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English Language Arts Formative Assessments: A Leadership Opportunity at a Title I Program Improvement Year Five Middle School

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree Doctor of Education

by

David Brian Costa

2012

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

English Language Arts Formative Assessments:

A leadership Opportunity at a Title I Program Improvement

Year Five Middle School

by

David Brian Costa

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Robert Cooper, Co-Chair

Professor Eugene Tucker, Co-Chair

This study examined how school leaders—teachers and administrators–at a high poverty middle school utilized formative assessment information to drive instructional improvement and increase achievement. The purpose of this study was to increase school participants' knowledge and effective application of formative assessment systems. By determining from the participant principal and teacher leaders what they do to support teachers using formative assessment systems in language arts and by synthesizing the research literature of assessment systems, an action research team of thirteen co-created a

formative assessment system that met the particular needs of the site's language arts department.

Data collected through preliminary interviews, participant reflections, a review of documents, and post-interviews provided evidence that specific leadership actions led to an improved assessment practices. Teacher participants and the principal exhibited specific leadership actions that advanced improvement in assessment practices and in turn this led to instructional improvement. The leaders shared curricular expertise and instructional materials. Furthermore, the principal communicated a clear expectation for growth and accountability, and the principal articulated a clear vision and mission. The barriers to implementing best assessment practices included minimal time, resources, minimal collaboration, and curricular experience. Again, several leaders assuaged these barriers by sharing resources, content expertise, and pedagogical knowledge. Teacher leaders worked to improve collaboration, and as a result teachers were able to improve assessment practices.

Completing two plan, do, check, and act, action research cycles provided for a greater likelihood of sustained change. Significant implications exist in terms of the study's findings. High poverty schools must continue to utilize assessment results to target students and the particular standards that are most challenging. Teachers must be part of the instructional decision-making process. The findings also offer significant implications for education reform. If policy advocates continue to push for teachers to be evaluated utilizing

assessment results, districts must build this capacity in teachers to use results to inform their instruction.

The dissertation of David Brian Costa is approved.

Beverly Lynch

Wellford (Buzz) Wilms

Robert Cooper, Committee Co-Chair

Eugene Tucker, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2012

DEDICATION PAGE

Dedicated to the memory of my father, Donald Costa.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION PAGE vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS vii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ix
VITA x
CHAPTER I 1
Introduction 1
The Problem 3
Purpose Statement 7
The Research Site 9
Brief Summary of Design 10
Significance of the Research 11
CHAPTER 2 14
Literature Review 14
Background of ESEA Title I (1965) and NCLB (2001) 15
Role of the Principal 18
Formative vs. Summative Assessments 24
Principals' Effect on Teachers' Use of Formative Assessment Information 27
Leadership Theory—Transformational Leadership 32
Leadership Theory—Instructional leadership 34
Data-based Decision Making 35
Poverty and Learning 37
Summary 40
CHAPTER 3 42
Summary of the Problem 42
Research Design 43
Research Site and Participant Description 45
The Action Research Structure 50
Data Analysis Methods 57
Threats to Validity, Credibility, and Trustworthiness 59
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS 62
Summary of Action Research Meetings 62
Research Question One: 63
Finding: Data collected in this study provided credible evidence that specific leadership actions advanced effective formative assessment practices. 63
Finding: Data collected in this study provided credible evidence that accountability was a component of the research site's assessment practices. 70
Research Question Two: 78
According to school leaders—teachers and administrators—who are participating in an action research study, what are the essential components of effective assessment practices that advance instructional improvement? 78

Finding: Data collected in this study provided credible evidence that item analysis was an essential component of best assessment practices among participants. 79
Finding: Data collected in this study provided credible evidence that collaboration was a driver for improved instructional planning; however, there was limited evidence that collaboration extended to data analysis and re-teaching. 83
Research Question Three: 86
If barriers exist for teachers and administrators concerning formative assessment systems, how are school leaders who are participating in a structured and collaborative forum confronting these barriers? 86
Finding: Data collected in this study provided credible evidence that time is a barrier to effective assessment practices. 86
Finding: Data collected in this study provided credible evidence that participants perceived that the action research meetings improved their use of assessment information to drive instructional improvement. 92
Conclusion 98
CHAPTER FIVE 99
Summary of Findings 99
Significance of Findings 99
Limitations of the Study 101
Practical Implications and Lessons Learned 102
Research Implications 104
Final Thoughts 105
LIST OF APPENDICES 108
REFERENCES 123

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VITA

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Educational institutions, particularly K12 schools, have a wealth of assessment tools. Massive investments have been directed toward testing and accountability systems. According to Kozol (2007), the testing industry generated $2.8 billion in 2005. Burch,(2010) reports, the testing industry doubled sales from 2000 to 2006, and "the top vendors in the testing industry reported annual sales in the range of $200 to $900 million" (p. 152). Hess (2004) cites a GAO study estimating the cost of high quality assessments at 5.3 billion for 2002 to 2008. Given what appear to be substantial investments in testing, leaders at Title I Program Improvement schools often fail to use these assessment tools to maximize teacher effectiveness and student learning. This problem is a leadership challenge that site-based administrators must resolve to increase teacher effectiveness and student learning. Evidence of this problem surfaces in several studies. Ed Source's (2010) study, "Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades: Why Some Schools do Better" which collected data from 303 middle school principals, 3,752 teachers, 152 district superintendents, and five charter management organizations illuminates the issue. The findings indicate that leadership behaviors that focus on assessment information to drive decision making on teaching and learning could have a significant and positive impact on school improvement. Simply stated, school leaders who focus on assessment information gain greater student success than those who do not.

A meta-analysis study by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) identified twenty-one leadership responsibilities that had a positive impact on student achievement. The researchers argued that second order change—lasting comprehensive change—required leaders with "knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment [all considered one responsibility in the study]" (p.70). This responsibility accounted for an average correlation of .25 with student achievement. The authors contend that leaders must invest greater efforts to utilize assessment information to support increased teacher effectiveness and student learning. I propose that these efforts focus on improving the systems for better using assessment results.

Specifically targeting test performance, the US Department of Education (2003) claims, "that teachers who use student test performance to guide and improve teaching are more effective than teachers who do not use such information" (As cited in Militello, Schweid, and Sireci, 2009). School leaders must create the conditions for this to occur among teachers. Furthermore, research has shown that teachers are aware of the importance of assessment information. Duke, Kanold, and Salmonwicz (2007) found that "many teachers believed they needed to learn more about how to use classroom assessment results to support student learning" (p. 288). Teachers recognize the value of their own assessment literacy for the benefit of increased student learning. Supporting teachers in this endeavor needs to be a priority for site-based leaders. Stiggins (2001) asserts "the development of school and classroom assessment environments that use assessment to promote student success, principals must desire and be able to provide

informed, confident, and assertive leadership" (p. 19). This action research study investigates leaders—administrators and teachers—utilizing assessment information to improve teaching and learning.

Many other researchers have found consistence evidence supporting the view that using "formative assessments" or assessments used in the process of teaching, results in improved teaching and student learning. In a literature synthesis of research spanning ten years—1988 to 1998, Black and William (1998) found consistent evidence of the positive impact formative assessments can have on learning. The researchers summarize eight studies showing significant student learning gains when classroom teachers implemented regular assessment and feedback. One of the eight primary studies found "a mean effect size of .70" utilizing a meta-analysis technique (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1986). The authors of the study concluded that the significant learning gains were the result of systematic efforts to utilize frequent formative assessments with feedback to and from students. While the studies reviewed by Black and William were not focused on leadership behaviors, they target the most effective practices of teachers and the use of assessments—of primary concern to school leaders. These studies reveal compelling evidence indicating that school leaders need to support teachers in better utilizing assessment information.

The Problem

Even with a compelling body of research showing the positive impact effective assessment systems have on learning, many school leaders do not implement best assessment practices. In the article

"Effective instructional leadership requires effective assessment leadership," Stiggins and Duke's (2008), analyzed the problem of leadership knowledge of assessment from a pre-principal training perspective. Stiggins and Duke noted the virtual absence of assessment training for school leaders. The authors speculate "leadership program designers may have assumed, for example, that candidates must have been trained in effective assessment practices during their preparation to become teachers" (p. 289). The authors acknowledge that their conclusions do not come from their own systematic research; however, a wealth of studies confirms the need for greater leadership involvement in classroom assessments. Given that standardized test scores are the one measure determining whether schools are sanction or not, Stiggins and Duke are concerned that current administrators do not have enough knowledge of assessment to succeed in increasing teacher effectiveness and student learning.

In a research study of school principals by the Regional Educational Laboratory (2004) "results show[ed] that principals of those higher performing schools rate[d] their employment of most (4 out of 7) of the elements of effective assessment and accountability systems more highly than principals in those schools rated as lower performing" (p. 16). The comparisons show a statistically significant ($p<0.05$) effect size of .35 in the area of assessment data usage. When the authors of this report compared schools with "Declining or Static Achievement Levels" on district and school personnel data usage to "Improving Achievement Levels" a statistically significant ($p<0.01$) effect size of 0.50 was reported. This research indicates that schools

that are improving and principals who work at schools with higher performing students utilize assessments more effectively.

More researchers have documented the problem of leadership and the effective use of assessment information to increase student learning and teacher effectiveness. A policy brief by Fuller, Loeb, Arshan, Chen, and Yi (2007) provides further evidence of this leadership assessment problem. Their findings from survey data and interviews of 267 California principals indicate leaders "use achievement data to identify struggling students. However, the mean scale score of 2.1 indicates discussions 'every few months,' reported by both elementary and secondary principals"(p. 41). The frequency or infrequency of principals' utilization of assessment information remains a problem. In an earlier policy brief, Fuhrman (1999) provides evidence that school leaders and teachers utilized assessment information only in "superficial" ways. The problem of principals and teachers not utilizing assessment best practices to support instructional improvement and learning needs to be fully explored.

Given this evidence, many school leaders continue to under-utilize this lever to improve teacher effectiveness and student learning. Title I Program Improvement schools are organizations that must confront and prevail over complex barriers. To accomplish this and exit Program Improvement, leaders at these sites must be highly skilled. Research indicating this elevated level of expertise for program improvement school leaders has been argued in the educational reform literature. Turner (2007) found that teachers at schools exiting Program Improvement rated their principals higher on a survey

instrument. The differences were statistically significant on nearly all survey items. In particular, 80% of teachers at schools exiting Program Improvement indicated their principal "Is knowledgeable about current curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices" (p.203). This was compared to the 49% of teachers at current Program Improvement schools on the same survey item. This difference in teacher perceptions was substantial.

A similar point comes from a Regional Education Laboratory West report (2009). The authors argue, "There was participant consensus that turnaround leaders [leaders at Program Improvement districts and schools] need additional training, support, and resources, as well as opportunities for mentorship by and apprenticeship to district and school leaders with experience in successful school improvement"(p.5). As evidenced in the literature, a need for leaders with specialized training persists at Program Improvement schools. Specifically, this training needs to focus on leaders supporting teachers with formative assessments in language arts. Language arts is of primary concern because standardized summative assessment scores are the determining factor of a schools Program Improvement status. Furthermore, language arts achievement scores are consistently lower than any other subject, and language arts like math are tested all three years in middle schools. Most importantly, students who become more literate as a result of better language arts instruction will thrive in science and history classes.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to increase school leaders' (teachers and administrators) knowledge and effective application of formative assessment feedback systems. By determining from administrators and teacher leaders what they do to support teachers using formative assessment systems in language arts and by synthesizing the research literature of assessment systems, an action research team co-created a formative assessment system that met the particular needs of teachers and administrators situated in a Title I Program Improvement year 5 middle school. This study was necessary to investigate the leadership assessment system problem because many high poverty, low-achieving schools remain unchanged even in an intensely reform oriented climate. Stiggins (2007) discusses two types of assessments, "of learning and for learning" (p. 2). This study was primarily concerned with the "for learning" assessments to increase student success in Title I Program Improvement year five middle schools. Assessments for learning, if used properly, provide teachers and administrators clear signals of success and weakness. With this immediate information, teachers, supported by administrators and teacher leaders should make adjustments in their instruction to remedy student-learning challenges. Accordingly, this study investigated how school leaders increase English teachers' capacity to use formative assessment information to improve instruction and student learning.

Research on literacy formative assessment systems and what school site leaders do to strengthen the effectiveness of these systems is critical in Title I Program Improvement year 5 middle schools. Given

that several Title I Program Improvement middle schools in southern California are not making greater academic gains, a study was essential in this region of the state. Utilizing a qualitative action research approach, interviews, participant reflections, and a document review, this research project identified the most important components of effective assessment systems and identified school leader behaviors that encourage English teachers at a Title I program improvement year 5 middle school to better use assessment information to improve instruction and learning outcomes.

The following research questions guided this study:

Research questions:

1. As a result of a structured and collaborative action research project, what specific actions by school leaders help change teacher practices in response to formative assessment information at a Title I Program Improvement year five middle school?
2. According to school leaders—teachers and administrators—who are participating in an action research study, what are the essential components of effective assessment practices that advance instructional improvement?
3. If barriers exist for teachers and administrators concerning formative assessment systems, how are school leaders who are participating in a structured and collaborative forum confronting these barriers?

An abundance of research exists on language arts assessments in the middle grades. Many studies assert the value of assessments for

teachers and how administrators play an essential role in the execution of these assessment systems. In the context of schools attempting massive turn-around efforts, administrators and other school leaders need to encourage teachers as they address student-learning challenges. Teachers and administrators should work collaboratively to utilize these tools for learning to increase Title I Program Improvement middle schools.

The Research Site

I conducted this study at one[1] Title I Program Improvement year 5 plus middle school located in a southern California urban community.[2] The middle school is located in a school district where the researcher is an employee. The school serves students with free and reduced lunch rate of 97%. The campus serves a high number of students identified as English Language Learners. The average time of service for teachers at the school is 10.5 years. The school board school reconstituted[3] the campus in the past, and is currently under an alternative governance structure. In the district, all Program Improvement year five middle schools are currently under the direct supervision of the superintendent, and all of these schools work within a Professional

1 The participants will include the school's principal, assistant principals, English department chair, and eight English teachers.

2 According to No Child Left Behind (2001) schools and districts that fail to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets two years consecutively are labeled Program Improvement schools. Each year a school is in Program Improvement, sanctions become progressively more severe.

3 In 2000 the school was reconstituted because of low achievement. The reconstitution included the termination of the principal and 50% of the schools faculty.

Learning Community[4] (PLC) framework. The principal at the research site reports directly to the superintendent with additional support provided by a principal coach. The school site has a data assistant principal to support the principal with data collection and analysis.

Brief Summary of Design

For this study I used an action research approach to address the problem of school leaders under-utilizing language arts assessment information to improve teaching and learning at a Title I Program Improvement year 5 middle school. This project explored how leaders—principals and other school leaders—utilized formative assessment data to foster instructional improvement. This process of action inquiry emerged over the course of five professional development sessions for administrators and teachers. The foundational action research model comes from Coghlan and Brannick's (2010) *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization* where by the process will include a pre-step of establishing *context and purpose*, followed by *constructing, planning action, taking action* and *evaluating action*. In addition, I merged this action research framework with the schools site's Baldrige plan, do, study, and act model. Prior to the first meeting, I interviewed participants to familiarize myself with current site assessment practices. The first action research session included a presentation on action research as a structure for comprehensive school improvement, and I presented an abridged literature review of best assessment practices. Furthermore, I presented to participants'

4 Professional learning communities is a conceptual model requiring intensive teacher collaboration and educators to focus on learning as opposed to teaching (DuFour, 2007).

collective perspectives on site assessment practices as reported during initial interviews. During the following four sessions, participant administrators, teachers, and I worked through the action research components to significantly improve the site's formative assessment systems. The administrators and teachers immediately implemented their new knowledge of effective assessment systems and reported their experiences back to the researcher. The primary reasons for reporting was to modify the action research plan and collect data on the school leaders' experiences. In addition, a document review, and interview transcripts provided data for a richer understanding of the participants' knowledge and understanding of best practices with regard to assessment systems. This action research model allowed school leaders—teachers and administrators—to improve their understanding of formative assessment systems, to put into immediate action their new knowledge, and to improve their school's assessment practices.

