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Exploring Early Childhood Teachers' Experiences When Teaching Phonics With the Letterland Program

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Abstract

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by

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MA, Georgian Court University, 2007

BS, Georgian Court University, 2001

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

In 2015, a small school district in a mid-Atlantic state implemented Letterland, a phonics-based early reading program, to increase early reading levels. The problem investigated in this study was that, despite district implementation of the Letterland phonics program, early childhood students continued to struggle with mastery of phonics and phonemic awareness skills, suggesting that improvements might be needed in program implementation. The purpose of this project study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of early childhood teachers who teach phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program. The conceptual framework that guided this study was the constructivist theory. The research questions centered around the experiences of teachers and the supports and resources needed to implement the Letterland program successfully from the teachers' perspective. Nine early childhood teachers who had implemented the Letterland program participated in one-on-one interviews. Data were analyzed using inductive coding to identify themes that emerged. The themes that emerged were early childhood educators' experiences of obstacles and barriers, effects of teaching Letterland on teaching practice, Letterland's professional development experiences, teaching experiences prior to Letterland, professional training opportunities necessary to teach students successfully, and tools necessary to teach Letterland. The results of the project study were used to create a 3-day professional development to assist early childhood reading teachers in teaching phonics and phonemic awareness more effectively. This project study may promote positive social change by informing future teachers and administrators on what is needed to adequately prepare early childhood teachers to teach phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my husband, William J. Winters, who gave his constant support and encouragement when it was needed the most; to my mother, Gloria F. Woods, who taught me the value of hard work and persistence; and to my four sons, who taught me to never give up and to "just do it."

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

In the past 7 years, early childhood teachers in a small school district in a mid-Atlantic state have struggled with teaching phonemic awareness and phonics. Due to the large number of students reading below grade level, and the lack of phonemic awareness and phonics training, teachers were introduced to the Letterland program in 2015, a supplemental program utilized to address the problem with phonics and phonemic awareness skills. The problem to be investigated in this study was that, despite district implementation of the Letterland phonics program, early childhood students continued to struggle with mastery of phonics and phonemic awareness skills, suggesting that improvements might be needed in program implementation. According to the district's supervisor of Title 1 instruction, the teachers and administrators hoped that all children would benefit from the program.

In 2015, the local school district implemented the Letterland phonics program in Grades K–2 for 40 minutes a day, in addition to the district's reading and writing program. Staff, students, and their families have fully embraced the program, as well as the Letterland characters. On March 17, 2020, the local school district transitioned from in-person learning to virtual learning due to the health-related school closure caused by COVID-19. Students in the local school district received a computer device, through which staff members taught students each day by posting videotaped lessons on their Google Classrooms, allowing students to view their lessons and complete their classwork at any point during the day. Students had to sign in each day, view their lessons, and

complete all classwork, in order for their attendance to count for the day. Teachers and guidance counselors met with their students, especially those considered at risk, on a daily basis using the Google Meet platform. Assessments were still administered, and expectations were still held high; however, it is clear via the data collected that the COVID-19 slide impacted many students, even though the local school district has been back to school full time since September 2020, impacting Letterland and reading levels across all grade levels, as 40+ staff members took advantage of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act to take care of their own children while their schools were closed. On January 4, 2021, almost all staff members returned. The local school district was open for 8 full months of school during the pandemic (September 2020 through April 2021) and had 215 students and 172 staff members contract COVID-19, with almost every positive case being reported as being contracted outside of school. In June 2021, the decision was made to stop utilizing the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) and purchase the DIBELS 8 program, which is more inline with measuring and assessing phonics and phonemic awareness. In addition, after administrators reviewed disrict data and took into account COVID-19 learning loss, the decision was made to increase student practice when teaching phonics and phoenemic awareness foundational skills using the ReadBright Program during the 2021–2022 school year.

Phonics is the system of sound-symbol relationships, built on the awareness of the sounds that letters require to construct words (Cunningham, 2011; Ehri, 2005). Many teachers in the local school district were not confident in their ability to implement a phonics and phonemic awareness program, as they had not received in-depth training.

The purpose of this project study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of early childhood teachers regarding teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program. Guided by the constructivist theory, I explored the experiences and perceptions of teachers when teaching phonics and phonemic awareness, their areas of concern and how they addressed them, and the supports and resources needed to become a highly effective teacher.

Researchers endorse the importance of early phonemic literacy skills as essential to learning to read and comprehend (Ehri, 2005; Ehri et al., 2001; Hart & Risley, 1995; Logan et al., 2019). In 1995, Hart and Risley published findings from their benchmark research on early literacy and called the discrepancy between children who were prepared to learn to read and those who were not a catastrophe. In 1997, the U.S. government began to take steps to improve language education. The National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000), authorized by Congress, published its findings and recommendations in 2000. For early learners, phonemic awareness, the ability to hear language, and phonics, the ability to correlate sounds of letters to print, were deemed essential (Cunningham, 2011; Ehri, 2005). For English learners, the NRP placed emphasis on students who were learning new words that contained the new sounds of English through systematic phonics instructions.

Since 1988, there has been an increase in the number of culturally diverse students in the United States (Ghattas & Carver, 2017). Educators across the nation must equitably attend to students with varying backgrounds and skill sets (Ghattas & Carver, 2017). For teachers, addressing the individual needs of students in the literacy classroom

can be extremely challenging. Providing students with a strong foundation in the early grades can prevent them from developing learning gaps and falling behind their grade-level peers (Scanlon et al., 2016). Children who struggle with early foundational skills in the areas of phonemic awareness and alphabetic knowledge are at risk for enduring reading difficulties (Goldstein et al., 2017).

In order to provide children, especially those considered at risk, with a strong early literacy foundation and prevent them from falling behind their grade-level peers while at the same time increasing their chances of academic success, curriculum should focus on and around phonics and phonemic awareness (Ehri, 2005; Logan et al., 2019; NRP, 2000). Effective reading instruction includes identifying sounds and letter correspondence, phonemic awareness, and decoding, along with personalized instruction based on the diverse needs of students (Cassady et al., 2018). Keesey et al. (2014) noted that students who are poor readers showed limited phonemic awareness as early as first grade. Researchers support common characteristics of children who are most at risk to experience literacy difficulties and who would benefit from reading interventions (Reardon & Portilla, 2016; Snyder & Golightly, 2017). Snyder and Golightly (2017) found that at-risk readers characteristically lack phonemic awareness, lack familiarity with the letters of the alphabet, lack sufficient vocabulary, and lack oral language skills. Given the evidence, it is critical to focus on phonics and phonemic awareness in the early literacy classroom and to ensure that at-risk students have additional opportunities to receive supplemental interventions that focus on these areas.

There are a large number of children in the United States learning English as a second language and in need of reading interventions to catch up to their grade-level peers. Interventions that include vocabulary and reading comprehension have been found to improve a student's reading comprehension skills (Johnston et al., 2018) but are often implemented too late in the developmental process of learning to read for English learners. Students who struggle with reading should be immersed in early intervention programs that are evidence-based and that explicitly teach essential reading skills in an appropriate scope and sequence (Kamps et al., 2007). Letterland's imaginative narrative is an integrated letter mnemonics system for dual language learners (Fitton et al., 2018; Roberts & Sadler, 2019). Shared reading is another intervention that is considered effective for enhancing language and literacy development for both monolingual and English language learner (ELL) children (Fitton et al., 2018).

Many students in the local school district who are exiting kindergarten cannot identify a majority of their letters with the corresponding letter sound . This serious foundational weakness is evidenced by the end-of-year assessment that district kindergarten teachers give students in order to assess the skills that the students learn throughout the school year (see Table 1).

Table 1

Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA): Percentage of Students at or Below Grade

Level, End-of-Year Kindergarten

Assessment	Above grade level	On grade level	Below grade level	Way below grade level
DRA-2 6/2018	8%	7%	26%	59%
DRA-2 6/2019	4%	27%	34%	35%
DRA-2 6/2020	*	*	*	*

Note. It is important to note that 50% of students entering kindergarten are bilingual

(Spanish).

*Data not available due to health-related school closure (COVID-19).

The local school district implemented Letterland, a phonics-based, multisensory

program for early learners. The local school district has a large percentage of students

who are classified as bilingual, ELL, and at risk. According to the district's student

software program, Realtime, there are 5,542 students enrolled in the district; of those

students, 4,778 students are Hispanic and 1,529 are identified as ELL students, with the

exception of a few who have chosen to opt out and not receive services. During the

2016–2017 school year, 1,426 students in the local school district (K–12) were classified

as limited English proficient. In addition, 100% of the students in the local school district

are considered low-income students and receive free breakfast and lunch.

Past researchers have shown that ELLs often face significant challenges in

learning to read, due in part to issues with acculturation, linguistic isolation, and lack of

prior literacy experiences in their native language or in English (Rahn et al., 2015).

According to Cummins (2016), language proficiencies, such as accent, oral fluency, and sociolinguistic competence, in a student's first and second languages are interdependent. Cummins stated that for students whose first language is the minority language, the trend is opposite between achievement and instructional time through the majority language. The degree of transfer will depend on the chances that students have to develop both languages within the school setting (Cummins, 2016).

Limited vocabulary has been shown to thwart literacy progression, as too many unknown words interfere with a student's ability to understand written text. When Hart and Risley (1995) documented preschool children's vocabularies, they found that many children enter the same classroom with students who know many more sounds, letters, and vocabulary words. Hart and Risley estimated that the gap in vocabulary knowledge for early childhood students might be up to 3 million words. Due to this common effect, instruction has been targeted at providing ELLs explicit vocabulary instruction in order to support reading instruction, with early reading emphasis on connecting the elements of sound, symbol, and word function (Cassady et al., 2018). Emergent ELL readers need to be exposed to high-quality levels of teacher modeling and phonemic awareness skills, as well as feedback on their individual performance (Cummins, 2016; Ehri, 2005). The degree of transfer will depend on the opportunities that students have to develop both languages within the school and the motivation to do so.

Students who learn to read early, in preschool, receive more exposure to print and gain exceptional automaticity, which is the ability to recognize words instantaneously without decoding (Spencer & Wagner, 2018). Once children master the sounds and

alphabetic principle, they practice reading and build comprehension skills and vocabulary (Chall, 1983; Lesaux, 2012; Spencer & Wagner, 2018.). Children who have limited phonological awareness require explicit and systematic instruction to build up their skills (Nunn, 2019). Researchers have demonstrated inconsistencies in the delivery of phonics and phonemic awareness instruction, with many practices falling short of what students need (Earle & Sayeski, 2017; Piasta & Wagner, 2010). Teaching explicit phonics effectively to early readers requires a level of knowledge and training that many teachers lack, and when asked about their skill level, teachers tend to rate themselves more skilled than they actually are (Ehri & Flugman, 2017). Unfortunately, those students falling behind their grade-level peers also have a tendency to have a negative outlook and never achieve grade-level reading fluency (Ozernov-Palchik et al., 2016).

According to Dussling (2018), interventions for ELLs having reading trouble in the younger grades increase the chance that they will do better academically, decreasing the likelihood of needing special services later. Explicit instruction in the areas of phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension is extremely important for ELL students. Reading instruction should not be prolonged in order to wait for the acquisition of English language proficiency (Dussling, 2018).

Children come to school with varying experiences and backgrounds, and their differences should not be ignored. Children are immersed in and surrounded by spoken language, making learning to talk natural, as opposed to learning to read, which does not come naturally (Hanford, 2018). The first 4 years of a child's life can have lasting effects on their future educational experiences (Hart & Risley, 1995). On average, a 4-year-old

child from an upper middle class family whose parents are professionals will accrue

experience with almost 45 million words, an average 4-year-old child from a working

class family will accrue 26 million words, and an average 4-year-old child from a family

receiving welfare will accrue 13 million words (Hart & Risley, 1995). Children attending

schools in high-poverty areas are beginning school with limited vocabulary and

experiences. Hart and Risley (1995) suggested that curriculum and instruction must

address the needs of students in order to prevent them from lagging behind their peers.

Vocabulary development is extremely important for children learning to read, as

vocabulary knowledge assists young learners with the needed prereading skills, such as

letter-sound correspondence and decoding (Moody et.al., 2018). Research has shown that

repeated exposure to vocabulary words and explicit instruction has the potential to close

vocabulary gaps, especially for English as a second language students (Moody et.al.,

2018).

Teaching across all content areas, and within their content, can facilitate and

enforce letter-sound instruction, as it can be connected to a multitude of instructional

areas. According to Campbell (2018), children need to be able to decode and/or make the

relationship between phonemes and graphemes, phonological awareness, and decoding in

order to experience reading success. Teachers need to have the skill to support the

development of oral language, vocabulary, fluency, grammar, and comprehension.

Phonemic awareness enables children to apply the alphabetic decoding strategy to

unknown words, which allows students to develop reading fluency and apply spoken

language (Carson et al., 2018). If the gap between average readers and at-risk readers is

addressed aggressively through interventions in the early grades, later reading problems may be avoided or greatly reduced (Solari et al., 2017). Due to the large number of students reading below grade level and the lack of phonemic awareness and phonics training, teachers were introduced in 2015 to the Letterland program, a supplemental program utilized to address the phonics and phonemic awareness skills problem. Despite district implementation of the Letterland phonics program, early childhood students continue to struggle with mastery of phonics and phonemic awareness skills, suggesting that improvements may be needed in program implementation. The intention of the district in implementing the Letterland program was to improve early childhood teachers' prereading teaching skills and to increase the number of below-grade-level students attaining grade-level reading skills.

Teaching children to read is extremely difficult, and way too many children have difficulty reading and writing (Moats, 2020). According to Moats (2020), reading achievement is not as good as it should be because teacher preparation programs do not include practices that are recommended by the most credible sources. Therefore, many teachers are not equipped to teach reading. Reading failure can be prevented in most students, except for those with severe learning disabilities. When classroom teaching includes research-based practices that target specific language and cognitive and reading skills, most students should be able to read by the end of first grade (Moats, 2020). Learning to teach reading requires teachers to have extensive knowledge in the components of word recognition, language comprehension, spelling, and writing (Moats,

2020). Learning to read involves deciphering and understanding the meaning of print (Ren & Ma, 2017).

