READING INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS WITH READING DISABILITIES

THE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS INFLUENCING THE TEACHING

PRACTICES OF ELEMENTARY SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS WHEN WORKING

WITH STUDENTS WITH READING DISABILITIES

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READING INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS WITH READING DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

Students with a reading disability often struggle to become proficient readers. The learning support teachers challenged with the job of teaching these students to read can significantly affect the level to which they become competent readers. However, without scientifically-based reading instruction, many students will struggle with the reading process, and many will not learn to read at a proficient level. Therefore, it was the purpose of this qualitative research study to explore the lived experiences of elementary special education teachers currently teaching reading to students with reading disabilities. Through the use of a hermeneutic phenomenological design, the researcher utilized questionnaires and semi-structured interviews of elementary learning support teachers in order to develop a deeper understanding of the internal and external factors that affect their practice. The researcher subsequently transcribed, coded, and analyzed the content of the interviews to identify themes within three broad categories: 1) internal factors influencing the teaching practices of elementary special education teachers as they teach students with a reading disability to read, 2) external factors influencing the practices of elementary special education teachers as they teach students with a reading disability to read, and 3) specialized knowledge that special education teachers possess and apply when teaching students with a reading disability to read. Through this study, the researcher sought to better understand these factors and how they affect the practices carried out by special education teachers in their pursuit of teaching students to read proficiently. The insights garnered through this process illuminated the importance of understanding how various factors influence how special education teachers plan and carry out specialized reading instruction for students with reading disabilities.

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DEDICATION

To all of my former, current, and future students, it is my honor to dedicate this work to you.

You are the reason I strive to be the best educator I can be. I learn for you and I learn from you.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Background of the Study

Years of research on the science of reading has answered the basic question of how a person becomes a reader. However, what does this look like in practice? Little is known about what practices are actually being implemented by special education teachers in their quest to teach students with reading disabilities to read. Moreover, few research studies exist that examine the reasons why special education teachers choose to employ certain practices and not others (Cunningham et al., 2009). Most teachers want their students to succeed, however recent studies show that lack of information about the results and findings of scientific research seem to be one reason that some teachers are still relying on instruction that has been proven by science to be ineffective (Moats, 2020; Kilpatrick, 2015; Seidenberg, 2017; Wexler, 2019). Other experts in the field believe it may be more of an issue that what the science of reading is reporting, is counter to what some teachers believe about the nature of teaching reading (Lyon, 1998; Moats, 2020; Stanovich, 1993). Multiple theories in education suggest that teachers rely on their own underlying ideas and theories when teaching students to read (Clark & Peterson, 1985; Stanovich, 1993; Wilson & Peterson, 2006). In addition, many researchers are beginning to investigate the role of schools of education and how they prepare pre-service teachers to teach reading to students. The result is that one of the greatest hindrances to teaching children to read, is not lack of research, but rather lack of research in practice.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the state of research and practice as it relates to the teaching of reading to students with reading disabilities. The chapter is divided into six main sections: (1) statement of the problem, (2) purpose of the study, (3) factors that affect how educators teach reading, (4) research questions, (5) definitions of key terms, and (6)

delimitations. Finally, the information presented in this chapter will be synthesized to demonstrate the need for research that investigates the ways in which elementary special education teachers are putting into practice the research that exists about teaching reading to students with reading disabilities.

Statement of the Problem

Whether it is because the research is not being disseminated to teachers or that the research is disseminated but rejected by teachers due to underlying ideologies that run contrary to the research, the result is the same, many American students are not learning to read at a proficient level. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 35% of our nation's fourth grade students were reading at or above a proficient level in 2019 (NAEP, 2019). This number is far below what research predicts. According to evidence from various research studies, approximately 95 percent of all students can be taught to read at a proficient level. The next sections will describe why reading must be explicitly taught to students with reading disabilities, the repercussions for not learning to read well, and why some teachers may continue to use ineffective practices when teaching reading.

Importance of Proficient Reading: Present and Future

The inability to read at a proficient level has many negative repercussions. A child's failure to acquire reading skills affects almost all other learning including math, history, and science (Seidenberg, 2017). Some have even suggested that the inability to read is not just an education problem, but also a public health concern (Lyon, 1998). Students who struggle to learn to read are also more likely to drop out of high school. According to a national study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1 in 6 children with reading skills below proficiency, do not graduate from high school on time, or at all (Hernandez, 2012). In addition, studies have found

that students with poor reading skills are more likely to experience socio-emotional maladjustment. (Morgan et al., 2016). Poor reading skills affect learning in other subjects, the likelihood of earning a high school diploma, and how a child feels socially and emotionally. Difficulty in learning to read can affect all aspects of a child's life.

Children who do not learn to read, grow up to be adults who cannot read. This has serious consequences. Studies have shown that adults with low levels of literacy were 16.5 times more likely to have received public financial aid in the last year (Wood, 2010). In addition, adults with low literacy levels working full time were among the lowest paid, many earning less than $300 per week (Wood, 2010). The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) found that adults demonstrating "below basic" literacy skills were also less likely to have completed high school, be in good or excellent health, or registered to vote (2003). Failure to teach children to read well can have consequences that will affect their future health and well-being.

An Unnatural Process

Unlike learning to speak, reading is not a natural process. Long before the written word existed, humans learned to communicate orally through speech. Any child, unless neurologically or hearing impaired, will learn to talk (Moats & Tolman, 2009; Seidenberg, 2017; Shaywitz, 2003). Reading is not natural and cannot be learned simply through exposure. The human brain is not wired to read. Therefore, for most students, reading must be taught (Moats & Tolman, 2009; Shaywitz, 2003). The idea that people learn to read naturally through immersion in print, results in misguided instructional practices (Moats & Tolman, 2009). Most students must be explicitly taught how to read, and there is an abundance of research available to inform practice.

Factors That Affect How Educators Teach Reading

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There are many factors that inform a teacher's practice. Undergraduate courses, pre-teaching experiences, teaching experiences, professional development, personal experience, and educational theory are among the multitude of factors. Understanding the internal and external factors guiding and informing the practice of teaching reading is paramount. How reading is taught can significantly affect the level of difficulty a child will have in learning to read (Shaywitz, 2003). Failure to implement scientifically-based practices can be detrimental to students with reading disabilities. Reading disability is estimated to make up at least 80 percent of all learning disabilities. This is equivalent to about 3.5 percent, or slightly more than 2 million American children that are receiving special education service for a reading disability (Shaywitz, 2003). Knowing how to teach these children to read can be the determining factor as to whether or not they learn to read well. Research shows that classroom teaching, when based on scientifically-based research and practice, can reduce or even prevent reading difficulties in most students (Cunningham et al., 2009; Moats, 2020). Teacher knowledge and practice are significantly related to reading outcomes in students.

Research is not in the Hands of Educators

So why are ineffective practices still being utilized? One reason is that the research has not been disseminated to those in the field. Recent research has begun to focus on the role colleges of education play in promulgating the use of ineffective strategies (Cunningham et al., 2009; Kilpatrick, 2015; Moats 2020; NRP, 2000; Seidenberg, 2017; Shaywitz, 2003; Spear-Swerling, 2019). If teacher educators are unaware of the research in reading, they will be unable to share it with their pre-service teaching students. In addition, Moats (2020) writes, "There is an unfortunate misalignment between what is typically taught to prospective teachers and what is consistent with research… textbooks and course content often include theories and practices that

are directly contradicted by research" (p. 10). Once pre-service teachers transition to in-service teachers, they must rely primarily on professional development opportunities. Research has shown that the number of years of experience in teaching does not drastically affect practice as related to teaching reading (Cunningham et al., 2009; Moats, 2020; Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2012). The art of teaching reading cannot be learned solely through "in the field" experience or intuition. In other words, teachers do not know what they have not been taught.

Another reason that research is not ending up in the hands of teachers is lack of access. Once pre-service teachers graduate, they lose their access to university libraries. Much of the research published on the science of reading is only published in journals that are relatively inaccessible to teachers. In addition, teaching can be described as more than a full-time job (Gates Foundation, 2012). Most teachers spend many hours outside of the school day working on tasks such as lesson planning, mentoring, and communicating with parents, leaving little time to read education journals. Furthermore, research published in journals rarely explains how the findings can be directly applied to teaching. Teachers typically must rely on their school district curriculum, state standards, and the particular textbook series their school has adopted. These factors hinder a teacher's ability to apply research to practice. In regards to the nation's Common Core Standards (2010), it has been argued that their content in the early grades have not been helpful in guiding teachers in the use of effective practices (Moats, 2020*; Seidenberg, 2017). Educators lacking a strong background in the science of reading will have an especially difficult time using Common Core Standards to inform practice.

The Reading Wars- Theories of How Students Learn to Read

Another reason that ineffective practices still exist is the primarily philosophical debate known as the "reading wars". The reading wars created an ideological "line down the middle"

approach to teaching reading. On one side of the line are those that believe students will learn to read simply through exposure. This is referred to as the "whole language" approach to teaching reading (Goodman, 1967). In this approach, teachers are guides and students are leading the way. Advocates of whole language assume that just as children learn to speak through exposure to language, they will learn to read through exposure to the printed word (Goodman, 1967). One of the most common practices in a whole-language classroom is the three-cueing approach or MSV. MSV stands for "meaning, structure, visual". Upon encountering an unknown word when reading, students are taught to ask themselves, "does it look right (visual), sound right (structure), and make sense (meaning)?" With this approach, when the student makes a reading error, the teacher prompts the student by saying things like, "look at the picture" or "what is the first letter in the word that's tricking you" or "what is a word that begins with that sound that would make sense here". Gay Su Pinnell, Irene Fountas, Lucy Calkins, Kenneth Goodman, and Richard Allington have been among the most vocal advocates of whole language reading, with Fountas and Pinnell creating leveled reading assessments, leveled reading books, and developing reading curriculums based on this method. One such intervention is Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI). This was designed to instruct struggling readers and relies on the three-cueing system, or MSV (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009). Many well-intentioned teachers have adopted this theory of teaching reading, implementing it with some of their lowest-performing readers. It is currently being utilized in many classrooms across the country, though research has shown that the strategies taught using this approach, are actually the strategies that poor readers rely on (Kilpatrick, 2015; Moats, 2020; Spear-Swerling, 2019; Stanovich, 1993). When a student cannot read well, he is forced to rely on picture clues and guessing. Research has shown that these are not the strategies that proficient readers use.

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On the other side of the reading wars are the proponents of phonics instruction. Proponents of phonics instruction cite research about the importance of teaching students the code. English is an alphabetic orthography, meaning that the letters in words represent sounds. English is not a 1:1 orthography which means that there are not an equal number of letters and sounds. English is considered to have a deep orthography and has been shown to be more difficult to read than languages such as Italian, Spanish, German, Finnish, Turkish, and other languages which have shallow orthographies (Seidenberg, 2017). The shallower an orthography, the easier it is to read because the relationship between letters and sounds is more consistent. Proponents of phonics instruction argue that without understanding the English code, students cannot learn to read. This side of the debate has been criticized by whole-language proponents for too much reliance on "skill and drill" type exercises and worksheets. Whole-language proponents argue that students will never learn to love reading if they are taught in this way.

In an effort to meet in the middle, balanced literacy emerged. Proponents of balanced literacy propose that students should have a balance of phonics instruction and exposure to authentic texts. Balanced literacy proponents have held on to the major tenets of whole-language, focusing on authentic literature and guided reading using the three-cueing system. They advocate an increase in phonics instruction but believe that it should only be taught as the need arises. For example, if a child struggles to read the word "part", the teacher would at that point instruct the child on the sound of "ar". This is known as incidental teaching of phonics. Many researchers disagree with the tenets of balanced literacy, arguing that balanced literacy is simply whole language in disguise. Moats (2000) writes, "Unfortunately, many who pledge allegiance to 'balanced' reading continue to misunderstand reading development and to deliver poorly conceived, ineffective instruction" (p. 11). The emergence of balanced literacy, instead of ending

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the reading wars, has in essence allowed for the continuation of ineffective, unsupported

practice.

Synthesizing the research on reading from the last 30 years with current research has produced an approach to teaching literacy referred to as "structured literacy". Structured literacy is an umbrella term used by the International Dyslexia Association and literacy researchers to refer to the use of evidence-based instructional methods and materials that have been shown to successfully teach language and literacy skills. (Fallon & Katz, 2020). These practices include key features such as: (1) explicit, systematic, and sequential teaching of literacy at multiple levels, (2) cumulative practice and ongoing review, (3) a high level of student-teacher interaction, (4) the use of carefully chosen non-examples, (5) decodable text, and (6) prompt, corrective feedback (Spear-Swerling, 2019). In addition, research has supported the incorporation of key features of structured literacy within tiers of support. (Gersten et al., 2008). This is especially important when schools use a student's lack of response to tiered intervention as a determining factor to special education identification and placement. By utilizing the methods and materials associated with structured literacy, teachers can prevent or remediate many reading problems early in a child's school career, making structured literacy approaches especially important for students who are at risk for reading difficulties (International Dyslexia Association, 2017; Spear-Swerling, 2019).

Personal Beliefs about the Nature of Reading

As previously discussed, the whole language theory of teaching reading is not based on science. So why did it gain so much popularity, and why is it still being used today? One reason for this is personal philosophy. The constructivist philosophy is based on discovery learning and

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the social construction of knowledge (Seidenberg, 2017). This theory is embraced by many

educators and does have a place in the classroom. However, when applied to reading, this theory

is incompatible. Most readers, and especially struggling readers will not and cannot learn to read

in this way. They need direct, explicit, systematic instruction in phonological awareness and

phonics (Kilpatrick, 2015; Moats, 2000; Moats, 2020; Ryder et al., 2008; Seidenberg, 2017).

When planning instruction, it is important that teachers are aware of their personal philosophy

and how that philosophy fits with what research has shown about the teaching of reading.

Research to Inform Practice

Though the ramifications of not teaching a child to read are dire, research suggests that

up to 95 percent of students can learn to read and to read well (Kilpatrick, 2015; Moats, 2020). In

chapter two, specific research studies will be discussed in detail. These studies have shown that

early, explicit, and systematic instruction in phonics, direct instruction in phonological

awareness, and time devoted to reading connected texts can prevent or remediate most reading

difficulties (Kilpatrick, 2015; Moats, 2020; Torgesen et al., 2001). However, without

scientifically-based reading instruction, many students will struggle with the reading process,

and many will not learn to read at a proficient level (Kilpatrick, 2015; Seidenberg, 2017;

Shaywitz, 2003). The students most greatly affected by ineffective teaching practices are

students with reading disabilities. It is imperative that what has been learned through research be

put into practice so that the goal of 95 percent of students learning to read well is achieved.

Purpose of the Study

Therefore, it was the purpose of this qualitative research study to explore the lived

experiences of elementary special education teachers currently teaching reading to students with

reading disabilities. Through developing a deeper understanding of elementary special education

teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching reading to students with reading disabilities, the researcher explored the internal and external factors affecting the instructional decisions of special education teachers. Through the exploration of these factors, the researcher adds to the knowledge base about how scientific research in the area of teaching reading is being carried out in the real world.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- What internal factors do special education teachers regard as influencing their instructional decisions when teaching students with reading disabilities to read?

- What external factors do special education teachers regard as influencing their instructional decisions when teaching students with reading disabilities to read?

- What specialized knowledge do special education teachers possess and apply when teaching students with reading disabilities to read?

- How do special education teachers' practices align with the science of reading?

Definitions of Key Terms

Advanced Phonological Awareness- phonological awareness that continues to develop until about third or fourth grade; involves tasks such as manipulating phonemes by deletion, substitution, and phoneme reversal (Adams, 1990)

Affix- an additional element placed at the beginning or end of a root, stem, or word, or in the body of a word, to modify its meaning (dictionary.com)

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Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015)- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed

by President Obama on December 10, 2015, and reauthorizes the 50-year-old Elementary and

Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the nation's national education law

Evidence-Based Practice/Scientifically-Based Reading Instruction- effective educational

strategies supported by evidence and research (ESEA, 2002)

Explicit Instruction- instruction in which the teacher clearly explains and models key skills,

using specific examples and non-examples

Grapheme- the set of units of a writing system (such as letters and letter combinations) that

represent a phoneme (sound)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004/IDEIA, 2004) -

federal special education law that outlines instruction specifically designed to meet the individual

needs of a child with a disability

Morphological Awareness- refers to the ability to recognize the meaning parts of words such as

roots, affixes, and grammatical endings (Kilpatrick, 2015)

Morphology- the study of the structure and form of words in language or a language, including

inflection, derivation, and the formation of compounds (National Research Council, 1998)

Orthographic Knowledge- knowledge involving two related concepts; (1) general knowledge

about what is permissible and impermissible in English spelling and (2) the learning of common

patterns in words (Kilpatrick, 2015)

Orthographic Mapping- the encoding process that readers use to store written words for instant

and effortless retrieval; the means by which readers turn unfamiliar words into familiar and

instantly recognizable words (Kilpatrick, 2015)

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Phonic Decoding- refers to the process of sounding out a word using letter-sound knowledge and blending those sounds together to pronounce the word (Kilpatrick, 2015)

Phoneme- In phonology and linguistics, a phoneme is a unit of sound that distinguishes one word from another in a particular language (Shaywitz, 2003)

Phonological Awareness- the ability to notice the sound structure of spoken words (Kilpatrick, 2015)

Phonology- the study of speech structure in language that includes both the patterns of basic speech units and the rules of pronunciation (National Research Council, 1998)

Pragmatics-term referring to the ways the members of the speech community achieve their goals of using language (National Research Council, 1998)

Response to Intervention (RTI) - multi-tier approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs that includes the following characteristics: high-quality, scientifically based classroom instruction, ongoing student assessment, tiered instruction and parent involvement (RTI Action Network).

Semantics- term referring to the ways that language conveys meaning

Syllable- a unit of spoken language consisting of a vowel sound alone, or a vowel sound with one or more consonant sounds preceding or following (National Research Council, 1998)

Simple View of Reading (SVR) - practical framework researchers use to organize the most useful findings from a vast amount of research; basic formula: Reading Comprehension = Decoding x Linguistic Comprehension (R=D x LC) (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Kilpatrick, 2015)

Special education teachers- Special education teachers are defined as teachers who work with students who have a wide range of learning, mental, emotional, and physical disabilities. They adapt general education lessons and teach various subjects, such as reading, math and writing.