Significance of the Research

This study was needed to contribute to a limited body of research on Title I Program Improvement year five middle schools, especially those schools serving student populations in which ninety percent or more of the students receive free and reduced food services. Although the research literature has noted the lack of formative assessment use at low achieving schools, few of these studies have provided a clear direction for these unique sites. This action research study offered the participants and myself the ability to design an improved formative assessment system that is sensitive to the unique context—a

middle school in which ninety-seven percent receive free and reduced food services—of an individual site. The research is compelling that there is a strong link between formative assessment systems and student achievement. Given this knowledge, why are administrators and teachers in Program Improvement year five middle schools failing to exercise this knowledge to increase achievement? How are administrators collaborating with or facilitating the collaboration among teachers to better use formative assessments? Finding answers to these questions was a necessary endeavor to improve low achieving, high poverty schools.

Again, this study was particularly concerned with language arts because a substantial component of STAR (Standardized Testing and Reporting) testing is in language arts. Furthermore, students perform lower on language arts assessment than they do on math, history, or science. Most importantly, language arts is literacy development and practice. Schmoker (2004) explains succinctly, "Under-developed literacy skills are the number one reason why students are retained, assigned to special education, given long term remedial services and why they fail to graduate from high school" (P. 29). Without question, low achieving schools need to confront and remedy the lack of success in language arts, or many students will not have an opportunity at a college education, will have limited opportunities for fulfilling employment, and few skills to participate constructively in a democratic society.

Result for this study will be presented to district administrators as recommendations for improving the effective use of

formative assessment information at Title I Program Improvement year five Middle schools. Additionally, this project will be submitted for presentation at regional professional conferences.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

This action research project investigated how a principal, teacher leaders, and I developed and sustained a formative assessment process to target program improvement. The study investigated principals' actions and interactions with teachers in the formative assessment processes at a Title I Program Improvement Year Five middle school identifying barriers, if any, which surfaced and noted leaders mediating actions. This chapter reviews the pertinent literature related to the problem of school leaders not utilizing formative assessment information to drive instructional improvement. In this chapter, I first review the background of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) and the Reauthorization of ESEA, No Child Left Behind Act (2001), because these laws established current accountability mandates determining Program Improvement status. Second, I review research on the principals' effect on student achievement and teacher practice. Third, I discuss the literature on effective school assessment practices in order to show their impact on academic achievement. Fourth, I discuss the effect principals have on teachers' use of assessments, and the leadership theory relevant to effective principals. Fifth, I present findings on data driven interactions between principals and teachers. Lastly, because these teachers' formative assessments need to respond to the particular student population of Title I schools, I review the research on the effect poverty has on learning.

Background of ESEA Title I (1965) and NCLB (2001)

According to studies using National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data and other standardized assessment data, the Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of (1965) appears to have had a positive impact on the educational outcomes of schools (Borman and D'Agostino, 1996). Title I of ESEA (1965) was the domestic policy centerpiece for President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty." Borman (2009) explains, Title I "is a funding mechanism designed to support a range of whole-school reform models, various instructional programs and practices, and school organizational and structural changes" (P. 51). Title I is money for school improvement; it is not a specific academic program to improve schools. Even with added fiscal resources directed at schools serving low-income students, forty-six years since the inception of the original ESEA (1965), the nation's poorest students continue to lag far behind their more financially comfortable peers in academic assessments. These Title I funds are intended to balance educational inequities at schools serving students from low SES backgrounds; however, the nation's poorest children and the schools that serve them have been unable to break the cycle of low achievement.

Schools qualify for Title I funds if approximately 40 percent of their students are near or below the poverty line. My study investigated the leadership assessment challenge where over ninety percent of the students are considered economically disadvantaged. Students living in poverty are identified by their eligibility for free and reduced lunch services. The United States Department of

Education website published guidelines for receiving these services:

> Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals, for which students can be charged no more than 40 cents (U.S. Department of Education).

In California, a student in a family of four with a total income not exceeding $28,665 qualifies for a free meal. For a reduced-price lunch, income for a family of four must be between $28,665 and $40,793 (California Department of Education).

More recently, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001), the reauthorization of ESEA (1965) attempted to reinvigorate efforts to address an increasing disparity between low SES students and their middle and upper-income peers on achievement outcomes (standardized tests). Weinstein, Stiefel, Schwartz, & Chalico, (2009) offer recent funding totals in their study of the effect of Title I programs:

> As the fourth largest of all federal programs for low-income children (behind Medicaid, food programs, and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), Title I allocated $13.9 billion in FY 2008, reaching over half the public schools in the country and almost 17 million students. The recent federal economic stimulus bill (the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 or ARRA) allocates an additional $13 billion to Title I, over two years (P.1).

Despite substantial fiscal resources, many Title I schools continue to fail to meet growth mandates under NCLB. When Title I schools do not

meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for two consecutive years, the schools are considered Program Improvement (PI). In California, AYP targets are based on how many students in each numerically significant sub-group meet or exceed target proficiency levels on the California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) tests (California Department of Education, 2011). In the 2009/2010 school year, only ten out of the 1,073 year five schools exited PI status in California. This evidence indicates that less than 1% of Program Improvement year five schools were able to achieve gains great enough to lift sanctions.

The U.S. Department of Education provides twelve purposes of NCLB legislation. Of these, the most relevant to the purpose of my research study is "ensuring that high-quality academic assessments" and "accountability systems" work to increase student success and close the achievement gap. In addition to affecting assessment and accountability, this federal legislation has had other effects on educational reform. With the reauthorization came rigorous achievement standards and academic outcome targets. One of the most ambitious goals of the reauthorization is that all students will achieve proficiency in English language arts and math by the year 2014. Currently, no country has achieved this goal (Bracey, 2009). Louis Freedberg (2010) notes:

> The number of schools [in California] in need of "program improvement" – those schools labeled as failing under the federal No Child Left Behind Act – has now soared to 3,197 schools, out of some 6,142 which are rated under the law. This

includes 567 schools that have been designated "program improvement schools" for the first time.

Improving principals' knowledge and use of assessment systems has the potential to positively impact teacher effectiveness, student achievement and to potentially move schools out of Program Improvement.

Not only was the law written with high achievement expectations, it also mandated sanctions for schools that continue to fail to make growth targets. Schools that fail to meet these performance outcomes face progressive sanctions. Some of these sanctions include a restriction of Title I funds, parent notification of PI status, replacing school staff, decreasing site management authority, implementing new curriculum, appointing outside experts, shutting-down the schools, and reopening the schools as an independent charter. Considering that failing to meet AYP targets results in severe sanctions, principals and teacher leaders need to increase the effectiveness of their formative assessment processes to improve teaching and learning. The research suggesting that a few skilled leaders are able to accomplish this is abundant.

Role of the Principal

Given that the dominant narrative in education reform appears to be based on sanctions for underperforming schools, students and teachers will benefit when principals perform their jobs with greater precision (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom, 2004, and Hallinger, Heck, 2010). With the abundance of reform literature in

education, necessary questions to reconsider by stakeholders concern the role of the principal and his or her effect on student achievement. Does the principal have an effect on student achievement, and does the principal have an effect on teacher practice? These questions are difficult to answer because of the complexity of the principal's interactions with teachers and students. Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) argue leadership "is second only to teaching among school-related factors in its impact on student learning" (p.5). Several other scholars provide powerful evidence of the importance of effective principals. Dhuey and Smith (2010) found that principals in British Columbia do have a positive effect on elementary school student achievement. By comparing math and language arts assessment scores of students in grades four through seven from 1999 to 2006 to principal job mobility characteristics. Dhuey and Smith (2010) found dramatic results: "A one standard deviation shift up the principal quality distribution can increase achievement by 0.194 standard deviations in math and 0.228 standard in reading" (p.30). This study used experience and mobility constructs to determine effects on student achievement. The researchers defined experience by the length of time a principal had been a principal and defined the mobility construct by the number of transfers a principal made over the course of the study. Although the Dhuey and Smith (2010) do not argue for any specific leadership approach, their study provides findings that indicate principals can have a significant impact on student achievement.

Other scholars have found similar principal effects on student achievement. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) enumerate twenty-one responsibilities for principals, and they calculate a correlation for each responsibility with student achievement. The authors use a meta-analysis research method and review over sixty-four studies, representing 2,599 schools. Of the twenty-one responsibilities, Situational Awareness had the largest correlation with student achievement r = .33. The authors defined this construct as a principal who "is aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems" (p. 43). The average of all correlations calculated was r = .25. The twenty-one responsibilities spell out the massive role of principals. Without question, the principal has an impact on student learning.

According to additional research studies, the principal's impact on student achievement is well documented; however, the literature fails to specifically investigate Title I Program Improvement year five middle schools. This is evidence that an action research study is essential to better understand the assessment challenge at these unique schools. Brown (2001) found a mean effect of d =0.57 of leadership on student achievement, while Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) d =0.55 leadership effect on student learning. Both studies are meta-analyses, showing the powerful impact principals can have on student achievement. An action research study investigating the principals' action and interactions with teachers using formative assessment information has the potential to contribute to the research

literature on school improvement. With an action research team of a principal, other school leaders and teachers, barriers in the formative process can be confronted and mediated through collaboration. The research on how principals' and other school leaders' influence improved academic achievement is compelling. To maximize the principals' positive impact on student achievement, we need to know how administrators can directly support teachers' effectiveness.

Effective teachers can have a significant impact on student learning, (Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain, 2005). However, is there empirical evidence that indicates principals affect teacher practices? Several studies indicate principals can influence teacher practice. Wahlsrom and Louis (2008) found "that elementary, middle, and high school principals can all have a significant effect on instruction" (p. 479). Their study used survey data collected from February 2005 through November 2006. A total of 4,165 teachers, in 39 districts and from 138 schools participated, with a response rate of 67%. The greatest impact principals have on student achievement consists of their influence on the work of teachers. Several studies provide evidence of this phenomenon. Again, Brown's (2001) study provides evidence that the principal's influence on teacher effectiveness is greater in elementary schools d=0.75 than in secondary schools d=0.44. The author surmises that the broad range of content and the various levels of the content taught at the secondary level explain the difference in effect size between the elementary and secondary schools. Thirty-eight studies provided 339 effect sizes that formed

the sample for the meta-analysis study. Of the four leadership approaches analyzed in Brown's research, Instructional leadership had the largest effect size *d*=0.74 on student achievement. Furthermore, Brown states, "categorically that leadership does influence school effectiveness, and the instructional approach to leadership assumes preeminence of the other approaches" (P.113). This study compared effect sizes on four leadership approaches: Instructional, Transformational, Inclusive, and Leadership style. According to this study and several others, the principal influences teacher effectiveness.

An additional study of primary relevance to this inquiry is Supovitz, Sirinides, and May's, (2009) research on the strength of association between principals' leadership and teacher change. The first of their five research questions reads "Is principal leadership associated with teacher change in instruction?" (p. 39). Analyzing teacher perceptions from survey data and student achievement records, the authors found a strong association between principal leadership and teacher change. Furthermore, the researchers found a strong positive association between principal leadership and student achievement on math and English language arts scores. The results further indicated that principals directly and indirectly influenced teacher change. Supovitz, Sirinides, and May, (2009) assert "principals who focus on instruction, foster community and trust, and clearly communicate school mission are associated with teachers who report making a greater degree of changes to their instruction" (P.

44). The indirect influence is driven by the principals' actions that enable teachers to collaborate and rely on each other.

Although the findings from these various studies indicate the effect of leadership, gaps in the literature exist. The studies identified and reviewed here have not looked at the effects of leadership or the lack of effects principals or other school leaders assert at Title I Program Improvement year five middle schools. Additionally, the body of research on principals' effects on student achievement and teacher practice lacks an action research approach, one that contextualizes, probes deeply, and seeks to remedy ineffective systems at underperforming schools. Additionally, the literature lacks research on how teacher leadership drives instructional improvement.

Given these gaps in the literature, other studies provide empirical evidence that assessment, when used properly, can contribute to improved teacher effectiveness and increased student learning. These studies provide explanatory value to the research problem, but they are predominately based on summative assessment information. My action research project investigated a principal's and other school leaders' actions and interaction among teachers with regard to formative assessment processes, namely ongoing assessments targeting immediate student need. I draw from both the summative and formative assessment literature to extrapolate my research problem, and to expose additional gaps in the researcher literature. The principal's and teacher leaders role in developing and sustaining these processes is well-documented, but many of the studies focus on the elementary

grades or the studies rely primarily on survey methods. Furthermore, the research fails to include teacher leader actions as a catalyst for instructional improvement. Still, I include this research to illuminate the complexity of creating and sustaining effective assessment procedures at a Title I Program Improvement year five middle school.

Formative vs. Summative Assessments

Summative assessments are given at the end of a unit of time or instruction and are used to judge the final quality and quantity of student achievement and /or the success of an instructional program. NAEP and STAR are examples of a summative assessment. In California, the results of the STAR test are published in late summer, too late for administrators and teachers to analyze and plan for improved instruction. This is one of the many primary criticisms of high stakes summative assessments. In the high stakes accountability era of education reform, the results of summative assessments determine whether a school is failing or meeting the mandates of NCLB and state policy mandates. The assessments are of learning.

Conversely, formative assessments consist of checkpoints of learning. Formative assessments inform instruction and learning to provide feedback concerning progress toward achieving learning goals; and they provide the information needed to modify teaching and learning while they are happening. Formative assessments are for learning. In many schools, the results of formative assessments can be available within minutes.

Debate centered on the utility of summative and formative assessments is discussed in Young's (2006) case study research: "teachers complain that those kinds of data [summative assessment] lack instructional usefulness" (p. 521). Using embedded case studies, the researcher investigated "one grade-level team of teachers in four sites across two districts" (p. 523). The sites were purposively selected because the schools espoused the goal of being data driven. In each of the two districts, one school was high achieving while the other school site was low achieving. Although all of the schools sites were elementary schools, the findings drawn from 90 interviews and 73 observations are consistent with other studies investigating formative assessment protocols. Hilltop, one of the two high achieving schools, had a principal who built strong data teams, articulated a clear agenda, defined team roles, established collaborative norms and provided resources to accomplish goals. Young does not argue causation or correlation, but speculates better capacity building efforts lead to higher student achievement.

The recent preference to formative assessment over summative assessment is rooted in a literature synthesis of research spanning ten years—1988 to 1998 (Black and William, 1998). The authors found consistent evidence of the positive impact formative assessments can have on learning. Of the eight studies reviewed, Fuchs and Fuchs' (1986) study showed "a mean effect size of .70." (p. 206). Black and William's (1998) synthesis has been cited over 2,200 times; however, their literature synthesis and the research on formative assessments' impact on student achievement has been challenged.

Dunn and Mulvenon (2009) criticize the quality of studies used by Black and William (1998). In particular, Dunn and Mulvenon (2009) argue that the effect sizes are highly inflated because of the poor quality of the research studies. They take aim at Fuchs and Fuchs' (1986) study arguing, "while only eight of the effect sizes that contributed to the findings were of poor quality, the combination of poor and fair quality studies in this meta-analysis accounted for 80 percent of the effect sizes included in the analyses"(p. 5). Furthermore, Dunn and Mulvenon (2009) challenge the soft definitions of "fair" and "good" quality research. Even a research study considered of "good" quality in Fuchs and Fuchs (1986) meta-analysis could have serious statistical flaws that would inflate effect sizes.

In addition to challenging the methodologies in several studies, Dunn and Mulvenon (2009) challenge scholars on the lack of clarity in the language of formative versus summative assessment arguments. The authors assert that summative assessments if used properly can be used as formative assessments and inversely formative assessments used poorly are no better than ineffective summative assessment procedures. The authors propose broadening the discussion to what they describe as formative and summative evaluation as a larger framework that consists of formative and summative assessment systems. Moreover, Dunn and Mulvenon (2009) argue for more scientifically rigorous research in the area of formative assessment and student achievement. The authors present a strong argument, but failed to illuminate why scholars and practitioners see greater value in formative assessments. Data from formative assessments are more quickly available, allowing for

teachers and administrators to make quick decisions to improve teacher effectiveness.

