economically disadvantaged students, a district with a campus meeting the 90% success on the third-grade reading STAAR was sought to offer rich data that could be compared and contrasted with the model offered in the conceptual framework. This case study design allowed for the investigation of a unique school context as well as the alignment between the school and its district policies that achieved results rarely seen across the state of Texas.

### **Summary of the Case, Participant Selection, and Data Collection**

A site that exemplified a high performing, high poverty elementary school was chosen. The site was chosen based on three criteria: (a) the school was an elementary school located in the state of Texas (b) at least 90% of students qualified for free and

reduced lunch, and (c) at least 90% of students scored at the approaches grade level standard on the Grade 3 State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness. The researcher compared publicly available data from the Texas Education Agency to find schools that might meet the defined criteria. Loretta ISD's Karson Elementary met the selection criteria.

After permission was granted from Loretta ISD to conduct the study, Karson Elementary was chosen as the case study site for this research. Karson was an A-rated rural elementary school in Texas that served approximately 500 students and employed about 50 staff members. The elementary school consistently produced impressive academic results. In August of 2022 after the study had been conducted and the first complete post-pandemic STAAR results were published, Karson Elementary continued to be an A-rated campus, earning every Academic Distinction possible from the Texas education Agency (namely, Academic Achievement in ELA/Reading, Academic Achievement in Mathematics, Top 25 Percent: Comparative Academic Growth, Top 25 Percent: Comparative Closing the Gaps, and Postsecondary Readiness).

Key members of the Karson Elementary school community were interviewed to provide a comprehensive picture of the campus literacy practices from Kindergarten through Grade 3 both from the perspectives of campus staff and parents whose children attended Karson. An interview was conducted with the campus principal. Focus groups were conducted with teachers. One focus group included primary teachers including Kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2 teachers. Another focus group was conducted exclusively with Grade 3 teachers. Another focus group was conducted with central

office administration who directly support Karson Elementary. Lastly, a focus group was conducted with parent volunteers whose children attend Karson Elementary. In all, 10 members of the school community participated in the study.

The protection of all study participants was ensured through strict confidentiality of all collected data. Pseudonyms were assigned to all identifying data including the name of the school district, campus, staff members, and parent volunteers. The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the research proposal prior to the researcher beginning to recruit any participants for interviews. All information kept electronically was encrypted. Participants signed a consent form prior to participating in their interviews and were given a transcript of their interview for their review. All participants were given the opportunity to change or add to their original statements. A semi-structured approach to the interviews was utilized, allowing for additional questioning and extension, as time allowed. Each interview or focus group was approximately an hour in duration, allowing time for discussion. An audio file and transcription of each interview was created. All interviews occurred between May 31, 2022, and July 18, 2022. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and checked for accuracy by both the researcher and the respective interviewee. All interviewees confirmed that their transcripts were accurate. Additionally, publicly available academic documents were reviewed to gather information on student demographics, academic performance, and teacher statistics.

### **Summary of Data Analysis**

To begin data analysis, the researcher read and studied the participant feedback thoroughly. After a careful review of the data collected, a list of themes was generated. Transcripts were color-coded based on the themes identified. Using an open coding technique, the researcher reviewed each interview transcript and identified key ideas and phrases. The frequency of each code was calculated and supported with key phrases and quotes from the participants. Codes were generated from all participants and compared across all participants' interviews to yield the findings that emerged to answer each of the three research questions.

All documents were coded and categorized to find similarities and differences in the documents between and within the elementary school. The documents contributed to the thematic findings. These data were triangulated to develop a consensus amongst participants regarding the contributing factors that have led to the school's reading success, as evidenced by scores on the third grade STAAR Reading. The researcher also engaged in peer debriefing to reduce the number of findings and ensure the data accurately reflected how the economically disadvantaged students at Karson Elementary demonstrated reading achievement.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

The 10 participants identified and described the resources, supports, and educational practices that they believe has achieved and sustained their exemplary reading achievement. The participants also contributed information regarding the school's culture and how this academic culture has contributed to the school's success.