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They also teach basic skills, such as literacy and communication techniques, to students with severe disabilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

Systematic Instruction- Instruction that is planned sequentially to address prerequisite skills before advanced skills

Delimitations

Several delimitations were noted for the present study. First, the sample was restricted to elementary special education teachers currently teaching students with reading disabilities how to read. This restriction was put in place because the purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of special education teachers in order to develop a deeper understanding of their beliefs and practices as they relate to teaching students with reading disabilities to read. Elementary special education teachers represent a missing voice in the research to date on this topic. Another delimitation was the geographic location. Research sites were limited to public schools in Erie County. In addition, specific schools were chosen in order to create a diverse sampling. A final delimitation was the theoretical views adopted when framing the investigation. A hermeneutic phenomenology was appropriate for the present study because it enabled the researcher to not only study the experiences of special education teachers but also to look for meaning. Based on the work of Martin Heidegger, hermeneutic phenomenology prioritizes interpretation and its critical role in the process of understanding (Laverty, 2003). In the present study, hermeneutic phenomenology was used as a lens through which the researcher could observe and interpret the human experience of special education teachers as they live the experience of teaching elementary students with a reading disability to read.

Summary

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The practice of teaching students to read remains elusive. While the research in reading clearly defines best practices, the reality of what happens in the classroom remains largely unknown. The implications for what and how a special education teacher chooses to teach a student with reading disabilities is at the heart of the present research. Understanding the internal and external factors influencing special education teachers in the phenomenon of teaching students with reading disabilities to read is a less-known area in the research on teaching and learning. The researcher sought to add to the current knowledge base.

In this chapter, evidence for the necessity of the present study was discussed. Evidence included the importance of utilizing research to inform practice when teaching students with reading disabilities to read. A review of the consequences of not reading proficiently was discussed, as were the reasons why ineffective practices persist. Finally, the purpose of the present research, along with research questions, delimitations, and definitions of key terms was provided.

In the next chapter, the researcher provides an in-depth review of the literature related to the significance of learning disabilities in reading, the history of the teaching of reading, and the research and science related to reading. Finally, the researcher discusses the literature related to moving from research to practice.

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Chapter II: Review of the Literature

What is the Purpose?

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an extensive review of the literature and research related to the reading instruction of primary grade students with reading disabilities. The chapter is divided into four main sections: (1) the significance of learning disabilities in reading (2) the history of the teaching of reading, (3) research and the science of reading, (4) research and practice. Finally, the information presented in this review of the literature will be summarized to show the relationship between the literature and the lived experiences of special education teachers as they teach elementary students with reading disabilities.

Significance of Learning Disabilities in Reading

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that provides a free appropriate public education to children with disabilities throughout the nation (sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/). During the 2018-2019 school year, there were 7.1 million students between the ages of 3 and 21 receiving special education services under IDEA. Of those 7.1 million, 33% were diagnosed with a specific learning disability (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). According to Section 300.8 of IDEA, a specific learning disability is defined as:

> a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia ([Statute/Regs Main]() » [Regulations]() » [Part B]() » [Subpart A]() » [Section 300.8]())

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Of the 33% of students identified with a learning disability (LD), approximately 75% to 80% have their basic deficits in language and reading (Learning Disabilities Association of America). Deficits in reading and language affect every aspect of a child's learning. Adequate reading and language skills are necessary for success in math, science, social studies, as well as other subjects taught in school. Furthermore, while reading and language skills may refer to the ability to read and write, lacking in these skills also has repercussions in application-oriented basic knowledge that develops during the whole lifetime, not only during school years (Vagvolgyi et al., 2016). Because of the significant number of American children with reading disabilities, and because reading affects all aspects of learning, it is of paramount importance that research and evidence-based interventions (EBI) in reading are making their way into classrooms across America. Cognitive scientist, Mark Seidenberg (2017) states,

> I argue that a major factor contributing to our national underachievement in reading is the culture of education, by which I mean the beliefs and attitudes about how children learn, the role of the teacher, and the educational mission that dominate schools of education…This culture is an obstacle to improving education outcomes. (p.248)

His is not an isolated view. (Kilpatrick, 2015; Moats, 2020; NRP, 2000; Seidenberg, 2017; Shaywitz, 2003; Spear-Swerling & Brucker, 2005; Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2011). To better understand this, the following sections will review the literature regarding the history of the teaching of reading in education.

The History of the Teaching of Reading: The Reading Wars

In America, the question of how to teach reading has been a source of debate and contention for centuries (Castles et al., 2018; Kilpatrick, 2015; Pearson, 2004; Seidenberg, 2017;

Snow et al., 1998; Wexler, 2019). This debate has been referred to by many in the education world as the "reading wars" (Castles et al., 2018; Chall, 1967; Pearson, 2004).

Researchers and historians trace the beginnings of the "reading wars" to the 1840s when educational reformer, Horace Mann argued against teaching the relationship between letters and sounds and promoted instead the idea that for students to read for meaning, they should be taught to read whole words (Castles et al., 2018; Pearson, 2004; Seidenberg, 2017). Prior to that, educators relied on an American speller written by Noah Webster. Webster's speller, published in 1783, became the most popular introductory reader of its time and emphasized the alphabetic method of teaching reading (Barry, 2008). The alphabetic method rests on the idea that letters and groups of letters match individual sounds in words (National Center on Improving Literacy). The alphabetic principle is more commonly known as phonics instruction.

The 1940s were predominated by a whole-word approach to reading. Whole word reading is best described as memorizing complete words rather than their phonetic pieces. This approach was witnessed by the popular 1930s and 1940s "Dick and Jane" series in which teachers were encouraged to use a whole word or "look-say" approach to reading instruction. The series included a guide for teachers, and while phonics played a small role, the series had a predominately whole word approach to the teaching of reading (Barry, 2008). This method was again challenged in the 1950s with the publishing of a book written by Rudolf Flesch, entitled *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It".* In his book, Flesch advocated for the teaching of letter-sound correspondences to decode words. This practice, better known as phonics, is described as "Reading instruction on understanding how letters and groups of letters link to sounds to form letter-sound relationships and spelling patterns" (National Center on Improving Literacy). And although some publishers revised their textbooks to include phonics,

most educators did not agree with Flesch's argument and whole word reading remained the popular method for teaching reading (Wexler, 2019).

The whole word reading method to teaching reading eventually evolved into the related philosophy known as "whole language". Whole language rests on the theory that the process of learning to read is much the same as the process of learning to speak. With the whole language approach to teaching reading, the focus is on meaning construction, not the structural units that provide the basis for mapping print onto spoken language (Ryder et al., 2008). According to this view, if children are immersed in a print-rich environment, they will readily acquire reading skills. One of the most noted whole-language advocates, Kenneth Goodman, argued that reading is just a psycholinguistic guessing game (Kim, 2008; Seidenberg, 2017). Goodman and other proponents of whole-language purported that to be a good reader, students need to use context clues and background knowledge. In a classroom utilizing whole language instruction, teachers employ "miscue analysis" to identify the types of mistakes students are making in order to prompt them to use meaning, structure, or visual cues to guess the correct word (Kilpatrick, 2015).

Balanced literacy emerged in the early 2000s. Seen as a way to end the reading wars, balanced literacy combined phonics instruction with the whole language approach (Frey et al., 2005). Balanced literacy components include reading aloud, shared readings with the whole class, small group guided reading, independent reading, shared and interactive writing with the whole class, and the use of writer's workshop (Robinson et al., 2016). Phonics is a part of balanced literacy, but is not taught explicitly, but incidentally. Because of this, some reading researchers argue that balanced literacy, while seeming like a compromise, fails to address underlying concerns about the teaching of reading (Seidenberg, 2017). Though presumably

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under the new title of "balanced literacy", many argue that popular methods of whole language reading, such as relying on context to predict words in text, are still being used in favor of teaching students to use strong decoding skills (Moats, 2020; Seidenberg, 2017; Spear-Swerling, 2019).

To address these issues and to reflect the research more accurately, the idea of structured literacy has entered some American classrooms. The hallmarks of structured literacy include the explicit, systematic, and sequential teaching of literacy combined with cumulative practice and ongoing review, along with prompt corrective feedback to students by teachers (Spear-Swerling, 2019). Researchers have found that structured literacy benefits students in the general education classroom, but has particular benefits for students requiring Tier two and Tier three interventions (Moats, 2017; Spear-Swerling, 2019).

The Research and Science of Reading: **The National Reading Panel**

In 1997, in response to the reading wars, Congress called for a panel of reading experts to be convened to determine the status of research-based knowledge and to assess the effectiveness of different approaches to teaching children to read (National Reading Panel, 2000). The National Reading Panel (NRP) experts relied on evidence-based methodological standards to determine what instructional methods were supported by the research on reading. Through their investigation, the Panel identified five main components to the teaching of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension. Each will be defined and described in the following sections.

Phonological Awareness and Phonemic Awareness

Phonemes are the smallest units of spoken language and phonemic awareness refers to the ability to focus on and manipulate phonemes in words (National Reading Panel, 2000).

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Phonological Awareness can be described as the steps a child takes on his way to phonemic awareness. Whereas phonemic awareness refers to the ability to focus on and manipulate individual phonemes, phonological awareness refers to the ability to focus on and manipulate larger parts of the spoken word. These larger parts can include words in sentences, syllables in words, and rimes (Ehri & McCormick, 1998; Rack et al., 1992; Scarborough et al., 1998). A syllable is defined as a segment of speech that is made up of a vowel sound and may or may not have a preceding or following consonant sound. In contrast, a rime is the part of a syllable which consists of its vowel and any consonant sounds that come after it (NPR, 2000).

Phonemic and phonological awareness deficits have been found to play significant roles in a child's ability to learn to read (Ehri & McCormick, 1998; Kilpatrick 2015; Moats, 2020; National Reading Panel, 2000; Scarborough et al., 1998 Torgesen et al., 2001). Studies in which these deficiencies were targeted for intervention, have shown that remediating these skills can directly and positively impact the word-level reading scores of at-risk and reading disabled children (Iversen & Tunmer, 1993; Snow et al., 1998; Torgesen et al., 2001; Vellutino et al., 1996).

In a study by Vellutino et al. (1996), researchers provided intervention for 74 students who were at risk for reading difficulties. Intervention included intensive phonemic awareness training, as well as systematic phonics instruction. After 15 weeks of intervention, 67% of the participants scored at or above average on tests of word-level reading. In a study by Iversen and Tunmer (1993), the researchers explored whether adding a phonological dimension could improve the outcomes of a popular intervention program at the time, Reading Recovery. Iversen and Tunmer found that by modifying one group's Reading Recovery sessions by adding a segment in which students were taught systematic phonological recoding skills, those students

reached a level of performance for discontinuation of the program much more quickly than students in the traditional Reading Recovery intervention program. A study by Torgesen et al. (2001) demonstrated that intervention similar to that of Vellutino et al. (1996) was also successful in remediating older students. Torgesen et al. (2001) provided intervention to 60 third through fifth grade students with average IQs and severe reading difficulties. The intervention consisted of intensive instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics, along with opportunities to read connected text. At the end of the intervention, students were shown to make impressive gains on the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test-Revised (WRMT-R). In addition, almost 40% of the participants no longer required ongoing special education reading support following the intervention.

Phonics

English is based on an alphabetic code that must be broken by combining knowledge of sound symbol correspondence. This "code breaking" is referred to as phonics (Moats, 2020; Seidenberg, 2017; Shaywitz, 2003). Shaywitz (2003) writes, "Once a child appreciates that spoken words can be pulled apart into distinct sounds, he is well on his way to solving the spoken language part of the reading code" (p. 176). The National Reading Panel (2000) found that the research they investigated provided solid support in favor of systematic phonics instruction. The findings regarding the positive nature of systematic phonics instruction also led the panel to conclude that "systematic phonics instruction provides beginning readers, at-risk readers, disabled readers, and low-achieving readers with a substantial edge in learning to read over alternative forms of instruction not focusing at all or only incidentally on the alphabetic system" (p.2-137). Systematic phonics instruction is characterized by the direct teaching of a set of letter-sound relationships in a sequence that has been predetermined and clearly defined. The

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sequence includes the major sound (phoneme) and spelling (grapheme) relationships of both

consonants and vowels (National Institute for Literacy, 2006).

Reviews of the research in other countries have found similar support for the teaching of

systematic phonics. Similar to the NRP report (2000), the United Kingdom published an

independent review known as "The Rose Report". In that report the recommendation for explicit,

systematic phonics instruction is central to the United Kingdom's national curriculum (Rose,

2006). A report published in Australia written to guide the national curriculum, found six key

elements to the teaching of reading. One of those six elements was an early and systematic

emphasis on the explicit teaching of phonics (Rowe, 2005). Both the United Kingdom and

Australia's curriculum reflect this finding by including systematic phonics instruction as a core

teaching principle.

Orthographic Mapping

Advanced phonemic awareness and explicit, systematic instruction in phonics allow

students to develop the ability to rapidly associate sounds and syllables in spoken words with

their representative graphemes (the letter(s) that represent a sound). This leads students to store

words in the brain, eventually allowing them to recognize these words by sight. This ability is

referred to as orthographic mapping. Orthographic mapping is the process readers use to store

written words for automatic retrieval. Orthographic mapping is the way the brain establishes a

stable memory of spelling patterns, so that once mapped, students can recognize these words by

sight (Kilpatrick, 2015; Moats, 2020). Linnea Ehri (1998) was the first to describe orthographic

mapping and other researchers have studied the concept and found it to be a solid theory of how

children develop a sight word vocabulary (Ehri, 1998; Kilpatrick, 2015; Rack et al., 1994).

Orthographic mapping requires children to reach advanced levels of phonemic awareness and the

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ability to apply this knowledge with graphemes, effectively "breaking the code" of the printed word. According to Kilpatrick (2015),

> The order of phonemes in spoken words represents the anchoring element for remembering the order of the letters in written words. Aligning stored phoneme sequences to printed letter sequences will allow that printed word to become familiar. It will no longer require sounding out or guessing. (p.100)

Fluency

The NRP (2000) describes fluent readers as those who, "can read text with speed, accuracy, and proper expression" (p.3-1). The NRP found two practices associated with improving fluency to be effective. Both repeated reading and guided oral reading practice were both found to have a consistent and positive impact on fluency (p. 3-11). These recommendations were applicable at least through the fifth grade.

Additional studies also suggest that direct instruction on fluency during oral reading can improve reading achievement in elementary-aged students (Hasbrouck et al., 1999; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003). Building fluency in students is important because the ability to comprehend text is strongly influenced by a student's ability to effortlessly read the words on a page so that the majority of attention can be spent on making meaning out of what was read (Snow et al., 1998).

Although fluency was deemed an important component of literacy, a meta-analysis was not possible because too few studies met the criteria for inclusion. Consequently, although advocated by the NRP (2000) and supported by a few studies, the use of oral reading and repeated reading techniques for improving fluency continue to be debated and researched (Kilpatrick, 2015). It is argued that because fluency was not well understood at the time of the NRP report, it may have been incorrectly reported as a practice that is supported by research. An

alternate theory is that fluency is best addressed by ensuring a student has proficient orthographic mapping skills (Kilpatrick, 2015). The necessity to phonetically decode words, rather than retrieve them automatically through the orthographic memory, is a primary reason that students may lack fluency in reading (Moats, 2020; Torgesen et al, 2003).

Comprehension and Vocabulary

While the National Reading Panel report resolved issues regarding instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics, the Panel was unable to make the same recommendations about comprehension and vocabulary. According to Foorman and Moats (2004), "A strong empirical base for instruction in vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension has yet to be achieved" (p. 53). The committee concluded that the research base was inadequate to determine best practices for teaching vocabulary, though they did advise the use of multiple approaches, including direct and indirect methods and multiple exposures (Foorman & Moats, 2004). Similarly, the NRP could not give specific recommendations regarding comprehension due to an inability to complete a meta-analysis of 205 studies of comprehension instruction because as Foorman and Moats (2004) report,

> Studies lacked clear comparisons among strategies and methods that did have independent support, including comprehension monitoring, cooperative learning, use of graphic and semantic organizers, question answering, question generation by student, use of story structure, and summarization (p. 53).

Though specific practices in vocabulary and comprehension instruction could not be validated by the committee, the NRP did conclude that teaching a combination of techniques assists in recall, question answering and generation, and summarization of texts (Foorman & Moats, 2014).

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Research and Practice

Research

Much of the research discussed in the preceding sections remains unknown to many educators in the field (Kilpatrick, 2015; Moats, 2020; Seidenberg, 2017). Many researchers have found that this is due in part to teacher educators in colleges and universities lacking knowledge about the research in the science of reading (Cunningham et al., 2009; Kilpatrick, 2015; Moats 2020; NRP, 2000; Seidenberg, 2017; Shaywitz, 2003; Spear-Swerling, 2019). Others have found that lack of access to research journals is also a factor in why research is not getting into the hands of teachers. After leaving college, most pre-service teachers lose their access to university libraries. That, coupled with the demands of teaching full time, make it difficult for teachers to access, read, and comprehend the research on reading. In addition to this, personal beliefs and theories of how students learn to read may still be the propelling force in what and how educators teach reading (Moats, 2020). Research has shown that there remains a gap between what is known through research and what is done in practice (Kilpatrick, 2015; Moats, 2020; NRP, 2000; Seidenberg, 2017; Shaywitz, 2003; Spear-Swerling & Brucker, 2005; Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2011).

Researchers have found that early, explicit, and systematic instruction in phonics, direct instruction in phonological awareness, and time devoted to reading connected texts can prevent or remediate most reading difficulties (Kilpatrick, 2015; Moats, 2020; Torgesen et al., 2001). In fact, researchers estimate that 95 percent of all children can be taught to read by the end of first grade (Moats, 2020). Currently, this is not the case. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2019), only 35% of the nation's fourth grade students performed at or above a proficient level in reading in 2019. It has been argued that too often teachers are not

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given the knowledge, skills, and supported practice that will enable their teaching to succeed. This coupled with the findings that many educators' teaching of reading is grounded more in ideology than on evidence (Kilpatrick, 2015; Moats, 2020; Seidenberg, 2017; Shaywitz, 2003) leads to teachers inadvertently using teaching methods that will not enable students with reading disabilities to thrive.

The report of the NRP (2000) illustrated a need for further research into the investigation of teacher preparation and in-service professional development stating, "Perhaps the most apparent feature of the research analyzed in this study is that there are significant gaps in our knowledge of teacher education and development across the board" (p. 5-14). Since its publication in 2000, several researchers have continued to investigate this topic.

In a study by Spear-Swerling et al. (2005), researchers investigated teachers' literacy-related knowledge and self-perceptions in relation to their preparation and experience. Their findings demonstrated that educators responsible for the reading instruction of beginning and struggling readers may lack literacy-related disciplinary knowledge. The researchers confirm that the results support the perspective that teachers need more intensive pre-service training and in-service professional development. While the study did show that participants with more preparation and experience did demonstrate more disciplinary knowledge of literacy, they found that even high-background teachers performed well below ceiling on the knowledge measures, supporting the argument that there is a substantial gap between research on reading and teacher preparation (Spear-Swerling et al., 2005).