Researchers suggest that phonics and phonemic awareness are reading skills that ELL students need to be successful readers (Klingbeil et al., 2017). The Institute of Education Sciences made four instructional suggestions for teaching ELL students: teaching academic vocabulary, incorporating English language arts instruction across content areas, providing written language practice on a daily basis, and providing small group instruction to struggling students (Snyder et al., 2017). According to Klingbeil et al. (2017), ELL students benefit from intensive instruction from phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Intensive instruction should be explicit and provide repetition of the needed skills. Systematic phonics instruction includes reading programs that teach graphemes and phonemes in an alphabetic writing system in a natural and logical sequence (Castles et al., 2018).

Phonological awareness develops when children become mindful of smaller parts of words, noticing syllables before rhyme. Phonemic awareness develops when a child can pull apart the sounds of words and blend the sounds together to create words. Phonemic awareness is a critical indicator of reading ability (Suortti & Lipponen, 2014). Young children are often able to show the phonemic structure of a word by tapping out the word by hand, manipulating sounds at the syllable and phoneme level (Suortti & Lipponen, 2014). A review of research shows that the best and most consistent improvement in early reading skills for kindergarten and first-grade ELL students is derived from building phonemic awareness and phonics (Richards-Tutor et al., 2015).

In order to be a successful reader, one must have the fundamental skills necessary to decode the relationships between letters and sounds and between sounds and words (Chall, 1983; Ehri, 2005). Letter-sound knowledge is a strong predictor of whether a student has the ability to decode words (Earle & Sayeski, 2017). In order to read words, students must be able to distinguish the smallest sounds in words (Ehri & Flugman, 2018). Letter-sound instruction is a very important segment of beginning literacy instruction, especially in kindergarten and first grade (Earle & Sayeski, 2017). Prior to the Letterland program, teachers at the study site did not have the knowledge base or the confidence to teach students the foundational skills needed to address the gaps in letter-sound correspondence and phonological awareness.

Although much of the research has demonstrated the need for letter-sound knowledge as a foundational skill for beginning reading instruction, recent research shows inconsistencies in the delivery and instructional approaches, with many current practices falling short of meeting the needs of students (Earle & Sayeski, 2017). Many teachers lack the knowledge to teach phonics sufficiently, specifically concerning how to separate phonemes into spoken words (Ehri & Flugman, 2018). Because preservice college programs are limited in what can be covered, teachers do not receive the extensive course work or extensive classroom experience needed to teach beginning readers (Ehri & Flugman, 2018).

The teaching of phonics allows for students to understand the printed form and spoken form of words (Castle et al., 2018). Systematic phonics instruction has been researched extensively over the years. Adopting a systematic phonics program, along

with sight words, is highly recommended (Castle et al., 2018). The explicit teaching of

phonics assists all students in accessing text and is vital for many children (Castle et al.,

2018). In addition to acquiring the needed strategies and skills, it is also important for

students to develop a love for reading. Incorporating student engagement and social

interaction with text as students are learning to decode and comprehend will increase

their ability to make meaning and to share their thinking, as well as develop long-term

motivation and skill (Moses & Kelly, 2018).

According to the simple view of reading, decoding/word recognition plus

language comprehension equals reading comprehension (Vollebregt et al., 2021). Explicit

teaching of phonics, phonemic awareness, and morphological awareness enables children

to develop the necessary skills to decode text (Vollebregt et al., 2021). For students to

become expert readers, they must have a solid foundation in phonics and reading skills

(Vollebregt et al., 2021). Reading proficiency is a reliable predictor of academic success

and high school graduation rates (Whitbread et al., 2021). Researchers advise that

teaching foundational reading skills, which include the alphabetic principle, with

additional supports as needed, will result in higher academic success (Whitbread et al.,

2021). The instructional method suggested is "I do, we do, you do."

In September 2015, the local school district adopted and implemented the

Letterland phonics program, which has shown a slight increase in the number of students

reading on grade level. Letterland phonics is a 40-minute intervention block that takes

place in addition to the literacy block. The objective of the Letterland program is to train

teachers and to assist students with learning their letters, letter sounds, letter shapes, and

word build skills (blending and segmenting) in order to meet or exceed grade-level

reading skills . Once the much-needed prereading skills are learned, the hope is that

reading levels will improve.

Table 2

Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA): Percentage of Students at or Below Grade

Level, Middle-of-Year Kindergarten

Assessment	Above grade level	On grade level	Below grade level
DRA-2 6/2018	12%	50%	38%
DRA-2 6/2019	16%	56%	29%
DRA-2 6/2020	0%	15%	85%

Note. It is important to note that 50% of students entering kindergarten are bilingual

(Spanish).

The Letterland phonics program is an established, research-based program that

explicitly teaches the innate rules of phonics and phonemic awareness in a student-

friendly, multisensory manner. The alphabet letter sounds are taught to students via a

picture mnemonic. Each letter-sound and phonics rule is taught via a memorable

interconnected story. The Letterland phonics program provides teachers and students

with a toolkit of strategies to assist with blending and decoding of text. Students are

exposed to a variety of vocabulary words using the Letterland phonics program. This

vocabulary review is exceptionally beneficial for ELL student populations. Students

require large doses of exposure to new words in order to begin to catch up to the average

English native speaker, which is why the district chose the Letterland phonics program over other phonics and phonemic programs.

The goal of implementing the Letterland phonics program at the local site was to improve the number of students reading on grade level and to provide teachers with the training necessary to improve phonics and phonemic awareness instruction. In this project study, I explored the experiences and perceptions of early childhood teachers as they taught phonics and phonemic awareness with the Letterland program. Guided by constructivist theory, I centered this project study around the experiences and perceptions of teachers when teaching phonics and phonemic awareness and the supports and resources needed to successfully implement the program with students. The information gained will assist teachers and administrators in understanding the support and resources needed to successfully teach phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program.

Rationale

Early childhood teachers in the local school district have been uneasy for some time with their acknowledged shortcomings in teaching phonemic awareness and phonics, as most schools of education programs do not teach this much-needed skill in-depth. During a districtwide curriculum meeting including staff members from kindergarten through Grade 2, it was stated that the curriculum did not include a systematic way to teach phonics and phonemic awareness, which the educators felt was their greatest priority in improving teaching and learning in kindergarten through Grade 2, and when recently asked, they felt the same way. In a 2020 curriculum meeting,

teachers acknowledged their lack of training, which is why the local school district implemented the Letterland program 7 years ago. This priority is emphasized in the research literature on early reading.

According to Wood et al. (2013), deficits in phonemic awareness are strongly correlated with reading ability and can affect overall reading achievement. Children who have fallen behind their peers in kindergarten often struggle with text in third grade (Goldstein et al., 2017). Children need to have a high level of prereading skills, along with many opportunities to develop their skills interactively (Neuman & Roskos, 2005). The NRP (2000) examined over 100,000 studies on reading components and interventions and identified five areas of instruction for all children. Within the five areas, phonemic awareness is considered an important foundational skill (Wood et al., 2013). Due to the lack of this necessary reading skill, students exiting kindergarten in the local school district read below the expected reading level prior to the implementation of Letterland. As measured by Pearson's (2011) DRA, 12% of the students read above grade level, 53% read on grade level, 24% read below grade level, and 11% read far below grade level. During the prereading phase, teachers must help their students activate prior knowledge, along with their cognitive schema, so that students can understand the new knowledge that is being taught and apply it successfully in all that they learn (Spanou & Zafiri, 2019).

The intention of the district in implementing the Letterland program was to improve early childhood teachers' prereading teaching skills and to increase the number of below-grade-level students attaining grade-level reading. In 2015, the district

implemented Letterland, a supplemental program utilized to address the phonics and phonemic awareness skills problem. The purpose of this project study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of early childhood teachers regarding teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program.

Definition of Terms

Alphabetic principle: The alphabetic principle is connecting letters with sounds and the relationship between written letters and/or symbols and spoken words (Baker et al., 2018).

Common Core State Standards (CCSS): The CCSS are standards that detail what students should know in English language arts and mathematics from kindergarten through Grade 12 (CCSS Initiative, n.d.).

Decoding: Decoding is sounding out words and blending sounds together (Kelly, 2014).

English language learner (ELL): Cellante and Donne (2013) defined an ELL as someone whose natural language is not English; who is not proficient or has difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language; and who was not born in the United States.

*Grade-level expectation*s: Grade-level expectations are written descriptions, called *learning standards*, that students should be able to know and do at specific stages during their education (Great Schools Partnership, 2014).

Letterland*:* Letterland is a phonics and phonemic awareness program published by Letterland International Ltd. and purchased by the local school district. The Letterland

phonics program is a research-based program that uses Letterland characters to explain phonics facts and to motivate students. Letterland stories explain letter sounds and shapes, building to reading and writing (Keys to Literacy, n.d.).

Mnemonic: A mnemonic is a strategy used to promote recall of information, such as rhyme and rhythm (Chancellor & Lee, 2016).

Phonemic awareness: Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear sounds in spoken language (Wood et al., 2013).

Phonics: Phonics is correlating sounds with letters or groups of letters in an alphabetic writing system (Snyder & Golightly, 2017).

Running record: A running record is a record of oral reading behaviors (Harmey & Kabuto, 2018).

Sound/letter correspondence: Sound/letter correspondence is the relationship between letters and phonemes (Clemens et al., 2017).

Significance of the Study

This qualitative study will contribute to the local setting by improving the understanding of how teachers in other school districts are using Letterland so that the implementation of the program in the local school district can be improved. Guided by constructivist theory, I explored the experiences and perceptions of early childhood teachers teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program. The more students who exit their K–2 grade-level reading on or above level, the more confident they will be, and the more likely they will be to experience academic success.

The NPR recommends teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency,

vocabulary, and comprehension (Noltemeyer et al., 2013). Measuring the effectiveness of the Letterland phonics program in improving the early reading development of students is particularly important, as phonics instruction is highly effective during kindergarten but is less so for students in higher elementary grades (Noltemeyer et al., 2013). Conversations about the teaching and learning of phonics and phonemic awareness via the Letterland program must occur to prevent any misinterpretations of the outcomes.

Those who may benefit from this study are present and future kindergarten teachers, future educators, administrators, parents, and the community at large. Implementing the Letterland phonics program, which emphasizes early phonemic awareness and improved reading outcomes for low-income early childhood students, can have powerful effects on the academic and behavioral success of the district's earliest students. Guided by constructivist theory, this project study explored the experiences and perceptions of teachers teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program.

Research Questions

This project study explored the experiences and perceptions of early childhood teachers who teach phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program. The research questions that drove this project were as follows:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are early childhood educators' experiences

teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What resources and/or supports do early childhood

teachers perceive as necessary to implement the Letterland program

successfully with students?

Review of the Literature

I drew the review of literature from journals, books, texts, and internet sources;

government reports; and published dissertations and included relevant information on (a)

the theory of constructivism, (b) evidence-based prereading skills, (c) phonics and

phonemic awareness, (d) whether students are engaged, and (e) supports and resources

still needed. This section of the literature review includes the conceptual framework for

this study.

Conceptual Framework

Constructivism Theory

Constructivist teaching is a theory of learning, not teaching, and is often referred

to as social constructivism (Kosnik et al., 2018). Constructivism draws on the learner's

prior knowledge and experiences and where social interactions are encouraged during in-

class discussions and small groups. The constructivist teacher's responsibility is to help

students make sense of their new knowledge in order for students to internalize and

effectively interpret educational activities (Shah, 2019).

According to Qiu (2019), constructivist learning theory is teacher guided and

student centered. Teachers assist and encourage students to construct meaning by

stimulating students' interest in learning and motivating them to connect their old

knowledge with new content. Learning should include discussion and social interactions

(Qiu, 2019). In teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program,

teachers encourage students to remember letters and letter-sounds by connecting what

they know with new content.

Those who adopt the constructivist perspective perceive learning as a process that

encourages students to think of more than one way to arrive at a correct answer (Kesler et

al., 2021). The best way for children to learn to read using the constructivist view is to

allow children to discover patterns and links to language after providing the guidance

needed to learn how the alphabetic system works (Treiman, 2018). Having children find

patterns with rhyming helps create connections.

When people think of constructivism, they often think of the works of Lev

Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and John Dewey. The four types of constructivism are cognitive

constructivism, radical constructivism, situated constructivism, and co-constructivism.

All four types share common beliefs, such as the belief that learning is active, not

passive, and that the learning environment should concentrate on the learner (Mattar,

2017). Constructivism relies on process, not content, which is why it is extremely

important for teachers to know all their students (Mattar, 2017).

Constructivist teachers guide their students through a series of inquiry-based

activities that allow students to create their own meaning (Shah, 2019). Students are

actively engaged learners and are guided by their teacher. The curriculum includes

problem-based learning, critical thinking, inquiry-based activities, and discussion with

peers and teacher (Shah, 2019). Teachers in the constructivist classroom encourage

students to share what they have learned in a variety of ways. Content-rich lessons have a

deep effect on what learners comprehend and understand (Kara, 2019). In a constructivist classroom, the teacher teaches the content and focuses on a learning environment that is student based and accommodating for all learners (Kara, 2019).

The teaching of Letterland is in line with the theory of constructivism, as the Letterland curriculum assists teachers in actively engaging all learners. It is student based and includes inquiry-based activities. The teacher explicitly and systematically teaches letters and letter sounds. Instructional components include active stories, embedded characters that tie together letters and sounds, and activities that involve individual learners. The Letterland program incorporates the *I do, we do, you do* learning approach, allowing students much-needed time to practice the skills needed to read on their own. Students are encouraged each day to participate in hands-on activities and open dialogue between students and students and students and teacher. The teacher addresses the individual needs of all students during small group instruction. Those students needing intensive interventions receive additional support through a reading intervention teacher. Like constructivism, the Letterland program is taught by teaching letters and sounds explicitly and systematically.

