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Fourth Grade Teacher Perspectives of Instructional Practices to Support Students With Reading Deficits

juanita carter robbins
Walden University

Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Juanita Carter Robbins

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Review Committee
Dr. Patricia Anderson, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty
Dr. Nancy Williams, Committee Member, Education Faculty
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Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
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Abstract

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by

Juanita Carter Robbins

MA, Marygrove College, 1995

BS, Eastern Michigan University, 1991

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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May 2023

Abstract

The problem that was the focus of this study was that only 30% of fourth grade students in the United States read at or above grade-level proficiency. Lack of reading proficiency affects fourth-grade students' ability to master content presented in subjects across the curriculum and may limit their educational attainment. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore fourth-grade teachers' perspectives of instructional practices to support students with reading deficits, the challenges teachers encounter, and the resources teachers need to meet those challenges. The conceptual framework comprised Tomlinson's model of differentiated instruction. Three research questions explored the instructional practices, challenges, and resources that teachers described as affecting their work with fourth grade students who have reading deficits. Open-ended interviews were conducted with 8 fourth grade, general education teachers from one southwestern state in the United States. Data were analyzed using open and axial coding. Results indicated that some fourth grade students lacked mastery of basic literacy skills, such as the ability to decode unfamiliar words; curriculum was poorly aligned with the instructional needs of students with reading deficits; and teachers lacked training in reading remediation techniques. Recommendations based on these results include increasing teacher autonomy in implementing effective strategies to improve reading skills in struggling students and offering more resources to motivate struggling readers, such as low-level reading materials that match the interests of fourth grade students. The findings of this study may contribute to positive social change by being used to inform reading instruction, improve appropriateness of reading materials, and support teacher professionalism in ways that contribute to students' reading success.

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Dedication

To my beloved David, Maria, Edward, Megan, and Meleah,

I dedicated this dissertation to you with all my heart. You all have been my greatest source of strength and inspiration over the years, and your unwavering support have made it possible for me to accomplish this monumental accomplishment. I could not have done this without you guys. I hope that this dissertation will serve as an inspiration to you all as well. You can and will accomplish all of your dreams. I believe in you as you have believed in and supported me. Also, Meleah, thank you for waiting until grandma, Neena, was done working so that we could play together.

Thanks for your love and support,

Juanita C. Robbins

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With sincere thanks and appreciation,

Juanita C. Robbins

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The topic of this study was fourth-grade teacher perspectives of instructional practices to support students with reading deficits. A reading deficit is when a student's literacy struggle is not a static or stable trait but rather when the reader has difficulty because of their interactions with texts, activities, and across contexts (Learned, 2018). A National Assessment of Education Progress (2019a) report of the target state in the southwestern United States found that only 30% of fourth graders in the state performed at or above grade proficiency level in reading. Reading proficiency is defined as demonstrating a strong understanding of the written text, making inferences, drawing conclusions, making connections to relate to a students' own experiences, and exhibiting reading fluency by using grammar and vocabulary (Connor et al., 2018).

According to Sparapani et al. (2018), proficient readers are more immersed into print and text during reading; however, reading proficiency within a student can differ in their ability to understand content throughout elementary school years. In a dissertation, Carr (2018) associated the "fourth-grade-slump" to three primary considerations: students' prior reading performance, students' motivation to read, and a teachers' ability to provide students with explicit instruction to improve their reading performance and motivation (p. 17). The low percentage (30%) of students who read at or above grade-level proficiency in one U. S. Southwestern state suggests that Carr's consideration regarding a gap in teacher practice for improving reading proficiency in students with reading deficits needs more exploration (NAEP, 2019a). Davis et al. (2018) suggested that elementary teachers may lack proficient training in instruction for students with

reading deficits. According to Naumann et al. (2019), a consensus has not been established on which components of reading instructional practices are most helpful for teachers in explicit and generic instructional practices. Kent et al. (2019) found that multitiered, data-driven instruction might be able to improve the reading performance of struggling readers. The authors recommended additional research be conducted in the field regarding effective instructional strategies that could inform educator practice when teaching students with reading deficits. Additionally, Condie and Pomerantz (2020) proposed that elementary teachers understand and utilize explicit instructional methods and take advantage of resource opportunities associated with professional development for successful teaching of reading curricula. Said-Metwaly et al. (2021) revealed that fourth-grade slumps were identified as the most common grade-level drop and suggest a need for age-appropriate instructional strategies that promote student development.

In this chapter, I describe the background of this topic, the study problem and purpose. The research questions that guided this study are presented. The chapter also contains a discussion of the conceptual framework, the nature of the study, and assumptions and limitations that affected the transferability of study results.

Background

Reading is considered the "passport to achievement" in curricula (Auletto & Sableski, 2018, p. 236). Additionally, Zhang et al. (2020) found that reading proficiency influences what students can learn across all subjects taught at the fourth- and fifth-grade levels. Likewise, a fourth grader who fails to read proficiently may likely remain a low reader throughout their life and could experience lifelong difficulty related to

employment opportunities and socio-economic outcomes (Wijekumar et al., 2020). The performance and motivation of fourth-grade students who struggle with reading may continue to worsen, causing these students to struggle in all subjects throughout their remaining academic years (Auletto & Sableski, 2018). Accordingly, Kang and Shin (2019) stated that low reading progression is a concern because the fourth grade is a pivotal year where students are transitioning from "learning to read" to "reading to learn", and this transition is difficult for some students due to their struggles with reading complex text (p. 4). Consequently, Kang and Shin found that almost 6% of struggling readers in upper-elementary grades have had problems with early reading skills, such as decoding and reading fluency (p. 4). A student with basic reading skill deficits will likely find it difficult to comprehend texts and will be identified as a persistently poor reader (Kang & Shin, 2019).

The NAEP (2019a) found that fourth-grade students in the target southwestern state had a lower nonproficiency reading rate than the national average. This statewide nonproficiency reading rate finding suggests a gap in teacher practice and a need to explore fourth-grade teacher instructional practices with reading deficit students, the challenges teachers encounter, and the instructional resources teachers need to meet those challenges. Across states, the percentage of fourth-grade students in public schools who are proficient in reading ranges between 24% and 49% (NAEP, 2019a). In addition, Kent et al. (2019) found through analysis of multiple studies that 13% to 46% of U.S. public-school students with reading difficulties are not identified until after they completed the primary K–3 grades (p. 161). Teachers of fourth-grade students may be challenged to

support previously unidentified deficient readers as those students make the transition from learning-to-read to reading-to-learn. This study was needed because failure to resolve student reading deficits in the fourth grade may make it impossible for teachers in later grades to bring students to grade-level reading proficiency (see Wanzek et al., 2019).

Problem Statement

The problem that was the focus of this study was centered around the NAEP (2019a) findings that identified lower nonproficiency reading rates than the national average among fourth-grade students in the target southwestern state. Within the target state, only 30% of the fourth-grade students read at or above grade-level proficiency (NAEP, 2019a). This problem was demonstrated at similar levels among fourth-grade students across the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). For this study, the problem scope was limited to one southwestern state. Wigfield et al. (2016) suggested that students' reading proficiency may be influenced by a teachers' ability to provide students with instruction to increase their reading performance and motivation. Condie and Pomerantz (2020) found that universal protocols associated with explicit instructional practices, an application of the state standards, and teacher training to teach reading proficiency were needed in elementary schools to increase student reading skills. However, Davis et al. (2018) suggested that teachers do not receive adequate training in reading instruction and fail to implement research-based instructional practices that have been deemed effective. Kang and Shin (2019) specified that research is needed to explore diverse instructional strategies that teachers can use to improve a

student's reading proficiency. Therefore, a gap in practice existed regarding fourth-grade teacher instructional strategies that could improve the reading proficiency in students identified to have reading deficits.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore fourth-grade teacher perspectives of instructional practices to support students with reading deficits, the challenges teachers encounter, and the resources teachers need to meet those challenges. Use of the basic qualitative approach enabled me to understand multiple teacher perspectives regarding their challenges, instructional practices, and resources regarding fourth-grade students with reading deficits. According to Butina (2015), qualitative research is an appropriate approach when exploring perspectives within an educational context. The basic qualitative approach permitted me to explore the phenomenon of teacher perspectives regarding instructional practices to support fourth-grade students with reading deficits. Creswell and Poth (2016) indicated that qualitative research allows the researcher to study issues in their natural setting while attempting to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring them. Open-ended interviews were conducted to allow participants to share their stories and describe their experiences (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Research Questions

Three research questions (RQs) guided this study:

RQ1: What are teacher perspectives regarding the challenges in improving proficiency related to fourth-grade students with reading deficits?

RQ2: What are teacher perspectives of instructional practices they use to improve proficiency in fourth-grade students with reading deficits?

RQ3: What are teacher perspectives of resources available to them in improving proficiency related to fourth-grade students with reading deficits?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Tomlinson's (2001) model of differentiated instruction (DI) that provides guiding factors by which to tailor instruction to meet students' different learning needs. According to Tomlinson (2014), a teacher's task of teaching reading is complicated by the diversity of skills and experiences represented by students in the classroom so that following a single approach with all students is unlikely to be successful for every child; therefore, a teacher must differentiate instruction to provide specific help to an individual student or small group. Tomlinson (2000) asserted that teachers could differentiate teaching and learning environments, contexts, and processes according to a students' learning profile and meet students' needs to connect their learning to their interests and experiences. Tomlinson (2000, 2014) specified content, process, product, and learning environment as the four areas for teachers to modify curriculum to help guide their instructional practices. According to Tomlinson (2000), *content* signifies that the student can demonstrate acquired knowledge and understanding without modification; *process* refers to how a student may understand or make sense of the content being taught; *product* is the knowledge, understanding, or skills that the teachers want the student to learn; and *learning environment* consists of routines and procedures that encourage attitudes and interactions that may affect

students' learning. A teacher's continuous application of academic decision making to diversify lessons may result in effective instruction and improved learning outcomes; therefore, DI could benefit students with reading deficits (Bondie et al., 2019).

Bondie et al. (2019) recommended exploring teachers' perspectives and the effect DI may have on students with reading failures. Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) indicated additional supports and resources may be necessary for students who have reading deficit needs to optimize their development and knowledge. Using Tomlinson's (2001) model of DI as my study's conceptual framework provided a basis from which to explore teacher perspectives of instructional practices to support students with reading deficits, the challenges teachers encounter, and the resources they need to meet those challenges. I further explain the concepts and tenets of Tomlinson's model of DI in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

In this basic qualitative study, I interviewed fourth-grade teachers from one southwestern state where only 30% of students tested at or above grade-level proficiency in reading (see NAEP, 2019a). Creswell and Poth (2016) proposed that using the qualitative method allowed the researcher to collect participant perspectives to purposefully inform and provide an understanding of the research problem in the study. Creswell (2014) described how a basic qualitative design using interviews allows the researcher to pose central questions and several subquestions permitting the participants to explain their ideas. I considered ethnography as the study's research design but decided against it because an ethnographic inquiry is used to study a cultural group often over a long period of time and, therefore, the design was not helpful to achieving the

study's purpose (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, I did not use a case study design because this type of design requires the use of a specific group of participants for an in-depth analysis of a problem as opposed to a program, event, or process (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The phenomenon under study was fourth-grade teachers' perspectives of instructional practices to support students with reading deficits, the challenges teachers encounter, and the resources teachers need to meet those challenges. I investigated this phenomenon by interviewing 8 fourth-grade teachers who work in one southwestern state in the United States. I analyzed transcriptions of the interviews using thematic analysis as described by Manzano (2016). Participants' interview responses contained detailed and rich descriptions that were provided as evidence to support the various themes that emerge from the data. A full description of the methodology of the study is explained in Chapter 3.

Definitions

Automaticity: The ability to successfully perform reading with ease, accuracy, efficiency, and minimal cognitive effort (Sabatini et al., 2019).

Differentiated instruction (DI): A continuous academic decision-making concept for teachers to diversify lessons that will strengthen effective learning outcomes (Bondie et al., 2019).

Expository text: Written information to inform the reader, give details about a topic, and learn technical vocabulary not frequently encountered (Wu et al., 2020).

Fourth-grade slump: The period in which a fourth-grade student who was previously on academic reading level drops in performance and motivation to read (Suhr et al., 2010).

Reading deficit: A problem evident when a student has difficulty as a result of interactions with texts, activities, and across contexts (Learned, 2018).

Reading proficiency: The ability to demonstrate a strong command of written text and content knowledge to make inferences, draw conclusions, make connections related to a students' own experiences, and read fluently by using grammar and vocabulary (Connor & Phillips et al., 2018).

Assumptions

In this study, I assumed that the teachers interviewed were truthful and provided comprehensive details regarding their perspectives (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I also assumed that the teacher participants were representative of fourth-grade teachers and that their students were representative of fourth-grade students in the target state. Such assumptions are typical in an interview-based study in which data quality depends on the veracity and representativeness of informants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I selected participants with representativeness in mind and trusted the teachers' truthfulness and completeness.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study involved fourth-grade teacher perspectives of instructional practices to support students with reading deficits, the challenges teachers encounter, and the resources teachers need to meet those challenges. The study was delimited to include

eight general education, fourth-grade teachers who had at least 1 year of experience

teaching in a public-school setting in one southwestern state in the United States.