In a similar study by Cunningham et al. (2004), researchers investigated the self-perceptions of teachers regarding their knowledge of literacy-specific topics. Cunningham et al. (2004), found that many teachers with less experience, viewed themselves as more

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knowledgeable than did more experienced teachers. This led the researchers to suggest that the

ability to self-evaluate one's knowledge is important to future learning and professional

development. In addition, many participants in the study held perceptions of their knowledge in

the areas of phonological awareness and phonics was highly inaccurate. They go on to state,

> The results of our study indicate that the knowledge-base of many K-3 teachers is not
>
> aligned with the large and convergent body of research demonstrating the key role that
>
> component processes such as phoneme awareness and the alphabetic principle play in
>
> learning to read (p. 161).

This finding is similar to the findings of Spear-Swerling et al. (2005) in that both studies

demonstrated that many participants in the study held incorrect self-perceptions of their

knowledge and that participants in both studies demonstrated a lack of knowledge in key

components of the reading process.

In another study by Cunningham et al. (2009), researchers explored the relationships

between various teacher quality factors and whether those factors led teachers to hold beliefs

favoring explicit, code-based instruction or meaning-based, holistic instruction. One key finding

of interest to this review of literature was that "special education teachers, who are more likely to

work with struggling readers, preferred to allocate more time to explicit instruction geared at

basic reading skills and to dedicate less time to independent reading" (p.427). In addition, they

found that the overall results of the study suggest that recent research findings have not been

communicated effectively to either beginning or more experienced teachers.

Practice: Response to Intervention

In 2004, Congress made many changes to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

(IDEA 2004), with response-to-intervention (RTI) being one of the largest. In general terms, RTI

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has been around for over a century and has its beginnings in the behavioral tradition of psychology. (Hale, 2008). In relation to education, RTI is generally described as a comprehensive, multi-step process that closely monitors how the student is responding to different types of services and instruction (Cortiella, 2006). An important term included in RTI as defined by IDEA (2004) is the term "scientific, research-based instruction". IDEA (2004) defines this as, "Curriculum and educational interventions that are research-based and have been proven to be effective for most students" (Cortiella, 2006). RTI typically includes three to four tiers, with each tier becoming more intensive in order to prevent and remediate learning difficulties (Hale, 2008). The concept of RTI and more specifically, the call for scientific research-based instruction, is an important concept for teachers to be familiar with when working with students who struggle in academic areas.

In a study by Spear-Swerling and Cheesman (2011), the knowledge-base around implementing response-to-intervention (RTI) models in reading of 142 elementary-level educators was examined. RTI findings indicated that even experienced elementary and special education teachers often lacked knowledge about phonemic awareness, phonics, and reading development. The results of the study also indicated that for many participants, there was a relative weakness involved with the knowledge about the purpose and interpretation of various types of assessments. Participants who had received code-focused professional development performed better than those with extra reading-related course work, however even those teachers were found to lack familiarity of knowledge in interventions that have been widely referenced in scientific literature. In addition, less than half of the participants were familiar with the NRP report (2000). For the researchers, the study raised further questions about the preparedness of regular and special education teachers to implement response-to-intervention approaches. While

most participants were shown to have a basic understanding of the RTI's three-tiered model, most were lacking other necessary knowledge regarding assessment and application of research-based strategies for teaching reading that are important in implementing RTI.

Need for the Study

Teachers want their students to succeed. Those who teach students with reading disabilities want this too, but often find the task elusive. Research has demonstrated that the majority of students, even those with reading disabilities, can learn to read. The data on the percentages of students reading at grade level, do not mirror this fact. Based on the information presented in this review of literature, it seems that one reason for the discrepancy in the number of students researchers believe can learn to read and the number of students who are actually reading, may be due to the fact that research in reading remains largely inaccessible to those in the field of teaching. There have been some studies investigating the knowledge-base of teachers, but few investigating what is actually happening in schools. Understanding the types of instruction and intervention currently happening with elementary students with reading disabilities could add to the research base by further illuminating what happens in practice.

Summary

This chapter explored the relevant literature examining the significance of reading disabilities in America, the history of the teaching of reading to students with and without disabilities, the reasons for the contentious nature of this history, and the research and current practices in teaching students with reading disabilities to read. The next chapter explains how this current research study investigated the phenomenon of teaching students with reading disabilities to read. Using a qualitative methodology, the researcher explains the research and

methods used to investigate the lived experiences of special education teachers as they work

through the phenomenon of teaching elementary-aged students with reading disabilities to read.

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Chapter III: Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the lived experiences of elementary special education teachers currently teaching reading to students with reading disabilities. Through developing a deeper understanding of elementary special education teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching reading to students with reading disabilities, the researcher explored the internal and external factors affecting the instructional decisions of special education teachers. Through the exploration of these factors, the researcher adds to the knowledge base about how scientific research in the area of teaching reading is being carried out in the real world. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a rationale for the chosen research methodology based on the research questions sought to be answered, and to describe specific elements of the research design. Therefore, this chapter is broken into seven sections: (1) research methodology (2) research ethics and human subject protection, (3) population and sample, (4) data collection, (5) data analysis, (6) limitations, and (7) summary.

Research Methodology

Based on the nature of the research questions, hermeneutic phenomenology was the research method chosen for this study. According to Friesen et al (2011), hermeneutic phenomenology is popular among researchers in education because it, "is a combination of theory, reflection and practice that interweaves vivid descriptions of lived experience (phenomenology) together with reflective interpretations of their meanings (hermeneutics)" (p. 9). Hermeneutic phenomenology allows the researcher to not only study the experience of individuals, but also to look for meaning (Friesen, 2011).

Phenomenology

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Phenomenology has its roots in the writings of German mathematician, Edmund Husserl (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Husserl believed that one had to step out of the everyday experience in order to examine the everyday experience (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl argued that while empirical sciences were objective in their research, they could not uncover the phenomenological meaning of the lived experience (Dibley et al., 2020). Though there have been others who have written extensively on phenomenology, with some variations in meaning, the general idea behind phenomenology is that it seeks to study the lived experience. For this research study, the examination of the lived experiences of special education teachers was the focus and the teaching of reading to elementary-aged students with reading disabilities was the phenomena, therefore examining the research questions through this lens, made the most sense.

One potential criticism of Husserl's work has been of his belief that the researcher must be able to observe the phenomenon without any preconceived ideas. Bracketing is the process by which researchers set aside their experience or pre-understanding of a phenomenon, so that they do not allow those past experiences and pre-understanding to color the meaning of a situation or experience (Dibley, et al., 2020).

Hermeneutics

Another German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, took the views of phenomenology and linked them with hermeneutics. However, unlike Husserl, Heidegger rejected the notion that the researcher must bracket out past experiences and pre-understanding (Dibley et al., 2020). In contrast, the researcher's prior understanding and reflection allow for a deeper understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon to be studied. (Dibley et al., 2020). Therefore, when a researcher seeks to interpret the lived experience, hermeneutics provides the lens to do so. In the present study, the researcher wanted to not only explore the lived experiences of elementary

special education teachers and the phenomena of teaching reading to students with reading disabilities, but also to examine and interpret how internal and external factors have affected their practice.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

The combining of phenomenology and hermeneutics is the approach of the present study. This approach to inquiry was chosen because it not only describes the phenomenon of interest, but also allows the researcher to develop a deeper understanding. This process of going back and forth in the questioning of prior knowledge in order to understand the deeper meaning of the lived experience is referred to as the hermeneutic circle (Dibley, et al., 2020). This back and forth between the parts and whole is the core of hermeneutic phenomenological research. The purpose of its utilization in this research was to better understand and interpret the lived experiences of special education teachers as they teach students with reading disabilities how to read. Hermeneutic Phenomenology influenced the methodology and method throughout the research process.

Research Ethics and Human Subjects Protection

To ensure the protection of human subjects, approval was received by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Slippery Rock University. In order to have research involving human subjects approved by the IRB, three main ethical principles must be considered: (1) respect for persons, (2) beneficence, and (3) justice (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The following sections will discuss how this research study addressed each principle.

Respect for persons

In order to adhere to the principle of respect for persons, participants in the study were informed via an informed-consent document that their participation was completely voluntary

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and they could withdraw at any time with no repercussions. Prior to the informed-consent

documents being sent to study participants, a written consent via email was received from Erie

County school district superintendents. This consent allowed an email and questionnaire to be

sent to elementary learning support teachers in the districts in which consent was granted. Based

on the information from the initial email and questionnaire, informed-consent documents were

emailed to the teachers who would be participating further in the study. The document also

outlined the specific protocols in place to protect each participating individual's privacy and

confidentiality.

In addition to addressing respect for persons, respect for the site(s) was held as a top

priority. Prior to the start of the research, the superintendents of the selected school districts in

Erie County were contacted through email. The email explained the basic details of the study and

requested written consent in the form of an email response. Phone conversations were had with

any superintendent who did not respond or who had further questions or concerns. This initial

interaction ensured that respect for the site(s) was maintained.

Beneficence

According to the Belmont Report (1979), beneficence is the idea that, "Persons are

treated in an ethical manner not only by respecting their decisions and protecting them from

harm, but also by making efforts to secure their well-being" (p.5). For this study, one aspect of

beneficence was secured by informing participants of the potential benefits. Potential benefits in

this study were identified as: the opportunity to participate in a research study that could

potentially elucidate some of the factors that affect a teacher's use of reading interventions with

reading disabled students. Participants were also informed about the efforts of the researcher to

minimize any foreseeable risk. Risks were minimized by the researcher through the use of safety

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protocols to ensure confidentiality. To help ensure confidentiality, the researcher personally

transcribed the data files from the interviews, removing all identifying information. These

transcribed documents were saved electronically in a password protected file. Hard copies of

transcripts were kept in a locked file cabinet. In addition, voice files will be destroyed at the end

of the study.

Justice

The principle of justice in human subjects research addresses the belief that equals ought

to be treated equally. It considers the question of who should benefit and who should take on the

burden in research (Belmont Report, 1979). In this research study the researcher upheld the

principle of justice through the use of participant selection. Participants were selected based on

their willingness to participate and their status of meeting the researcher's predetermined criteria.

Because of the predetermined criteria, no vulnerable persons were exploited and no one was

excluded by any other means than through failure to meet the predetermined criteria.

Population and Sample

Sample

For a phenomenological study, it is recommended that researchers interview from five to

25 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To select those participants for the research study,

purposeful criterion sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Patton, 2002) was used. In this type

of sampling, participants must have experienced the phenomenon being studied and meet criteria

that has been predetermined by the researcher. Because this study focused on the lived

experiences of elementary special education teachers and the phenomenon was the teaching of

reading to students with diagnosed reading disabilities, the following participant criteria was

selected:

- Currently working in a public elementary school in one of the predetermined school districts in Erie County
- Currently working in the capacity of a special education teacher
- Currently working with elementary-aged students with reading disabilities in a learning support resource room or general education inclusive setting

Population

The population from which the sample was selected was based on the purposeful sampling strategy known as maximum variation sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). According to Suri (2011), "Employing maximum variation sampling, research synthesists can identify essential features and variable features of a phenomenon as experienced by diverse stakeholders among varied contexts to facilitate informed global decision-making" (p. 67). Due to the nature of this research study, choosing schools that represent a diverse set of characteristics allowed the researcher to better understand the phenomenon and increase generalizability.

The population used for this study included teachers working in elementary public schools in Erie County. According to the Erie County Community Needs Assessment, 2018 (https://eriecountypa.gov), Erie is the largest of Pennsylvania's 67 counties. There are 38 municipalities in Erie County and they each vary greatly in population, land area, and population density. Of the approximately 276,000 people residing in Erie County in 2016, 88% were White, 7.7% were Black, 4.1% were Hispanic, 1.7% were Asian, .3% were American Indian or Alaska Native, .05% were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 2.3% were classified as two or more races. In 2012-2016, 16.7% of Erie County residents and 24.5% of children under 18 years lived below the poverty level. Overall, 2012-2016 poverty rates varied greatly among Erie County's 38 municipalities, with the highest rate of poverty being in the City of Erie and Edinboro

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Borough with 26.4% and 26.3% respectively. The lowest poverty rates were observed in Elgin

Borough and Summit Township with poverty rates of 2.2% and 3.6% respectively.

There are 13 school districts in Erie County. For the purposes of this study, participants

were selected from five different school districts. The researcher used information from the

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) website

(https://nces.ed.gov/Programs/Edge/ACSDashboard) to identify school districts with diverse

characteristics including:

- Location: urban, suburban, rural
- Poverty level: high, medium, low
- Racial/Ethnic Diversity: Significant diversity, little diversity

Recruitment

After specific school districts were determined based on maximum variation sampling,

the researcher contacted district superintendents through email. This initial email detailed the

specifics of the research study and provided contact information should the superintendents have

further questions. In addition, the researcher requested written permission via email. Permission

was granted from seven school districts. Another email was then sent to the special education

directors in those seven school districts. The email explained the research study and outlined

how teachers could participate. Along with the email, a link to a 12-item questionnaire was also

sent. Special education directors were asked to forward the email to all elementary learning

support teachers within their district.

The questionnaire was developed and distributed using Qualtrics software (Qualtrics,

Provo, UT). Qualtrics is a web-based platform that can be used as a tool for data collection and

analysis in research. The questionnaire created for this study included questions to determine

necessary information, including demographic information and information to confirm that the

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teacher completing the questionnaire met the predetermined criteria for participation in the study. The questionnaire also had a section for teachers to complete indicating if they would be willing to participate in the formal interview process.

Teachers meeting the predetermined criteria for the study and who expressed a willingness to participate in the study were provided with a second email. This email included a link to a follow-up questionnaire and consent form. Participants were asked to read the consent form and inform the researcher of any questions or concerns. Consent forms were then returned via email. In addition, the questionnaire included a question verifying that the participants had read the consent and were agreeing to participate in the study. The other questions included in the questionnaire were designed to elicit information relevant to exploring the lived experiences of the participants as they teach reading to students with a diagnosed reading disability. The questionnaire was developed using the research questions as a guide. Two elementary learning support teachers participated in a pilot of the questionnaire. Through this pilot, the researcher was able to make necessary changes before utilizing it with study participants. The information collected from the pilot is included in the appendix, but the data was not included as part of the study.

Based on the results of the Qualtrics Questionnaires, eight participants were selected to be part of the interview portion of the research. Of those participants, none were male and all eight were female. The inclusion of only female participants was due to a lack of male responses indicating willingness to participate. One participant had between one and five years of teaching experience, one participant had between six and ten years of teaching experience, three participants had between eleven and twenty years of teaching experience, and three had more than twenty years of teaching experience. For educational attainment, the sample consisted of

two participants without a master's degree, three with a master's degree, and three with a master's degree and additional college credits in the field of education. Of the participants, five had teaching experience solely in a special education setting and three had teaching experience in both a general and special education setting. One participant was teaching in an urban school, three in a rural school, and four in a suburban school. Three were teaching in schools with a high poverty level and five were teaching in schools with medium to low poverty level. All eight participants taught in a school with little racial diversity.

Data Collection

Phenomenological research typically employs data that has been primarily gathered through the use of individual interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary means of data collection. Each participant was interviewed individually by the researcher using semi-structured research questions. Based on the research and writings of phenomenological researcher, Clark Moustakas, the interview questions for this study were developed in a semi-structured fashion with two broad, general questions as the guide. These two general questions suggested by Moustakas (1994) were: What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon (teaching students with reading disabilities to read)? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon (teaching students with reading disabilities to read)?

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, a questionnaire was completed by each participant. Each participant had completed the questionnaire prior to the interview. The purpose of the questionnaire was to procure short answers to questions related to the phenomenon being studied. These answers were used in developing the questions and shaping the discussions that

took place during the interviews. Direct quotes from some participants were used as they were relevant to themes that emerged during the data analysis stage.

Data Analysis

Phenomenological data analysis steps based on the works of Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (2014) were used to guide the data analysis in the present study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using a systematic procedure, the researcher began data analysis by transcribing the interviews. The researcher chose to personally transcribe the interviews. This allowed the researcher to add emotional tone, pauses, sarcasm, and other emotions that may not translate well. In addition, by personally transcribing the interviews, the researcher was able to remove identifying names and places from the transcript, adding an additional layer of security through confidentiality. These transcribed interviews were saved on a password-protected computer. Following transcription, the researcher read each transcript and emailed each participant her transcript to check for accuracy. No participant reported inaccuracies. The researcher then re-read all transcripts, taking notes in the margins. Using these notes, the researcher then created interpretive summaries for each interview. According to Dibley et al. (2020), "an interpretive summary is written for each interview to summarize the story and the interview's salient points" (p. 122).

Using the interpretive summaries, interview transcriptions, and the Qualtrics questionnaire responses, the researcher began looking for significant statements that helped provide an understanding of what the participants had experienced in regards to the phenomenon of teaching reading to students with reading disabilities. This activity is referred to as horizontalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This was accomplished by the researcher reading each transcript as a whole. Notes were made, including general impressions. Initial coding of each transcript was achieved by the researcher reading and marking the

transcript, using the right-hand column to record important and memorable statements. According to Saldana, 2016, "Coding in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 4). For the purposes of this study, a code is a researcher-generated construct that is used to summarize and translate data for the purpose of pattern detection, theory building, and analysis. Using the codes and categories developed, the researcher then used the significant statements and notes to devise a rudimentary list of emerging themes and patterns. These themes were then used to create textural and structural descriptions. These descriptions were then used to report what Creswell and Poth (2018) describe as the "essence" of the phenomenon. In the following chapter, the researcher reports on the essences of this phenomenon as well as the individual themes that emerged.

Rigor

In hermeneutic phenomenological research, the purpose of the research is to make insights into the lives of those experiencing a specific phenomenon. Rigor in phenomenological inquiry includes the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Cypress, 2017; Dibley, et al., 2020; Leung, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1982).

Credibility was achieved in this study by ensuring an accurate and truthful depiction of the participants' lived experiences. To achieve this, the researcher transcribed the interviews personally, as not to miss any pragmatic interpretations, including facial cues, humor, and sarcasm. In addition, member-checking was employed when the researcher supplied a copy of the transcribed interview to the interviewee.

Transferability was enhanced by using maximum variation sampling. In addition, the researcher continuously reread transcripts and questionnaire information. Data was collected

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until saturation. During the analysis phase, responses were coded, recoded, categorized, and analyzed for emerging themes until the researcher reached the essence of the phenomenon.

Dependability, much like reliability in quantitative studies was achieved by having a colleague read the transcribed material to validate findings related to the themes (Cypress, 2017).