Review of the Broader Problem

I reviewed a variety of literature to understand the skills and strategies needed to properly teach reading to early childhood students. The review began with the conceptual framework and the synthesis of literature on prereading skills and strategies needed to learn how to read, as well as reading interventions for those who find reading difficult. I

drew materials for the review of literature from journals, books, texts, and internet sources; government reports; and published dissertations.

The databases utilized to retrieve resources for this literature review were ERIC, EbscoHost, and Science Direct. The search terms included were *early reading skills*, *phonics and phonemic awareness*, *reading interventions*, *early reading interventions*, *constructivism*, *reading interventions for students at risk*, *reading interventions for bilingual students*, and *reading interventions for ESL students.*

During the search process, several themes and topics resurfaced time and time again. The alphabetic principle, phonics and phonemic awareness instruction, explicit instruction, students at risk for reading interventions, best practices for early reading intervention, and early intervention programs were among the prevalent themes and topics. This project study was guided by the reoccurring themes and topics.

Phonics and Phonemic Awareness

The educational system needs significant improvement in the teaching of reading and the important foundational/prereading skills that students must learn and know to become proficient readers. The prominence of phonemic awareness and phonics instruction has been strengthened by many events in the last 3 decades. The publication of a *Nation at Risk* in the 1980s highlighted the problems of literacy instruction and outcomes. By 2000, when the No Child Left Behind Act was passed in Congress, the bill was accompanied by a phonics-based reading program recommended by the U.S. Department of Education, *Reading First*. In 2010, the National Governors Association released the CCSS, which was the first state-led effort to establish clear standards for

English language arts. For those students who are struggling readers, the most effective method of identifying unknown words is the teaching of phonics (Torgerson et al., 2019).

According to Ehri (2005), the alphabetic system provides a mnemonic system that helps students acquire new vocabulary words in both memory and pronunciation. Ehri's theory of learning to read using the alphabetic principle is like the Letterland phonics and phonemic awareness program, which is an established, research-based program that explicitly teaches the innate rules of phonics and phonemic awareness. Each of the alphabet letter sounds is taught to students via a picture mnemonic. Each of the letter sounds is cemented into the student's long-term memory using action tricks. The action tricks are kinesthetic motions, which help students recall the letter's sound. Each letter-sound and phonics rule is taught via a memorable interconnected story. Letterland provides teachers and students with a toolkit of strategies to assist with blending and decoding of text.

The Letterland phonics programs starts with a fast-track phonemic awareness section that introduces children to all of the A-to-Z letters and sounds within the first few weeks of school. The second section of the program introduces each letter and its Letterland character in detail, including upper- and lowercase, as well as letter formation. After the first seven letters, children learn to blend these letter sounds into words and learn to segment and spell words. They also learn useful digraphs, such as th, sh, and ng.

The third section of Letterland teaches students onsets and rhymes. If a student can read "cat," they can read "hat" and "sat." Children are given many opportunities to practice reading words both in and out of context to help develop automatic decoding and

fluent reading. Children enjoy the activities and characters of Letterland. When teaching, constructivist teachers must know what each student understood and what they did not understand, so they can help the learner become engaged in the learning process (Shah, 2019).

In the fourth section of Letterland, children work on consonant blends. They learn the most common consonant blends and use them in reading words. Teachers work with students during whole group instruction, as well as small group and independent activities. Activities include stories and interactive games and songs. In Section 5 through Section 7, the most useful vowel sound combinations are taught. Phonic fables, drama, song, art, and more advanced word building are utilized to apply vowel patterns. Students enjoy acting out stories and reading for meaning.

When educators create a teaching/learning environment based on constructivism, the curriculum is based on what students know and what they do not know. Teachers set a learning goal and guide students to understanding new concepts using their background knowledge as the foundation of learning. Individuals contribute their own experiences and background knowledge to make sense of new content (Kesler et al., 2021).

The goal of the teacher is to have students dig deeper into the curriculum work to have a better understanding of the content. When teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program, teachers encourage their students to relate what they do know with new letters and sounds. The goal is not to give students too much information.

As Jean Piaget discovered, the minds of children are different, and they learn and grow through a series of stages (Polona & Hus, 2019). Students are exposed to a variety of vocabulary words using Letterland. They are introduced to words as part of the Letterland story logic, and they utilize the vocabulary in the stories, which are retold during review daily. This is extremely beneficial for kindergarten ELL and at-risk students, as such students require massive doses of exposure to new words to begin to catch up to the average English native speaker.

Technology is utilized in the Letterland program in a variety of ways, assisting with the introduction of new content, large group practice, small group practice, and individual practice. Letterland builds phonological awareness and phonemic awareness activities into the program's instructional units daily. The Letterland program engages students in their learning.

The Letterland program has eight main strategies or tricks that help children become better readers and writers. It has 20 strategies for teachers to utilize throughout the program. The program is developed around pictograms, which contain visual images and information about letters and letter sounds, which engage children with all learning styles. Teachers who engage students in a constructivist pedagogical approach have classrooms that are student centered and discussion based (Kesler et al., 2021).

Offering teachers professional development using the Letterland phonics program will contribute to Ehri's (2005) theory of learning to read using the alphabetic principle. The Letterland phonics program, like Ehri's theory of learning the alphabet and building

word knowledge, is based on teachers laying a foundation for letter-sound correspondence, decoding, and vocabulary development.

Early implementation of phonological awareness research was conducted in the past 5 years that confirms that phonological awareness and letter recognition are strong predictors of school readiness, as well as predictors for future reading success (Camahalan & Wyraz, 2015). Research studies are grounded in areas of reading instruction that support the need for strong phonics/phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension skills. According to Callaghan and Madelaine (2012), blending, segmenting, and letter knowledge are more readily transferred to reading skills than is blending on its own. Systematic phonics explicitly teaches grapheme-phoneme correspondence in a well-organized manner prior to teaching word meaning (Bowers & Bowers, 2018). Although phonological processing is very important to readers, it especially benefits beginning readers (Double et al., 2019).

Research studies conducted in the past 5 years confirm that phonological awareness and phonics are critical reading skills that are effective when utilized in kindergarten, as well as in first and second grade reading interventions (Cohen & Brady, 2011; Lemons et al., 2012; Simmons et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2013). Interventions that begin earlier are more effective than interventions that begin later. Providing interventions in kindergarten jump starts phonologic and alphabetic proficiency. When decoding is not completely automatized, it has a strong impact on reading comprehension (Florit & Cain, 2011). Early predictors of decoding and reading fluency in children include letter knowledge and phonological awareness (Torppa et al., 2020).

The Letterland phonics program is being implemented in Grades K–2 in the local school district. This qualitative study is being conducted to determine the impact of the intervention on kindergarten students at the only two early childhood schools utilizing the program. It is the goal of the district to influence as many students as possible to effect positive social change.

The NRP classifies phonemic awareness as one of the five domains critical to reading, along with the alphabetic principle, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Vesay & Gischlar, 2013). Indeed, when children fail to learn phonemic awareness and literacy skills in early childhood, the long-term outcomes for academic success can be damaging (Schryer et al., 2015). Early childhood educators need to have an understanding and an ability to teach children the individual sounds the alphabet represents (Vesay & Gischlar, 2013). If students have inadequate first-grade reading skills, they show an 88% likelihood of both not achieving at grade level and experiencing other curricular challenges, even after 3 additional years of instruction (Schryer et al., 2015).

Interventions for Students at Risk

Schools with high numbers of at-risk students, who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically, benefit from early interventions that increase phonemic awareness skills, as the goal is to have students experience academic success as early as possible. According to Taub and Szente (2012), phonemic awareness skills should be used as an intervention to support students having difficulties with reading. Rahn et al. (2015) noted that recent research shows that the earlier the intervention

occurs, the more beneficial the intervention is to the at-risk student. The study school

district, a district with large numbers of high-risk students, considered this research and

implemented the Letterland program in all kindergarten classrooms.

Diamond and Baroody (2013) conducted research on a sample of 502 preschool

and kindergarten children at risk of school failure, who wrote their names on a daily

basis. The researchers looked at the students' ability to associate letter-sound recognition

and to identify words from writing their names, versus students who did not write their

names on a daily basis. Diamond and Baroody concluded that students who wrote their

names in prekindergarten knew more letters and sounds than those who did not write

their names.

Students who are at risk for reading difficulties in the early grades should be

provided with explicit instruction in decoding and word recognition. If they are not given

this instruction, they will fall into the category of students who have decoding deficits

and will struggle with comprehension problems (Spencer & Wagner, 2018). Explicit

instruction often emphasizes sound-spelling correspondences and word identification.

Explicit, systematic phonics instruction, when taught in addition to other methods, may

be effective for certain student populations, such as ELL students who struggle with

reading (Robinson, 2018).

Early Reading Intervention Practices

During the first year of literacy instruction, most children will come across

spelling-sound correspondences that are foreseeable, based on a simple set of rules

relating to graphemes and phonemes (Rastle & Taylor, 2018). Most early childhood

programs incorporate explicit instruction and include decodable text (sound-spelling), which are patterns of words that have been taught (Denton et al., 2014). This building of phonemes and graphemes creates a strong foundation for early reading skills. Letter naming and phonemic awareness is vital to students learning letter-sound correspondence (Paige et al., 2018). The skill of letter-sound correspondences must be taught explicitly to kindergarten students, especially for those students who are considered at risk for reading acquisition (Paige et al., 2018). According to Ehri and Flugman (2018), in order for teachers to engage in high-quality phonics instruction, they need appropriate professional development and a strong curriculum.

Other promising reading practices include combining phonological awareness with English language development activities. These practices, combined with helping students develop a strong foundation in reading in both their native language and in English, goes a long way. Strong vocabulary instruction based on rigorous research and best practices guides teaching for ELL students (Richards-Tutor et al., 2015). A phonemic awareness program that is explicit and intentional helps children who entered school behind their peers (Groth, 2020). Phonemic skills are very important to learn in kindergarten, focusing on consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words (Gillon, 2018). Phoneme identity skills are extremely important to learn in kindergarten, focusing on CVC word, the initial and final phonemes, prior to working on the middle vowel sound (Gillon, 2018). Students will vary in their individual progress; therefore, small group instruction and differentiated instruction is effective (Gillon, 2018).

Guided reading is often implemented as a reading intervention in the classroom (Denton et al., 2014). The objective of guided reading is to have students read silently, on their independent level, while increasing the complexity of the text. Guided reading consists of small group lessons based on reading for meaning. Teachers of guided reading prompt their students to use reading strategies, meaning cues from background information, visual information obtained from print, sound-spelling associations, and word study instruction (Denton et al., 2014).

Reading Recovery is an intervention program in which students work one-on-one with a trained teacher for 30-minute sessions (Rinehart & Short, 2010). Students who participate are chosen if they are in the lowest 20% of their class in reading or if they are recommended by their kindergarten teacher, based on results of a diagnostic survey and/or the results of standardized tests. The instructional framework for Reading Recovery is based on what a child already knows. A typical lesson consists of the student reading a familiar text while the teacher maintains a running record, which the teacher then analyzes. The child may write a story or respond to the text. Based on what the student knows, the teacher will design a program to teach the child to become an independent reader. The goal is for the child to self-monitor and self-correct their own reading (Rinehart & Short, 2010).

Reading First is authorized under Title I as a program to improve reading skills of students in kindergarten through Grade 3 (Sopko, 2010). The program relies on scientifically-based reading research and must include the following components: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading

comprehension (Sopko, 2010). The program requires the use of screening and progress monitoring, as well as classroom assessments. Reading First programs require the implementation of at least a 90-minute, uninterrupted block of time each day. The instructional framework must include explicit instruction, ample practice, and supplemental intervention instruction for those students performing below grade level. The program requires professional development to ensure that teachers are qualified to screen, identify, and help students overcome reading difficulties (Sopko, 2010).

For at-risk students to read fluently, they must be able to combine various skills and concepts, such as phonemic awareness, alphabet sounds, vocabulary words, background knowledge, and grammatical features of different genres (Campbell et al., 2014). Young children learn to appreciate concepts of print through reading and developmental play songs and rhymes, all of which are extremely meaningful. Educators must ensure that at-risk children are exposed to childhood settings that are language-rich, surrounded by picture books, and include imaginative play based on the interests of children in order to see positive outcomes for children (Campbell et al., 2014).

Implications

This project study recognizes the need for the Letterland program to be successful in the local school district. The intent of the Letterland program is to increase the number of early childhood students in grades K-2 to exit their grade reading at or above level and decrease the number of students needing reading interventions throughout their school years. When teachers are confident and knowledgeable in the content they teach, students experience greater academic success.

The purpose of this project study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of early childhood teachers who teach phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program. This project study could assist administrators in the local school district with making improvements to the Letterland program by ensuring that early childhood educators are adequately prepared to teach beginning and struggling readers. Recommendations will be made about the resources, materials, and professional development needed to address any shortfalls. The results of this study may benefit many students now and for years to come.

Summary

Based on the varied backgrounds and unique experiences, students' educational needs can and will be vastly different as they enter a formal school system for the first time, and those differences must be addressed in the classroom. Researchers clearly state that there are precursor skills and strategies students need that better enable them to learn to read, and without these skills, students may be at risk for academic failure. Students who are in need of intensive alphabetic instruction, combined with a print-rich literacy block to obtain precursor skills and strategies, should have research-based options available to them to stay on track and not fall behind their grade-level peers.

The district implemented Letterland, a phonics and phonemic awareness program, in September 2015; however, despite district implementation of the Letterland phonics program, early childhood students continue to struggle with mastery of phonics and phonemic awareness skills, suggesting that improvements may be needed in program implementation. Additional training, resources, and supports may be needed.

Section 2: The Methodology

The purpose of this project study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of early childhood teachers regarding teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program. I collected and analyzed data from in-depth, semistructured interviews. I developed a coding system and identified reoccurring themes. The information discovered could provide professional development insight.

