ABSTRACT

LASSITER, STEVE MICHAEL. The Perceptions and Beliefs of High Performing Teachers Who Teach Struggling Readers In Low Performing Schools. (Under the direction of Dr. Lance D. Fusarelli).

The Excellent Schools Act was passed during the 2012 legislative session in North Carolina. This act changed several aspects of the public school curriculum. Part of the legislated act was Read to Achieve, which sought to improve literacy in grades K-3 and end social promotion. The National Assessment of Educational Progress showed no improvement in reading scores from 2013 to 2015 for fourth-grade students across the nation. Since then, much attention has been focused on improving childhood literacy across the United States.

This study, conducted in an eastern North Carolina school district, aimed to analyze the perceptions and beliefs of teachers who teach struggling readers in their schools. Understanding their perceptions and beliefs might assist administrators and teachers in establishing strong schoolwide literacy programs, build teacher capacity in the area of literacy, and decrease the likelihood of academic failure for struggling readers who are at risk.

A case study of eight teachers who were identified as exemplary reading teachers in their school district was used to investigate this issue. The findings of this study confirm the important roles teachers have in impacting the quality of reading instruction students receive. The findings indicate teachers hold an unwavering commitment to helping their students read at grade level, know the importance of monitoring student progress, and realize the impact of small group instruction. Implications for national, state, and local changes in educational policies, university teacher preparation programs, and professional development are discussed to help teachers of reading improve literacy practices in their classrooms.

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The Perceptions and Beliefs of High Performing Teachers Who Teach Struggling Readers In Low Performing Schools

by
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to God, my grandparents Mary Blount and Cleodia Bonner, and my parents Steve and Diane Lassiter. It is through my grandmothers that I learned, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

My parents worked hard to ensure that I had a good life. I am eternally grateful for their love and support. Without them I would not be where I am today. Mom, I can finally answer your question, “Yes, I am finished.”

In the words of Condoleezza Rice, “Good parents are a blessing.” Mine were determined to give me a chance to live a unique and happy life. In that they succeeded, and that is why every night I begin my prayers saying, “Lord, I can never thank you enough for the parents you gave me.”

BIOGRAPHY

Steve Lassiter is a native of Edenton, North Carolina. He earned his Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education and a Masters in School Administration, both from East Carolina University. He has served as an elementary and middle school teacher, assistant principal, principal, and assistant superintendent of human resources. Currently, he is the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Programs and Services for Pitt County Schools.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES x

CHAPTER 1: Introduction 1

Problem Statement 4

Purpose of the Study 7

Research Questions 8

Significance of the Study 8

Overview of Approach 10

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review 12

Introduction 12

Struggling Readers 13

Assessments to Determine Reading Levels of Struggling Readers 16

District Reading Level Assessments 17

School Reading Level Assessments 18

Monitoring Student Progress 19

Characteristics Necessary for Effective Teachers of Struggling Readers 21

Teachers' Beliefs about Literacy Instruction 22

Approaches to Teaching Reading 26

Scientifically Based Reading Instruction 28

Differentiated Reading Instruction 30

Small Group Reading Instruction 33

Facilitating Reading Instruction 35

Independent Reading 36

Professional Development 37
Effective Practices and Preparation to Improve Reading Instruction 40
Professional Development and Struggling Readers 42
Professional Development, Reflection and Inquiry 43
Student Motivation 44
Summary 47
CHAPTER 3: Methodology 48
Purpose of Study and Research Questions 48
Research Design 49
Data Sources 50
Data Collection 52
Interviews 54
Data Analysis 56
Trustworthiness 57
Researcher Subjectivity Statement 57
Ethical Considerations 59
Chapter Summary 60
CHAPTER 4: Findings 61
Introduction 61
Participants 62
Gail 63
Ann 64
Sarah 64

Cate 64

Tara 64

Alex 65

Mary 65

Kelly 65

Text Comprehension a Priority 66

Parent Support and Involvement 68

Difficulty Differintiating Instruction 70

Explicit Instruction 75

High Expectations 79

Small Group Instruction 82

Teacher and Student Emotions 85

Student Lack of Confidence 85

Students Experience Frustration 86

Teachers Experience Frustration 87

Student Motivation 89

Building Relationships 95

Reading Utopia 98

Professional Development and Teacher Training 101

Summary Responses to Research Questions 102

Summary and Reflections of the Researcher 108

Conclusion 110

CHAPTER 5: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusions 111

Discussion 112

Implications for Research 118

Implications for Practice 120

Limitations of the Study 122

Conclusion 123

References 125

APPENDICES 145

Appendix A 146

Appendix B 148

Appendix C 149

Appendix D 150

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Elementary Reading Assessments 17

Table 2. Approaches to Teaching Reading 27

Table 3. Participants 63

Table 4. Common Themes and Research Correlations 112

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In North Carolina, The Excellent Public Schools Act was passed during the 2012 legislative session, with updates made in the 2013 session. This act changed several aspects of the public school curriculum, including creating elementary school reading programs, phasing out teacher tenure, and establishing a plan to pay teachers according to their students' performance. Part of the legislated act was Read to Achieve, which sought to improve literacy in grades K-3 and end social promotion. When students struggle to read, their school attendance and grades tend to decrease. These students become disengaged in school, and school becomes a place of frustration instead of a place of learning (Moats, 2001). The result of their educational frustration and poor school attendance can be correlated with high numbers of students who are retained or drop out of school (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Struggling readers can be defined as students who experience difficulties with fluency and comprehending text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017).

Drummond (2005) asserts that struggling readers experience difficulty catching up with their peers to become good readers and are at risk of failing in later grades. When students struggle to read and fail in later grades, reading achievement gaps remain unacceptably high. Sixty-six percent of North Carolina's fourth graders performed below proficient in reading on the national 2011 NAEP test. Students who were eligible for free/reduced lunch had an average score that was 28 points lower than students who were not eligible for free/reduced lunch. Based on North Carolina state standards, 39.3% of North Carolina's third graders are reading below grade level on the North Carolina End-of-Grade

(EOG) Test of Reading Comprehension—Grade 3. That percentage jumps to 53.5% for third graders receiving free/reduced lunch. A recent study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2010) found students who do not read at grade level by the end of third grade are four times more likely to not graduate from high school. The number rises for students living in poverty.

The increasing number of struggling readers in the elementary school setting consists of students who may be second language learners, students who have a learning disability, and/or students who have a limited vocabulary (Kamil, 2004). Resources and support throughout the school may be available; however, many students receive the majority of their reading instruction in the general classroom setting (Kamil, 2004). Teacher training in reading is critical as the strategies they learn can be applied to assisting learners how to read. The instructional approach to assist a struggling reader varies. The area of need could be across the five areas of reading: phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017).

Over the years, there has been a legislative focus in North Carolina on improving reading instruction in elementary schools: (a) policy changes to legislation requiring students to be proficient in reading prior to exiting third grade, and (b) bonus compensation for teachers whose teacher effectiveness data rank in the top 25% in the state (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2016). Researchers, educators, and policy makers now have a better understanding of the importance of children learning to read in the primary grades. Instruction in reading must become more explicit, rather than taught in isolation (Torgesen, 2002).

The United States government report titled, “A Guide to Education and No Child Left Behind” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004) stated,

> Reading opens doors to children who otherwise would struggle through school, lacking the skills to succeed and grow. Literacy is a vital skill for a successful student. Children who learn to read well early in life are more likely to be engaged in school and experience academic success. A deficiency in reading skills impacts achievement in all other areas of education. (p. 1)

This report also demonstrated America's devotion to the importance of reading through increased fiscal spending on reading in 2004 by "1.4 billion, including 1.1 billion for Reading First program, 132 million for Early Reading programs, and 100 million for Striving Readers program" (p. 20). These statistics reveal the U.S. government's dedication to the reading cause.

In addition to financial support of these principles, NCLB, now the Every Child Succeeds Act, demands "scientifically based research" (Sparks, 2016, p. 18) in every reading classroom. The National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) identified very specific instructional strategies that were scientifically proven to help students read best. An elementary principal would need to hold teachers accountable to this specific type of reading instruction. All educators and schools are also held to the challenging NCLB goal of each child reading at grade level by third grade (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Students who struggle to read in elementary grades become disadvantaged in adulthood. Employment, college acceptance, or completion of high school becomes limited (Lenters, 2006). The quality of life diminishes when young children do not learn how to read (National Council of Teachers of English, 2012). Minorities continue to fall behind on fourth-grade national standardized reading tests (Salinger, 2003). Experts estimate that nearly 40% of U.S. fourth graders do not achieve basic levels of reading proficiency. The number is

higher among low-income families, certain minority groups, and English language learners (Reading is Fundamental, 2015). No studies had been conducted at the site where this study took place related to teachers' perceptions and beliefs with teaching struggling readers. Knowing the teachers' perspective is critical to improving the quality of instruction for struggling readers; this topic must be explored through the lens of the classroom teacher.

Problem Statement

At the study site, the problem was to find why schools struggle to meet state proficiency goals in reading. Elementary principals and teachers have sought after best practices in literacy to improve student performance and build teacher capacity to raise the academic achievement gap between readers and struggling readers. Therefore, the researcher selected a qualitative case study in order to describe teachers' perceptions and beliefs and to understand their instructional strategies in assisting elementary students develop the necessary skills to become better readers. Understanding these perceptions and beliefs might assist administrators and teachers in establishing strong school-wide literacy programs, build teacher capacity in the area of literacy, and decrease the likelihood of academic failure for struggling readers who are at risk.

When children do not learn to read by the third grade, their remaining years in school are frustrating. Early elementary instruction is focused on students "learning to read," but after that it becomes "reading to learn" (Chall, 1983). Limited vocabulary, lack of reading fluency, and poor reading strategies compound the frustration of "reading to learn," which can lead to avoidance (Lyon, 2003) and decreased motivation (Ames, 1992; Strommen & Mates, 2004). Learning-to-read instruction diminishes over time in most educational systems and by third or fourth grade there is little direct reading instruction (McCray, Vaughn, &

Neal, 2001; Moats, 2001). Direct reading instruction is frequently the prescribed practice for struggling middle school readers who either lack specific skills or who are identified with a learning disability.

Struggling readers at the site of this study continue to score below grade level on summative and formative assessments given at the district and state level. For the purpose of this study the researcher defined struggling readers as students unable to fully participate in a curriculum that requires reading to learn skills, generally due to limitations in vocabulary, word attack skills, comprehension, and motivation to read (Curtis, 2002; Kamil, 2004). Teachers continue to find that students who struggle to read are easily frustrated and find a lack of motivation to engage in reading tasks, whether they be brief or extended (McCabe & Margolis, 2001).

Fifty percent of students living in inner cities and attending K-5 schools have difficulty reading at a basic level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Thus, the achievement gap between white and black students continues to widen (Thompkins, 2003). This widening gap calls for teachers to change their instructional practices by differentiating instruction (Gregory, 2013). Positive relationships have been found between effective teaching and student achievement (Stronge, 2007).

If elementary students are not prepared to read by middle school, it may be difficult for teachers to provide them with needed supports as the level of expectation for reading and understanding content on a more complex level increases. Reading skills at the middle school level are applied across all content areas; however, explicit reading instruction is not taught. For example, the North Carolina Common Core State Standards for sixth grade reading (a) cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences

drawn from the text, and (b) by the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 6-8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range (NCDPI, 2017). Based on the standards for students entering sixth grade, the expectation is students will already possess the reading foundational skills to scaffold text at a high degree. Therefore, the further assumption is that students can apply phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency skills needed in order to read and comprehend written text. When a student is taught by a teacher with a limited background in providing direct reading instruction, not certified in reading, or no experience teaching struggling readers with a learning disability, it is likely the student who struggles to read will not be successful (Carey, 2004).

The scant research that has been conducted on teachers of struggling readers indicates that tiered and varied instructional strategies improve student engagement and motivation to read (Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, 2007). Teacher beliefs can either improve or muddle the challenges of teaching. Clark and Peterson's (1986) review of the literature on the way teachers think, plan, and make decisions concluded that teachers develop their own beliefs about pedagogical theories that do not always match the way they plan or practice instruction. With a classroom of diverse learners, a teacher must believe it is possible to teach all students and plan and deliver diversified instruction. If a teacher does not believe in their ability to provide the necessary instruction, the shifting of responsibility onto the student for not learning is not uncommon (Jordan & Stanovich, 2003). For teachers, particularly those with struggling readers, efficacy in their ability and knowledge to reach students is crucial (Moats, 1995).

North Carolina EOG and formal assessment scores led to the reason for this study. The researcher selected a qualitative case study to describe teachers' experiences, perceptions, and beliefs and to discover their instructional strategies to help struggling readers understand and discover meaning from text they read. Understanding these teachers' experiences may help administrators and policymakers know what effective supports are necessary to aid in meeting the needs of struggling readers.

Stronge (2007) states in *Qualities of Effective Teachers* that teachers can have long-lasting effects on their students. Teachers impact how students learn, what they learn, how they learn, and the ways they interact with one another (Stronge, 2007). Cruickshank and Haefele (2001) suggest that good teachers have been called ideal, analytical, dutiful, competent, expert, reflective, satisfying diversity-responsive, and respected. In this study, the researcher will identify teacher responsibilities and behaviors that make them effective.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative case study was designed to understand the experiences, perceptions, and beliefs of elementary school teachers who teach struggling readers. The nature of this study is interpretive. One-to-one interviews, within a natural setting, will be conducted of eight elementary school teachers who will share their experiences with teaching struggling readers. The researcher will (a) describe elementary school teachers' perceptions and beliefs about their role as providers of reading instruction, (b) describe what their perceptions and beliefs are about providing reading instruction to struggling readers, and (c) describe their preconceived notions about the teaching of reading instruction.

The Department of Public Instruction has identified the study sites as a focus school. A "focus school" is a Title I school in the State that, based on the most recent data available,

is contributing to the achievement gap in the State. The total number of focus schools in a State must equal at least 10 percent of the Title I schools in the State. A focus school is a school that has the largest within-school gaps between the highest-achieving subgroup or subgroups and the lowest-achieving subgroup or subgroups (NCDPI, 2015).

The findings of this study may provide further research for teachers to provide better support for struggling readers. Furthermore, the findings may assist reading teachers at the study site and in the school district to better identify instructional strategies that work for struggling readers. These findings can assist teachers in better supporting reading instruction and assist with defining a framework for ongoing professional development. Reading programs and interventions could be better designed for school districts to utilize with struggling readers, thus increasing their motivation and engagement with reading.

Research Questions

1. What are elementary schools' reading teachers' perceptions and beliefs about their role as providers of reading instruction?
2. What are elementary schools' reading teachers' perceptions and beliefs about providing reading instruction to struggling readers?
3. What preconceived notions do elementary school teachers have about reading instruction?

Significance of the Study

Identifying strategies teachers can use with struggling readers is important to assist educators with providing high quality reading instruction for their struggling readers. Educators need a multi-layered and coordinated approach that offers high-quality instruction in a variety of forms to serve children at their independent level. Research indicates that 90–

95% of children with reading difficulty can overcome their difficulties if they receive appropriate interventions in the early grades (The Special Edge, 2000).

Direct reading instruction is an approach to teaching reading, but not an approach to maximizing results, as would be obtained with a balanced literacy approach (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017). In a classroom of diverse learners, teachers must believe in their students' ability to learn. If a teacher does not believe in their own ability to provide necessary instruction, then students become responsible for their own learning (Jordan & Standovich, 2003).

Cunningham and Allington (2003) indicate that, "Classroom teachers are the most important factor in the success or failure of at-risk children in our schools" (p. 125). However, very rarely are the thoughts, ideas, opinions, and perceptions of the classroom teachers' experience of teaching captured (Evans, 2002). Understanding their insight and perceptions will help other educators make informed decisions about instructional practices that will impact the education students receive in the classroom. Learning these teachers' best practices would help other teachers be equipped to develop stronger readers in their classrooms.

This case study could support teachers of reading who teach in northeastern North Carolina increase test scores. In the northeastern part of the state, reading scores are significantly lower than other regions across the state of North Carolina. Many of the areas are rural and receive less funding per pupil than wealthier school districts located in the Piedmont and western part of the state. The North Carolina legislature set aside $10 million to award to third-grade teachers who score in the top 25% for student growth in reading. The bonus is designed to reward teachers who successfully prepare students with a strong

foundation in reading (*Charlotte Observer*, 2017). This study may help teachers become more effective in the classroom and competitively increase their earning potential.

Fountas and Pinnell (2017) suggest three keys to promoting student success in reading: (a) expert teaching; (b) good books; and (d) good instructional design. This is achieved through quality professional development for teachers. The study results may help teachers and administrators focus on these key areas and improve teacher practice and district reading programs.

The objective for this present study was to determine methods and practices teachers use to teach struggling readers, challenges they face when providing such instruction to students, and their perceptions and beliefs about reading instruction and struggling readers.

To improve student academic achievement, instructional leaders such as teachers, administrators, and reading coaches must be capable of providing quality instruction. They must also know how their own beliefs, notions, and dispositions impact the instruction students receive. This case study will provide valuable insights to the school districts for the selection and hiring of teachers and improving instructional reading practices across elementary schools.

Overview of Approach

Qualitative research methods are best suited for this research, which use an interpretivist paradigm that seeks to understand and provide insights into the beliefs and realities of a purposefully selected group of elementary teachers who provide reading instruction to struggling readers (Glesne, 2010; Yin, 2014). The research from this study will shape personal and professional beliefs of teachers who provide reading instruction to struggling readers; therefore; this current study will attempt to determine the beliefs and

meaning teachers attach to their roles as teachers of struggling elementary school students in reading instruction.

Furthermore, qualitative research allows for multiple views of the same reality and that these realities are socially constructed. Qualitative studies are designed to acknowledge the range of realities participants will bring to the research and the factors that motivate or constrain them (Patton, 2015). The participants in qualitative studies were encouraged to freely express opinions and ideas that may exist individually or shared by a community (Morgan, 1997).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight reading teachers using open-ended interview questions. Themes were developed using qualitative case study analysis through coding of the interview transcripts.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter, the following topics are reviewed in relation to teachers of struggling readers and their students: (a) characteristics of struggling readers, (b) assessment of struggling readers, (c) characteristics of effective teachers of struggling readers, (d) teachers' beliefs and roles, (e) approaches to reading instruction, (f) professional development, and (g) student motivation. A teacher of reading is a teacher who teaches reading as an interactive process that occurs between the reader and the text, resulting in comprehension. The text presents letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs that encode meaning. The reader uses knowledge, skills, and strategies to determine what that meaning is (National Capital Language Resource Center, 2017).

In the state where this study was conducted, fourth-grade students scored below the national average in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests (NAEP, 2015). Students who struggle with early reading skills have difficulty catching up with good readers (Drummond, 2005; Stein et al., 2008). These students may be at a disadvantage in adulthood; they may be unable to graduate from high school, enter college, or find jobs that support them (Lenters, 2006). Estimates indicate that at least 40% of fourth-grade students fall below the national average on standardized reading tests (Salinger, 2003). Minority and impoverished students are among the highest populations who are struggling readers (Rand Corporation, 2007; Thompkins, 2003).

Schools and teachers need to close the achievement gap between struggling and non-struggling readers (Ryan, 2008). Blair, Rupley, and Nichols (2007) state that teachers who were viewed as exemplary instructors provided the same literacy materials and activities to

struggling readers that they provided to non-struggling readers, using explicit and comprehensive instructional approaches. Gaskins (2005) observed that struggling readers' instructional needs are supported when learning is dependent upon student motivation and learning is intensified by immediate feedback and accountability. Since the inception of the NCLB Act of 2002, teachers, administrators, and school districts have been concerned with identifying the best practices to close the academic achievement gap between struggling readers and non-struggling readers (Cunningham & Allington, 2003; Strickland, Ganske, & Monroe, 2002; Thompkins, 2003). The literature reveals that reading for struggling readers is problematic. One of the issues that led to this study was the increase in struggling readers and their performance on standardized testing as measured by EOG tests. The reasons for low EOG test scores in reading are not well documented. Therefore, the researcher will conduct this study in an effort to understand the experiences, perceptions and beliefs of elementary reading teachers who teach struggling readers using a qualitative research design.

Struggling Readers

Understanding the characteristics of struggling readers is important when teachers plan instruction to meet the needs of at-risk readers. Focused instruction helps teachers adapt their instruction as well as help the students identify these characteristics as being negative (Gaskins, 2005). Students who experience reading difficulties in the elementary grades continue to show little reading improvement as they move up in grades (Connor, Alberto, Compton, & O'Connor, 2014). Kindergarten students often enter school with deficient language exposure and experiences (Lenters, 2006). Students who are struggling readers are less likely to master grade level curriculum across all subjects (Ehri, Dryer, Flugman, & Gross, 2007; Lo, Wang, & Haskell, 2009).