Principals' Effect on Teachers' Use of Formative Assessment Information

Several other studies report findings indicating schools with effective formative assessment systems see greater student success than schools with less effective formative assessment practices. EdSource's (2010), "Gaining ground in the middle grades: why some schools do better" investigated the challenge of low and stagnant middle school achievement. This research utilized survey data from 303 principals, 3,752 math and English teachers, 152 superintendents, and 5 charter management organization leaders in California. The following research question quided the study: "What school and district practices and policies differentiate higher- from lower-performing schools serving demographically similar middle grade students?" (p. 9). The policies and practices were reported as 10 school domains. The domains most applicable to my action research study include the following:

> Domain B: An intense, school-wide focus on improving academic outcomes. Domain D: Coherent and aligned standards-based instruction and curricula. Domain E: Extensive use of data to improve instruction and student learning. Domain F: Early and proactive academic interventions. Domain H: Teachers competencies, evaluation, and support. Domain I: Principal leadership and competencies. Domain J: Superintendent leadership and district support.

In addition to these ten domains, seven sub-domains served as independent variables. The seven sub-domains include: CST scores for 6th, 7th, and 8th in math and ELA.

The EdSource research team analyzed the data in two different ways: Cross-sectional regression analyses and longitudinal regression analyses. The cross sectional analysis "measure[d] the power" of the ten domains, and the sub-domains within them. The authors reported controlling for variables such as student demographics and other school characteristics by collecting survey data from schools in the 20th to the 35th percentile SCI [School Characteristics Index] band and from the 70th – 85th percentile SCI bands. The longitudinal analyses included a 4-year look at middle grade CST scores. The authors note, "analyses were designed to determine which reported schooling practices were most positively correlated with higher school- level achievement outcomes" (p. 29). Moreover, the analysis revealed 56 sub-domains with statistically significant correlations that appear in both the cross-sectional regression analyses and longitudinal regression analyses.

Of the ten primary domains investigated, Domain B- an intense, school-wide focus on improving academic outcomes, showed the most powerful correlation between top performing schools and lower performing school in both School Characteristics Index (SCI) bands. This domain construct includes accountability at all levels, superintendents, *principals*, and *teachers*. The accountability discussed in this domain refers to setting and achieving measurable

goals on district benchmarks, an essential component of formative assessment process.

Besides domain B's strong correlation with higher student outcomes on summative assessments, other domains correlate with higher student outcomes and have explanatory value to my study. They include the following: coherent and aligned standards-based instruction and curricula; *extensive use of data to improve instruction and student learning*; and early and proactive academic interventions. Extensive use of data to improve instruction and student learning, and principal leadership and competencies have the most direct relevance to my study. Middle schools in both School Characteristic Index (SCI) bands that have reported "extensive use of data to improve instruction" outperform those that do not. According to the research, middle schools that serve low socioeconomic status (SES) students and report extensive use of data to improve instruction outperform those who do not report extensive use of data. This is also true for schools that serve students from middle to high SES backgrounds.

My study investigated a Title I Program Improvement year five middle school's use of formative assessment information. Utilizing an action research model, I investigated domain E (Extensive use of data to improve instruction and student learning) and domain I (principal's leadership) at Title I Program Improvement year 5 middle schools. The students at this school require a principal and other teacher leaders who can develop and or/sustained formative assessment systems that provide information regarding student learning. A Principal must build this capacity with their teachers so that adjustments can be made in

instructional delivery. My action research study employed what is known in the research literature, and includes the voices of participant administrators and teachers to build a formative assessment model that is responsive to the unique context of the Title I Program Improvement year 5 middle school.

Additional research identifies key components of effective assessment practices that lead to higher student achievement. Additionally, this research suggests that structured accountability systems when developed and sustained with the support of the principal lead to more informed instructional decisions (Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004). The Regional Educational Laboratory (2004) research report identified seven characteristics of effective accountability systems. The study sought to "develop a better understanding of assessments and accountability practices and policies principals are implementing at the school level and to determine whether those policies are associated with school and student improvement" (p. 1.). This study draws from Goodwin et al (2003) literature that identified 12 characteristics of good systems that are critical to investigate when evaluating accountability systems. This report concluded that seven of the 12 were most relevant to the current McREL (2004) study of principals. The characteristics are high expectations for all students; high-quality assessments aligned with standards; alignment of resources, support and assistance for improvement; sanctions and rewards linked to results; multiple measures; district and school personnel data usage; and informative to parents and the community. Like the EdSource (2010) study, REL (2004) presents several positive

characteristics of assessment systems associated with higher student achievement. Although not all of these characteristics provide explanatory value for my action research study, the complexity of the assessment systems problem is evidenced in these various components. My action research focused on a principal and teacher leaders' actions and interactions with formative assessment practices at a Title I Program Improvement year five middle schools to improve teacher effectiveness and student learning outcomes.

Given the school characteristics present in the REL (2004) study, the authors set forth three research questions:

> What policies and practices are principals using to meet new accountability demands? Are principals using policies and practices that research and literature have identified as being effective? Do policies and practices of high-performing schools differ from those of low-performing schools?

Although this is a comprehensive study, the findings are based primarily on survey instruments. The authors' conclude from their data "the differences between schools that were improving on state assessment and those that were either stagnant or declining was statistically significant ($p<0.01$), with a large effect size" (p. 17) with regard to district use and school personnel data usage. This provides further evidence that schools with better assessment practices increase student-learning outcomes. This also provides evidence that an action research study is essential to untangle the leadership assessment challenges at a low achieving Title I Program Improvement year five middle school.

The need for better formative assessment practices echoes in the statements of other scholars, but principals must coach and persuade teachers that formative assessment information is essential for effective instruction. For this to occur Tolley and Shulruf (2009) posit, "teachers must believe in the usefulness of the data they hold" and " many need support in how to turn this information into knowledge" (P. 1201). The authors argue that formative assessments provide better information for teachers to identify student-learning challenges and for improving instruction. Formative assessment systems are about data and intelligent decisions based on the knowledge acquired from the data. Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, and Russ, (2004) explain the importance of data succinctly, "data-richness has long been found to be an important component of effective and improving schools in studies in the UK, the US, and Canada" (p. 158). Formative assessment information is a component of "data richness." Schools led by strong principals will benefit if they utilize the information to drive instructional decisions. However, having large amounts of formative assessment information will reap very few positive teacher and student outcomes if the data is not processed for action.

Leadership Theory—Transformational Leadership

In this study of how a principal and school leaders develop and sustain formative assessment systems at a Title I Program Improvement year five middle school, two leadership theories inform my action research project, Transformational and Instructional leadership. Transformational leadership is a process theory concerned with the

moral dimensions of leadership and followership, and it has earned new recognition as a theory of leadership to empower people and organizations to change. Northouse (2007) asserts, "transformational leadership is the process whereby a person engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower" (p. 176). As implied in the name Transformational leadership, it is about change, changing and strengthening organizations. Title I Program Improvement year 5 middle schools require transformational leaders. Not only is the theoretical literature instructive to leadership at Title I Program Improvement schools, several studies indicate that transformational leaders drive change and improvement in their organizations. In a study on leaders Bennis and Nanus (1985) found four common strategies that transformational leaders used in changing organizations: created a clear vision, were social architects, created trust, and engaged in creative self-development. These strategies are similar to Kouzes and Posner's (2002) five practices of Transformational leader: model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart. Lowe, Kroeck, and Sivasubramaniam's, (1996) meta-analysis of transformational leadership found statistically positive correlations between transformational leaders and organizational outcomes. Although the findings did not originate from studies at Title I Program Improvement year 5 middle schools, evidence that transformational leadership strategies and practices influence organizations similarly emerged in my study. Transformational theory grounds leadership in ethical and moral

purposes. Leaders at the nation's most needy schools should ignite outrage; however, this outrage must be focused on increasing positive student outcomes.

Leadership Theory—Instructional leadership

In addition to transformational leadership, Instructional leadership frames my research study. Several scholars have described the most effective principals as instructional leaders. Hallinger, Murphy, Weil, Mesa, and Witman (1983) provide three responsibilities for the effective instructional leader: defining the school's mission, managing curriculum and instruction, and promoting a positive school climate. These instructional leader principals are expert teachers who drive focused professional development for their staff. Instructional leaders spend a substantial part of their day in classrooms, working to improve teacher effectiveness. Without a doubt, principals at Title I program Improvement year five middle schools need to be instructional leaders. A rich body of empirical research provides evidence that instructional leaders positively influence struggling schools (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, Wahlstrom, 2004; and Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2005). Robinson, (2010) argues that effective instructional leadership is based on the principal's ability to "build relational trust, solve complex problems, and integrate educational knowledge" (p. 21). The evidence presented in this meta-analysis suggests that a principal who invests in building trust with their teachers will see greater student outcomes and improved instructional effectiveness by teachers. Grounding my action research study in transformational and instructional leadership theories was essential

as these two theories combine moral and ethical issues with the technical challenges of pedagogy.

Data-based Decision Making

Formative assessment systems research is closely linked to decision-making research. Many of the previous studies reviewed discussed data-based decision making as a component of effective formative assessment practices. Accordingly, this literature review includes an examination of empirical evidence that data-driven decision making results in improved teacher effectiveness. Establishing systems to collect and analyze data will be ineffective if principals and teachers do not use this system to decide appropriate instructional methods. Park and Datnow's (2009) multi-site case study investigates data-driven decision making in high-performing schools. In an attempt to answer the following research questions: "How did district and school leaders cultivate a culture of data-driven decision-making? What types of activities and processes were distributed to making data-driven decision-making relevant? How did leaders build capacity for data-based decision making?"(p. 480). The authors created three broad codes from the transcript data of seventy interviews. The transcript codes were labeled " the identification of leaders of data-driven decision-making; the qualities attributed to leaders; and types of activities leaders engaged in to foster data-driven decision making" (p. 483). In their findings, Park and Datnow (2009) reported "team members usually facilitated conversations around data and helped teachers translate data into action plans" (p. 484). Furthermore, discussions addressed comprehensive meeting norms that

included appropriate behavior expectations and required materials in data meetings. The principal and other school leaders-teachers- placed strong emphasis on modeling actions and building trust. Trust at Title I Program Improvement year five schools is a critical component for improvement in formative assessment processes. Given current accountability mandates and school sanctions in PI schools, building trust will be an important part of building and sustaining effective formative assessment procedures.

Like the research on assessment, the studies exploring data-driven decision-making are equally expansive. Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) assert "our finding suggests that when teachers are involved in making decisions that affect them, they tend to strengthen or deepen their instructional practice" (p. 483). Using a mixed methods comparative case study Kerr, Mash, Ikemoto, and Heather, (2006) investigated" What strategies did districts employ to promote instructional improvement through data-based decision making; How did these strategies work; and What constrained or enabled district efforts to promote data use for instructional decision making?" (p. 8). The authors conducted a total of eighty-five interviews over three years at three different school districts. Their findings reveal that school districts where School Improvement Plans (SIP) are well developed and supported have principals and teachers that use assessment data to make instructional decisions. One of the districts in particular had a comprehensive SIP, and as a result the researchers noted "district's targeted investment in this area, school-level staff in Jefferson were more likely than their counterparts in the other two

districts to identify school improvement plans as a district-wide reform priority and focus of professional development" (p. 508). This study provides compelling evidence that when teachers are part of the decision making process, there is greater personal investment and greater positive outcomes in instructional decisions.

Poverty and Learning

The purpose of my study is to identify principals' and teacher leaders' actions within a high poverty context. Although not free of controversy, the body of research exploring poverty's impact on learning is conclusive. I include this section not to perpetuate "the soft bigotry of low expectations," but to discuss how intense poverty influence student achievement. Within a new field of neuroscience (neurogenesis), studies have investigated the impact of stress on brain cell regeneration, and as Gould (2009) asserts, "poverty is stress" (SEED Magazine). In the process of studying stressed primates in the laboratory, Gould (2009) discovered that neurogenesis - birth of neurons - is significantly reduced. Furthermore, Gould's study discovered that stressed monkeys have significantly smaller hippocampi, the memory center of the brain. These findings illustrate the physiological effect of stress/poverty on lab animals, but what about humans? Again, the evidence is conclusive.

Several studies on young students living in poverty have revealed memory deficits. Evan and Schamberg (2009) studied 195 Caucasian children living in rural poverty. They used an allostatic theory that measures "the combined effect of singular physiological changes across multiple biological systems" (p. 1). Simply stated, allolastic load is

a measurement of stress on the body. Within their results, Evan and Schamberg (2009) assert, "the greater the portion of life growing up in poverty from birth to the age of 13 years, the shorter the span of sequential information 17-year old adults can accurately hold in their working memory" (p. 2). This study does have limitations, but their findings, that poverty adversely effects humans, are consistent with previous studies.

In an earlier study of thirty low SES African American children, Farah et al (2006) found significant discrepancies in cognitive function when the participants were compared to thirty middle SES African American children. The authors detailed the specific brain functions-pre-frontal- that were assessed and provided a brief explanation of the cognitive tasks measured. Moreover, they describe their methods as "a more fine-grained parse of neuro-cognitive systems, particularly prefrontal systems, as well as to rule out medical problems that could account for the SES disparities in cognitive function" (Farah et al, 2006, p. 167), and the researchers claim that the participants were thoroughly screened and that all child participants had comprehensive health records. Like Evan and Schamberg, (2009), Farah et al (2006), "found SES disparities in working memory, cognitive control and especially in language and memory" (p.169). The research literature on the negative impact of poverty is substantial. This investigation, like many others, illuminates the challenges schools must face when educating impoverished children. Actions resulting from formative assessments, needs to consider these potential learning challenges.

Not only does poverty have a measurable effect on brain physiology and function, but poverty also negatively influences mental health. A high incidence of mental health diseases and disorders have been linked to poverty. Using latent growth curve models, McLeod and Shanahan (1996) examine the "relationship between poverty histories and children's mental health trajectories" (p. 208). In this study, McLeod and Shanahan reveal that poor children have higher incident rates of antisocial behavior (McLeod and Shanahan 1996) and that "early economic disadvantages can yield lasting deficits in depressive symptoms, at least through age nine" (p.215). The consequences of poverty devastate lives, and even with a substantial amount of empirical evidence, the institution blamed for the phenomenon, and tasked with the solution are schools.

Even with research that shows poverty has a physiological effect on the brain and psychological consequences, other dire manifestations of living in stressful circumstances take hold of students. In a policy brief, Berliner (2009) posits six out-of school factors contribute to achievement gaps for poor students who are predominately African American and Hispanic. The six factors are as follows:

> (1) low birth-weight and non-genetic prenatal influences on children; (2) inadequate medical, dental, and vision care, often a result of inadequate or no medical insurance; (3) food insecurity; (4) environmental pollutants; (5) family relations and family stress; and (6) neighborhood characteristics (p. 1).

In this brief, several empirical research studies are cited that show the measurable affect each one of these out-of-school factors have on

student learning outcomes. In the conclusion, recommendations are listed to mitigate some of the impact of these factors, and Berliner argues that if the No Child Left Behind and its accountability mandates/sanctions are to be successful for our most needy communities, equal vigor must be applied to the out-of-school factors.

The studies of the impact of poverty on individuals and communities are instructive. My action research study is situated in a high poverty community, and free and reduced breakfast and lunch rates exceed ninety percent of the student population. Very few studies explore principal and teacher leader actions and interactions to develop and sustain formative assessment practices at Title I Program improvement year five middle schools. My action research fills this gap and adds to the literature on this problem. Additionally, my study proposes, implements and tests the effectiveness of a formative assessment system where students, teachers, and principal must confront out of school factors.

Summary

The literature discussed in this chapter unites the discourse of several topics in educational research. Leadership theory and research enrich the dialogue on principal and teacher leaders' actions that support formative assessment practices at a Title I Program Improvement year five middle school. Furthermore, the literature on data-based decision-making contributes to a greater understanding of how principals create a climate conducive to improvement and change, while the literature on formative assessment structures provide empirical evidence that schools that use effective systems improve

teacher efficacy. Lastly, the literature on poverty and cognitive function objectively colors the complex nature of improving schools that serve children.