Participants in the study had to have experience teaching language arts, social studies,

and science for at least 1 year. I excluded teachers who taught nonacademic subjects,

such as physical education, art, or music; teachers who were employed in areas outside

the targeted southwestern state; teachers with less than 1 year of teaching experience; and

teachers who taught in nonpublic schools. Teachers of special populations, such as gifted

or special needs students, were also excluded. The scope and delimitations of this study

may have affected the transferability of study results to other states, grade levels, or

contexts.

Limitations

A limitation of the study was that it was conducted during and following the

COVID-19 pandemic. Teaching and logistical changes made in response to the pandemic

and the social-emotional impacts of coping with the pandemic may have affected

teachers' instructional practices and students' learning, as reported by Lessard and Puhl

(2021). In addition, because of pandemic-related precautions, I conducted six interviews

via Zoom video conferencing and one via self-report audio recording; only one interview

was conducted in person. This may have affected the quality of interview data because I

was not able to see participants' facial expression and body language in two of the

interviews. Creswell (2014) indicated that effective interviews are usually conducted by

speaking directly to the participants and seeing them behave and act within their natural

setting. Because video conferencing was the primary platform to interview the participants, the participants were able to conduct the interview from their natural setting.

Other challenges arose in collecting interview data. For instance, the Zoom-based interviews were affected by connectivity issues along with platform time limitations; some participants' computers had slower processer speeds, and other participants had a lack of Wi-Fi access. Although I ensured that my own equipment and internet capacity were optimal for the interviews, the challenges with participants' technology and connectivity became a limitation that I had to address. When the Zoom platform experienced technical difficulties, the participants and I logged off and then logged back in. When participants had technical difficulties, I remained on the platform until they were able to log back in. When a participant lacked Wi-Fi access, I allowed the participant to self-record their answers to written interview questions and email me the audio file. One participant requested an in-person interview, which was conducted in their home, sitting 6 feet apart to minimize risk of COVID-19 transmission. This participant also interrupted the interview for a short break.

These issues were compounded by the fact that I was unable to recruit my minimum intended number of 10 participants. I was able to enroll only eight participants despite repeated efforts to locate more volunteers. For example, two teachers who expressed interest via email soon withdrew their willingness to participate. Because there were so few volunteers, I had to accommodate changes to the interview process to meet the needs of two participants who did not interview via Zoom. Despite many recruiting

issues, data saturation was achieved during the data collection phase in that no new information emerged in the latter participant interviews.

A further limitation was researcher bias. Creswell (2014) stated the researcher is an instrument for data collection and may filter information through their own preconceived ideas. Likewise, Manzano (2016) advocated that managing those ideas requires reflexivity. Therefore, I employed reflexivity by keeping a journal to record my reflections throughout the data collection and analysis phases to understand how any of my preconceived ideas could have the possibility of shaping my overall interpretation of the research findings.

Significance

This study may be significant because it explored fourth-grade teachers' perspectives of and experiences with teaching students with reading deficits. This study's findings provide key knowledge regarding teacher perspectives, the challenges they face, and the resources they need in teaching fourth-grade students with reading deficits. These findings could be used to improve future instructional practices and the reading proficiency in students with reading deficits. This study could also be used to inform curricular and administrative decisions that could result in significant reading growth in students with reading deficits. The findings of this study may result in positive social change if they are used to develop increased teacher effectiveness that supports reading proficiency and motivation among struggling fourth-grade students.

Summary

In this chapter, I described the problem that was the focus of this study, which was, according to NAEP (2019a), fourth-grade students in the target southwestern state had a lower nonproficiency reading rate than the national average. Specifically, only 30% of fourth-grade students in the state demonstrated at or above reading proficiency (NAEP, 2019a). Reading difficulties that develop during the primary grades may not be fully apparent until fourth grade where reading material becomes more complex (Kent et al., 2019). Kang and Shin (2019) stated that low reading progression is a concern because fourth grade is a pivotal year where students are transitioning from "learning to read" to "reading to learn", and this transition is difficult when students are unable to read complex text (p. 4). Tomlinson (2000) suggested that teachers could cultivate learning and reading development through DI practices.

The purpose of this study was to explore fourth-grade teachers' perspectives of instructional practices to support students with reading deficits, the challenges teachers encounter, and the resources teachers need to meet those challenges. According to Kang and Shin (2019), research was needed on how instructional practices intended to improve student reading deficits are enacted, supported, and hindered. In Chapter 2, I will describe my strategy for locating literature relevant to the study problem and purpose, discuss the conceptual framework in greater detail, and review literature related to key variables and concepts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem that was the focus of this study was that only 34% of fourth-grade students in the United States read at or above proficiency (see NAEP, 2019a). Similarly, reports specified that only 30% of fourth graders in one southwestern state in the United States read at or above grade-level proficiency (NAEP, 2019a). While some students in upper elementary are able to read proficiently, 34% of fourth-grade students across the nation who have been identified as struggling readers with a low progression in the transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" (Kang & Shin, 2019, p. 4). In this chapter, I describe my strategy for searching the research literature on this problem, provide a more detailed discussion of the study's conceptual framework, and review current literature associated with the key concepts and variables of interest in this study.

Literature Search Strategy

To review the literature, I primarily focused on scholarly articles published between 2018 and 2022. However, this timeframe was expanded as necessary to include seminal works. The databases and search engines used to identify germane scholarship included ERIC, Google Scholar, Taylor and Francis online, and others available through the Walden University Library. Several terms were discovered in my reading, and I employed an iterative search process to identify and then search these terms. Keyword search terms used in the iterative search included *automaticity, critical thinking and inquiry, cognitive thinking and low reading, emergent reading, expository text, fourth-grade comprehension, fourth-grade slump, latent reading, reading deficiencies, reading, motivation, proficiency, reading deficit, reading comprehension, reading proficiency,*

reading to learn, struggling readers, and *upper elementary reading*. The databases

yielded articles for an in-depth review of the topic under study. Using *differentiated*

instruction as a search term in Google Scholar, I found additional articles that were added

to the discussion of the conceptual framework based on their relevance to the research

problem. To obtain saturation, additional searches included the terms: *critical teaching*,

elementary instructional approach, *elementary instructional strategy*, *explicit instruction,*

instructional practices, *reading development, teacher preparedness,* and *teacher's*

perspectives. Additionally, the websites of the NAEP, including its Nation's Report Card

site, provided information related to fourth-grade reading proficiency.

Conceptual Framework

For this basic qualitative study, I used Tomlinson's (2001) DI model as the

conceptual framework. As described in Chapter 1, Tomlinson (2014) indicated that to

support all students, teachers must differentiate instruction. Tomlinson and Imbeau

(2010) proposed that a classroom that incorporates DI practices includes student

experiences that are social and collaborative. Santangelo and Tomlinson (2012)

suggested that DI is associated with a teacher's ability to design instruction based on

learning needs that help students demonstrate their full potential. As a result, DI is

considered an intentional strategy to accommodate the different needs of learners in one

classroom setting, which can help students develop a sense of independent learning

ownership and keep them engaged (Stollman et al., 2021).

DI involves adapting teacher knowledge of instructional practice to align with

diverse student needs to develop learning outcomes and improve skills (Tomlinson,

2005). Therefore, the practical application of DI stimulates a surplus of practical interpretations related to instructional implementation based on research methods that are supported by theory (Tomlinson et al., 2003). Additionally, Tomlinson et al. (2003) noted that the use of DI has garnered mixed interpretations derived from theory and research methods that were not specifically about DI. However, Bondie et al. (2019) found that Tomlinson's model has been well referenced for over 15 years regarding how DI could be used to change teaching practices that support students' needs. The current study was guided by Tomlinson's (2014) DI framework to strategically meet diverse students' needs within a teaching and learning environment, including components of content, process, product, and affect.

According to Tomlinson (2014), teachers who use academic content based on their understanding of the curriculum improve the use of differentiation in their classroom. Tomlinson referred to content as the knowledge, concepts, and abilities teachers want students to learn. The teacher's charge is to create connections between each learner and the content. Examples of differentiating content may include partner reading, flexible grouping, or text on tape for struggling learners (Tomlinson, 2014). Likewise, Tomlinson specified that teachers in effective differentiated classrooms support student achievement but do not modify achievement grades to make it appear that a student has mastered content when they have not. According to MacDonald et al. (2020), interventions are needed to align content and support struggling readers with targeted instruction that may help students improve reading proficiency.

Process describes how pupils come to understand the curriculum content being taught (Tomlinson, 2003). In reading, process can be utilized in lessons or activities to determine if a student is able to apply or has difficulty demonstrating their understanding of a lesson. Tomlinson (2000) indicated that differentiated process relates to the type of instructional strategies used by a teacher to enhance a student's ability to comprehend the subject being taught. Ginja and Chen (2020) suggested that the instructional process can be differentiated by adjusting class activities and engaging learners in critical thinking and reasoning. Moreover, teachers may be able to motivate students to learn and to make sense of how the knowledge acquired can be applied outside of the classroom (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Therefore, teachers should be able to use curriculum with the intention to raise each student's achievement (Tomlinson, 2003).

Product is the third component of Tomlinson's DI model. Product refers to the variety of student outcomes supported by a curriculum that improves a student's acquisition of the desired knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary for proficiency (Tomlinson, 2000). The final product output is a student's ability to display what they have learned over time (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). In this regard, reading teachers can conclude each quarter with evidence of a student's proficiency in a skill (Tomlinson, 2003). Therefore, product extends beyond assessment of day-to-day processes and is geared toward understanding more long-term product outcomes like assessments and problem-based inquires (Tomlinson, 2003).

Finally, Tomlinson (2014) indicated that affect refers to students' emotions and moods regarding their own learning. Because emotions affect student learning, student

motivation, collaboration, and self-concept are supported or discouraged by how instruction makes students feel (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). This means that a student who is supported in approaching learning tasks with a positive attitude is more likely to experience academic success than a student who feels they lack teacher support for the emotional work of learning (Tomlinson, 2014). A teacher's understanding of affect may inform their practice related to student reading anxiety and their differentiation initiatives (MacDonald et al., 2021). Integrating the components of DI allows teachers to assess student learning differences to deliver curriculum and instruction that is focused on student variance (Tomlinson, 2001).

In addition to the four components that describe DI, Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) identified readiness, interest, and learning profile as three types of student variance that support the components of DI in addressing students' learning needs. Tomlinson (2003) indicated that readiness describes the suitability of DI components for individual students so that each works at a level of difficulty that is both challenging and achievable. The optimum point at which to start student learning is in their intermediate growth areas (Stollman et al., 2021). Tomlinson (2014) further explained that students should work on narrowly focused tasks because readiness to learn is a transitional phase that should fluctuate continuously; a narrow focus permits a teacher to adjust tasks as needed to meet evolving readiness.

The evolution of student readiness to learn may be affected by their interest and motivation. According to Tomlinson (2001), "interest-based" instruction is where teachers help students to bridge the symbiosis between school and their own interest for

all learning (p. 53). Tomlinson (2014) indicated the importance of having an instructional emphasis on student interest, finding that student interest is an essential characteristic of student motivation. Teachers are encouraged to develop instructional practices that help them get to know students' strengths and weaknesses according to their motivations. Likewise, student interests can be linked to culture, gender, background experiences, and prior knowledge to increase motivation (Tomlinson, 2014). However, differentiating interest for a specified curriculum may not suit all student learning demands (Stone, 2018). Tomlinson (2001) indicated that interest is a student's affinity or desire to learn a skill that varies based on their experiences. Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) acknowledged that students bring cultural and social learning experiences to their new educational setting. As such, each student presents a specific profile of qualities and experiences that can affect their learning. In addition, an effective differentiated classroom would seek to gain mastery of each profile and interest through student variance.

Stone (2018) advocated that Tomlinson's concepts associated with DI be applied to help achieve alignment with mandated, state standards-based education. Conversely, Bondie et al. (2019) cautioned that little to no research associated with DI examined how teachers vary instructional material to accommodate different skills. However, Subban (2006) stated that various methods may be difficult to assess empirically. Kalbfleisch and Tomlinson (1998) advocated that DI is a needed instructional practice that advances student understanding on what is being taught that can strengthen their future academic achievements. Therefore, using Tomlinson's DI model as the conceptual framework benefitted the current study due to the construct components. Consequently, the DI

constructs guided the research design and methodology with the development of the data collection instruments and the deductive thematic analysis. According to Tomlinson (2014), the extent to which teachers use DI may determine their ability to support fourth-grade students with reading deficits. The current study was informed by Tomlinson's work in that DI highlights the significance of factors, such as content, process, product, and the teaching and learning environment. I explicitly crafted the interview questions to explore teachers' perspectives regarding these elements, including their instructional practices to facilitate reading improvement and resources available to achieve the desired outcomes.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables

In this literature review, I cover concepts including the fourth-grade reading deficiency problem, reading deficit factors, explanations for fourth-grade reading deficits, reading teachers' instructional challenges, reading deficits in research, and DI. Descriptions of reading proficiency at the fourth-grade level and factors in K–3 education that may contribute to fourth-grade reading deficiency are also provided. A summary of the important topics from the literature review is presented at the end of the chapter.

Fourth-Grade Reading Deficiency Problem

The NAEP (2019a) reported that the number of students with reading deficits has increased across all demographics. Accordingly, for the year of 2019 the number of students who demonstrated reading deficits was 1 point higher than the 2017 Nation's Report Card and NAEP disaggregated data by race that revealed that 65% of U.S. fourth graders are deficient in reading. Specifically, the results indicated that 81% of African

American, 75% of Native American, 78% of Hispanic, 54% of White, and 44% of Asian

and Pacific Islander students failed to reach reading proficiency requirements.