Struggling readers are those students who have difficulty reading with fluency and comprehension at the basic level in all subject areas (Gaskins, 2005; Strickland et al., 2002). With regard to elementary students, NAEP (2007) asserts that fourth-grade students "should be able to make relatively obvious connections between the text and their own experiences and extend the ideas in the text by making simple inferences" (p. 1). Decoding and fluency skills should also be solidified by fourth grade. Although at this grade reading may become more challenging and sophisticated, readers should be able to rely on solid decoding and comprehension skills in order to make what they read more meaningful (Kelmon, 2016).

"At-risk elementary school readers are unable to pronounce rhyming words, learn numbers or the letters of the alphabet" (Drummond, 2005, p. 1). These deficiencies are clear indicators that a child may struggle with reading in later grades. "Struggling reading students also have poor intellectual capacity and language development that can cause reading difficulties" (Florio-Ruane, Raphael, Highfield, & Berne, 2004, p. 129). A number of characteristics are common to struggling readers as early as kindergarten such as a history of language impediments, limited English proficiency, nonstandard dialect of English spoken at home, attention deficit disorder (ADD), lack of motivation, and ineffective classroom practices (Strickland et al., 2002). These characteristics are precursors that may lead to further reading failure and frustration in older struggling readers.

When struggling readers reach fourth grade, they have knowledge and experience of reading failure (Salinger, 2003). These students come to dislike reading and feel it is too hard for them (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). Many struggling readers are "disengaged from reading and reading activities related to schooling" (Guthrie & Davis, 2003, p. 74). Students may

enjoy participating in science laboratories, but not reading the content in science books. Lenters (2006) notes the connection between adolescents' resistance to reading and their earlier struggles with reading acquisition.

In an effort to support struggling readers, teachers often use the same instructional methods taught in the primary grades, such as teaching decoding skills and using predictable text. These practices do not improve student achievement in reading comprehension (Salinger, 2003). In the meantime, older struggling readers are required to read content area books in math, science, and social studies with understanding (Hall, 2006; Vacca, 2006). These textbooks are written above their instructional level (Allington, 2002). "The reading instruction in middle school is often disconnected from content, making reading laborious" (Guthrie & Davis, 2003, p. 60).

Elementary teachers of struggling readers should work with students to determine what is happening with the student while he or she is trying to read text from content area subjects (Hall, 2006). Effective teachers understand the developmental changes these learners encounter and plan instruction that teaches them how to read and interact with content area text (Lacina & Watson, 2008).

Sound Reading Solutions (2017) cites the following reasons students struggle to read:

1. 98% of reading is auditory. Only 2% of reading is visual. Listening to a story and reading that same story will activate the exact same pathways in the brain. It's not where the sensory information comes from but where it ends up in the brain. Our eyes act more like ears when we read.
2. Listening skills (including phonemic awareness, auditory attention, auditory sequencing, and listening vocabulary are the most important factors in natural

reading. Teachers often notice that the child who has a hard time listening to a story also struggles to read.

3. The biggest barrier to comprehension is lack of fluency. Less than 15% of learning-disabled students have comprehension problems if they read accurately and read faster than 80 words a minute. It is like teaching a child how to steer a bike before they learn how to pedal.
4. English is the most difficult major language to listen and to read. For struggling readers, listening to English can be like listening to a foreign language you haven't quite mastered.
5. The main reason English is so difficult to speak, listen to and to read is because spoken English has an exceptional number of vowel sounds (phonemes). The ability to hear and identify individual sounds is what separates natural readers from struggling readers. Many weak readers struggle with spelling and most of their errors—not surprisingly—are with vowels. (paras. 1, 3–6)

Assessments to Determine Reading Levels of Struggling Readers

Reading teachers use assessments to determine the reading level of the students they teach. Students participate in assessments at the state, district, and school levels. At the state level, a number of tests are administered. Students take the North Carolina End of Grade test, which is a norm-referenced test (NCDPI, 2017).

Students in the third through eighth grades take the EOG Assessments. The EOG measures the students' knowledge and basic competence in reading, math, and science, as outlined in the North Carolina Common Core State Standards. Their outcomes are used to diagnose their reading strengths and weaknesses, as they relate to the standards used during

instruction (NCDPI, 2017). State and local assessment reports reveal in detail EOG content standards struggling readings do not know.

Students in kindergarten through third grade are monitored on their progress through the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). DIBELS is an assessment of short fluency measures used to monitor pre-reading and emergent reading skills. DIBELS is part of the Reading First Initiative, which originated from NCLB. DIBELS tests early literacy in the areas of phonological awareness, alphabetic principles, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency related to text (University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning, 2007). Kindergarteners are administered the Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) to assess, diagnose, and plan early intervention reading instruction that will help them catch up with their peers (NCDPI, 2017). Table 1 highlights various assessments and when they are administered to students.

Table 1

Elementary Reading Assessments

Name of Assessment	**Purpose**	**When Assessment is Administered**
DIBELS	Assess student reading levels	Beginning, Middle, and End of Year
End of Grade Test	Assess student proficiency in content standards	End of Year
NC Check Ins	Aid teachers in determining if students learned content standards taught	Beginning, Middle, and End of Year

District Reading Level Assessments

At the district level, struggling readers take benchmark tests that are part of the basal reader series adopted by the school district. The books contain researched-based skills with a

focus on the five competencies of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. Students in prekindergarten through fifth grade take the benchmark assessments that cover the skills and vocabulary aligned to the basal readers (Gaskins, 2005). These tests are given three times a year, in the fall, winter, and spring, to monitor student learning.

School Reading Level Assessments

At the school-wide level, teachers use the STAR Reading (STAR) and Accelerated Reader (AR) assessments to monitor at-risk readers' progress. Endorsed by the NAEP, STAR uses personalized practice tests to determine a student's appropriate reading level. Furthermore, STAR assessments personalize reading practice with four kinds of reading quizzes: reading practice, vocabulary, literacy skills, and textbook quizzes. Both tests are computer-generated to yield immediate results (Renaissance Learning, 2008). Additionally, teachers create tests to monitor specific learning goals of their students such as cloze tests, which are tests that teachers design with blanks to be filled in by the students to show if they are familiar with the content being tested (Thompkins, 2003). Struggling readers check out AR books at their independent reading level from their school libraries.

The books are read independently at home or at school. This gives struggling readers ongoing practice reading books independently (Hansen, 2009). After they have read the book, they take a comprehension test. The results from the test will determine if the teacher will move the struggling reader to a higher-level reading book or keep the child at the current level until independent reading gains are made (Bryant, 2008). However, Hansen (2009) posits this program is only successful in helping struggling readers improve reading skills if

the school administrators, teachers, parents, and media coordinator implement the AR program with fidelity.

Monitoring Student Progress

Effective teachers use progress monitoring to help identify the needs of underachieving readers. The desired outcome of progress monitoring is to identify underperforming students and to create effective programs for them (Safer & Fleischman, 2005). In response to the strict mandates of NCLB, progress monitoring has become increasingly important in our schools (Wallace, Espin, McMaster, & Deno, 2007). This scientifically based practice evaluates the effectiveness of instruction for individual students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Wallace et al., 2007). Teachers choose from a range of formal and informal assessments given frequently to ensure that reliable and valid information is given for a diverse population of students with varying learning abilities (Hasbrouck, 2006). The results inform teachers' decisions about which programs, strategies, and interventions are needed to move struggling readers toward stringent grade level standards with the support they need to become successful readers (Lose, 2007).

Teachers must use good professional judgment when selecting a measure for monitoring struggling readers, and selections should be influenced by the skills necessary to give students additional instruction or support (Blair et al., 2007). Progress monitoring assessments are adjusted according to grade level standards, objectives, and the information teachers wish to obtain (Lose, 2007). For example, teachers in kindergarten choose assessments that will provide data about a child's performance in letter recognition. The students' performance is then measured and serves as an indicator to identify students at risk for reading failure (Clarke & Whitney, 2009). After the students have been identified as

struggling readers, appropriate interventions are used in a comprehensive literacy program that offers ongoing support to lessen underachievement among at-risk readers.

Progress monitoring is necessary for teachers to ensure that all students become fluent readers and writers (Hasbrouck, 2006). Early and frequent monitoring can help prevent reading difficulties significantly (Hasbrouck, 2006). Effective teachers incorporate progress monitoring daily and use the outcomes to guide their reading instruction for individual students and the entire class (Strickland et al., 2002). Teachers can (a) monitor students as they read and write; (b) take anecdotal notes of literacy events, such as oral language fluency and word recognition skills; (c) hold regular conferences with students; and (d) collect students' work samples (Thompkins, 2003).

Assessments for struggling readers on the state, district, and school levels are appropriate for each grade level and ability (NRP, 2000). The assessment results produce analyses of struggling readers' strengths and weaknesses in regular education and special education. These assessment approaches monitor student progress by using teacher observations, anecdotal records, student conferences, and work samples (Renaissance Learning, 2008). Performance discrepancies are noted when student progress is monitored daily (Lose, 2007), and teachers need to prioritize and plan targeted instruction for every learner. Progress monitoring can be useful in reading instruction when teachers analyze and disseminate data from progress monitoring (Blair et al., 2007).

Progress monitoring is useful to elementary reading teachers who are interested in tracking students' progress in reading at specific intervals during a regular school year. Progress monitoring is also useful to elementary teachers of struggling readers in order to monitor their students' daily reading needs. Additional research is needed on how elementary

teachers of struggling readers articulate how they use progress monitoring to support and help struggling readers.

Characteristics Necessary for Effective Teachers of Struggling Readers

Effective reading teachers are important to successful classroom reading programs (Blair et al., 2007). Teachers are cognizant of the current reading research on evidence-based instruction and develop their instruction based on recommendations from the research findings (Blair et al., 2007; Duffy, 2003; Taylor, 2007). Teacher effectiveness is directly related to their knowledge about the subject matter that they teach (Darling-Hammond, 2000). When teachers are aware of the factors that place students at risk for failure, they can better support them in reading instruction (Strickland et al., 2002).

In primary reading grades, effective reading teachers should know about the developmental stages of the children they teach (Burns & Stechuk, 2003). Primary reading teachers use reading instruction to teach phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary skills that include the characteristics and uses of language. Ongoing assessments and prekindergarten and kindergarten standards drive these lessons (Blair et al., 2007; Burns & Stechuk, 2003). Primary-grade teachers spend much instructional time teaching and engaging in authentic literacy activities. These include singing songs, reading big books, and working with words (Gomez, Johnson, & Gisladottir, 2007). In these classrooms, the students are immersed in meaningful literacy tasks without displaying disruptive or restless behaviors. Students appear to enjoy what they are doing at a level at which they can understand (Bohn, Roehrig, & Pressley, 2004).

Effective teachers of struggling readers use professional development knowledge to provide high-quality instruction that includes thoughtful lessons to fit the learners' needs and

build upon their strengths. Engaging texts about literature, skills taught in context, and ongoing assessments are included in their instructional practices (Taylor, Anderson, Au, & Raphael, 2000). "Improving the achievement of poor readers and cultivating higher order thinking skills of all students requires thoughtfully adaptive teachers" (Duffy, 2003, p. 4). Effective reading teachers also establish definitive routines and procedures at the beginning of the school year (Bohn et al., 2004; Duffy, 2003). Teachers model the expected behaviors until students are able to self-monitor in academics and behavior (Bohn et al., 2004). The most effective teachers are masterful classroom managers (Metsala et al., 1997). When students are engaged in instruction and high expectations are maintained, good student behavior is often the result (Blair et al., 2007).

Effective teachers of reading are highly skilled in understanding of good teaching and instructional strategies. The expert instruction students receive influences their reading progress (Blair et al., 2007). Students become better readers when teachers possess these characteristics and are highly qualified and certified in content (Burns & Stechuk, 2003; Duffy, 2003). Thus, students who are taught in effective classrooms are able to connect instruction to real-life reading situations and become lifelong readers (Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2007). Research reveals a need for elementary teachers of struggling readers to share their perceptions and beliefs of what factors are needed to become effective teachers of elementary struggling readers.

Teachers' Beliefs about Literacy Instruction

Teachers make decisions based upon their beliefs and pre-service preparation. These decisions directly affect student outcomes and classroom environments (Brownell & Pajares, 1996; Graham & Pajares, 1997). Several studies indicate the relationship between teachers'

beliefs and reading instruction. Powers, Zippay, and Butler (2006) conducted a case study designed to examine the link between teachers' beliefs and instructional practices with struggling readers. Four teachers took part in a university clinical experience to fulfill their graduation requirements. Of the four, two taught elementary school, one was an elementary resource teacher, and the fourth taught high school-aged students in an alternative educational environment. The researchers collected data from open-ended interviews, observations, surveys, and reflective journals during this year-long study. Powers et al. (2006) used open-ended questions during interview sessions to obtain an accurate account of each participant's beliefs and reached several important conclusions. First, what teachers believed did not align with what they practiced in the classroom. For example, one teacher believed in the district's framework to teaching reading, yet failed to demonstrate it when she was observed. Teacher two believed in using the district's reading framework, which met the needs of all learners except her struggling readers. Teachers use AR and STAR as a quick means of assessing all students due to time constraints preventing them from testing each of the students authentically. Third, the last two teachers easily combined their beliefs and practices. Powers et al. (2006) took the initiative to explore methods that were not part of their district's framework in order to adjust their teaching strategies. These teachers believed they were the decisionmakers in their classrooms and restrictions and time constraints would not impede their level of reading instruction. However, for the purpose of this current study, eight third- through fifth-grade reading teachers will be interviewed to share their experiences working with struggling readers at a local school site.

In an exploratory qualitative study, Howerton (2006) examined how middle school language arts teachers' beliefs and values influenced their willingness to teach reading.

Howerton (2006) focused on teachers' perceptions of their roles in teaching struggling middle school readers. Howerton (2006) used semi-structured interviews and included 26 middle school language arts teachers from four different schools in the same district. Findings showed that the teachers believed their roles and responsibilities were that of a language arts teacher and not a reading teacher. For example, they believed that by the time a student reaches middle school, they should already know how to read. Second, they believed they lacked the skills to teach reading. Teachers perceived teaching content language arts skills was teaching reading. Teachers could not distinguish between the two subject areas. Last, the teachers' beliefs about professional development courses on book clubs and differentiated instruction did not help them teach struggling readers in the classroom (Howerton, 2006). Although Howerton (2006) examined middle school language teachers, for this research, a case study methodology is appropriate to examine elementary reading teachers' experiences, perceptions and beliefs in teaching struggling readers.

According to Gomez et al. (2007), who examined how teachers from three elementary schools engaged in conversations to reform their literacy instruction and the literacy learning of disadvantaged primary-grade students, teachers believed students' low achievement was caused by their inability to grasp what was being taught, rather than teaching in a manner where children can learn how to read. This exploratory study included two faculty members from a local university, 10 elementary teachers, and two reading specialists. The study was situated in a Midwestern city in the United States (Gomez et al., 2007). The researchers used interviews, information from group discussions, student work samples, and transcribed audio-recorded interviews to collect data. The teachers and their administrators believed that reading was a quantifiable and measurable skill. Other findings indicated that the

instructional model chosen to instruct at-risk students and to measure their progress did not match their learning needs. “Whereas some students’ achievement was quantified by their test scores and their ability to read leveled books, other students showed no visible gains and were recommended for special education” (Gomez et al., 2007, p. 46). Therefore, the implication of this study indicates the importance of teachers adjusting their beliefs and teaching practices that includes increased achievement for all students. Gomez et al. (2007) conducted an exploratory study and interviewed four reading teachers about their beliefs about teaching reading. The teachers shared three common themes. First, “learning to read is an independent process of developing a self-extended system of cueing for approaching text” (p. 38). Second, “students require specific methods for decoding text, such as the teacher pointing at the text to be read” (p. 39). Third, “reading should make sense and readers should have a repertoire of self-questioning strategies for comprehending texts” (p. 39). Gomez et al. (2007) did not study teachers’ beliefs about struggling readers and their instructional methodologies that may help struggling readers. These scholars found that reading teachers’ beliefs about literacy instruction and struggling readers affect their practice of teaching reading. Teachers’ beliefs also affect their classroom environments, especially when their struggling reader students are from diverse backgrounds (Love & Kruger, 2005). This information is important in teachers’ and administrators’ design of curricula and use of instructional strategies to help poor readers. The literature review did not uncover research on the experiences of elementary reading teachers of struggling readers in urban settings where students receive free or reduced lunches.

Approaches to Teaching Reading

Reading instruction is the focal point of educational systems (Gambrell et al., 2007). The increased regulations from the NCLB bring insurmountable pressures to teachers to raise students' achievement on standardized reading tests in North Carolina (WRAL, 2011). School districts are not viewed positively in the news media if their students don't make adequate progress on high-stakes reading tests (Gambrell et al., 2007). In order to meet the demands of NCLB, districts spend a lot of money adopting reading programs and curriculums that promise to raise student achievement (Allington, 2002). These programs are scripted and have a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching reading (Allington, 2002; Cummins, 2007; Thompkins, 2003), thus causing struggling readers to learn instruction they have difficulty understanding (Taylor et al., 2000). Oftentimes, these underachieving students are taught low-level skills in classrooms that offer little opportunity to engage in higher-level reading inquiry (Cummins, 2007; Patterson & Manning, 2008).

Struggling readers do not do well on the EOG assessments in North Carolina. Struggling readers rely on teachers' professional knowledge to make instructional decisions based upon their individual needs (Duffy, 2003). According to Gaskins (2005), these students' instruction is enhanced when reading teachers use differentiated instruction that is congruent with their learning needs. Effective teachers use a range of teaching strategies to match the needs of their students (Allington, 2002; Duffy, 2003). Their knowledge of content allows them to implement different methods, practices, and strategies to match individual learners' needs (Gambrell et al., 2007). These teachers do not base their decision-making on students' weaknesses, but rather on their strengths and abilities (Ehri et al., 2007).

Teachers face a difficult task when teaching reading, which is a complex process (Gambrell et al., 2007; Sloat, Beswick, & Willms, 2007). Sloat et al. (2007) state, "Complexity is reflected in the range of philosophies, pedagogies, curricula, and programs available to guide elementary instruction" (p. 523). Taylor et al. (2000) believe the intricate details of teaching reading are more involved than students receiving instruction from teachers; it involves more factors such as the teacher's ability to provide a broad range of teaching strategies and instructional methods to meet the needs of all learners. In response to meeting the needs of all learners, teachers use a variety of approaches to teach reading. Several major strategies have been pinpointed: (a) an understanding of basic elements of effective reading instruction, (b) differentiated instruction, (c) small group instruction, (d) appropriate text selection, (e) independent reading, and (f) monitoring of student progress. Table 2 highlights the different approaches to teaching students how to read.

Table 2

Approaches to Teaching Reading

Approach	Description
Phonics	A method of teaching people to read by correlating sounds with letters or groups of letters in an alphabetic writing system.
Sight based	Words that appear with enough frequency in a child's "diet" of reading and writing that they know them by sight.
Language experience	Students dictate a story based on an experience they have had. The teacher writes the dictated story. Through discussion, the teacher can help students organize and reflect on their experiences.
Literature based	Teaching reading in which literary selections are the major instructional materials. Reading materials can be tailored to a student's interests and needs. Models: core literature, text sets, and thematic units.
Balanced approach	The components of a 'balanced literacy' approach are as follows: The read aloud, guided reading, shared reading, interactive writing, shared writing, Reading Workshop, Writing Workshop and Word study.

In Wanzek, Wexler, Vaughn, and Ciullo's (2010) study on reading interventions for struggling readers, treatment groups and single groups of fourth- through ninth-grade students were designed to identify strategies that were effective in aiding struggling readers and readers with disabilities in understanding text. The studies outcome yielded favorable results in the area of vocabulary and comprehension and less in focusing on fluency and word study. Explicit instruction in comprehension supported students in understanding text and explicit vocabulary instruction aided students in understanding words. The study concluded for "upper elementary students, comprehension practices that provided opportunities for students to preview text and connect with their knowledge, use self-questioning and self-regulating practices while reading, and summarize what they are learning were associated with moderate to high outcomes" (p. 908).