CHAPTER 3

Summary of the Problem

This study investigated the problem of school leaders failing to use formative assessment information to improve teacher effectiveness and student achievement at a low achieving, high poverty middle school. In this project, I investigated how administrators and school leaders in the English department developed and sustained effective formative assessment systems at a Title I Program Improvement Year Five middle school. Given a substantial body of research suggesting best formative assessment practices, the action research participants and I pinpointed where the assessment process breakdown occurred. Additionally, my study endeavored to uncover how the participant administrator and teacher leaders supported teachers with best assessment practices to improve student learning. A study of this nature was necessary because many low achieving Title I middle schools fail to escape NCLB sanctions. I employed a qualitative action research model to identify specific barriers and drivers in the formative assessment process problem at a Title I Program Improvement Year Five Middle School. The following research questions guided my inquiry of the leadership assessment problem:

Research questions:

1. As a result of a structured and collaborative action research forum, what actions by the principal and other school leaders help change teacher practices in response to formative

assessment information at Title I Program Improvement year five middle schools?

2. According to school leaders—teachers and administrators—who are participating in an action research study, what are the essential components of effective assessment practices that advance instructional improvement?
3. If barriers exist for teachers and administrators concerning formative assessment systems, how are administrators who are participating in a structured and collaborative action research project confronting these barriers?

Research Design

To answer these research questions, I employed a qualitative action research method to investigate how principals and other school site leaders build and improve formative assessment processes to increase teacher effectiveness. The action research model of the study provided participants, teachers and site leaders, a safe environment to share expertise and discuss developing skills and knowledge. Because of the nature of the research problem, qualitative methods provided the most useful data to inform the remedies and answer the research questions. The research problem is a leadership process problem within a specific context, thus this inquiry required qualitative methods. Maxwell (2005) argues, "the strengths of qualitative research derive from primarily its inductive approach, its focus on specific situations or people, and its emphasis on words rather than numbers" (p. 22). Qualitative procedures, interviews, participant reflection, and a review of documents best provided data

to answer the research questions. Interviews allowed the researcher to probe how participants feel and interpret the research topic (Merriam, 2009). This research focused on a process, thus interview methods allowed the researcher and participants to explain the process in depth and in their own words.

Furthermore, since my study investigated and ventured to improve formative assessment processes, qualitative methods were ideal. Qualitative methods such as interviews provided participants an opportunity to describe the research problem. Qualitative data collection methods provided for a fuller description of the research problem, and these methods helped illuminate the success and limitations of the remedies in the action research plan.

An action research approach was essential because it provided the researcher and the study participants a structured and collaborative setting to investigate the problem. This approach required collaboration to design and implement research-based solutions to this problem. Moreover, my study required an action research approach because the inquiry focused on the formative assessment processes problem at a Title I Program Improvement year five middle school while putting into action a co-created solution. With action research participants, I "construct[ed] (context and purpose), planning action, taking action, and evaluating action" approach as described by Coghlan and Brannick (2010, p. 8). Because my goal was to establish a research environment to gain new knowledge about the problem and to test remedies, an action research approach was required. My qualitative action research study provided an opportunity to dig deep

into the complexities of utilizing formative assessment data to drive instructional improvement. The action research meetings allowed the participants to engage in dialogue with peers to learn about best formative assessment practices, while providing participants a forum to articulate drivers and barriers in their particular school. Furthermore, because the specificity of the research problem and the purpose of the study—looking at a process in a specific context—(Merriam, 2009) explains that action research is an ideal approach.

My study addressed a specific problem—principals and school leaders developing and sustaining formative assessment systems—in a specific context—a high poverty Title I Program Improvement year five middle school. With an action research methodology, problems and solutions can be understood through active inquiry and action as described by McNiff & Whitehead (2006). This approach allows the research participants situated in a specific context to investigate the leadership assessment problem. For these reasons, I utilized an action research approach to answer the three research questions. Again, my study identified fractures in the assessment processes at a Title I Program Improvement Year five middle school, and I collaborated with research participants to design and implement actions to remedy process barriers.

Research Site and Participant Description

I used purposeful participant sampling, because my study investigated the leadership formative assessment problem at a Title I Program Improvement year five middle school. Thus, the school site in my study is a Title I Program Improvement year five middle school. The

principal, assistant principal and teachers were all volunteer participants. This school allowed for an action research inquiry to answer the research questions. In a way, the school represented a critical case purposive sample because my action research study investigates the critical case of ineffective leadership assessment processes at a high poverty low achieving middle school.

The participants in this study came from one middle school in one large Southern California urban school district. The district serves almost 87,000 students. Not having met AYP mandates for more than five years, the middle school in this study is in Program Improvement. Currently, the district has nine Program Improvement year five middle schools, and they are referred to as Professional Learning Community (PLC) middle schools. According to NCLB (2001), these schools are required to be in an alternative governance structure. The alternative governance structure, as defined by the district, requires all principals to report directly to and be evaluated by the superintendent. Additionally, all Program Improvement year five middle school principals are assigned a leadership coach and a data assistant principal. New in the 2010/2011, the superintendent mandated that all Program Improvement year five middle schools move to a self-contained elementary school structure for 6th grade classes. Further sanctions or support offered to the PLC middle schools included a new writing curriculum (Write for the Future), and several mandated professional development days for administrators, English teachers, math teachers, and 6th grade teachers.

The participant principal at Condor Classical Middle School has been the principal at the site for less than one year. She is a thirty-seven year old African American who grew up near Condor Classical Middle School. The district office transferred her from a different Title I Program Improvement year five middle school to Condor Classical. Her data assistant principal is in her second year as an assistant principal and second year at the school site. The principal has ten years of experience as a principal.

The participants in the study were a diverse group of professionals. Nine of the thirteen participants are new to the school site. This faculty change was the result of the district laying-off approximately 800 teachers. Two of the participants were male. There were two African American participants, three Hispanic participants, and eight were white. The participant with the most experience was the language arts department chair who was in her thirty-third year at the site. The least experienced participant has been teaching for eight years, and he has been at the site for approximately two months. Eleven of the participants teach 6th grade self-contained classes and one participant teaches 7th grade English language arts.

Condor Classical Middle School is located in a large urban city. The school's address places it in a neighborhood with the city's highest crime rate. Multiple gangs vie for the territory and graffiti blight the local businesses, homes, and often times the school itself. The community has dealt with several high profile crimes, including one incident where a parent drove her son and his friend to fight. The

fight ended with one fatality from multiple stab wounds. To say the neighborhood is impoverished is a gross understatement.

The school is surrounded by low-income apartments on the north and west side. Adjacent to the east of the campus is a shelter for people who are homeless and south of the campus is an alley. Several times a year there are community meetings at the school where residents express their outrage over the crime in the neighborhood. Even with such woeful challenges in their school, the teachers in this study endeavored to improve their assessment practices. The school serves approximately 1000 sixth, seventh and eighth grade students.

The demographic characteristics and the English achievement statistics at Condor Classical Middle School show a high poverty campus struggling with low achievement. Of the 981 students attending Condor, forty-five percent- 445 total - are English Language Learners. Four hundred twenty-one of these students speak Spanish, thirteen speak Khmer, nine speak Filipino, one speaks Samoan, and one student's first language in indicated as "other." Ninety-seven percent of the students attending Condor receive free or reduced food services. Student climate data indicates that eighty-nine percent of the students feel safe before school and eight-five percent feel safe leaving their last period.

STAR English language arts results indicate that thirty-six percent of the students scored proficient or above in 2010-2011 school

year. The school had an Academic Performance Index[5] (API) growth of thirty-five points. Proficiency and advanced proficiency rates for students identified as low SES were thirty-five percent. For African American students and Hispanic student the proficiency rates were thirty-six and thirty-three respectively. English learners (EL's) language arts proficiency rates were nearly twenty percent, and students receiving special education services were nearly fifteen percent in language arts.

Again, I used purposive sampling for this study because the leadership assessment challenge was situated in a high poverty low-achieving school. This school site represents schools challenged by poverty and low achievement. Looking at the leadership assessment process problem at this school provides the best opportunity to answer the research questions and improve leadership practices using action research.

Access:

I established access to this site by calling and emailing the principal at the Title I Program Improvement year 5 middle school. Additionally, I scheduled brief introductory meetings to personally explain the action research goals and followed up with an informative electronic mail message (See appendix A). The principal of Condor Classical was supportive of the study's purpose, and she expressed an interest in participating with many of her teachers. Because I work as an assistant principal at a Title I Program Improvement Year Five

[5] Academic performance index is a California state score given to a school that ranges between 200 and 1000. This score is calculated based on proficiency rates from STAR testing.

Middle School, I regularly interact with the administrators and teachers who work at the schools targeted in my study. After I acquired verbal agreements from the principal, assistant principals, and English teachers, I presented informed consent documents for signatures by participants (See appendix B).

The Action Research Structure

The action research project began in early January 2012 with interviews of all thirteen participants[6]. The interviews probed for perceived barriers and drivers of effective formative assessment practices (See Appendix C and D). Additionally, the interview data provided baseline data of current assessment practices at each site. I utilized the transcript data, in part, to make decisions on the content of the action research professional development meetings. This information allowed me to better structure the professional development to meet the needs of the participants and the schools site.

Following the preliminary interviews, I facilitated five, ninety-minute action research meetings, with the thirteen participants. The purpose of the meetings was to increase participants' knowledge of effective formative assessment systems to improve instruction and student learning. Additionally, the sessions provided participants with training on action research methods to help structure formative assessment process improvements.

[6] Participants from the site included the principal and twelve English language arts teachers.

For the first meeting, I presented an abridged literature review of the professional development and research literature on best formative assessment processes[7], and I presented action research as a framework for organizing change in the participant school. I worked with participants to integrate best formative assessment practices into the site action research plans.

Coglhlan and Brannick's (2010) *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization* was the primary action research model for this study. However, during the preliminary interviews, participants noted the use of Baldrige Total Quality Management tools in previous change initiatives. Because the Baldrige tools were familiar to participants and because the tools paralleled components of Coglalhan and Brannick's action research components, I integrated both in a plan, do study, and act action plan. Coglhlan and Brannick's (2010) model proposes utilizing one pre-step phase (context and purpose) followed four additional phases, constructing, planning action, taking action, and evaluating action.

During the first meeting, the participants and I worked together to write student achievement goals in response to second quarter English language arts formative assessment results. The goals were SMART goals, specific, measurable, realistic, and time bound. The principal agreed to integrate the action research plan into the site's

[7] The best formative assessment practices will derive from Ainsworth and Viegut, 2006; Boudett, City, and Murnane, 2005; Love, 2009; Schmoker, 1999; Schmoker, 2011; Stiggins, 2001; Wellman and Lipton 2004.

Single Plan for Student Achievement[8]. Furthermore, the site team (principal, department chair, and English teachers) wrote a plan to achieve the goals. Within Coglhlan and Brannick's (2010) four-phase model, the first meeting activities engaged in the pre-step phase of establishing *context and purpose*, *constructing*, and *planning action*. The pre-step, *constructing and planning* action process was acknowledging a problem to be addresses, defining the specific problem, and planning an intervention to remedy the problem. The problem was actually two problems. The first problem was a lack of a system to use assessment data to improve teaching and learning, and the second problem was confronting student-learning challenges exposed in the assessment results. The goals and the plan targeted student achievement weaknesses that emerged in the formative assessment data and targeted how the principal and other leaders supported teachers with assessment information to sustain instructional improvement. The action research plans spelled out how precisely principals and teacher leaders supported teachers in the achievement of student-learning goals.

In the first meeting, participants brought midterm formative assessment data to analyze and to inform the action plan. Participant teachers item analyzed results and discussed which content standards needed to be re-taught. Furthermore, teachers shared instructional

[8] The Single Plan for Student Achievement is a mandated plan for Title I schools. The plan must include achievement and climate and culture goals. Additionally, the Single Plan for Student Achievement must be voted on and approved by the School Site Council.

strategies they planned to use to support students who did not achieve proficiency on previously identified standards.

The second action research session consisted of a review of the action research model and formative assessment best practices. The session provided the participants an opportunity to share progress on the action research plan with each other. This session was a preliminary check of progress toward established action research goals. The meeting offered participants a safe environment to voice concerns regarding the achievement of goals. Teachers discussed strategies to resolve concerns that surfaced during discussion. This second meeting consisted of Coglhlan and Brannick's (2010) phase *taking action* or the "do" phase of the Baldrige Plan, Do, Study, Act model. Although, the taking action phase was done at the participant site, this meeting was an arena to discuss taking action as it were at the research site. Participants reported successes in their efforts toward achieving goals and fidelity to action plans. Additionally, session two consisted of drilling down into the assessment results to pinpoint student-learning challenges.

Participant teachers discussed a need for a practice quarter three assessment that matched the rigor of the quarter 3 exam. Using released test items from the California STAR test, and *The Language of Literature's* standards manager resource book, along with the districts pacing guide, I created a fifty-question assessment targeting the specific standard from the third quarter pacing guide. Teachers utilized this practice assessment to monitor progress toward goals and to identify students who needed additional support.

I co-facilitated the third action research meeting with the principal at the end of the third quarter, March 2012. At this meeting, all participants analyzed third quarter English language arts assessment data. On poster paper, we charted successes and shortcomings in the achievement of goals. Additionally, we (the action research team) discussed specific efforts that may have led to success and discussed barriers which prevented success. This third meeting consisted of Coglhlan and Brannick's (2010) final phase of action research, *evaluating action.* Assessment results indicated the language arts department was outperforming all other PLC middle schools.

In addition to *evaluating action*, this third meeting was the beginning of the second action research cycle, *constructing,* and *planning action.* In this forum, participants revised goals for quarter three English language arts formative assessments and articulated plans involving principal support strategies.

In the fourth meeting, the participants and I addressed barriers and drivers to the success in achieving the revised action research goals established in forum three. In this session, teachers shared what instructional strategies appear to lead to increased student achievement and what supports principals and other leaders provided that increased teacher effectiveness. This session was a structured reflection of the *taking actio*n phase. During this session, participants were asked to drill-down further into the results of the third quarter assessment. Teachers item analyzed the results and identified content standards that were most difficult for students. Teachers collaborated to outline lessons to re-teach students the

content standard and additional classroom formative assessments were created to measure if students achieved mastery of the standard.

In the fifth and final meeting, the action research teams *evaluated action* plans. Having previously completed two action research cycles, the participants reflected on the complete action research study. These reflections documented successes and shortcomings of attainment of student learning goals. Furthermore, the reflections addressed how and to what extent the principal and teacher leaders utilized assessment information improve instruction. Because the research study focused on principals and other leaders --teachers and assistant principals—supporting teachers' use of assessment information to improve instruction and student learning, reflections during the final meeting uncovered successes and unresolved barriers.

Data Collection Methods

I utilized semi-structured interview protocols, teacher reflections, and a review of documents to answer each of the three research questions. I interviewed each of the thirteen participants on two occasions. I conducted the first interview before the beginning of the action research meetings, and I conducted a follow up interview of each participant at the conclusion of the study. Interview protocols are included in appendices (See APPENDICES E and F). With interviews, participants were able to describe in their words an effective assessment system at two points in time. Furthermore, interviews provided participants an opportunity to describe what school leaders do to support the assessment process. Because survey methods do not allow the researcher to probe for a greater depth of understanding of

the research problem, interview data provided a richer set of data to answer the three research questions. I recorded the interviews using two audio recording devices. After I completed each interview, I transcribed the audio files.

At the conclusion of each action research session, teachers I asked teacher to write reflections on topics discussed during the meetings. The reflections provided participants an opportunity to expand on their implementation of the action research plan. On the last reflection activity, I requested that participants write responses anonymously to decrease reactivity in their statements. Asking participants "if you felt there was an improvement in your assessment practices, would they describe the improvement?" yields much more reliable data when teachers anonymously respond to the question.

A document review also provided data to answer the research questions. Along with data from interviews and participant reflections, a document review provided me an opportunity to triangulate findings, thus increasing the study's credibility. I requested from all participants documents that provide information related to the research questions. Documents provided further evidence of effective principal actions of a sound formative assessment process. English department meeting agendas revealed strengths and weakness of formative assessment data practices. Additionally, the schools' Single Plan for Student Achievement illuminated the depth of effective leadership data practices. I collected calendars, school memorandums, and newsletters to answer each of the research questions.

The most data rich document was the action research plans created and discussed by the participants. Because the plans included goals and specific steps to achieve goals, these documents added critical information about the sites formative assessment processes. Furthermore, these plans articulated what support the principal or other leaders provided to achieve student goals.

