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Reading Teachers' Perspectives on Professional Development in Phonological Methods and Implementation of Instructional Strategies

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2023

Abstract

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by

Lisa M. Toole

MA, University of Dayton, 2002

BS, University of Rio Grande, 1995

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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May 2023

Abstract

The problem addressed through this research study was although kindergarten through Grade 3 (K–3) reading teachers have received specific professional development in phonological methods, a gap in practice exists with the implementation of instructional strategies. The purpose of this study was to explore K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. Flavell's theory of thinking about thinking, otherwise known as metacognition, was the grounding conceptual framework. The research questions guided the study by exploring the teachers' perspectives about their professional development, which professional development had the most effect on their teaching, and which opportunities are needed to enhance implementation. A basic qualitative approach using a participant interview protocol with predetermined questions was used to collect data from 10 K–3 reading teachers. Interview data were collected and analyzed using thematic analysis. The following four themes emerged from the data analysis: merging multiple professional developments leads to inconsistent implementation, teachers prefer curriculum alignment and instructional integrity, teachers value professional development leading to intentional phonics instruction, and teachers want organizational commitment to continuous improvement. This study may contribute to positive social change by providing professional development designers and educators with information when making decisions about professional development in phonological methods.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my husband, Eric, whose continuous support and love never wavered. My daughters Madelyn, Mackenzie, and Myla have inspired me to begin and continue this learning journey through their passion for learning and their internal drive to persevere regardless of the struggle. I also give a nod of gratitude to my parents, who instilled in me a work ethic while living on the family farm, which has carried over into my career in education as genuine grit, determination, and commitment.

As a constant reminder, my goal throughout my career in education, the doctoral coursework, and each phase of the dissertation has been to be committed to the process, make a difference, and improve lives. Finishing my dissertation wasn't about earning my doctorate but more about illuminating a topic that is essential to a student's quality of life. Lastly, I dedicate this study to educators, both teachers and administrators, who have a tall order in making a difference and improving lives every single day.

Acknowledgments

Finalizing the dissertation would not have been possible without the continuous support of my Walden University committee: Dr. Terri Edwards, committee chair; Dr. Beryl Watnick, second committee chair; and Dr. Glenn Penny, university research reviewer. The committee provided great feedback and redirected my focus to create a study that will positively affect educator capacity to serve effectively and the generations of students K–3 reading teachers will serve. Thank you, also, to the willingness of my research participants, who unselfishly provided important information relevant to the problem and purpose of this study.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Teaching students to read is more than the onset of rote and mechanical tasks assigned by the teacher. Teaching reading is a strategic process that requires the teacher to access and transfer their background, experiences, and personal knowledge to determine when and how to meet the needs of individual students (Vines et al., 2020). Explicitly learned teaching strategies are products of intentional preparation and high-quality professional development designed to increase metacognitive awareness and reflective practices relevant to what effects individual student achievement (Fischer et al., 2018). In my study, I explored kindergarten through Grade 3 (K–3) reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics.

In times of curriculum changes and new certification processes, districts and associated schools, often identified as a school system, need to make decisions and align action plans with programs and professional development (Flynn et al., 2021). In this study, those critical decisions were specifically aligned with the purchasing and securing of phonological professional development for K–3 reading teachers. By exploring K–3 certified reading teachers' perspectives of their lived experiences with specific professional development focused on phonological methods and phonetic strategies, the audience may choose to use the data and conclusions to address policy and implement changes.

The positive social change associated with this study involves schools using the unique perspectives of K–3 teachers' lived experiences to inform professional development initiatives. The following underlying educational factors were explored by engaging professionals in the research study: a professional learning growth mindset, self-reflection, collective efficacy, and more uniformity in best practices. On a regional or national level, the research may influence early childhood education, higher education, and educator preparation programs with an alignment between K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding professional development and implementation of effective instructional strategies that support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics.