Scientifically Based Reading Instruction

According to the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL, 2005), the federal government supports scientifically based research on the NCLB Act of 2002 and in the Reading First programs. "Scientifically-based instruction encourages ongoing use of instructional methods that have been proven effective" (NIFL, 2005, p. 2). According to Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001), "prior to 1970, educators were unfamiliar with the scientific research and relating to teaching as a *science*" (p. 6). Today, "educators use evidence-based practices to guide their decisions in the creation of reading instruction that meets the need of individual children" (Torgesen et al., 2007, p. 1). The use of research evidence is a sounder basis for reading instruction than reliance on philosophies, issues, or politics in the ongoing debate of what methods constitute the best practices for teaching reading (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001;

Wren, 2001). According to Lyon (2000), even early reading instruction can be positively influenced by scientific research.

To further emphasize the importance of improving reading instruction, Congress commissioned the NRP (2000) to study this issue to help parents, teachers, and policymakers select important skills and strategies essential to reading achievement. The NRP panel reviewed more than 100,000 studies and concluded that effective reading instruction comprises five components of reading. These panel studies concur with findings of other studies as summarized here: (a) "Phonemic awareness is the ability to identify, understand, and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in the spoken language. Phonemic awareness provides a foundation for children to learn how to read" printed text when they are aware of how the sounds work in words (NRP, 2000 p. 1); (b) Phonics instruction focuses on teaching early learners the relationship between written letters (graphemes) and individual sounds (phonemes). The goal is to teach children relationships between reading and writing (NIFL, 2005; NRP, 2000; Thompkins, 2003); (c) Fluency is the ability to read oral text quickly, accurately, and with expression (NIFL, 2005; NRP, 2000; Salinger, 2003; Thompkins, 2003); fluent readers' mental processes make meaning out of what they are reading (NRP, 2000; Strickland et al., 2002; Thompkins, 2003); (d) Vocabulary development is achieved when students are engaged in a variety of activities on a continuum (NRP, 2000; Thompkins, 2003); strategic planning engages learners in direct and indirect instruction, giving children a wide range of reading opportunities (Torgesen et al., 2007); and (e) Reading comprehension is a process in which students' purposeful thinking allows them to make meaning while they are reading (NRP, 2000; Salinger, 2003).

Teachers use these components of reading to plan instruction that includes materials that students enjoy reading on their own fluently and with understanding (Carbo, 2008). However, Marzano et al. (2001) pointed out that students who struggle with reading need more direct explicit instruction, which is validated through research in science. However, scientific research has been met with opposition from other researchers who argue that the methods are ineffective for all learners. For example, Pressley (2001) disputed the NRP report by stating that "the report omitted important scientifically-validated findings pertaining to instruction, such as home schooling reading instruction, effects of educational television, resources such as community tutoring, and school reform" (p. 2). Pressley (2001) concluded that the NRP report was too narrow and did not recognize that effective literacy instruction is a balance and blending of skills teaching and holistic literature and writing experiences.

In spite of such criticism, the NRP (2000) report on teaching early literacy skills emphasized several important and basic aspects of literacy. The report maintained that phonemic awareness instruction was effective in developing emergent reading and spelling skills. Systematic phonics instruction increased reading, spelling, and comprehension skills. Repeated reading improved oral reading fluency, and exposure to a wide range of literature improved vocabulary. Comprehension strategies increased text comprehension, which can influence reading. Struggling readers benefit from differentiated and small group instruction where these skills can be taught more explicitly and directly.

Differentiated Reading Instruction

Effective teachers use differentiated reading instruction to meet the needs of struggling readers. The number of struggling readers, who have various learning needs and

learning styles, has increased in classrooms (Strickland et al., 2002). Struggling readers come from many different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Cummins, 2007; Levy, 2008). Their levels of proficient reading awareness vary from student to student (Strickland et al., 2002; Torgesen, 2004). Current legislation requires students with specific learning disabilities to be mainstreamed into regular education classes (Drummond, 2005; Vaughn, Hughes, Moody, & Elbaum, 2001). These students need instruction that is assessment driven, engaging, and saturated with a wide range of meaningful literacy tasks that cultivate reading achievement (Walker, 2008).

Additionally, struggling readers need competent teachers who are knowledgeable of reading instruction and strong in their ability to provide differentiated instruction that meets their individual learning needs (Allington, 2005). Drummond (2005) posited, "The success of struggling readers rely on strong teachers who have an adept understanding of reading theory and practice" (p. 2).

In response to the continual pressures to raise student test scores, increase student achievement, and adhere to strict standards and federal regulations, effective teachers adjust their instruction to meet the wide range of individual needs of their students (Carbo, 2008; Taylor et al., 2000). Tomlinson (2000) defined differentiation as modifying instruction to respond to individual needs. In a differentiated classroom, teachers are concerned with three curricular components:

> (1) content—what the student needs to learn or how the student will get access to the information; (2) process—activities in which the student engages in order to make sense of or master the content; (3) products—culminating projects that ask the student

> to rehearse, apply, and extend what he or she has learned in a unit; and (4) learning environment—the way the classroom works and feels. (p. 2)

The culture in differentiated classrooms promotes student achievement at every level in order for students to thrive and make measurable reading gains (Key, 2008). However, limited research has been conducted with reading teachers to understand their instructional methodologies that include modifying reading instruction, which may help struggling readers.

Misconceptions continue to exist about the nature of differentiated instruction. It is not a single strategy but a comprehensive instructional approach that includes a plethora of strategies and teacher flexibility that support struggling readers (Access Center, 2004). The instruction struggling readers receive is not an easier version of work given to more capable readers—they are taught the same curriculum and standards that match their individualized level of reading proficiency (Allington, 2006).

Furthermore, differentiated instruction is not one-on-one tutoring that is often used in the Reading Recovery program. The Reading Recovery program targets at-risk students who were unsuccessful in reading during their first year in school. They receive intensive instruction with a Reading Recovery-trained teacher (Clay, 2000). According to Moats (2000), the struggling readers in the Reading Recovery program show few gains and actually lose what they had previously gained without subsequent systematic instruction.

Differentiated instruction is not a quick-fix method to end problems associated with reading difficulties (Gaskins, 2005). It is detailed and extends beyond planning different assignments for students (Leipzig, 2000). When used properly, differentiated instruction combines with ongoing teacher assessments, individualized classroom reading programs,

strategic instructional methods, and parental involvement to effectively meet the needs of their struggling readers (Access Center, 2004; Tomlinson, 2000; Walker, 2008). Elementary reading teachers often use differentiated instruction during small group instruction.

Small Group Reading Instruction

Elementary reading teachers use small group instruction to provide high quality instruction and to teach reading strategies to students who struggle in reading, even though their self-efficacy in teaching reading is not positive. This is a huge responsibility that requires exemplary instruction that results in proficient reading outcomes for all learners (Croninger & Valli, 2009). Raising test scores and teaching the district's reading curriculum and standards is challenging (Valencia & Buly, 2004). Consequently, North Carolina's EOG reading test results and the NAEP reports continue to reflect a learning gap between poor readers, minorities, children with specific learning disabilities, children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and good readers (Hall, 2006). Teale, Paciga, and Hoffman (2007) defined the literacy achievement gap as being a "disparity in academic performance between different groups" (p. 344).

In response to continued reading failure, elementary reading teachers rely on multiple instructional resources and methods to teach high quality reading instruction and to improve student achievement (Farstrup, 2007). Unfortunately, the method preferred by elementary teachers is whole-group instruction. They believe whole-group instruction facilitates classroom management (Vaughn et al., 2001). Allington (2006) purported that struggling readers do not benefit from whole-group instruction; instead, they need explicit individualized instruction in smaller groups. Strickland et al. (2002) agreed that effective teachers support struggling readers by planning small group instruction targeted to their

learning abilities (Strickland et al., 2002). To increase the effectiveness of small-group instruction, students with similar needs should be grouped together (Allington, 2006; Torgesen, 2004). This approach to instruction ensures that all learners will have their needs met with one lesson (Allington, 2006).

Effective teachers use small group instruction to teach reading strategies and to observe and monitor students' learning individually (Strickland et al., 2002). The instruction is more intense to support poor readers while they gain skills needed to improve reading comprehension (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). Students in these groups share what they know with other students and receive immediate feedback from the teachers (Vaughn et al., 2001). Litt (2007) reported using small group instruction to model learning, engage students in conversation about the text, and to teach strategic reading skills. However, Foorman and Torgesen (2001) suggested that further research should be conducted to determine if the number of students in the group influences the effectiveness of reading instruction. However, at the study site, no research has been conducted with reading teachers to understand their instructional methodologies that include small group instruction that may help struggling readers.

Struggling readers benefit from small group instruction when teachers are confident they can provide instruction that is congruent with their learning needs (Duffy, 2003). According to Allington (2006), expert instruction raises student reading achievement. Finally, Vaughn et al. (2001) suggest that many benefits of small group instruction have been identified by researchers such as maximized instruction and instruction that matches the students' academic performance level. Yet, teachers feel they need more professional development in planning and managing small group instruction effectively due to the

complexity of defining meaningful reading instruction and teaching reading. Bandura (1994) posited that self-efficacy is key to engaging in difficult tasks. People who doubt their abilities to teach reading do so with weak commitments and failure to reach high goals for their students. When teachers move beyond their weaknesses and participate in ongoing professional development, they are able to provide appropriate instruction for struggling readers (Richards, 2001).

Facilitating Reading Instruction

Another instructional strategy is for teachers to support struggling readers by providing appropriate materials for their ability levels (Allington, 2006; Rog & Kropp, 2001). If struggling readers do not understand and enjoy what they are reading, they will not increase the amount of reading needed to enhance comprehension (Allington, 2006; Blair et al., 2007; Carbo, 2008). Rog and Kropp (2001) reported a direct correlation between student understanding and books that are engaging and appeal to the student's interest level. They become motivated to read often and progress in grade level texts (Carbo, 2008; Cunningham, 2005). Struggling readers can choose books that are too difficult for them to read (Allington, 2002); therefore, teachers support students by helping them select books that match their reading level (Allington, 2006; Florio-Ruane et al., 2004). Thompkins (2003) suggests the following guidelines for teachers to determine students' reading levels with books: (1) independent books should be read with 95%-100% accuracy in word recognition and 90-100% in comprehension, (2) instructional books are read with 90-94% accuracy in word recognition and 75-89% accuracy in comprehension, (3) frustration level books are read with less than 90% accuracy in word recognition and less than 75% accuracy in comprehension.

As struggling readers progress through higher grade levels, the materials they are required to read with fluency and understanding become more difficult. Students in fourth grade through high school are expected to interact with content area text with ease and to engage in higher-level thinking activities (Allington, 2002; Salinger, 2003). Unfortunately, a lack of quality early reading intervention in primary grades leaves some students unprepared to read grade-level text in later grades (Sloat et al., 2007; Torgesen, 2004). These children begin to experience a decline in reading knowledge when they get to fourth grade (Florio-Ruane et al., 2004). Blair et al. (2007) posit effective teachers use strategic reading interventions in comprehension skills and vocabulary to help these students experience success. As stated, appropriate level reading books are important to engage students in reading for pleasure (Carbo, 2008). However, as Allington (2002) and Lacina and Watson (2008) stated, content area books need to match struggling readers' needs as well as pleasure books.

Independent Reading

Effective teachers support struggling readers by providing daily independent reading time. Clark and Rumbold (2006) defined independent reading as reading for pleasure voluntarily or as an assigned task with high interest texts. This critical component of reading instruction fosters reading development and student engagement (Carbo, 2008; Cunningham, 2005). According to Cunningham (2005), students read more when they enjoy what they are reading. Carbo (2008) purported when students enjoy what they are reading, they move from brain-based reading into a deeper emotional memory, which improves reading more rapidly.

Strickland et al. (2002) noted that independent reading is a mode that reflects real-life reading situations. Students are encouraged to choose from a wide range of

51 easily accessible reading materials they are interested in reading (Rog & Kropp, 2001). To influence at-risk readers' choices, teachers model how to select the right book and apply reading skills (Clark & Rumbold, 2006). Additionally, Thompkins (2003) pointed out that teachers become more effective when they understand the purpose of independent reading. The purposes include opportunities created for students to practice previously learned reading skills and strategies, the chance to interact with high interest literature, and to develop a love for reading to become lifelong readers.

In summary, effective teachers use a range of instructional strategies to support struggling readers. Teachers use past and present research-based pedagogy to increase students' achievement with strategies proven to support struggling readers at all grade levels. Teachers use their professional judgment to make decisions on which instructional strategies to use that are most effective with their students. Teachers plan small group instruction to differentiate instruction for at-risk learners. Teachers also give students opportunities to practice reading independently by providing a variety of appropriate grade-level reading materials.

Professional Development

Professional development for elementary teachers in reading education provides a practical means for them to develop positive behaviors and attitudes toward reading. Through professional development, teachers can identify the specific skills needed to teach reading proficiently at the elementary school level. Reading instruction has many complex elements, such as assessment of different students' skills and abilities, understanding of students' difficulties, and design of an individualized reading program.

Thus, effective reading instruction requires specific professional development that targets the skill and knowledge related to specific teaching and learning objectives (Strickland, Kamil, Walberg, & Manning, 2003). Since student comprehension is the focus, teachers must develop multiple skills and strategies that meet the needs of individual learners.

Professional development must contain several essential elements. It must be research-based, thoughtfully planned and ongoing, included in teacher contracts, and collaborative with other teachers and universities. In addition, professional development must be aligned with the needs of the students, teachers, parents, and the community; planned to encourage teachers to recognize individual student differences, strengths, and weaknesses; and focused so that teachers adjust their instruction accordingly (Strickland et al., 2003). Professional development may take place through informal and formal means. Informal methods include afterschool seminars, teachers' meetings to share ideas, professional journals, and books (Van Horn, 2003). Formal methods include preservice courses, internships in graduate schools of education, and literacy coaches (Theriot & Tice, 2009). Also, educational researchers provide formal professional learning to teachers and preservice teachers who participate in their studies (Duffy & Atkinson, 2001). Guskey (2002) noted teachers are often required to take a certain number of these in-service courses to remain current with the most advanced research-based instructional practices and may earn credits or certificates. However, at the study site, no research has been conducted with reading teachers to understand their instructional methodologies based on their professional development courses in order to help struggling readers.

The teacher learning process is complicated. Teachers who engage in quality professional development receive support in learning advanced skills and strategies to improve student achievement (Ganser, 2000). Having a good foundation from knowledgeable teaching colleges and universities is necessary to prepare teachers to merge theory and practice in daily teaching routines (Moats, 1999). Additionally, it is important for teaching institutions and schools to form ongoing partnerships that provide effective professional development (Ganser, 2000; Kiriakidis, 2010). According to Jehlen (2002), "Such partnerships are necessary to provide practical experience to preservice teachers before they become a classroom teacher" (p. 29). In an effort to respond to current mandates of NCLB, policymakers, school districts, administrators, and educators recognize the importance of professional development and teacher learning (Fitzharris, Jones, & Crawford, 2008; Gasner, 2000).

Teachers who engage in professional development do so with the learning needs of their students in mind (Kiriakidis, 2010; Lambert et al., 2002). When teachers increase their knowledge base, the knowledge of the students they teach is increased as well. With professional development, in which the teacher is also a learner and is improving teaching strategies, student achievement improves (Barth, 2001; Kiriakidis, 2010; Strickland et al., 2002). As noted by Mandel Morrow (2003), teachers who participate in ongoing professional development increase the success rate of their students' learning outcomes. When teachers come together to exchange ideas and learn from each other, they share a bond that improves their teaching (Henkin, Harmon, Pate, & Moorman, 2009). On the other hand, "when teachers become dissatisfied with their ineffective instructional practices, they become motivated to do things differently" (Hord, 2004, p. 77). "Through professional development,

teachers reflect on their teaching practices and make adjustments in order to improve classroom instruction" (Mandel Morrow, 2003, p. 6). Subsequently, continuous professional development prepares teachers to become exemplary professionals who expand their knowledge to impact reading instruction (Mandel Morrow, 2003). Teachers also need extensive professional development in understanding how students with dyslexia learn to read. Dyslexia is defined as a disorder that involve difficulty in learning to read or interpret words, letters, and other symbols, but that do not affect general intelligence (Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity, 2017). Fifteen percent of the U.S. population is dyslexic; the brain is unable to link letters to sounds they make, which is important to be able to recognize words (Brown, 2014). Professional development in this area for teachers should aid them in using graphic organizers, visuals, lesson notes and mnemonic devices to help dyslexic students with the reading process (International Association of Dyslexia, 2017).

Effective Practices and Preparation to Improve Reading Instruction

Reading is an intricate subject to teach. Teachers must be knowledgeable about the content and understand the process of learning to read (Ippolito, Steele, & Samson, 2008). Duffy (2003) observed that good teachers are chronically needed to improve students' reading achievement, especially disadvantaged and at-risk students. Beginning teachers often lack the experiential knowledge to implement effective reading programs that improve reading instruction, despite graduate courses and preservice knowledge. According to Strickland et al. (2002), "It is the responsibility of teacher preparation schools to produce qualified teachers with a strong knowledge of subject content and deep pedagogical skills" (p. 11). Teacher preparation institutions often fail to prepare teachers in the complex knowledge of teaching and reading instruction. Preservice teachers enter the profession

generally lacking experience in connecting theory to practice (Dole & Osborn, 2003). This lack of proficiency teaching skills and pedagogy has often led to teacher frustration and teachers leaving the profession (Patterson & Manning, 2008). Mandel Morrow (2003) added, "It is the professor's responsibility to inform preservice teachers about professional organizations and effective professional development that support them and encourage them to continue their teaching programs" (p. 6).

Beginning teachers increase their chances of becoming effective teachers when they have knowledge of current trends in education and participate in district-level professional development programs (Dole & Osborn, 2003). Professional development programs are most beneficial to new teachers when they receive support in learning how to connect college learning experiences with the demands of real-life classroom teaching such as preparing lessons and instruction for diverse learners (Burns & Stechuk, 2003). However, it takes time for teachers to change their beliefs and implement the new skills learned in professional development courses (Duffy, 2003). When beginning educators engage in ongoing professional development that focuses on literacy activities and research-based approaches, they develop into effective teachers (Burns & Stechuk, 2003). With such help, beginning teachers develop their own most effective teaching strategies (Strickland et al., 2003). However, at the study site, no research has been conducted with regular and not beginning reading teachers to understand their instructional methodologies that may help struggling readers.

Professional development can help both preservice and practicing teachers develop current knowledge about content and process. Teachers who participate in ongoing literacy professional development become equipped to integrate and manage all the components of

reading instruction (Duffy, 2003). Thus, effective professional development programs provide knowledge for teachers to become confident learners of reading instruction and content that has a positive impact on their students' reading achievement.

Professional Development and Struggling Readers

Struggling readers benefit from effective instruction in the classroom. However, many teachers admit they lack the necessary skills to teach struggling readers (Duffy-Hester, 1999). According to Duffy (2003), there is a need for good teachers to improve student reading achievement. Florio-Ruane et al. (2004) report that teachers used innovative professional development to create a classroom environment where struggling third-grade students could engage in reading. They created book clubs for struggling readers to engage in, which included discussions of the books and authentic writing activities. The teachers wanted to increase the amount of time struggling readers engaged in reading books to increase comprehension levels.

This intervention was crucial to the reading development of less capable readers because they increased their opportunities to learn and practiced reading in the regular classroom. Additionally, reading research confirms effective teachers and professional development improve achievement among poor students and increase their cognitive development through meaningful instruction adjusted to meet their individual needs (Duffy, 2003). Therefore, teachers of disadvantaged readers should engage in continuous professional development that teaches them how to implement targeted instruction that increases students' reading proficiency (Burns & Stechuk, 2003).

Professional Development, Reflection and Inquiry

Effective professional development includes teacher reflection and inquiry. The purpose of professional development is to prepare teachers to analyze and gain knowledge from their work with their students' learning outcomes as their goal (Pinnell & Rodgers, 2003). When they reflect on their teaching practices, they adjust their instruction to promote student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Duffy-Hester, 1999; Hord, 2004). However, teacher reflection takes time and practice. Thus, preservice teachers lack the knowledge of combining what they learned in universities and providing thoughtful instruction that supports struggling readers (Burns & Stechuk, 2003). Darling-Hammond (2000) posits teaching colleges need to provide an opportunity for preservice teachers to include reflection as a part of their coursework to change their views on teaching diverse students. According to Mandel Morrow (2003), "Teachers become reflective practitioners when they participate in the ongoing process of inquiry, planning, application, and evaluating their own and their students' learning" (p. 6). In sum, teachers use inquiry to determine best practices for meeting the needs of diverse children (Darling-Hammond, 2000). A focus on how to better support teacher learning is critical to effects aimed at improving student learning (Duffy, 2003).