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

I used a traditional qualitative approach due to the small number of potential participants for this study (Creswell, 2012). The research questions concentrated on information gathering, making the qualitative approach most appropriate. This study did not involve numbers, prediction, or the use of an experimental process; therefore, the quantitative or mixed method approaches were not appropriate.

I collected in-depth, semistructured interview data from nine participants in order to provide detailed information about the experiences and perceptions of early childhood teachers regarding teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program. Qualitative researchers study a variety of conditions to make sense or interpret experiences and the meaning that people bring to them (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Utilizing a quantitative or mixed-methods approach would not have yielded the results sought, as the data gained in qualitative research explore experiences and are not part of statistical analysis; therefore, the results cannot be tested to see if they are statistically significant.

The focus of the project study was early childhood educators who are currently teaching phonics and phonemic awareness utilizing the Letterland program. The study

included teacher interviews on guidance, learning, student engagement, and

implementation of the Letterland program. The research questions that drove this project

were as follows:

RQ1: What are early childhood educators' experiences teaching phonics and

phonemic awareness using the Letterland program?

RQ2: What resources and/or supports do early childhood teachers perceive as

necessary to implement the Letterland program successfully with

students?

The nature of the in-depth interview questions aligned well with this qualitative study.

Participants

Criteria for Selecting Participants

I chose volunteer participants from across the United States for this study due to

the power dynamic with my position and the necessity of collecting data from teachers

who were not in the local school district, as I am the superintendent of schools in the

local school district. I chose teacher volunteers because they had experience in teaching

the Letterland program. Teachers selected for this voluntary study needed to have met the

criteria of having experience teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the

Letterland program and agreed to be interviewed. Interviews took place via phone and

were audio-recorded.

Because I am the superintendent of schools of the local school district, I

interviewed nine teachers outside of the district. Recruitment of participants took several

forms, such as use of the Letterland Facebook group, Walden's participant pool, school

districts that teach Letterland, and referrals from participants. All participants interviewed taught Letterland in the United States.

Justification for Number of Participants

I collected rich qualitative data from nine early childhood elementary teachers who taught phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program. I developed in-depth, semistructured questions as an interview guide. It was important to hear from the participants what they thought was important in their own words. Having fewer participants allowed for more in-depth interviews. Interviews are important, as they allow participants to share their views and perceptions in the teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness (Creswell, 2012).

I sent 1,408 invitations to participate in this project study to teachers who, according to public websites, taught phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program. Nine teachers agreed to participate in the interview process. In qualitative research, the number of participants in the study depends on the depth of inquiry conducted (Creswell, 2012). Having too few participants provides insufficient data to address the problem. In this case, the qualitative component involved open-ended interviews and resulted in rich in-depth responses.

Procedure for Gaining Access to Participants

I began data collection for this study after approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University (approval # 03-29-22-0459089). Once consent was granted, the data collection process began.

I contacted a Letterland representative to find out what districts/schools were teaching phonics and phonemic awareness utilizing the Letterland program. Once I had a list of schools and districts, I conducted a search of public websites in order to obtain staff member email addresses. I emailed invitations to participate to potential participants. I sent reminder emails to encourage participation. Nine volunteers who taught Letterland in Grades K–2 in the United States participated in the interview process.

Establishing Researcher–Participant Relationship

I am the superintendent of the local school district. Due to the potential conflict, I interviewed teachers from other school districts, not the school district in which I work. Recruitment of participants took several forms, such as use of the Letterland Facebook group, Walden's participant pool, school districts that teach Letterland, and referrals from participants. When recruiting participants, I contacted only those who agreed to be interviewed via phone.

I informed participants, via email, of the purpose of the study and participant confidentiality before obtaining consent. Since I received limited responses, I emailed all participants a second time, explaining the benefits of the study and expressing the anonymity of teacher data. A third email invitation was sent to potential participants.

Protection of Participant Rights

I took proper measures to ensure that all participants were protected. All participants remain deidentified. I treated the confidentiality of all participants with the highest level of importance. I received permission to conduct the study from the Walden

IRB. Teachers who taught Letterland received an invitation to participate in the study. The letter of consent explained how the results of the study would be used to facilitate improvements. Teachers were not compensated for taking part in the interview or for teaching the Letterland program. Teachers who volunteered to participate in the study responded, "I consent."

I stored all data and participant information on my personal, password-protected computer for confidentiality purposes. I will securely store all collected data for a minimum of 5 years, with confidentiality always protected. After 5 years, I will destroy the data.

Data Collection

Justification for Data Collection

The goal of this qualitative project study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of early childhood teachers who taught phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program. Utilizing semistructured, open-ended questions, I interviewed nine early childhood teachers who taught the Letterland program to obtain in-depth data. The interview questions were centered on teacher experiences in using the Letterland program and the supports and resources necessary to implement the phonics and phonemic program successfully with students.

Data Collection Instruments

Peer Member Checking

To ensure credibility, validity, and trustworthiness, I called upon a trusted colleague, who had no involvement in the project study, to assist in the research process.

The trusted colleague I chose was not a research participant and did not have any special interests in the outcome. To ensure no potential conflict, the colleague did not work in the local school district. The person chosen was asked to volunteer their time to this project study. I shared and reviewed the findings and the final report of the project study to probe the researcher's thinking.

Open-Ended, Semistructured Questions

Teacher participants were given the opportunity to answer open-ended, semistructured interview questions. The open-ended questions addressed the research questions in this project study. Participants answered open-ended questions that addressed teacher experiences and additional supports and resources needed to successfully implement the Letterland program. The open-ended, semistructured questions were used to drive the in-depth interviews. The interviews were audiotaped. I took anecdotal notes. I will destroy all electronic documents 5 years after this project study concludes.

Establishing Sufficiency of Data Collection

The research questions in this project study addressed the teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness via the Letterland program from the teachers' perspective. Early childhood teachers had the opportunity to answer open-ended, semistructured questions about their experiences teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program, as well as supports, resources, materials, and professional development needed to implement the phonics and phonemic program more effectively. I created the open-

ended interview questions appropriate for this qualitative project study based on the needs of the local school district.

Process for Collecting and Recording Data

I invited early childhood teachers who taught phonics and phonemic awareness utilizing the Letterland program in the United States to participate in this project study. Early childhood teachers in the local school district did not participate due to a potential conflict of interest, as I am the superintendent of schools. Early childhood teachers received an invitation to join the study with a letter of consent. I sent a reminder email to all participants twice after the initial invite. I saved all responses electronically on a personal computer. Once consent was received, I scheduled dates and times to interview the voluntary participants.

Systems for Keeping Track of Data

Using open-ended, semistructured questions as a guide, I interviewed each voluntary participant via phone. I audio-recorded each interview and took detailed notes. I will maintain all notes in a research journal that has been locked in my home office. I analyzed data using the NVivo computer software program. The NVivo program assisted me in keeping my data organized. I analyzed data to find meaningful trends and patterns in the responses from participants that link to the research questions. Once patterns and trends were identified, I created themes that demonstrate comparability and variations across codes in order to establish the meaning of the patterns and trends.

Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants

Because I am the superintendent of schools in the local school district, I interviewed nine teachers outside the district. Recruitment of participants took several forms, such as use of the Letterland Facebook group, Walden's participant pool, school districts that teach Letterland, and referrals from participants. All participants interviewed taught Letterland in the United States.

To gain access to the participants for this study, I obtained approval for the project study from Walden's IRB. I then sent invitations to participate in the study, along with a letter of consent, to those who volunteered to be interviewed via phone. Once I received the participants' responses and received consent, I scheduled dates and times for the interviews.

Role of the Researcher

At the time of this project study, my role in the local school district was superintendent of schools. Due to the potential for conflict, I interviewed nine teachers who taught phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program in the United States. I held individual phone interviews that were audio-recorded. At the conclusion of this project study, I will share my findings with school administrators as a means of improving the teaching and learning of phonics and phonemic awareness in the local school district.

Data Analysis

How and When Data Were Analyzed

Upon interview completion, I analyzed the data collected from all interviews to address the research questions used in this project study to understand early childhood educators' experiences teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program, as well as the resources and supports necessary in implementing the Letterland program successfully with students. I analyzed the data using the NVivo computer software program. I manually created a chart by research question, codes, descriptions, and quotes, which I utilized to create themes.

I used codes from the recurring participant responses in order to identify patterns and trends linked to the research questions. I then categorized the codes and created themes. I used an open coding process. The codes reflected the data to ensure that my own ideas and background knowledge were not integrated. I combined comparable words and phrases to reduce the chance of duplication. The purpose of coding is to start with the data and identify patterns that emerge from the data (Bouncken et al., 2021). I created seven themes from the coded data to better understand childhood educators' experiences teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program, as well as the supports and resources necessary to continue to teach phonics and phonemic awareness successfully with students.

Evidence of Quality (Trustworthiness)

I took measures to ensure quality throughout the analysis phase of this qualitative study. I grouped, organized, and ordered by their commonalities and their differences all

qualitative data. Walden University committee members reviewed this study and

suggested revisions and modifications, as well as questioned the findings stated.

To ensure credibility, validity, and trustworthiness, I conducted member checking

to find out from the participants if the information provided was accurate. Credibility is

established when the results reflect the views of the participants. To enhance validity, I

conducted peer debriefing with a trusted colleague, who had no involvement in the

project study. The trusted colleague chosen was not a research participant and did not

have any special interests in the outcome. I shared the findings and the final report of the

project study.

Procedures for Discrepant Cases

I compared potentially discrepant data or perspectives to the emerging

perspectives and themes. I further analyzed the discrepant data to understand what the

responses meant or suggested. I addressed discrepant data in this project study.

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Data Analysis Results

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The purpose of the project study was to explore the experiences and perceptions

of early childhood teachers who teach phonics and phonemic awareness using the

Letterland program. This project study offers guidance to future teachers and

administrators on what is needed to adequately prepare early childhood teachers to teach

phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program. I gathered and analyzed

data from individual semistructured interviews. Participants included nine early

childhood teachers who were currently teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using

the Letterland program and who were currently teaching in the United States. All

participants volunteered to participate in the study. To ensure confidentiality, I

deidentified participants' names and details. The research questions guiding this project

study were the following:

RQ1: What are early childhood educators' experiences teaching phonics and

phonemic awareness using the Letterland program?

RQ2: What resources and/or supports do early childhood teachers perceive as

necessary to implement the Letterland program successfully with

students?

During the interview process, the early childhood teachers I interviewed

expressed a deep interest in teaching their K-2 students foundational skills, such as

phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program. I analyzed the data

utilizing coding and themes that emerged in relation to the study research questions.

Process by Which Data Were Generated, Gathered, and Recorded

I began the process for data collection for this project study once I received

approval from the IRB at Walden University. I began to collect email addresses of K-2

teachers across the United States who may be using the Letterland *p*rogram, as per their

public district websites. After receiving several responses via email that the district they

teach in no longer uses the Letterland program, I contacted a Letterland representative to

inquire as to the name of schools and/or districts that are currently using the Letterland

program. I then researched the names of the districts, which were open public websites,

for the email addresses of K-2 teachers. I emailed approximately 1,408 invitations over a

6-week period to potential participants. I received 12 responses. I sent those participants

who expressed an interest in participating in the study a letter of consent, which clearly

stated that participation was voluntary and confidential. Of the 12 responses I received,

nine resulted in an interview. I scheduled and held individual interviews via phone, each

one lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. I audio-recorded the interviews and saved them

on an electronic device. I utilized the NVivo software program to code and analyze data.

I analyzed the data as to codes and themes that emerged, which were also considered in

relation to alignment with the study research questions.

Teacher Participants

All nine participants in this project study were currently teaching the Letterland

program in the United States. One participant taught in Massachusetts, one participant

taught in Texas, and seven participants taught in two different counties in North Carolina.

Teacher participants ranged in overall teaching experience, from 1.5 years to 32 years.

Two teachers had between 1 year and 5 years of teaching experience. Four teachers had

between 14 years and 18 years of teaching experience, and three teachers had between 29

years and 32 years of teaching experience. The average teaching experience was 18

years. As far as experience in teaching phonics and phonemic awareness utilizing the

Letterland program, the range was from 1.5 years to 10 years. Six teachers had between

1.5 years and 5 years of experience, and three teachers had between 6 years and 10 years

of experience teaching the Letterland program. The average years of experience for

teaching the Letterland program was 5 years.

Problem and Research Questions

Despite district implementation of the Letterland phonics program, early

childhood students continue to struggle with mastery of phonics and phonemic awareness skills, suggesting that improvements may be needed in program implementation. In this project study, I explored the experiences and perceptions of early childhood teachers who teach phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program. The research questions that guided this project study were:

RQ1: What are early childhood educators' experiences teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program?

RQ2: What resources and/or supports do early childhood teachers perceive as necessary to implement the Letterland program successfully with students?

Findings in Relation to the Problem and Research Questions

I focused this project study on the experiences and teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program, as well as the resources and supports needed to use the Letterland program successfully with students. One of the primary outcomes was that eight of the nine teachers interviewed liked the Letterland program, while six participants reported that most typical students learn their letters and corresponding sounds using Letterland. Seven participants liked the sequence and structure of the systematic program. Five participants reported that the program engaged students. All nine participants found the Letterland program to contain a lot of materials. Three participants felt that the Letterland program is a great program for new teachers with little experience/knowledge of teaching phonics and phonemic awareness. Five of the nine teacher participants indicated that they were prepared to teach phonics and

phonemic awareness prior to implementing the Letterland program. Four of the teacher participants indicated they had minimal knowledge of teaching phonics and phonemic awareness prior to teaching Letterland and were teaching the best they could with the knowledge and resources they had. Teachers specified the need to organize all of their materials by unit, as there are a lot of forms, books, and other materials. Various teachers stated the need to participate in learning opportunities with their grade-level peers, as to sharing ideas and teaching strategies. Teachers indicated the need for professional development on phonics and phonemic awareness beyond Letterland for increased knowledge and understanding. Teachers noted that professional development should not be lecture style, where they are being spoken at.