Furthermore, in 2019, the proportion of fourth-grade students reading below basic grade-

level proficiency were 23% White, 52% Black, 45% Hispanic, 19% Asian and Pacific

Islanders, and 50% American Indian (NAEP, 2019a).

Educators use NAEP data to gauge if reading improvement is being achieved

according to grade-level curriculum benchmarks and individual student scores (Miciak et

al., 2018). According to Miciak et al. (2018), the cause of reading deficits associated with

upper elementary school students still needs to be identified. To remedy these deficits,

consistent monitoring of instructional practices and assessment of student performance

are necessary protocols to understand learners' level of proficiency (Baker et al., 2019).

However, identifying reading deficits for remedial instruction at the elementary grade

levels has not been associated with increased reading outcomes as the students

matriculate (Vaughn et al., 2019).

Although benchmark results are important at all grade levels, Hayden et al. (2019)

stated that it is especially important to identify a reading deficiency in a student prior to

the third grade. Hayden et al. suggested that improving reading deficits before the third

grade is pivotal in helping students avoid what is referred to as the fourth-grade reading

slump, which could have long-term ramifications. In fact, Hayden et al. (2019) indicated

that reading deficits are compounded over time and prevention is needed prior to the

fourth grade. According to Allington and McGill-Franzen (2021), reading deficit factors

that can impair reading development in students include skill-based factors, such as word

knowledge, decoding, automaticity, fluency, and comprehension, and various

motivational and social factors, such as student reading engagement, parental

engagement, opportunity for reading and access to reading materials, and various

socioeconomic factors.

Skill-Based Factors in Reading Deficiency

Deficits in reading that appear in fourth-grade students may be attributed to

specific latent proficiency skills (Spencer et al., 2019). At the fourth-grade level, students

are expected to have a command of reading proficiency skills that promote their

understanding of contextual information; however, skills in word knowledge, decoding,

automaticity, fluency, and comprehension are commonly associated with reading deficits

(Kang & Shin, 2019). These skills are taught in the years leading up to fourth grade so

that fourth-grade teachers may assume students have the reading skills necessary to

process literary and informational texts although many students do not (Kim, Quinn, et

al., 2021). Therefore, to remedy deficits in basic reading skills, teachers may need to

differentiate their teaching strategies to overcome students' reading deficiencies (Castles

et al., 2018).

Word Knowledge

According to Connor et al. (2019), word knowledge and word use are crucial

components of students' reading proficiency and ability to effectively use words in

reading. In fourth grade, a low level of vocabulary knowledge limits students' efforts to

improve their reading ability. Tighe and Fernandes (2019) suggested that repeated

exposure to target words in relevant contexts and texts is essential in vocabulary

development and that explicit instruction in word knowledge is often included in

curriculum followed by upper elementary school teachers. Kim, Quinn, et al. (2021)

noted that a student's inability to read a large number of words in first grade can prevent

them from reading higher level text in fourth grade and may limit their ability to acquire

new words appropriate to fourth-grade texts. Kim, Quinn, et al. further suggested that

lack of word knowledge may prevent fourth-grade students from comprehending

expository material, particularly when they do not have a command of domain-specific

terminology.

Lack of vocabulary has been identified as a problem for children as young as

kindergarten (Logan et al., 2019). Techniques for increasing students' vocabulary

knowledge include shared reading of literary texts (Logan et al., 2019), encouragement of

student writing (Durrant & Brenchley, 2019), incidental conversation using rich language

(Rahn et al., 2022), and direct vocabulary instruction (Dickinson et al., 2019). In addition,

Castles et al. (2018) found that students who are taught structured phonological strategies

could improve their word knowledge and reading proficiency.

Decoding

According to Lonigan et al. (2018), decoding is the ability to instantly generate a

visual image from written information to pronounce words. Lonigan et al. further stated

that mastery of decoding is evident when students display strengthened word knowledge

processes that improve reading efficacy. Spencer et al. (2019) stated that students

frequently display developmental delays in kindergarten due to the lack of acquiring the

appropriate phonemic skills for decoding mastery; hence, identifying decoding skill

weaknesses in early grades may inform teachers of a student's need for additional

specialized instruction. Decoding deficiencies due to nonmastery of basics phonemes

(i.e., sounds) and graphemes (i.e., letters that represent those sounds) impact a student's

ability to use the U.S. alphabetic system for reading proficiency (Pezzino et al., 2021). A

struggling reader may overgeneralize vowel sounds and fail to decode words correctly,

compromising their ability to decipher the word as given (Paige et al., 2018). Decoding

words from the written form to their sound and connecting to their meaning facilitates the

reading fluency process. Through decoding skills, readers develop new and unfamiliar

words by connecting word sounds to their meaning from the context of printed text

(Pezzino et al., 2021). According to Reed et al. (2019), instruction that focuses on the

development of decoding skills prior to fourth grade is important to prevent future

reading deficits.

Automaticity

Paige et al. (2018) reported that over 60% of fourth-grade students have reading

deficits and struggle with automaticity. Automaticity is the ability to scan words

accurately, efficiently, and with minimal effort (Sabitini et al., 2019). Readers with

automaticity can decode print automatically and without conscious effort, which is

critical for reading proficiency (Reed et al., 2019). In addition, employing automaticity to

pronounce words aids in developing word meaning (Pezzino et al., 2021). Relatedly,

learners can use their knowledge and automaticity in reading more challenging contexts

(Reed et al., 2019). The learner who reads with automaticity can apply context cues to

access unfamiliar words (Roembke et al., 2019). In this manner, the reader does not have

to think consciously about decoding, and their minds are free to comprehend text (Sabatini et al., 2019).

Students who have not demonstrated contextual understanding of words have a weakness with using automaticity (Roembke et al., 2019). Megherbi et al. (2018) supported the idea that automaticity emerges in synchrony with word decoding. Letter-sound associations were suggested as necessary skills to relate the pronunciation of whole words to the alphabetic symbols used in those words. Without this connection, word reading would proceed relatively slowly and be prone to errors (Megherbi et al., 2018). Paige et al. (2018) proposed that instruction aimed toward building automaticity skills would assist students in mastering fourth-grade expository and informational text. Reading text that requires advanced automaticity skills can be challenging for readers beyond the fourth-grade since students are expected to demonstrate more reading independence without direct teaching support (Paige et al., 2018). Ralph et al. (2020) proposed that pre-fourth-grade students who have shown evidence of reading deficits would benefit from remediation that concentrates on the specific development of automaticity.

Fluency

Reed et al. (2019) defined reading fluency as the ability to read and comprehend what is read with reasonable accuracy, rate, and speed. Reading fluency can be measured by assessing a student's consistency in reading and comprehension of the text. A reading fluency deficiency is described as an inconsistency in reading and comprehension (Paige et al., 2018). A fluent reader can concentrate on obtaining meaning from written material

instead of concentrating on recognizing words (Reed et al., 2019). A student is considered fluent in reading only when they comprehend the text with accuracy, rate, and speed. The influence of fluency on reading and comprehension varies depending on the students' grade-level (Roembke et al., 2019).

At the fourth-grade level, oral reading fluency becomes the preferred predictor of silent reading proficiency (Sabitini et al., 2019). Oral reading assessments may be used for screening, benchmarking, and progress monitoring to address students reading below grade level expectations (Sabitini et al., 2019). Oral and silent reading fluency skills are vital because they are strong predictors of reading efficiency and comprehension aptitude for all other subjects (Reed et al., 2019). The ability to demonstrate oral fluency in readings is called prosody. Oral reading fluency is evaluated as expressive or having prosody when the rhythm, tone, and emphasis matched the content and meaning of the text (Sabitini et al., 2019). Prosody can be difficult to measure, therefore assessments for reading fluency may include how fast and accurate students can read printed texts as well (Paige et al., 2018).

According to Paige et al. (2018), reading deficits are caused by a lack of oral reading fluency, making it difficult for students to concentrate on comprehension and understanding. Because fluency is necessary for developing reading proficiency, improving fluency would help students achieve reading mastery (Reed et al., 2019). When overall fluency is underdeveloped pre-fourth grade, engaging the reading process may become time-consuming or memory-intensive beyond the fourth-grade level. In addition, a fluency deficit can undermine a student's ability to read and understand

advanced texts as they progress through their education (Roembke et al., 2019). Capin et al. (2021) recognized a difference between fourth graders with low reading comprehension and high oral reading performance. The scholars found that reading assessments at the fourth-grade level had shown low-proficiency comprehension outcomes despite their oral reading abilities (Capin et al., 2021). Therefore, a struggling readers low oral reading fluency may have an impact on their content comprehension competences (Roembke et al., 2019).

Comprehension

Comprehension is defined as the ability to construct meaning from text (Cirino et al., 2019). Reading text involves two processes that are interconnected for comprehension. The first process connects the visual input of spelling patterns into the phonological system with word identification by mapping them into alphabetic patterns. In the second connection, phonological, phrasing, and grammatical factors are combined to obtain word recognition (Sabatini et al., 2019). Comprehension is established when a student can display accurate word knowledge as well as speed, intonation, and commitment to the topic (Kim, Burkhauser, et al., 2021). Cirino et al. (2019) determined that these executive functions play an important role in comprehension and development of readers' ability to learn new information from text.

The process of reading becomes the core method for learning new information in later grades (Cirino et al., 2019). During these years of learning, students must demonstrate knowledge of inference-making, vocabulary, and prior knowledge that will contribute to their reading comprehension (Cirino et al., 2019). Additionally, students

must gain reading comprehension in core subject areas while focusing on their reasoning and metacognition knowledge (Sabatini et al., 2019). Pezzino et al. (2021) asserted that gaining higher cognition skills is difficult for students with poor word skill recognition due to their compromised comprehension. However, Pezzino et al. maintained that it is important to examine the underlying skills required to gain comprehension.

Motivation, Personal, and Social Factors Related to Reading Deficiency

In addition to skill-based factors that affect reading proficiency, each student is presented with factors that affect their motivation for reading, their expectation for reading success, and how reading has been modeled at home. These motivation, expectation, and social factors may influence student engagement, parental engagement, leisure reading, access to books, and socioeconomic factors related to reading deficits (Wigfield et al., 2016). Many of these factors may influence teacher instructional practices and challenges associated with reading proficiency development and deficits.

Student Engagement and Reading Deficits

According to Hayden et al. (2019), many fourth graders do not read as much as they need to in school to meet grade-level competency requirements. Student engagement can therefore lead to a more extensive volume of text being read at home as compared to what students may read in school (Torppa et al., 2020). The NAEP (2020), in its most-recent annual reading trend survey, showed that 42% of 9-year-old students (third to fourth grade) indicated they read every day for pleasure in their leisure time. The report revealed a trend that indicated 53% of students read for pleasure. In the early grades, reading instruction focuses heavily on daily reading skills to facilitate independent leisure

reading engagement (Torppa et al., 2020). Supper et al. (2020) suggested that reading

engagement progresses into reading proficiency growth. Therefore, increasing the

intrinsic motivation of students to read leisure is of interest to educators. Merga and Roni

(2018a) found that 54.5% of students under the age of nine were not reading outside of

school hours. Parental motivation for a student to read anything that captures their

interest may result in the student improving reading proficiency through authentic textual

experiences (Merga & Roni, 2018b).

     As a part of NAEP long-term reading trend survey for monitoring reading

assessment, students were asked how often they read for leisure independently, with

options to indicate almost daily, weekly, or twice a week, monthly or twice a month, a

few times a year, or almost never or almost never (NAEP, 2020). This was compared to

students' reading assessment results that indicated who scored below, at, or above

reading proficiency. Thirty-nine percent of students with below-proficiency scores

reported daily reading independently for leisure, while 50% of students who scored at or

above reading proficiency reported reading independently each day (NAEP, 2020).

Reading weekly or twice a week was reported by 19% of students with below-proficiency

levels and 27% of students with reading levels at or above proficiency. Eight percent of

students from both score levels reported reading independently only monthly or twice a

month. Fewer than 10% of low-proficiency students and only 6% of high-proficiency

students reported engaging in independent, leisure-time reading only a couple of times a

year. Differences in reading frequency by score level were statistically significant in all

but the category "once or twice a month." Overall, leisure reading on a daily basis was

reported by no more than half of fourth-grade students, and four out of five students in fourth-grade reported reading independently at all (NAEP, 2020).

One factor that may hinder student development of leisure reading is related to an insufficient selection of appealing books. Gagen-Spriggs (2020) indicated that 41% of children aged 6 to 17 struggle to find books that appeal to their interests, and this difficulty escalates as the child grows older Accordingly, Gagen-Spriggs suggested that students are reluctant to leisure read due to required in-school reading for academic advancement. Moreover, students are less engaged in leisure reading because they do not find it enjoyable.

Parental Engagement and Reading Deficits

Reading proficiency development is closely related to how a language is spoken at home (Shen & Del Tufo, 2022). Shared conversations between parents and children expose children to vocabulary and language, allowing them to acquire a better conceptual understanding of words and their context (Shen & Del Tufo, 2022). Van der Pluijm et al. (2019) proposed that learning vocabulary phrases and sentence patterns through shared parent-child conversations positively affects a child's reading proficiency. In addition, shared parent-child conversation during reading aloud together can help children to think critically as well as express their thoughts on the topic discussed (Xu & Warschauer, 2020).