Background

Reading Horizons Discovery Reading System is an intensive, explicit, systematic phonics program that Lockhart (2003) created using her teaching experience. Lockhart used this system throughout her career as a teacher and principal. Lockhart's instructional strategies were designed to intentionally teach phonetic decoding methods to beginning readers. Over the years, these instructional strategies became a complete reading program aimed at equipping K–3 reading teachers with the skills, curriculum, and software to extend student learning through direct, guided, and independent practice. Lockhart's phonetic program, now known as Reading Horizons Discovery (2014), is based on the Science of Reading and is a standards-based curriculum explicitly addressing the two most foundational levels of reading: phonemic awareness and phonics. The Reading Horizons Discovery system has evolved through organized, high-quality professional

development, sequenced lessons for the primary grades, and the transfer of knowledge by implementing instructional strategies explicitly designed to facilitate student learning. The program's purpose is to increase the K–3 reading teacher's knowledge and ability to deliver effective phonics instruction, thereby increasing the reading potential of all students exposed to the curriculum and explicit methods. Like Lockhart, other researchers support the cyclical nature of developing teachers' knowledge and ability to deliver effective phonics instruction through explicit instruction and interactive opportunities with students (Forgie et al., 2022; Tortorelli et al., 2021). The long-term outcome is to create a sustainable system of trained educators to share and utilize specific phonological techniques to develop fluent, capable readers equipped with the problem-solving strategies necessary for literacy success.

According to the school system's office of curriculum, from 2016 through 2021, the three schools in this study implemented the Reading Horizons Discovery phonological reading program. The schools trained 100% of K–3 reading teachers, including Title I teachers and intervention specialists, and facilitated specific follow-up lesson observations and coaching sessions specifically for the Reading Horizons Discovery methods. A credentialed Reading Horizons Discovery instructional coach facilitated the professional development. Using credentialed coaches to conduct specific training benefits teachers who are not prepared to teach the most foundational components of literacy (Ehri & Flugman, 2018; Peltier et al., 2020; Xavier, 2022). Each school participated in lesson observations and individual feedback sessions provided by a credentialed coach. However, student data varied between the three elementary schools

where the teacher-participants in this study teach regarding performances and outcomes for demonstrating effective learning of grade-level phonics. Benchmark data on universal screeners illustrated inconsistent implementation of the instructional strategies from school to school. The outcomes of my study support K–3 reading teachers in their preferences regarding professional development, phonetic decoding methods, and implementation of instructional strategies directly associated with the newly acquired knowledge shared in the professional development. Additionally, the study results can inform professional development designers for continuing explicit training and areas of reinforcement and refinement.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this research study was that although K-–3 reading teachers have received specific professional development in phonological methods, a gap in practice exists with the implementation of instructional strategies. The gap implied a need for further professional development of effective instructional strategies supporting student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics (Forgie et al., 2022; Piasta & Hudson, 2022). The decisions made by the school system's administration where the teachers in this study work played a critical role in enhancing teachers' phonological knowledge and implementing effective instructional strategies.

According to national research literature, teachers’ phonological expertise has benefitted from organized professional development, a significant amount of professional learning leading up to at least a year-long mentoring relationship with experienced teachers, continuous and routine feedback from instructional coaches, and ongoing

professional learning opportunities beyond the initial year of training (Ehri & Flugman, 2018; Peltier et al., 2020; Xavier, 2022). Ehri and Flugman (2018), Forgie et al. (2022), and Peltier et al. (2020) discovered that extended professional development reinforced and refined teachers' phonological knowledge and their ability to implement learned instructional strategies. Their findings collectively support this study's problem statement by demonstrating that teachers benefit from a significant number of training hours and ongoing training in consecutive years to implement instructional strategies.

Thomas (2023) noted a need to understand what people think about their world and how individuals can, in turn, understand and learn from them. Teachers play a significant role in the education process. Therefore, the gap in practice addressed in this study provides the opportunity to learn from teachers' perspectives and draw conclusions for schools wanting to make policy and future professional development decisions.