Finally, confirmability was met via reflexive note taking. This was accomplished in several phases. First, the researcher took notes during each interview. After each interview, the researcher sat privately to document additional perceptions from the interviews. Using the concept of reflexivity, the researcher continuously took part in dynamic self-awareness (Dibley et al., 2020). This was done throughout each stage of the research process and allowed the researcher to acknowledge and adjust how personal knowledge and experience could hinder or aid understanding.

Limitations

This study examined the lived experiences of elementary special education teachers in Erie County. Because Erie County does not necessarily represent all counties across the country, generalizability to the experiences of other teachers is limited. In addition, the very nature of a hermeneutic phenomenological study rests on the premise that the researcher is exploring the lived experiences of a group who has experienced the same phenomenon. Though research has shown that the issues involved with teaching students with reading disabilities to read is a national one, the knowledge, thoughts, and experiences of the participants cannot be completely representative of all experiencing the same phenomena. In addition, this research was conducted during a world-wide pandemic. This pandemic affected the way students were educated, causing school districts and teachers to face additional challenges. Of specific challenge was meeting the substantive and procedural components of providing a free and appropriate education (FAPE) to

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students in need of special education and related services (Jameson, et al., 2020). A shift to virtual learning, school closures, and additional stress could all influence the lived experiences of the special education teachers as they teach students with reading disabilities how to learn to read.

To combat these limitations, the researcher sought to reach saturation in data collection, however these issues could continue to be potential limitations. Future studies could enhance the findings of the present study by exploring the same issues in varying parts of the country and abroad. Further studies could also explore the same issues during a post-pandemic period.

Summary

This chapter began with the theoretical underpinnings of the chosen methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology. The researcher set forth the rationale for the chosen methodology based on the questions to be answered. Moving forward from this, ethical considerations were discussed, and the researcher explained how human subjects would be protected. An overall description of the methods for selecting the sample and population along with the rationale for using the methods was given, citing best practice in the area of hermeneutic phenomenology. Finally, the data collection and data analysis procedures were described in detail. The next chapter presents the researcher's findings based on the data collection and analysis described in the current chapter.

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Chapter IV: Results

Introduction

As stated in previous chapters, the purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the lived experiences of elementary special education teachers currently teaching reading to students with reading disabilities. The overarching goal of which was to develop a deeper understanding of elementary special education teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching reading to students with reading disabilities. In order to better understand this, the researcher explored the internal and external factors affecting the instructional decisions of special education teachers. By exploring these factors through interviews, which were later transcribed, coded, analyzed, and thematically represented, the researcher adds to the knowledge base about how scientific research in the area of teaching reading is being carried out in the real world. The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of the data analysis that was conducted. Therefore, this chapter is broken into five main sections: (1) research questions, (2) data collection procedures (3) research methodology applied to data analysis, (4) findings and (5) summary.

Research Questions

Based on the research and writings of phenomenological researcher, Clark Moustakas, the interview questions for this study were developed in a semi-structured fashion with two broad questions as the guide (Moustakas, 1994). The two overarching questions that served as a guide for this research study are:

- What have elementary special education teachers experienced in terms of the phenomenon (teaching students with reading disabilities to read)?

- What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected elementary special education teachers' experiences of the phenomenon (teaching students with reading disabilities to read)?

The following sub-questions served as a tool to break the two overarching questions into more specific questions to guide the research:

1. What internal factors do special education teachers regard as influencing their instructional decisions when teaching students with reading disabilities to read?

2. What external factors do special education teachers regard as influencing their instructional decisions when teaching students with reading disabilities to read?

3. What specialized knowledge or practices do special education teachers possess and apply when teaching students with reading disabilities to read and does this knowledge and practice align with the research on teaching reading?

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher successfully received permission from the superintendents of seven school districts located in Erie County. For each district, the researcher then contacted the Director of Special Education in order to disseminate information to the elementary learning support teachers within his or her district. Interested participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire. Based on the results of the questionnaire, ten individuals were sent a second questionnaire and a consent form. Of those ten, eight completed both questionnaires and an interview. Participants represented five school districts. These districts were selected due to participants' willingness to participate as well as their representation of varying locations (urban, suburban, and rural) and poverty levels. The researcher used information from the National

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Center for Education Statistics (NCES) website

(https://nces.ed.gov/Programs/Edge/ACSDashboard) to verify demographic information related

to each school district.

Table 1: *Participant's School District Demographic Information*

Participant	School District Location	School District Poverty Level
Natalie P1	Primarily Urban	High Poverty
Hillary P2	Primarily Rural	Low-Medium Poverty
Cate P3	Primarily Suburban	Low-Medium Poverty
Mary P4	Primarily Rural	High Poverty
Anne P5	Primarily Suburban	Low-Medium Poverty
Beth P6	Primarily Rural	High Poverty
Sue P7	Primarily Suburban	Low-Medium Poverty
Carly P8	Primarily Suburban	Low-Medium Poverty

The eight participants all completed Questionnaire 1 and Questionnaire 2. Information

from Questionnaire 1 was used to collect demographic information and to determine if

participants met the pre-selected criteria for the study. Pseudonyms and numbers were assigned

to each of the eight interviewees.

Table 2: *Participant's Teaching and Education Information*

Participant	Years Teaching Special Ed	Grade Levels	Educational Attainment
Natalie P1	1-5	K-2	Bachelor's Degree
Hillary P2	6-10	K-5	Master's Degree

Cate P3	21+	5-6	Bachelor's Degree
Mary P4	6-10	3-5	Post-Master's Degree
Anne P5	11-15	6	Master's Degree
Beth P6	1-5	K-4	Post Master's Degree
Sue P7	21+	3-6	Master's Degree
Carly P8	1-5	3	Post Master's Degree

Research Methodology Applied to Data Analysis

In order to understand the lived experiences of special education teachers as they teach students with reading disabilities to read, the researcher chose to conduct a phenomenological qualitative study. Phenomenological research typically employs data that has been primarily gathered through the use of individual interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, according to Dibley et al. (2020), "The interview's distinguishing characteristics are based in philosophical ways of thinking with the goal of generating meaning and understanding" (p. 98).

For this research study, seven of the eight participants completed an in-person interview with the researcher. One participant was interviewed via an online meeting forum. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Participants were given a copy of their transcript in order to check for accuracy. No participants shared concerns regarding the accuracy of the transcripts. The interviews ranged in duration from approximately twenty-nine minutes to approximately fifty-eight minutes, with an average time of approximately thirty-eight minutes each. The researcher audio-recorded each interview while taking field notes. As previously noted, the researcher transcribed each interview, assigning each participant a pseudonym and number. Transcripts were emailed to participants to cross-check.

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Following transcription, the researcher re-read each transcript in its entirety. The researcher took notes in the margins, marking comments and preliminary codes in the margins (Dibley et al., 2020). Important and memorable statements were then highlighted. Different colors were used to code ideas falling under the emergent themes. According to Dibley et al. (2020), "an emergent theme is something that necessitates thinking about and gives an invitation to the reader to think further" (p. 122). Following this, the researcher wrote interpretive summaries for each of the eight interviews (Dibley et al., 2020). The interpretive summaries served as a guide in theme development due to the iterative nature of the practice.

For the next cycle of analysis, the researcher used the highlighted statements to devise a rudimentary list of emergent themes. Quotes were organized by themes that brought meaning and identity to experiences described by participants. In the following section, the themes that emerged from this study will be aligned with the research questions and direct quotes from participants will be shared.

Table 3: *Themes and Quotes in Relation to Research Questions*

Research Questions	Themes/Operational Definitions
What internal factors do special education teachers regard as influencing their instructional decisions when teaching students with reading disabilities to read?	**1. <u>Desire to Build Confidence and Rapport:</u>** Teachers prioritized building student confidence and rapport as two of the strongest internal factors guiding their teaching practice.
	2. <u>Personal Beliefs, Experience, and Self-Reflection Guide Teaching</u> Teachers adapt their teaching and curriculum based on personal beliefs about learning and prior teaching experiences. Special education teachers who self-reflect will make changes to their teaching practices based on those reflections.

	3. Accountability to Students and Colleagues Teachers feel accountable to students and colleagues and this accountability influences their desire for improvement
What external factors **do special education** **teachers regard as** **influencing their** **instructional decisions** **when teaching students** **with reading disabilities** **to read?**	**4. Time and Personnel** A lack of time and personnel influence what materials and strategies special education teachers employ with students
	5. Special Education Knowledge of Individuals in Leadership **Positions** The knowledge of school leaders about special education affects teachers' practice
	6. Working Relationships with Colleagues Special education teachers cite co-workers as both positively and negatively affecting their teaching practice
What specialized **knowledge do special** **education teachers** **possess and apply when**	**7. Alignment Throughout Instructional Tiers** Materials and teaching practices vary throughout tiers of instruction and do not always align due to lasting influences of previous curriculums and beliefs about whole language, balanced literacy, and phonics

teaching students with reading disabilities to read and do these practices align with the research?	**8. Education: The Continuing Quest for Knowledge** There is a need for special education teachers to continue to learn and seek knowledge throughout their careers
	9. Delivery Model of Special Education Services The model of delivery affects how and what special education teachers do to support students with reading disabilities

Findings

Presentation of the Data and Results of the Analysis of Research Question One

The first research question addressed in the findings is "What internal factors do special education teachers regard as influencing their instructional decisions when teaching students with reading disabilities to read?" The researcher used the iterative process previously described to analyze the data. Through this process, the following three overarching themes emerged: (a) desire to make a difference through building confidence and rapport, (b) personal beliefs, experience, and self-reflection guide teaching, and (c) accountability to students and colleagues.

Theme One: Desire to make a difference through building confidence and rapport

Among the teachers interviewed, all eight expressed that one of the most important internal factors driving their teaching practice is their desire to make a difference in their students' lives. They accomplished this through building student confidence and developing a relationship of respect and genuine care. All eight teachers attributed these two actions as vital to teaching a student with a reading disability.

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When asked about what teaching practices she has found to be especially beneficial,

Hillary stated:

Well, I think first and foremost, rapport building with students, building those early

relationships early on is critical to successful teaching because if you don't have a

relationship with your students, I feel like the instruction becomes near impossible….so I

feel like that is critical in guiding decision-making for students. I also create a culture for

learning in terms of we are in it together…the good, bad, the ugly. I do believe because of

that initial rapport building the students know I genuinely care for them, and my

expectation is that they are going to try their best even if it's not going to be at grade

level …if they do their best, there won't be a problem. I've laughed with my students,

I've cried with my students, when I say we're in it together, we're in it together for sure

and I think that is the critical piece (Personal Communication, July 14, 2021).

Similarly, Beth shared:

I think that they have fun, and honestly, I think they feel good about themselves because

it's finally something they're good at. When they come to me, we're working on where

they're working at. I'm pushing them a little to get where they need to be, and they feel

comfortable. I just think for them, it's a safe environment (Personal Communication, July

21, 2021).

Along with the belief that building confidence and rapport is an important step in

teaching students to read, many of the teachers also shared the immense joy they felt when their

students made progress and felt successful. One participant, Sue, shared "I feel like it's a

blessing to see kids' lightbulbs go off, confidence go up" (Personal Communication, July 27,

2021).

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Cate shared similar feelings when she said,

> The kids and their success, just seeing that lightbulb go off is just awesome. You know
> when they get an A on their test and they are so happy to show me and just build their
> self-confidence and just building that rapport with the kids, you know, telling them I'm
> here for them, that's the most successful thing (Personal Communication, July 14, 2021).

Similarly, Anne said of herself and her co-teacher, "We just want to see these kids grow
and it's like our passion for them to grow and that's like truly internal" (Personal
Communication, July 20. 2021).

For several of the participants, the desire to build rapport and help students learn to read
could be traced to their own personal experiences. For example, Carly shared about her
experiences with her second-grade teacher:

> I talked to you a little about my second grade teacher, she kind of took me in. My dad
> was hurt in a car accident when I was little and for a little bit of time, I was living with
> different people because he was in the hospital and she took me in for a little bit and gave
> me a stable home and so, she made a huge difference in my life… she became my mentor
> so I, you know, think about what she did for me and I want to pay it forward. She's
> always been my guiding force, I guess. Before her, I don't know, I really did not like to
> read, and I didn't think it was something I was good at. Now, I love to read, and I love to
> teach kids that they're good at it and they can read, maybe they're not good at it yet, but
> they will be good at it (Personal Communication, August 12, 2021).

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Sue shared a personal experience from her childhood as well. She experienced school difficulty and therefore attributes this to influencing her teaching. She said:

When I was in school, I wasn't the best in school at math, I didn't like math, I still don't really like math, I felt really insecure with math, and in class to be challenged was scary and to feel like I didn't know something in front of my peers was scary, so I kind of relate it to that, you know, I think that's what drove me to be a teacher in the first place (Personal Communication, July 27, 2021).

Theme Two: Personal beliefs, experience, and self-reflection guide teaching

Throughout the interviews, many of the special education teachers shared that they adapt their teaching and curriculum based on personal beliefs about learning. Stating that while she constantly refers to the standards, Natalie interprets the curriculum through the lens of her own beliefs about teaching. She shared:

I love teaching, I love seeing students make progress, I love making it fun, making it hands on… so I guess that's woven through how I interpret the curriculum and how I plan my teaching, because you know when you are looking at a curriculum it can kind of be like an out of the book….'say this'…'read this'….kind of scripted approach or you know do these worksheets and stuff, so I think it's important that you bring it to life in your teaching and use your own knowledge to kind of boost it, and I guess everyone has different philosophies and so everyone interprets that kind of different (Personal Communication, July 13, 2021).

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Another of the interviewees, Mary, shared that she believes that the students and their interests should drive instruction:

> If I start teaching something and the kids see my enthusiasm about it, I might not just spend a day on it, I might spend two or three days on it if they're interested in it. It's really just important that these kids like what they're doing and how we're doing it (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021).

In addition, many teachers' personal beliefs were shaped by experience both in and out of the classroom. For Carly and Cate, having family members who received support through special education, has impacted their beliefs and practices in the classroom. Carly stated:

> I have a son who is special ed, I have a brother who was special ed and I think there are teachers who are annoyed by these kids. They don't annoy me. I let them have their fidgets, if they're not a problem. I let them stand if they need to stand, dance if they need to dance, I even take in other teachers' kids when they need a break. I'm just trying to be who they need when they need it (Personal Communication, August 12, 2021).

About her own experiences with her son, Cate shared:

> Having a child that struggled as a reader, I found ways that worked for him, and I would take that back to the classroom and I think I could just relate to the kids, knowing what it's like. The majority of my students are ADHD, a lot of the boys, so I could just take the strategies back and like, they need stuff repeated, they need to be standing at their desk, they need to move, they need to, you know, just knowing all those things, I was just able to let them be who they are, and it helps (Personal Communication, July 14, 2021).

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For Hillary, experience as a mental health therapist prior to her career as a teacher, has impacted

her practice. When asked about what influences what she does in her classroom, she stated:

> I'm going to say experience, I really think a lot of it was trial and error. I was actually a
>
> mental health therapist before I became a teacher, so this is my second job, second career,
>
> and I think bringing that experience to the classroom helped with those initial rapport-
>
> building skills and, understanding that and not having judgement of families

In addition to personal experience, several teachers also shared the importance of

classroom experience. Cate shared, "You know, until you are actually in the profession and

doing it, what they teach you in the college classroom is not necessarily how it works in real life"

(Personal Communication, July 14, 2021). Carly shared a similar sentiment when she said, "I

think practical experience trumps everything" (Personal Communication, August 12, 2021).

Carly elaborated sharing how she feels experience has impacted her teaching:

> Not every child fits into a program so I like having years of experience to fall back on
>
> because I didn't have that when I first started teaching. I could go to someone else, but
>
> they didn't know the kid, so it's nice to have the experience when the program isn't
>
> always working (Personal Communication, August 12, 2021).

Natalie also shared that experience in the classroom working with students with reading

disabilities has shaped her teaching and practice:

> I think my first two years of teaching have had the biggest influence because that's, you
>
> know…in undergrad you don't really know what curriculum you are going to be using,
>
> so now that I'm a little bit more comfortable with the curriculum- you know- and how to

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apply it, how to make it fun, how to make it interesting" (Personal Communication, July 13, 2021).

Experience, along with self-reflection about that experience was an internal driving force in what and how special education teachers planned and carried out instruction for students with reading disabilities. For Anne, reflecting on her experience in the classroom has shaped her practice. She explained this when she stated:

> I'm going to say that my co-teacher and I really go on our gut and that's more internal than anything else. Instead of…and I don't know if this is good or bad… going strictly by the book, now we go more by our gut. This is what we've done, this is what we know works. We use what we know works instead of going by exactly what we were taught (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021).

Beth also shared how self-reflection about her teaching influences how she teaches. She described this when she said, "I try to look back, especially when things, when I'm not seeing what I want to see in my students, I think about is it me, because it's obviously not them" (Personal Communication, July 21, 2021). Similarly, Mary shared how she keeps students at the center of her teaching. She said:

> I don't worry so much about the pressures outside of the classroom, I worry about what's inside the classroom more so than all those external pressures that are put on teachers. And not every teacher is the same. You know, I think it just depends upon the teacher and you know what they do and how they feel about different things. Now you could talk to another teacher and maybe they'd say something totally different, but I do what I feel is best for my kids. They are the most important thing (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021).

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Theme Three: Accountability to students and colleagues

Special education teachers shared that they felt an intrinsic accountability to students and colleagues and that this accountability influenced their desire to learn and grow as a teacher.

For Natalie, there is a strong desire to do her job to the best of her ability for her students as well as her colleagues. She said:

.   If I wasn't doing my job, then everyone, Kindergarten through second grade teachers who have my special ed students in their classroom would be suffering too. And so, I want to do well for the people I work with too (Personal Communication, July 13, 2021).

Mary shared this feeling of accountability as well, expressing the desire to do her job well for a variety of stakeholders. She explained this saying, "My supervisor, my principal, and parents-their expectation is they want their kids to learn to read. I always think of those things in the background" (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021).

All eight of the participants also shared their internal, intrinsic desire to be the best they could be for their students. Mary, with tears in her eyes, stated:

These kids in front of me- it is such a huge responsibility to teach them, and it's just so, like, I don't think people understand how teachers…like I just care so much for these kids (teary) I'm sorry, but I just want them to do their best, I always tell my kids you can do anything you want to do, you just have to work hard at it (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021).

Similarly, Anne attributed her desire for continued professional growth and learning to her strong need to be the best she could be for her students. She shared:

I want to get these kids to grow, that's my biggest motivator, the kids, seeing them come in and when something clicks, you're like 'oh my gosh- so that helped you?' So, if I need

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to get more information about a specific learning disability, I'm going to go and get the information I need to make myself better for these kids (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021).