Shared parent-child reading can motivate students to read and parental reading engagement is beneficial to children's reading proficiency development (Van der Pluijm et al., 2019). Shared reading as a daily practice is encouraged as a way for parents to

engage in their child's development for reading proficiency (Shen & Tufo, 2022). This parental engagement has a positive influence on a child's motivation to read (Levy et al., 2018). Xu and Warschauer (2020) found that shared parent-child reading is essential to creating a learning environment that supports a child's motivation to read. The development of reading skills among students varies based on a child's exposure to printed text from parental engagement at home (Shen & Del Tufo, 2022). Reardon et al. (2019). indicated that the shared parent-child reading for pleasure connection has the most influence on a child's reading attitude and viewpoint. A child's reading desire may be influenced by parental attitudes and reading experiences in the past (Niklas et al., 2020).

According to the U.S. Department of Education, findings from their Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies revealed that one in five adults ages 16 to 74 lack reading proficiency (Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies , 2022). More specifically, about 54% of United States adult family members have reading proficiency below the middle school level (Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, 2022). This is of particular concern for children's reading proficiency development because a pattern of reading disengagement in parents may influence a developing children's reading mindset even more than a parental pattern of positive reading attitudes (Ramirez et al., 2019). Parents who experienced reading deficits as children were identified as a strong negative predictor of how their child would succeed in reading proficiency growth (Ozernov-Palchik et al.,

2018). Peterson et al. (2018) suggested that a parent's own pursuit or avoidance of leisure reading can extend to their child.

Leisure Reading and Reading Deficits

Torppa et al. (2020) found that leisure reading has an important influence on reading proficiency skill development and reading frequency. Leisure reading begins with students being encouraged to read at home which fosters an intrinsic motivation to read (Torppa et al., 2020). The motivation for reading pleasure, regardless of reading deficit competencies, enhances the propensity for students to independently leisure read on their own time (Troyer et al., 2018). Furthermore, Troyer et al. (2018) asserted that a students' intrinsic motivation to read tends to decrease while in school, making a student less inclined to read for pleasure outside of school. The implication of a student not being motivated or not having opportunities to leisure read while in school has been identified as impacting a student's proficiency in reading (McClung et al., 2019).

Students' intrinsic motivation for leisure reading can be enhanced when they have opportunities to autonomously select what they want to read (McClung et al., 2019). A student's ability to select a book of their own choosing helps motivate them to want to read (Fisher & Frey, 2018). When students are allowed the freedom to discover texts independently, they can choose books that match their interests, experiences, and preferences (McClung et al., 2019). Increased reading volume was observed among students when they were given more choice in what they read (Fisher & Frey, 2018). Further, the choice of books by students does not have to be confined to a

particular genre, but should be determined by their reading level, so the appropriate range of book options can be accessed.

Access to Books and Reading Deficits

Leisure reading is naturally dependent on access to books to read, and, conversely, the quantity of books that children have access to is linked to their interest in reading (Troyer et al., 2018). There is evidence that children who have books at home have a more successful education (Cho et al., 2021). Children who live in households with fewer access to books may not be as prepared for school as those who live in households with more literary access (Cho et al., 2021).

Student access to printed text has drastically changed within the onset of digital literacies. Torppa et al. (2020) reported that access to books has maintained its status with the onset of digital technologies. However, research does not support using online skills as the primary alternative for determining student comprehension or reading proficiency development. The evolution of digital literacies has made reading more accessible as a result of electronic text. Digital text reading, e-mail, social media, gaming, and chat conversations are examples of forms of reading that a student can engage in (Torppa et al., 2020). Students may also connect to computers, laptops, smartphones, and tablets to engage in reading (Latini et al., 2019). According to Latini et al. (2019), printed material is accessed regularly in many homes, libraries, and workplaces. Using technology as a single source for reading has limitations that create a disadvantage for students who may not have access to this resource (McClung et al., 2019). McClung et al. (2019) further

argued that economic and digital disadvantages limit access to the same variety of texts as affluent students.

Caglar-Ryeng (2020) specified that a student's reading frequency is influenced by their access to books and the number of books in their household. Accordingly, access to books from public and school libraries expands a student's ability to have a broader range of books to read at home (Merga, 2019). Miller and Sharp (2018) proposed that providing routine access to books significantly improves a child's reading proficiency development. The quantity of books that children have access to read has been linked to their interest in reading (Troyer et al., 2018). Children who live in households with fewer access to books may not be as prepared for school as those who live in households with more literary access (Cho et al., 2021). Fagan (2022) reported that reading proficiency development was impeded in students that had the least access to a variety of books in the home. Increasing the number of books in a students' home has the potential to significantly improve their reading proficiency development (Fagan, 2022). Myrtil et al. (2019) further noted that students who regularly access libraries exhibit greater vocabulary and reading proficiency development than children who do not. Yurdakal (2019) found that students who spent their leisure time visiting the public library two or three times a week demonstrated a significant improvement in reading proficiency. In contrast, a struggling reader was identified as having less access to a variety of books and a lower commitment to reading outside of school (Merga, 2019). Lupo et al. (2018) argued that students might benefit from librarians who suggest a variety of different books that introduce them to several genres and topics which helps to improve the development of reading proficiency.

According to Myrtil et al., restrictions on the number of books a student could check-out made some of the students uninterested in going to visit the public library. Similarly, public libraries can be discouraging to students due to program restrictions such as fees for lost library cards, late book returns, quantity check-out limits, and/or damaged books (Miller & Sharp, 2018).

Schools can be a reliable source for students to access books, both in collections in each classroom and in a designated room serving the entire school (Miller & Sharp, 2018). School libraries in a designated room may provide students with a greater range of books to access, however, classroom libraries make it easier for students to access books (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2021). Classroom libraries can provide a robust amount of reading materials specific to the interests and abilities of students in the class (Fisher & Frey, 2018). Reading lexical relevant texts enables students to have an increased interest in what they read (Fisher & Frey, 2018). Miller and Sharp (2018) indicated that classroom libraries help students engage in books without some of the impeding restrictions of public libraries. In addition to providing literature within the classroom for students to access, teachers are encouraged to sustain student interest in books by helping students feel autonomous in book selection (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2021).

Teachers may encourage parents to purchase lexical reading level material for students during school book fairs or suggest reading list to include in home libraries (Fisher & Frey, 2018). However, a family's socioeconomic status may pose a limitation on the ability for a family to accommodate this classroom-to-home access to books (Miller & Sharp, 2018). Torppa et al. (2020) pointed out that access to digital reading

materials has made opportunities for reading more accessible. Digital text reading, email, social media, gaming, and chat conversations are examples of forms of reading that a student can engage in (Torppa et al., 2020). In regions and households where internet access is available, students may engage in reading using computers, laptops, smartphones, and tablets (Latini et al., 2019). However, research does not support using online digital materials as an instructional alternative to providing access to print materials (Torppa et al., 2020), in part because using technology as a single source for reading proficiency development creates a disadvantage for students who may not have access to this resource (McClung et al., 2019). McClung et al. (2019) further argued that due to socioeconomic factors, access to a variety of reading materials is more limited for less-wealthy students than for affluent students.

Socioeconomic Factors and Reading Deficits

Socioeconomic status is linked to low reading proficiency (Shen & Del Tufo, 2022). Hung et al. (2020) contended that students of low-income households have weaker reading proficiency skills than their middle- and high-income counterparts. The indicators related to low-income socioeconomic status and reading proficiency development include factors such as school readiness and parental educational attainment (Ralph et al., 2020).

Duncan et al. (2021) investigated whether student school readiness was a predictor of later elementary reading proficiency. Shen and Del Tufo (2022) found that no common criterion of school readiness has been established to compare student school readiness among populations. However, children of low-income households commonly

score lower on school readiness assessments than their higher-income peers (Ozernov-Palchik et al., 2018). Likewise, these students are approximately 2.5 times more likely to demonstrate below-level reading ability than their counterparts, even prior to entering school. Gullo and Ammar (2021) asserted the reading proficiency gap between impoverished and more affluent students has widened in recent years.

Parental educational attainment is related to their socioeconomic status and has been used to measure the home reading environment (Ozernov-Palchik et al., 2018). Chen et al. (2018) defined socioeconomic status by dimensions of educational attainment, income level, and career type. Parental educational attainment and socioeconomic status are the primary predictor of students reading proficiency, according to Hung et al. (2019). More specifically, Nikolas et al. (2020) noted that a child's maternal socioeconomic status and educational attainment have a greater impact on a child's reading proficiency than their father's. These factors are not amenable to intervention by classroom teachers, yet teachers must apply instructional strategies to support these children's reading proficiency.

Instructional Strategies to Resolve Student Reading Deficits

In a general education classroom, teachers look for effective instructional strategies for a wide range of learners (Swanson et al., 2021). Reed et al. (2019) targeted instruction strategies that improve reading comprehension as key elements in assisting students with low reading ability. However, Swanson et al. (2021) reported that elementary teachers were often unsure of best practices to teach comprehension, particularly with informational texts. This suggests a lack of refined reading

comprehension techniques among instructional practices intended to advance reading proficiency development (Wijekumar et al., 2019). Naumann et al. (2019) revealed that elementary grade teachers could not name any two reading comprehension strategies when asked how they taught informational text constructs. Teachers may prioritize learning and writing objectives for their diverse learners. However, this prioritization may be challenging due to the lack of the training necessary to address students' learning needs (Davis et al., 2018). Connor and Cavendish (2018) found students with identified learning disabilities recommended that their teachers be willing to slow down instruction when needed, clearly explain concepts as well as assignments verbally and to use instructional strategies to teach material in different ways so that all students can benefit from instruction. Wijekumar et al. (2019) suggested that teachers may increase their understanding of instructional teaching strategies by participating in school-based professional development, being given autonomy, and freely using learned practices to develop elementary teacher instruction.

Tomlinson (2001) believed that DI practices support independent teaching practices to improve the reading deficit development of all learners in any teaching and learning environment. Swanson et al. (2021) specified that student comprehension abilities could vary from low to high, and DI is one approach that can meet the diverse needs of students. Correspondingly, differentiated content instruction has been identified as most effective when teachers use several instructional practice strategies to improve reading proficiency outcomes (Miciak et al., 2018). The most common practices used to improve reading deficits for comprehension were student reading aloud time, vocabulary

usage, and peer discussions (Wijekumar et al., 2019). Instructional practices in reading proficiency development that include teaching to make students feel like they are learning helps to promote their reading engagement (Kusdemir & Bulut, 2018).

Summary and Conclusions

The literature revealed that reading proficiency development is essential to increasing American students' reading proficiency comprehension at the fourth-grade level. Only 50% of the assessed students demonstrated basic skills-based reading proficiency knowledge (NAEP, 2019a), and only 34% of fourth-grade students in the nation can read proficiently (NAEP, 2019b). More specifically, according to NAEP (2019a), over 70% of fourth-grade students in one southwest state within the United States are reading below proficiency for their grade level.

A variety of factors may contribute to fourth-grade reading deficits, including elements of student and parental engagement, leisure reading, access to books, socioeconomic factors, and teacher instructional practices. In addition, lack of student skill in word knowledge, decoding, automaticity, fluency, and comprehension are often associated with reading proficiency problems (Kang & Shin, 2019). Differentiation of instruction has been proposed as a way to best meet diverse students' needs (Tomlinson, 2005). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore fourth-grade teacher perspectives of instructional practices to support students with reading deficits, the challenges teachers encounter, and the resources they need to meet those challenges. In Chapter 3, information regarding the methodology of this study is provided in detail.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore fourth-grade teacher perspectives of instructional practices to support students with reading deficits, the challenges teachers encounter, and the resources teachers need to meet those challenges. In this chapter, I describe the study research design and rationale, my role as the researcher, and the methodology used. This chapter also addresses issues of trustworthiness and ethical protections for participants.

Research Design and Rationale

Three RQs guided this study:

RQ1: What are teacher perspectives regarding the challenges in improving proficiency related to fourth-grade students with reading deficits?

RQ2: What are teacher perspectives of instructional practices they use to improve proficiency in fourth-grade students with reading deficits?

RQ3: What are teacher perspectives of resources available to them in improving proficiency related to fourth-grade students with reading deficits?

The central phenomenon explored in this basic qualitative study was fourth-grade teacher perspectives of instructional practices to support students with reading deficits. A basic qualitative research design is used when the researcher has preexisting knowledge regarding the research topic and wants to examine the phenomena from a participants' perspective (Kahlke, 2014). My rationale for using a basic qualitative approach was to enable teachers to describe their experiences as educators and help me fulfill the study's purpose. The research results may contribute to positive social change with its

instructional practice findings that could lead to increased fourth-grade students reading proficiency.

Role of the Researcher

My role as a researcher was to serve as an observer throughout this study. According to Butina (2015), the observer role includes observing and recording the participants' responses. As an observer, I conducted virtual interviews, recorded and processed the interview transcripts, and performed the thematic analysis. My role as an observer was to not affect the interview inquiry process. There was no professional affiliations or power relationships between myself and the teacher participants. As stated in Chapter 1, open-ended interviews were conducted to gather data regarding fourth-grade teachers' perspectives associated with reading proficiency.

I took a sabbatical to focus on my dissertation research, but in the past, I worked as a middle school sixth-grade English language arts teacher before taking on the position of reading interventionist. As a reading interventionist, my instructional objective was to provide reading support to students who were reading below grade-level proficiency. In addition, as a reading interventionist, I hosted afterschool tutoring sessions to provide more reading intervention time for the students.