Collaborative reflective inquiry is also effective in professional development. Teachers engage in collaborative reflective inquiry with colleagues "to engage in learning conversations and apply new ideas, solve problems and create new conditions for students" (Hord, 2004, p. 9). Pinnell and Rodgers (2003) note, "The goal is to construct group understanding of behavioral phenomena and theoretical ideas" (p. 14). Collaborative inquiry promotes participation in ongoing professional development that increases critical thinking

skills for teachers and promotes collegial relationships (Krisko, 2001). According to Darling-Hammond (2000), shared reflections also allow teachers to move beyond their personal boundaries to appreciate the views of others. As Pinnell and Rodgers (2003) conclude about teachers' collaborative reflection, "Collaborating with peers provides support to teachers for planning the next step with students. This is the goal of reflection. Adapting behavior based on reflective inquiry is what makes reflection a powerful tool for professional development" (p. 16). Thus, quality professional development for preservice, beginning, and experienced teachers is needed to support teachers in their own learning, to improve their efficacy, and to meet the challenging expectations of helping struggling readers improve their literacy and overall academic achievement (Ganser, 2000). Professional development needs to be taken seriously as part of planning and managing effective reading programs (Mandel Morrow, 2003). Subsequently, having adequate funding will determine if professional development will continue in the future (Gewertz, 2013).

Student Motivation

Fostering a love for reading in their students is an important goal for many teachers. They understand that motivated readers become more capable readers (Duffy-Hester, 1999; Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Kiriakidis, 2010; Strickland et al., 2002; Thompkins, 2003). According to Baker (2003), primary grade students perceive reading as an enjoyable task in which they willingly engage. When these students perceive the material as too hard, they become less motivated to read (Allington, 2002). Thus, disengaged readers become poor readers (Strickland et al., 2002). Allington (2006) agreed that good readers are motivated to read many books and other materials, and less capable readers lack the motivation to spend

time reading. These negative behaviors toward reading decreases in-home reading (Baker, 2003).

Teachers of struggling readers must understand the dynamics of motivation to help their students most effectively. Thompkins (2003) defined motivation as intrinsic and internal, "a driving force within" (p. 251). Baker (2003) posited that motivation is both intrinsic and extrinsic with multiple parts. Intrinsic motivation characteristics include curiosity, a need to read something of interest; involvement, the pleasure of reading specific informational texts; and importance, students believe reading is valuable. Extrinsic motivation characteristics are goals, wanting tangible recognition for reading achievement, grades, to receive high marks from the teachers, competition, and to out-read their peers. Marzano et al. (2001) posited five aspects of motivation: drive, attrition, self-worth, emotions, and self-system. Drive is described as striving for success or the fear of failure. Students begin to develop a tendency toward success or failure over a period of time. Attrition refers to students seeing themselves as successes or failures based upon their prior experiences. Self-worth stems from self-acceptance. Students who are accepted among their peers and teachers see themselves as having high self-worth (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). Emotions influence motivation, are not easy to control, and can be more important than student beliefs and attitudes. Self-system refers to deep needs and goals with a hierarchical structure within each human (Marzano et al., 2001).

Children's motivation to read and write are influenced by many factors such as their interest, attitude, and engagement. Additionally, no two students are motivated to read in the same way (Strickland et al., 2002). Struggling readers develop low self-esteem and negative attitudes toward reading. In turn, their lack of reading achievement causes them to avoid

literacy activities (Lacina & Watson, 2008). Moreover, struggling readers lack motivation to read and to practice the skills needed to become independent lifelong readers (Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Strickland et al., 2002).

Effective teachers understand the importance of providing an environment in which students choose to be motivated (Hall, 2006; Lacina & Watson, 2008). Furthermore, teachers of struggling readers need to plan lessons that include motivation in addition to instructional goals. Praise by teachers is also a motivational factor that can have an important place in class when used carefully. For example, when students demonstrate an effort to follow directions or improve antisocial behaviors, teacher praise is warranted and helps reinforce the desired behavior. Additionally, "when praise is used in class, it is important to describe the criteria for the praise. What makes an act 'good' or 'excellent' must be communicated along with the praise" (Costa & Kallick, 2000, p. 11). Costa and Kallick (2000) advocate that teachers create a thoughtful classroom culture in which students encounter, think about, and develop habits of mind. In this environment, students are taught how to use their own thought processes to gain understanding and motivation from within to achieve learning success. They are given the freedom to take risks and to change their responses as they gain new knowledge about the content studied. In such an environment, there is no need for extrinsic motivating factors such as praise, incentives, and book choice because the motivation develops internally from the students themselves (Costa & Kallick, 2000; Thompkins, 2003).

What the parents do at home influences reading motivation in school. Furthermore, when parents and teachers collaborate on effective home-based strategies to use with struggling readers, all stakeholders will benefit (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). Rasinski and Padak (2000) state at-home reading programs are more effective when parents have easy

rules to help them implement effective reading activities. This leads to students engaging in more home-based reading for pleasure which helps improve reading in the classroom (Baker, 2003). When students spend much time reading for pleasure, their reading proficiency increases (Carbo, 2008; Cunningham, 2005). Therefore, positive home-school connections are important to student learning outcomes.

Summary

This review indicates that in addition to teachers encouraging students to read more, teachers need to encourage students to become engaged readers who are motivated, knowledgeable, strategic, and socially interactive (Cunningham, 2005). Effective teachers know that students are motivated differently. Thus, teachers incorporate many strategies and principles that foster reading motivation in the classroom (Allington, 2006; Cunningham, 2005; Lacina & Watson, 2008). An assessment of the research literature for the present study was presented, including educators' perceptions and beliefs about reading instruction. The present study involved the use of a qualitative case study research design. Creswell (2009) defines a case study approach as a study elaborating on an individual's perception and experiences about a concept or phenomenon. The rationale supporting the present qualitative research study is to explore educators' perceptions and beliefs as providers of reading instruction. As a result of what is not in the literature, it is important to determine how teacher perceptions and beliefs impact the quality or lack of quality reading instruction they provide to their students. The review of literature resulted in an overview of topics relative to the development of the research study. Chapter 3 presents the methodology used in this study.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

The previous chapter discussed teachers' beliefs about literacy, approaches to teaching reading instruction, and professional development relevant to teaching struggling readers. This chapter reviews the purpose of the study and the methods used for a case study. In addition, the chapter also includes how data were collected and analyzed. The steps to ensure trustworthiness and researcher subjectivity are also discussed.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions and beliefs of elementary school teachers who teach struggling readers. Additionally, this study sought to contribute to the limited body of research related to teachers of struggling readers. While examining current literature and legislation (NCDPI, 2016) committed to improving literacy in grades K-3, it was important to study what teachers experience when teaching struggling readers. The study was conducted in the elementary setting because research has established a strong correlation between children who learn to read early and easily and how they achieve academic success (National Reading Technical Assistance Center [NRTAC], 2010). The research questions that guided this study are:

1. What are elementary schools' reading teachers' perceptions and beliefs about their role as providers of reading instruction?
2. What are elementary schools' reading teachers' perceptions and beliefs about providing reading instruction to struggling readers?
3. What preconceived notions do elementary school teachers have about reading instruction?

Research Design

A qualitative case study was chosen because the researcher explored the perceptions and beliefs of reading teachers, which is a qualitative factor. The experiences of participants involved an in-depth analysis with a humanistic approach. Furthermore, case study research encompasses examination of an issue within a bounded system. The bounded system illustrates the issue being examined and in this case, the bounded system being reading teachers in a public school district in North Carolina. This design was undertaken at the study site to ensure a comfortable environment for participants as they shared their experiences, perceptions, and beliefs about teaching struggling readers. The nature of this study was interpretive. One-to-one interviews, within a setting of eight elementary school teachers, were conducted so that they could share their experiences about teaching struggling readers. The researcher (a) described elementary school teachers' perceptions and beliefs about their role as providers of reading instruction, (b) described what their perceptions and beliefs were about providing reading instruction to struggling readers, and (c) described their preconceived notions about the teaching of reading instruction. Qualitative research methods were best suited for this research, which used an interpretivist paradigm that sought to understand and provide insights into the beliefs and realities of a purposefully selected group of elementary teachers who provide reading instruction to struggling readers (Glesne, 2010; Yin, 2014). This study sought to understand and describe the experiences, perceptions and beliefs of elementary school teachers who provide reading instruction to struggling readers. Qualitative research was the most appropriate design to answer the study's research questions. Qualitative methods allow the researcher to gain additional information to describe in rich detail what happens in natural settings and emphasizes multiple realities of the same

phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The researcher is able to explore individuals or organizations, relationships, or programs (Yin, 2009). The collection of interpretations gained during data collection allows the researcher to identify patterns to determine the themes that may interpret the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Because this study sought to understand the perceptions and beliefs of teachers, the experiences of those who participated in the study contributed to this understanding. Creswell (2007) defined qualitative research as "assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems" (p. 37). Qualitative research allows the researcher to act as a key instrument of the study. Qualitative researchers use "the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under the study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes" (Creswell, 2007, p. 37). A qualitative case study at the study site enabled participants to be in an environment that was comfortable to them (Kiriakidis, 2008).

The research from this study shaped personal and professional beliefs of teachers who provide reading instruction to struggling readers; therefore, the study attempted to determine the beliefs and meaning teachers attach to their roles as teachers of struggling elementary school students and reading instruction.

Data Sources

In this study, the criteria were that the participant (a) must be an elementary school teacher, (b) serve students in a school that is 80-90% free and reduced lunch, (c) taught fourth grade at least one year prior to the 2017-2018 school year, (d) exceeded growth based on the Educator Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS), and (e) taught in a rural school

district in a school with a performance grade of D. With those criteria in mind, teachers in a medium-sized school district in North Carolina were asked to participate in the study.

In this district, it was important to talk with key personnel at the district level to identify schools who fit the criteria of the study. Questions that were asked: "Which schools had a tradition of low performance in the area of reading?" and "Which schools could use support in helping identify strategies that could improve reading performance?"

The researcher identified a medium-sized school district located in eastern North Carolina. Based on selection criteria, these schools were designated as a low-performing according to the definition of low-performing schools in the North Carolina General Statutes, identified as Title I schools and had a performance grade of a D. Traditionally, these schools had low teacher retention with teachers often leaving within the first 3 years to work in schools with higher-achieving students (Borman & Dowling, 2008). With this constant turnover, students are often left with gaps in their education. Secondly, after identifying schools that fit the profile, teachers were chosen to participate in the study based on exceeding the growth standard for reading in the North Carolina Educator Value-Added Assessment System. These teachers were then provided with additional information. Finally, district level officials were asked to suggest other potential interviewees who might contribute to the study; eight participants were identified to participate in the study.

Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling is the selection of individuals and sites that can provide different perspectives and understandings of the research problem and the study's phenomenon. In purposeful sampling, which is also called criterion-based selection, the researcher creates a list of attributes and characteristics that participants must possess in order to participate in the

study (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). According to Patton (1990), “Those people or events recommended as valuable by a number of different informants take on special importance” (p. 176).

Using this process, the snowball sampling approach was used (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Snowball sampling is an approach to identify information-rich participants who will contribute to the study (Patton, 1990).

The strength of case study research is the use of multiple data sources (Yin, 2012). Patton (1990) states that case study research enhances the internal validity of a study. The purpose of a case study approach was to gather comprehensive, in-depth information about the case. Data sources could include interviews, documents, observations, or focus groups. In case study design, data from multiple sources are combined to provide a rich description of the phenomenon. This convergence of data contributes to a deeper understanding of the case. “Understanding the case in its totality, as well as the intensive, holistic description and analysis characteristic of a case study, mandates both breadth and depth of data collection” (Merriam, 1998, p. 134).

Data Collection

Upon receiving IRB approval, the researcher developed a preliminary list of potential school districts. The school district identified participants based on the research criteria. Then the researcher contacted the appropriate district official by email, explained the study, and requested permission to meet to discuss potential participants. The study was explained to potential participants in detail and the researcher emphasized that the results were confidential. Each participant signed consent forms to participate in the study.

In this qualitative case study, the researcher conducted open-ended interviews with each participant during the period of the study to answer the research questions. The direct source of information included semi-structured interviews. For this case study, a data source protocol was utilized to gain needed confirmation, credibility, and to demonstrate commonality of an assertion (Stake, 1995). The researcher conducted the semi-structured interviews in order to seek insight about their experiences, perceptions, and beliefs with struggling readers. The interviews provided data on personal feelings of being a teacher of struggling readers in K-5 classrooms. The meetings with the participants reflected on personal feelings and perceptions and beliefs of struggling readers.

Several educators and the dissertation chairpersons reviewed the interview protocol (see Appendix A) before administering the questions to participants to ensure that the questions posed to the participants were appropriate and relevant. Upon receiving approval from NC State University and the IRB, recruitment of participants and data collection began.

According to Yin (2012), qualitative study allows the researcher to explore or describe a phenomenon using multiple data sources in order to provide a detailed and comprehensive description. Creswell (2007) offers four types of data for case study research: observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials. Yin (2009) identifies six types of data sources in case study research: documents, records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observations, and physical artifacts. Data collected for this study included teacher interviews. Creswell (2007) further explained that a case study is a qualitative approach whereby the researcher explores a phenomenon through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information. Data collection is a cyclical process in which gathering data from one source may lead to subsequent sources of data.

Maintaining a data collection system allowed for organization and data analysis that assisted the researcher throughout the phases of data collection and analysis.

Interviews

The source of data for this study was interviews. After developing a preliminary list of potential interviewees, the researcher contacted each participant and scheduled a time to interview. Each interview took place in the location of the interviewee's school site and lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants. Questions posed prompted for open-ended responses and provided participants with the opportunity to provide as many details as possible. While conducting the interviews, it was important that an accurate account of the conversations were audio-recorded. The researcher electronically audio-recorded the interviews so that all details were captured. A second recording device was made available in the event that the first device failed. Although, no respondent requested that the conversation not be recorded, the researcher was prepared to transcribe the interview as it was being conducted. In this instance, field notes were critical as the field notes captured the thoughts and reactions of the interviewee that were missed in an audio recording or transcription. During each interview, the researcher took notes when appropriate, audio-recorded, and transcribed the interviews in full.

Additionally, field notes ensured the researcher was able to reflect on and record thoughts, ideas, questions, and concerns regarding the interviews. The researcher transcribed eight interviews conducted with participants. Participants were selected based on having taught fourth grade prior to the 2017-2018 school year and a teacher effectiveness rating of met or exceeded expected growth in the Educator Value-Added Assessment System.

Transcriptions were used for data analysis. At the conclusion of each interview the researcher sent a note of gratitude expressing appreciation for participating in the study.

Seidman (2006) stated that "at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). This is important because interviewing provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of their behavior (Janesick, 1994). More specifically, in this study, the researcher employed semi-structured interviews. According to Creswell (2007), it is important to design and use an interview protocol and to include questions that are a narrowing of the central question and sub-questions in the research study.

Interviews are described as conversations that are used to gather information that cannot be observed (Merriam, 1998). These conversations include a participant's feelings, interpretations, or descriptions of events (Merriam, 1998). As the primary source of information for this research, interviews were guided conversations rather than overly-structured queries.

Rubin and Rubin (2011) suggest that an interview is a relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee that imposes obligations on both sides; a semi-structured interview protocol allows for additional conversation that may not be anticipated by the researcher. A semi-structured interview begins by asking participants questions that are predetermined prior to the interview (Merriam, 2009). However, the largest portion of the interview consisted of the researcher exploring issues that arose during the interview.

Data Analysis

In this study, data analysis involved making sense of the interview data. The preliminary analysis began when the researcher collected the data, and transcribed interviews. The preliminary analysis consisted of looking over the field notes, listening to the audio-recorded interviews, reading the transcripts, and looking over any products handed over by the participants such as instructional strategies, professional development, and literature related to reading instruction.

Interviews and transcripts were read line by line to identify themes in the text. The data collected were examined and analyzed according to the research questions. In the analysis phase, a six-step process included (a) organizing and preparing data, (b) carefully reading and studying the data, (c) designing a detailed analysis of the information with coding, (d) generating a description of the findings by themes, (e) representing the descriptions in a narrative and visuals, and (f) analysis—making meaning of the data, were followed. At the conclusion of the data analysis phase a story was presented which presents the experiences, beliefs, and experiences of elementary school teachers who teach struggling readers.

Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data, reducing the data to themes through coding, and then presenting the results (Creswell, 2007). "Data analysis is one of the few facets, perhaps the only facet, of doing qualitative research in which there is a preferred way" (Merriam, 2009, p. 171). Data analysis occurs simultaneously with data collection. Ongoing analysis ensures that collected data are focused on the study's research questions. The management of the data begins the process of data analysis (Creswell, 2007).

Merriam (1998) described the process of data analysis as being a complex action of moving back and forth between data and concepts, between description and interpretation, and using both inductive and deductive reasoning. Classifying codes into categories and themes during analysis supported the researcher in determining generalizations that best answer the study's research questions (Creswell, 2007). According to Schwandt (2001), data analysis is defined as the process of making sense of the data.

Trustworthiness

The researcher used multiple interviews during the research process. These data sources included in-depth interviews. The purpose of having multiple data sources was for data triangulation. Multiple strategies were used in order to ensure trustworthiness. These strategies consisted of conducting interviews in which the participants, and not the researcher, were doing the majority of the talking; audio-recording all interviews and making verbatim transcripts.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the goal of any qualitative researcher is to convince an audience that the findings of the study can be trusted and are worthy of attention. Multiple data sources can be used to enhance research viability (Mathison, 1988). Marshall and Rossman (2006) added that triangulation enhances a study by bringing together more than one source of evidence to corroborate, elaborate, or illuminate a research question under investigation.

Researcher Subjectivity Statement

This study used a qualitative case study design to describe the experiences, perceptions, and beliefs of elementary school teachers who teach struggling readers. As the

researcher, it was important to share why this topic is of a personal interest and a professional passion.

While in undergraduate studies, the researcher took one course in reading education. By the end of the semester the researcher was fascinated by how children learn to read. From there, the researcher decided to pursue a certification in reading education which allowed him to take a master's level course in reading while an undergraduate student. This was the beginning of becoming a reader for the researcher and helping young children find their passion for reading.

Upon graduation, the researcher taught fifth and sixth grades. Teaching language arts the last 3 years of his teaching career opened his eyes to the number of children who struggle to read. Many of them were unable to decode or read fluently, making the text difficult to decipher. As a principal, the researcher saw students endure the same challenges with reading and teachers were increasingly frustrated helping struggling readers learn to read. The researcher knew firsthand the challenges teachers face in rural, low-performing, Title I schools. However, the experiences teachers have with struggling readers often go unnoticed. Having taught struggling readers, the researcher was familiar with the challenges and lack of professional development given to build teacher capacity in this area.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge some of the biases the researcher brought to this study. The researcher has formed lasting relationships with district officials, principals, teachers, and families for whom the study was conducted. This was an advantage in accessing participants for the study. Nevertheless, the findings were reported in an unbiased manner and with confidentiality. As described in the section on trustworthiness, several steps were taken to minimize researcher bias.

Ethical Considerations

According to Erickson (1998),

> In order to negotiate entry and deal responsibly with the concerns of those who will be studied it is necessary to tell them how we plan to conduct the study so that they can consider and give us advice about what that will mean to them in convenience and in safety. (p. 1160)

As such, participants were made aware of a few things. First, this study was conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Administration and Supervision. Second, the participants were informed that the interviews were to be audiotaped and that upon the completion of the dissertation, the tapes were to be destroyed. Third, the participants were made aware that any field notes, documents, or records obtained during the study were to be kept strictly confidential and that their purposes were only to be used in order to analyze the perceptions and beliefs of teachers who teach struggling readers. Lastly, the participants were informed that they were free to withdraw their participation at any time without consequence should they become uncomfortable with the study. After providing participants with this information they were asked to sign a consent form, signifying they were made aware of the study and the confines of the research.

Confidentiality was retained at all times throughout this study. Pseudonyms were given to all participants in order to maintain their anonymity. All audiotapes, field notes, documents, and transcribed interviews were placed under lock and key. Only the researcher had access to these data. Upon the completion of the research, the documents and archival records were shredded and the audiotapes were destroyed with the exception of consent forms, which will be kept on file for 3 years after the completion of the study.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a detailed account of how the data were collected for the purpose of examining the perceptions and beliefs of elementary teachers who teach struggling readers. Using qualitative case study design and purposeful sampling to identify participants ensured a thick and rich description of the study. Furthermore, answers to the research questions also brought about an understanding of group and individual beliefs about reading instruction for struggling readers.