Presentation of the Data and Results of the Analysis of Research Question Two

The second question addressed in the findings is, "What external factors do special education teachers regard as influencing their instructional decisions when teaching students with reading disabilities to read?" The iterative process previously described was again used to analyze the data. Through this process, the following three overarching themes emerged: (a) lack of time and personnel, (b) special education knowledge of individuals in leadership positions, and (c) working relationships with colleagues.

Theme Four: Lack of time and personnel

An external factor that emerged during these interviews that affected what and how special educators teach students with reading disabilities, is a lack of time and personnel. The amount of time a special education teacher has with students was an important factor in what and how the teacher was able to instruct. Several teachers noted that they do not see their students daily, due to a shared intervention time. If a student has a need for any other service such as speech and language, occupational therapy, social skills, or another support, the student would be pulled to work on those things during the same block of time as they were supposed to be receiving special education instruction for reading. Cate shared her experience regarding this when she said:

Unfortunately, our schedule is what drives us, we have the 45 minutes of intervention and then the time I'm pushing in with them, and I have a lot of kids that also have speech or occupational therapy, and they're being pulled at that same 45 minutes in different

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directions, so I may end up only having them one day a week, so it's hard to make

progress with that (Personal Communication, July 14, 2021).

Anne also attributed time and scheduling as an external factor driving what she is able to do with

her students. She stated:

We do have a tutorial where we could pull students to work with them, but it's so hard

because the tutorial time for me is supposed to be when I write my IEPs, so you know, I

would love to use that time to write IEPs, in a perfect world I would, but I can't, because

if a student needs something, I'm obviously going to pull them during that tutorial as long

as they have a tutorial, they could have specials at that time and not have a tutorial, so

that doesn't always work either (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021).

Even without scheduling conflicts, several teachers felt they did not have enough time in

the day to provide students with the amount of repetition and practice that they need. Most

teachers expressed the belief that students with reading disabilities need sufficient time for

review and practice. A common barrier experienced by teachers in the study was a lack of time.

Natalie shared her experience about time when she said:

I think the other thing that is difficult with teaching would be just ensuring there is

enough time for repetitive practice because the regular education classroom does move at

a much quicker pace than I move in my classroom, so it's kind of tricky at times because

they're moving ahead but you want them to get that practice in a small group of the

things they are doing in regular ed, but also going back to the things they haven't

mastered yet, so you're kind of weaving your lessons in (Personal Communication, July

13, 2021).

Sue, half laughing, half crying shared this thought:

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Sometimes it's a little overwhelming as a teacher because you feel like there's not

enough time to be the best teacher that you want to be and create all those opportunities.

It can be very overwhelming and daunting and suck the life right out of you sometimes,

you know (Personal Communication, July 27, 2021).

The lack of time is magnified when there is also a lack of personnel in the building. In

her interview, Beth shared, "I just wish I had more time with my kids and more time to be a

resource for the teachers. It would be really nice to have another learning support teacher

(Personal Communication, July 21, 2021). Five of the teachers interviewed shared that due to a

lack of personnel, they are responsible for servicing students in multiple grade levels and with

multiple disabilities, spreading their time even thinner. Anne shared that this is an issue for her

stating:

I share my time with autistic students, I share my time with emotionally disturbed

students, and learning-disabled students, whether that be a math disability or a reading

disability, and other health impaired students, ADD, ADHD, so I have a lot on my plate

(Personal Communication, July 20, 2021).

Sue felt similarly frustrated when she shared a conversation she had with her principal regarding

the idea of the school "doing what's best for students". She relayed this conversation during the

interview:

I actually had a meeting with my principal and I said, 'I don't want to hear you guys say

that again, do not tell me we are doing what's best for students, because we're not

anymore and I know it's not always your fault because it's money, and it's we're short-

staffed and we're not filling positions when people retire, but please don't say that

because it's not true' (Personal Communication, July 27, 2021).

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Theme Five: Special education knowledge of individuals in leadership positions

Another external factor influencing special education teachers is the special education knowledge held by individuals in leadership positions. Most participants shared positive experiences with administration and their knowledge about reading disabilities and special education in general. Cate shared of her current principal:

> My principal got hired the year I did…he was hired as the Learning Support teacher, I was hired as the Emotional Support teacher…., he is amazing because he understands and he knows- he supports our team of special ed teachers like 100% (Personal Communication, July 14, 2021).

Similarly, Mary shared of her experiences with her special education supervisor:

> Our supervisor, she's really good about things, you know she wants the kids to learn but also cares about how and what they're learning and she understands that these are kids who can't read so she wants them to make progress (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021).

Though most participants shared positive experiences with administration, many still felt the weight of their leaders' expectations and identified those expectations as an external factor affecting what they do in the classroom. Anne shared:

> Obviously, our administrators want our students to show growth so there's always the pressure of administrators, not that there's like ridiculous pressure, but you always feel that, because at the end of the year, we're going to be evaluated on our students' growth, so there is that (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021).

Hillary also shared that the expectations of her administrators was an external factor driving what she teaches in the classroom. She shared:

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We are told in my department that we are to teach it with fidelity and it has always been

ingrained in my head that you have to be able to go on the witness stand someday and be

able to say, I taught this curriculum with fidelity. So, I honestly don't do much

supplemental that is not grounded in evidence-based research in terms of our curriculum

(Personal Communication, July 14, 2021).

Conversely, three of the participants shared that they have had experiences in which

administrators, either current or past, lacked the necessary knowledge about special education.

This lack of knowledge negatively influenced teachers' abilities to do their job in a way they felt

would be most beneficial. For instance, Sue shared:

I just get thrown around. I get moved every year, you know, the more knowledge you

have, the more degrees you have, the more junk they throw at you. And, you know

another thing, this is huge, I wish I would have said it sooner, they move learning support

teachers so much, they never allow you to get really good at what you do. So, I feel like,

yeah, it's the administration and it's money… (Personal Communication, July 27, 2021).

Another participant, Beth, shared the importance of having administrators who understand

special education and intervention services. She explained that her school district had not

prioritized curriculum and interventions to the detriment of students. She shared:

I don't think that we helped those students that were right on the cusp, whereas maybe in

another district, they would have been able to get them the help that they needed to get

them to stay in regular ed, I kind of feel like we've done a disservice just by changing

programs and like I said before, our intervention time, they'd leave maybe a half hour

two days a week to get title support….so I think that we're finally getting to the point

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where we should have been, which I'm excited about it (Personal Communication, July

21, 2021).

When asked during the interview what prompted the change in her district, Beth said:

I think different people we've had in different positions have had different priorities, so

this is definitely a priority for one of our current administrators, it is really getting those

students the support they need, whether it be staying in the general ed classroom, or

getting title, or eventually becoming you know a student with maybe a learning disability

in need of special education services, so, I'm excited that this person has that background

and sees the need in our district (Personal Communication, July 21, 2021).

Theme Six: Working relationships with colleagues

Another external factor influencing special education teachers is their relationships with

colleagues. All eight participants shared how co-workers affect their ability to teach students

with reading disabilities to read.

Seven of the participants shared that they have learned a lot through collaboration with

colleagues. Sue described the positive role colleagues have played in her teaching:

I've learned so much from my colleagues, just being around them and pushing into a lot

of classrooms over the years with a lot of different teachers has been a blessing, I have a

lot of older teachers who've been retired who have been my friend and such a guide

(Personal Communication, July 27, 2021).

Similarly, Mary shared:

Collaboration with other teachers too is very important. You can't do it yourself, you

need a team of people to help you, so that's the other thing, too. Other teachers are so

important to how you teach…I don't know what other schools are like but, we do have a

lot of collaboration between the teachers. They support me, I support them (Personal

Communication, July 20, 2021).

Anne, who teaches in a middle school setting and works with a team of teachers shared:

Definitely sitting down with my co-workers, not just the ELA teacher, but also sitting

down with the Science, and Social Studies, and Math teacher and discussing the different

students in their class and seeing what works with them as well. Um, and kind of going

from there. Like, 'this worked for me, did it work for you?' That was a big influence

(Personal Communication, July 20, 2021).

For most teachers interviewed, co-workers with knowledge of learning disabilities,

particularly in reading, were the strongest and most positive external factors affecting their

practice. For Anne, working with a co-teacher who has extensive knowledge and training in

reading, has been a big influence. She shared of her co-worker:

It's amazing and I'm lucky that I have her to fall back on because, I'm going to be

honest, in college, in my special ed classes I was never really taught this is how you teach

a student to read…then I'm expected to do this so thank goodness I do have my co-

worker who can say 'okay, let's do this' and we'll formulate a plan (Personal

Communication, July 20, 2021).

Similarly, for Natalie, who has been teaching for only two years, having knowledgeable

colleagues has been very beneficial to building her repertoire of strategies. She explained:

I would also say the teachers I work with in my school have had a big influence because

they really are very, very helpful… they really are wonderful at collaborating, especially,

like I'll attend their planning meetings and they'll share things they use and strategies that

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they've used in years past that have worked really well (Personal Communication, July

13, 2021).

Conversely, five participants shared how colleagues lacking knowledge about special

education can negatively impact their ability to teach students with reading disabilities. Sue

shared her experience with some teachers when she said:

I feel like general education teachers do not really grasp what a learning support teacher

goes through and does, they don't seem to really respect us, even students have asked if

we're real teachers (Personal Communication, July 27, 2021).

Carly shared how her relationships with some of her colleagues have been strained due to a lack

of knowledge on their part. Carly stated:

I know that the other 3rd grade teachers don't always share the same philosophies as

special ed. I've been told, like 'they're your kids, they're not my kids', and breaking that

has been very hard. There's a lot of teachers here… that have been here a long time who

don't seem to understand that they are a part of special education, whether they have that

degree or not, and so, becoming a learning support teacher in this district has changed my

relationship with them (Personal Communication, August 12, 2021).

Similarly, Hillary shared:

Also, coordination with particular gen ed teachers becomes a challenge. Others are

wonderful, willing to accept them, welcome them, love them like I do, but others just

aren't, and then it becomes an ongoing challenge (Personal Communication, July 14,

2021).

Several of the teachers interviewed shared that it would be beneficial for all teachers to

have knowledge about special education. Beth discussed this when she said:

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What I've found though is a lot of them don't know how to help the students on an IEP,

it's not that they necessarily don't want to… but I really feel like everyone should have a

special education degree, not just have to take one class, just because everyone has

special education students in their classroom now-a-days with inclusion, they really need

to have that background as much as I do (Personal Communication, July 21, 2021).

Similarly, Hillary shared:

I think a lot of it is personality and temperament of the general education teacher, but

also, I think understanding and education of reading disabilities, or even students on IEPs

would be very helpful (Personal Communication, July 14, 2021).

Presentation of the Data and Results of the Analysis of Research Question Three

The third research question addressed in the findings is, "What specialized knowledge do

special education teachers possess and apply when teaching students with reading disabilities to

read and do these practices align with the research? The iterative process previously described

was used to analyze the data. Through this process, the following three themes emerged: (a)

alignment through instructional tiers, (b) education: the continual quest for knowledge, and (c)

delivery model of special education services

Theme Seven: Alignment throughout instructional tiers

A theme that emerged during the interviews was that among all of the participants,

materials and teaching practices varied throughout tiers of instruction. Five of the participants

voiced concerns that not only did practices vary throughout the tiers of instruction, there also was

a misalignment in practice. In regards to this, Hillary shared:

It's very separate. I'm going to say it doesn't align well which I think is a huge need-area.

If possible, the gen ed teachers are supposed to accommodate their curriculum based on

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the SDI in the IEP, some are better than others with that…for sure (Personal

Communication, July 14, 2021).

Similarly, when asked how the core curriculum aligns with what she was doing with her students

with reading disabilities, Beth stated:

I would say our regular ed curriculum has led to an increase in the special education

population… unfortunately, we'll pilot one program and it's not a consensus, so we pilot

multiple programs. So, I think that has hurt our school and I'm hoping now we can kind

of get everyone on a better path. They've started Heggerty, which I think will be good for

the students, and Fundations, so I think that's good to have as a background for our

students. Because before, like I said, it was just kind of a hodge-podge of things and

resources, so that was definitely hurting everyone (Personal Communication, July 21,

2021).

Cate shared a similar problem with aligning what she was doing in special education with her

students to the general education curriculum. She explained:

I am trained in Wilson reading. I loved that program. It helped all of my kids, even

though it was designed for dyslexia, it helped all the kids. But the problem with that is

that I taught it in isolation with my intervention group, it was hard to carry over into the

classroom for them to use it because there was another curriculum…if I was building my

own curriculum, I could tie it together, but having two separate curriculums like that

there was not a lot of success because they couldn't transfer over, or I wasn't with them

to say, 'hey, remember' (Personal Communication, July 14, 2021).

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When discussing the potential misalignment, three of the participants shared that their schools had conflicting philosophies on how best to teach students to read. Beth shared about some of the regular education teachers in her building:

> From my understanding, they're doing more of like whole language…but I think what we're doing in learning support is more beneficial for that student population. I know there are students who can learn from whole language, but I think, especially with some of our population and the lack of you know, just basic letter identification and phonics, that for the students we have coming in, that might not be best (Personal Communication, July 21, 2021).

She shared that this was a problem for at least one of her co-workers in tier two instruction when she explained, "One of our Title teachers refused to actually go to the training at the IU because it was against what she felt like was right for her students" (Personal Communication, July 21, 2021).

When asked about plans to educate others in her building and align the tiers better, Beth shared:

> There's just so much to learn and so many things that are always changing and new studies that have come out, and to make us better, I feel like if we could look at that more closely, and even giving teachers time to self-reflect on themselves and giving them time to work on what they need, what they're struggling with I think would make us all better, but especially like with reading, cause like I said, our approach at our district lately has been changing and has been heading in the right direction, but, I know that there are still teachers that feel a certain way, so just giving them the resources and time to look into these, like 'why is this good?' (Personal Communication, July 21, 2021).

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Carly shared that in her district, there was a shift in philosophy regarding whole language, balanced literacy, and phonics. She shared:

> There's always the phonics people who drill, drill the phonics, and the meaning people who drill meaning. I really think it has to be a marriage of both…what I've seen is that we were a meaning- based school at the elementary…. you know a Fountas and Pinnell, and then our principal left, and a new principal came and she just wanted to get rid of whatever the former principal had an imprint on, it was kind of like 'burn the ship'…now we have no philosophy at all… (Personal Communication, August 12, 2021).

Cate too noticed deficits in students due to the regular education teachers using a whole language approach. When asked about what she saw working in terms of teaching students to read, she explained:

> Honestly, the Wilson reading where they teach the basic phonics from the individual syllables, the closed syllables, and all that. When I was co-teaching, I would teach it to the regular ed kids and they would be like 'oh, that's why that does that'. Like they didn't even know because they did away with phonics, a lot of the kids I'm teaching now, they went through that whole language and they didn't have the basics, like their spelling is horrible (Personal Communication, July 14, 2021).

Theme Eight: Education: The continual quest for knowledge

Another theme that emerged was that special education teachers must be life-long learners. Participants shared how they pursued additional knowledge in order to work with students with reading disabilities.

Six of the participants shared that the training received during undergraduate education did not prepare them as pre-service teachers to one day teach students with reading disabilities.

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Anne explained this when she said, "I'm going to be honest, in college, in my special ed classes I was never really taught this is how you teach a student to read" (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021). Mary explained this when she said:

> I had a reading course, one reading course in college, way back when, and basically, what you learn in college is not even close to what you learn in the actual classroom… so, I guess my individual training comes from myself researching and looking at ways I can help my kids. When I first got the resource room, the summer I found out…I was over the summer, researching strategies and the best ways to teach kids to read, who had reading disabilities (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021).

Similarly, Beth explained:

> Because even myself when I was in my graduate studies, there was so much I hadn't learned and I'd recently graduated with my undergraduate degree, so there's just so much to learn and so many things that are always changing and new studies that have come out (Personal Communication, July 21, 2021).

Sue, who had recently earned a master's degree in reading, said about her preparedness early in her career compared to now:

> Oh my gosh, I knew nothing, I feel like. When I first started teaching, um, it took many years and I still feel like there's so much to learn even after getting a masters, you know. I feel like my undergrad was a skim, um and just like the basics. And then of course, not anything against undergrad, but once you get thrown in the fire (laughter) and the thick of it is when you really start to learn, when you are really working with students. Getting my masters has opened my eyes up to a lot, too (Personal Communication, July 27, 2021).

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About her undergraduate degree and the benefit of experience, Carly said:

> I feel like the practical experience is what helped the most. Learning to write IEPs was helpful but then after 15 years, I forgot and it all changed anyway, so um, I don't think that they prepare us, they do as much as they can (Personal Communication, August 12, 2021).

Similarly, Natalie said:

> As an undergraduate you have reading classes but there's not…there's a lot more to being prepared to be a reading teacher than just what you learn in your undergrad classes, so I definitely think that my master's classes have been so beneficial because in your undergrad classes its more of an intro to reading and you haven't been a reading teacher yet so you have field experiences which is 100% a beneficial practice, but when you're on your own and teach for a couple years, I would definitely recommend getting your master's in reading to anyone who teaches reading because there's so much more to learn (Personal Communication, July 13, 2021).

All eight participants shared that they have learned the most about teaching reading through post-graduate studies, independently researching reading strategies, and on-the -job experience. Additionally, all discussed the importance of continuing to learn throughout their career. Carly explained this when she said:

> I've always, I don't know, gosh, I think freshman 101 they said to be a good teacher, you have to be a lifelong learner and I've always followed that. I kind of keep that in my heart. I think I'll always be learning (Personal Communication, August 12, 2021).

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When asked about knowing what materials and practices to use when teaching students with reading disabilities to read, Beth shared that personal research and implementation were important:

Just continuing to research those programs and implementing the programs has given me some additional knowledge and background about what's best for those students and just seeing the growth they're making in these programs (Personal Communication, July 21, 2021).

Similarly, when asked about her continued desire to grow and learn, Natalie said:

I think just working with the students, you know, I want to be a better reading teacher for them, and I kind of see the rewards of my teaching when things go well and when they understand and learn new patterns and it's kind of like "I want more of that", you know? I want every day to be a success (Personal Communication, July 13, 2021).

Sue also shared about what prompted her to get more training when she explained:

I was trained in Orton Gillingham…it was brought to us, the school district brought it to us, and offered it and asked who was interested, and I was like 'heck yeah' and I really saw value in it and so I guess that sparked my initial love for teaching reading specifically for kids who struggle (Personal Communication, July 27, 2021).

Beth talked about the importance of professional development and shared her thoughts on how schools could improve, she said:

Professional development should almost be differentiated. I just feel like sometimes at our faculty meetings and even at our in-service there's so many things that don't relate to everyone, um and I feel like in order to make everyone a better educator, getting them the

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professional development that they need, and not just a cookie cutter (Personal

Communication, July 21, 2021)

Theme Nine: Delivery model of special education services

Another theme to emerge was that the delivery model of special education services

represented a large external factor determining how special education teachers delivered

instruction to students with reading disabilities. While there were differences in each

participant's school district's model of delivery, for the most part, none of the teachers had a

strong voice in what type of delivery model their school employed.