These data answered the three research questions and provided a holistic picture of an elementary campus that achieved and sustained high reading achievement, despite serving a student body in which the vast majority (99%) of students were economically disadvantaged. The two themes addressing the resources and supports that increase reading achievement were: (a) all-hands-on-deck academic support and (b) standardized curriculum resources. The three themes addressing the educational practices that improve reading skills of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were: (a) connecting writing with reading, (b) use of assessment data, and (c) differentiating instruction. Finally, the three themes regarding the aspects of academic culture that promote and sustain high reading achievement were: (a) community relationships built on trust and communication, (b) celebrating reading, and (c) COVID-19 affected school culture.

### **Conclusions**

Previously in this chapter, the qualitative findings that answered each of the three research questions were summarized. This section offers a discussion of the themes in relation to the conceptual framework and the literature and presents conclusions about the findings.

#### **The Themes and the Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework involved merging school leadership as operationalized in the ESF (Texas Education Agency, 2021) and literacy instruction as applied in the three-pillar interconnected infrastructure by Woulfin and Gabriel (2020). Woulfin and Gabriel ascribed to the notion that literacy instruction requires an interconnected infrastructure that ties together key pillars of success. The macrolevel pillars of

leadership, campus climate, and professional development must work in concert to ensure the microlevel of curriculum and instructional techniques empower students to attain the goal of reading achievement. Quality literacy instruction goes beyond a particular lesson or curriculum; instead, it encompasses the entirety of the school. As displayed in Table 4, the three main concepts that laid the foundation for the conceptual framework are outlined as they related to the findings with a summary of how each finding contributes to reading achievement.

This conceptual framework involved merging school leadership as operationalized in the ESF (Texas Education Agency, 2021) and literacy instruction as applied in the three-pillar interconnected infrastructure by Woulfin and Gabriel (2020). The first concept of leadership, school planning, and culture was tied to the ESF's Lever 1 of strong school leadership and planning and Lever 3 positive school culture. These concepts related to the literacy leadership of the principal and other school leaders and the culture of literacy that was created on the campus.

There were three overarching themes found in the participant data that ascribed to the first level of the conceptual framework. Each of these themes coincided with the leadership and culture of the school community. On campus, there were personnel who took leadership roles in planning and offering support for teachers, particularly regarding the reading practices of the school. Celebration and connection regarding reading achievement and progress was a central theme mentioned by several participants.



**Table 4***Emerging Themes as Related to the Conceptual Framework*

Conceptual Framework	Theme (Research Question)	Contribution to Reading Achievement
Leadership, School Planning & Culture (ESF Levers 1 & 3)	All-hands-on-deck academic support (1)	Personnel on campus including principal, academic deans, classroom teachers, teacher assistants, and parent volunteers all contributed to the campuses' reading achievement.
	Community relationships built on trust and communication (3)	School culture had an atmosphere of team spirit and the participants felt a responsibility to their community to have honest conversations and do all that they could for student achievement.
	COVID-19 (3)	School culture was impacted by the pandemic, creating hardships across the school community and causing teachers to change the way that they teach.
	Celebrating reading (2)	The school culture offered many ways for students, teachers, and families to celebrate the joy of reading and recognize students' reading accomplishments.
Professional Development & Well-Supported Teachers (ESF Lever 2)	Use of assessment data (3)	Teachers used academic data to make decisions about reading instruction.
	Differentiating instruction (2)	Teachers differentiated reading instruction based on students' reading needs and reading levels.
Curriculum & Instruction (ESF Levers 4 & 5)	Standardized curriculum resources (1)	The campus curriculum was standardized, so that all students receive essential reading content using the same resources.
	Connecting writing with reading (2)	Literacy activities based on the reciprocal nature of reading and writing were utilized school wide.

Members of the school community expressed how, as early as prekindergarten, students engage with the AR program, and their accomplishments were celebrated. The school hosted family events that celebrated reading and taught parents how to support their children's reading at home, know their reading level, and to understand how the AR program functioned as a staple of reading instruction across the school district.