Data Analysis Methods

In an on-going iterative process, I transcribed interview recordings. These transcriptions were coded for specific themes and common perceptions of principals' action and interactions with regard to formative assessment protocols. The transcript data were coded with the following preliminary codes: (1) principals' or other leaders actions and interaction to *develop* structure in formative assessment processes; (2) principals' or other leaders actions and interaction to *sustain* structure in formative assessment processes; (3) principals' or other leaders actions and interactions to provide professional development to respond to formative assessment data; (4) principals' or other leaders actions and interactions to facilitate change in instructional strategies; (5) principals' or other leaders actions and interaction to *develop* trust in the formative assessment process; and (6) principals' or other leaders actions and interaction to *sustain* trust in the formative assessment process. Although these anticipated themes did not fully emerge as anticipated, the findings reveal school leader actions that mediated assessment process barriers. Additionally, findings showed leaders actions improved collaboration among teachers.

I conducted a review of documents to augment themes from transcript data. Spaulding, and Voegtle, (2006) argue, "records and documents can be a valuable way to corroborate information from other sources"(p.132). In coding documents, I examined documents and files to establish if assessment process barriers surface. If a principal or teachers indicate that the English department consistently employ formative assessment information to improve instruction, meeting agendas or documents should substantiate those claims. Like the interview transcripts, I coded the documents based on themes observed in the document review process. The emerging themes were used to answer the three research questions. Including the themes anticipated in the interview transcripts, the following themes had the potential to surface in the document review process: accountability; and principals' messages of high expectations for instructional change. The codes that emerged from the data provided answers each to the research questions.

While interviews and documents provided the primary source of data in this study, I collected participant reflections at the conclusion of each of the five action research meeting. These reflections provided greater insight into how the participants worked as a team to interpret formative assessment data. The reflections also provided participants an opportunity to further explain how assessment results informed their instructional decision-making. The reflections proved to be invaluable data source because participants were able to discuss their thinking immediately following assessment analysis and instructional planning.

Threats to Validity, Credibility, and Trustworthiness

A potential threat to the credibility of my study was the reactivity from key informants. Participants in the study, especially the principal, may over report the frequency in which they support their teachers with using formative assessment information to improve instruction. I attempted to mitigate reactivity by encouraging participants that truthful responses will allow the action research team to better identify authentic barriers in the assessment system. Two of the participant reflections were anonymous, and this added to the data's trustworthiness. Additionally, I triangulated interview transcripts from participant teachers and the principal with documents that supported or refuted participant claims. This provided increased credibility of the research findings. For example, when the principal reported that she spends a substantial amount of time supporting teachers with formative assessment information, and there are teachers who and/or documents that confirm such assertions, the finding becomes increasingly credible.

An additional threat to credibility I managed was my bias regarding effective principal actions and interactions. I curbed my bias by using member check procedures to ensure transcripts and interpretations reflect the participants' perceptions of the research phenomenon. Moreover, I reported coded and themed transcripts to participants to increase credibility, and I explicitly presented my bias by discussing the theoretical framework utilized to view the research problem.

A threat to the validity of my study could derive from poorly constructed interview protocols. To address this potential threat, I field-tested and piloted the interview protocols with several principals, assistant principals, and teachers. The pilot activity provided opportunities for individuals to offer qualitative feedback to strengthen the interview protocols.

Ethical issues

Maintaining confidentiality is the main ethical issue in my study. I assigned pseudonyms for the school site and for individual participants to maintain anonymity. Furthermore, I protected participants by creating electronic files of interview recordings stored on micro-recorders and by creating encrypted passwords for the files. Additionally, I protected the anonymity of participants by locking all paper transcript data in a file cabinet and by removing all identifying information. I scrubbed all documents of identifying information to further protect participants and school sites.

An additional potential ethical issue was the hierarchical structure of participant principals, assistant principals, and teachers. To eliminate any coercion to participate, informed consent documents explicitly indicated that participation was voluntary. Moreover, participants who have initially agreed to participate may withdraw their consent without any retribution from supervisors. Lastly, supervisors agreed not to sanction their subordinates for views expressed as they relate to this research study. As the principal researcher, I worked to establish a research team based on

trust and collegiality, and I worked to create forums where formal professional titles were unnecessary.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Despite massive expenditures in achievement testing, many schools fail to use assessment data to maximize teaching and learning (Hess, 2004; Kozol, 2007; and Birch, 2010). This action research study aimed at the process by which participants utilized assessment information to improve their practice and increase student achievement. Furthermore, this study aimed to improve assessment practices, when participants identified weaknesses in their process. First, this chapter begins with a brief review of the action research meetings. Second, I present each research question followed by the primary findings that answer the research questions. Lastly, the chapter ends with a conclusion of the findings.

Summary of Action Research Meetings

The action research process consisted of five, ninety-minute meetings in which the thirteen participants and I established student achievement growth goals and a plan to achieve the goals. During the meetings, we cycled through a plan, do, study, and act action research change sequence two times. Beginning with language arts quarter two assessments, we planned for increased achievement and an improved assessment system, followed by plan implementation. We checked our progress with a practice assessment, and we modified our plan. After completing quarter three formative assessments and analyzing the results, we made further modifications and repeated the action research cycle. Repeating the action research sequence twice provided for a greater likelihood that the change in assessment practices would remain over time. Achievement results indicated growth and through

participant interviews and reflections, teachers and the principal perceived that there was an improvement in the language arts departments assessment system.

Findings

The findings in this study derive from preliminary interviews, participant reflections[9], a review of documents, and post-action research interviews. Here, I present each research question followed by the relevant findings that provide answers to the questions.

Research Question One:

As a result of a structured and collaborative action research project, what specific actions by school leaders help change teacher practices in response to formative assessment information at a Title I Program Improvement year five middle school?

Finding: Data collected in this study provided credible evidence that specific leadership actions advanced effective formative assessment practices.

Evidence that leadership was a driver for improved assessment actions surfaced in both the participants' words and their actions. Four of the teacher participants began to exhibit leadership according to their peers, and although two participants noted Ms. Brown and Ms. Rixx for their expertise in language arts and gifted and talented education strategies, six participants discussed Ms. Flynn and Mr. Creek as teacher leaders. One of the teachers, Mr. Creek, who has fourteen years of experience, began creating and sharing quizzes and

[9] At the conclusion of each action research session, participants were asked to write brief comments about concepts discussed during the meeting.

power-point lessons for his colleagues. Another teacher Ms. Flynn, who has over ten years of experience with the curriculum, created grammar resource packets for other teachers. According to several participants, these resource supplements aligned with the content standards that faculty members were required to teach. Data collected during this study revealed that both teacher participants and the principal demonstrated leadership, and this leadership led to better use of assessment information and teacher practice. Accordingly, I divided the finding that specific and focused leadership actions advanced improved practice into two sub-categories, teacher leadership, and the principal's leadership.

At the beginning of this study, participants struggled with the idea that leadership was action and not a job title, or participants struggled with the notion that leadership actions were not exclusively reserved for managers. During initial discussions, eight participants discussed management visitations to classrooms as evidence of leadership. Ultimately, teacher participants began to see their colleagues as leaders, invaluable resources for change, and evidence in this study illustrated that change began because of their leadership.

Teacher Leadership

During the course of this study, eight participants named four teachers who exhibited leadership. Six teachers named Mr. Creek and Ms. Flynn as leaders, while two other teachers both noted Ms. Brown and Ms. Rixx as teacher leaders. Sharing knowledge—content expertise—and curricular resources were the primary leadership actions by

participant teachers. Additionally, these teachers shared their lesson plans with their colleagues during grade-level meetings, and participant leaders modeled their lessons, too. In recognizing the leadership of a teacher colleague Ms. Greene stated, "Ms. Flynn is the one that pretty much supplies us with the resources that we need; she will ask us if there's anything that we need to cover the quarter." In fact, during post interviews, eight participants described Ms. Flynn as someone who exhibited leadership. Ms. August stated "You know, there's only like three or four [teacher leaders]. And so, pretty much I, I relied uh heavily on Ms. Flynn." Ms. August looks to Ms. Flynn for her knowledge and expertise of the language arts curriculum and for her ability to find, duplicate, and disperse instructional resources. Because teachers indicated that the school possessed minimal instructional resources, this leadership was invaluable.

The statements of several other of Ms. Flynn colleagues and of the principal indicated that she reached out to teachers and offered support. Mr. Rad stated, "Ms. Flynn you know she has a complete set [of supplemental materials] and she was always like hey if you need something let me know. I'm like okay I need to say cover verb tenses to work on this grammar." On the surface, it might appear that Ms. Flynn is simply a library or resources; however, her colleagues have noted her instructional support, as well.

Ms. Rixx, a teacher with thirty-three years of experience, commented about Ms. Flynn "We sit down and together we tally incorrect answers on a test, and then we look at what the kids are missing the most, we look at the standards manager, we look at release items." Ms.

Flynn exhibits her leadership by working with her colleagues to analyze assessment results and to map a plan to address student-learning challenges. During four of the action research meetings, Ms. Flynn was a hands-on participant, discussing her students' challenges and success on the assessments. When her results were confounding, she asked he colleagues.

In addition to Ms. Flynn's leadership actions, several other teachers have provided leadership to support the improvement of teaching and learning. Several participants spoke fondly of Mr. Creek's PowerPoint lessons and assessments. According to participant interviews and documents, Mr. Creek's PowerPoint lessons and subsequent quizzes aligned with the district's pacing guide and the districts weekly newsletter called the PLC Post. Five of the participants stated that they used the PowerPoint presentation as the primary instructional method about five times a quarter. Ms. Gail noted, "You know Mr. Creek, he loves PowerPoint; kids love it, too. They love anything that's different, that's kind of like an extension menu." Ms. Gail shared that she used Mr. Creek's PowerPoint lessons, and she sought his curricular expertise. Ms. Greene stated, "I've always had the support from Mr. Creek, from, you know since day one." Ms. Brinkman noted, "I was able to talk to Mr. Creek and see how they do it [analyze assessment results] and get an idea of how to work around it." Like Ms. Flynn, Mr. Creek was providing instructional materials for his colleagues and supporting teachers with assessment analysis. Before the school transitioned to a sixth grade self-

contained structure, Mr. Creek was an English language arts teacher for fourteen years.

When I asked Mr. Creek how he feels about his colleagues seeing him as an instructional leader, does he feel like teachers were leaning on him too much he responded, "I don't know that they're leaning on me. I mean, that almost sounds uncomfortable. I've made great friends here at Condor, and the new people, I've made really good friends with them, as well. So I'm happy." His comments illustrate his leadership actions were not a burden because he shares and works with teachers for whom he has developed friendships. In other comments, Mr. Creek stated that he welcomed the role of instructional leader, and he wished more people would seek his support because of his knowledge of the curriculum. Mr. Creek also discussed how open-minded his colleagues were to his support. I discuss this amenable teacher attitude with regard to improving collaboration later in the chapter.

Principal Leadership

Evidence of leadership by the principal was noted in transcript information and documents provided by research participants. The principal's leadership became discernable in her communication of high expectations for teachers and students. Additionally, the principal communicated the school's mission and vision according to data collected in this study. Six participants noted that the principal exhibited leadership by openly communicating her high expectations with faculty and students. The principal communicated this message during faculty, department, and grade-level meetings. Furthermore, the

principal delivered this message to students during a closed circuit television broadcast three times a week. One participant described the principal like a cheerleader. Ms. August noted "Every time we take a test, we call [the principal] on the phone. We put her on speakerphone, and I'm pretending like we're in trouble. And then I go, well, guess what and then she gets all excited." Ms. August explained the principal's response to the assessment results with energy and enthusiasm, attempting to explain the principal's own energy and excitement. In pre and post study interviews, the principal is very animated, speaking with her hands and moving around in her chair. She speaks somewhat like a stage actor, loud and with a cadence. If you did not know her, you might think she is yelling at you when she speaks.

Another teacher discussed a recent faculty meeting in which the principal discussed the value of a vision and mission. A different participant informed me about a homily like lecture regarding Blockbuster video. Ms. Greene summarized the principals message stating that because the business refused to change and improve to meet the needs of its customers and the business market, Blockbuster has undergone massive revenue losses and filed for bankruptcy. The message was a cautionary example to the faculty that the school must focus on continuous improvement.

In addition to communicating the schools mission and vision, seven of the participants noted that they felt the principal was always available to support them if they needed it. Ms. River commented on the principal's accessibility:

> And if my data's not working out, I can go and stress about it and say I can't figure out why it's not working. You know, I wish they would do more this, how can I make this happen, more. How can I get these results more, whatever the results may be? It could be as simple as data like, I don't have enough-like I'll say, I'll walk into my principal's office, and I did, and say I only have five kids turning in their homework.

Ms. River expressed that she was very comfortable talking to the principal and asking for support. Six other participants agreed with Ms. River. I asked Mr. Creek about the principal's support provided to him, and he noted, "when you seek support you get it. And I, and I feel like if I needed it, if I sought it, I would get it." Ms. Rixx offered a description of the leadership of the principal in terms of data meetings. Ms. Rixx noted:

> At our data meeting, we have one after each quarter test, we share information and the principal, very, very knowledgeable lady, always has input. I haven't really received support, but I know if I asked, I would get it. So I think though, I get the feeling, especially from the meeting we had yesterday, the staff meeting, that it's going to be much more structured and the focus is going to be around academics next year, I get that feeling.

Other participants echoed a similar theme with regard to the principal's leadership.

Many of the teachers relied on their colleagues for instructional leadership; however, they indicated that if they asked the principal for assistance, they were confident she would provide it. Still, five

participants did discuss the principal's instructional leadership in terms of several professional development faculty meetings.

During three faculty meetings, teachers and administrators presented and discussed "active participation" strategies. These strategies according to teachers actively engaged all learners simultaneously with challenging content. The intent of these strategies was to confront passive learning. Some of these strategies required student to walk around the classroom and discuss topics. Another strategy required students to teach their neighbor content after the teacher models the activity. Four teachers noted that after the professional development the principal informally observed teachers utilizing active participation strategies and the principal wrote informal feedback to teachers.

This accountability for implementing best teaching practices extended into the realm of assessment practices, too. Six teachers indicated that the data meetings were a positive component of their assessment practices, and three participants indicated the principal was instrumental in setting and facilitating these data meetings. *Finding: Data collected in this study provided credible evidence that accountability was a component of the research site's assessment practices*.

Data meetings with the principal emerged as the main component of accountability. Although participants felt that the meetings needed to be improved, most of the teachers indicated it was an important component of their assessment practices. Here, Ms. Street, the principal expressed her ideas on accountability:

> In doing the immediate goal setting and the conversations with the teachers about the item analysis um, you know the same thing we were doing that 10 years ago and I think that that's the best way to hold people accountable. It's kind of like testing them to death, but um, I still felt like the students were learning as well.

According to the principal, accountability for growth was essential. The principal indicated she needed to report and discuss the school's achievement data to her supervisor, and she expected the teachers to meet with her and discuss results as a component of the schools overall accountability practices. Within the accountability finding, three subheadings emerge, data meetings, School Loop (electronic grade book), and data displays.

Data Meetings

Many participants noted the data meeting as an essential component of accountability in the school's assessment practices. Most felt the meetings were a positive opportunity to reflect on past teaching and to discuss specific students who were struggling with the content. Ms. Flynn stated, "I think having the data meetings and the dialog was important." MS. Greene noted, "We have data meetings every quarter with administration, and for the sixth grade collaborations we're asked to bring data." Seventh grade teacher Ms. Rixx shared the following:

> We have to present our data and we have to, you know, explain why we think our students did as they did, preformed as they did, but

> I'm not threatened by the results. I think it's definitely the pressure's there. So I would say there's pressure.

Ms. Rixx further expressed that the data meetings pushed her to teach the students more of the curriculum and with greater focus on identified standards that were challenging for her kids.

Ms. Street, the principal, noted how she used the data and data meeting to determine the level of support she offered her teachers. Ms. Street stated, "If there's a significant discrepancy [in assessment results], if it seems like there's something not right there, then I will spend more time in your classroom, because then I can help identify what kind of support I need to give you." Additionally, Ms. Street noted that during the meeting she can connect struggling teachers with teachers who were able to demonstrate significant student growth.