CHAPTER 4: Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of elementary school teachers who teach struggling readers. Additionally, this study sought to contribute to the limited body of research related to teachers of struggling readers. While examining current literature and legislation (NCDPI, 2016) committed to improving literacy in grades K-3, it was important to study what teachers experience, along with their perceptions, when teaching struggling readers. The study was conducted in the elementary setting because research has established a strong correlation between children who learn to read early and easily and how they achieve academic success (NRTAC, 2010).

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with eight fourth-grade teachers. The researcher then later transcribed the interviews. All interviewees worked in the same rural public school district in eastern North Carolina. They also met the following criteria: they must have (a) been an elementary school teacher, (b) served students in a school that is 80-90% free and reduced lunch, (c) taught fourth grade at least one year prior to the 2017-2018 school year, (d) exceeded growth based on the Educator Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS), and (e) taught in a rural school district in a school with a performance grade of D.

The interviews provided information to provide an understanding of the experiences of elementary school teachers who teach struggling readers. The nature of this study was qualitative and interpretive. One-to-one interviews, with a sample of eight elementary school teachers, were conducted so that they could share their experiences with teaching struggling readers. During the interviews, the participants shared the following: they (a) described their perceptions and beliefs about their role as providers of reading instruction, (b) described what

their perceptions and beliefs were about providing reading instruction to struggling readers, and (c) described their preconceived notions about the teaching of reading instruction.

Chapter 4 highlights the participants and the common themes from the interviews with the elementary school teachers, along with responses to the research questions provided throughout the interviews.

Participants

The interviewees were teachers who worked as reading teachers in elementary schools. The participants included professionally accomplished educators who understood the reading process and had taught in the profession for years. Each of the participants displayed a different set of methods that they utilized in understanding the behavior of struggling readers and that contributed to the development of such students.

Every participant was chosen based on their successful teaching of reading as indicated by North Carolina's growth model for educators. Each of the participants were in the top 25% of their district's or state success rate with teaching their students in reading. These participants were provided with a set of questions to understand the context of the interview. The conversation helped provide an understanding of the effect of an excellent teacher who teaches and works to provide enriching instruction to students who struggle to read. Table 3 demonstrates the sample of participants, followed by a brief description of each participant.

Table 3

Participants

Demographic Information					Participant Criteria
School	**Teacher**	**Ethnicity**	**Gender**	**Experience**	
CS Elementary School	Gail	Caucasian	Female	18 years	Each participant served as an elementary school teacher, greater than 90% of their student population received free or reduced lunch, all teachers taught 4th grade prior to the 2017-2018 school year, each teacher exceeded growth according to the Educator Value Added System and all participants worked in a school with a performance grade of a D.
CS Elementary School	Ann	Caucasian	Female	20 years	
NE Elementary School	Sarah	African American	Female	7 years	
NE Elementary School	Cate	African American	Female	7 years	
NE Elementary School	Tara	African American	Female	8 years	
NW Elementary School	Alex	Caucasian	Female	3 years	
NW Elementary School	Mary	Caucasian	Female	21 years	
SE Elementary School	Kelly	African American	Female	3 years	

Gail

Gail is a Caucasian female who possesses a Bachelor's in Elementary Education and a Master's degree in Reading. She has taught fourth grade for the last 18 years at CS Elementary School. The interviewee described that the school started as an elementary school and then later merged into the middle school. Gail teaches fourth-grade language arts and is constantly learning about reading every day. Gail has demonstrated success as a teacher across all subjects.

Ann

Ann is a Caucasian female who has taught for 20 years as a teacher at CS Elementary School. She has a Birth to Kindergarten certificate, a Master's degree, and is a National Board Certified teacher in Elementary Education. She has been teaching fourth-grade language arts for the past 20 years. She is well-versed in different techniques of educating struggling readers and enjoys supporting readers during the reading process.

Sarah

Sarah is an African American female who teaches fourth grade at NE Elementary School. She has a Master's in Sociology. She is K-6 licensed and is completing her Academically and Intellectually Gifted degree. She has been teaching fourth grade for the past 7 years. Her main concern is that struggling readers need an education that is continuous and includes support at home prior to entering school. She believes this support alone can improve the results of students' development and give students a head start.

Cate

Cate is an African American female who served as an elementary school teacher at NE Elementary School. She has been teaching for the last 7 years. She has a degree in elementary education and has a K-6 license. Cate teaches fourth- and fifth-grade reading to students. Teaching multiple grade levels helped build her knowledge of what contributes to a struggling reader's lack of reading skills.

Tara

Tara is an African American female who has been teaching for the last 8 years. She taught for 4 years at another school in the same district and now works at NW Elementary School. Tara has taught second, third, and fourth grades. She has the experience of teaching

reading in lower grades and upper grades, which has built her understanding of how students learn to read and read to learn in the upper grades. Tara possesses a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education.

Alex

Alex is a Caucasian female who has taught for 3 years. She teaches language arts at NW Elementary School. She graduated from East Carolina University with a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education. She has an add-on license in middle grades math and an add-on license in serving academically gifted students, the AIG license. She also possesses a Master's degree in Elementary Education.

Mary

Mary is an African American female who has taught for 21 years. She teaches at NW Elementary School and has taught in other counties in North Carolina and in Florida. Mary is very knowledgeable about teaching vocabulary and fluency skills to reading. Her knowledge and skillset has helped her to gain positive results. Mary has a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education.

Kelly

Kelly is an African American female who has taught for 3 years. She has been taught at SE Elementary School all 3 years and is very informed about the strategies and techniques used to support struggling readers. Her interview was helpful to gain an understanding of struggling readers and information about the strategies that can help students grow and progress. Kelly has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Brain and Cognitive Sciences and also joined the Teach for America Corp.

Text Comprehension a Priority

One of the main themes that emerged from the interviews with teacher participants was that their priority was for students to understand and comprehend text. It is important that students are able to comprehend text. Students comprehend the meaning of text by active interaction with text and word recognition. Their personal experiences, language and background knowledge, and ability to utilize reading strategies all work together to assist them in deriving meaning. Teachers understood how important this is when describing their role as the provider of reading instruction. For example, Gail, a fourth-grade teacher, stated the following:

> I knew that my job would be important, that I would have to, you know, work harder with reading and, you know, making, trying to make sure that they understood everything, the phonics and things that they do in the primary grades a lot of times the kids just don't seem to have all of that achieved. So when they come to us, they—we have to try to catch them up a lot.

In light of Gail's statement, one can see that she believed part of her job/responsibility was to make sure students were reading at grade level proficiency. Despite students coming to third grade unable to read fluently, Gail worked to assist students in closing gaps they had entering the upper grade. A strong foundation of learning how to read is key for students when they enter the third grade. Gail further indicated that phonics is a skill many students lack, which contributes to their difficulty reading and comprehending text.

Oftentimes, students needed targeted support to assist them with comprehension. Ann indicated that she has to devote time to figuring out how to approach instruction for struggling readers. She stated,

> Target some areas that we need to work—that are causing them to struggle as a reader, and then figure out a plan for how I can help them with those struggles that they have would be—and to motivate them to want to read, because that's, that is a—you know, that's a big struggle, to find—to help them find things that they're interested in reading. I use that a lot as a motivational tool. My role is to just to figure out where they are when they come to me, target those struggles, those weaknesses, and develop a plan to move them along.

Ann indicated that it takes time to develop a plan to help struggling readers become motivated to read and understand text. She took time to discover their interests in order to engage them in the reading process. After doing so, she was better able to develop a plan to support them as readers. Ann also addressed targeting areas that may be the cause of students' struggle to read. For example, students who may have dyslexia have trouble recognizing letters and knowing which sounds the letters make. Other students may have a learning disability causing them to not be able to recognize word patterns, blends, sounds, and word patterns. Knowing what a student needs informs the teacher where to begin in remedying a struggling reader's deficiencies.

Teachers sometimes grapple with teaching students how to read in the later grades, which is a skill that teachers often expect them to have when they arrive to upper grades. Sara stated,

> I feel like my role is to ensure that my students are able to comprehend complex texts overall, that's my goal, my role. But I feel that I more so have to teach students how to read, in the fourth grade. So sometimes my role changes. I feel like my role changes depending on the needs of my students, because it's so many varying needs.

> So I have students who can read over 100 words per minute, and then I have a student who can't read any English. So I feel like my role changes depending on the student and what they need from me.

Sarah knew that her primary role was to teach students how to comprehend complex texts. However, there are times when she had to drill back and teach students foundational information that she expected they should have learned in the early grades. When students leave the primary grades and enter fourth grade, they should have a strong grasp on being able to decode words and read and comprehend text. Reading to learn by the fourth grade is an expectation of upper grade teachers for many students. Often, this is not the case. Many students arrive in the upper grades struggling to decode and comprehend text. Like Sarah, many of her students were able to read 100 words per minute, while others struggled to read entirely. Thus, her role was constantly changing while she worked to meet the needs of all students.

Text comprehension is critical to becoming better readers. Students' ability to comprehend text depends much on their ability to process the information read. While there is no one reason students are unable to comprehend text, teachers must be prepared to identify why students struggle with text comprehension and provide them with strategies to help them as struggling readers.

Parent Support and Involvement

Parent Support and Involvement was a theme that emerged from the interviews. Teachers emphasized the importance of parents being involved in their child's education. Teachers expect parents to be engaged in their child's academics. To help their child become better readers, parents can attend reading workshops offered by the school, meet with

teachers to determine reading activities that can be done at home, and encourage their child by reading 20 minutes a day at home. Parents can also connect writing and reading such as asking children to write about what they just read.

Ann expressed the importance of the home-school connection when it came to providing parents with resources to support their child at home. She stated, "So working together with the parents, you know, providing resources and strategies and things that they can do to help support what we're doing here at school." Ann expected parents to know what their child was doing at school in order to support them at home. Working together with parents in order to provide resources and show them strategies on reading concepts they are working on at school is crucial. Research supports reading at home for at least 20 minutes a day improves a child's ability to read (Renaissance Learning, 2008). Parents can ensure that their child is reading daily and utilize various resources to help students better understand what they have read. Also, hosting sessions for parents that expose them to the curriculum of what their students need to learn is helpful to parents and helps them become more involved in their children's education. When parents know what their child is expected to learn and do by the end of the year, it prepares them for struggles their child may encounter during the school year.

When teachers are unable to meet with parents, oftentimes they send information home to them. Mary stated,

> I believe as a reading teacher, I have a responsibility to do everything, everything. That sometimes means sending home information because I just recently had a conference with a parent, and the parent said to me, because their child is struggling,

> ‘I struggled when I was in school.’ So when she said that, it opened up another picture for me.

Sometimes parents who struggled when they were in school struggle to provide their child with the needed academic support from home in order to become a successful student in school and better yet, a successful reader. Mary expressed that empathizing with parents as a teacher is crucial to a student’s success as a reader. If parents struggled to read when they were in school, they did not likely possess the skills necessary to encourage and support their own child in the reading process. Oftentimes this experience calls for a strong home-school connection with parents.

Parental support and involvement are necessary for children at an early age. The exposure to language and words builds children’s vocabulary. Research supports students who have more words in their vocabulary when they arrive to school are less likely to struggle with reading (Lyon, 2003). Not only should parents read and talk with their children, parents should also require reading 20 minutes a day if their children are struggling readers, and the reading time should be uninterrupted in order to improve their reading abilities.

Difficulty Differentiating Instruction

Differentiation of Instruction was another theme that emerged. Students come to school with individual needs; therefore, instruction must be tailored to meet their needs. Teachers can differentiate instruction for students by way of content, process, or product for students. When differentiation happens for struggling readers, students may access the same text at different levels. However, with so much differentiation, teachers feel overwhelmed with their responsibilities and also become frustrated with their role as teachers.

Gail expressed her challenges in knowing how to support so many students with many different needs:

> It's just hard sometimes to know what to do with Johnny sitting over here that is just struggling so hard, and then you've got Mary sitting over here that is, it's just you feel pulled in so many directions. And you do, you feel like everything is—you feel like everybody's looking at you, that you've got to have that child ready and I don't know, sometimes we feel like we fail to get them where they need to go, because sometimes that gap is so big. I just, you know, I know as the reading teacher that I've got to provide that instruction, that—trying to get them on track.

Gail described how challenging it is to meet the needs of so many struggling students in a class. The feeling that a student's success or lack of success rests entirely on the shoulders of the teacher is daunting for educators. The fear of failing to aid students in reaching end of year targets is a challenge for many teachers. However, Gail understood that she must do whatever it takes to get her struggling readers on track and working towards success. Embedded in differentiation is the ability to provide students with academic rigor. Sometimes rigor is a challenge to offer when students are struggling at their current reading level. Sarah discussed her challenge with proving students with rigor. She stated,

> Because, like I said, we have so many varying levels, you know. And I hate to say that, but essentially that's what it is. To comprehend, you know, you want to provide rigorous instruction, but is—what's rigorous to one student may be not rigorous to another student.

Sarah struggled to define rigor for the many students reading on various levels. Rigor can sometimes be hard to accomplish when students don't know the basics. The difficulty of

providing rigor is when so many readers are reading at different levels and abilities. This causes a challenge with lesson planning and having enough time to teach all students at their appropriate level.

Alex continued to describe the feeling of not knowing where to start with struggling readers:

> Because when I first started I kind of felt a little bit lost, but then I researched it and found different techniques that would help the kids, knowing how to help a kid that's struggling versus a kid that is already on the ninth-grade level, there's a wide range in the classroom, so knowing how to reach each and every one. I'm trying to think what else. Knowing what's expected of them in fourth grade and the grades below, because if they are struggling in fourth grade, I need to know what instruction they should have gotten in Kindergarten through third, and fill in those gaps.

Alex independently sought to find different techniques to teach struggling readers. The wide range of readers in her classroom provided a challenge on how to reach each student. Also, Alex was unfamiliar with the curriculum students should have mastered in the lower grades. Unfamiliar with teaching students how to read was a point of frustration for this teacher. Despite gaps that children may have when they arrive to the upper grades, teachers remain responsible for filling those reading gaps, and teaching them reading material at grade level. This is a challenge and a point of contention for these teachers.

Often, teachers find it difficult to teach struggling student readers who come in without foundational skills for reading (Connor et al., 2014). These students are passed on from the early grades without having the necessary skills to be proficient as a reader.

Teachers find it daunting to teach fourth-grade students at grade level when they lack the foundational reading skills in the early grades. Tara stated,

> Differentiating instruction is a big piece. I do small group instruction every day. When—and I have a push-in assistant that comes in with me. I personally take my struggling readers, and my push-in assistant works with my higher readers, and I model, model, model every day, every single day. I mean that's what I have to do at this point. We do a small piece of phonics skill, and then we have to go into what essentially is gonna be assessed in 5 weeks at this point.

Tara utilized her instructional assistant to assist with small group instruction. The assistant provided reading instruction to higher-level readers, enabling Tara to provide instruction to struggling readers. During her time with these students, she reads a portion of text and models her thinking for her students. Modeling and thinking aloud as she reads and writes explicitly shows her students the mental strategies involved in constructing meaning from text. After utilizing this strategy, she implements a phonics lesson because students are unable to decode words. Phonics helps these students decode, which enables them to construct meaning from what they read.

Facilitating the reading process for students requires scaffolding. Many teachers scaffold by modeling how to read such as writing notes in the corner, asking questions as they read, and sounding out unfamiliar words. Teachers know that they have to facilitate reading instruction in this manner to ensure the learning process takes place.

Cate sees herself as a facilitator in the reading process. She stated, "Facilitate, you know, facilitating reading and just scaffolding, you know, just doing all the things that I need to do to help them to master reading." When differentiating instruction, Cate knew she

must serve as a facilitator and use scaffolding during instruction. Scaffolding the reading process helps students break down what they read. They may highlight key terms, skim the text, jot down notes in margins, and discuss it with a partner. Scaffolding later supports teachers when differentiating instruction to meet the explicit reading needs of each student in the classroom.

Teachers sometimes experience frustration when students are unable to recall or retell whey they have read. This requires them to help students process what they are reading. Alex reported being frustrated when students are unable to retell what they have read. Her role is to help students comprehend what they read. She stated,

> I feel like I need to help kids not only learn how to read, but understand what they are reading, because a lot of times you see kids, they're reading something, but if you ask them the next minute what they read they have no idea. So they are just going through the process of it.

Alex explained that oftentimes students are able to read but they do not comprehend what they have read. They go through the motions but lack the skill of understanding and ability to retell what they have read. Therefore, it was important for Alex to not only teach struggling readers how to read but how to understand what they have read and retell it in a way that is true to the text.

Although students must develop the critical skill of being able to retell what they have read, teachers must allow students autonomy in choosing what they read. This is another way to differentiate reading material for students. Kelly stated,

> I think being able to differentiate, like knowing, "Okay, these students are not on the same level," so you are going to need to do different things to support the different

> readers that you have, that's for sure. And giving them some autonomy in choosing the things that are interesting to them, because I mean like for the—like for the sports book, all right, I know you're interested in that, but we're not going to do all sports books, but you can read one sports book, but I also want you to branch out and read other things.

Kelly differentiated her reading instruction by allowing students the opportunity to choose books of interest. She believed if students are able to choose texts of interest to read, they will become more engaged in the reading process. However, she also recognized the importance of encouraging them to branch beyond their interests and read other genres of material. Kelly stated that autonomy is an important way to differentiate for students who are not on the same reading level.

Differentiation of instruction for struggling readers is a challenge for many teachers because so many of their students are on different reading levels; however, they are expected to be proficient on end-of-year state assessments regardless of their struggles with reading. Teachers can differentiate reading instruction in many ways; however, the strategies they use can be created to help students enhance reading skills such as phonics, comprehension, fluency, word prediction, and story prediction. Teachers simply feel overwhelmed because they feel responsible for everything related to their students' academics.

Explicit Instruction

The use of explicit instructional strategies emerged as a theme in the interviews. Instructional strategies are ways in which a teacher explains a concrete concept, a fact, or problem and uses models, objects, charts, slides, pictures, and/or pieces of equipment to develop student understanding. Explicit instruction involves highly structured and

sequencing in order to teach a specific skill. Teachers of reading must carefully prepare their lessons, execute them in a manner that engages students, and assess what students have learned to determine the effectiveness of their instruction.

Oftentimes, teachers literally help students dissect the text to develop an understanding of what they have read. Alex stated,

> Also I feel like my role is to teach them the strategies, how to go back in those texts to help them, how to take a text apart, knowing what it means for a text to be comparing and contrasting, like those struggling readers have to be built up, but they also have to learn those strategies for fourth-grade EOG. So it's just a wide range of things that we have to do with the struggling readers.

Alex explained the importance of utilizing a wide range of instructional strategies to help struggling readers understand text. Teaching them these strategies will help them achieve proficiency on North Carolina's End of Grade assessments.

Teaching them explicit strategies such as annotating text and comparing and contrasting will also help them better comprehend what they are reading in their daily interactions with printed text. On instructional strategies, Sarah commented,

> And as far as instruction—strategies we use—I mostly just use going back in the text. In the past, I have used other strategies: U.N.R.A.V.E.L. We used RAQ, resay the question, it was like—so we've used like acronyms and other things, but I have mainly focused on, for the past 2 years, just using evidence strictly from the text. So if it's not there, if it's not explicitly there, is there something that can guide my thinking? So, that's what I have focused on mostly. And so, like I said, it's really teaching them how to navigate, teaching them how to—we unpack questions.

Sarah also realized the importance of utilizing instructional strategies with her struggling readers. She used several strategies that required her students to refer back to the text, which is an objective on the North Carolina Common Core State Standards. Students are expected to demonstrate mastery of this objective by showing that they can refer back to a specific place in the text and locate an answer. Students are tested on this on the North Carolina End of Grade assessments. The use of various reading techniques helps struggling readers comprehend text and enhances this expected skill.

When students are unable to locate what a question is asking in the text, the use of explicit strategies aids their thinking on what the text may be indirectly asking or implying. Teachers give students a strategy to use when they are struggling to answer text-related questions. Tara noted,

> Giving them the strategies to try to answer the questions helped motivate them to do it because then they had something they could use when they're just given a story and have no idea where to go, they kind of just stare at it. They also have to know why they're doing with it. If they don't see why they have to sit here and read it, then they're not going to. I know last year when we were doing it, we did interactive notebooks and we made it more interactive for the kids. Using different colors to go with the questions. We taught them how to compare and contrast, what does that mean, we taught them what it means to be a procedure text, but we did a lot of it through the interactive notebook so it was more fun for them, where they were able to cut something or use a marker, so sometimes with struggling readers you have to make it seem like they're not actually reading, they're doing this fun activity that's helping them learn what they need.