To mitigate bias created through my teaching experience and from my personal views regarding reading instruction, I engaged in a reflexive process as described by Pezalla et al. (2012), which included keeping a journal of my thoughts and opinions, thereby isolating them from the data. In addition, after completing the interview transcribing process, I asked participants to member check their transcripts for accuracy

before analyzing the data. Member checking is a process where the researcher sends transcribed interviews of their final conclusions for review by participants to ensure that the researcher's bias did not affect the recording and interpretation of the participants' responses (Lodico et al., 2010). Creswell and Poth (2016) argued that member-checking procedures can help ensure the validity of research findings and can assist in controlling researcher bias.

Methodology

Participant Selection

The population of the study included fourth-grade, public school, general education teachers in one southwestern state in the United States. To obtain a representative sample, I used purposeful sampling to recruit participants. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to identify a small group to interview, which may provide a deeper understanding of a central phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The inclusion criteria were fourth-grade, public school, general education, elementary teacher participants who had at least 1 year of experience teaching in a public-school setting in the southwestern state of the United States that was the focus of this study. Exclusion criteria included physical education, art, and music teachers and teachers who were employed outside the study state. Teachers with less than 1 year of experience as well as teachers in private schools did not meet the inclusion criteria and were excluded from this study as well. Additionally, teachers of special populations, such as gifted or special needs students, were excluded. I also excluded teachers of grades other than fourth grade and teachers whose work was outside the classroom, such as in a specialist,

interventionist, or other support role. In addition, I excluded teachers with whom I had a prior professional or personal relationship from the study.

In addition to the purposive sampling method, I also used the snowball sampling recruitment method by which I enrolled initial and subsequent participants through an electronic recruitment referral process. The initial group of contacts were enrolled from my professional network. Since these persons had a preexisting relationship with me, they were excluded from participation in the study. However, I asked this initial group to inform teachers they knew who matched the participant criteria about the study, using a flyer that had study information and an electronic recruitment sign-up QR code.

I started recruitment of participants by asking nine of my professional contacts to share the study flyer with teachers they knew and who matched the participant criteria of the study. This effort resulted in an initial group of 23 contacts who responded to this effort and provided me their phone numbers or email addresses. Three participants following the interview also suggested other participants to interview and provided me with their contact information. I then sent these prospective participants the study recruitment flyer. A total of 26 potential teacher participants were emailed a consent form, but only 12 individuals responded with "I consent." To get more participants, I requested my contacts assist me with recruiting more participants by sending out my sign-up recruitment flyer a second time. This request yielded only one more recruit who agreed to participate by emailing me the words, "I consent." However, five interviews never occurred because five consenting teachers did not schedule an interview despite my multiple efforts to contact them and set up a day and time. One recruited participant felt

the need to receive permission from their principal before speaking with me. One participant failed to meet their first interview, and they rescheduled but did not appear at the rescheduled time either. In the end, despite many efforts to secure at least 10 interviews, I only conducted eight interviews.

The intended sample size of 10 to 15 participants was based on the concept of saturation. Kim (2017) indicated that when research is qualitative, participants are homogeneous, and the phenomenon is narrow, the number of participants needed to achieve data saturation was identified as being between 10 to 15. However, Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested that qualitative inquiry requires only one to two participants, and Dworkin (2012) reported that a minimum of five participants are adequate for qualitative studies such as dissertations. After multiple recruitment attempts, it became clear that I would be unable to interview more than the eight persons who already volunteered.

Instrumentation

I conducted this study using an interview protocol I developed with a set of eight semistructured, open-ended questions designed to collect rich data that align with the research questions (see Appendix A). The interview questions were based on the differentiation of instruction to accommodate diverse learning needs as described in the study's conceptual framework. Interview Questions 1, 2, and 5 and their follow-up questions were associated with RQ1 regarding the challenges teachers have in improving proficiency of fourth-grade low readers. Interview Questions 3 and 6 and their follow-up questions were associated with RQ2 on practices of teachers to improve reading

proficiency. Interview Questions 4 and 7 and their follow-up questions were associated with RQ3 regarding the resources teachers describe are available to them in improving reading proficiency in low readers. In Interview Question 8, I asked what more a participant wanted to add to their remarks. The interview questions and their associated RQs are illustrated in Table 1.

To further develop a trustworthy protocol instrument, I conferred with a doctoral-level professor from another university to critique the interview questions and their alignment with the study purpose and research questions. The reviewer advised me to include probing questions that would collect contextual information that aligned with the basic qualitative approach. Therefore, along with the advisement from my dissertation chair, I revised the interview protocol to include probing, follow-up questions that would assist in collecting saturated qualitative data.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I used a snowball sampling method to recruit fourth-grade general education teachers from one state in the southwestern United States. Snowball sampling allows a researcher to enroll participants based on a homogenous referral system (Naderifar et al., 2017). I initiated the snowball sampling by asking nine colleagues to share my information flyer as an email or text attachment with fourth-grade general education teachers whom they knew. The electronic information flyer contained a description of the purpose of the study, participation inclusion criteria, and my contact information as well as included a QR code for accessing the informed consent form. Once potential participants accessed the consent form, they had an opportunity to read the conditions

Table 1

Interview Questions With Associated RQs

Interview question	RQ
1. It is possible that you have students in your fourth-grade class who are not proficient in reading. Tell me a little bit about the challenges you face in helping these students.	RQ1
2. What factors do students who have reading deficits seem to have in common?	RQ1
3. What instructional strategies do you use in helping in helping a struggling reader become more proficient in reading?	RQ2
4. What sorts of resources or materials are available to you in helping struggling readers become more proficient in reading?	RQ3
5. Let's go back to the beginning. What more do you want to add about the challenges you face in helping students who are deficient in reading in the fourth grade?	RQ1
6. What more can you add about instructional strategies that seem to work, or about how you manage a class with a variety of reading levels?	RQ2
7. What more can you add about resources or materials you've found helpful for these students?	RQ3
8. What else can you tell me about reading deficits in students that we did not discuss?	Wrap-up question

of the study and check a box to indicate that they understood and agreed to participate. I then registered participants for a one-time, 60-minute Zoom session based on their scheduled date and time, indicated as part of their consent response, and emailed them the Zoom link. In addition, I asked each person who scheduled an interview with me to share the information flyer with their peer colleagues. I assigned every participant a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality once consent was given and their interview was scheduled.

I recorded six of the eight interviews using the Zoom platform and retained only the audio portion of the recordings. One interview took place at the participant's home, in which I made an audio recording with my iPhone. The eighth interview was self-recorded with the participant verbally responding to the written protocol questions; the audio recording of their responses was later emailed to me. In addition to audio recording, I took reflective notes during the interviews to capture observations for thematic analysis contextual considerations. Manzano (2016) stated that notetaking is an important inclusion in the interview process. According to Creswell (2014), researcher notes help provide context to interview transcripts. All eight audio recordings were uploaded to Otter.ai for transcribing. I reviewed the transcripts received from Otter.ai while listening to the audio files to correct any transcription errors. This process of careful listening and reading also helped me familiarize myself with the data. I then emailed the corrected transcripts to each participant so that they could confirm the accuracy of the transcription and make changes if necessary.

Data Analysis Plan

After I received the corrected transcripts from each participant or after 1 week with no participant response, I began the hand coding of each transcript. Charmaz (2008) stated that hand coding allows for a line-by-line analysis that supports the iterative reading process. I began with each transcript as a Word file, removing the words attributed to me, the interviewer, and inserting paragraph breaks as needed to separate individual thought units. I then copied each entire edited transcript into a single column (i.e., Column B) of a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Excel automatically created individual rows for each thought unit. A separate column to the left (i.e., Column A) was then created to insert the participant pseudonym in each row, according to the participant who provided the thought unit presented in each row. Column B was expanded to accommodate each participant's entire thought unit. After all the transcribed data were inserted into individual rows in Excel, along with indicators of the participant source for each thought unit, I highlighted words and phrases in the thought units that seem significant for this study. When a thought unit appeared to include more than one idea of significance, I separated the thought unit so that each idea was contained in its own spreadsheet row. This process of reading and examining the transcripts provided me with another opportunity to familiarize myself with the data. I examined the thought unit codes for categorical considerations, and the resulting individual rows of data in Excel were each represented by a code.

Following coding, I reorganized the data so that similar codes were grouped together on the spreadsheet. I did this by cutting and pasting rows of data. This process

created categories, which is the next step in data analysis as described by Saldana (2016).

I inserted category labels in a new column (i.e., Column C) and repeated this process,

moving all the rows in a category so that similar categories were grouped together on the

spreadsheet. In this way, I created themes. I then inserted theme labels in another column

(i.e., Column D). In addition, I actively evaluated the data analysis process for any

discrepant cases. Discrepant cases may emerge when instances contradict or do not

correspond to the pattern and/or explanation generated by the majority of the data

(Creswell, 2014, p. 182). Creswell (2014) recommended that discrepant data be flagged

during the data analysis process as it emerges. I examined all data for patterns, themes,

relationships, and discrepant data to determine this study's findings. After conducting the

data analysis process, I determined that there were no discrepant cases in this study.

Trustworthiness

According to Korstjens and Moser (2017), a qualitative research study's

trustworthiness is determined by credibility, transferability, dependability, and

confirmability. The credibility of a research design and execution refers to the steps taken

to ensure the accuracy of the research findings (Shenton, 2004). Credibility strategies in

qualitative research can include: (a) prolonged engagement with respondents, (b)

determining saturation, which is when adequate data has been collected, (c) being aware

of researcher bias through reflexivity, (d) having participants member-check transcripts,

and (e) other transcript validation methods which could include the researcher verifying

that the transcripts accurately reflect recordings (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). For

prolonged engagement and saturation, I included the integration of probing questions

with the interview questions. As a reflexivity strategy, I took notes in a reflexive journal to capture contextual considerations that was referenced during the thematic analysis. The member-checking activities included participant transcript validation, in which I returned completed transcripts to participants to provide them an opportunity to verify their responses and ensure transcripts accurately reflect their opinions and experiences (Shenton, 2004).

The transferability, or external validity, of research findings is defined by how readily the findings provide the opportunity to transfer findings to other contexts or settings with different respondents. Accordingly, Shenton (2004) recommended that a researcher provide a thick description within the context, setting, and variation in participant selection of the study. Therefore, I provided a detailed description of all contextual factors that may influence the findings compared to other contexts and relevant information captured within the researcher's reflexive journal.

The dependability of the research findings relates to the ability to track all procedures and processes used to collect and interpret data (Lodico et al., 2010). The qualitative criterion for dependability is similar to reliability; however, it is not measurable statistically. Additionally, I used an audit trail as a confirmability strategy which is required to ensure dependability (see Lodico et al., 2010). Therefore, I was able to support dependability by disclosing the data thematic analysis process within the study (see Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

Confirmability of the findings ensures that the results are derived from the data rather than the researchers' biases (Chowdhury, 2015). Based on Korstjens and Moser's

(2017) indication that confirmability is the aspect of neutrality in the study, I was responsible for ensuring the inter-subjectivity of the data, including an audit trail. An audit trail entails a transparent description of all the research steps within a research methodology. In addition to the instrument and procedures described previously, I utilized my reflexive notes to capture any additional processes that needed to be included during an audit trail. For transparency, my dissertation chair was the auditor who investigated the analysis of this research to assure trustworthy findings. Qualitative research confirmability relies on reflexivity, which can maintain transparency and quality for audit trails (Chowdhury, 2015).

Ethical Procedures

Ethical research interacts with human participants in ways associated with fairness, independence, concern, and protection (Reid et al., 2018). Data collection began only after Walden University's Institutional Review Board approved (09-07-22-0752631) the dissertation proposal in which I described ethical recruitment activities, solicitation of informed consent, and preservation of confidentiality. As part of following the principles of ethical research, I (a) informed participants of the purpose of the study, (b) disclosed study details, (c) allowed participants to withdraw from participation at any time, (d) maintained participant confidentiality, (e) encouraged participants to provide comments or ask questions, and (f) secured the collected data.

I also responded to people who expressed interest in the study by emailing them the consent form. Participants who wished to volunteer replied with, "I consent." I was able to safeguard all participant information by using pseudonyms. I will keep all

research data confidential and secure for at least 5 years after the study is completed, including hard copies of data, recordings, interview transcripts, and my reflexive journal. After 5 years, I will shred any paper documents and I will wipe digital files from my computer and other devices, using a tool such as Eraser. I conducted the study outside participants' work environments and after work hours. By excluding prospective participants whom I already knew, I minimized conflicts of interest and the influence of power differentials. Finally, there were no participant incentives offered for enrolling in the study.

Summary

In Chapter 3 I described the qualitative research design and methodology to explore fourth-grade general education teacher perspectives regarding students with reading deficits. The purpose of this research was to explore participant instructional practices, the challenges they encounter, and the resources they need to meet those challenges to support students with reading deficits. Eight general education teachers from the one state in the southwest United States composed the participant sample for this study. Snowball sampling and an information flyer with a scannable QR code were used to recruit participants for the study. Three research questions addressed teacher perspectives regarding challenges they experience in improving reading proficiency in students who exhibit reading deficits, the instructional practices they use to assist these students, and the resources they believe are effective in improving student reading proficiency. Eight open-ended questions constituted the interview protocol, along with integrated probing questions. Inductive thematic analysis was applied to the member-

checked interview data. Both open and axial coding were utilized to identify emergent themes from the data. Trustworthiness and ethical procedures were supported throughout the application of established processes of qualitative research. In Chapter 4, the collected and analyze results are presented.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore fourth-grade teachers' perspectives on teaching practices supporting students with reading deficits. In this study, three research questions guided inquiry into fourth-grade teachers' perspectives on instructional practices that support students with reading deficits, challenges teachers to encounter, and resources teachers need to meet those challenges. In this chapter, I discuss the data collection and data analysis processes and present the study's results.