Patterns, Relationships, Themes Aligned With Research Questions

Due to the nature of the research questions, it was important to compare the data to overall teaching experience and experience in teaching the Letterland program. Overall, eight of the nine project study participants had good experiences teaching the phonics and phonemic awareness program using Letterland. However, participants made suggestions on improvements that can be made to the program, many of which were similar across the board. The participants provided insights as to their experiences, supplies/resources needed, and professional development/resources that would bring their teaching to the next level (RQ1 and RQ2).

The codes and themes that emerged were linked to the research questions. The participants shared the types of professional learning that would benefit and enhance their teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness via the Letterland program, as well as

supplies needed. Although those who were interviewed were not from the project study site, the information gained will help the administrators and teachers of the project study site improve and enhance teaching and learning of phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program by strengthening the professional development opportunities offered to teachers and administrators.

Coding and Theme Development

Once all nine interviews were conducted, I collected and analyzed the data from the interviews. The data analysis process included coding. I then grouped the common codes by themes aligned to RQ1 and RQ2 (see Table 3).

Table 3

Coding Results

Research question	Thematic coding
RQ1: What are early childhood educators' experiences teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program?	Early childhood educators experience obstacles and barriers.
	Effects of teaching Letterland on teaching practice.
	Letterland's professional development experiences.
	Teaching experience prior to Letterland.
RQ2: What resources and/or supports to early childhood educators perceive as necessary to implement the Letterland program successfully with students?	Professional training opportunities necessary to teach Letterland successfully.
	Tool necessary to teach Letterland.

Research Question 1, Theme 1: Early Childhood Educators' Experiences

RQ1 focused on early childhood educators' experiences teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program. Data responses from the

semistructured, individual interviews related to RQ1 indicated that seven out of nine participants were happy with the sequencing and structure of the Letterland program. Five out of nine participants described the Letterland program as fun and engaging for students. Participant 1 stated, "The Letterland characters and stories really engage students." While Participant 7 said, "The Letterland program is very visual and students really like it and learn from it." Nine participants stated that the Letterland program has a lot of materials. Participant 2 shared, "There are many components of the Letterland program. You need a good organizational system so that you teach in a thoughtful and purposeful way." Seven out of nine participants shared that the Letterland program has a great structure and sequence. Three out of nine participants stated that Letterland is great for new teachers. Participant 5 stated, "Letterland is great for teaching skills, sequencing and patterns." Participant 7 shared, "Letterland is a great program for new teachers and teachers who do not have experience teaching phonics and phonemic awareness." Eight participants stated that they liked the Letterland program. Participant 2 noted, "The more you teach Letterland, the more you learn, and the more your students benefit."

Table 4

Early Childhood Educators' Experiences

Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
Teacher likes the program	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Very visual	X				X		X		
Students like the program	X	X			X	X	X	X	
Engaging for all students	X				X			X	
Hands-on, multi-sensory		X			X			X	
Great scope, sequence, and progression/systematic	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	
Great transfer of skills to reading			X	X					
Most typical students learned their letters and sounds	X	X		X	X		X	X	
Phonics and phonemic awareness skills did not transfer to reading	X								
Too much emphasis on characters, not letters and sounds	X								
Many materials included	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Great for new teachers			X		X		X		
Difficult when you get new students who have not had Letterland				X					
Students with oral language deficiencies know the characters, but not letters and sounds				X					
Not my favorite program				X					
Not a fan of systematic phonics									X
Love the resources and materials	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Great for general education and special education students					X	X	X		
Concerned about character education based on names and actions of Letterland characters (Kicking K)									X

Research Question 1, Theme 2: Obstacles and Barriers

  Although eight of the nine participants enjoyed teaching phonic and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program, they did report a few concerns and suggestions they believe would improve the program and the student learning outcomes. Participant 1 and Participant 3 reported that students with limited oral language skills sometimes focus on the Letterland characters, as opposed to the letters and coordinating sounds. It was suggested that less emphasis be put on the Letterland characters and more emphasis on letters and sounds. Participant 1 reported, "Students with limited background knowledge and oral language skills associate more with the characters, and not the letters and letter sounds." Participant 3 stated "Students sometimes rely on the characters as opposed to the letters and sounds." It is important to note, that teachers reported making the change in the program themselves to overcome the reported concern.

  Three participants reported that the Letterland program does not include enough decodable texts. Six participants stated that there are tons of Letterland materials that are not bundled by unit, which they hoped could be done in the future. One participant reported that you really have to dig into the program and prepare each day, or it will be very easy to fall behind. Participant 9 expressed concern about having to repeat units until 80% of the class passed their weekly spelling assessment. Participant 9 felt that you should be able to move on and address deficiencies during small group instruction. Participant 9 was concerned about character education with the Letterland program, as the characters and stories refer to names, such as Kicking King (K), Quarrelsome Queen (Q), and robots who kidnap people.

Table 5

Obstacles and Barriers

Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
Not enough codable books	X			X					X
Too much emphasis on characters	X		X						
A lot of materials to learn	X		X	X	X		X	X	
A lot of lessons to cover	X	X			X				
Most emphasize letters and sounds, not characters						X			
Difficult to fit in games		X							
Must be very organized				X					
A lot of rules, no explanations			X	X					
Contains low interest books				X					X
Do not like handwriting component							X		
CDs do not sound American									X
Characters are not nice – Kicking K, Quarrelsome Queen, Robots that kick people									X
Student must obtain an 80% on weekly tests in order to move to the next unit									X

Research Question 1, Theme 3: Effects of Teaching Letterland on Teaching Practices

Five out of nine participants felt that teaching the Letterland program made them more confident in teaching phonics and phonemic awareness, as it is well structured. Two participants felt they learned how to analyze data and provide small group interventions through the Letterland program. Participant 4 stated that teaching the Letterland *program* did not have any effect on her teaching practices. Participant 5 stated that she is so grateful for the Letterland program and has learned so much about data and assessment.

Table 6

Effects of Teaching Letterland on Teaching Practices

Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
Letterland teaches you the rules of phonics and phonemic awareness		X							
Confident in teaching phonics and phonemic awareness because the program is well structured		X	X		X	X	X		
Learned how to analyze data and provide small group interventions							X		X
Took my teaching to the next level								X	
Increased knowledge in regard to phonics and phonemic awareness		X							X
Improved my small group instruction									
No change in practice – trained on Reading Recovery, Wilson, etc.	X								
No effect					X				

Research Question 1, Theme 4: Letterland's Professional Development Experiences

All participants reported that they had received the initial Letterland training. Four of the nine participants felt that the initial training was extremely helpful and necessary to the implementation of the program. Eight of the participants stated that the Letterland presenters are knowledgeable. Three of the nine participants stated that the refresher training was good; however, it is important to note that not all schools/districts offer the Letterland refresher course. Participant 4 and Participant 7 believed that the Letterland trainings improved their practice.

Table 7

Letterland's Professional Development Experiences

Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
Better at teaching Letterland, not necessarily phonics and phonemic awareness	X								
Made corrections with other teachers	X								
Must follow the program in its entirety in order to implement fidelity	X								
Initial training was good		X			X	X	X		
New teachers receive a week of training		X							
Refresher training was good					X	X	X		
Training did not help									X
Training improved practice				X			X		
Even with all of the training, it is difficult to implement in the beginning, as there are so many materials			X						

Research Question 1, Theme 5: Teaching Experiences Prior to Letterland

Four of the nine participants felt they were prepared to teach phonics and phonemic awareness prior to teaching the Letterland program. One participant stated, "I had the knowledge and skills to teach phonics and phonemic awareness prior to Letterland; however, I did not know the sequence the skills should be taught in." Three of the nine participants were previously trained in programs such as Reading Recovery or Wilson. Four of the nine participants shared that they had no idea how to teach phonics and phonemic awareness and were happy to teach using Letterland. One participant reported, "I was basically pulling things out of a hat to teach phonics and phonemic awareness prior to Letterland. I had to figure out what students needed based on

assessments." Another participant stated, "I taught four programs prior to Letterland, and I like Letterland the best."

Table 8

Teaching Experiences Prior to Letterland

Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
Reading Recovery teacher—very knowledgeable	X								X
Difficulty teaching phonics and phonemic awareness due to no sequence or structure	X		X			X	X		
Taught the best I could with the resources I had		X					X		
Only taught with Letterland					X				
Taught many programs, Letterland is the best									
Taught in another state, did not have appropriate materials/resources							X		
Knowledgeable				X					
Wilson training – Letterland validated what I already knew								X	

Research Question 2, Theme 1: Professional Training Opportunities Necessary to Teach Letterland Successfully to Students

RQ2, Theme 1 focused on professional training opportunities necessary to teach Letterland successfully to students. Participants reported receiving the required initial Letterland professional development training, which was necessary to understanding the program; however, depending on the school/district/county, some received more training than others. Two participants reported attending follow-up training. One participant reported that the most useful training after the initial Letterland training would be one in which teachers could organize and manage all of the Letterland materials by unit, since it

is not bundled that way. Three participants reported that teachers should have content training after the initial Letterland training in order to fully understand the content, as opposed to the program. One participant stated, "We need professional development on the content that we are expected to teach." Another participant said, "Training is needed on learning the skills/rules, how to use the decodable books and teaching sight words." Four participants expressed the need to practice and plan with their grade-level peers, while two participants would like to receive professional learning in regard to small group Letterland interventions in order to meet the needs of all students. One of the teachers shared, "We need to meet with other teachers who teach the same grade level, to share ideas." Participants felt that one day of training is not enough. One participant said, "We need ongoing training each year." One of the participants, stated that she would like professional learning on what can be done to enhance the learning of sophisticated readers, not just struggling readers.

Table 9

Professional Training Opportunities Necessary to Teach Letterland Successfully

Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
Half-day trainings throughout the school year	X								
Need to make connections with other teachers, share ideas	X		X			X	X		
Learn about common mistakes students make in order to anticipate errors		X							
Need to learn phonics and phonemic awareness content in order to teach confidently	X	X							X
Opportunities to do a make-and-take with your team			X						
Training to enhance what is needed for sophisticated readers								X	
Initial training	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Refresher trainings			X		X				
Data and small group intervention training			X				X		
Top 10 ways to organize Letterland materials				X					
Work with a veteran teacher				X					
Literacy coaches				X					

Research Question 2, Theme 2: Tools Necessary to Teach Letterland Successfully

RQ2, Theme 2 addressed the tools early childhood educators perceived to be

necessary to implement the Letterland program successfully. The resources/supplies that

participants stated were necessary to teach phonics and phonemic awareness using the

Letterland program consisted of decodable books, high-interest books, predictable books,

pattern books, Letterland website/app, leveled readers, pocket charts (small), word lists,

magnetic word builders, advanced picture cards, 10 passages to go with each unit, and

Letterland puzzle. Participant 1 stated that additional decodable books are needed in

addition to high-interest reading books, if the goal is to develop better readers. Six

participants stated that additional decodable books are needed, as the Letterland program

does not provide enough. Participant 9 reported that she has made over 200 decodable

books to match the skills being taught. Four of the nine participants reported that the

Letterland APP/website is a must for students and parents.

Table 10

Tools Necessary to Teach Letterland Successfully

Response	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
Decodable books	X			X	X	X		X	X
High-interest books	X			X		X		X	
Predictable books									X
Pattern books	X								
Letterland website/app	X	X					X	X	
Leveled readers	X								
Pocket charts			X						
Letterland CDs with songs		X					X		
All Letterland materials			X			X		X	
Letterland cards (small)				X	X	X	X		
Word lists				X					
Magnetic word builders				X	X				
Advanced picture cards								X	
10 passages to go with each unit									X
Letterland puzzle						X			

Handling Discrepant Cases

Trends and patterns that are opposite to the themes that emerge are considered

discrepant cases (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). During data analysis, I found no cases to

be discrepant. Although Participant 4 stated that she did not like the Letterland program,

she did at the same time state that students do retain the information taught. Like the

other participants, she reported that there are a ton of materials and that you really need to

learn the program and be organized, which is similar to what the other participants stated. Researchers must acknowledge the points-of-view of all participants.

Evidence of Quality

As the researcher of this project study, I clarified who the participants were and how the data were collected, analyzed, and coded. It is important to provide reliable and valid data in order to strengthen credibility. Utilizing audio-recordings, coding software, charts, participant quotes, and member checking, I was able to track and organize my data sources that aligned to RQ1 and RQ2. Should this study be replicated, the same/similar results would be found, and thus dependable. One limitation in this basic qualitative study is the number of participants. There were nine participants, all early childhood teachers who are currently teaching the Letterland program in the United States. Having more participants could have provided a bigger perspective of teachers across the United States.

To ensure credibility, validity and trustworthiness, I called upon a trusted colleague, who has no involvement in the project study, to assist in the research process. The trusted colleague I chose was not a research participant and did not have any special interests in the outcome. I shared and reviewed the findings and the final report of the project study to probe the researcher's thinking.

Findings and Themes in Relation to Literature Review

The findings revealed several areas of alignment with the literature review. The themes of Letterland program/experiences, professional development, and structure and sequence were evident in the project study data and literature review.

This project study focused on the experiences and teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program, as well as the resources and supports necessary to use the Letterland program successfully with students. One of the primary outcomes of the study was that eight of the nine teachers interviewed liked the Letterland program, while six participants reported that most typical students learn their letters and corresponding sounds using Letterland. According to Nunn (2019), children who have limited phonological awareness require explicit and systematic instruction to build up their skills. When classroom teaching includes researched-based practices that target specific language and cognitive and reading skills, most students should be able to read (Moats, 2020).

Seven teachers liked the sequence and structure of the systematic program, and five participants reported that the program engaged students. The explicit teaching of phonics assists all students in accessing text and is vital for many children (Castles et al., 2018). Incorporating student engagement and social interaction with text as students are learning to decode and comprehend will increase their ability to make meaning (Moses & Kelly, 2018).