The principal delivered a clear message of accountability for effective teaching, and teachers clearly heard the message. Mr. Creek commented, "Well I'm certainly am held accountable, and I even discuss with my students. I have to answer why you didn't, why you scored low. You know, they're [the principal] going to ask me why I dropped you." Although Mr. Creek did indicate that low achievement could be the result of many "out of school factors," he did agree that accountability was an essential component of effective assessment systems.

Other teachers discussed the importance of accountability. When I asked Ms. Greene if she thought the data meeting and accountability for growth were too harsh, she noted,

> No, I think that it, should be a requirement, if I was in administration I would want to know that my teachers knew where there kids were and I would want to be like, Mr. Smith, whoever, can you show me by the end of September your data and where all your kids came in.

All twelve of the teacher participants in the study discussed the data meeting as a significant component of their assessment system and of school accountability. The participant comments indicated that the primary leadership action to drive improvement was simply having the meeting and meeting facilitation. Another participant Ms. Brinkman commented, "We have had a few meetings where we give the data to the principal and she goes over the data, and I tell her, 'Okay, this is where I'm at. This is what I see.'" The participants expressed that the meetings were low-stakes conversations about results and areas for growth.

Even with an overwhelming majority of participants indicating data meetings were positive, some teachers felt anxiety about the data meetings. Because of previous experiences, one teacher felt like she had to justify her existence with her assessment data. In telling the experience from her past, Ms. Brown stated, "the principal would you know, pass us our results and say, 'Talk. Justify your results. Why are they as good or as bad as they are?' It was, yeah, they were intense." According to Ms. Brown her current principal was not as direct as her previous principal, but she still expressed a heighten level of anxiety with regard to data meetings.

Raising the level of teacher concern through data meetings was important; however, other components of accountability surfaced in my action research data. Even with participant consensus that data meetings were important, many teachers felt that it needed to be improved. During an action research meeting several participants expressed a desire to have the principal's data meetings be more working meetings than simply reporting how many students dropped in achievement, stayed the same, or grew a proficiency quintile. I discuss the change in the data meeting within the finding that "participants perceived the action research project improved the sites language arts assessment system."

When I looked at the data teachers were required to bring to the data meetings, I had questions about how "growth" was defined. It seems narrowly defined. Growth, in terms of the district's data, was only defined as growth by improving a complete proficiency quintile. Simply stated, growth is only considered growth when a student moves up from far below basic to below basic, or when a students moves from below basic to basic and so on and so forth. So, a low basic student who moves to a high basic position was considered no growth. Even worse, it appears the message is advanced proficient students have no growth value.

School Loop (Grade Book)

School Loop was not a leadership action, still the principal held participant teachers accountable for updating assessment results in the web-based program. Five of the participants noted the program School Loop as a component of accountability within the schools

assessment practices. School Loop is an online/web-based grade book program. Parents who have access to the Internet and who register for School Loop can see their child's grades for every class. Parents can see the grade of each assignment and test results entered into the program. Parents, teachers, and students can email each other using this program.

This program allows the principal to execute inquiries to identify students who are struggling. Among many other features, the program allows the principal to search for students whose grades are trending up or down. Many of the program features supports the schools assessment accountability practices. Ms. Greene stated, "Accountability, having those data meetings, we also put things in School Loop, which we're accountable to students and parents." Ms. Gail stated, "I did have the data; it is visible. I mean I put it on School Loop in the sense of the kids' assessment and their scores and for parents." According to the principal and participants, parents use School Loop to monitor their students' grades and assignments. Parents can gain access the program on smart phones, too. Unfortunately, too many of the students do not have Internet access at home. This requires teachers and administrators to continue to rely on paper report cards every ten weeks. Even with report cards, the school struggles to get information to the homes of the students because of a high rate of transiency.

Even though teacher participants felt that School Loop was under-utilized by many students and families, they did report it was an important component of accountability. The principal expected teachers

to update their grades weekly; however, she could not mandate that teachers used the program, as it was not part of the collective bargaining agreement. The principal communicated her expectations during meetings, through email, the school's paper bulletin, and the closed circuit television broadcasts. The principal expressed that all of the Condor teachers agreed to update School Loop weekly.

Data Displays

Eight of the participants discussed data displays as a component of accountability in their assessment practices. Mr. Rad captures the general outlook of all of the participants in the following comments:

> They're [assessment results] posted in a data room, um, so the teachers can actually come in at any time to kind of see how everybody else is doing. Um, I think that does hold them accountable in terms of it's out there. It's public data. It's not, not um, you know, you're not, it's a lot different than you know, being confined in, your classroom and you do what you do and you know, just within your four walls and nobody knows about it. I think we, we have a responsibility to bring this out school-wide and so, having it posted and, and uh, sharing out good or bad, I don't think it's um, it's… Again, we look at it as more supportive than punitive in any way.

The principal expected teachers to post their quarterly assessment results in the data room. Ms. Snow shared "Uh, support regarding data. Well, she directs us in what she would like to see. Um, how she wants us to present our data in terms of the stacked graphs, the Excel

business that we do." Participants shared that the data displays supported reflection and continuous improvement.

As indicated by three participants, the purpose of the data room was to make public the results of quarterly assessments and to stimulate conversations and celebrations of growth. In addition, the purpose of the data room was to expose weakness in achievement. The principal and teachers conveyed that the data was not a venue for public shaming, but a location for bringing light to learning challenges that perplexed teachers and administrators. When I visited the data room, most of the data was presented in "stacked graphs." These data indicated student growth or a lack of it. Again, "growth" was narrowly defined. The "stacked graphs" answered relatively low-level analytical questions: Who was the teacher, and how many students grew, remained the same, or faltered on the quarterly assessments? These questions are important to answer; however, effective assessment systems go well beyond these questions to drive instructional improvement.

The data collected in this study provided evidence that several leadership actions improved assessment practices and drove instructional improvement. Teacher and administrators shared expertise and resources. Furthermore, participants noted the principal's communication of a shared vision and mission for change. Study participants described data meetings, School Loop, and data displays as the key components of the principal's accountability efforts, and these efforts advanced assessment practices.

Ultimately, the leadership actions by the principal and teachers led to improved assessment practices and drove instructional improvement during the course of this study. These actions included physically providing teacher resources and sharing content expertise. The sharing occurred in department, grade-level, and faculty meetings. Furthermore, this sharing of curricular expertise occurred during data meetings, conference periods, and even during lunch. Again, the major leadership actions that drove instructional improvement were the facilitation of data meetings at the conclusion of each quarter assessment, ensuring teachers posted result in School Loop, and teachers' data displays were regularly updated. These actions allowed the principal and teachers to reflect on the number of students climbing an achievement quintile, to focus their attention on stagnant student achievement, and to focus on content standards that were particularly challenging. Additionally, facilitating collaboration was an essential leadership action. In this chapter, I discuss the collaboration as one of several essential components of an effective assessment system. At the genesis of this study, collaboration, according to participants was limited.

Research Question Two:

According to school leaders—teachers and administrators—who are participating in an action research study, what are the essential components of effective assessment practices that advance instructional improvement?

Finding: Data collected in this study provided credible evidence that item analysis was an essential component of best assessment practices among participants.

All thirteen participants noted that test item analysis was an essential piece of the assessment process and instructional decision-making process. This was a claim substantiated by documents and was observed during action research meetings. Participants provided templates for item analysis, and during the first action research meeting, the teamed revised the template to better meet teacher needs. Additionally, most participants noted that the district's technological infrastructure, Lexmark scanners and LROIX software system supported the analysis of test results. Accordingly, I divide the finding that item analysis was essential to the schools assessment practices into two sub-findings, item analysis as a tool for instructional decision-making and the utilization of the technological infrastructure to support item analysis. Item analysis and a technological infrastructure to expedite the analysis were essential components of the research site's assessment system.

Item analysis as a tool for instructional decision-making

Test item analysis is the process by which a teacher reviews a specific assessment question to identify what content standard the question was assessing. Furthermore, item analysis consists of tallying the number of students who correctly or incorrectly answered an assessment question. The results of assessments are broken-down in multiple ways. In effective assessment systems, this type of analysis informs educators on what specific content the students have mastered

and/or what specific content was a challenge for students. Several instructional decisions can be made with this information. Four participants noted that the information informs their student grouping, and other teachers stated that the information gleaned from item analysis informed re-teaching strategies.

During preliminary interviews, every participant noted that test item analysis was an imperative component of best assessment practice. After every English language arts quarter assessment, teachers used site created item analysis templates to reflect on student learning successes and challenges. Although I was unable to verify this claim with observations, one participant made the following comment:

> I do the most frequently missed [test item], and I re-teach the concepts that most of the students missed. Then I use small group instruction for those that need a mini-lesson. So if, like five people missed number three, then they get to come to the back of the table.

This student grouping decision process is partially substantiated by a document the school district calls an Innovation Configuration and by the principals comments of classroom observations. This document places significant instructional value on small group instruction based on assessment results. According to the principal, central-office administrators and curriculum coaches use the Innovation Configuration as growth indicator of effective teaching. The document resembles a rubric for evaluation; however, the district has not negotiated the Innovation Configuration with the teachers union and, therefore, cannot be utilized as an evaluation tool. When the

Innovation Configuration was introduced three years ago, a very specific memorandum from the district office described how administrators should introduce it to teachers.

Several other teacher participants noted test item analysis as an essential component of an effective assessment system. Ms. Greene stated, "I think we really do item analysis really well as teachers, and most of us are elementary teachers coming up. So being that we're self-contained, we're able to pull that student and go, "Hey, what's going on here?"' Item analysis, according participant statements and school site documents was a widely accepted teacher practice.

Ms. Brinkman reported, "It [item analysis] helps us focus on skills we need to re-teach, and when planning to re-teach, focused my thinking as to what I have already done that obviously didn't work, and how I was going to re-teach it differently." Given that item analysis was ubiquitous, the districts technological infrastructure significantly expedited item analysis and other data analysis practices. Even with all the participants indicating item analysis was essential and widely utilized, many felt that the data meetings with the principal would be improved if conversations were launch from the item analysis as opposed to the stacked graphs data. I discuss this concern in greater detail later in the chapter.

District hardware and software supported assessment results analysis

The school district maintains an assessment database call LROIX. All teachers have login names and passwords. Two Lexmark scanners located at the participating site upload assessment results to the LROIX database. Administrators have access to the results of every

teacher at their school. When the teacher scans an assessment, the teacher can print and send an email to his or herself. Teachers can choose from a plethora of reports. Even though the technology is relatively sophisticated, all of the teachers are able to easily print and upload assessment results. The principal asserted, "This school is pretty advanced with data collection; most of the teachers are pretty familiar with LROIX, they know how to get the data." Ideally, this data is meant to drive instructional decision-making.

Six of the thirteen participants discussed using the Lexmark scanners for item analysis. Ms. Flynn made the following comment:

> I think, even down to the scanner, that scans your test in will break it down quickly by question and by student and incorrect, and it's right at your fingertips before you had to do it by hand, you know, like two years ago you were doing it by hand.

The technology employed at the site supports teachers in rapidly analyzing assessment results. For some teachers technology can mean anxiety and fear. None of the participants noted frustration with the system. Ms. Greene commented the following:

> When I print out from the Lexmark, my favorite one is the item analysis already, where it has the ABCD choices, and then it has a little star by the correct response, and it has a bar graph for how many of your students chose each one.

When she made these comments, she lit up with enthusiasm, as if using the technology gave her joy. The graphs produced by the Lexmark are easy to read and produce according to participants. This makes for rapid turn around of assessment results. Even with expedited analysis

and reports, evidence indicates teachers utilized this information in relative isolation.

Finding: Data collected in this study provided credible evidence that collaboration was a driver for improved instructional planning; however, there was limited evidence that collaboration extended to data analysis and re-teaching.

Participant after participant noted how important collaboration was with regard to planning. Teachers met to plan before school, at lunch, during conference periods, and after school. Unfortunately, collaboration did not occur during analysis of assessment results. Thus, I discuss this finding in two sections, collaboration in instructional planning, and collaboration with regard to assessments and analysis of assessment results.

Collaborative Lesson Planning

The three teacher participants who shared a conference period with a colleague and who taught similar English language arts sections expressed the greatest satisfaction with collaborative planning. Still, teachers [four participants] who did not have a common conference were able to find time for meaningful collaborative planning. Even with what appears to be a highly collaborative culture, two teachers felt collaboration was limited. One participant stated, "it just seems like there's a lot of people in isolation working really, really hard for their own little isolated room and there should be something that's more universal." Ms. Snow agreed:

> Um, in years past, I had partners that were more open and we were able to share our data weekly or even, uh, bi-weekly. We

> compared. We contrasted. We shifted groups of students in and out of our classrooms to suit their needs. Um, this year it's very closed door for me and I'm working alone, basically.

During post interviews, three participants continued to express a feeling of isolation.

Even with three participants refuting the collaborative culture, many more participants discussed the strength of collaborative planning. When asked "What role does collaboration play in your assessment practices?" Ms. T responded with the following comments:

> Huge. Big role. Especially now, I prefer to collaborate. We get together during our conference period. Usually we'll say, 'Okay, let's focus on just reading for today.' And then we'll take a look at the standard and make sure what we're doing is going with the standard.

Teachers and the principal provided several examples of collaborative planning. Teachers provided evidence in documents that substantiated their planning. These documents included department agendas, photocopies of plan books, email correspondence, and other district-generated documents that provided evidence of the collaborative planning. Every quarter teacher attended professional development that focused on collaboratively planning writing instruction.

Minimal Collaboration with Regard to Analysis of Assessment Results

Although eight of the participants discussed collaborative planning as a driver for improved learning, most of the participants balked when discussing collaboration with analyzing assessment

results. MS. Gail commented in a hypothetical conversation with colleagues:

> Hey you know what, I did this assessment for this, knowing that someone is using an assessment … maybe we have a kid who didn't get that content. We can then use that assessment … I think if we all got together and said, I did this, I did that, I used this, I used that. Don't use this because it … you know, especially because we are new to this. We don't know what works and what doesn't, so yeah.

Ms. Gail reported that collaboration was limited to planning and felt expanding collaboration to the analysis of results would improve teaching and learning. Ms. Brown stated, "The collaboration that we do, we can plan together for the actual lessons, but any assessment analysis or any re-teaching planning I can't do with them, because their students don't need the level of re-teaching that mine do." Ms. Greene explained, "we don't really sit together and go, 'Our students are missing this one,' because it's all different for all different students at different levels at different classrooms." Even with various student abilities, collaboration provides teachers and leaders a broader picture of assessment results. During collaborative analysis at our action research meetings, I was able to show accelerated students were struggling with precisely the same content standards that challenged students in strategic literacy sections. Furthermore, I was able to connect to one teacher whose students struggle on a specific assessment item with a teacher whose students had a high level of success on the same item.

Putting all of the teacher's brainpower together to analyze learning challenges increases the potential for improvement. The comments of participants revealed that collaboration was needed during results analysis. Participants and I addressed this weakness during the action research meetings and I discussed this change as a separate finding.

Research Question Three:

If barriers exist for teachers and administrators concerning formative assessment systems, how are school leaders who are participating in a structured and collaborative forum confronting these barriers?

Finding: Data collected in this study provided credible evidence that time is a barrier to effective assessment practices.

Time as barrier to effectively utilizing assessments to drive instructional improvement emerged from several statements made by participants. In fact, almost every participant in the study noted time as a major constraint with regard to using assessment information to drive instruction. Most hard working professionals would certainly agree that a lack of time as a primary barrier to greater success. This was undoubtedly the case in this study; however, time as a barrier to success in the assessment process emerges as a significant finding was somewhat more nuanced than "I need more time" as Ms. Rojas simply stated. Generally, statements were not sweeping requests for more time for planning, and participants' statements were consistent with the research on best assessment practices; however, because of limited time, teachers were unable to execute best practices. I discuss the nuances of this finding in three sub-findings, participant

tenure at the research site, participant experience with curriculum, and time established to analyze assessment results.