Tara found that using interactive notebooks was a way to strengthen a struggling reader's understanding of text they read. Utilizing a color-coding system that was connected with different questions or the use of a procedure to use with unfamiliar text or words supported the reading process. Engaging struggling readers in this way appears to be a diversion for them from the actual reading process but ensures they are mastering the objective set by the teacher and giving them what they need.

Kelly found that struggling readers needed to hear a concept or have it modeled for them repeatedly before they understood it. She left nothing up to chance for struggling readers. Explicit instruction and use of strategies is a must. She stated,

> Well, specifically with the struggling readers, they benefit from that explicit instruction, and like it's not—you can't leave it, anything up to chance, like you have to really be, "All right, this is how you do it. I'm going to model it for you multiple times," because something I learned in my—in the reading foundation training was that those lower and struggling children, they have to hear something at least 100 times, compared to the learners who get it right away, they can hear it two times or six times, but no, those struggling readers have to hear something 100 times.

From Kelly's training, she knows that struggling readers must have explicit instruction and repetition from the teacher before they are able to master a concept. Nothing can be left up to chance; teachers must provide students with clear, explicit teaching in order for struggling readers to develop an understanding.

Embedded throughout the reading lesson should be explicit instructional strategies from beginning to end. Teachers develop this through careful and precise planning. Small steps such as checks for understanding along the way are critical to developing

understanding. Modeling, guided practice, and independent practices allows the teacher to know what a student can do independently after explicit instruction has been provided.

High Expectations

Maintaining high expectations of students was a main theme that emerged from teacher participants. Despite a student's reading level, teachers indicated they maintained firm expectations from their students. They explained that while they acknowledged the struggles of their students, they refused to lower their expectations. Students were still required to work hard and give their best effort even when they were frustrated. Different students may require alternative avenues to achieving but these teachers never lowered their expectations despite their students' struggles.

Mary said she sets the bar high for all of her students regarding any disabilities or learning difficulties. Instruction was adjusted for each of them, but her bar remained high for them:

> I have high expectations for all of them. We shoot towards a 70% reading goal, but because I understand even from my special education students all the way up to my strongest student, I know where everyone stands. I tell them, "I want you to reach for 70% in everything you do, so when you do test at the end or have any type of assessment in the classroom, you can feel confident in knowing that chances are if you do your best all year long, then it's easier to reach that 70% at least at the end." If they go beyond 70%, I'm actually ecstatic, but I give them at least somewhere to reach.

From the onset, Mary sets a reading goal of 70% for all of her students regardless of their current reading level. She believed setting the bar high oftentimes caused her students to

exceed the expectation, but at no time could she allow her students to work below their potential. Giving them a bar to reach gave her students confidence that in the end, they have given the reading test or reading assignment their best efforts. All students are standing on equal ground when it comes to expectations from their teacher.

Although students are not reading where she thought they might after finishing college, Tara's expectations had not changed in setting the standard in the classroom. She set the bar and expected students to rise to the occasion:

> My expectations for my kids have not changed, because if you want—let me get the right words, now. The expectations you set is what you get. So, if you have high expectations, you'll get them. If you have low expectations, that's what you'll get. So my expectations are up here, and you have to come get them.

Tara believed you get what you expect. If you set expectations low, then students will not perform and teachers will not see quality work or high effort. However, if you set expectations high, students will rise to the occasion and work hard to give their best effort. High expectations for struggling readers are a must, as these students oftentimes lack confidence in their ability. Tara pushed her students to her level of expectation and did not change them for any reason.

Alex expected her students to grow academically but her expectations focused on their reading growth, not proficiency. She stated,

> At the end result my expectations are still there. To begin with, it may be my expectation for that kid may be—okay, so we have to first get to being able to read a sentence fluently, or being able to read a paragraph fluently, so like the expectations for each kid may be a little bit different, but they're still holding them up high,

> making them work for it, never giving up on them. I think sometimes when you see a kid that's so far behind; it kind of makes you wonder did someone give up on them? So just making sure that for that kid, the expectation may be this, for this kid it may be that, but we all have to come together at the end and take this EOG and the expectation is that you grow. That's typically what I tell my kids, my expectation may not be that you make an A or a B, but it is that you grow. You learn, you get there.

Like many teachers, Alex expected her students to show reading growth instead of reading proficiency. She set a path for her students and expected them to master each phase, which ultimately led to their growth as a reader. She often wondered why her students were so far behind. While they all may be behind in different ways, she still expected them to show growth on the North Carolina End-of-Grade reading assessment and that the results of standardized testing showed that they were learning and growing as readers.

Sarah found that even if she had high expectations and students continue to struggle, she still maintained high expectations for her students. She believed that lowering her expectations indicated that she did not believe they were capable of learning. She stated,

> I always kept high—I always keep high expectations. Even if they are struggling some, I still feel if I keep that high expectation they will work to meet it. If I lower my expectations, then that's kind of telling them that I don't think they can do it. So I feel like coming in strong, telling them, hey, this is where we're going to get, even if we have to work really hard to get there, helps them.

Sarah's high expectations from the beginning set the tone for what she expected her struggling readers to do by the end of the year. If students struggled, Sarah still provided them with the help that was needed for them to be successful, but she did not lower her

expectations by any means.

Teachers must set a culture of high expectations in their classrooms. Teachers can neither allow academic challenges nor poor student behavior be the reason for students to underachieve. They, too, must be cognizant of their own beliefs and behaviors towards students who may struggle to read and establish the same high expectations for all students in their classrooms. When this happens, students tend to rise to the occasion and work at the level expected by the teacher.

Small Group Instruction

The utility of small group instruction was another theme that emerged from the interviews. Teachers found the use of small group instruction was an effective way to provide struggling readers with the tools necessary to become proficient readers. Small group instruction is a way for struggling readers to benefit most from explicit skills during intensive, targeted instruction. Oftentimes, researched-based interventions are used during small groups to help readers make progress on a skill they may be lacking.

Cate used small group and one-on-one instruction to support her students. She found that the one-on-one assistance helped her target specific skills and deficits of struggling readers:

> Small group, just working on it one-on-one, depending on if they need one-on-one, or a small group, helping them to be influencing with each other, reading out loud at the same time with each other, reading to a partner, and just using different strategies to help them. Being a reflective practitioner, seeing what works, seeing what hasn't worked, and just, like I said, keeping up with the data, looking at the data, and, you

> know, where we're at in the middle of the year, you know, where do we—what do we need to do between mid-year and the end of the year.

In Cate's small groups or personalized learning sessions she used a variety of strategies to support her students. She tried to be a reflective practitioner in conjunction with consistently reviewing her students' data in order to know where they needed to be by the middle of the year and at the end of the year. In order to get them where they needed to be, Cate found small group instruction to be an impactful way to accelerate her struggling readers.

Alex believed the most effective way to support struggling readers was by way of small group instruction. In the small group setting, her students' self-esteem was not compromised in front of their peers who may be fluent readers:

> For struggling readers you really have to sit there and work with them in a small group. Teaching them (in a) whole group is very difficult because each kid's on a different level. Those struggling readers need not—like one-on-one attention or in a small group, because sometimes they're embarrassed to read, and you have to make it a friendly environment to where they're not embarrassed. I mean I—sometimes when I read to them I get tongue-tied so it just shows them it's normal.

Alex indicated that it is hard to work with struggling readers in whole groups. They struggle to follow the lesson and teachers are unable to hone in on their direct needs during reading instruction. Also, struggling readers are shy reading in front of their peers and are oftentimes embarrassed. But Alex was better able to model for her struggling readers during small group and in one-on-one settings. She modeled mistakes that all readers make. She did this to remind them that it is normal to sometimes struggle when reading text.

Kelly found that pulling struggling readers into small groups was most effective for her students and her ability to be an effective teacher. Whole group instruction does not allow teachers to be effective for struggling readers. Smaller, more intimate groups of students with similar needs are more effective for producing better academic outcomes. She stated,

> Pulling small groups, that's something that helped a lot, like I knew I was going to have to work with them in small groups, but I didn't realize the extent of that. And I think that that was something that now I know, "All right, like I really need to pull these guided reading groups, and we need to talk about the text," and staying on a text for an extended amount of time, it's not just a different text every day, like, you know, we would stay on passages for up to a week, like breaking that passage down and going back and underlining, highlighting, making notes, annotations, like—yeah, every skill and strategy that I learned, I was like, "Oh, let me try that and see if that works for them," and then if it worked, we kept it, it didn't work, toss it out, like, so.

Kelly often spent a large amount of time on one portion of text or element of text, often referring to the same reading passage for weeks during small group instruction. Kelly realized when she needed to delve deeper into a reading concept, the best way to approach teaching it was to pull her struggling readers into small groups. This began the period of trial and error. When a strategy worked for her struggling readers, she maintained that strategy; when it did not, she eliminated it and moved on to a new one.

Small group instruction gives teachers the opportunity to personalize the instruction needed by students. Teachers found that students tend to be more active in the learning process when in smaller groups of peers who may have similar needs to improve their reading. Moreover, teachers found they were able to better meet the needs of students during

small group than in whole group. Preparation is key to effective small group instruction; therefore, teachers must have a clear vision about what their students need and how they plan to address their needs.

Teacher and Student Emotions

Teachers asserted that struggling readers lacked confidence when interacting with text. They observed that these students sometimes exemplified negative behaviors because they were unable to understand what they were reading. These emotions required delicate care from their teachers. Jointly, teachers too experience a great range of emotions when working with struggling readers, primarily frustration. However, they continue to work with their students to provide the instruction that they need to be successful readers.

Student Lack of Confidence

Mary related students' confidence in reading to an everyday life skill. She knew that if she could build their confidence in reading, they would be confident in other areas. She stated, "I still have to go back to confidence. I do, because confidence is a life skill. And the reason I see it that way because every day the children go back out into life." Mary indicated in order for students to become better readers, they needed to have a high level of confidence in their reading ability. When these students lack confidence, they continue to struggle to read. Mary believed that confidence is a life skill that all students should possess. When students lack confidence in reading, she believed it causes them to be less confident in their daily interactions with others, which is why she continually encouraged them, despite their struggles.

Tara recognized the importance of praising students during the reading process because many of them lack confidence in their reading. She stated,

> So they just need praise. Some of them do lack confidence, some of them would lack confidence in reading out loud because they felt like they struggled, so just praising them for when they would read out loud, or when they would answer a question because they were afraid to get the wrong answer really seemed to help.

Tara commented that students must be praised when they take risks such as reading aloud in front of their peers or with the teacher and when they engage with the teacher to respond to a question. Many students lack the confidence of answering questions aloud for fear that they might give the wrong answer. Tara found that their confidence and engagement was much more important than a right or wrong answer.

Students Experience Frustration

When students lack confidence in their reading, they also become very frustrated during the reading process, which can often lead to students shutting down or avoiding reading entirely. Teachers also see their frustration in other subjects that require them to read and comprehend text. Cate found that when students struggle to read it causes them to be frustrated and infringes on their ability to perform well in other subjects:

> I've also seen frustration. I've seen students that struggle to read, it kind of—it makes it hard for them to do math, word problems, and other subjects, some—and I have seen students that don't try their best because—or even behavior, I've seen behavior become an issue because the students struggle at reading, and so I've had to try to find other ways to help them to be engaged so that they don't have behaviors during those times.

Cate found that struggling readers have difficulty with word problems and other subjects that involve reading. When students are frustrated because of their struggles with comprehending

text, they tend to misbehave. These misbehaviors sometimes persist, putting the students further behind academically. Thus, the teacher must work to ensure that students are engaged in their daily work so they choose not to misbehave during other times.

Teachers Experience Frustration

Teachers experience a great range of emotions when working with struggling readers, primarily frustration when students display a lack of confidence in their reading. As the teacher, Tara felt a high degree of frustration when teaching struggling readers. But she realized sometimes both she and her students were experiencing the same emotions. She stated,

> I have to persevere myself because there are days that I can sit there, and it's all I can do not to pull my hair out, not to just go—go, you know? Yeah. And then I think there's some days at some points you have to say, "Okay, stop. We'll come back to this tomorrow." Because you don't want to get so frustrated that the kids feel it either. So, I mean there are those days that I have to say, "Okay, stop. We'll come back to this tomorrow."

Tara explained that perseverance is important for her when she is working with struggling readers. There are times when she has had to take a break because despite attempts to explain a concept, sometimes struggling readers simply do not understand it. This is when she has to take a deep breath, step back, and tell her students to stop and they will try again the next day. Tara believed stopping is appropriate because she did not want her students to sense her personal frustration. Allowing them to see that she is frustrated would only cause them to shut down and lose self-confidence.

Alex felt some days were tougher than others because although she is a fourth-grade teacher, her students are reading on a primary grade level:

> Teaching the struggling reader can be very challenging and frustrating because sometimes you don't know where to go. You are sitting here, you are like, okay, I'm supposed to be teaching fourth grade, but yet my kids are on first or second grade, so what do you do to help build them?

Alex's experience is not uncommon. Many teachers experience frustration because a high number of their students are reading at a much lower level. Teachers struggle to identify the intervention needed to provide support for the student. Moreover, they struggle to be required to teach grade level content to students who are unable to grasp grade level text because they are reading at such low levels. This alone creates frustration for teachers, as they are not given additional resources or support to provide the instruction needed to ensure these students are successful.

Mary, too, felt frustration but believed if the students are feeling frustration, she too, as the sole provider of reading instruction, should feel frustrated also. She commented on her awareness:

> Frustration. Here's the deal. Because if the children are going through frustration, why shouldn't I feel it? And I don't mean that in a negative way. Because when there's frustration going on, you have to jump into the frustration in order to help those who are frustrated really to be able to come out. So I jump in with my frustration. I have peace, don't get me wrong, but when I get in, sometimes finding out really what the problem is, it's not always easy, and that's why I say frustration, I don't mean it in a negative way.

Mary used her students' frustration to drive her towards helping her students. She believed this was her opportunity to jump in and help students resolve their frustration by finding why they may not understand or comprehend the lesson being taught. This is Mary's fuel to aid in finding solutions to a problem instead of allowing her frustration to make her feel defeated.

Teachers and students experience frustration during the reading process. Teachers realized at the moment when their students show frustration, it is important to stop and come back to what they were working on later. Teachers also understood how important it was for their struggling readers to not see their frustration. Doing so could further discourage the reader from desiring to engage with text entirely. Despite their frustration, teachers remained committed to helping struggling readers engage and understand text.

Student Motivation

Teachers found a number of ways to motivate students to become better readers. Primarily, technology and reading programs were sole motivators for students. Teachers used specific technologies to monitor student progress through the use of online platforms and programs. Teachers saw that when struggling readers used these technologies, their motivation and engagement in the reading process increased.

Gail used accelerated reader in her classroom as a motivational tool. She believed in utilizing technology for her students to practice what they need:

> I use AR a lot as a motivational tool. I know they can't always read what they choose to read or what they want to read but if you can get them interested in something to use as that practice that they need, you know, that seems to help a lot.

Gail found that one must build a student's interest in reading. Teachers can do this by finding out what their students enjoy reading. The key to utilizing technology in an effective way is

to allow the technology to work on deficits that struggling readers may have (Hasselbring, 2012). The programs help improve those deficits and help students become better readers. However, teachers must consistently monitor computer programs in order to track student progress and ensure that utilization of the program is used to fidelity (Brann, Gray, & Zorfass, 2018). Some students may just randomly click buttons to finish the task.

Ann found that the use of technology has improved her struggling readers' confidence and motivation during small group instruction. She stated,

> Technology has been wonderful, you know, since we've been here and had the one-to-one and the iPads, that has been great. We have—they have iPads. Yes. And we have—this will be our fourth year, I think, in elementary. So, you know, and we have MacBooks available that we can use. But the technology part has made it so much easier. It has, I think, really helped them, because there's so many good and free stuff out there that can motivate them. Like right now, just this year, I've started using, she purchased for me, Learning A to Z. And I've never used it before.

Ann indicated that her school is a 1:1 technology school. Therefore, all students have their own devices to use during instruction. According to Ann, student access to technology has given her access to materials to use for students such as reading programs and games. Students enjoy these programs during their small group time. Students are even motivated with the technologies by way of competing with their peers to respond with the correct answer to a question. Ann found that her struggling readers work best in smaller groups centered about the use of technology during her lessons.

Sarah found several online games to be helpful with her students. Games that allow students to compete against each other or in a collaborative group were intriguing and engaging for struggling readers. She commented,

> Also, anything that includes technology. If we're doing a Kahoot, they do—like their score to be the highest. So they are working hard to answer those questions. Anything that includes technology, or when we're in small group. To me, their confidence is much better when I'm in a group of four other students, you know, than when I'm in front of 22. So I think small group as well helps a lot. So that's why I try to make sure that I get to it.

Sarah found that when students were competing and in smaller groups, student confidence improved. Therefore, in Sarah's class she utilized many games in small groups for students to use.

Cate used technology by way of the Accelerated Reader program. Students earned points by reading a book and answering questions online. Cate responded,

> Yes, I'm sorry, and AR points, also, being able to see how many AR points they have from reading and taking those tests, I think that's a big motivator also. We used to have AR parties, so they would definitely work for those points. And we also use I pads.

Cate found that her students worked really hard to earn accelerated reader points so they could participate in the AR parties. Cate set a goal each 9 weeks for her students to earn points. Their reading level determined the number of points students should earn. At the end of the 9 weeks, if a student had met their point goal, they were able to join in a celebration.

Cate found this to be a great motivator for her students and found it improved their reading simply by engaging them in the reading process routinely.

Tara used a myriad of things as motivators for students such as accelerated reader, pizza coupons, and homework passes. She stated,

> Okay, so schoolwide we do AR, which is not my favorite thing. But, so they have different point clubs that they can—that they earn, and our big one is our eagle's nest club, which is 100 points. My struggling readers are sitting at like 20 points because it's very hard to get them to read. So, when the Pizza Hut was open, I had these pizza coupons and if they met their goal, then they got—every month, they—I gave them a coupon to go get a free pizza, which is wonderful. They loved to go get the free pizza, I mean, you know? So this year's been a little more difficult, but as far as like their assessment pieces, with my first group, which is my regular class, I know that a 70 is a 3 on the End of Grade test. So if they make a 70, they can get a homework pass to use the next week on a spelling assignment. It's amazing what children will do for a free homework pass.

While Tara did not enjoy the Accelerated Reader program, she found it to be a motivator for her struggling readers. Students can earn a range of 20 to 100 points. Struggling readers find it difficult to reach the 100-point goal that would give them admittance into the Eagle's Nest Club. To provide students with alternatives, Tara gave her students a pizza coupon if they met their AR goal and a homework pass if they attained a grade of 70 on their reading assessments. She found that her struggling readers were motivated by these two incentives.

Alex also found the use of prizes as a motivator for her students. Students found they could earn stickers and participate in the balloon walk on Fridays. She stated,

> Right now some of my kids at—were struggling with those science and social studies articles, they are able to start earning stickers for like being able—like doing well on it, and then those stickers end up—ending up in a prize for them. So they are kind of motivated by a prize, or here we have an AR walk that once they've met 100 AR points they get to get a balloon and walk the halls on Fridays. So we're trying to help motivate them that way. I would motivate them by just being encouraging, not putting them down, and that seemed to help a whole lot.

Alex allowed her struggling readers to earn stickers when reading non-fiction articles in science and social studies. When these students were able to comprehend the text and answer questions accurately, students were awarded with a sticker. Alex found this to be a motivator for her students. She continued to motivate them by allowing them to participate in the balloon walk around the school on Fridays if they had earned their Accelerated Reader points. She further motivated them by never using negative words towards them when they struggled with reading and it appeared to help with seeing better student outcomes.

Mary, too, uses technology in her class to motivate her struggling readers. Waterford, MobyMax, and Accelerated Reader are technologies made available to her struggling readers. She commented,

> We use—and as a matter of fact, sometimes I would give them additional time if when they went on Waterford—because they had gone on—gone at least I think it was 15 to 20 minutes a day. If they went on, did well, when I went back in to take a look at their time, and also their score, if they did well, I would oftentimes give them additional time there. So again, taking the learning experience and giving them a double dose there without them really knowing it. Also, MobyMax for my fourth

> graders. There was something else I was, oh, I know what it was. In the reading, with AR, earlier this year, my students were struggling with really reading AR tests.

Mary used district programs to motivate her struggling readers. Many of these programs required students to engage with technological programs for an extended amount of time daily. Struggling readers must log-in to the Waterford program, read passages, and answer questions. The program was designed to help students improve their reading by targeting skill deficits. Consistent engagement should improve the students' reading ability and close gaps. Although her students continued to struggle with Accelerated Reader tests, she still required them to utilize the program.