Of the participants, Hillary and Natalie exclusively pulled students out in small groups to

work on interventions. Cate and Sue were in school districts that followed a model of a

combination of a resource room in which they taught the entire ELA block to special education

students intermixed with push-in support. Two participants, Anne and Carly, were in a co-

teaching model. Carly was self-contained with a regular education teacher for the entire day and

had both regular education and special education students in their classroom for the entire day,

while Anne, who was also in a co-teaching model, worked with four general education subject

area teachers. Beth was the only participant who did a combination of small group pull-out

support for intervention groups and push-in support in the general education classrooms. Mary

was the only participant who practiced all three models: self-contained resource room, push-in

support, and small group pull-out for intervention.

Figure 1: *Special Education Delivery Models*

Participant	RR	PI	PO	CT
Natalie			x	
Hillary			x	

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Cate	x	x		
Mary	x	x	x	
Anne				x
Brittany		x	x	
Sue	x	x		
Carly				

Key	
RR= Resource Room	For the purposes of the present study, a resource room is defined as a classroom taught by a special education teacher with the purpose of replacing instruction of the general education teacher. The special education teacher becomes the teacher of record for these students and is responsible for all English-Language Arts (ELA) instruction.
PI= Push-in Support	For the purposes of the present study, push-in support refers to a learning support teacher going into a regular education classroom in order to support students with IEPs.
PO= Pull-out Support	For the purposes of the present study, pull-out support refers to a learning support teacher giving supplemental and/or intervention services to students with an IEP. The student receives this support in addition to instruction in the general education classroom
CT- Co-Teaching	For the purposes of the present study, co-teaching refers to a general education teacher and a special education teacher working together to teach all subject areas to students with and without IEPs in a general education setting.

Of these models, Hillary and Natalie expressed the most satisfaction. Hillary explained of her model:

I pull them so they get whole-group instruction in ELA in their class, and then when the

students in gen ed are doing their independent work time, I will pull them for their time,

so they're getting exposed to their grade level curriculum but also getting instructed at

their level (Personal Communication, July 14, 2021).

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Natalie shared the benefits of her model when she stated:

> I see the students in a small group and I do direct instruction with immediate feedback so
> rather than being in a large group setting, I am right there with them, walking around
> giving them immediate feedback so they're not sitting through an entire lesson and being
> off-topic or doing something incorrectly. I also do direct instruction, I do systematic
> instruction I use Fundations in my room which isn't something they use in the regular
> education classroom at my school, that's just a program we use for special education.
> Since I have a small group I can tailor my teaching to their needs, so like if students are
> struggling, we don't move on. I can really make my teaching fit their needs and spend as
> much time as we need until skills are mastered (Personal Communication, July 13, 2021).

Sue and Cate, who teach in a school district that has recently moved from the type of model that Natalie described, to a model in which part of a learning support teacher's day is in a self-contained classroom and the rest of the day is spent providing push-in support, both shared their unhappiness about the switch. Sue shared about the shift in models:

> That's been the heartbreaking thing. This year coming up, I'm very upset about, the last
> couple years I've been very upset about my interventions being taken and then I was still
> doing Language Arts so I was at least still feeling like I had my hand in it, but now I'm
> only going to have grade 5 that I'll have my hands on for Language Arts and no
> interventions and I'll be doing push-in (Personal Communication, July 27, 2021).

She shared that prior to this switch, she had been having success with a pull-out intervention model of which she said:

> I would say those 6 years were the most rewarding years of my career. I saw the most
> gain in my students, even though they might not be the best test takers, and it might not

always show up on PSSAs or their MAP testing, but they did, they always showed

growth. I could see their change in attitude, confidence, and definitely increasing their

ability to decode and read. I had a lot of data that I shared with the school district over the

years, I kept really good data and I still have it, and it did show their growth in reading

levels. I think it was because they had a, they were in a regular education class for

language arts at the time and then they came to see me for extra Language Arts

instruction, whether it be vocabulary, comprehension, decoding, and just you know, I

think it was just having all that extra time plus being in the regular education classroom

too with the other kids (Personal Communication, July 27, 2021).

Of the new model she said:

I have to do a lot of push-in support now and I've told my principal for many years, many

times, and I feel bad saying this as a learning support teacher, but it's a waste of my time.

An aide can be doing what I'm doing. You're paying me a lot of money to be an aide in a

classroom when I can be using my skills to teach students how to read and not just put a

band aide on them or help them, you know, be organized and pass a test for that day or go

help them find their missing work that they left in their locker… I feel like it is good to

have them in the general curriculum, but I feel like push-in support with a highly trained

teacher, and you don't get to use all of your skills and all of your tools and manipulatives,

they train you in all of these things and then you don't have the opportunity to use them

and then they sit on a shelf or in a closet or in a box and they don't get used (Personal

Communication, July 27, 2021).

Similarly, Cate shared:

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We do have a self-contained classroom, but the majority of our students are in push-in so I am in the classroom. This year I supported two Language Arts classrooms. That's probably one of the most challenging things about my job, cause I can say my piece, but they sometimes don't want to listen to me, but the other part, feeling like an aide, is a struggle, as the learning support teacher pushing into the classroom, sometimes the teachers don't view you as the same as them (Personal Communication, July 14, 2021).

Anne and Carly were mostly satisfied with their co-teaching model, but shared concerns about the lack of time for interventions. When asked about whether or not she had a designated time to pull out students in need of additional support, Anne said:

I wish (laughter). I wish that I did, but no, we try to…we do have that flex opportunity where we have 15 minutes to work with students, but you really don't want to take the kids from their recess time. So, if we did have a student who was really, really struggling, we would take them out of their ELA time and practice with them. Thank goodness we have the co-taught where one teacher can be in the classroom, sort of like a parallel teaching sort of thing, so if they're doing reading in the classroom, we can pull them out and do reading outside of the classroom. But, because we use the co-teaching method, there's not a lot of time to do pull-out so it goes more to the administration, where we'd have to contact our administration and maybe our special ed supervisor and say, 'if you want to have this, we might have to get additional supports, like an aide or something to work with your child' because there is no time within our day, within our scheduled day (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021).

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Carly shared about the difference in the two types of co-teaching models she has been a part of when she said,

> My first year was more of a push-in model, I was adapting…certain teachers would work with me certain teachers wouldn't work with me. Now that we are in a full inclusion model, I get to really keep with my co-teacher and I work very well with her. Last year was nice because we didn't have to, we could kind of shut our door and not worry about anything else. This year, I will have one student who is in another room, and I don't know how that will go because I know that the other 3rd grade teachers don't always share the same philosophies as special ed. I've been told, like 'they're your kids, they're not my kids', and breaking that has been very hard (Personal Communication, August 12, 2021).

Beth, who practiced both small group pull-out for intervention and push-in support in the general education classroom, had similar comments about her time pushing into classrooms. She said:

> I've found, and it's really no fault of anybody, but there's just such a lack of time, especially when I'm working with so many different teachers to implement a really good co-teaching model, so a lot of the times it was just me kind of going in and helping my few students. And there were some teachers where I felt like we were more successful with it and it was helping the students, but then there were other times I kind of felt like it was not as beneficial or helpful to both the teacher and the students with me pushing in (Personal Communication, July 21, 2021).

Summary of Key Findings

Based on the data collected for this research study, nine overarching themes emerged, (1) desire to build confidence and rapport, (2) personal beliefs, experience, and self-reflection guide

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learning, (3) accountability to students and colleagues, (4) time and personnel, (5) special

education knowledge of individuals in leadership positions, (6) working relationships with

colleagues, (7) alignment throughout instructional tiers, (8) education: the continuing quest for

knowledge, and (9) delivery model of special education services.

Both internal and external factors were cited by participants as guiding instructional

practice and materials when working with students with reading disabilities. Internal factors

centered around a strong desire to assist students in building confidence. All eight participants

believed that creating rapport with students was vital to their ability to teach reading. All eight

also shared how internal factors, such as their beliefs and experiences, were integral to what and

how they taught. Five of the participants talked significantly about the importance of self-

reflection. Additionally, all eight participants shared an intrinsic accountability to their students.

Externally, a lack of time and personnel, along with the special education knowledge of

district leaders, and working relationships with colleagues were among the most frequently

discussed. Participants shared that a lack of time is an issue when trying to provide intervention

and services to students with reading disabilities. Participants also shared that having sufficient

personnel to service students with special needs was also an external factor in their practice.

Participants also discussed the importance of having leaders in their district who are

knowledgeable about special education. Relationships with colleagues were also one of the most

frequently mentioned external factors.

When looking at the specialized knowledge of participants and the extent to which

practices aligned with the research, three main themes emerged. For all participants the

alignment of curriculum and practice among the three tiers of instruction affected student

performance as well as participants' teaching practice. In addition, participants' experiences in

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undergraduate education, graduate education, in-service trainings, and on the job training all influenced the materials used and the practices utilized by participants. Finally, the delivery model of special education services affected participants, though this was an area they had little control over. Finally,

Summary

This chapter began with a restatement of the research questions and the data collection procedures. The process by which participants were recruited, along with their demographic information was described in detail. The researcher then discussed the research methodology as applied to data analysis, setting forth the rationale for hermeneutic phenomenology based on the questions to be answered. Finally, each of the nine overarching themes were explored and salient quotes from participants provided credence and justification for each theme. Chapter five will address both what the researcher discovered and learned from the data as well as recommendations for further research on the lived experiences of special education teachers working with students with reading disabilities.

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Chapter V: Recommendations

Introduction

Understanding the internal and external factors influencing special education teachers in the phenomenon of teaching students with reading disabilities to read is a less-known area in the research on teaching and learning. Through this phenomenological qualitative research study, the researcher sought to add to the current knowledge base through the exploration of the lived experiences of elementary special education teachers currently teaching reading to students with reading disabilities. Through developing a deeper understanding of elementary special education teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching reading to students with reading disabilities, the researcher explored the internal and external factors affecting the instructional decisions of special education teachers. Through the exploration of these factors, the researcher adds to the knowledge base about how scientific research in the area of teaching reading is being carried out in the real world.

This chapter provides a discussion of the key findings garnered throughout the study. Furthermore, through a discussion of the themes brought forth in this study, the researcher will discuss the potential implications of the findings as related to teaching students with reading disabilities to become strong readers. Finally, the chapter will conclude with recommendations for future research on this topic.

Key Findings

Little is known about what practices are actually being implemented by special education teachers in their quest to teach students with reading disabilities to read. Moreover, few research studies exist that examine the reasons why special education teachers choose to employ certain practices and not others (Cunningham et al., 2009). Slightly more than 2 million American

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children are currently receiving special education services for a reading disability (Shaywitz, 2003). Knowing how to teach these children to read can be the determining factor as to whether or not they learn to read well. Research shows that classroom teaching, when based on scientifically-based research and practice, can reduce or even prevent reading difficulties in most students (Cunningham et al., 2009; Moats, 2020). Teacher knowledge and practice are significantly related to reading outcomes in students.

The key findings from the present research shed light on the internal and external factors of eight special education teachers as they work to help struggling readers learn to read. In addition, the researcher will elucidate the specialized knowledge participants possess and apply when teaching students with reading disabilities to read and how their knowledge and practice align with the research on reading instruction.

Research Question One

Research question one relates to the internal factors influencing special education teachers when making instructional decisions about what and how to teach students with reading disabilities to read. The themes identified within this research question include the following:

1. Desire to build confidence and rapport

2. Personal beliefs, experience, and self-reflection guide teaching

3. Accountability to students and colleagues

Theme One: Desire to build confidence and rapport

Among the teachers interviewed, all eight expressed that one of the most important internal factors driving their teaching practice is their desire to make a difference in their students' lives through building each student's confidence and developing a relationship of respect and genuine care. Teachers all shared that two of the most vital things they do when

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teaching a student with a reading disability to read is to improve confidence and build a genuine relationship and rapport.

Building a rapport with students was discussed as one of the most beneficial practices the participants employed when working with students with reading disabilities. The teachers interviewed explained that building rapport with students and letting students know they are cared about had to occur before real learning could take place. During the interviews, one participant, Hillary, enthusiastically shared,

> I think first and foremost, rapport building with students, building those early relationships early on is critical to successful teaching because if you don't have a relationship with your students, I feel like the instruction becomes near impossible, so I feel like that is critical in guiding decision making (Personal Communication, July 14, 2021).

Studies on rapport have affirmed these ideas, linking rapport building with students to various instructional outcomes including higher student motivation, trust, comfort, and satisfaction (Burke-Smalley, 2018).

In addition to building a rapport with students, many participants shared that it was also critical to build each student's confidence. Because students with reading disabilities previously struggled in general education classes, participants noted that building their confidence was an important teaching practice. Natalie recognized this in her students and talked about the significance of this when she said:

> I get a lot of students you know, Kindergarten through second grade is when they were evaluated normally, so they've already had those experiences of struggling without support and some of them know they are struggling readers and some of them don't like

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to read and they're not motivated to read so it's important to just make sure they're

comfortable, they're excited, you know and kind of change their view of that (Personal

Communication, July 13, 2021).

McCabe and Margolis (2001) give credence to this when they write, "To help struggling readers

become proficient, highly motivated readers, teachers must continuously work to help change

students' 'can't-do' attitudes about reading into 'can-do' attitudes" (p.45). Furthermore, McCabe

and Margolis write that negative beliefs about one's ability to learn to read affect motivation and

often become one of the most formidable barriers that teachers face in helping students become

better readers.

Theme Two: Personal beliefs, experience and self-reflection guide teaching

Personal experience, classroom experience, and the ability to reflect on those experiences

in relation to one's teaching emerged as a strong internal factor in instructional decision-making

of special education teachers when working with students with reading disabilities. For the

participants in the present study, their beliefs and experiences, both personal and professional,

could not be separated from their practice. Corroborating this idea in their study, Unal and Unal

(2012) state:

Teachers' beliefs are important for understanding and improving educational processes

because they are closely linked to teachers' strategies on how they shape students'

learning environment, influence student motivation and achievement and manage their

classrooms (p. 48).

Throughout the interviews, the participants frequently discussed how their personal beliefs,

experience, and ability to self-reflect influenced how they adapt their teaching practices. In

regards to their personal beliefs, participants shared how experience both in and out of the

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classroom have shaped their views about how best to teach students with reading disabilities to read.

Interwoven throughout nearly every interview was the idea that classroom experience and reflection had a strong impact on the educational practices and materials utilized when teaching students with reading disabilities to read. Participants shared how important classroom experience was in their day-to-day decisions about how to teach students to read and what materials and practices to utilize. Classroom experiences combined with the belief in the importance of self-reflection, emerged as a strong internal factor affecting teaching practice. Anne explained this when she said, "This is what we've done, this is what we know works. We use what we know works instead of going by exactly what we were taught" (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021). Carly echoed that sentiment when she said,

> Not every child fits into a program so I like having years of experience to fall back on because I didn't have that when I first started teaching. I could go to someone else, but they didn't know the kid, so it's nice to have the experience when the program isn't always working (Personal Communication, August 12, 2021).

In a study by Dos Santos (2018), the connection between personal experience and teaching practice was affirmed. Dos Santos writes of the participants in his study:

> Teachers base their daily decision-making on their past experiences with formative education, contemporary pedagogical methods, and collaborative learning. The teachers reported that these combined experiences taught them the importance of being caring and supportive teachers, which involved being concerned about their students' mastery of the coursework (p. 11).

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Personal experience was noted by several participants as also being an internal contributing factor to their teaching. For two participants, having family members who received support through special education influenced their teaching. Carly shared:

> I have a son who is special ed, I have a brother who was special ed and I think there are teachers who are annoyed by these kids. They don't annoy me. I let them have their fidgets, if they're not a problem. I let them stand if they need to stand, dance if they need to dance, I even take in other teachers' kids when they need a break. I'm just trying to be who they need when they need it (Personal Communication, August 12, 2021).

The personal experience of having a child with special needs, prompted Carly to view the students in her class differently than she otherwise might have if she had not had a son in special education. Through reflection on her own experiences as a struggling learner, Sue shared how her difficulty in learning math has allowed her to relate to her students. She shared,

> When I was in school, I wasn't the best in school at math, I didn't like math, I still don't really like math, I felt really insecure with math, and in class to be challenged was scary and to feel like I didn't know something in front of my peers was scary, so I kind of relate it to that, you know, I think that's what drove me to be a teacher in the first place (Personal Communication, July 27, 2021).

Special education teachers come to the classroom with their own unique experiences that have impacted their teaching. These experiences combined with personal beliefs and self-reflection inevitably leave an imprint on the classroom environment and teaching practices utilized when teaching students to read.

Theme Three: Accountability to students and colleagues

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In line with the first two themes, the participants in the present study shared that they felt an intrinsic accountability to students and colleagues. Unlike the extrinsic accountability in the form of performance on high-stakes testing, the participants interviewed referred to the intrinsic accountability they felt to their students and colleagues. This feeling of accountability drove many of the participants to strive for excellence for their students and colleagues. This theme of intrinsic accountability surfaced as another influential internal factor affecting teaching practice. For all eight participants, this desire to help students grow and succeed, had a strong influence on what and how they taught. Mary explained this when she said:

> There is just so much stress put on teachers because of testing… I just do what's best for kids, to be totally honest with you. I mean I hate to say that, but it's true. I know what they need and I just do it. They're growing and learning and to me that's more important than a test score, it's just a piece of paper that says you got this score on the PSSA (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021).

Another participant, Anne, felt an intrinsic responsibility to her students and society. When asked about what internal factors impacted her teaching, she replied:

> Well, I feel like every student should be given every opportunity to become a good reader. I feel like every kid needs to be at least at the 6th grade level. Our newspapers are written at the 6th grade level and to be a productive citizen in society they need to be able to read at that level and I feel like it's our job to move them forward … I feel like my job is and my goal is for these kids to grow to be successful citizens in our society (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021).

In addition to feeling an intrinsic accountability to students, several of the teachers discussed feeling that same accountability for their colleagues. Natalie discussed this when she said:

> If I wasn't doing my job, then everyone, Kindergarten through second grade teachers who have my special ed students in their classroom would be suffering too. And so, I want to do well for the people I work with too (Personal Communication, July 13, 2021).

Affirming the findings of the present study was a study by Boardman et al. (2005). In their study, researchers found,

> The special education teachers who participated in these focus groups indicated that determining the needs of each student and teaching to those needs was their most significant responsibility. That belief is integral to the tenets of individualized education (p.177).