The second level of the conceptual framework focused on professional development and well-supported teachers. This concept was tied to Lever 2 of the ESF's: effective, well-supported teachers. The two overarching themes that supported this aspect of the framework were the use of assessment data to make instructional decisions and differentiating instruction. Participants from all facets of the school community expressed that a variety of different assessment instruments were used to make decisions about students' reading instruction. Some of these were recommended or required by the state. Others were selected by the district. These assessments were used to tailor reading instruction to students, so that it was focused on each student's reading level, strengths, and areas of growth. Teachers commented that they began their lessons using whole-group instruction but also noticed that the real learning and "lightbulb moments" occurred when students participated in guided reading or small groups.

The third and final level of the conceptual framework was focused on curriculum and instruction and tied to Levers 4 and 5 of the ESF: high quality curriculum and effective instruction. The related themes were standardized curriculum resources and the connecting of writing instruction with reading content. Teachers commented on how the use of standardized curriculum resources, including the basal reader and planning

documents, allowed them to provide a basic level of instruction that was easy to use and aligned across the district. The participants frequently mentioned the use of AR as a staple of the curriculum that allowed students to read independently with accountability. Finally, the focus on connecting writing with reading was notable. Participants attributed their students' reading achievement to the explicit focus on students engaging in writing that was directly tied to the reading content that students were studying each week. Not only did the themes show alignment to the conceptual framework, they also displayed connections to relevant literature as seen in the following section pertaining to the first research question.

### **Research Question 1: Resources and Supports that Increase Reading Achievement Among Students from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds**

To answer the first research question, qualitative data were gathered through interview and focus groups. When asked about resources and supports that contributed to reading success, participants identified the following factors as critical in the achievement and sustainment of the school's reading success: (a) all-hands-on-deck academic support and (b) standardized curriculum resources. The themes that emerged in answer to Research Question 1 are briefly summarized below.

#### ***All-Hands-On-Deck Academic Support***

The opportunity to collaborate with peers and learn from colleagues helps teachers to build their professional skills (Amendum & Fitzgerald, 2013; Reinhorn et al., 2017; Walpole et al., 2010). This notion appeared in the data shared by the participants. When asked about resources and support that contributed to the reading success of the campus, six participants mentioned campus personnel whose help was seen as a source of

support and contributed to the academic reading success of the campus. Academic deans, teacher's assistants, and district personnel were mentioned by participants as staff whose help was available and made a difference in the school's reading achievement. Support from all levels of the district's personnel seemed to be valued by participants and an "all-hands-on-deck" philosophy existed at Karson Elementary. This finding supports observations by Cosner (2011) and Puzio et al. (2015) about the importance of administrators communicating with and supporting teachers. The key to support in the literature involves administrators having the knowledge and skills to provide support effectively (Kindall et al., 2018; McGeehan & Norris, 2020).

Another support contributing to the reading achievement of students mentioned by participants was the Texas Reading Academies, professional development from the Texas Education Agency that is required for all teachers Kindergarten through Grade 3 and elementary administrators across the state. Study participants mentioned that not only did they participate in the required professional development but that measures were in place to incorporate this professional development into administrator feedback when conducting walkthroughs in teacher classrooms. Amendum and Fitzgerald (2013) indicated that school-wide educational reforms that included strong teacher professional development components with effective follow-up addressing teachers' specific challenges were most effective. In interviewing parents, teachers, administrators, and central office staff at Karson, the theme of an all-hands-on-deck philosophy of working together for a common goal emerged. This mentality of "we're all in this together" has been instrumental in sustaining campus reading achievement over the last two years.

Not only was all-hands-on-deck academic support reflected in the literature, the use of standardized curriculum resources also supplemented students' reading success.

### ***Standardized Curriculum Resources***

Regarding the resources and support that contributed to the reading achievement of the campus, the participants discussed the curricula. The first example included the AR program that allows students to read books of their own choosing (within a bank of hundreds of books) at their own pace and take an individual reading comprehension test to accumulate points in the program. By differentiating students' reading, AR allows students to self-select books of interest and read independently with accountability measures in place. Therefore, Karson Elementary provides students with targeted literacy instruction based on his or her individual learning needs which positively represents findings by Buffum et al. (2010).