Kelly also used Accelerated Reader as a motivational tool for struggling readers. She also monitored what they were reading on a daily basis. She stated,

> We had AR reading folders, they knew their own reading level, and that was something. I think that's important too, because a lot of students, they don't really know where they are. Like you give them a letter or a sticker of a certain color, and like, "These are the books that you can pick out," but they don't really understand what that means, and I conference with my students every week and make sure that they were picking books on their level, and not just books on their level, but like for example, like my boys will only want to read sports books, and I'm just like, "No, you can read one sports book on this week, but the other books need to be on different topics. We need to read some different nonfiction books and fiction books, we need to mix it up," and I think kind of pushing them to read different genres and to meet the goal of five AR books a week.

Kelly organized reading folders with each students' reading level on it. Many libraries color-code their books but for many struggling readers the color-coding lacks meaning. Therefore, Kelly gave them a reading level to use when selecting books and she conferenced with them to make sure they were picking good books across several genres. She required her struggling readers to read at least five Accelerated Reader books a week. She found that this focus and constant push kept them motivated about their reading.

Student motivation was a key factor in struggling readers becoming successful readers. In order to improve student motivation, teachers must build upon students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Many teachers use both ways to motivate students. For struggling readers, it is important to find out their reading interests in order to build their internal desire to read. It is also helpful to have external rewards for students to help motivate them to want to become better readers. The participants indicated the high results of using motivational tools for struggling readers.

Building Relationships

Another theme that emerged among participants was building relationships with students. When teachers build relationships, students tend to show more trust toward their teachers and more engagement in their academics. When building relationships with students, the teacher serves as a coach. In reading, teachers must talk to students about what they are reading and form a partnership. Having dialogue about the text enhances the social aspect of learning to read and reading to learn.

Gail pushed her students towards success despite students' disbelief in themselves. She set goals for each of her students and worked intentionally with each of them to meet their goals. She stated,

> Even though they don't believe in themselves, I make sure they know that I believe in them, and that I'm going do everything in my power to push you to get you where you need to go. I'm not going continue to let you be a failure.

Gail was dedicated to serving all of her students but made sure that she did not allow her struggling readers to feel like a failure. Gail pushed her students and provided them the instruction they needed to succeed.

Positive relationships have been found between effective teaching and student achievement (Stronge, 2007). Ann believed in building relationships with her struggling readers. She tried to make meaningful connections with them every day. She stated,

> Probably the relationships that I try to build with them, I think, are really important. Just trying to find a way to connect. I think if you don't have that connection with them, you're not going to—they're not going to want to work for you, and they're not going to—they're not receptive always to what you're saying to them or what the feedback you're trying to give them, they're not—so I think building relationships, and I think I've been doing better at learning how to do that, and kind of watching teachers that I see that do a good job of that.

Ann knew she must make a connection with her students in order to make them want to give their best effort academically. She has watched her colleagues do the same and tries to model what she saw from her colleagues. She knew that students did not care how much a teacher knew until they knew how much they cared.

Tara realized the importance of building a positive relationship with her students. She also worked to build a good rapport with them by treating them as if they were her own children. On building relationships, she commented,

> Well, I think in the whole spectrum, it's the relationship that you have with your kids, by far. If you can't have a good rapport and a good relationship with your kids, you can get them to do anything, absolutely anything. I mean, and anybody would tell you my babies are my babies, and they don't do nothing wrong. I can punish them. They're mine. I created them. I spoiled them. They're mine. And that goes for both of my classes. You know, I push my kids. I tell them, you know, "I know you can do it. Let's make, you know, let's show everybody else what you can do." But, it ultimately comes down to what kind of relationship do you have with your kids? If they know that you care and you love, then they'll do anything that they can to make you happy.

Tara related the personal relationship she had with her own children to the relationship she had with struggling readers in her classroom. She treated them as if they were own because she wanted them to know they were loved and that she wanted them to be happy. If her students can come to school happy, knowing their teacher loves them, they will work hard at school and show improvement.

Building relationships with students is a vital part of supporting them during the reading process (O'Donnell, 2018). Knowing students' reading interest opens the door for discussion about books and how to choose books of their interest (Tankersley, 2005). It also shows that teachers take a personal interest in knowing who their students are and involves empathy in understanding their struggles as readers and being committed to helping them improve (Hall, 2006). Teachers found when they build positive relationships with their struggling readers, they were better able to engage them in the reading process and reduce significant negative behaviors.

Reading Utopia

When teachers finished their programs of study in college, they indicated that they expected their experience as a teacher to be similar to their own growing up in school. They likened it to a reading utopia and all kids would be proficient in reading and reading on grade level. To their surprise, this was not the case when they began teaching. These teachers had to quickly adjust their perspective and ideas about the teaching and learning process of reading instruction.

Gail thought that all of her students would be ready. She would just have to plan her lessons and students would be able to follow along effortlessly. She responded,

> I guess I believed that everybody was going be ready. That everybody knew how to read and everybody knew how to understand what they were reading. And that I could just take my lessons that I had planned and just move right along. And not have to take tomorrow and finish what was not finished today because we didn't get there, you know, I think going into it, I thought that they would be just spot on and everybody would know how to decode and everybody would know all of the phonics that they needed to know and be able to go in there and find the evidence to answer questions and that was what I thought I would be going into.

Gail quickly discovered that many of her well-planned reading lessons would have to be extended into the next day or several days thereafter. Students may have been in the same grade but they were not at the expected reading levels. She thought it would be a perfect classroom and immediately discovered that it was not.

Sarah was prepared to differentiate her lessons as she had learned in college and have endless professional development, but it was not the case:

> I thought that I would come in, and I don't know why I thought that, you know, everybody would be on the same page. And you know, lesson plans would be great. Even though we differentiated lesson plans in college, it just—I don't know. And that I would have tons of, you know, professional development, tons of support. I guess I just had a utopia in my head of what my classroom would look like overall. I mean, that's the truth. That's really what I thought.

Sarah envisioned a utopia in her head of teaching reading to her students. She thought her school would provide professional development that would aid her in providing high quality reading instruction to her students. Sarah created what she thought were perfect lesson plans but they were not enough to respond to the many needs of her struggling readers.

Cate shared that she knew she would teach struggling readers but was surprised by the number of students who struggled to read:

> I knew that there would be struggling readers, I didn't know that there would be so many struggling readers, and so expected more, and even after teaching students how to read. I thought that I would show students how fun and important reading was, show them how I love to read, so—and just do different things with them to give them a lot of reading time and so that they can just have a love for reading, and I basically thought that once I taught them reading that they would be able to—that they would be proficient in reading.

Cate felt if she was able to show students how important it was to read and provide them with fun experiences in reading, they would develop an immediate love for reading and reach proficiency. She was surprised that it was not that easy. Students had so many struggles with

reading that her excitement alone as a teacher was not enough to give them what they needed.

Kelly imagined teaching reading would encompass small groups, talking about text and responding to questions. She stated,

> I mean, I just imagined that we were going to be doing like reading groups, and then talking about the book and answering questions like whole group, maybe like seminar style. Kids would be on the same reading level, that sort of thing, and everyone would be working and getting their work done, like I didn't think it was going to be like kids that could not answer the questions or didn't understand the questions 100%. Yeah, just like a lot of that. "I thought it would be similar to what I did growing up, but it's actually not. It's very different, because my first year, I learned very quickly that everyone is not on the same reading level.

Kelly quickly discovered that students sometimes responded to her teaching and other times they did not. Students did not always engage in the learning process the way that she thought they would. Due to many difficulties or learning gaps, oftentimes struggling readers were unable to simply refer back to the text and answer a question. Kelly found that this happens more often than not as a reading teacher.

In many schools the reading utopia experience is desired but non-existent. Teachers still have students who are not reading at grade level but are required to perform at high levels. Universities prepare teachers to teach students to read, but oftentimes the experience for teachers entering the field requires a much different skillset. Gaps in learning, lack of parental involvement, and lack of readiness of students contribute to the problems students

encounter with reading. These problems are difficult but not impossible to address or overcome.

Professional Development and Teacher Training

The last theme that emerged was the need for more professional development and teacher training on how to teach struggling readers. Training and support would help teachers improve their craft and learn explicit reading strategies to use with teaching struggling readers. The training must begin with university teacher training programs and in school districts with teachers who teach struggling readers.

Sarah wanted to do more for her students and she desired to know more about reading instruction to better serve them. She stated, "I feel like I want to know more, and to do more, like I want more professional development, only because we do have struggling readers and each year, it seems, their struggle, every student's struggle is different, I'll say that." Sarah desired more professional development to better understand how to address the many needs of her students. Each year she felt like more and more students are coming to her fourth-grade class below grade level. With the varying needs of her students, Sarah could benefit from professional development centered around grouping students in her classroom with similar needs and providing like instruction to each of them.

> Alex researched on her own ways to support her struggling readers. She said,
>
> Because when I first started I kind of felt a little bit lost, but then I researched it and found different techniques that would help the kids, knowing how to help a kid that's struggling versus a kid that is already on the ninth-grade level, there's a wide range in the classroom, so knowing how to reach each and every one.

Alex saw a wide range of abilities during her reading class. Some students were struggling while others were excelling. Therefore, she took it upon herself to find out how to teach each of those students and offer challenges. More support and professional development would help Alex differentiate her approach to teaching struggling readers in her classroom.

Gail found it hard to know what to do when a reader is struggling immensely. She responded, “It’s just hard sometimes to know what to do with Johnny sitting over here that is just struggling so hard, and then you’ve got Mary sitting over here that is, it’s just you feel pulled in so many directions.” Gail felt like she was pulled in so many directions with the varying needs of her students. More support and professional development from her school or district would help relieve the stress and challenge of not knowing how to best serve her struggling readers.

Universities must prepare teachers entering teacher education programs with more courses on how to teach struggling readers. School districts need to lend more support to teachers who teach struggling readers. Teachers are not well trained on how to address the many needs of struggling readers that they teach. Oftentimes they are left to figure out on their own how to approach the struggles that these students have or identify professional development opportunities that would help them in the classroom. Intense professional development and coaching opportunities would benefit these teachers tremendously.

Summary Responses to Research Questions

The following research questions were explored in this study.

1. What are elementary schools’ reading teachers’ perceptions and beliefs about their role as providers of reading instruction?

2. What are elementary schools' reading teachers' perceptions and beliefs about providing reading instruction to struggling readers?
3. What preconceived notions do elementary school teachers have about reading instruction?

According to the fourth-grade teachers, the elementary school teachers' perceptions and beliefs about their role as providers of reading instruction evolved as they provided instruction to their students. Many of them viewed themselves as facilitators. Cate expressed that "Facilitating reading and just scaffolding, just doing all the things that I need to do to help them to master reading." Determining where the students are in the reading process was crucial for many teachers. Identifying each student's reading level was most important before providing direct instruction. Ann expressed this by indicating,

> My role is to figure out where they are when they come to me. That's my role at the beginning of the year, to pinpoint, you know. Target some areas that we need to work—that are causing them to struggle as a reader, and then figure out a plan for how I can help them with those struggles that they have would be—and to motivate them to want to read.

As educators, the teachers thought it important that they knew their craft as reading teachers and relay content to students in a meaningful way. The ability to diagnose a student's deficiency is believed to be the foundation to executing their role as reading teachers. Alex stated the following, "My role as the instructional part would probably be knowing what I'm doing, like knowing how to teach reading. I need to know what instruction they should have gotten in Kindergarten through third, and fill in those gaps." Kelly

discussed how reading teachers must also be systematic in their approach to instruction. She stated,

> Well, specifically with the struggling readers, they benefit from that explicit instruction, and like it's not—you can't leave it, anything up to chance. I like having that same sort of routine, systematic way of doing things is something that those struggling readers need as well.

These teachers' perceptions and beliefs as providers of reading instruction have been a combination of learning how to identify strategies to support varying levels of students in the classroom and reflecting on their practices as teachers. Despite their own frustrations and student frustrations they work to help their struggling readers excel, never lowering their expectations.

In reference to the elementary school reading teachers' perceptions and beliefs about providing reading instruction to struggling readers, their primary strategy was to utilize small group instruction and to get the students as close as they could to scoring proficient on the End of Year formal assessments, although it may be nearly impossible for some students because they are so far behind academically. Gail stated,

> Trying to get them as far as I can. As close to grade level as I can. Because I know, you know, every day when I come in, I know that I'm not going to be able to get this group of kids where they need to be. I come to school every day knowing that they're not going to make a 3 or 4 on the EOG.

Mary expressed that even end of year assessments are a one-time snapshot of student progress. She stated,

> Other than testing? The data that you get from the test that they take is only a snapshot, true. In addition to looking at the educational records and seeing what the gaps were in the past, there is still no guarantee that the gaps were filled at the end of the year.

The participants discussed the importance of using small group instruction as an approach to help struggling readers foster a love of learning. Ann stated,

> I guess my strategies change, you know, but I think my role is probably the same, you know, I'm still trying to foster that love of learning, I'm still trying to figure out where their weak areas are and I'm still, you know, looking at data and planning lessons based on where I'm seeing those weaknesses.

Determining their students' weaknesses helps teachers target areas of support. Alex stated,

> For struggling readers you really have to sit there and work with them in a small group. Teaching them whole group is very difficult because each kid's on a different level. Those struggling readers need not—like one-on-one attention or in a small group, because sometimes they're embarrassed to read, and you have to make it a friendly environment to where they're not embarrassed.

Even in small groups teachers must sometimes give students one-on-one attention because students lack confidence reading aloud in front of their peers. This can be intimidating, so teachers must be in tune to their students and know how to support them.

Cate used small group instruction and a constant tracking of data on student progress for her struggling readers. Cate stated,

> Just making sure that I look at the data to see where they are, where they need to be and just kind of keeping up with it all year long. Small group, just working on it one-

> on-one, depending on if they need one-on-one, or a small group, helping them to be influencing with each other, reading out loud at the same time with each other, reading to a partner, and just using different strategies to help them.

Progress monitoring struggling readers reveals areas of concern, so that targeted instruction can begin sooner rather than later.

Overall teachers expressed that supporting students in the reading process and helping them learn how to become better readers was an important part of their perceptions and beliefs as the sole providers of reading instruction to struggling readers.

In relation to preconceived notions elementary school teachers have about reading instruction, teachers expected their experience to be similar to their own when they were in school. Ann stated,

> Probably more like what it was when I was going to school. You know, scripted. You know, more—a basal program or, you know, that's kind of what I envisioned, you know, your little small groups, and everybody has their book, and you know, you're going through this program.

However, when they entered the profession, their preconceived notions quickly dissipated as they had students in the same grade but reading on various grade levels. Kelly thought students would be reading at the same grade level since they were all in the same grade. She stated,

> I mean, I just imagined that we were going to be doing like reading groups, and then talking about the book and answering questions like whole group, maybe like seminar style. Kids would be on the same reading level, that sort of thing, and everyone would be working and getting their work done, like I didn't think it was going to be like kids

> that could not answer the questions or didn't understand the questions 100%. Yeah, just like a lot of that.

Tara wasn't sure what to expect but she knew that what she learned in college was not going to prepare her. She stated,

> I don't think any college can prepare you for what you face when you get out there, because I know myself, I need, I know what I need as a professional to make myself better, and I don't—and this may not be what the question asked, but I don't think that colleges prepare you for what you get when you get out. We talked about early literacy, and we talked about the early literacy assessment, but did I really know how to look at that assessment data and drill back.

Cate shared that while in school, she had experiences in schools but it did not prepare her well for the real experience upon graduating college. She stated,

> Of course we did practicums in school and those things and, you know, I knew that there would be struggling readers, I didn't know that I would see it at the capacity that I have seen it, and that was my, I mean I just, before, I didn't—I knew that there would be struggling readers, I didn't know that there would be so many struggling readers, and so I expected more, and even after teaching students how to read, I thought that I would show students how fun and important reading was, show them how I love to read and just do different things with them to give them a lot of reading time and so that they can just have a love for reading, and I basically thought that once I taught them reading that they would be able to and they would be proficient in reading.

Many of the participants expressed some idea of a reading utopia—a place where all students would be engaged in the reading process, read on grade level, and ready to interact with texts at high levels. Sarah expresses this idea during her interview. She stated,

> I thought that I would come in, and I don't know why I thought that, you know, everybody would be on the same page. And you know, lesson plans would be great. Even though we differentiated lesson plans in college, it just—I don't know. And that I would have tons of professional development, tons of support. I guess I just had a utopia in my head of what my classroom would look like overall. I mean, that's the truth. That's really what I thought.

The teachers found that reading utopia did not exist and they had to maintain high expectations and seek opportunities for professional development to prepare them to teach struggling readers.

Summary and Reflections of the Researcher

The participants selected for this study were identified as highly effective teachers. Many of these educators had taught reading for a number of years. Their experiences were similar to my own. As a former teacher of reading, listening to their experiences about struggling to find common ground with so many students reading at different levels, disengaged with the reading process, but still required to take high stakes assessments at the end of the year was nostalgic.

However, having high expectations of struggling readers was a key to making sure students were engaged in their own learning. Each of these teachers expressed the importance of having high expectations. Whether it is the utilization of technology, games, and rewards as motivators, a determination for each student to be successful was the sole motivator.

Participants noted that even if parents are not involved, they still were obligated to provide the support for struggling readers inside and outside of school. Like my own experience as a teacher, I recognized many parents did not have positive experiences with school, requiring the teacher to find ways to reconnect them with school in a positive way so they can be engaged in their child's learning.

I found it surprising when several participants indicated that they expected their teaching experience to be similar to their own growing up. This lends to the one-size-fits-all approach to education. All students do not learn in the same fashion. Having students read the same story from a basal reader, without differentiation is not helpful to students who are required to read more complex texts since the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. After interviewing each participant, the reality of teaching struggling readers and their experiences at the university was much different upon assuming their own classrooms.

Participants described explicit strategies they use to support struggling readers. While technology and small group instruction was mentioned across all interviews, it would have been powerful to hear in detail how they were able to successfully increase the reading levels of struggling readers. These teachers were clearly committed to supporting struggling readers, but making clear connections about why they were exemplary teachers could have been conveyed through the detailing of explicit strategies.

It was very interesting to learn that struggling readers are not alone in experiencing frustration during the reading process. Teachers expressed a great deal of frustration. Many times, they would abandon the reading process, take a moment to breath, and return to teaching the student. These teachers did this to avoid their students seeing them upset, which

is believed to cause more student frustration. Each of these teachers had an unwavering commitment to their students.

Despite their commitment, after graduating college, some of the teachers appeared to be naïve in their expectation that every student would be at or near similar reading levels. They quickly discovered that this was not the case and was "utopia"-like thinking. This belief does not align with research about differentiating instruction, scaffolding, and the importance of teaching reading at the student's instructional level. Instead, it is an unrealistic belief that is ungrounded in the personalization of learning.

Conclusion

The common themes from the interviews with the eight reading teachers were text comprehension, parent involvement, differentiation, explicit instruction, high expectations, small group instruction, teacher and student emotions, student motivation, building relationships, reading utopia, and professional development and teacher training. In Chapter 5, I discuss how the findings of this study fit into existing research and discuss the study's implications for practice and further research.

CHAPTER 5: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions and beliefs of elementary school teachers who teach struggling readers. Additionally, this study sought to contribute to the limited body of research related to teachers of struggling readers. When examining current literature and legislation (NCDPI, 2016) committed to improving literacy in grades K-3, it was important to study the perceptions and beliefs of teachers who teach struggling readers. The study was conducted in the elementary setting because research has established a strong correlation between children who learn to read early and easily and how they achieve academic success (NRTAC, 2010).

The face-to-face interviews were the data source in the study. The interviews took place between exemplary reading teachers who worked in the same rural public school district located in eastern North Carolina. They also met the following criteria: they (a) must be an elementary school teacher, (b) serve students in a school that is 80-90% free and reduced lunch, (c) must have taught fourth grade at least one year prior to the 2017-2018 school year, (d) exceeded growth based on the Educator Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS), and (e) teach in a rural school district in a school with a performance grade of D.

The interviews provided information to help understand the perceptions and beliefs of elementary school teachers who teach struggling readers. The nature of this study was qualitative and interpretive. One-on-one interviews with a sample of eight elementary school teachers were conducted so that they could share their experiences with teaching struggling readers. During interviews the participants shared the following: they (a) described their perceptions and beliefs about their role as providers of reading instruction, (b) described what

their perceptions and beliefs were about providing reading instruction to struggling readers, and (c) described their preconceived notions about the teaching of reading instruction.