In Carol Dweck's *Mindset, the New Psychology of Success* (2008), Dweck writes about an outstanding teacher at Juilliard. Of this teacher, Dweck writes, "For her, teaching was about watching something grow before her very eyes. And the challenge was to figure out how to make it happen. If students didn't play in tune, it was because they hadn't learned how" (p. 196). This same intrinsic accountability motivated many of the participants in the present study to continue to learn, grow, and do their job to the best of their ability, knowing that their students and colleagues depended on them.

Research Question Two

Research question two relates to the external factors influencing special education teachers when making instructional decisions about what and how to teach students with reading disabilities to read. The themes identified within this research question include the following:

1. Time and personnel

2. Special education knowledge of individuals in leadership positions

3. Working relationships with colleagues

Theme Four: Time and Personnel

An external factor that emerged as a theme was that a lack of time and personnel influenced what materials and strategies special education teachers could employ with students. The lack of time was a two-fold issue for many teachers. First, because many of the students with a reading disability required more time for repetition and practice on skills than their regular education counterparts, many participants felt that there was never enough time. Natalie discussed this when she said:

> I think the other thing that is difficult with teaching would be just ensuring there is enough time for repetitive practice because the regular education classroom does move at a much quicker pace than I move in my classroom, so it's kind of tricky at times because they're moving ahead but you want them to get that practice in a small group of the things they are doing in regular ed, but also going back to the things they haven't mastered yet, so you're kind of weaving your lessons in (Personal Communication, July 13, 2021).

Affirming Natalie's belief that students with reading disabilities require more intensive instruction, a study by Vaughn and Wanzek (2014) found, "Interventions require small group instruction that occurs daily for 45 min or more. In order for students with reading disabilities to

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make progress towards grade level expectations, they must accelerate their learning, and, for some students, the evidence suggests that this will require ongoing, sustained, and intensive treatments for several years (p. 50)

Another compounding factor was that rather than having more time to work with students with reading disabilities, many participants shared that their time with students is often limited. Several teachers noted that they do not see their students daily, due to a shared intervention time. If a student has a need for any other service such as speech and language, occupational therapy, social skills, or another support, the student would be pulled to work on those things during a shared block of time set aside for these types of services. Cate discussed this when she said:

> Unfortunately, our schedule is what drives us, we have the 45 minutes of intervention and then the time I'm pushing in with them, so and I have a lot of kids that also have speech, OT, and they're being pulled at that same 45 minutes in different directions, so I may end up only having them one day a week, so it's hard to make progress with that (Personal Communication, July 14, 2021).

The lack of time is magnified when there is also a lack of personnel in the building. Several participants discussed the need for more personnel in their schools. Several participants reported servicing three or more grade levels, and all participants reported servicing multiple disability groups including students with emotional disturbance, students with autism, and students with other health impairments such as ADHD. In regards to this, Anne shared:

> I share my time with autistic students, I share my time with emotionally disturbed students, and learning-disabled students, whether that be a math disability or a reading disability, and other health impaired students, ADD, ADHD, so I have a lot on my plate (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021).

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Similarly, Beth shared:

>We just have such a need for students needing that small group direct instruction that it's hard to give them all what they need. So, I'd really say time and teachers are the biggest difficulties that I face. I just wish I had more time with my kids and more time to be a resource for the teachers. It would be really nice to have another learning support teacher (Personal Communication, July 21, 2021).

The need for additional time with students with reading disabilities coupled with a lack of human resources made providing necessary interventions to students difficult, and therefore this external factor was significant in terms of what and how the participants could educate and remediate students with reading disabilities.

Theme Five: Special education knowledge of individuals in leadership positions

Another theme that emerged throughout the interviews was that the knowledge of individuals in leadership positions was an external factor that could either positively or negatively affect what teachers were able to do when working with students with reading disabilities. The majority of the participants shared that their administrators and others in leadership positions were knowledgeable and supportive. Of her principal, Cate shared, "He is amazing because he understands and he knows- he supports our team of special ed teachers like 100%" (Personal Communication, July 14, 2021). Participants shared that having the support of principals and other leaders was important to their teaching. Affirming this, DiPaola et al. (2004) write, "In one way or another, all of the actions of effective principals are geared toward providing teachers and specialists with the resources and support they need to do their jobs effectively" (p.1).

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Conversely, principals and other leaders who are not effective leaders, or who are not knowledgeable about special education issues, may act in ways that are not supportive of teachers and specialists. For Beth, former administrators without special education knowledge led to increases in student referrals for special education. She noted that this was in large part due to differing priorities of previous school leaders. She shared:

> Different people we've had in different positions have had different priorities, so this is definitely a priority for one of our current administrators, it is really getting those students the support they need, whether it be staying in the general ed classroom, or getting Title [I services], or eventually becoming you know a student with maybe a learning disability in need of special education services, so, I'm excited that this person has that background and sees the need in our district (Personal Communication, July 21, 2021).

Beth has attributed recent positive changes in the delivery of special education services is to an administrator with the background and knowledge in special education. The integral nature of having knowledgeable leaders was discussed in a study by DiPaola et al. (2003). About this, they write, "Principals identified help and information about implementing successful special education programs as their greatest need" (p.4).

Theme Six: Relationships with Colleagues

All eight participants spent significant time during the interview portion of this study discussing the impact colleagues have or have had on their teaching. Whether it be a positive impact or negative, participants were very passionate about their interactions.

Seven of the participants shared examples of how current or past colleagues have positively influenced their teaching practice when working with students with learning

disabilities. For Natalie, who has only been teaching for two years, collaboration with colleagues

has been a beneficial experience. She shared:

> I would also say the teachers I work with in my school have had a big influence because
>
> they really are very, very helpful… they really are wonderful at collaborating, especially
>
> um, like I'll attend their planning meetings and they'll share things they use and
>
> strategies that they've used in years past that have worked really well (Personal
>
> Communication, July 13, 2021).

Affirming this sentiment, Jones and Frank (2013) write, "If beginning special educators perceive

… high levels of collective responsibility in their schools, this may alter the ways in which they

access and make use of resources from colleagues" (p.13).

In contrast, many participants shared that having poor relationships with colleagues also

affected their teaching practice. The most common area of difficulty cited was a lack of special

education knowledge of colleagues in general education. Sue shared about some of her

colleagues in general education, "I feel like general education teachers do not really grasp what a

learning support teacher goes through and does, they don't seem to really respect (us)" (Personal

Communication, July 27, 2021). Beth also discussed how beneficial it would be for general

education teachers to understand special education better. She said,

> What I've found though is a lot of them don't know how to help the students on an IEP,
>
> it's not that they necessarily don't want to… I really feel like everyone should have a
>
> special education degree, not just have to take one class, just because everyone has
>
> special education students in their classroom nowadays with inclusion" (Personal
>
> Communication, July 21, 2021).

Similarly, Carly said of some of her general education colleagues,

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> Teachers don't always share the same philosophies as special ed. I've been told, like 'they're your kids, they're not my kids', and breaking that has been very hard. There's a lot of teachers here…that have been there a long time who don't seem to understand that they are a part of special education, whether they have that degree or not (Personal Communication, August 12, 2021).

An educational brief by the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2011), affirmed this stating, "Teacher education has a crucial role to play in ensuring that classroom teachers are prepared for the challenges of educating students with disabilities" (p.5). Furthermore, the brief specifies the importance of improving general education teachers' knowledge of special education is addressed:

> The time has come to consider additional, innovative approaches to improving the outcomes for students with disabilities by focusing on the preparation of general education teachers because of the overwhelming evidence on school effectiveness that classroom teachers are the single most important factor influencing student achievement. (p.7).

Research Question Three

Research question three relates to the specialized knowledge that special education teachers possess and apply when teaching students with reading disabilities to read and if practices align with the research. The themes identified within this research question include the following:

1. Alignment through instructional tiers
2. Education: The continuing quest for knowledge
3. Delivery model of special education services

Theme Seven: Alignment through Instructional Tiers

In relation to the question of what specialized knowledge and practices special education teachers apply when teaching students with reading disabilities, a theme that emerged was that among all of the participants, materials and teaching practices throughout their individual school districts varied among instructional tiers. All school districts represented in the current study considered tier three to be special education. Instruction that occurred or did not occur in tiers one and two, could either positively or negatively affect several aspects of special education. In a study by Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, (2012) the researchers found,

> Even the most knowledgeable teacher using effective methods of instruction cannot be maximally effective working alone. Without consistency of instruction and intervention across teachers within a grade, as well as coordination of instruction across grades, ineffective instructional practices may continue to contribute to some children's learning problems. Hence, a systems approach to reading instruction and intervention is vital (p. 1694).

Five of the participants voiced concerns that not only did practices vary among the tiers of instruction, but there was a misalignment in practice. For at least one participant, the misalignment in her school began in tier one and continued into tier three, leading to an increase in special education referrals. Beth explained:

> I would say our regular ed curriculum has led to an increase in the special education population….I don't think that we helped those students that were right on the cusp, whereas maybe in another district, they would have been able to get them the help that they needed to get them to stay in regular ed, I kind of feel like we've done a disservice

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just by changing programs …we'll pilot one and it's not a consensus, so we pilot multiple

programs so I think that has hurt our school and I'm hoping now that we can kind of get

everyone on a better path…, it was just kind of a hodge-podge of things and resources, so

that was definitely hurting everyone (Personal Communication, July 21, 2021).

A study by Boardman et al. (2005) mirrors Beth's reflections. In their research study, Boardman et al. found:

Teachers also expressed frustration with the district's lack of retention of endorsed

instructional practices: 'I wish the district would kind of stick to a program or a group of

methods. It seems like for a year or two they'll grab onto something, and then the

pendulum swings and they grab onto something else' (p. 173).

Tier one instruction is typically considered the core curriculum. It should be aligned to state standards and is intended to deliver a high-quality instructional program that is evidence-based (National Center for Learning Disabilities). However, when instruction in tier one, or the core curriculum, is not high-quality or evidence-based, it can lead to an increase in the number of students who struggle to learn in the general education classroom. Hillary shared her observation about instruction in her district when she said,

It's very separate, I'm going to say it doesn't align well which I think is a huge need area.

If possible, the gen ed teachers are supposed to accommodate their curriculum based on

the SDI in the IEP, some are better than others with that…for sure (Personal

Communication, July 14, 2021).

Based on responses of the participants in the present study, this misalignment was often a curricular misalignment. However, three of the participants also shared that they saw a

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philosophical misalignment in their district due to some of their colleagues' varying, long-standing beliefs regarding how reading should be taught, sharing that some of their colleagues involved in tier one and tier two instruction continued to model teaching practices of whole language and balanced literacy. Castles (2019) confirms that such issues are still relevant today, writing,

>The quality and scope of the scientific evidence today means that the reading wars should be over. But strong debate and resistance to using methods based on scientific evidence persists (p.6).

Beth experienced this with some of the regular education teachers in her building, "From my understanding, they're doing more of like whole language…but I think what we're doing in learning support, is more beneficial for that student population" (Personal Communication, July 21, 2021). Additionally, she noted, "One of our Title teachers refused to actually go to the training at the IU because it was against what she felt like was right for her students" (Personal Communication, July 21, 2021). Affirming these observations, Vaughn et al. (2000), write, "Some of these issues may be related to philosophical differences and teaching routines" (p. 168). Additionally, according to Boardman et al. (2005), "There is a growing focus on implementing research-based instructional programs, as well as aligning goals for growth in reading for general and special populations" (p.178). Over fifteen years later, the present study reflected that for the districts represented, this goal remains unrealized.

Whatever the reasons for each district's misalignment in tiered instruction, the result was similar for many of the participants, the ramifications for what was or was not taught in tier one and two instruction affected the learning outcomes of the students who eventually were identified as needing tier three supports in special education.

Theme Eight: Education: The Continuing Quest for Knowledge

When investigating the specialized knowledge that special education teachers possess and use when teaching students with reading disabilities, the theme that special education teachers must be life-long learners emerged. Throughout the interviews, participants shared how they pursued additional knowledge in order to successfully work with students with reading disabilities.

As research uncovers more about reading disabilities and how students acquire the skills necessary to be strong readers, the potential for student growth could be higher than ever before. However, with this growth in scientific understanding, comes the challenge of disseminating this knowledge to both pre-service teachers as well as those already in the field (Spear-Swerling & Brucker, 2005). Of the eight participants, six discussed how the training they received during undergraduate education did not prepare them to teach students with reading disabilities to read. For Anne, she experienced a disconnect between what she learned in undergraduate education classes and what she needed to know to be a successful teacher. About her education courses she shared, "I was never really taught this is how you teach a student to read" (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021). Similarly, Sue said of how her undergraduate reading classes prepared her, "I feel like my undergrad was a skim, um and just like the basics" (Personal Communication, July 27, 2021). In the previously mentioned study by Spear-Swerling and Brucker (2005) the researchers' findings affirm the experiences of Anne and Sue. They write, "The results confirm the viewpoint that teachers need more intensive preservice preparation related to reading as well as ongoing professional development" (p.290). Relatedly, in a brief by The National Center for Learning Disabilities (2011), the authors write,

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In today's classrooms, new teachers are teaching more diverse groups of students than ever before. However, these same teachers report that they do not feel adequately prepared for the job and for being held accountable for the achievement of learners who have disabilities, who are English language learners, or who are from the nation's lowest socioeconomic levels (p.5).

In order for special education teachers to possess and apply the knowledge and practices necessary to teach students with reading disabilities, they must have the knowledge-base to discern what works. For all eight participants in the present study, this learning has primarily taken place through post-graduate studies, independently researching reading strategies, and on-the -job experience.

All participants in the present study discussed the importance of their own continual growth and learning. Throughout the interviews, many participants spoke excitedly about reading courses they were taking and professional reading groups they belonged to. Several of the participants shared a desire to continue their own learning. Illustrating this point, Carly said,

I think freshman 101 they said to be a good teacher, you have to be a lifelong learner and I've always followed that. I kind of keep that in my heart. I think I'll always be learning (Personal Communication, August 12, 2021).

Theme Nine: Delivery Model of Special Education Services

A final theme related to the specialized knowledge and practices utilized by special education teachers is that for most participants, the model of delivery that their respective schools were implementing drastically affected how they were able to support students with reading disabilities as well as what specialized practices they could utilize.

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Though all participants taught in the same county, the implementation models for special education services varied greatly. The following table presents this information.

Table 4: *Learning Support Delivery Models*

Participant	Resource Room	Push-In	Pull-out	Co-Teaching
Natalie P1			X	
Hillary P2			X	
Cate P3	X	X		
Mary P4	X	X	X	
Anne P5				X
Beth P6		X	X	
Sue P7	X	X		
Carly P8				X

For the special education teachers in the present study, the way in which their district had chosen to implement services, greatly affected how they could apply specialized knowledge and practices when working with students with reading disabilities. Participants who utilized pull-out instruction to provide supplemental instruction and interventions expressed the greatest satisfaction with their ability to implement services. Adding support to this observation is a study by Fernandez and Hynes (2016). Their findings suggest the following, "They confirmed that the pullout model provided a small environment that was less distracting and specialized instruction that could not be achieved in the larger general classroom (p.37). Furthermore, the researchers found, "The chief benefit of the pullout program, unanimously shared by the teachers, was that students with dyslexia and speech problems benefited significantly from it" (p.39).

Participants in the co-teaching classrooms also expressed overall satisfaction, however they did discuss the difficulty of providing interventions to students with reading disabilities within the classroom, sharing that it was often problematic to provide support for students in need of intensive remedial instruction. In regards to this, Anne shared,

> Because we use the co-teaching method, there's not a lot of time to do pull-out so it goes
> more to the administration, where we'd have to contact our administration and maybe our
> special ed supervisor and say if you want to have this, we might have to get additional
> supports, like an aide or something to work with your child because there is no time
> within our day, within our scheduled day (Personal Communication, July 20, 2021).

This was also affirmed in the study by Fernandez and Hynes (2016). Of the teachers in their study, they reported:

> While teachers were supportive of the inclusion model, they liked having the option of
> the pullout model as well. With the diverse classroom, teachers contended that the pullout
> program helped some of the students with learning disabilities (p. 40).

All teachers in the present study who are currently or had previously participated in a push-in model expressed frustration and concern about its effectiveness. Sue expressed this frustration when she said:

> I have to do a lot of push-in support and I've told my principal for many years, many
> times, and I feel bad saying this as a learning support teacher, but it's a waste of my time.
> An aide can be doing what I'm doing…I can be using my skills to teach students how to
> read and not just put a band aide on them…I feel like it is good to have them in the
> general curriculum, but I feel like push-in support with a highly trained teacher, and you
> don't get to use all of your skills and all of your tools and manipulatives, they train you in

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all of these things and then you don't have the opportunity to use them (Personal

Communication, July 27, 2021).

Similarly, Beth shared:

I do really like pushing in to the classrooms, but I've found, and it's really no fault of

anybody, but there's just such a lack of time, especially when I'm working with so many

different teachers to implement a really good co-teaching model, so a lot of the times it

was just me kind of going in and helping my few students, and there were some teachers

where I felt like we were more successful with it and it was helping the students, but then

there were other times I kind of felt like it was not as beneficial or helpful to both the

teacher and the students with me pushing in (Personal Communication, July 21, 2021).

A lack of time and training seem to be two hindrances to successfully utilizing a push-in model

of support. Without proper training and sufficient time for collaboration, push-in support may be

difficult to sustain and may not provide students with disabilities the level of support they need

to succeed. Bemiller (2019) reflects on this when she states, "In classrooms where teachers lack

proper training, children with special needs may not experience equity, ultimately weakening the

intent of inclusive practices" (74).

Implications

The purpose of the present research study was to garner a deeper understanding of the

internal and external factors influencing special education teachers in the phenomenon of

teaching students with reading disabilities to read. This is a less-known area in the research on

teaching and learning and through this phenomenological qualitative research study, the

researcher sought to add to the current knowledge base through the exploration of the lived

experiences of elementary special education teachers currently teaching reading to students with reading disabilities.

The implications of this study are numerous. One significant implication of this study is that it provides a deeper understanding of the factors that affect the daily instruction of students with reading disabilities. It is important for special and general educators, teacher-educators, school leaders, and educational researchers to better understand what drives the teaching decisions and practices of teachers as they work to teach students with reading disabilities how to read.

Implications of Internal Factors

Internally, the participants in this study were guided, in large part, by their personal beliefs about how students learn. Concepts such as confidence, rapport, intrinsic accountability, and self-reflection were discussed often and with great emotion. The implications of the emotional nature of this aspect of teaching are important to understand due to the tremendous weight participants assigned to internal factors when planning and implementing instruction. Personal beliefs about teaching and the intrinsic motivation to teach effectively can positively impact teaching practices. The effect of building student confidence and teacher-student rapport can have lasting implications for students' development, both socially-emotionally and academically (Rim-Kaufmann & Sandilos, n.d.). While rapport and confidence-building in and of itself will not produce competent readers, studies have found that students engaged in positive relationships with teachers will have a better response to high-quality instruction than students without those positive student-teacher relationships (Akin & Radford, 2018; Rim-Kaufmann & Sandilos, n.d.).