Five of the nine participants indicated they were prepared to teach phonics and phonemic awareness prior to implementing the Letterland program, and four of the teacher participants indicated they had minimal knowledge of teaching phonics and phonemic awareness prior to teaching Letterland and were teaching the best they could with the knowledge and resources they had. According to Ehri and Flugman (2018), many teachers lack the knowledge to teach phonics sufficiently, specifically how to

separate phonemes into spoken words. The evidence of adopting a systematic phonics program, along with sight words, is highly recommended (Castles et al., 2018).

Five participants shared that they were more confident in their teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness since using the Letterland program. Teachers are more willing to change their teaching methods if they have a high level of confidence (Yang, 2019). Participants indicated the need for professional development on phonics and phonemic awareness beyond Letterland for increased knowledge and understanding. According to Thoma (2021), providing professional learning on the use of skills and practices leads to increased student achievement.

Eight participants reported the initial Letterland training was good, with four participants expressing the need to meet with colleagues to discuss ideas and to share teacher practices. When designing professional development, the needs of teachers and how they learn should be met, which is why it is important to incorporate active learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Active learning may involve such activities as collaboration with other teachers.

Six participants stated the need for the Letterland program to have additional decodable books, with four participants reporting the need for high-interest books. Explicit teaching of phonics, phonemic awareness, and morphological awareness enables children the necessary skills to decode text (Vollebregt et al., 2021). Students need many opportunities to practice the skills they are learning. Reading high-interest books may motivate students to read more and to share their thinking.

Conceptual Framework

The themes emerging from the findings of this project study showed alignment with the conceptual framework. Themes related to the research problem, such as Letterland experiences/programs, support the constructivist learning theory. Five participants stated that the Letterland program is engaging, with two participants stating that the program is multi-sensory and hands-on. Dewey (1963) acknowledged that engaging students with hands-on experiences is important for learning. Dewey also noted the connection between experiences and education. Kolb (1984) believed that knowledge is created through experience.

Seven participants acknowledged that the Letterland program has a great structure and sequence to follow. Teachers explicitly and systematically teach letters and sounds. Participants noted the engaging stories and visual characters that bring together letters and sounds. Vygotsky (1978) considers constructivism as a learning theory where knowledge is created in context.

The Letterland program creates opportunities for children to discover patterns and links to language. The best way for children to learn to read using the constructivist view is to allow children to discover the patterns and links to language after providing the guidance needed to learn how the alphabetic system works (Treiman, 2018). In discussing the Letterland program, one interview respondent stated, "The Letterland characters and stories really engage students." Another respondent shared, "Letterland focuses on thoughtful patterns and sequencing."

Summary of Outcomes

One of the primary outcomes of this project study was that eight of the nine participants interviewed believed that the Letterland program was a good phonics and phonemic awareness program. Six participants shared that their students enjoyed the program, with seven participants noting that they really liked the structure and sequence of the systematic program. Participants shared that the Letterland program is engaging, visual, and multi-sensory.

Nine participants found the program to have a lot of materials, with organization and management of materials key to implementing the program with success. Three teachers felt that the Letterland program was good for new teachers with little experience/knowledge of teaching phonics and phonemic awareness. Five participants indicated they were prepared to teach phonics and phonemic awareness prior to implementing the Letterland program, with four participants indicating they had minimal knowledge of teaching phonics and phonemic awareness prior to teaching Letterland. Participants expressed the need for professional learning opportunities that include organization of materials by unit, meeting with grade-level peers to share ideas and teaching strategies, and professional development on phonics and phonemic awareness content beyond Letterland for increased knowledge and understanding.

Project Based on Outcomes

The findings of this study yielded meaningful data to create and plan a professional development project. Participants in the study reported the need for

professional development in regard to phonics and phonemic awareness content

knowledge, decodable books, phonics and phonemic awareness intervention groups,

sight words, organization of Letterland materials, collaboration with grade-level

colleagues, and a Letterland refresher training.

In addition, participants noted having literacy coaches who provide continuous

learning opportunities. Participants discussed small group/cohort trainings as a

preference. The project plan will incorporate small groups of teachers, opportunities for

sharing, collaboration, hands-on activities, and job-embedded coaching/mentoring.

Section 3: The Project

In order to address the professional needs that were identified in this study, I developed a 3-day professional development project (see Appendix). Participants expressed the importance of ongoing professional development, which could take place in many forms, such as workshops, demonstrations, peer mentoring, and embedded coaching. The additional professional development support will assist teachers as they develop the expertise needed when teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program.

The creation of a 3-day professional development experience will help mold early childhood educators into early childhood phonics and phonemic experts using the Letterland program. The 3-day professional development experience will consist of several components and cohorts:

- training on the content of what needs to be taught and the importance of why it needs to be taught

- training on the strategies used to teach the content; in-depth training on the various strategies that students can utilize to add to their action toolbox

- time to practice/plan the content and strategies with their grade-level peers (hands-on activities)

After the 3-day professional development experience, classroom observation, and review of student achievement data, job-embedded literacy coaches will work with individual teachers in their own classrooms in order to provide immediate feedback, both oral and written.

Rationale

The genre I chose for this project study was professional development. Professional development was determined based on the problem and research findings. Based on the findings, it was clear that professional development on teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program was needed in order to support teachers, as the program includes a lot of materials and forms.

Study findings showed the need for professional learning opportunities in regard to organizing the Letterland program, decodable books, Letterland small group instruction, assessing phonics and phonemic awareness skills, and teacher collaboration. Participants requested professional development opportunities that did not include all-day lecture style trainings. Requested were opportunities to discuss their teaching craft with their grade-level colleagues in order to share their professional practices when teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program, as well as professional development opportunities that increased their knowledge of best practices teaching phonics and phonemic awareness. The professional development plan that I created includes ongoing learning opportunities, coaching, and active learning. Early childhood educators will have the opportunity to have literacy coaches observe their phonics and phonemic awareness practices and offer meaningful feedback, both orally and in writing.

Review of the Literature on Professional Development

The project genre I selected for this study was professional development, as it coordinated well with this study. Professional development is extremely important in effectively implementing the phonics and phonemic awareness program Letterland. I

conducted the literature review by searching multiple databases, such as ERIC and Ebscohost. The search terms were *professional development*, *continuous learning*, *professional training*, *staff development*, *ongoing training*, *continuous professional development*, *collaborative professional learning*, *effective professional learning*, and *workplace training*.

The results of the review of literature provided me guidance on creating my project with a focus on learning and ongoing improvement, models/formats of effective professional development, effective professional development for teachers, self-efficacy, teacher learning, and the characteristics of effective development. There are several models/formats of professional development for teachers, which include, but are not limited to, professional support from experienced teachers to newly hired teachers, workshops at schools, teacher study groups, peer observation, extended training courses (series of workshops), opportunities for informal self-learning, professional learning communities, teacher networks, college credit courses, coaching and mentoring, partnerships between schools and universities in supporting collaborative research, workshops outside of school, conferences, action research, and online training programs (Abu-Tineh & Sadiq, 2018).

Effective Professional Development Characteristics

Developing and growing as an effective educator takes time and commitment. The impact that teachers have on student learning cannot be ignored or overlooked. Teachers are the most important element of teaching and learning; however, many find it difficult to keep up with the fast pace of educational research (Merchie et al., 2016). It is

up to schools and school districts to prioritize professional learning within the context of the school day, if the goal is to improve teacher practice and increase student learning outcomes. Effective professional development is needed if teachers are required and expected to assist students with the sophisticated development of content mastery, self-direction, and critical thinking (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Effective professional development is defined by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) as learning that is structured, changes teacher practices, and increases student learning outcomes. Darling-Hammond et al. identified seven elements of effective professional development (see Table 11).

Table 11

Elements of Professional Development

Element	Description
Content-focused	Focuses on specific curriculum and strategies
Active learning	Engages teachers in creating and trying out teaching strategies
Collaboration	Teachers share ideas and collaborate
Coaching and expert support	Coaching focuses on individual teachers
Models of effective practice	Teachers view models of instruction of what best practice looks like
Feedback and reflection	Built-in time for teachers to reflect and receive input in order to make changes in practice
Sustained duration	Time to learn, practice, and implement new strategies and change in instructional practice

According to research, professional development is valuable to teachers and students (Baker et al., 2017). Effective professional development must address knowledge gaps and focus on research-based skills and strategies (Cavazos et al., 2018). Professional development is meant to support and improve teacher practice (Noonan, 2018). When research-based strategies are embedded into professional development

opportunities, there is a greater chance for teacher learning (Smith et al., 2020). When teachers improve their practice, students have a better chance of improving their learning outcomes.

In the design of professional development experiences, the needs of teachers, specifically how they learn, should be met, which is why it is important to incorporate active learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Active learning may involve such activities as data analysis, collaboration with other teachers about data, engagement in student learning activities with team teachers, and collaboration that includes one-on-one or small group interactions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Educators are more likely to assist their peers when they participate in professional development of a longer duration (Pak et al., 2020).

Peer coaching has the potential to improve teacher practice and learning and self-efficacy (Ma et al., 2018). Professional development that is not followed up with feedback and/or support will rarely result in a change in instructional practices (Cavazos et al., 2018). Early childhood teachers need to receive high-quality professional development, as lack of qualification in early reading skills can lead to negative consequences (Martinez et al., 2021). Teachers often continue their regular ways of teaching after receiving professional development, because most professional development activities are not supported by the work that is done in classroom (Collet, 2015).

Student performance can only be improved when teachers deliver high-quality instruction (Didion et al., 2019). Desimone's (2011) conceptual framework explains five

core features that should be included in professional development if the goal is to increase teacher knowledge and improve student learning outcomes: content-focused, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation. According to Desimone (2011), professional development activities should focus on content area matter and how students learn that specific content. Teachers should also be given time to observe and receive feedback. Groups of teachers from the same grade and/or subject areas should participate in the professional development together in order to build a strong learning community; the professional development should include at least 20 hours or more (Desimone, 2011). Teacher professional development is more meaningful when multiple formats are combined, such as workshops on teacher knowledge and best practices, on content and student learning outcomes, and on student data and coaching (Didion et al., 2019). Professional development provided in only one session is reviewed poorly by teachers and does not develop their understanding of the information being provided (Didion et al., 2019). Improving and changing teacher practice is a complex process that occurs over weeks, months, and years; it does not occur in one session (Main et al., 2020). Developing high-quality teachers is extremely important in closing student achievement gaps. Having systemwide supports in place to improve student learning outcomes through professional development is crucial (Stahmer et al., 2020).

Professional Development Impact on Student Achievement

In order for professional development to be effective, it should change teacher practice and improve student learning outcomes. Having highly qualified teachers in classrooms does more for student achievement than having smaller student–teacher ratios

(Gupta & Lee, 2020). Teachers have increasing amounts of tasks added to their plate each day, one of which is to improve student achievement. There is a solid belief that effective professional development has the potential for positive effects on student achievement (Gore et al., 2021). Improving student achievement requires changes in teacher practice. Effective professional development is not only necessary, but a must. Early literacy instruction must focus on many skills, such as phonological awareness, phonics, and print concepts. Providing professional learning on the use of these skills and practices leads to increased student achievement (Thoma, 2021).

Professional Development Effects on Teachers' Self-Efficacy

Teachers are expected to teach sophisticated skills and strategies; therefore, they must be confident and knowledgeable in the subject matter they teach. Effective professional development should change teachers' beliefs and practices so that it leads to improved student learning (Yang, 2019). The way in which a teacher feels about their ability to confidently present information in an engaging matter greatly impacts the quality of instruction and student engagement. Teachers are more willing to change their teaching methods if they have a high level of confidence (Yang, 2019). The job of a teacher has become increasingly challenging, and how a teacher feels about their capabilities in the classroom can have negative effects. Teacher self-efficacy is recognized as a predictor of teacher effectiveness (Buric & Kim, 2019). Teachers who have high self-efficacy also reflect positively on job satisfaction (Kasalak & Dagyar, 2020).

Project Description

Based on the findings from this project study as well as the literature review on professional development, I planned a 3-day professional development experience for first-grade teachers. The goal is to help teachers enhance their phonics and phonemic awareness teaching using the Letterland program. Guidance from this study and literature review suggests that professional development should be ongoing and consist of 20+ hours in order to change teacher behaviors in the classroom. Literacy coaches should follow up with teachers shortly after the training to assist the teachers in making behavioral changes by observing the teachers, reviewing student achievement data, offering meaningful feedback, and offering professional collaboration. The components of the project include grade-level cohorts, hands-on activities, collaboration, sharing of ideas and activities, and planning small group instruction based on the individual needs of students, followed up with observation and collaboration with the literacy coaches, as well as oral and written feedback.

The first day of the 3-day professional development experience will consist of grade-level cohorts working together to organize their Letterland materials by unit, given that according to the interview participants, this was the most important and overwhelming task in properly implementing the program with fidelity. Teachers will then share with the larger group how they organized their materials by unit and what they included with each unit. During the last session of the day, a literacy coach will conduct a model demonstration lesson of what is expected during the Letterland phonics and

phonemic awareness block. Teachers will then discuss the demonstration lesson and share how they can include all of the expected components in their lessons.

Day 2 of the professional development experience will include learning how to assess their students' phonemic awareness abilities and plan specific lessons and activities to address the students' needs. Teachers will practice assessing students with their assigned grade-level cohort, as well as design lessons and activities to address deficiencies. During the last session of the day, teachers will learn how to collect meaningful data that will drive their phonics and phonemic awareness instruction.

Day 3 of the professional development experience will include Letterland small group intervention training. Teachers will learn how to group students and how to plan meaningful and purposeful intensive phonics and phonemic awareness instruction that makes a difference. Teachers will have the opportunity to create meaningful small group phonics and phonemic awareness lessons with their grade-level cohort. During the last session of the day, teachers will learn strategies to develop their students' fluency rate, accuracy, and automaticity. Teachers will work with their grade-level cohorts in order to develop fluency and automaticity lessons and activities.