Participant tenure at research site

Nine of the thirteen participants in this study were new to the school. Most, seven of the twelve teacher participants, indicated that the transition to the school site was a challenge. Two participants joined the school after the year began. As one teacher stated when I asked how long has he been teaching at Condor "This is my first year here, so I've been here since October." Another teacher noted that she is technically the fourth teacher in the classroom this year. This has resulted in her missing all of the trainings for new teachers. When discussing her transition to Condor Ms. Rojas states "eighteen plus trainings [missed] and I didn't go to one of them." In post interviews, Ms. Rojas continues to express how difficult the year has been with regard to being new to the site. She reported in terms of grade-level, geography, demographics, and curriculum, she felt totally out of her element. Ms. Rojas reported that this has been the worst year of her professional teaching career.

Other participants repeated the message that time was a barrier to implementing best assessment practices. Some teachers felt lost and struggled with the transition to middle school. Many teachers indicated the school was welcoming and supportive; still the transition left many of the participants frustrated. A lack of participant site tenure emerged as a barrier in other comments made by teachers. Ms. Greene expressed the following:

> I kind of feel like I'm a starving dog looking and looking for stuff that already has been made that has worked, but nothing is there. So we've talked about getting together on a meeting and just saying, 'Okay, if someone has resources, what are the ones that you're using?'

Sadly, during post interviews, participants shared that the sixth grade team will lose six teachers again next year, potentially disrupting team cohesion and collaboration. Because nine of the thirteen participants are new to the site, many struggled with finding instructional resources. In addition to being new to the school site, many of the participants had no previous experience with the curriculum.

Participant Experience with Curriculum

Eight of the participants in the study noted the difficulty of adjusting to a different English language arts curriculum. Some of the teachers in preliminary interviews discussed the difficulty of reading the pacing guides; while others were overwhelmed by how much content they needed to teach each quarter. Ms. Rojas comments reflect the general feelings of participants, "One thing that was hard for me was, I was used to the elementary planning guides ... pacing guides. And these pacing guides to me are very, very loose." Ms. Brown agreed, "I'm learning how to read it and work with it, but it's like, here's a bucket full of stuff to teach in nine weeks." The principal confirms this lack of experience, "These teachers are good teachers; they're just unfamiliar with the curriculum." Another teacher Ms. August shared, "it is totally new content. I was having a hard time coming up

with stuff that was successful for me because it's brand new. So, I really relied on my colleagues that have been, you know, working sixth grade." The district's curriculum coaches design quarterly pacing guides to outline what content standards should be taught each quarter. Because these documents are dense with information, the English language arts coaches also publish a monthly newsletter called "The PLC (Professional Learning Community) Post". The newsletter is a monthly pacing guide. On the monthly calendar, some of the lessons were mandatory and a few were suggestions. Additionally, "The PLC Post" provides information on supplemental resources.

Aside from the pacing guides, many of the participants discussed the quantity and depth of standards. Ms. Brown shared the following:

> The large difficulty has been the amount of resources that we have. That you know, it's an older adoption, and so a lot of my master copy books aren't here. The way that the pacing is done is very different from elementary school, that's been a difficult adjustment.

Documents and other participant's comments confirm Ms. Brown's observations about the textbook adoption. Ms. Rojas comments, "the big barrier for me, is knowing where everything is, and plus I'm new, so I don't know everybody, and I feel uncomfortable banging on people's doors saying, 'Can I have the teacher guide?'" The lack of experience with the language arts curriculum has clearly frustrated the participants; however, leadership emerged from teachers and the principal to support the new teachers.

Five participants in this study noted a lack of instructional resources as a barrier to their success. Ultimately, several teacher leaders discussed earlier came to the support of struggling colleagues. Confirming teacher participants' frustration with regard to limited curriculum resources for new teachers, documents indicated the district did adopt the current language arts program in 2002. Over the course of ten years, teachers depleted or lost the resource materials. Compounding the curriculum resource problem is the new sixth grade self-contained model. Typically, an English department would consist of approximately three teachers per grade-level teaching language arts. One of the primary interventions for the district's PLC middle schools model is a sixth grade self-contained structure. This requires eleven teacher resource kits per subject. The district has only funded teacher editions. The result of this was that most teachers needed to scavenge for critical supplemental resources that were lost over the previous ten years. This time spent looking for resources was a waste of precious planning time.

Other teachers echo the challenge of adjusting to a new curriculum. Mr. Rad notes, "The curriculum is a little bit more dense and so it's almost like starting over. So, I'm kind of out of my comfort zone." Even with many of the new teachers struggling with the pacing guide and curriculum, one participant commented that the pacing guides helped her become a better teacher. Ms. Rixx stated, "I think it's the pacing guide that improves my teaching more than the assessment." Ms. Rixx expressed that the pacing guides pushed her to

teach more of the standards and provided her with effective teaching strategies.

Time for Analysis of Assessment Results

In addition to lacking experience with the curriculum, several participants noted that there was no time for spiraling back to assessment items that were most difficult for students. Six of the twelve teachers discussed this as a barrier to successfully using assessment process. Mr. Rad states, "Yeah, we have those meetings with the principal and administrators, but definitely not a lot of time to spiral back and cover things that were areas of weakness." Ms. Gail commented, "it would be nice to have more time, more time to collaborate, more time to use the data from the time we get it to the time that it could be effectively utilized to improve the scores." Teachers and the principal would like to see the pacing guides adjusted so that a re-teach week can be included as it is in the math pacing. Reviewing the districts pacing guide provided data that there was no scheduled time to target standards that challenged students and teachers. When I asked the principal why this pacing recommendation has not been integrated, she commented that there is only one assessment version. District curriculum coaches would need to create two additional versions, "A," "B," and "C." One of the primary challenges to creating additional test versions is the cost of copy right for literary passages.

Nine of the participants noted that not having common conference periods as a major barrier to collaboratively analyzing assessment results. Ms. Brown explains, "the collaboration that we do, we can

plan together for the actual lessons, but any assessment analysis or any re-teaching planning I really can't do with them, because their students don't need the level of re-teaching that mine do." Given this perceived barrier to improved assessment practices, the action research meetings targeted this lack of collaborative assessment analysis.

Participants' site tenure was a barrier to the successful implementation of effective assessment practices. Furthermore, participants' inexperience with the curriculum was a barrier to effective assessment practices, and although almost every participant stated time was a barrier to the successful implementation of best assessment practices, one participant felt that it was a driver. One teacher commented that the new teachers came together because they were all first year teachers at the site, and they were all teaching middle school language arts for the first time. According to Mr. Rad this helped motivated participants and created a "we are in this together" frame of mind. In my own observations of the action research meetings, it appeared camaraderie was high.

Finding: Data collected in this study provided credible evidence that participants perceived that the action research meetings improved their use of assessment information to drive instructional improvement.

I divided this section into two subsections, perceived improvement of the utilization of assessment information and perceived improvement of collaboration. According to the data, participants indicated that there was an improvement in the utilization of their

assessment information, and participants indicated that collaboration was improved as a result of this study. Thus, the two subsections.

Perceived improvement in utilization of assessment information

During the course of the action research project, many participants indicated that this study brought a much-needed focus on better utilizing assessment information to drive instructional improvement. During post-interviews, this echoed in participant comments. Teachers voiced that the open forum structure allowed for honest conversation about improving assessments practices. Ms. Brown stated, "now we look more at the data, um, and not just the quarter data, looking at these assessments that we're doing weekly, and analyzing those..." Mr. Rad expressed, "I was thinking about uh the third quarter when we used the poetry practice test. It kind of gave us a lot more confidence after we did that data analysis. So, all of our instruction was more focused." According to participant perceptions, the action research meeting helped teachers use assessment results to focus on teaching the content standards that were most difficult for their students.

Before the study, teachers indicated that data meetings primarily focused on the number of students who grew a proficiency level or dropped a level. Discussions launched from the stacked graphs and because of the limitations of this particular data, deep analysis of results were stilted. The study meetings, according to nine of the participants, changed by focusing more on standards that were challenging students. Mr. Rad continued:

> So, all of our instruction was more focused. And, when we did the comprehensive review or the- the whole block from the PLC post, it was like okay we knew what we needed to re-teach. You know, so um, I believe that was a big help because we were asking for something similar to that at the beginning of the year. And so once we finally got that help then it just made everything a lot smoother for us being new you know so that was a big help.

Most participants expressed that the team became better at analyzing the results to inform their instruction, and Mr. Rad's comments typify all but two of the participants.

Other participants expressed the perception that the action research meetings reduced the feeling of isolation. Ms. Gail noted, "that getting more support from the other neck of the woods because we are so isolated and separated, we're not all kind of join together." The sixth grade team is scattered throughout the school campus, thus deepening the feeling of isolation.

During the study, the principal shared with me that she is in the process of moving all of the sixth grade classrooms to one floor of one building. Three participants confirmed this physical restructuring. She hoped to reduce this feeling of isolation, but she did express that some teachers who have been in one classroom for most of their careers were resistant.

Even with many participants reporting that the action research meetings improved their assessment practices, some participants felt there was no change. Mr. Creek opined that aside from more

collaboration during meetings, his assessment practices remain unchanged. Ms. Snow expressed a similar sentiment. She stated:

> Um,[collaboration plays] a very small role, um, in comparison to years past. Um, in years past, I had partners that were more open and we were able to share our data weekly or even, uh, bi-weekly. We compared. We contrasted. We shifted groups of students in and out of our classrooms to suit their needs. Um, this year it's very closed door for me and I'm working alone, basically. Um, I share my data with the other six grade teachers but their data doesn't have an impact on my classroom in any way.

Ms. Snow teaches a specialized curriculum for English Language Learners called *Imagine It*. The program is significantly more scripted than the grade-level program and includes an assessment program.

Perceived Improvement in Collaboration

Collaboration, according to nine of the participants, improved during the course of this study. During early action research meetings, participants noted that collaboration during data meetings was minimal. The team discussed how we could improve the data meetings with the principal to increase collaboration. Again, nine of the participants perceived this had a positive impact on collaborative practices. Ms. Flynn shared the following:

> I think the one big change is that it did help us collaborate. I really, I got a lot out of your chart that you showed me, where it was showing me the strengths of my other staff members. So that I could go to them and ask them what they're using, or what resources they're using, or how they taught their students to get

those results. And so, I would say it got me, it provided a tool for communication you know, among colleagues.

During all of the action research meetings, participants and I collaboratively looked at assessment results. Teachers discussed with colleagues how they taught specific lessons that resulted in high proficiency rates on standards, and conversely, participants discussed the specific content standards that provided the biggest challenge for students. Participants dialogued how they initially taught the content, and I facilitated dialogue about re-teaching with improved practice. During the meetings, I did not advocate any particular teaching methods as this was beyond the scope of the study. I simply drew from teachers whose results were significantly better than classes that struggled with the content.

During our first action research meeting, one participant commented, "Collaboration is a huge need. Truth be told, this is the first time we collaborated on the ELA [English language arts] assessments. It was the first time I heard my colleagues ways of delivery of content." The action research meetings, according to participants, provided them an opportunity to improve collaboration while improving assessment analysis. Ms. Brinkman stated emphatically, "I have looked at test items and standards more closely and thought about patterns more. I have collaborated with colleagues more." Another teacher commented, "The chance to understand other people's challenges and make me feel less alone with this struggle, and the chance to collaborate with others and learn from their strengths was an improvement." During initial interviews, many teachers expressed a

need for improved collaboration. The participants and I took on this barrier.

From the comments of the principal, the department head, and the other participants, a consensus existed with regard to improved collaboration. Ms. Gail noted, "I learned all kinds of different strategies and techniques. It was good to discuss the frequently missed questions and see that other teachers had different frequently missed items." Another teacher expressed how collaboration improved in stating, "Discussing the most missed items gave me ideas about how to revisit these topic. The teachers I worked with gave examples of their strategies. Through collaboration, I feel re-energized and I'm looking forward to addressing the missed items again." Several teachers felt energized by the improvement in collaboration. When I asked them "why they felt collaboration was so important?" There was a general agreement, six participants, that their colleagues had valuable information that could help improve their teaching.

Additionally, I asked participants, "What teacher and administrator characteristics led to effective collaboration, and can leaders develop these essentials in the staff?" Seven of the participants noted, "sharing," while five of the participants discussed "open mindedness." Four participants discussed "being positive." While I facilitated the action research meetings, I observed all of these characteristics in the work of the participants. Some teachers did attend tired and frustrated; however, all but two participants fully attended to the work of improving their assessment systems.

Conclusion

The findings discussed in this chapter illustrate fidelity of best assessment practice research by the actions of research participants. The research team made growth toward the goals we established; however, improvements in practice are required to further increase teacher effectiveness and student learning. The teacher participants and the principal exhibited specific leadership actions that advanced improvement in assessment practices and in turn this led to instructional improvement. The leaders shared curricular expertise and instructional materials. Furthermore, the principal expressed clear expectations for growth and accountability, and the principal communicated a clear vision and mission. The barriers to implementing best assessment practices were minimal time, resources, and curricular experience. Again, several leaders assuaged these barriers by sharing resources and sharing content expertise. Teacher leaders worked to improve collaboration, and as a result teachers were able to improve analysis.

Thus, continuing the change process via action research is essential. Again, because the action research team completed the action research cycle two times the likelihood that the change in the assessment system increased. Given that the team anticipates a turn-over of six teacher may help mitigate this foreseen barrier. In the following chapter, I will discuss recommendations for the continuation of the action research process and assessment practices.

CHAPTER FIVE

This chapter begins with a summary of the findings followed by a discussion of their significance. Next, I discuss the limitations of the study and practical implications for this action research project. Additionally, I argue the larger research implications as it pertains to this study, and lastly, I end with my final thoughts.

Summary of Findings

The principal, who communicated a shared vision and mission for growth and innovation, drove the improvement of assessment practices. Moreover, teacher leaders pushed the improvement of the assessment system by collaboratively analyzing formative assessment results. Teacher leaders shared content and pedagogical knowledge with colleagues. The participant principal and teachers embedded important accountability practices that further advanced improvement in teaching and learning. The participants and I met to openly discuss assessment results, and we planned instruction to confront specific content standards that students were unable to master. Additionally, these leaders focused on collaboration with regard to assessment analysis and instructional decision-making. These leadership actions by participant teachers and the principal combined to overcome significant barriers. Participants indicated that their assessment practice improve, as did their collaboration. Student achievement scores were on the rise for participants, as well.

Significance of Findings

Successful researchers conduct original research, finding a unique perspective on a perplexing educational problem. This critical

agenda helps establish creative methods for tackling low achievement in schools. This study and its findings revealed the importance of action research as an essential instrument for organizational change. Furthermore, this study provided instructive evidence for improving assessment systems in similar middle schools. Other research frameworks may have illuminated barriers to school reform; however, this action research provided participants and I the living educational points in time to confront barriers while collecting data. Action research provided the opportunity for participants to implement solutions and continue to collect data on the problem. No other method allows for simultaneous inquiry and action (Lodic, Spaulding, and Voegtle,2006; Coghlan and Brannick, 2007; Stringer,2008; Merriam,2009). Given the intuitive nature of the plan, do, check, and act cycle of action research, participants were able to confront the barriers of limited time and resources to improve their use of assessment information. Furthermore, participants identified assessment practice barriers, and we were able to discuss these obstacles and plan strategies to overcome them.

The significance of the findings further solidifies what was previously known with regard to assessment practices. Schools that effectively utilize assessment result to drive instructional improvement have better results (Schmoker, 1999; Johnson, 2002; Bernhardt, 2004; Wellman and Lipton, 2004; Boudett, City, and Murnane(Eds.), 2005; Ainsworth, and Viegut,2006; Love, 2009; Noyce and Hickey (Eds.), 2011). Improving schools means improving the practices of teachers. Policy makers and many others saturate schools with

reform programs to address low achievement. Many of these program and innovations result in stagnant growth. This study provides further evidence that investing time and effort in improving assessments systems yields improved teaching and learning. Educators must continue to utilize assessment results especially in high poverty middle schools like the middle school in this study.

Limitations of the Study

This study like every study has limitations. The most significant limitation of this study was the number of participants. With thirteen participants, generalizing the findings is limited. The uniqueness of this school and the participants further complicates generalizing the findings. Ninety-seven percent of the students receive free and reduced food services. Nine of the thirteen participants were in their first year at the site, and eight of the participants were new to the curriculum. Needless to stay this is not a typical school. Thus, generalizing findings may be limited to schools with similarly unique attributes. Ultimately, generalizing the findings beyond this particular school in unwise because of the number of participants; however, even with the low number of participants, this study has the potential to be instructive with schools and districts serving similar students.