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While teacher beliefs can positively affect their teaching due to the emotional weight assigned to it by special education teachers, studies have found that teachers may sometimes reject research-based practices when they are not consistent with their beliefs about how students learn (Vaugn et al., 2000). It is important to take this into consideration when planning professional development for teachers in their use of evidence-based practices. In a study similar to the present study, Cunningham et al. (2009) found, "Research-based practices will not be employed widely, nor with fidelity, until teacher knowledge and beliefs are congruent with the instructional practices recommended by research and policy consensus" (p. 429). If teachers cannot integrate their personal beliefs and experiences with the research, evidence-based practices may be rejected.

Implications of External Factors

Externally, the participants in this study attributed colleagues, school leaders, and time constraints as the largest contributing factors influencing their reading instruction. The implications of these findings are significant to understand because these are generally outside the control of teachers. Issues such as a lack of time and personnel are not uncommon, but can have detrimental effects on the quality of instruction given to students with disabilities.

Several participants in the current study identified a lack of time as one of their greatest challenges in providing instruction to students with reading disabilities. This finding is not unique to the current study. A study by Vaughn et al. (2000) found that a lack of time was one of the obstacles in the way of teachers implementing research-based instruction. They concede, "Time is the pervasive predator for teachers and they are ever-vigilant about monitoring implementation of practices that take too much time, regardless of the promised payoff". Time for the learning and implementation of new practices is limited, as is the time available to work

with struggling readers who generally need more time and repetition to learn than their general education counterparts. This finding has implications for those in charge of schedules, models of support, and professional development.

Special education knowledge of colleagues and those in leadership positions were also external factors that could influence the reading instruction of special education students with reading disabilities. When colleagues and leaders lack knowledge about special education and their role in it, everyone suffers. A study by Gersten and colleagues (2001) found that building-level support from principals and general educators had strong effects on "virtually all critical aspects of (special education) teachers' working conditions" (p. 557). The influence that general education teachers, principals, and other school leaders have on special education teachers can be positive or negative, depending on each individual's personality and more critically, their knowledge of special education and specifically reading disabilities. The implications of these findings drive home the need for general education teachers and school leaders to engage in professional learning about learning disabilities, inclusive practices, and current research in instruction for students with reading disabilities (Blanton et al., 2011; Cunningham et al., 2009; Gersten et al., 2009; Mills & Clarke, 2017; Moats, 2020; Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2012). In addition, an implication for colleges and universities as well as teacher educators would be to recognize this gap in knowledge and improve upon this at the pre-service level (Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2012). Additional coursework and field experience in the area of special education could drastically expand general educators' knowledge and acceptance of their role in educating students with disabilities.

Implications of the Specialized Knowledge of Special Education Teachers

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When attempting to investigate the specialized knowledge that learning support teachers possess and apply when teaching students with reading disabilities, it became clear that there was no simple answer. While most of the participants did possess specialized knowledge and had received training in research-based practices, their opportunities to utilize said knowledge, was largely dictated by how well the curriculum aligned at the various levels or tiers of support and the special education delivery model. These findings have important implications in part, because they are largely outside the control of the special education teacher. Participants in the present study discussed programs and practices that were well-aligned with the research on teaching students with reading disabilities, however how, when, or if they could utilize these practices depended on those factors outside of their control. To help diminish these factors outside of their control, many of the participants pursued additional knowledge through the earning of master's degrees, participation in professional development opportunities, piloting of research-based materials and programs, and joining online educational groups. While this mitigation did appear to positively impact instruction and practice, it could not completely null the effects of a misaligned curriculum, or a delivery model implemented inefficiently.

The implications for these findings are important for those involved in educational leadership, particularly building principals, curriculum directors, and special education directors. Understanding how curriculum in tiers one and two can positively or negatively affect students with reading disabilities is of utmost importance (Boardman et al., 2005; Cook & Smith, 2012; DiPaola et al., 2004; Gersten et al., 2008; Moats, 2017; Spear-Swerling, 2019). Students with learning disabilities are among the most vulnerable to poor instruction, it is therefore imperative that those in charge of curriculum recognize when the curriculum and instruction in tiers one and two are not effective (Moats, 2015; Seidenberg, 2017; Vellutino et al., 2006). Furthermore,

special education directors and others responsible for determining the delivery model of special education services must be diligent not only in their pursuit of choosing a model that is research-based, but also of ensuring that the model is carried out with fidelity.

Recommendations for Further Research

This phenomenological qualitative research study explored not only the factors influencing what and how special education teachers deliver instruction and remediation to students with reading disabilities, but also sought to investigate the specialized knowledge and practices they possessed and applied. Though the study yielded data that elucidated all of these, further research in the following areas would be beneficial:

1. How does the experience and personal beliefs about how children learn to read match up with the research on reading? When there is a mismatch between beliefs and research, how do special education teachers amend the dissonance experienced?

2. How can school leaders facilitate changes in curricular alignment and special education delivery models to improve outcomes for students with reading disabilities?

3. To what extent are special education teachers utilizing practices that are supported by the science of teaching reading and are students reaching levels of proficiency by third grade. What additional factors play a role in this?

Further Research: Recommendation One:

While there have been research studies exploring how teachers' experience and beliefs affect their likelihood of implementing and sustaining research-based reading instruction (Boardman et al., 2005; Kilpatrick, 2015; McCutchen et al., 2002; Siedenberg, 2017; Spear-Swerling & Brucker, 2005; Vaugn & Linan-Thompson, 2003), this remains an area of research

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that has not been significantly studied as it relates to teaching reading to students with reading disabilities. A research study design that could look more deeply into the effects of special education teachers' beliefs and philosophies in relation to their willingness to explore research that may not align with their beliefs would be beneficial in the area of professional development. In order to help struggling readers be successful, teachers must be willing to put aside personal beliefs to consider research practices that may be contrary to what they believe or have experienced. In Cunningham and colleagues' study in 2009, the researchers identified a similar need for research in this area.

> Research that clarifies the relationships between teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and practices may provide fodder for a restructuring of the objectives of such programs. It is unfortunate that at this point we know very little about how teachers' beliefs about the teaching of literacy are related to actual instructional practices and student learning. Furthermore, we do not yet have strong data addressing whether or how teacher beliefs get enacted in practice (p. 424).

Research that allows those providing education and professional development to special education teachers could benefit from having a better understanding of how to connect beliefs and practices to research.

Further Research: Recommendation Two:

It is not surprising that school leaders have the power to enact change in schools. However, if leaders lack the skills, knowledge, or vision to do so, obstacles to teaching students with reading disabilities will remain (Cook & Smith, 2012; DiPaola et al., 2004). Further research examining how to effectively prepare leaders to collaborate with general and special education teachers and specialists in order to identify gaps and misalignments in curriculum or to

distinguish effective delivery models from those that are ineffective would greatly enhance the ability of school leaders to effectively enact positive change for special education teachers and consequently for the students receiving special education services. Current research has already identified the importance of knowledgeable leaders, however, there remains a gap in the research on how leaders can support special education teachers in the areas of curricular alignment and delivery model of special education services. The current study identified that among all external factors that were largely out of teachers' control, those two factors appeared to be influential in affecting their ability to deliver research-based instruction to students with learning disabilities.

Future Research: Recommendation Three:

The present research uncovered that most participants possessed specialized knowledge to support students with reading disabilities. However, the extent to which they utilized these practices as well as how well these practices align with the science of teaching reading remain elusive. Further studies are needed to identify specific practices utilized by special education teachers working with students with reading disabilities. Information such as: (1) how they align with research, (2) if they are being utilized with fidelity, (3) if the students being instructed are reaching levels of reading proficiency by third grade, and (4) what additional factors play a role in this are all still awaiting answers.

Research exists detailing intervention techniques that have been effective in improving reading outcomes of students with reading disabilities (Snow et al., 1998; Torgeson et al., 2001; Vellutino et al., 1996 & 2006). However, the success of teachers in the field replicating these results remains largely unknown. Kilpatrick (2017) found that when translated into a process and framework, the actual intervention techniques utilized in studies did not produce the same effects in practice. Therefore, a study examining the real-life implementation of the practices and

techniques described in research and asserted to be effective, would be extremely beneficial in guiding the future recommendations of instruction for both students with and without reading disabilities.

Summary and Conclusion

This qualitative research study explored the lived experiences of elementary special education teachers currently teaching reading to students with reading disabilities. With the overarching goal of developing a deeper understanding of elementary special education teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching reading to students with reading disabilities, the researcher utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological design in order to not only describe but to interpret the lived experiences of these special educators. Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to better understand the lived experiences of these teachers first-hand. Through the interview process and the qualitative data analysis that followed, the researcher was able to identify nine themes that aligned with the study's three central research questions. The themes that emerged were: (1) desire to build confidence and rapport, (2) personal beliefs, experience, and self-reflection guide learning, (3) accountability to students and colleagues, (4) time and personnel, (5) special education knowledge of individuals in leadership positions, (6) working relationships with colleagues, (7) alignment throughout instructional tiers, (8) education: the continuing quest for knowledge, and (9) delivery model of special education services.

In this chapter, each of the nine themes was expounded upon and pertinent participant experiences and quotes were utilized. Through the utilization of participant experience and salient quotes the researcher demonstrated connectedness to both the overarching research questions of the present study as well as to other research in the field of reading. Additionally, this chapter discussed how the findings of the present research has implications for special and

general education teachers, school leaders, teacher educators, researchers, and those involved in the curriculum and development of teacher preparation programs.

Teaching students with reading disabilities to become proficient readers involves an extraordinary amount of preparation, experience, motivation, collaboration, support, guidance, and knowledge. There is not one lone factor that influences the practices employed by special education teachers. Rather, it is a unique combination of internal and external factors. However, without scientifically-based reading instruction, many students will struggle with the reading process, and many will not learn to read at a proficient level (Kilpatrick, 2015; Seidenberg, 2017; Shaywitz, 2003). Research informs that the students most greatly affected by ineffective teaching practices are students with reading disabilities. It is imperative that what has been learned through research be put into practice. Therefore, this research study provides valuable insight for all stakeholders involved in the critical task of teaching students with reading disabilities to develop into skilled and capable readers.

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APPENDIX A: LETTER TO DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS TO REQUEST SITE

PERMISSION

My name is Rebecca Doolittle-Whitman and I am a teacher in the Harbor Creek School District, as well as a doctoral candidate in Slippery Rock University's Special Education Ed.D. Program.

I am emailing you today to request permission to invite your district's K-6 Learning Support Teachers to participate in a study investigating the lived experiences of learning support teachers in their work to teach students with reading disabilities. Specifically, I am interested in exploring how learning support teachers teach elementary-aged students with a disability in reading how to read. All information will be kept completely confidential and the district will not be named directly.

I have attached the letter that I would like to send to your district's elementary learning support teachers.

I would greatly appreciate an email confirming your consent for me to send the email invitation and questionnaire link to your elementary learning support teachers.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Doolittle-Whitman
rxd1014@sru.edu
814 431-8695

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APPENDIX B: EMAIL INVITATION TO TEACHERS

Dear Colleagues,

My name is Rebecca Doolittle-Whitman and I am a fellow teacher in the Harbor Creek School District, as well as a doctoral candidate in Slippery Rock University's Special Education Ed.D. Program. I am inviting you to participate in a study investigating the lived experiences of learning support teachers in their work to teach students with reading disabilities. Specifically, I am interested in exploring how learning support teachers teach elementary-aged students with a disability in reading how to read.

If you would be willing to participate in this study, please click on the link below. You will be led to a short, three-minute Questionnaire.

https://sru.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9SqFIYCxqfe9hNI

Based on the results of the questionnaires, I intend to then interview a total of 8-10 learning support teachers throughout Erie County. Each interview will consist of 10 open-ended questions and will take approximately 30-45 minutes.

Your participation is voluntary and you may choose to opt out at any time. There are no risks associated with participation. While there is no compensation for participation in this study, you will have the opportunity to add to the growing body of knowledge around the challenge of teaching students with a learning disability in reading how to read. Approval from the Internal Review Board at Slippery Rock University was granted prior to conducting this study.

Thank you very much in advance for your consideration and willingness to participate in this study. I truly appreciate it. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Respectfully,

Rebecca Doolittle-Whitman

rxd1014@sru.edu
(814) 431-8695

APPENDIX C: TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE 1 (RETYPED FROM QUALTRICS)

1. What is your gender?
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Other
2. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?
   a. Bachelor's Degree
   b. Master's Equivalency
   c. Master's Degree
   d. Post-Masters or Doctoral Degree
3. Have you received post-baccalaureate training, education, or staff development in the area of teaching reading?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. I am unsure
4. How many years have you spent teaching?
   a. 1-5 years
   b. 6-10 years
   c. 11-15 years
   d. 16-20 years
   e. 21 or more years
5. Are you currently teaching students diagnosed with a reading disability?
   a. Yes, I teach in a learning support capacity
   b. Yes, I teach in a capacity other than learning support (Emotional Support, Autistic Support etc.)
   c. No, I do not teach students with a learning disability in reading
6. In which grade levels do you currently teach students with a learning disability in reading?
   a. K-2
   b. 3-5
   c. 6-8
   d. 9-12
7. How many years have you taught in a special education environment?
   a. 1-5 years
   b. 6-10 years
   c. 11-15 years
   d. 16-20 years
   e. 21 or more years
   f. I have never taught in a special education environment
8. How would you describe the school in which you teach?
   a. Rural

      b. Suburban
      c. Urban
      d. I am unsure

9. Would you be willing to participate in an interview regarding your experiences teaching students with a learning disability in reading how to read?
      a. Yes, please contact me using the information I provide in the next section
      b. Maybe (Please consider leaving contact information)
      c. No

10. If you are willing to participate in an interview or would like more information, please list your name and contact information

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APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT EMAIL LETTER

Dear Teacher

Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in this research study. I am so excited to talk with you about your experiences.

For now, please read the attached consent form and let me know if you have any questions or concerns. Please email a copy of your signed consent.

After that, please click on the link below to access a follow-up questionnaire. There will be a question related to the consent form as well as some follow-up questions that will help guide our interview. I will be in touch soon so we can choose a time and place for our interview. Virtual interviews are also an option, if you prefer.

https://sru.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2tQ5vUMDzyStwNM

Thanks again,

Rebecca Doolittle-Whitman

rxd1014@sru.edu
(814) 431-8695

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APPENDIX E: QUESTIONNAIRE 2: FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONNAIRE

(RETYPED FROM QUALTRICS)

1. Please type your full name and contact information.
2. I have read and understood the Consent Form that was sent to me in an email. I agree to participate in the study and to be audio-recorded during the interview. I have been informed that my confidentiality will be protected and that the audio-recording will be destroyed at the end of the research study.
   a. Yes, I received the consent form and I consent to participate in the study
   b. Yes, I received the consent form but do NOT consent
   c. No, I did not receive the consent form
3. Briefly describe a typical work day.
4. Which of the following do you utilize when teaching students with reading disabilities (check all that apply)
   a. Explicit phonics instruction
   b. Instruction in phonological awareness
   c. Decodable texts
   d. The 3-cueing system
   e. Leveled readers
   f. Companion materials from school's basal
   g. Repeated reads
   h. PSSA preparation materials
   i. PA Core Standards
   j. District Curriculum
   k. Other
5. In addition to the previous list, is there anything else you utilize when teaching students with reading disabilities to read?
6. What has influenced how you teach reading to students with reading disabilities? Please rank the following from most influential to least influential.
   a. Undergraduate courses at a college or university
   b. Graduate courses at a college or university
   c. Professional development through the Intermediate Unit (IU)
   d. Experience teaching students with reading disabilities
   e. Staff development through my school district
   f. A specific author or publisher
   g. My personal philosophy of how students learn
   h. A professional organization such as the Reading League or International Literacy Association
7. In addition to the list you just ranked, is there anything else that has influenced how you teach reading to students with reading disabilities? Please list and/or describe
8. Describe how the general education teachers you work with impact the work you do with students with reading disabilities.

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9. Briefly describe some of the factors that you feel influence how you teach reading to students with reading disabilities.

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APPENDIX F: RESEARCH QUESTIONS INTERVIEW GUIDE

Hi, Thank you for talking with me today. As you know, my research study focuses on the experiences of special education teachers as they teach students with reading disabilities how to read. I have two central questions that I have broken into more specific questions. For the most part, I would like to just talk with you about your experiences. Because your responses are so important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to do that? I will also be taking written notes. Again, I want to assure you that all responses are confidential and a pseudonym will be used when I type up the transcript of our conversation. The audio tapes will be destroyed at the completion of the study and all written information will be stored in either a password protected computer or a locked file cabinet. I appreciate your candor as I want to get a feel for your day to day experiences with teaching reading to students with a reading disability This interview should last approximately 45 minutes. Are you ready to get started?

Central Research Questions	Interview Questions Aligned to Central Question	Potential Follow-up Questions

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1. What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon (teaching students with reading disabilities to read)?	**"Tell me about your experiences with teaching reading to students with a reading disability"**	a. Describe a typical day b. What specialized knowledge do you possess and apply? c. What teaching strategies, programs, etc. have you found to work? Not work? d. What are some challenges you face when teaching students to read? e. What does your working relationship with the general education teacher look like? f. Describe how your teaching of reading is the same/different today than it was when you first began teaching students with reading disabilities.
What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon (teaching students with reading disabilities to read)?	**"Tell me about some of your most utilized strategies or resources for teaching reading. Why do you utilize that particular strategy/resource/etc.?"**	a. What are some of the external factors that influence your teaching (curriculum, standards, reading program, etc.?) b. Tell me about your experiences with learning to teach reading (what did you learn in college, professional development, etc.) c. Discuss how you feel about your own skills and knowledge in the area of teaching reading? d. How do your beliefs about how students learn impact the instructional choices you make?

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Research Questions (The above interview guide has been based off of the two central questions:

- **What have elementary special education teachers experienced in terms of the phenomenon (teaching students with reading disabilities to read)?**

- **What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected elementary special education teachers' experiences of the phenomenon (teaching students with reading disabilities to read)?**

The following research questions were developed based on the central questions and guided the study:

- How do special education teachers' practices align with the science of reading?

- How do special education teachers' perceptions of their knowledge of reading affect their desire for additional professional development?

- What internal factors do special education teachers regard as influencing their instructional decisions when teaching students with reading disabilities to read?

- What external factors do special education teachers regard as influencing their instructional decisions when teaching students with reading disabilities to read?

- How do special education teachers change throughout their career and what is the catalyst for change?