A second example was the district's CARES curriculum that provided teachers with a scope and sequence of specific learning activities. The participants mentioned that the CARES curriculum allowed their students to have continuity of instruction from classroom to classroom across the district. This standardized curriculum agreed with Amendum and Fitzgerald (2013) who found that a higher degree of content delivery structure was associated with students making more progress, which is not likely to happen when teachers generate the curriculum on their own.

The AR and CARES curriculum allow the district to offer standardized curriculum resources and provide a standard of instruction across the district that contributes to the reading achievement of all students. This finding supports the

relationships between systematic phonics instruction and minority elementary school student academic achievement that Jeynes (2008) found in a meta-analysis. Given these connections to relevant literature, the following section presents the discussion of the second research question's findings.

### **Research Question 2: Educational Practices that Improve Reading Skills of Students from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds**

In order to answer the second research question, qualitative data was gathered through interview and focus groups. When asked about the educational practices that contributed to their proven reading success, participants identified the following factors as critical in the achievement and sustainment of the school's reading success: (a) connecting writing with reading, (b) use of assessment data, and (c) differentiating instruction. The themes that emerged in answer to Research Question 2 are briefly summarized below.

#### ***Connecting Writing with Reading***

Graham and Hebert (2011) found that increased writing improves reading comprehension, reading fluency, and word reading. At Karson Elementary, participants notably commented on how a focus on writing instruction leads to academic achievement in reading. When asked about the educational practices that most improve the reading skills of students, six participants emphasized the importance of connecting writing with reading. The emphasis on writing instruction at Karson Elementary begins in the early grades. Not only is writing explicitly taught at every grade level, but the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing is demonstrated through lessons that highlight the reading/writing connection. In addition to making these connections with students,

Karson Elementary utilized various methods to collect data and assess students. This is discussed in the following section.

### *Use of Assessment Data*

The use of assessment data was another theme that emerged after interviewing the Karson school community. Participants explained how assessment data is used to drive instruction and inform school practices. The teachers used small groups and guided instruction as an educational practice that contributed to the economically disadvantaged students' reading achievement. The findings support Buffum et al. (2010) who noted that teachers meet the individual learning needs of students by providing each child targeted literacy instruction. Providing targeted instruction to each child suggests that differentiated instruction can be used to benefit economically disadvantaged children's reading development.

In examining the overarching theme of using assessment data to drive instruction, there were a variety of assessments that were mentioned including DIBELS and benchmark assessments. Overall, there was a campus culture of using assessment data to make instructional decisions. Ronfeldt et al. (2015) found that students who were provided with interventions, after initially failing a screener, were able to outperform students who did not receive sufficient intervention. This study also found support for the collection of oral reading fluency data for the purpose of making a range of decisions about students' reading.

### ***Differentiating Instruction***

Regarding the elements of educational practices that contributed to the reading success of the elementary campus, the participants discussed differentiated instruction as tailored classroom activities that were based on each student's strengths, areas of growth, and interests. Differentiated instruction was a campus instructional practice that was utilized by teachers at Karson. The participants described differentiated instruction as a fundamental practice. Teachers attributed student achievement to differentiated, small group instruction. Differentiated instruction was evident in the spelling program used by Karson Elementary. Instead of giving all students at a grade level the same list of spelling words for the weekly spelling test, teachers provide the students with a differentiated list of spelling words. The campus also differentiated the books students read, as a part of the AR program, as well as the books selected for guided reading. Differentiation was studied by Puzio et al. (2020) and found to be an effective, evidence-based practice at the elementary level, leading to significantly higher literacy achievement scores. Given these connections to relevant literature, the following section presents the discussion of the third research question's findings.

### **Research Question 3: Academic Culture to Promote and Sustain High Reading Achievement with Students from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds**

The third research question was designed to ascertain the aspects of academic culture that participants identified as promoting and sustaining the school's reading achievement. All participants were asked for their unique perspective on the elements of academic culture that led to the exemplary performance of Karson Elementary. Themes related to the academic culture that promoted and sustained high reading achievement



were identified as (a) community relationships built on trust and communication, (b) celebrating reading, (c) COVID-19 affected school culture. The themes related to the campus culture are discussed.