One week after the 3-day professional development experience, literacy coaches will visit and observe classrooms during their Letterland phonics and phonemic awareness block to see how teachers are implementing the program and offer meaningful feedback, orally and in writing, using the Letterland Fidelity Checklist (see Appendix). Literacy coaches will review student data and observe small group phonics and phonemic awareness instruction using the Letterland program in order to assist with the appropriate

grouping and targeted intensive instruction. One month later, the literacy coaches will

meet with the grade-level teachers during their professional learning community to

review patterns and trends from the walkthroughs. One week later, the literacy coaches

will conduct classroom visits and observations to assist the teachers and offer meaningful

feedback that improves instruction using the Letterland Fidelity Checklist. This pattern

will continue throughout the school year. Teachers will receive monthly phonics and

phonemic awareness training using the Letterland program via the literacy coach,

followed up with a classroom visit/observation and meaningful feedback, oral and

written, using the Letterland Fidelity Checklist (see Appendix).

Resources

The resources needed include supervisor of English language arts (K-2) to

facilitate the large group sessions and literacy coaches to facilitate grade-level cohorts

(first grade). Each cohort will contain six to eight grade-level teachers by building. The 3-

day professional development will be held in one of the school facilities. Literacy

coaches will conduct class visits/observations. Administrators will support the teachers

and literacy coaches. The literacy coaches will distribute the materials and evaluation

forms.

Existing Supports

Building principals and district administrators support professional development

opportunities for teachers, as they are much needed in order to improve teaching and

learning across the district. Job-embedded literacy coaches are in place across the district,

as well as available facilities for small and large group sessions. Professional learning communities are also in place for ongoing continuous learning.

Potential Barriers

Due to COVID-19 and a national shortage of substitutes, there is a possibility that there may not be enough substitutes on any given day for all early childhood teachers to attend the 3-day professional development experience. Should some teachers be unable to attend portions of the professional development, there may be a lack of buy-in for organizational change and continuous improvement, which will have a great impact on improving student learning outcomes.

Potential Solutions to Barriers

A possible solution to the potential barrier of not having enough substitutes on any given day of the 3-day professional development experience would be to utilize guidance counselors and special area teachers to cover classrooms so that all first-grade teachers can meet, work, and grow together. This would send the message that professional growth and student achievement is a district priority. In the end, teachers and students will reap the benefits and rewards of continuous learning and school improvement.

Proposal for Implementation and Timeline

I will present the proposed 3-day professional development plan to administration and literacy coaches by July 15, 2022 in order to give them enough time to plan appropriately for a September 2022 implementation. In September 2022, teachers are assigned to their grade-level cohorts by building. Teachers initially meet with the large

group and then break into grade-level cohorts by building. This 3-day professional

development experience in September will help set the tone for the school year. At the

end of the school year, teachers, building principals, and district administrators will meet

to discuss steps for the following school year.

Roles and Responsibilities

I have developed a 3-day professional development experience and will present it

to building principals, district administrators, and literacy coaches for feedback. District

principals will have all first-grade teachers put in for 3 professional days via the district's

attendance program. Teachers will request substitutes. The English Language Arts

supervisor for grades K-2 will prepare the professional development days with the first-

grade literacy coaches. Literacy coaches will be assigned to teachers/building in order to

provide visits/observations and oral and written feedback each month. The participating

first-grade teachers must engage in professional learning communities each week, in

addition to the 3-day professional development experience.

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Project Evaluation Plan

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Types of Evaluation and Justification

A formative evaluation would align best with this 3-day professional development

experience. The professional development evaluation is a self-reflection of the impact

that the professional development has on instructional practices and participant

professional growth at the time the professional development is provided. The feedback

is given in real time, as opposed to summative evaluation, in which feedback is given at

the end of a course/program.

The 3-day professional development experience happens in stages, with continuous ongoing learning. Formative evaluation is most appropriated, as learning is progressing and is self-reflective. Summative evaluation would not be appropriate for this type of professional learning, as there is no measurement of what is being learned, as all learners may be in a different place at different times. See Appendix for Formative Evaluation.

Professional learning must be linked to changes and results. It is important to know what types of professional development activities are associated with positive change and continuous improvement. The first step in evaluating professional development is determining what outcomes are expected (Merchie et al., 2016).

Overall Evaluation Goals

Formative evaluations have several goals. One goal is to provide feedback to instructors on how to improve teaching and learning. Additional goals are to improve the academic achievement of students, define learning goals, and personalize learning experiences.

Key Stakeholders

Key stakeholders for this project are teachers, administrators, and students. Teachers would receive the direct benefit of the continuous learning plan and professional growth. Administrators would benefit from building and strengthening the human capacity in their school building by improving the teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program. Students will reap the rewards of the

improved teaching and learning of phonics/phonemic awareness using the Letterland program and, in turn, improve their learning outcomes.

Project Implications

Social Change Implications

This project study is focused on supporting early childhood teachers in teaching phonics and phonemic awareness utilizing the Letterland program. The possible social change implications would include early childhood teachers being more skilled at teaching the very important foundational skills of phonics and phonemic awareness. If the teachers are better equipped, early childhood students may increase their learning outcomes.

Importance of the Project

The project I created was the result of a study that focused on the experiences and teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program, as well as the resources and supports needed to use the Letterland program more effectively. The professional development project was aimed at improving the teaching of Letterland and increasing the knowledge and understanding of early childhood teachers. It is my hope that the 3-day professional development experience will strengthen the teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness using Letterland in a collaborative, hands-on manner throughout the school year, so that teachers welcome and foster a continuous learning environment for improvement.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Project Strengths and Limitations

I created a project using my literature review on professional development and my study findings. The project addresses the need for professional learning as perceived by the teachers interviewed in several states across the country, which could have profound effects on the local school district. The project plan includes guidance from the professional development literature.

Overall, data gained from my participant interviews align with the results of the literature review, which strengthens my project design. The problem noted in Section 1 was the large number of students reading below grade level and the lack of phonics and phonemic awareness training for teachers. Early childhood teachers need to receive high-quality professional development, as lack of qualification in early reading skills can lead to negative consequences (Martinez et al., 2021).

To address this instructional problem, the local school district must develop high-quality teachers in order to close the achievement gaps. One-day workshops are not enough to change instructional behaviors in the classroom; it is crucial that districts have systemwide supports in place to improve student learning outcomes through professional development (Stahmer et al., 2020). Effective professional development should change the beliefs and practices of teachers so that it leads to improved student learning (Yang, 2019).

I am confident that the professional development project I created will enhance teaching and learning and assist in changing teacher behaviors, as the plan addresses the

elements of effective professional development and targets phonics and phonemic awareness skills using the Letterland program. Effective professional development is needed if teachers are required and expected to assist students with the sophisticated development of content mastery, self-direction, and critical thinking (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

The professional development project that I created includes content knowledge, hands-on activities, collaboration with peers, and follow-up observations in which teachers are provided with oral and written feedback. Professional development trainings must take into account the needs of teachers, specifically how they learn, which is why it is important to incorporate active learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The way teachers feel about their ability to confidently present information in an engaging matter greatly impacts the quality of instruction and student engagement. Teachers are more willing to change their teaching methods if they have a high level of confidence (Yang, 2019).

The limitations of the project are teacher buy-in and participant motivation. Leaders at the local school district can do everything in their power to motivate, inspire, and teach; however, teachers are the ones who must take ownership of their own learning and make behavioral/instructional changes in the classroom. Another limitation of the study is the transferability of skills from what is learned in the training to what takes place in the classroom. Teachers may love the new program; however, they may need additional support in the classroom to effectively implement the program. Teachers may effectively implement the program; however, there may be students who need additional

supports and individualized interventions. It is difficult to control and/or predict the outcome.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

Despite district implementation of the Letterland phonics program, early childhood students continue to struggle with mastery of phonics and phonemic awareness skills, suggesting that improvements may be needed in program implementation. The intention of district leaders in implementing the Letterland phonics and phonemic awareness program was to improve early childhood teachers' prereading teaching skills and to increase the number of below-grade-level students attaining grade-level reading. Even though some teachers felt prepared to teach phonics and phonemic awareness, as they had professional development training using programs such as Read Recovery and Wilson, it may be necessary to look at the broader problem. The alternative approach to the problem may be much broader than addressing the issue during professional development trainings.

An alternative approach would be to conduct a program evaluation on Letterland. A program evaluation would assist the district in improving the quality of the phonics and phonemic awareness program. Basic questions regarding the strengths, weaknesses, and effectiveness of the program would assist the district in making informed decisions about the program.

The district can also conduct focused walkthroughs during Letterland, concentrating on various components of the program in order to collect trend data to drive future professional development and to support teachers. In addition, district leaders

may wish to collect and analyze quantitative student data to find patterns and trends across grade levels and to find strengths and weaknesses in the curriculum program. Any changes and/or professional development offered would be data driven.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

Guidance from both the literature review and findings of the study informed the creation of the project. Had I not completed these two stages in the process, the project would look very different and would not be grounded in research. Based on the findings of the semistructured interviews, I chose professional development as the project genre. The findings in Section 2 indicated that teachers did not want to attend workshops in which they were lectured to for hours on end. Findings from the literature review on professional development in Section 3 indicated the need for ongoing continuous learning of 20 or more hours, which is why I planned a year-long professional development learning experience. Professional development provided in one session is reviewed poorly by teachers and does not develop their understanding of the information provided (Didion et al., 2019). Teacher professional development is more meaningful when multiple formats are combined, such as workshops on teacher knowledge and best practices, or content and student learning outcomes (Didion et al., 2019).

Based on the findings from my literature review on professional development, I decided to include active learning in order for teachers to be active participants in their learning. Working with their grade-level peers, teachers will create lessons and activities to bring back to use in their classroom immediately to assist them in making instructional and behavioral changes in the classroom. Active learning includes hands-on activities in

which the learner is trying to make sense of the information and for which the information is also modeled (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

The literature reviews also revealed the need to include coaching as part of the professional development support system. Teacher professional development is more meaningful when multiple formats are combined, such as workshops on teacher knowledge and best practices, or content and student learning outcomes (Didion et al., 2019). I added literacy coaches and a continuous learning plan to the 3-day professional development experience in order to increase the success of the professional learning opportunity.

Based on my study findings, teachers would like to collaborate with their grade-level teams, as they feel that it is an important aspect of growing as a professional. The literature review supports this, so I added collaboration to my project for increased success. Active learning should include collaboration that includes one-on-one or small group interactions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

I reflected on the data received from both my participant interviews and literature review as I designed the project to include best practices. The intention is to increase teacher knowledge in the area of phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program and for teachers to teach more effectively. This should also increase teacher confidence and change instructional behaviors and, as a result, improve student learning outcomes.

Personal Learning

Being a school administrator for many years, I have experience creating professional development workshops. Most of the workshops offered have been 1-day workshops in regard to a new program and/or curriculum being implemented. Having completed literature reviews on foundational skills/phonics and phonemic awareness and effective professional development, I have rethought and reflected on the type of professional development that teachers need if they are to make real instructional changes in the classroom.

After creating a 3-day professional development experience for early childhood teachers, supported by research and ongoing throughout the school year, I am confident that instructional change can be made. I know firsthand the value of research-based best practices. For school leaders, it is important to lead change, utilizing practices that are supported by research.

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Reflection on Importance of the Work

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As a researcher, I recognize that it is important to make decisions that are grounded in research and aligned with goals of the district and school. Reflecting on the participant interviews and creation of the 3-day professional development experience, with ongoing continuous learning throughout the school year, I am confident that the project that I designed will result in positive instructional change in the classroom, as I have learned the value of the research process and the framework for planning.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Implications for Social Change

As teachers in the local school district become stronger in teaching phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program, they will feel more confident in the materials they are teaching. Social change is possible as more students will experience success when learning important foundational skills that are required to read. The climate and culture of schools may greatly improve if more students achieve at higher levels.

Implications for Methodology

This project study provided a multitude of learning experiences. Researching various studies through the extensive literature review helped bring about new insights. The doctoral project study process has taught me how to think critically and how to create themes using codes. It was a challenging but rewarding experience trying to obtain participants to take part in the study and collect and analyze data, all while composing meaningful scholarly writing.

Future Research

Future research that would be most valuable in regard to the teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness in early childhood classrooms would involve looking at the broader picture and looking at how colleges/universities prepare teachers to teach prereading/foundational skills. To effectively teach reading in the early childhood classroom, teacher candidates should receive proper training on the science behind reading so that teacher candidates have a good understanding of the skills and strategies children need to learn how to read.

Future research may also include quantitative studies that collect and analyze student data in order to find patterns and trends in the data to help drive future program decisions based on the strengths, weaknesses, and effectiveness of the program. In addition, focused walkthroughs can be conducted during the phonics and phonemic awareness block in order to collect and analyze trend data to drive future professional development experiences based on staff needs.

Conclusion

The teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program can be extremely rewarding, as eight of the nine participants liked the program and loved the materials provided. Although several participants felt that the program had an overwhelming number of forms and materials that made early implementation difficult, most overcame the problem with time and organization. Eight of the nine participants liked following Letterland's structure and sequence. Six participants reported that most typical students learned their letters and corresponding sounds, while at the same time they found the program to be engaging.

After concluding the study, the Letterland program understandably has value in meeting the needs of students in regard to teaching phonics and phonemic awareness. In order to maximize student learning outcomes, the professional development staff's needs must be acknowledged and supported by administrators. An effort will be made in sharing the knowledge and benefits of high-quality professional development regarding phonics and phonemic awareness using the Letterland program.

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Appendix: The Project

A 3-Day Professional Development Schedule, Agenda, and Formative Evaluation

Phonics & Phonemic Awareness
Professional Development Experience

Agenda: Day 1

I.   Welcome

II.   8:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.
   a. Organizing Letterland materials by unit.
   b. Teachers will create binders with all materials, forms, assessments, worksheet/workbooks, and CDs by unit.
   All teachers must bring their Letterland Kit along with resources used with Letterland.