Setting

To my knowledge, there were no personal or organizational conditions that influenced my interpretation of the study's results. The participants in the study were not affected by restrictions from their district. Participants were included in this study based on a voluntary referral process. I collected interview data from eight fourth-grade, general education teachers, of which all eight participants were women. By adding the individual participants' years of experience, the collective teaching experience equaled 132 years. More specifically, P1 had over 30 years of teaching experience, and this was the only participant who discussed their experience with struggling fourth graders from their home. P2 and P7 had taught fourth grade for 3 to 5 years each and had taught other grade levels within the U.S. K–12 education system for several years. Notably, P4 was in her fifth year of working with fourth-grade struggling readers as a reading interventionist but had taught previous years at the high school level. P5, P6, and P8 were instructional coaches for teachers at the elementary school level. Each had worked with teachers at the fourth-grade level to improve reading instruction. Lastly, P3 was in their second year of

teaching reading at the fourth-grade level (see Table 2).

Table 2

Participant Demographic Data

Participant #	Gender	Years of Teaching Experience
P1	Female	31
P2	Female	19
P3	Female	2
P4	Female	14
P5	Female	12
P6	Female	16
P7	Female	23
P8	Female	15

Data Collection

During the data collection process, I conducted eight participant interviews after school hours based on participants' schedules. Six interviews were conducted via Zoom. These participants used their homes or similar private locations for the interview, and I used my home office as my setting. One participant (P1) preferred to have the interview conducted in person, so we met privately at their home. To address COVID-19 concerns, this participant and I sat more than 6 feet away from each other on two separate couches. Also, a 5-minute bathroom break was taken by this participant during the in-person home interview. I used my iPhone to generate an audio recording for this interview. Another modification of the interview procedures was necessary because P6's schedule would not

allow her to schedule a Zoom interview. As a result, I emailed P6 the interview protocol

for her to audio record her responses independently. Upon completion, P6 emailed the

audio file to me. Finally, two participant calls (of P3 and P5) were ended prematurely due

to the 40-minute Zoom limit for nonpaid users. I asked these participants to log out of

Zoom 5 minutes before the end of the time allowed and then log back on. Both

participants did and the interviews were completed. Additionally, P4 chose to end the

interview session after 36 minutes due to feeling ill; therefore, this participant only

answered Questions 1–4 of the interview protocol. I offered in an email to accommodate

P4 in continuing the interview at a later date but did not receive a response.

The data collection process lasted 4 weeks. Participant interviews were recorded

via Zoom with time lengths ranging from 23 minutes to 47 minutes. I downloaded the

Zoom audio files transcription, then uploaded them to Otter.ai for conversion into

Microsoft Word files. I corrected any transcription errors that I found in the Word files

while listening to the audio files. The process of careful listening and reading helped me

to become familiar with the data. Once the transcription had been reviewed and verified

by me, I emailed each file to the appropriate participant for verification. All participants

were asked to inform me of any changes that needed to be made; however, no changes

were requested by participants.

While conducting the interviews, I took reflective notes to capture observations

for contextual consideration in thematic analysis. Manzano (2016) emphasized the

importance of notetaking during the interview process. I took notes to provide

descriptions, clarity, or elaborate based on interviewee remarks during the interview

session. According to Creswell (2014), researcher notes help to contextualize the interview transcripts.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were saved as Word files, removing all words attributed to me, the interviewer. Through reading and examining the transcripts, I became familiar with the data. Each transcript was manually annotated to start the data analysis (see Charmaz, 2008), and each unique idea was isolated as a discrete paragraph on the Word file. Saldana (2016) recommended organizing the transcripts to facilitate coding, which I did using Microsoft Excel. I imported the edited transcripts into Column B of an Excel spreadsheet; as a result, each row of the Excel spreadsheet represented a unique idea. I inserted the pseudonyms of participants into each row of Column A to identify the source of each unique idea. These unique ideas, situated on individual rows of Excel, represented data codes, and a total of 254 codes were generated in this way.

After this coding was complete, I reorganized the data to group similar codes together on the spreadsheet by cutting and pasting rows of data. Saldana (2016) described this process as creating categories, the next step in data analysis. With this reorganization of codes by similarity, I inserted category labels in Column C after determining what seemed to be the unifying concept presented by the codes in each grouping. This process yielded 15 category codes: administrative support, differentiation of instruction, family financial issues, high-interest/low-level texts, lack of familiarity with English, peer-to-peer collaboration, phonics skills, poor school attendance, poor student motivation, reading comprehension, responsive curriculum, small group intervention, support for

motivation, training in basic skill remediation, and vocabulary. These categories were grouped by similarity to identify themes, which were inserted in Column D of the spreadsheet. Four themes emerged: foundational reading skills contributing deficit factors, reading improvement approaches, and teaching and learning resources. I associated foundational reading skills and contributing deficit factors with RQ1 regarding the challenges participants encountered in meeting the needs of struggling fourth-grade readers, reading improvement approaches with RQ2 regarding participants' instructional practices, and teaching and learning resources with RQ3 regarding the resources that participants suggested affected their ability to teach struggling readers. The relationships among categories, themes, and RQs are depicted in Figure 1.

Results

Results for RQ1

RQ1 was: What are teachers' perspectives regarding the challenges in improving proficiency related to fourth-grade students with reading deficits? The first theme that emerged as a key component related to the challenges in improving proficiency in fourth-grade students with reading deficits was gaps in foundational reading skills. The foundational reading skills needed for success in fourth-grade reading but often not fully mastered by struggling readers included understanding and application of phonics, grade-level vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

Several participants cited lack of phonics skills as a foundational challenge for fourth-grade struggling readers. P5 said, "I have a lot of students who are struggling with phonics and phonemic awareness and phonological awareness and alphabetic awareness."

Figure 1

Research Questions, Themes, and Categories

```
┌─────────────────────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│      RQ1 - Challenges           │      │   RQ2 - Instructional practices  │
│                                 │      │                                 │
│  Foundational reading skills    │      │  Reading improvement approaches  │
│   • Phonics skills              │      │   • Differentiation of instruction│
│   • Vocabulary                  │      │   • Support for motivation       │
│   • Reading comprehension       │      │   • Small group intervention     │
│                                 │      └─────────────────────────────────┘
│  Contributing deficit factors   │
│   • Lack of familiarity with    │      ┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│     English                     │      │        RQ3 - Resources          │
│   • Poor school attendance      │      │                                 │
│   • Family financial issues     │      │  Teaching and learning resources │
│   • Poor student motivation     │      │   • Training in basic skill      │
└─────────────────────────────────┘      │     remediation                 │
                                         │   • Responsive curriculum        │
                                         │   • Administrative support       │
                                         │   • Peer-to-peer collaboration   │
                                         │   • High-interest/low-level texts│
                                         └─────────────────────────────────┘
```

P2 agreed, noting that, "Just the simple basic skills needed to read is the phonemes, grasping the letter sound recognition, blending words to be able to auditorily hear those sounds like a short a or e should be silent." P6 remarked,

> They're not necessarily able to decode some of those more complex vocabulary
>
> words that you find in upper-level texts. Phonics, learning that happens in the
>
> primary grades that maybe they either didn't get or didn't master, is where we go
>
> back and start.

P7 indicated how lack of phonics skills affect instruction, saying, "I group my students in a way according to their levels. Here, they may struggle in the area of phonological awareness and phonemic awareness." P2 echoed this, saying,

> I had a kid sitting in front of me that did not have phonics skills, letter recognition, the blending–like the basic reading skills–they just did not have. So even if I chopped the text, or if I did a read aloud, those basic skills that needed to be read were not there. So, we couldn't even tackle the comprehension.

P5 summed up the challenge related to lack of understanding and application of phonics by students by saying, "I also definitely encountered students who it was a lot of phonics and decoding and things like that, that students struggled with."

Participants also noted that fourth-grade students who struggle with reading may lack familiarity with vocabulary. P1 said, "Students cannot pronounce certain letters or pronounce the word correctly." P3 suggested, "I would say the number one challenge that comes to mind would be the vocabulary challenges or the lack of background information that students have." Issues with poor vocabulary go beyond the ability to accurately decode a word; P1 said, "It's not just them learning the word but also them learning the meaning of the word."

Gaps in vocabulary knowledge contribute to problems with reading comprehension. P5 indicated that, "A lot of things surrounding comprehension, like just being able to decode and read the words hinders being able to actually make sense of the story itself." P6 described the problem this way:

Reading struggle has to do with why they are struggling, or what is keeping them from being proficient. If it's comprehension, if students are really great decoders, but they're not able to talk about or show that they understand what they're reading, then it's a lot of making them aware of it and teaching them how to stop and think.

P5 said, "Strugglers could read the words, but then when I started asking questions about the story itself, they are not sure what to say." P6 noted,

A lot of times my kiddos who are not proficient in reading now, as fourth graders it's more on the comprehension side. But that comes because when they are reading, they're not necessarily able to decode some of those more complex vocabulary words that you find in upper level texts and then that's what hinders their comprehension.

P5 agreed, saying, "When it would come time to tell the most important parts of this story, a summary of the story, or just retelling it, students would struggle." P5 further noted, "The overwhelming majority of the challenges that I encountered in fourth-grade struggling readers were mostly in my experience around comprehension."

A second theme that emerged from the data relevant to challenges in resolving reading struggles was contributing deficit factors, such as students' familiarity with the English language, poor school attendance, family financial issues, and poor student motivation. For example, P1 indicated, "It's hard when you have students that do not speak one word of English. Even to say hello or good morning is really hard." P8 described the linguistic problem this way:

There has been an influx of students who are emergent bilinguals. Reading is significantly below level, or they know no English. They're from the Ukraine. They are from Syria, Iran, Iraq, you know, some of the Middle Eastern countries and they speak Arabic, and sometimes their alphabet is not like our letters and so teachers have struggled on how to help them.

P1 noted that,

So, the problem is that we did not know which language they spoke, even though the refugee papers were in Turkish. So, the whole time, we're thinking that they're speaking Turkish, but they weren't, and the student does not speak English at all.

P8 furthered the conversation about this issue, saying,

Some students do not know how to read in their language, they only know how to speak. Also, translations may not be in the dialect that they're used to, or it's more traditional. There's different types of Spanish on some of the things that we've used because it's more the traditional Spanish and students who grew up in Mexico or Venezuela, they have no idea what saying.

P1 continued, saying, "Some students haven't been to school at all. Some of the countries that students come from are Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador. Today, we have a large Hispanic population, and then we have other kids that are coming in too."

P8 worried, "Who knows what went on, the things that happened to the student in her country where she had to leave and come here and whatever. So, I feel like this."

Another contributing factor participants suggested leads to fourth-grade reading struggle is poor school attendance. P4 said,

Students may come to school the first month, and then he or she may miss 3 or 4 weeks. It may have been one of those type of situations where absences are an ongoing pattern within the past couple of years with fourth grade.

P1 noted, "Students are pulled out of school so that they can babysit so that their parents can work." P4 suggested,

Primarily, teachers need to find out why the student is not at school or what is causing the student not to not be at school. Most times students in fourth grade is not as a result of them. Students are not at school because they can't just get up and do their own thing because of different things at home.

Students' attendance might also be affected by family financial issues. P8 described a support program for immigrant families, saying,

The way the program worked was they would help with rent for like, a certain amount of months. And then you had to take over the rent, while a lot of parents could not afford the rent, because it's an expensive area to live in. So, they had to move. And some found out that there were jobs and other states and they just left.

Students may struggle with a variety of problems associated with low socioeconomic status. P4 said,

Students were either residing with someone else, or students may have been residing in an economically challenged neighborhood, our residents, with their actual parent, or their grandparents raised by someone else. And so, with that in

mind. It's not that they didn't know the information or know how to really learn.

It may have been that students were going through so much that they were

overwhelmed with the learning processes.

This all affects reading, as indicated by P2, "The challenge is basically helping the family

understand the importance of reading because economic status plays a key role in

determining whether or not a student will be supported in understanding the importance

of reading."

A final category that emerged regarding contributing deficit factors concerned

students' motivation for school and for reading. P4 remarked, "There may have been

other external factors that would hinder their motivation to read. A lot of times students

will bring that into the classroom and act out." P8 agreed, saying, "We had a lot of

behavior issues. They were having issues at the apartment that they were living in, and

that carried over into the schools." P4 explained,

What students with reading deficits may have and seem to have in common is

really getting their attention or grasping their attention. A lot of students are and

have been off focus. So, getting students focusing on tasks or just coming

prepared teachers have to work on students being prepared.

P5 suggested, "Typically, the students who struggled with reading were the ones who did

not read very much because it was so hard for them." P1 noted, "Reading is harder as

students get older because students are self-conscious." P6 said, "Students don't want to

carry around a book or even pull a book out during reading time that looks babyish, or

too young, even if it is what they're able to independently work on." P5 pointed out,

Students don't want to read as much, so students are not going to get as much

practice. And reading is going to continue to be hard, students are going to

continue to avoid it. It feeds into itself. It's a vicious cycle.