### ***Community Relationships Built on Trust and Communication***

One important theme that was mentioned by every participant in the study was parent-teacher communication. The partnership between school and home was regarded as a fundamental piece of the school's reading achievement and promoted through a variety of avenues including parent events, parent education, and parent support. At the campus level, teachers promoted a culture of parent-teacher collaboration, with teachers making special effort to include parents in their children's learning. The importance of this collaboration was also emphasized by Chiuri et al. (2020) who used quantitative data to establish the importance of parent-teacher collaboration on student achievement.

Collaboration was built on communication. Teachers explained that communication across the campus community was critical for the school's academic achievement. Communication avenues referred to by participants cut across all facets of the school community: teachers with parents, teachers with colleagues, teachers with administrators, and administrators with central office. The value of communication was evident in Puzio et al. (2015) whose principals ensured teachers had opportunities to engage with each other, share resources, and observe expert teachers during instruction. Additionally, Zoch (2016) found that teacher-centered inquiry groups supported teachers and helped them to respond to student needs.

The trusting relationships across the community also included a culture of students helping students. The principal and teachers commented on the benefits that students receive when working with their peers. A theme found in the qualitative data and mentioned in the focus groups was the notion of teacher experience. From publicly available data on the Texas Education Agency website, teachers at Karson Elementary had above average years of teaching experience when compared to other elementary campuses across the state. Notably, 80% of teachers at Karson Elementary have 11 or more years of teaching experience. Educator experience was cited in the literature as a critical factor of student achievement. Huang and Moon (2009) found a significant positive correlation between teachers with 5 or more years of experience in a particular grade level and higher student achievement. Additionally, Kearney et al. (2012) found that “in the aggregate, the longer a principal serves as leader of a campus, the better the student test scores on the campus are likely to be.” These factors seem to be at play at Karson Elementary. Both the teachers and the campus leadership are invested in the school with staff longevity beyond state averages, leading to long-term relationships across the school community.

Finally, many participants explained that the trusting relationships existing amongst the school community played a role in the students’ reading success. These relationships could be characterized as caring, supportive, and allowing for flexibility in times of difficulty. This aspect of community seemed to relate to the findings of Ronfeldt et al. (2015) in that better collaboration amongst teachers had better achievement gains in reading.

### *Celebrating Reading*

One overarching theme that emerged in the data was celebrating reading. Celebrating students' progress in the AR program represented a part of the campus culture of reading. Ho and Lau (2018) agreed that policies can be implemented to nurture a positive reading climate and improve students' reading performance.

At Karson Elementary, the campus community promoted and encouraged students to begin their journey as readers through the AR program, starting at pre-kindergarten and developmentally increasing the students' reading level and reading comprehension. This shaping of reading culture bore out in the literature when Ho and Lau (2018) recommended that teachers should increase student participation and promote reading engagement through scaffolding strategies. AR represents a scaffolding strategy. Additionally, Reis et al. (2011) found that including high interest, self-selected books that are above students' current independent reading levels, results in higher reading fluency and comprehension in some students, which is a staple of the AR program.

Another way that Karson Elementary celebrated reading was through fun reading events held throughout the year, such as the AR parade at the beginning of the school year, storybook character dress-up days, interactive events with children's book authors, high school students coming to campus to read books for story time, and family reading night at mid-year to engage the school community. Teachers regularly sent notes home for encouraging parental involvement. Thus, all campus-level participants mentioned the celebratory campus culture surrounding reading, causing children to love books and ask parents to take them to the library. Additionally, the district's central office staff reported

initiating certain guidelines for motivating students not only to enjoy reading but also to be successful at it. The parent involvement office regularly invited parents to participate in activities pertaining to students' reading, including the "Week of the Young Child" that set aside time during the year to celebrate student learning. From parents to teachers to school and central office administration all touted the celebration of reading by the school community as a whole to ensure students demonstrated their reading skills on STAAR (Dearing et al., 2006).