III.   11:00 a.m. to 11:15 a.m.
   a. Break

IV.   11:15 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.
   a. Cohorts will share with the larger group how they organized their Letterland materials by unit and what they included in each unit's binder.

V.   12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m.
   a. Lunch

VI.   1:00 p.m. to 1:45 p.m.
   a. Model lesson on what is expected during the Letterland phonics and phonemic awareness block.

VII.   1:45 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.
   a. Discuss and share ideas on how you can include all of the expected components in each lesson.

Phonics & Phonemic Awareness
Professional Development Experience

Agenda: Day 2

I.   Welcome

II.   8:00 a.m. to 9:45 a.m.
   a.   Information will be presented on how to assess students' phonemic awareness abilities and how to plan specific activities to address the needs of students.

III.   9:45 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.
   a.   Break

IV.   10:00 a.m. to 11:15 a.m.
   a.   Teachers will practice assessing phonemic awareness skills with their assigned cohort and plan specific activities to address the varying needs of students.

V.   11:15 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.
   a.   Teachers will share and discuss their assessment results and activities that they created to address the varying needs of students.

VI.   12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m.
   a.   Lunch

VII.   1:00 pm. to 2:15 p.m.
   a.   Presentation on Using Data to Drive your Phonics and Phonemic Awareness Instruction.

VIII. 2:15 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.
   a.   Summary and Reflections

Phonics & Phonemic Awareness
Professional Development Experience
Agenda: Day 3

I.   **Welcome**

II.   **8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.**
       a. Information will be presented on Intervention Training: Intervention Groups, Grouping Students and planning meaningful and purposeful intensive phonics and phonemic awareness instruction that makes a difference.

III.   **10:00 a.m. to 10:15 a.m.**
       a. Break

IV.   **10:15 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.**
       a. Teachers will have the opportunity to create meaningful lessons and activities for small group instruction.

V.   **12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m**.
       a. Lunch

VI.   **1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m.**
       a. The Literacy Coach will present information on developing students' fluency rate, accuracy & automaticity.

VII.   **2:00 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.**
       a. Summary and Reflections

Day 1

8:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.

Objective: Teachers will be able to organize and sort their *Letterland* Materials and Resources, by Unit, in order to implement the program effectively.

- Teachers will bring their *Letterland* kit, Materials and Resources to the Professional Development 3-day training.
- Teachers will work with their grade-level cohort to organized all of their Letterland materials and resources by unit.
- Teachers will create binders with all materials, forms, assessments, worksheets/workbook & CDs.

Day 1

11:00 a.m. to 11:15 a.m.

Day 1

11:15 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Objective: Teachers will be able to discuss and share how they organized their *Letterland* materials and resources, by unit.

- All first grade teacher cohorts will meet with the larger group to share how they organized their *Letterland* materials and resources by unit, and what was included in each unit.

Day 1

1:00 p.m. to 1:45 p.m.

Objective: Model lesson of what is expected during the *Letterland* phonics and phonemic awareness block.

- The Literacy Coach will model the expectations of what is expected during the *Letterland* phonics and phonemic awareness block.

Day 1

12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Day 1

1:00 p.m. to 1:45 p.m.

Objective: Model lesson of what is expected during the *Letterland* phonics and phonemic awareness block.

- The Literacy Coach will model the expectations of what is expected during the *Letterland* phonics and phonemic awareness block.

Day 1

1:45 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Objective: Summary and Reflections

- Teachers will discuss the model lesson with their cohort and share ideas on how to include all components and expectations in each *Letterland* phonics and phonemic awareness lesson they teach.
- All cohorts will share their ideas with the larger group.

Day 2

8:00 a.m. to 9:45 a.m.

Objective: Assessing students' phonemic awareness abilities and planning specific *Letterland* activities to address the needs of individual students.

- The Literacy Coach will conduct a presentation to first grade teachers on assessing students' phonemic awareness abilities and how to plan specific *Letterland* activities to address the needs of individual students.

Day 2

9:45 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.

Day 2

10:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.

Objective: Teachers will practice assessing phonemic awareness abilities with their assigned cohort and plan specific *Letterland* activities to address the varying needs of their students.

- Teachers will practice with their grade-level cohort assessing phonemic awareness abilities.
- Teachers will create specific *Letterland* activities to address various phonics and phonemic awareness skills.

10

Day 2

11:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Objective: Teachers will be able to discuss and share *Letterland* activities that address the varying needs of their students.

- All first grade teacher cohorts will meet with the larger group to share *Letterland* activities that address the varying needs of their students.

11

Day 2

12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Lunch

12

Day 2

1:00 p.m. to 2:15 p.m.

Objective: Teachers will learn how to collect data that is meaningful in driving phonics and phonemic awareness instruction.

- The Literacy Coach will conduct a presentation on how to collect data that is meaningful in driving phonics and phonemic awareness instruction.

13

Day 2

- 2:15 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Objective: Summary and Reflections

- Teachers will share with the larger group what they learned about collecting meaningful data to drive phonics and phonemic awareness instruction.

14

Day 3

8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.

Objective: Teachers will learn how to create Intervention groups, and plan meaningful intensive phonics and phonemic awareness instruction using data to drive their *Letterland* small group instruction.

- The Literacy Coach will conduct a presentation to first grade teachers on how to create intervention groups and plan meaningful intensive phonics and phonemic awareness instruction based on data.

15

Day 3

- 10:00 a.m. to 10:15 a.m.

Day 3

10:15 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Objective: Teachers will create meaningful lessons and activities that address small group *intensive* phonics and phonemic awareness instruction.

- Teachers will work with their grade-level cohort on creating meaningful lessons and activities for small group intensive phonics and phonemic awareness using *Letterland*.

Day 3

12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Day 3

1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Objective: Teachers will learn how to develop their students' fluency rate, accuracy & automaticity.

- The Literacy Coach will present information on how to develop their students' fluency rate, accuracy and automaticity.

19

Day 3

2:00 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Objective: Summary & Reflections

- Teachers will discuss and share with their grade-level cohort, activities that develop grade appropriate fluency & automaticity.

20

Professional Development Evaluation Form

Check one: ____ Teacher ____ Paraprofessional

____ Administrator

Please respond to each item by selecting the number which best describes your opinion (5=excellent; 1=poor).

Impact on Instructional Practice

Question	Rating				
Enhanced the educator's/school leader's content knowledge	5	4	3	2	1
Increased the educator's/school leader's teaching skills based on research/best practices	5	4	3	2	1
Provided information on assessment and data	5	4	3	2	1
Enhanced the participant's professional growth	5	4	3	2	1
Improve/change how you will teach in the classroom	5	4	3	2	1

Participant Feedback

Question	Rating				
Well organized	5	4	3	2	1
Objective clearly stated	5	4	3	2	1
Relevant to the classroom	5	4	3	2	1
Materials provided or made readily available	5	4	3	2	1
Instructor Performance	5	4	3	2	1

What information will you utilize immediately in the classroom?

_____
_____
_____

What would you like to receive future Professional Development on?

_____
_____
_____

Date: _____   Unit # _____   Teacher: _____   Observer _____Day ____

Letterland Fidelity Check – Whole Group

Day 1

Phonics Concept Review

Children respond to Picture Code Cards (PCCs) or words using phonics from
previous Unit.   _____

Introduce New Concepts

Teacher explains new concepts with Letterlanders and 'story logic'   _____
interactively with children using various materials (PCCs, books, software, and songs).
Children do Action Tricks or role-play the story logic related to new sounds or patterns.   _____
Word building: Teacher makes words including new concepts with PCCs or software.   _____
Children finger tap the sounds to read the words.   _____

Live Reading

Teacher lines up children holding PCCs to form words.   _____
Other children finger tap the sounds to read the words.   _____
Teacher or a child uses the word in a sentence.   _____

Word Detectives

Teacher displays or provides copies of sentences with new concepts.   _____
Teacher reads sentences to and with children.   _____
Teacher guides children in marking new phonic elements. (May be completed Indep.)   _____

Read Word Cards

Teacher guides reading of Word Cards in columns related by phonic pattern.   _____
Children reread words a few times at an increasing pace.   _____

Day 2

Quick Dash

Teacher shows picture side of 4–8 recently taught PCCs, and then the plain letter side.   _____
- Children respond to the picture with the character name or story logic and to the   _____
  plain letter with the sound.
- Teacher goes through 10–15 plain letter sides 2–3 times, faster each time.   _____
- Children respond with sounds. (Option: Action Tricks)   _____

Letterland Songs

- Shared reading and singing. (Not in all lessons.)   _____

Date: _____   Unit # _____   Teacher: _____   Observer _____ Day ____

Letterland Fidelity Check – Whole Group

<u>Day 2</u>

<u>Live Spelling</u>

Teacher says a word, a sentence, and repeats the word.   _____
Children repeat the word and segment by finger tapping. Then they decide   _____
 the letters needed. _
Children with PCCs form the word.   _____
Other children finger tap the word to check it.   _____

<u>Day 3</u>

<u>Guess Who</u>

Teacher keeps PCCs out of sight and says the sounds.   _____
Children repeat sounds and write, air-trace and/or name the letters or characters.   _____

<u>Word Sort</u>

Children take turns placing Word Cards under the related PCCs.   _____
After a child sorts a word, he or she points to all the words in the column   _____
for the class to read.
Teacher and children may play Word Sort Game earning points as they sort.   _____
Teacher may guide children in rereading the words a few times to increase   _____
fluency with Tractors, Trains, Planes and Helicopters activity.

<u>Story</u>

Teacher introduces the story.   _____
Teacher reads the story to the class.   _____
Teacher and children discuss the story.   _____

<u>Day 4</u>

<u>Quick Dash</u>

Teacher shows picture side of 4–8 recently taught PCCs, and then the plain letter side.   _____
Children respond to the picture with the character name or story logic and to the   _____
 plain letter with the sound.
Teacher goes through 10–15 plain letter sides 2–3 times, faster each time.   _____
Children respond with sounds. (Option: Action Tricks   _____

Date: _____   Unit # _____   Teacher: _____   Observer _____ Day ____

Letterland Fidelity Check – Whole Group

Day 4

Red Robots Reading Race

Teacher guides children in reading the Student List for the Unit.   _____
Teacher and children reread the Student List at least two more times at an increasing rate. _____

Game of the Week (Children play of five word reading games in pairs or threes.)

Children read word cards made for the gam or words on the game board as they play.   _____

Date: _____ Unit # _____ Teacher: _____ Observer _____ Day ____

Letterland Fidelity Check – Small Group

Day 1

Teacher builds words for reading with Picture Code Cards (PCCs) or Letter Sound Cards (LSCs)

Children finger tap the sounds and blend to read the words.   _____
For some words, one child is the 'Blending Leader' finger tapping the word first,   _____
followed by others doing the same.

New Tricky Words

Teacher writes the word and reads it.   _____
Children help decide which letters are not making their usual sounds.   _____
Teacher marks these sounds with wavy lines
Children practice word with the '3-by-3 Strategy'.   _____
Children read several Tricky Words on cards.   _____

Read the Student List (Teacher provides list for each student.)

Teacher reads whole list or one section at a time.   _____
Children read the list or section.   _____

Day 2
Children build words.
Teacher says a word, a sentence, and repeats word.   _____
Children repeat word and finger tap the sounds.   _____
For some words, one child is the 'Segmenting Leader' finger tapping before   _____
the other children follow.
Children make the word with Letterland Word Builders (magnetic board or app) or   _____
other letter sets.
Children 'touch and say' the sound of each letter or digraph. Then they   _____
slide fingers beneath and read the word.

Review Tricky Words (Teacher uses 5 or so Tricky Word Cards)
Teacher shows word, says it, waits 3 seconds, and then points to the children.   _____
Children say the word.   _____
If any children miss a word, teacher points out some feature of the word to   _____
help them remember it. On the second round with Word Cards; teacher does not
say word but waits 3 seconds, and then points for children to say it.
Continues until children read all words correctly for two consecutive rounds.   _____
If introducing Tricky Words not covered on Day 1, use the 'New Tricky Words'
items from Day 1 above.

Date: _____   Unit # _____   Teacher: _____   Observer _____ Day ___

Letterland Fidelity Check – Small Group

<u>Day 2</u>

Read Review Sentences (Steps below are repeated with 4–10 sentences.)

Children read a sentence to themselves.   _____
Teacher or child asks a question about the sentence.   _____
Everyone reads the sentence in unison.   _____
Individuals may take turns rereading orally to practice expression.   _____

<u>Day 3</u>

Dictate new Tricky Words from current Unit (2–5 words)

Teacher and children review Tricky Word Cards.   _____
Teacher calls out words for children to write   _____
Any missed words are practiced by the group and called out again.   _____

Dictate one or two review sentences.

Teacher says the sentence with natural rhythm and expression.   _____
Children repeat the sentence twice in the same way.   _____
Children write the sentence. Teacher guides needed corrections.   _____
Each child reads their own sentence aloud when finished.   _____

Children Read the Unit Story (Each child has a copy or shares one.)

Children share what they recall from the story.   _____
Teacher leads choral-reading of the story.   _____
Children reread the story with a partner.   _____
Teacher and children discuss story.   _____

<u>Day 4</u>

Share Homework Sentences

Each child selects their own most interesting sentence to read aloud.   _____
Teacher and children discuss each child's sentence and what makes it interesting. _____

Reread Unit Story

All the children read the story in one or more of the following ways: _____
 Echo-reading, choral-reading, mumble-reading, or partner-reading.

Date: _____ Unit # _____ Teacher: _____ Observer _____ Day _____

Letterland Fidelity Check – Small Group

Day 4

Spelling sort (Each child has a copy of the Written Word Sort for the Unit, or makes their own with Picture Coded letters for each column.)

Teacher says a word.   _____
Children repeat the word and finger tap it.   _____
Children choose the matching column and write the word.   _____
Teacher encourages self-correction with questions.   _____
Children read completed paper to a partner.   _____

Reference: Letterland International, Fidelity Checklists