Qualitative action research presents inherent limitations. As a researcher-participant, it was possible that participants were indicating growth because this study sought to improve how school leaders utilized assessment information to drive improvement in teaching and learning. I attempted to mitigate this reactivity by

triangulating data sources; however, it is possible participants embellished their work and how this study influenced their work. Furthermore, I shared transcriptions with participants and offered them an opportunity to expand or retract statements. This member-checking helped to mitigate researcher and participant bias.

Another limitation to consider concerns the potential for replication of this study. The research site and the district have invested in a technological infrastructure that makes assessment scoring and manipulation of data quick. Three hundred quarterly assessments can be scored in minutes, and the Lexmark systems can produce a multitude of charts and tables that support analysis. A school or district without these resources would be severely limited in their ability to replicate this action research to improve their assessment practices.

Practical Implications and Lessons Learned

The practical implications of the findings should not be understated. When teacher leaders and principal leaders work collaboratively to define and mitigate barriers to effective assessment systems, change occurs. This study provided empirical evidence that when teachers and administrators collaboratively define a problem, analyze data, and implemented an evidence-based solution there will be significant change. As the research and professional literature has proven, effective assessment systems result in improved teaching and learning. This action research study confirms that specific leadership actions advance improved assessment practices.

Although the organizational structure of action research was critical, the human elements were equally invaluable. The success of the research was dependant on the trust, collegiality, and open-mindedness of the participants. These team dynamics were essential, and although they may be obvious to many people, this was somewhat surprising to learn. Working in high poverty schools is incredibly exhausting. Well thought out systems for improvement help quell conditions that consume staff energy and so does the involvement of educators who share expertise, resources, and exhibit compassion for their students and colleagues.

Additional lessons I learned include changing the way schools and districts think about accountability and how they think about leadership. Expecting schools to show growth in Academic Performance Index is important; however, accountability should be thought about with regard to individual student growth and specific content standards. Schools who zero in on students who are struggling and zero in on specific content standards that challenge students have a greater opportunity of improving assessment results. Counting the number of proficient and advanced proficient students and calculating rates will not have the same impact as identifying who is struggling and pin-point the content standards that are most challenging. There must be accountability for creating and sustaining an assessment system that drives instructional improvement and improvement in academic achievement. This type of accountability will be more fruitful than current accountability practices.

During the course of this study, I asked participants about leadership, and I asked participants about the actions of school leaders. In the early stages of this study, most participants discussed the actions of their supervisors or managers. Eventually, participants began to see leadership as action and not position or job title. Participants began to see their own behavior as vital leadership actions essential for improving how the department utilized assessment results. Participants shared resources, content expertise, and instructional expertise. Although the principal did exhibit effective leadership, the leadership actions of teachers drove changes in collaboration and in the assessment practices. Although I do not argue correlation or association, the research school site out-performed all other PLC middle schools in the district on the quarter three English language arts assessment and on the end of course exams. Schools will change and improve when leadership capacity is built and distributed to those who have the most impact on student achievement.

Research Implications

This study with thirteen participants, in one high poverty urban middle school provides essential evidence to the larger dialogue on educational reform. Although some federal and state policy mandates have led to school improvement, local district and school site research maintains preeminence with regard to initiating and sustaining school change. The farther decisions are made from the classroom, the greater the likelihood these decisions will not be heard or implemented. This includes even the wise and noble decisions. The research on improving assessment systems to drive instructional

improvement is massive, yet schools continue to under-utilize this information to improve teaching and learning. This study provides further evidence that focusing on assessment practices improves teaching.

Currently, the loudest critics of public education rightfully demand an improvement in teacher evaluations. Many have suggested value-added techniques that make use of assessment results to evaluate teachers (Harris, 2011). I do not advocate this method for evaluation; however, in school districts that do, schools must invest in improving how teachers use information. This study provides evidence that school districts and school leader must collaboratively focus in on content standards that were most challenging for students. School leaders, teachers and administrators, must discuss and share content expertise and instructional resources. In many schools across the country, the economic crisis shattered staff cohesion. Layoff notices have reached teachers with over ten years of experience. The immediate future on public education in high poverty schools remains unstable, and this environment requires leadership and focus.

Final Thoughts

As I have stated earlier in this discussion, I do not advocate for more testing of children, nor do I advocate for using assessment results to hammer down teachers who work in the most challenging schools. Thus, I feel this study's findings and conclusions are situated between "no excuses" rhetoric and anti-poverty advocacy. All children can learn, yet compelling evidence exists indicating high poverty schools have an incredibly more challenging task. Ninety-

ninety-ninety schools[10] and other "miracle" schools do not hold up to the scrutiny (Baeder,2011; and Ravitch, 2011). High poverty schools need resources and the support of the community. Yes, there are ineffective teachers and administrators in some schools, and we need to first help them, and if this does not work, they must be quickly and inexpensively removed from classrooms and schools.

Moreover, a growing part of me feels, at least at school sites similar to the one in this study, students should be tested less and assessed more. Undoubtedly, this is a perplexing conundrum. As one insightful participant noted when I asked her "If there are barriers to improving her teaching?" she responded by saying, "all this testing is interfering with effective teaching." We are testing students too often and the results of these tests are being usurped by "reformers" to bash public school teachers and administrators. Even worse, too many schools are not fully utilizing assessment information to improve teaching and learning.

Finally, there are questions that remain unanswered: Why are more schools not utilizing assessment best practices to increase achievement and teacher effectiveness and why does this occur more often in schools serving large numbers of students living in poverty? Although my study did not seek to answer these questions, I do recommend that researchers investigate these questions to better understand the barriers inhibiting high poverty schools from

[10] Ninety/ninety/ninety schools are schools that allegedly have 90% minority students, 90% low socioeconomic status students, and 90% proficiency. Recent inquiries exposed much of the 90/90/90 schools literature as invalid.

establishing and maintaining effective assessment systems. I think if these schools had better resource to support the more immediate psychological and social needs of the students and their families, more attention could be paid to teaching and learning. Moreover, assessments must be low-stakes to increase their power to change teaching and learning. Improving assessment systems within schools is not a fad. Researchers and leadership practioners must continue to advance an agenda that focuses on the improvement of assessment systems. With this, schools will see improved gains in achievement.

LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

David Costa
UCLA Doctoral Candidate
1404 E 1st Street #4
Long Beach, CA 90802-8208

November 1, 2011

[redacted]
Principal
[redacted]

Dear Ms. [redacted]:

This letter is to request your participation in an action research study. The title of this study is LANGUAGE ARTS FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS: A LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITY AT TITLE I PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT YEAR FIVE MIDDLE SCHOOLS. The purpose of this study is to increase school leaders' knowledge and effective practice of formative assessment feedback systems. By determining from administrators what they do to support teachers using formative assessment systems in language arts and by synthesizing the research literature of assessment systems, an action research team will co-create a formative assessment plan that meets the particular needs of teachers and leaders situated in Title I program Improvement year 5 middle schools.

If you are willing to participate in this research, you will be expected to participate in five action research forums lasting approximately ninety minutes. Additionally, you will be interviewed before the first forum and after the last forum.

Finally, to comply with all University of California, Los Angeles Institutional Review Board's protocols, I will need a signed informed consent document. By signing the informed consent, you agree to participate in the study. Thank you very much for your time and consideration, as I am sure you agree that improving school assessment systems is an essential leadership responsibility to create and sustain greater levels of student achievement and teacher effectiveness.

Respectfully,

David B. Costa

APPENDIX B

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

LANGUAGE ARTS FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS: A LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITY AT A TITLE I PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT YEAR FIVE MIDDLE SCHOOL

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by David B. Costa, Doctorate of Education candidate, from the Graduaute School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. This is a dissertation action reseach study conducted by a graduate student to meet in part the requirements of the educational doctorate degree. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a principal, assistant principal, or a language arts teachers at a Title I Program Improvement year five middle school.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to increase school leaders' (teachers and administrators) knowledge and effective practice of formative assessment feedback systems. By determining from administrators and other school leaders what they do to support teachers using formative assessment systems in language arts and by synthesizing the research literature of assessment systems, an action research team will co-create a formative assessment system that meets the particular needs of teachers and leaders situated in a Title I program Improvement year 5 middle school.

PROCEDURES

Participation in this study requires participants to attend five, sixty-minute action research meetings. There will be approximately one meeting every 3 weeks beginning in February. Each one of the meetings will include presentations on best formative assessment practices and action research procedures. During the meetings the principal researcher (David B. Costa) and participants will co-create goals and action plans to improve formative assessment practices or collaborate to strengthen current goals and action plans. Additionally, participants in this study will be interviewed prior to the first meeting and interviewed after the final meeting.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Sacrificing time to committ to the action research meetings, and interviews is the only potential inconvenience this study might create. Because the researcher is aware of how precious time is for families, the interview questions have been limited to only essential questions that pertain to the purpose of this study.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

The participants of this research may benefit by having an opportunity to increase their knowledge and expertise of formative assessment systems. Moreover, this action research study will offer professional

development opportunities to create and sustain lasting assessment systems utilizing an action research approach. At the conclusion of this study, participants will be offered a summary of the research findings and recommendations to improve the use of formative assessment processes.

Will I receive any payment if I participate in this study?

You will receive a $10 gift card for every action research meeting you attend. This gift card will be handed to you at the conclusion of each of the five meetings.

CONFIDENTIALITY

To protect the confidentiality of participants and their school sites pseudonyms will be assigned to individuals and schools. Additionally, all interview transcripts will be scrubbed of identifying information.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer during interviews and still remain in the study.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me at davescosta@yahoo.com, dcosta@lbschools.net, or (714) 273-1672.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Office of the Human Research Protection Program at 11000 Kinross Avenue, Suite 102 Box 951694 Los Angeles, CA, 90095-1694, (310) 825-7122, or gcirb@research.ucla.edu.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT (AND) OR LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the procedures and conditions of my participation described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

_____

Name of Participant

_____ _____

Signature of Participant or Legal Representative Date

STATEMENT and SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

In my judgment the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

_____ _____

Signature of Investigator Date

APPENDIX C

Action Research Teacher Interview Protocol #1

1. How many years have you been teaching?

2. If you have received any assessment training or professional development (coaching, workshops, consultants, or other types of training), please describe it.

3. What role does collaboration (by collaboration I mean collaborative problem solving) play in your assessment practices?

4. Talk to me through your feelings and reactions when you get student results of your district quarter assessments.

5. If you were going to design an assessment and a structure to use assessment information, what would you do?

6. How does looking at the district's quarter assessment information help you improve your teaching?

7. On a scale of 1 to 10, ten being very confident, how confident are you with looking at district quarter assessment information? Please explain your response.

8. How often do you use formative assessment data?

9. If there is an accountability component to your school's assessment practices, please describe it?

10. Please describe how your school's current quarterly assessment practices guide instructional decisions in your classroom?

11. Please take me through the system for using quarter formative assessment data in your department meetings?

12. Describe the support your principal or assistant principal provides you regarding the use of formative assessment data?

13. If there are any strengths in your schools/departments current assessment processes, please describe them?

14. What do you wish you had in terms of support for using quarterly assessment information to improve your teaching?

15. How do you manage with the weaknesses or barriers in the assessment process? Do you get support?

16. Is there anything else with regard to leadership support and English language arts assessment practices that you would like to share?

Action Research Teacher Interview Protocol #2

1. Talk me through your most recent classroom assessment?

2. If there has been a change as a result of your participation in this study, please describe it with regard to your confidence level in looking at assessment information?

3. If there has been a change as a result of your participation in this study, please describe it with regard to the frequency in which you use formative assessment data?

4. If there has been a change as a result of your participation in this study, please describe it with regard to classroom instructional decisions?

5. If there has been a change in your departments/grade-levels process for utilizing assessment information as a result of participating in the study, please describe it?

6. Describe the support your principal or assistant principal provides you regarding the use of formative assessment data? (If there has been a change in the support your principal provides you, please describe it).

7. If there are any new strengths in your schools/departments current assessment processes, please describe them?

8. What do you wish you had in terms of support for using quarterly assessment information to improve your teaching? (If there has been a change in your desire for support with assessments, please describe it).

9. How do you manage the weaknesses or barriers in the assessment process? Do you get support? (If there are new strategies to manage weaknesses or barriers in the assessment practices, please describe them).

10. If trust and collegiality are critical for collaboration, how can teacher leaders and administrators increase them to improve collaboration?

APPENDIX D

Action Research Principal/ Assistant principal Interview Protocol #1

_____

1. How many years have you been an administrator?

2. If you have received any assessment training or professional development (coaching, workshops, consultants, or other types of training), please describe it.

3. What role does collaboration (by collaboration I mean collaborative problem solving) play in your assessment processes?

4. Talk to me through your feelings and reactions when you get student results of your district quarter assessments.

5. If you were going to design an assessment and a structure to use assessment information, what would you do?

6. How did you develop the current assessment processes at your school?

7. How do you sustain current assessment processes at your school?

8. How does looking at the district's quarter assessment information help guide the support you offer teachers to improve instruction?

9. On a scale of 1 to 10, ten being very confident, how confident are you with looking at district quarter assessment information? Please explain your response.

10. How often do you use formative assessment data?

11. If there is an accountability component to your school's assessment practices, please describe it?

12. Please describe how your school's current quarterly assessment practices guide instructional decisions?

13. Please take me through the system for using quarter formative assessment data in your meetings?

14. Describe the support you provide regarding the use of formative assessment data?

15. If there are any strengths in your schools/departments current assessment processes, please describe them?

16. What do you wish you had in terms of support for using quarterly assessment information to improve teaching?

17. How do you manage the weaknesses or barriers in the assessment process? Do you get support?

18. Is there anything else with regard to leadership support and English language arts assessment practices that you would like to share?

Action research Principal/Assistant principal Interview Protocol #1

1. As a result of this action research study, do you have any feelings good or bad about assessment data/information? Probe: elaborate.

2. As a result of this action research study, do you feel that you can better describe the qualities of an effective formative assessment system? Please describe the characteristics of an effective system. (Aligning assessments, curriculum, and standards)

3. What role does collaboration (by collaboration I mean collaborative problem solving) play in your assessment processes?

4. As a result of this action research study, have your feelings changed with regard to developing and sustaining a formative assessment data system as an important part of effective school leadership? Probes: Why? Why not? If there have been changes as a result of your participation, please describe how you have changed the assessment system at your school site?

5. As a result of this action research study, do you feel that your formative assessment data skill level has changed? Please provide an example or describe this change with regard to using data to make instructional decisions? Probe: Elaborate on skills mention.

6. As a result of your participation in this action research study, has the frequency of your data usage changed?

7. If the depth in which you use formative assessment information has changed as a result of participating in this study, please describe the change.

8. If there has been a change in the accountability component to your schools assessment practices, as a result of your participation in this study, please describe it. (Supervision, walkthroughs, evaluations, public posting of assessment results)

9. If there has been a change in your conversations with English teachers as a result of your participation in this study, please describe that change.

10. If there has been a change in the systematic process for using data at your school, please describe it. If no, explain why.

11. Does this process contribute to instructional decisions in your classroom? Probe: How so? Please describe an instructional decision you or your leadership team made as a result of formative assessment data? (As a result of your participation in this study has there been a change with regard to how instructional decisions are made?)

12. Is there a structure or system for utilizing formative assessment data in your department meetings? (If there has been a change as a result of your participation in this study, please describe it with regard to how formative assessment data is utilized in English department meetings.)

13. If yes, please describe that process.

14. If no, Why? How are achievement goals established?

15. As an administrator, how do you provide support to English teachers regarding the utilization of formative assessment data? Please describe a typical meeting with an individual teacher or the English department in which you provided assessment data support. (If there has been a change as a result of your participation in this study, please describe it with regard to teacher support.)

16. Is this support helpful? Please describe the specifics of this support.

17. What if any are the strengths of your current assessment processes? (If there has been a change as a result of your participation in this study, please describe it with regard to strengths of the assessment processes.)

18. What if any are the weaknesses of your current assessment processes? (If there has been a change as a result of your participation in this study, please describe it with regard to the weaknesses of your assessment practices.)

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