### ***COVID-19 Affected School Culture***

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, the nation's response to the disease affected the culture of all schools. As such, Karson Elementary adapted to the current context of education. Participants notably mentioned the increased academic, social, and emotional needs not only of students but also of the adults on the campus and in the community. The participants discussed how the entire community was taken aback by COVID-19 and the exacerbated educational challenges presented by the pandemic, particularly during the time when students were engaged in remote learning. Student achievement fell and efforts to keep students reading were challenged. The teachers reported persevering even during online instructional days. These observations were supported by the Nation's Report Card released on October 24, 2022, even though the school community's efforts actually enabled the school to retain its high achievement status with the Texas Education Agency in 2022.

Overall, the school community had a clear understanding of the wholistic needs of the students and campus. Teachers, parents, and administrators worked in whatever way

necessary to keep students engaged, celebrate the joy of reading, and promote reading achievement as a campus community. Given the nature of these findings, implications for practice appear next.

### **Implications for Practice**

Students who are not reading on grade level by the third grade fall behind and often face serious consequences throughout their school careers (Wanzek et al., 2013). Moreover, economically disadvantaged students who do not learn to read become more likely to live in poverty and enter the prison pipeline and unlikely to reach average life expectancies during adulthood (Buffum et al., 2010). Unfortunately, far too many economically disadvantaged students do not receive the instruction necessary to offer them the opportunity for literacy and life success. However, schools serving economically disadvantaged students can make a difference and achieve what many other schools serving the same population of students find to be impossible. By studying the Karson school community, the overarching themes that emerged suggest implications for best practices. After analyzing the identified themes and cross referencing the most frequently mentioned themes with the conceptual framework, the following section outlines implications for practice that could be considered by other campuses looking to increase reading achievement.

The first research question supported identifying the resources and supports the participants believed contributed to the exemplary reading achievement of the campus. All-hands-on-deck academic support and standardized curriculum resources were the two most mentioned contributions to the impressive results of the campus by the participants.

In relation to personnel, the mentality of teamwork, where all members of the school community were included, contributed to the reading achievement of students. This mentality included central office staff, the campus principal, primary teachers, intermediate teachers, teacher assistants, academic deans, parents, and school volunteers.

The school also relied heavily on standardized curriculum resources provided by the district that allowed teacher instruction to be aligned from classroom to classroom, while allowing for teacher creativity. The AR program was a fundamental component of the reading instruction of the campus. The buy-in for reading was expressed across the campus with an emphasis on students reading independently with comprehension starting as early as possible, including in prekindergarten. Therefore, the implication is to increase student reading achievement by aligning instruction and creating a way to measure student reading both in quantity and accuracy.

The second research question supported identifying the educational practices utilized by Karson Elementary to achieve their exemplary results. The theme of connecting writing with reading suggests a need for curriculum focused on writing. The emphasis on the reading/writing connection is a staple of instruction at Karson Elementary, so much so that the practice of writing in response to reading on a weekly basis spread across the district with similar positive results. For other campuses looking to achieve similar results, the reading-to-writing connection would be an avenue to consider and has been recommended by previous researchers (Downer & Pianta, 2006; Turecotte & Caron, 2020). Writing instruction enhances students' reading, and teaching

reading by writing about informational texts in an integrated manner increases reading comprehension with a larger effect size.

Another implication for practice is the use of small group and differentiated instruction. Campuses seeking to improve reading achievement could reflect on the percentage of instruction that occurs in a whole group setting versus the percentage of instruction that occurs in a small group setting. Additionally, schools could examine the use of differentiated instruction across the campus to better meet the needs of all students and address challenges affecting all students to ensure substantial progress across the campus.

The final research question supported understanding the campus culture of a high performing, high poverty campus. The findings suggest several implications for practice. The first, and most notable, was parent-teacher collaboration that was based on trust and communication. In fact, this area was mentioned by every participant in the study. As such, other schools looking to increase student reading achievement would do well to examine their parent involvement practices and develop an active parent involvement office. Schools would also do well to build trusting collaborative relationships across the campus through open communication and team building.

Secondly, the Karson community celebrated reading and the reading achievements of students. The main program by which this was measured was Accelerated Reader. The campus relied heavily on AR to build their reading culture. Starting in kindergarten, students learned to read independently for comprehension and were challenged to earn points by successfully completing quizzes on books they read.

Other campuses looking to increase reading achievement would do well to review their reading culture and assess how often students are reading independently and what measures are in place to accurately log student progress.