Chapter 4 highlighted the participants and the common themes from interviews from elementary school teachers along with the responses to the research questions provided throughout the interviews. In this chapter, the study's findings are situated within existing research and the implications for further research and practice are discussed.

Discussion

Schools and teachers need to close the achievement gap between struggling and non-struggling readers (Ryan, 2008). Blair et al. (2007) state that teachers who were viewed as exemplary instructors provided the same literacy materials and activities to struggling readers that they provided to non-struggling readers, using explicit and comprehensive instructional approaches. In interviewing eight highly effective reading teachers in a rural eastern North Carolina school district, several common themes arose. These themes were text comprehension, parent involvement, difficulty differentiating instruction, explicit instruction, high expectations, small group instruction, teacher and student emotions, student motivation, building relationships, reading utopia, and professional development and teacher training. Research on assessments to determine reading levels, progress monitoring, beliefs about literacy, small group instruction, professional development, and student motivation was presented in Chapter 2, which correlates with the themes that arose during the interviews. Table 4 identifies common themes from participant's interviews that correlate with research from chapter 2.

Table 4

Common Themes and Research Correlations

Common Themes from Interviews	Research from Chapter 2
• Text Comprehension a Priority • Parent Support & Involvement • Difficulty Differentiating Instruction • Explicit Instruction • High Expectations • Small Group Instruction • Teacher and Student Emotions • Student Motivation • Building Relationships • Reading Utopia • Professional Development and Teacher Training	• Assessments to Determine Reading Levels • Progress Monitoring • Beliefs about Literacy • Small Group Instruction • Professional Development • Student Motivation

Assessments to determine student reading levels were discussed in the interviews with each teacher. Students in kindergarten through third grade are monitored on their progress through the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). DIBELS is an assessment of short fluency measures used to monitor pre-reading and emergent reading skills. DIBELS is part of the Reading First Initiative, which originated from NCLB. DIBELS tests early literacy in the areas of phonological awareness, alphabetic principles, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency related to text (University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning, 2007). While this assessment was not administered to students to assess reading levels in fourth grade, teachers reviewed this information in their cumulative folders to determine student reading levels.

Participants cited the use of Accelerated Reader assessments. At the schoolwide level, teachers use the STAR Reading (STAR) and Accelerated Reader (AR) assessments to

monitor at-risk readers' progress. Endorsed by the NAEP, STAR uses personalized practice tests to determine a student's appropriate reading level. Furthermore, STAR assessments personalize reading practice with four kinds of reading quizzes: reading practice, vocabulary, literacy skills, and textbook quizzes. Both tests are computer-generated to yield immediate results (Renaissance Learning, 2008). Across all interviews, participants recognized the critical role reading assessments played in identifying learning goals for their students.

Monitoring student progress of struggling readers was identified among participants during the interviews. Effective teachers use progress monitoring to help identify the needs of underachieving readers. The desired outcome of progress monitoring are to identify underperforming students and to create effective programs for them (Safer & Fleischman, 2005). Teachers indicated if students met or exceeded reading expectations; they continued to provide instruction to each student in a similar fashion. If the student performance on the progress monitoring measurement did not meet the expectation, then the teacher quickly adjusted their approach to instruction. Students also found progress monitoring helpful in knowing where they stood academically and what they needed to do in order to achieve their reading goals.

As cited in Chapter 2, progress monitoring is necessary for teachers to ensure that all students become fluent readers and writers (Hasbrouck, 2006). Early and frequent monitoring can help to significantly prevent reading difficulties (Hasbrouck, 2006). Effective teachers incorporate progress monitoring daily and use the outcomes to guide their reading instruction for individual students and the entire class (Strickland et al., 2002). Teachers can (a) monitor students as they read and write; (b) take anecdotal notes of literacy events, such as oral language fluency and word recognition skills; (c) hold regular conferences with students; and

(d) collect students' work samples (Thompkins, 2003). Teachers found progress monitoring to be useful when tracking students' progress in reading at specific intervals during the school year. However, participants did not discuss the importance of progress monitoring in depth.

Participants expressed their beliefs about reading instruction during the interviews. As cited in Chapter 2, Gomez et al. (2007) conducted a study that found that reading teachers' beliefs about literacy instruction and struggling readers affect their practice of teaching reading. Teachers' beliefs also affect their classroom environments, especially when their struggling reader students are from diverse backgrounds (Love & Kruger, 2005). The participants expressed a belief that students should be able to read fluently by the time they arrived to fourth grade. Many of these teachers struggled to articulate the skillset needed in order to provide high quality instruction to struggling readers as they lacked the proper training from their teacher education programs. Despite their lack of training, teachers felt it was their role and responsibility to still work diligently with their struggling readers to assist them in becoming better readers.

Teachers make decisions based upon their beliefs and pre-service preparation. Further, in-service work highly impacted their perceptions and beliefs. While serving as teachers, they better understood their needs as professionals in order to make instructional decisions in the best interest of their struggling readers. These decisions directly affect student outcomes and classroom environments (Brownell & Pajares, 1996; Graham & Pajares, 1997). Participants did not confuse the teaching of content with the teaching of reading. There was a clear understanding that in order for students to understand the content, they first had to be able to decipher what they were reading. Lacina and Watson (2008)

asserted that effective teachers understand the developmental changes these learners encounter and plan instruction that teaches them how to read and interact with content area text.

Providing small group instruction to struggling readers was critical for all fourth-grade teachers interviewed in this study. Teachers indicated the importance of having small groups of three to four students who are reading at the same grade level. Elementary reading teachers use small group instruction to provide high quality instruction and to teach reading strategies to students who struggle in reading. As cited in Chapter 2, Allington (2006) purported that struggling readers do not benefit from whole-group instruction; instead, they need explicit individualized instruction in smaller groups. Strickland et al. (2002) agreed that effective teachers support struggling readers by planning small group instruction targeted to their learning abilities. To increase the effectiveness of small-group instruction, students with similar needs should be grouped together (Allington, 2006; Torgesen, 2004). This approach to instruction ensures that all learners will have their needs met within one lesson (Allington, 2006).

The instruction utilized during small group is more so individualized, targeted, and intense. Oftentimes, during small groups, teachers remediate deficiencies and skills students lack from the prior grades. Participants expressed small group is done every day with their students and sometimes, teacher assistants come in and multiple small groups are occurring at one time. Vaughn et al. (2001) suggested that many benefits of small group instruction have been identified by researchers such as maximized instruction and instruction that matches the students' academic performance level.

Participants cited a need for more professional development centered around struggling readers. Teachers who were interviewed in this study stated that professional development on struggling readers should be ongoing and job-embedded as they find themselves unprepared to address the many needs of struggling readers. Effective reading instruction requires specific professional development that targets the skill and knowledge related to specific teaching and learning objectives (Strickland et al., 2003). Reading instruction has many complex elements, such as assessment of different students' skills and abilities, understanding of students' difficulties, and design of an individualized reading program. Teachers who engage in quality professional development receive support in learning advanced skills and strategies to improve student achievement (Ganser, 2000).

Fostering a love for reading in their students is an important goal for many teachers. They understand that motivated readers become more capable readers (Duffy-Hester, 1999; Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Kiriakidis, 2010; Strickland et al., 2002; Thompkins, 2003). Participants in this study expressed the importance of motivating struggling readers. Teachers found technology to be highly motivating for students. Participants used technology during small group instruction and during learning centers in reading. Children's motivation to read and write are influenced by many factors such as their interest, attitude, and engagement. Additionally, no two students are motivated to read in the same way (Strickland et al., 2002). Teachers used a myriad of ways to motivate readers such as rewards, free-time, stickers, and praise.

In Chapter 2, Costa and Kallick (2000) cited that praise is a motivational factor that can have an important place in class when used carefully. For example, when students demonstrate an effort to follow directions or improve antisocial behaviors, teacher praise is

warranted and helps reinforce the desired behavior. Additionally, "when praise is used in class, it is important to describe the criteria for the praise. What makes an act 'good' or 'excellent' must be communicated along with the praise" (Costa & Kallick, 2000, p. 11).

Marzano et al. (2001) posited five aspects of motivation: drive, attrition, self-worth, emotions, and self-system. Each participant expressed these as important factors for struggling readers. Participants found that being in tune to how struggling readers viewed themselves informed them on how to motivate students. Struggling readers who have a poor view of themselves tend to disengage from the reading process.

Very few participants mentioned the impact of policy on their practices as educators. Although I didn't ask specifically about policy, it was surprising that they didn't comment about it. It could be that the questions I asked didn't trigger participants to think about policy or that it is so ingrained in their work that they didn't think to comment on it. Many federal and state accountability measures were met by teachers with a drive to meet the demands required by law. Teachers mentioned that lessening the number of standardized tests and assessments would be helpful in removing the pressure students feel as the amount of testing and assessing has become burdensome.

Implications for Research

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions and beliefs of elementary school teachers who teach struggling readers. For the majority of teachers in this study, they accepted their role as the sole provider of reading instruction. Without accepting this role, they could not be described as the reading teacher and could not provide highly effective lessons for struggling readers. These teachers were highly effective at teaching struggling readers and thus produced academic gains for their students. Each of these teachers provided

systematic instruction to all students. However, participants struggled to identify skill deficiencies and strategies that would improve those areas. These findings suggest there are implications for further research in the area of policy, reading instruction, and professional development.

If current local, state, and national policies hope to improve literacy outcomes of elementary students, they must first understand the perceptions and beliefs of teachers who provide reading instruction. The North Carolina legislature has implemented policies to end social promotion for those students who do not demonstrate proficiency on the third-grade North Carolina reading assessment, which places pressure on teachers to certify their students are reading on grade level despite how far students are behind, lack of parental support, and other factors. Drummond (2005) asserts that struggling readers experience difficulty catching up with their peers to become good readers and are at risk of failing in later grades.

Policies that demand compliance without research to support the initial implementation of the policy may only cause more frustration with teachers and eventually cause more students to fall behind. While the intent of legislation such as the revision of the Every Student Succeeds Act is to raise accountability across states to improve educational gaps amongs underserved students, there is no current research to demonstrate how these policies have positively achieved the result for which the policies were intended. A study that could measure the effectiveness of current reading education policies is an area for further research.

Effective reading teachers are important to successful classroom reading programs (Blair et al., 2007). Their knowledge of how to approach instruction explicitly for students

who are struggling readers is critical for their success. When teachers are aware of the factors that place students at risk for failure, they can better support them in reading instruction (Strickland et al., 2002). University programs and school districts should work together to provide teachers with explicit strategies to use when instructing struggling readers. Professional development focused on proven instructional techniques that promote improved reading should be extended to teachers. Early intervention that focuses on fluency and comprehension would be helpful for teachers to explore more in-depth. A study that measures professional development designed to improve reading outcomes using specific strategies is an area for further research as well.

A study identifying what reading strategies are most effective, as judged by highly effective reading teachers must also be explored. Highly effective reading teachers could potentially identify explicit strategies that improve a struggling readers ability to decode and comprehend text.

Implications for Practice

The implications of this research are imperative to improve the quality of reading instruction teachers extend to students. Participants demonstrated different levels of knowledge of reading instruction. Although they all had a high level of effectiveness, they struggled to clearly define how they were able to support struggling readers. While they had similar perceptions and beliefs about reading, they all entered the field of education from various backgrounds, experiences that either collided or merged depending on the context, which impacted what they believed about reading instruction and how they perceived their students.

Not many of these teachers' beliefs held strong on their teacher training programs, which implies that teacher education programs do not necessarily shape the beliefs of students; instead, teachers' beliefs lied much in their own personal experiences. In fact, most participants were committed to finding ways to build their knowledge to better support struggling readers. It was clear that a one-size-fits-all approach to professional development had not been helpful; rather, time spent collaborating with other teachers and discussing strategies and approaches specific to students who were not reading at grade level was most beneficial. Therefore, structured professional development opportunities and increased time for collaboration also impact and shape teacher beliefs.

Teachers find value in working with their colleagues. Merging their perceptions and beliefs with mutual collaboration is a natural aspect for teachers to be successful at their craft. As teachers work to improve their craft, they gain knowledge about themselves. There is a need for teachers to be involved in the decision-making about the professional development they need. Teachers who engage in quality professional development receive support in learning advanced skills and strategies to improve student achievement (Ganser, 2000). This process of professional development must be continuous.

The constant assessing of students and stringent local, state, and national policies are cited as hindrances to having time to provide students with actual instruction. Less assessing and more teaching would be valued from professional educators and could help improve reading instruction and student mastery of reading.

Further, could it be that the job of teaching has become so challenging that it is no longer doable as teachers have become so overwhelmed with the requirements and complexities of the job. Just as teachers have utopia like thinking when it comes to teaching

reading; perhaps legislators share utopia like thinking when creating policies that demand unrealistic expectations, such as all students reading proficiently by the end of a certain grade. Policy must be aligned to the realities of practice. Policy makers appear to be divorced from the realities of practice. This makes us question how should policy be modified.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation of qualitative research is that interview methodologies assume participants are able to clearly describe their beliefs and perceptions in one instance, when in reality all one can hope to gain is a particular understanding of a moment that is subject to multiple influences (Glesne, 2010). Although this study aimed to describe these teachers' perceptions and beliefs about struggling readers, it was not enough to change what they believed about their approach to instruction or preconceived notions about reading. Nor would it be enough to ensure they were able to reach all struggling readers in their classrooms. One can only hope to have helped them be reflective practitioners and to consider the issues from a different perspective.

The number of participants in this study was small and the results cannot be generalized to other populations. Furthermore, this study only examined one case of teachers who taught a single grade level, which makes it difficult to generalize the results to other situations. It must also be recognized that this case was viewed through a single lens of the researcher. In case studies, the researcher is the primary agent of data collection and analysis. This opens the study to researcher bias. There were no observations of teachers working with students, so this was limited to the participants' own perceptions and beliefs.

Conclusion

The teacher learning and reflection process is complicated. This study sought to analyze the perceptions and beliefs of elementary school teachers who taught struggling readers. The context was a group of fourth-grade teachers who were teaching fourth-grade students after the passage of the Excellent Public Schools Act in North Carolina in 2012, which ended the social promotion of students after third grade. It appeared that even after six years of the passing of this legislation, Read to Achieve legislation seem to have no positive impact on students achievement and students still entered fourth grade reading below grade level.

The teachers in this study were identified as having exemplary results with teaching struggling readers. They discussed how they motivate students, progress monitor student learning, and involve parents in their classrooms. They were reflective about their beliefs and were committed to improving learning for all of their students. Teachers who believe and perceive their role as having a direct impact on student learning have a stronger sense of self-efficacy (Hansen, 2009). Their participation in the study challenged them to reflect deeply and examine what they believed about reading instruction and struggling readers. They were challenged to identify factors that hindered their effectiveness and how to overcome those challenges to make them even better teachers of reading. Their conversations were rich and showed that much work must be done across America's school to address the problem of struggling readers. Much of this work must be addressed in early childhood, as literacy is a vital skill for the success of all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Instead of discussing how policies impact their work, participants focused steadfastly on understanding the pedagogy of reading. They utilized their colleagues as invaluable

resources to support their work and recognized that their approach to teaching and learning had to be challenged. A delicate balance must be struck between teacher autonomy and collaboration. The knowledge that teachers possess collectively paves the way for the success of all students. Participants in this study knew how important it was to know the science behind their instruction and to be highly effective in practice; as the future of literacy in America is dependent upon the daily work done in classrooms by excellent teachers.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Protocol and Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in research on the perceptions and beliefs of elementary school teachers who teach struggling readers.

You have agreed to participate in this interview. The interview will be audio recorded. This interview will take between 45 and 60 minutes to complete. During the interviews my desired outcomes are to explore your experiences, perceptions and beliefs about teaching struggling readers. The information in the interview will be used solely for research. Your responses will remain confidential. You will not be identified by your name in my dissertation. With your permission, I would like to record our conversation, so that I am able to accurately capture your responses.

Interview Questions

1. Introductions

- Please state your name
- Educational background
- Years of experience in education
- How long have you taught this grade?
- What grade do you teach?

2. What are elementary schools reading teachers' perceptions and beliefs about their role as providers of reading instruction?

- What do you perceive as your as role as a teacher of reading?
- What do you believe about your role as a provider of reading instruction?
- Describe your experience as a teacher of reading?

3. What are elementary school reading teachers' perceptions and beliefs about providing reading instruction to struggling readers?

- What do you perceive as your role as teacher of struggling readers?
- What do you believe about your role as a provider of reading instruction to struggling readers?
- Describe your experience as a teacher of struggling readers?
- What instructional strategies do you use to motivate struggling readers?
- What do you believe makes you an effective teacher of struggling readers?

4. What preconceived notions do elementary school teachers have about reading instruction?

- What did you believe about reading instruction prior to teaching struggling readers?
- What did you expect from your students?
- How has what you believed changed based on your experience as a reading teacher?
- How has your expectations of your student changed based on your experiences?

4. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix B

Study Recruitment Letter

Dear Principal:

I am researching the perceptions and beliefs of elementary school teachers who teach struggling readers. As a former language and literacy teacher, I would like for you to identify teachers eligible to participate in my research study. Eligibility criteria are as follows:

1. The individual must be an elementary school teacher, teaching in a school that receives 80%-90% free lunch,
2. Taught fourth grade at least one year prior to the 2017-2018 school year,
3. Exceeded growth based on the Educator Evaluation System, and
4. Currently teaches in a rural school district with a performance grade of a D.

Participants will partake in an individual interview, which will take no longer than an hour and will take place at your school. In the interview teachers will be asked to share perceptions and beliefs as a teacher who teaches struggling readers. They will receive all interview questions prior to the interview.

Please provide me with a list of teacher candidates in your school eligible to participate in the study. Your list can be sent to smlassit@ncsu.edu. Thank you for your consideration. Please feel free to contact me if you have any additional questions.

Sincerely,

Steve M. Lassiter, Jr.

Appendix C

Participant Disclosure Letter

Participant Disclosure Letter

I am researching the perceptions and beliefs of elementary school teachers who teach struggling readers. As a former language and literacy teacher, I would like for you to participate in my research study.

Agreeing to participate will require you to participate in an individual interview, which will take no longer than an hour and will take place at your school. In the interview you will be asked to share perceptions and beliefs as a teacher who teaches struggling readers. You will receive all interview questions prior to the interview.

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. Professional risk may be associated with the participation of this study. Participants are asked to be candid in their responses. All responses are confidential. No information will be disclosed that could link research data to the participants.

The benefits to this study to you are indirect. The indirect benefit includes assisting school districts, university programs and state policy makers in understanding the teachers perspective in teaching struggling readers and assist teachers in better teaching struggling readers.

The information in your interview will be used solely for research and will remain confidential. Data will be stored securely on a password protected USB drive then will be transferred to a laptop then saved which will remain with the researcher during the duration of the research project. At the completion of the project all data will be deleted. No reference will be made in oral or written reports, which could link you to the study.

Thank you for your consideration. An **Informed Consent Form for Research** is attached that can provide additional information. Please feel free to contact me if you have any additional questions.

Sincerely,

Steve M. Lassiter, Jr.

Appendix D

Participant Informed Consent Form

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Study: **Reading Foundations: The Perceptions and Beliefs of Elementary School Teachers Who Teach Struggling Readers**

Principal Investigator: **Steve M. Lassiter, Jr.** Faculty Sponsor: **Dr. Lance D. Fusarelli**

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions and beliefs of teachers who teach struggling readers in elementary schools.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to contribute by way of individual interview. The individual interview, which will take no longer than an hour will take place at your school. You will be asked about your experiences as teacher teaching struggling readers. You will receive all interview questions prior to the interview. Your individual interview will be audio recorded.

Risks

Professional risk may be associated with the participation of this study. Individual interview questions will focus on perceptions and beliefs about teaching struggling readers. Participants are asked to be candid in their responses. No information will be disclosed that could link research data to the participants.

Benefits

The indirect benefit includes assisting school districts, university programs and state policy makers in understanding the teachers perspective in teaching struggling readers and assist teachers in better teaching struggling readers.

Confidentiality

The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely on a password protected USB drive then will be transferred to a laptop then saved which will remain with the researcher during the duration of the research project. At the completion of the project all data will be deleted. No reference will be made in oral or written reports, which could link you to the study..

Compensation

You will not receive anything for participating.

What if you have questions about this study?

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Steve Lassiter at smlassit@ncsu.edu.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the NCSU IRB office at irb-director@ncsu.edu or by phone at (919/515-4514).

Consent To Participate

"I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled."

Subject's signature_____ **Date** _____

Investigator's signature_____ **Date** _____