P6 indicated the motivation issue affects teacher instruction, saying, "When fourth

graders get to fourth grade, and they're not proficient in reading, the biggest problem is

getting texts that they can read what they want to read."

At the same time, P4 noted, "Some students don't want to read however they

know how to read." P4 continued, saying, "The motivation for students to read really can

be questionable. In the sense of, does the student actually know how to read? Is the

student really willing to read or have the motivation?" Teachers in this study also

indicated they were challenged by a curriculum that does not fit student needs and may

not motivate them to read. P6 said, "When students see the only purpose for reading is to

get a grade or a score or answer questions about it, then that sucks the fun out of it."

Lack of reading ability and limited personal experience affect success in all areas

of the fourth-grade curriculum. P4 explained, "I tried homework, but some of the

homework that was sometimes given to the students, the students may not have even

understood the homework themselves, as far as reading capabilities." P3 also noted

difficulty in relating personal experiences to a character that the class is discussing in a

story, saying,

Many of the fourth-grade students that I've taught have not had experiences that

maybe teachers did as a student. So, trying to build that bridge, so that students

have a better understanding to be able to connect to the story, is a problem.

In summary, teachers described challenges that affected their ability to improve students' reading proficiency, including lack of basic literacy skills, unfamiliarity with English vocabulary and pronunciation, family issues including those that affect student attendance, and students' motivation to read. that the issue of low student motivation is compounded by lack of ability to read and students' unwillingness to read books suitable for low reading ability. This creates a vicious cycle that inhibits reading practice and perpetuates reading struggle.

Results for RQ2

RQ2 asked: What are teachers' perspectives regarding instructional practices they use to improve proficiency related to fourth-grade students with reading deficits? The themes of reading improvement approaches applied to this question, and included categories of differentiation of instruction, support for motivation, and small group intervention. For example, multiple participants expressed their differentiated instructional strategies which helped students think critically. P3 described their adaptive instructional approach, saying,

> Differentiation would be tailoring a question type. The higher learners would write a complex sentence as a student's free response stem. So rather than telling students trying to get students to arrive at the answer that teachers are looking for, without telling students directly.

P3 also noted that reducing the length of text may be a more manageable learning experience for students regardless of their individual learning abilities, saying

Teachers do sometimes cut down the text to accommodate all learners. So that way, it's not overwhelming a story that's too long, but students still get the main points and are able to get a sense of what teachers are looking for in that day's specific lesson.

P7 described their adaptive instructional strategy as, "I will always work with the shorter texts, have students highlight, underline the key information within the text, and then have them annotate to think about what they just underlined." P7 emphasized the importance of breaking down lessons into manageable parts to focus on understanding the main idea, saying,

You're leading them on the right path to literacy. But definitely chunking that lesson making, pulling out the key words, pulling out what they know, is a supporting detail to the main idea, because sometimes, it can be words in a text as just as what I call distractors. Not really that important, but it's needed to get the information out.

According to P4, however, reading instruction has not changed significantly with adaptive instructional practices for students who are struggling in reading, saying, "There hasn't been very much of a difference in reading other than allowing students to have extra time or extra help to adapt to the reading concepts that they're lacking in." Teachers want to help students better grasp reading concepts. P8 summed up how teachers should develop, and used differentiated instruction in their practice, suggesting, "Teachers need to meet with struggling readers daily. That's not going to happen. But at least three times a week, I try to get them to read with a partner, or give them other things."

A second category that emerged with regard to reading improvement approaches was teachers' support for motivation, not only in the task of reading but throughout the school day. P1 suggested that a student-focused approach is motivating for students, saying, "The strategies that work is that teachers have to take their time, and let every student start on their own. Another thing that works is that teachers use praise a lot." P2 employed a variety of methods for getting students engaged and motivated, saying, "I tried to do things with students on a Friday to give them extra time or time outside. I try all different things to try to get students connected." P5 remarked that reading should be meaningful saying,

> Creativity helped the kids engage with the books in more creative and meaningful sorts of ways. Instead of just reading and writing about it in my journal which gets mundane after a while. So, incorporating this helped them engage with the books in new ways and think about them on a deeper sort of level.

P5 described why motivation may not be enough for some students:

> The student tried real hard to read. She was really thinking about the story and really trying to make sense of it. The ability and the motivation was there. The student just kind of got lost in the language and needed somebody to help smooth it out and figure it out.

P6 summed up student support of motivation to read, saying, "The biggest problem is getting students in texts that they can read and that students want to read."

The third theme that emerged regarding teachers' instructional practices was small group intervention to provide students of similar abilities with instruction tailored

to their specific needs. P4 said, "Instruction may be different tiers that the majority of the students are at or where students may need the interventions of small group. So, I will say a minimum of probably three to five or even smaller groups." P7 noted, "I group my students in a way according to their levels. I would pretty much group them by their level Lexile scores." At the same time, there can be problems with small group instruction. P7 also noted, that in small group settings, students may not always be working on the same thing, saying,

> I think giving them level books and doing a guided reading lesson with them is very beneficial. In the smaller group setting they don't always work on the same thing. But I can have all of them in one group.

Grouping for instruction has some drawbacks. For example, P1 suggested that being in a small group might carry some stigma, noting, "I don't want other students to make fun of these students." In addition, P1 noted that the teacher can get distracted by their focus on the small group and not notice issues that may arise in the remaining students, saying, "If I do small groups, I keep my eyeball on the other students to make sure that they work."

In summary, teachers explained they may provide tailored instruction and individualized attention to support each student. Reading level grouping allows teachers to target instruction to smaller groups, which can help ensure that all students receive support. Grouping for instruction carries with it its own challenges, of whole-group oversight and embarrassment for students singled out to be in a group. In general, teachers in this study described trying various methods to support struggling readers.

Results for RQ3

RQ3 asked: What are teachers' perspectives regarding resources they use to improve proficiency related to fourth-grade students with reading deficits? The theme that applied to this question was teaching and learning resources, including categories of training in basic skill remediation, responsive curriculum, administrative support, peer-to-peer collaboration, and access to high-interest/low-level texts for students. The first category described teachers' need for training in basic reading skill development. P6 said,

> Upper elementary teachers don't always have a huge background in teaching kids to read. I always said, I taught the kids to understand what they read, and to think about what students read, but I was never someone who taught students to read. Therefore, teachers are not always sure what to do.

P5 revealed their inability to explain to phonics to students, saying, "Phonics, phonological awareness, and alphabetic awareness are so far outside my wheelhouse, that as teacher, I didn't feel very proficient in to teaching those things and supporting around those things." P6 also noted, "I didn't have a huge phonics background. I couldn't tell students why something was spelled that way. I knew that sounded out words wasn't the

best option for teaching them how to decode." However, even what might be considered a fourth-grade focus – reading comprehension – was not an area of confidence for at least one teacher. P5 explained, "Teaching comprehension was my weak spot or my hole in my capabilities as an educator. I needed more support with learning a lot about teaching comprehension through Reading Academy." The need for training in basic reading skill development was expressed by these teachers.

Teachers also found the curriculum they use in fourth grade is not responsive to the remedial needs of struggling readers. For example, P7 noted, "The curriculum will be more or less on grade level and not all of our kids are on grade level." P8 explained that there is no single program that works for all students, saying,

> As a teacher, you had to pretty much just figure it out. I've used Jennifer
> Serravallo and the units of study by Lucy Caulkins. That's our curriculum in our
> in the district that I'm in. We've used Comprehension Toolkit when I was in the
> classroom. There's not one program resource because I think every reader is
> different.

P8 reported that the availability of curricular resources for teachers is dependent on their own initiative, saying, "Resources is very much on you, it's up to you. I think it's not just one thing, you have to pull different things." P1 said,

> Even though we have a curriculum, I go outside of the curriculum, and I seek and
> find, or I borrow and beg from other teachers. Therefore, you've got to be on your
> toes to learn new ways to help the kids.

P6 agreed, saying, "I have learned that teachers are able to really dig in and figure out what it is that students struggle with."

Teachers reported that creative use of resources on behalf of struggling readers was not always welcomed by their school leaders, however. P2 described how administration prevented them from implementing an online program to teach students how to read, saying,

> I was trying to implement the online learning program, but because it wasn't research base, I wasn't able to go that route to implement the program. Admin was very adamant about students learning how to read from the actual teacher sitting down with them.

P1 agreed that a rigid perspective on teaching and students' needs can have a chilling effect: "The challenge is more personal for me. It becomes personal when teachers have the principal and appraiser instructional coach walk into your classroom and tell teachers they can't do a lesson anymore." P7 noted, "Even though teachers' motivational strategies are raising your scores, administrators say it's not part of the curriculum. I don't feel like the administration has my back. They're saying no, you got to follow this strict curriculum." P5 expanded on the idea that administrators are not so supportive as they should be, saying,

> Having more clear-cut guidance and support around what [teaching] means and what it should look like would have been helpful. But this is hard to do when leaders are also not completely clear on it. Supports are hard to push down to the teachers because administrative leaders are all kind of confused.

Budgetary considerations may limit resource availability in numerous ways. P8 said, "We would have district literacy coaches like myself. There was a budget cut and they all left." At the same time, teachers indicated they need to be proactive in support of helpful resources. In particular, P2 noted,

> If teachers don't say this is something really good that we want, and don't advocate for it, then admin is going to believe the resource wasn't useful. Because when administration look at the report, teachers know, nobody loves it, nobody use it. So, admin feels the need to use that money elsewhere.

> Another resource teachers named was peer-to-peer collaboration related to reading support and techniques. P4 suggested several resources are available to help teachers promote more engagement in reading, saying,

> There's also community service resources within the schools. Teachers can reach out to either wraparound specialist, academic specialists or the department chair are able to see what teachers can come up with as far as specific writing resources that would help students to be more engaged in reading.

P5 explained, "Administration did the best they could, but I felt myself relying much more heavily on the special education teacher or the intervention teacher, because they had that knowledge and that expertise, whereas I just I just didn't." P8 agreed, with peer-to-peer support indicating, "They do have a reading interventionist, and it does help. And they have been able to close gaps." P4 summed it up, saying, "As the teacher, I coordinate with the teacher specialists or department chair, to see what we can do to try to bring struggling students up to speed."

Finally, teachers indicated being able to provide students with high-interest books that are on students' reading level, through access to leveled libraries and Scholastic reading resources, also formed an important resource. However, materials at a low reading level are often not interesting to fourth-grade children. P6 said,

> There's been a lot of talk about leveling books, I don't believe in making kids stick to their levels. Although my district in the curriculum and the literacy leads, we use Teachers College units of study, and we have leveled libraries. They definitely want us to focus on levels. But unfortunately, when you have a fourth grader who should be reading on an R,S, or T level, they come in reading on a level G, the books that are level G are not going to be the kinds of books that they want to read, nor the kind of books that help them fit in alongside the other readers. So, I think the biggest problem is getting them to read books that they can read.

P7 noted needing to be proactive in finding and preparing appropriate reading materials to support instruction, saying,

> I will create my supplemental sometimes, okay, most of the time. I will use the Scholastic to do the guided reading because I will have all my notes in what I'm going to ask the student and just guide them through it.

P2 stated that districts have demonstrated interest in providing more access to literacy resources recently, saying,

> What happened in the elementary components, they were doing the literacy read by three, where they were trying to implement students being able to read by

grade three. They implemented a lot of read alouds, just-write books; getting kids

comfortable with reading.

P4 suggested that teachers have the resources they need to teach all levels of readers,

even if the teachers must seek out those resources themselves: "So with the resources

available, teachers have different applications and platforms that have been used in the

past and use now."

In summary, teachers emphasized the need for training in basic reading skill

remediation for teachers in upper grades. They also revealed that they must go beyond

the set curriculum to draw on various resources and techniques to effectively teach

students, and to provide reading materials for them. Teachers described relying on each

other for ideas and guidance, and that administrators were largely unhelpful in supporting

reading instruction.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the criteria for establishing trustworthiness includes

credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

Credibility refers to the steps taken to ensure the believability of qualitative research

findings (Shenton, 2004). The credibility strategies utilized in this qualitative study

included prolonged engagement with participants during 30-to-60-minute interviews. In

addition, I relied on verbatim quotes from participants as the data set, which supported

credibility of the results.

Transferability of research findings considers the degree to which qualitative

research finding can extend to other contexts or settings with different respondents

(Shenton, 2004). The strategies to support transferability was the use of thick descriptions to describe the context, setting, and the participant inclusion criteria for the study. Another strategy to support transferability was data saturation. The data analysis was applied until no new information was discovered by the researcher and the dissertation chair. Therefore, a robust and valid understanding of fourth-grade DI practices that support students with reading deficits should be transferable to similar context and settings.

Dependability of qualitative research findings relates to the ability to track all procedures and processes used to collect and interpret data (Lodico et al., 2010). An audit trail entailing descriptive research steps and the data thematic analysis process were the strategies used in this qualitative research which supported dependability. The thematic analysis of data and an audit trail including descriptive research steps contributed to the dependability of this qualitative study.

Confirmability of qualitative research findings ensures neutrality by establishing that the results are derived from the data rather than the researchers' biases (Chowdhury, 2015). The strategies that supported confirmability within this research was my use of reflexivity strategies. Reflexive notes captured any biases that may have influenced the research findings. The member-checking activity included sending final transcribed interview conclusions to participants for review to ensure that bias did not affect the recording and supported the interpretation of participant responses.