Finally, there was a culture of celebration and connection around reading. In this way, campuses seeking increases in students' reading achievement could examine their campus reading cultures and seek ways to celebrate students' reading progress. Clearly, nurturing a campus reading culture that offers connections across the school community benefits students of economic disadvantage, as seen at Karson Elementary. With the implications for practice in mind and given their connections to the findings, the implications for future research are presented.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study's findings highlight the resources, practices, and culture of one public elementary school in Texas. Also, these findings demonstrate that students can achieve and sustain exceptional reading achievement even when they are economically disadvantaged. Although the research questions were answered, there is more to learn about this topic. Until high performing, high poverty schools become the rule and not the exception, there is still the need for further research. Moreover, this study addressed only a single high performing, high poverty campus.

More research is needed to understand a wide variety of schools that fit the high performing, high poverty criteria. Douglas Reeves (2004) coined the phrase *90/90/90 schools*. These are schools in which 90% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch, 90% of the student body is identified as non-Anglo, and 90% of state assessments



are passed. This study examined a campus whose student demographics identified as 99% Hispanic; however, the campus dynamics could be different at a school with most of the students identifying as another race or ethnicity. This is one implication for future research

Another avenue of potential research is to look specifically at how the superintendent and central office staff support the school, since there are several high performing, high poverty campuses in Loretta ISD. This study could be expanded by studying how the district offers supports to all its campuses that fit the high performing, high poverty demographic. Additionally, longitudinal research should be conducted to study whether the gains that students achieve in elementary reading continue through their middle and high school years.

The most notable aspect of the study involved the most frequently mentioned theme: community relationships built on trust and communication. One idea for future research is purposefully investigating the nature of parent-teacher collaboration in high performing, high poverty schools. The findings indicate that all participants attributed parent-teacher collaboration to the school's impressive reading achievement. In future study, it would be beneficial to know if this perception appears at other high performing, high poverty campuses.

Another prevailing theme in the study was the use of standardized curriculum resources throughout Loretta ISD, such as AR. The AR program was mentioned as one of these standardized curriculum resources that permeated the school's reading culture. First, a future study of other high performing, high poverty campuses use of standard

curriculum resources within the Loretta ISD could suggest how these resources benefit the district. A study of the practices that high performing, high poverty districts utilize to standardize their curriculum resources could inform district practices and standardize their district resources. Finally, more research is needed to understand specifically what teachers do throughout all classes to ensure student reading success. Given the themes of connecting reading and writing, more research is needed to understand how high performing, high poverty schools specifically teach reading and writing. Finally, given the impact of COVID-19 on education, research is needed to study the pre- and post-pandemic effects on student performance of historically high performing, high poverty schools.

Each of these ideas for future research could strengthen the body of literature on this important topic and help to isolate the essential elements of quality reading instruction that promote the reading success of all students, despite the challenges of serving economically disadvantaged students. This case study provided fertile ground for future research; however, no qualitative study is complete without the inclusion of final concluding thoughts from the researcher.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The care and commitment that educators bring to their work is impossible to quantify and capture. Nevertheless, the work of the Karson school community represents an exemplary model of reading success for the state. Despite serving a school community composed solely of economically disadvantaged students and operating during a global pandemic, the school community continued to excel. In 2022, the year in which the most

current data for the campus was available at the time of publishing the study, the school earned a Grade A rating from the Texas Education Agency, along with every Academic Distinction possible (Academic Achievement: Achievement in ELA/Reading, Academic Achievement: Achievement in Mathematics, Top 25 Percent: Comparative Academic Growth, Top 25 Percent: Comparative Closing the Gaps, and Postsecondary Readiness). With these impressive and sustained results, the work of the Karson school community, and others like them, rightfully deserve recognition and further study to measure the unmeasurable. The deep commitment and proven results of Karson Elementary formed the essential components for guiding students toward and sustaining their impressive reading achievement. The educators offer their students the opportunity to fully achieve their dreams and compete with their more advantaged counterparts. The work of this exceptional community helps to level the playing field of college, career, and life for students who might not otherwise be afforded these opportunities. The work of Karson Elementary is a ray of hope for all of us in education.

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