Summary

In Chapter 4, the setting, and conditions at the time of the study are described. As the researcher, I also described the participants' demographics and characteristics relevant to the study. I explained the data collection process and how I used participant thought units to group codes into categories and then combined categories based on recurring themes were described in detail. During thematic analysis, there were 15 categories formed based on the similarities within participant thought units among the coded units, which led to four themes: contributing deficit factors, foundational reading skills, reading improvement approaches, and teaching and learning resources. A discussion of the results of the data analysis related to the research questions and their relevance to the evidence for trustworthiness. In Chapter 5, I provide an interpretation of these findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications, and a conclusion to shed light on the important ideas of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore fourth-grade teacher perspectives of the challenges teachers encounter, the instructional practices to support the challenges of teaching students with reading deficits, and the resources teachers need to meet those challenges. I interviewed fourth-grade teachers from one southwestern state where only 30% of students tested at or above grade-level reading proficiency. The key findings of this qualitative study indicated two principal learning challenges associated with fourth-grade students with reading deficits: (a) the lack of basic foundational reading skills upon entering fourth grade and (b) a curriculum that is misaligned with their needs. In addition to the learning challenges, there was one resource finding related to teacher professional development training. The teacher participants expressed a need for training that would improve their upper elementary-level instructional practice to develop basic reading skills in struggling readers.

Interpretation of Findings

A key finding of this study was that fourth-grade teachers faced challenges in improving proficiency with some students who lacked mastery of basic literacy skills. The fundamental literacy skills the teacher participants found challenging to improve in fourth-grade students included teaching them to understand and apply phonics along with decoding unfamiliar words. Accordingly, Kang and Shin (2019) suggested that struggling readers with basic reading skill deficits in upper-elementary grades often struggle with early reading skills, such as reading fluency and decoding (p. 4). In contrast, Kim, Quinn, et al. (2021) proposed that even though not all students may have achieved grade-level

reading proficiency, teachers assume students possess the reading abilities required to comprehend both literary and informational texts since fundamental skills are typically taught prior to fourth grade. Additionally, Castles et al. (2018) found that instructing students with structured phonological strategies can enhance their word knowledge and reading proficiency. This finding confirms the work of Reed et al. (2019) who emphasized that instruction in developing decoding skills before fourth grade is crucial to prevent reading difficulties.

A second key finding was that teachers described misalignment between the fourth-grade reading curriculum and the reading deficiencies among some of the students. This teaching and learning gap was explained as an instructional practice challenge for improving the reading proficiency in students with reading deficits. This finding about the misalignment of the curriculum confirms those of Stone (2018) who stated that instructional practices based on various curriculums may not suit all students' learning demands and suggested that a differentiated instructional approach is needed to meet the learning needs of a student with reading deficits. In addition, Kent et al. (2019) proposed that teachers combine multitiered instructional strategies and information gathered from student data to inform practice for improving a struggling readers' performance. According to Tomlinson (2014), teachers should be able to modify the curriculum based on the four areas of DI (i.e., content, process, product, and learning environment) to help guide their instructional practice. However, teachers in the current study noted that they needed to follow the curriculum faithfully, a requirement communicated to them from administrators, which interfered with their efforts to accommodate individual students.

Teachers in the current study also noted that they searched on their own for instructional materials useful for struggling readers.

A third key finding of this study was that teachers identified professional development training as a needed resource to increase the reading proficiency in fourth-grade students. The teachers explained that they currently implemented instructional strategies that failed to improve the reading deficits in fourth-grade students due to insufficient professional development training. Teacher participants remarked that they lacked knowledge and skill in remediating students' basic literacy skill deficits. This finding echoes the work of Davis et al. (2018) who noted that elementary teachers are undertrained in reading instruction. This lack of professional development creates an instructional challenge due to an insufficient understanding by the teachers of research-based practices that might assist students with reading deficits. According to Naumann et al. (2019), some teachers have no idea which reading instructional practices are most effective in improving student reading deficits because there is no consensus on the best instructional approach to meeting the diversity of student reading needs. The authors noted that there are varying commonalities regarding reading deficiencies across students, complicating the development of a universal approach to instructing struggling readers. These findings collaborate this need to train teachers in differentiated instructional practices to accommodate individual students specialized areas of reading deficiencies. However, Condie and Pomerantz (2020) advocated for universal protocols that would guide elementary school teaching standards and teacher training for explicit instructional strategies and inform practice to increase the reading proficiency of

struggling readers. This contrast could be considered a continuing debated between customized, tailored instruction and a universal approach. Conversely, the participants in the current study stated the need for professional development training that could inform their individual differentiated instructional practice. Therefore, fourth-grade teachers could benefit from standard-based professional development training that would cultivate their instructional practice and provide the flexibility to differentiate instruction based on a student's individual reading deficit needs.

Limitations of the Findings

The limitations of this study included several departures from the initial plan for the interviews. One participant requested the interview be conducted in person while adhering to COVID-19 protective procedures by sitting 6 feet apart on separate couches in their home. This participant also took a 5-minute bathroom break during the interview. A second participant could not meet for the interview as scheduled, but self-recorded responses to emailed interview questions and emailed me an audio file of her responses. Another participant ended the interview abruptly due to her feeling ill. In addition, two participant Zoom calls were ended prematurely when they reached the free 40-minute time limit. In both cases, the Zoom calls picked up where the prematurely ended calls left off to complete the interviews fully.

Recommendations

One recommendation for future research is to explore school administration perspectives on why teacher-created curriculums and activities are not used as standard instructional practices associated with student motivation and reading improvement.

Teachers are professional educators who want to consider instructional resources beyond school curriculums to help students to love reading and be able to read at the elementary-grade level. Participants shared their frustration with being told not to use supplemental material, which they felt would support unmotivated students' reading growth. In fact, many participants reported that administrators did not favor using instructional resources other than the grade-level curriculum provided, which was written above the capacities of students with reading deficits. Despite teachers in this study feeling confident in their ability to provide engaging resources that complemented curriculum and added fun to the teaching and learning of reading, evaluating administrator perspectives related to the efficacy of teacher-created lessons could serve as a basis for determining how administrators could support teacher-created lessons. Perhaps future researchers could begin with a review of existing literature for teacher-created curricula and their impact on student motivation and reading interest. A study like this would help to identify any existing knowledge gaps in the field of education and inform future research.

In addition, a future study might investigate the efficacy of teacher-created curriculums for developing students' motivation to learn reading compared to that of motivation that is inspired by school or district curricula. Because teachers in the current study described motivation as a critical factor to student success and engagement, a greater need exists for understanding what instructional practices support a student's motivation to read for proficiency at grade level. Such an exploration could expand knowledge related to different methods of teaching low and struggling readers, specifically at the fourth-grade level. This future research might also explore the extent to

which teachers create curriculums and activities that can motivate students to practice at home and read for pleasure both at home and at school. A study of student motivation for classroom engagement may inform educator practice in ways that make classroom learning more fun and attractive for students.

I also recommend that future researchers examine teacher perspectives regarding the causes of low reading achievement at different grade levels. It is logical to assume that reading difficulties presented in fourth grade had their start in early grades; therefore, an exploration of teachers' perspectives on students' early reading skills and mastery of grade-level reading expectations would help to identify the point at which reading struggles begin. This study might also identify factors that contribute to reading struggles and suggest ways to resolve those factors before fourth grade. Finally, in alignment with Bondie et al. (2019), I recommend for further research be conducted that examines the differentiated instructional practices, skills, and materials that would accommodate the various skill levels of students with reading deficits.

Implications

One implication for practice arising from this study is that teachers should be granted autonomy to deviate from the established curriculum as necessary to meet students' learning needs. This implication includes permitting teachers to use high-interest media and similar resources to motivate struggling readers and inspire them to increase their reading ability. Participants in the current study described the expectation that they adhere to established school curriculum and use only standardized instructional materials, even if the curriculum and materials are inappropriate to the needs of students.

In addition, participants described resistance from administrators over innovative instruction that might be more helpful to students than the established instructional plan. A recognition of the professional autonomy of teachers and administrative support for teacher-devised instruction designed to meet students' needs would do much to resolve the problem of reading failure in fourth-grade students.

Another implication from this study is that fourth-grade teachers and students be provided more access to high-interest books at a low reading level. When students are able to engage with books that they can read and that they find highly interesting, their perception of the value of reading and enjoyment in reading can grow. In this study, participants complained that the district's practice of offering fourth-grade struggling readers books on their reading level but that were intended for first-grade children was embarrassing for their students and reduced their motivation to read. Low-level/high-interest books for fourth-grade students are readily available and should be provided freely for use in the classroom.

A third implication from this study is that teachers be permitted to use digital resources available on the internet to encourage students to read. Students typically find digital text, interactive media, and games intrinsically interesting and are motivated to read on-screen materials they might not find interesting in books. The participants in this study wanted to be creative in finding and implementing digital materials in their reading interaction as strategies to motivate struggling readers to improve their reading performance; however, participants felt blocked in these efforts by requirements to adhere only to the established texts and curriculum. Because interest in what reading can

offer is so important to students' willingness to engage in learning to read, teachers should be permitted to use digital materials to motivate students.

The methodological implications for this basic qualitative study include the difficulty that can arise in recruiting participants when the administrative climate seems repressive, as appeared to be the case here. Several prospective participants expressed concern that their name and what they said could somehow be revealed to school administrators if they spoke out about the school curriculum and systems. One person said she wanted her principal's approval before participating and so did not end up taking part in the study. Even though I assured prospective participants of the confidentiality of their engagement in the study and took care in avoiding use of school email addresses and other possible conflicts of interest, the recruitment process became a struggle. I was able to interview fewer teachers than I intended and needed to alter my interview process to accommodate the wishes of the few participants I had. The difficulty I encountered in recruiting participants in a district in which teachers and administrators seemed to have opposing views on teachers' role in guiding instruction suggests caution for future researchers. Systemic issues that affected the educational climate in this district affected my ability to conduct this study.

Results of this study demonstrated that, when barriers to learning are evident, fourth-grade teachers need access to appropriate high-interest reading materials, support in remediating reading deficits, and professional autonomy to teach according to student needs even if those are not aligned with the needs addressed by the established curriculum. This study may lead to positive social change through helping teachers be

better supported with training in reading remediation for grade-level progression in upper elementary and given autonomy to teach based on their own professional knowledge of what strategies will aid student development for reading improvement. When teachers are allowed to inform instructional practices by the actual needs of their fourth-grade students, teachers will be more effective, and their students can become stronger readers.

Conclusions

The problem identified in this basic qualitative study was that fourth-grade students in one southwestern state demonstrated lower reading ability than the national average among fourth-grade students. I used Tomlinson's (2001) DI model as the conceptual framework. Eight teacher participants who met the inclusion criteria from one state in the southwestern United States took part in audio-recorded interviews. The results of this study indicated four issues that contribute to reading deficits in fourth-grade students: some students lack mastery of basic literacy skills, including phonics and decoding skills; the fourth-grade curriculum is misaligned with the instructional needs of students with reading deficits; many fourth-grade teachers lack training in remediation of basic literacy skills; and systemic challenges, such as lack of administrator support, inappropriate reading resources, and lack of professional autonomy for teachers in meeting students' learning needs, hamper instruction.

The results of this study suggest opportunities for positive social change. When teachers and administrators abandon the one-size-fits-all approach described by participants in this study and take steps to differentiate student instruction in ways that are intrinsically motivating and appropriate to the sensibilities of fourth-grade children,

struggling readers may increase their reading skill and their ability to read and understand texts. When administrators recognize and support the professional autonomy of teachers by providing them with the training they need, the resources their students need, and the freedom to teach and learn in creative and motivating ways, teachers will be more effective and students will benefit. Fourth-grade teachers must be proactive in asking for support and in advocating for their students, including students who struggle with reading. School administrators must work in collaboration with teachers to focus on teaching children instead of merely teaching content, understanding that curriculum is useful only when it meets students' needs and inspires learning. These adjustments to current practice will result in positive social change through increased literacy among students, increased motivation for school, and increased success for the adults fourth-grade students will become.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. It is possible that you have students in your fourth-grade class who are not proficient in reading. Tell me a little bit about the challenges you face in helping these students.

    a. What other challenges do you recall?

    b. Can you give me an example of a student who comes to mind?

2. What factors do students who have reading deficits seem to have in common?

    a. How do you approach these different factors?

    b. How do you manage a class with so many different reading levels and issues around reading?

3. What instructional strategies do you use in helping a struggling reader become more proficient in reading?

    a. Tell me about a time when the strategy you described helped improved a student's reading literacy?

    b. You mentioned "ABC" happening. Can you elaborate?

    c. You mentioned "DEF" happening. Tell me more about that…

4. What sorts of resources or materials are available to you for helping struggling readers become more proficient in reading?

    a. Tell me about a time when a resource or the materials you described helped improved a student's reading deficits?

    b. You mentioned using "ABC." Can you elaborate?

    c. You mentioned using "DEF." Tell me more about that…

5. Let's go back to the beginning. What more do you want to add about the challenges you face in helping students who are deficient in reading in the fourth-grade?

6. What more can you add about instructional strategies that seem to work, or about how you manage a class with a variety of reading levels?

7. What more can you add about resources or materials you've found helpful for these students?

8. What else can you tell me about reading deficits in students that we did not discuss?