Reading is an essential skill and involves the complex cognitive task of orchestrating strategies to problem-solve print. The metalinguistic study conducted by Hikida et al. (2019) determined that educators cannot teach what they do not know. Researchers have concluded that if educators have not had ample training in phonological knowledge attainment, they cannot deliver effective reading instruction (Hikida et al., 2019; Hudson et al., 2021).

Before choosing professional development in specific phonological teaching methods, K–3 reading teachers where this study was conducted were surveyed to determine professional needs. Data collected from K–3 reading teachers is vital to address the research problem that remains a current concern and support justification for

the study. According to the office of curriculum where the three schools in this study were located, in 2016, 93% of local K–3 reading teachers' professional needs survey responses showed the necessity to explicitly train K–3 reading teachers in phonics instruction. After 5 years of teachers using Reading Horizons Discovery, which included 2 days of initial training and implementation of instructional strategies, all K–3 reading teachers were trained in the phonetic methodology, and every teacher had access to a researched-based phonics program. Yet, according to the One Needs Assessment for 2021, teachers in the three elementary schools where this study was conducted indicated that students were still not on track with grade-level phonics and word analysis skills, which reflected a problem with implementing instructional strategies and a need to further train K–3 reading teachers in phonological development.

In 2021, according to building leadership team input in the schools examined in this study, one factor contributing to the problem was a lack of consistency among K–3 reading teachers' strategies in phonemic awareness and phonics instruction. Scarparolo and Hammond (2018) investigated a similar problem with teacher implementation of instructional strategies. The researchers discovered that teachers felt underprepared to teach reading. Training is needed once individuals become teachers because some preparation programs do not devote sufficient time for preservice teachers to teach reading, including the two most foundational components of phonemic awareness and phonics (Malik & Asif, 2022; Scarparolo & Hammond, 2018). According to the 2021 One Needs Assessment and Standardized Testing and Reporting Early Literacy Report, the schools in this study were underperforming in phonemic awareness and were not

meeting benchmarks in knowing and applying grade-level phonics. The local 2021 Standardized Testing and Reporting Early Literacy Report data aligned with the concern mentioned in the schools' One Needs Assessment, suggesting the inconsistent implementation of phonological instructional strategies.

Data represented in Table 1 support the problem statement and that a gap in practice exists with implementation and the need for potential follow-up training for effective instructional strategies supporting student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics, particularly in School B. The schools' Standardized Testing and Reporting Early Literacy Benchmark data is featured in Table 2. The table represents the schools' midyear combined cohort results for current performance and projected performance in the accuracy of students knowing and applying grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.

Table 1

Comparison of Second Grade Phonics Mastery

School	Second grade current mastery %
School A	50%
School B	14%
School C	71%

Table 2

Schools Combined: Apply Grade-Level Phonics and Word Analysis Skills in Decoding Words

Cohort/grade	Kindergarten	First	Second
Current performance	8%	32%	65%
Projected performance	22%	75%	90%

The percentage of students demonstrating proficiency with 80% to 100% accuracy was considerably lower than the projected outcome for each grade level's midyear benchmark. Table 2 illustrates a snowball effect when each grade level cohort trends well below the expectation for projected mastery. Furthermore, Table 2 clarifies the lack of student phonics proficiency at each grade level and supports the study's problem of inconsistent implementation of phonics instruction resulting in lower levels of student achievement.

The act of reading requires a sophisticated interactive process of skills aligned with phonological, morphological, and orthographic knowledge (Zarić et al., 2021). K–2 phonics data collected across the three elementary schools where the participants in this study taught indicated inconsistent implementation of phonetic instruction for the state's English Language Arts Literacy Standard RF.2.3 to know and apply second-grade phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words. Table 1 represents a comparison of each school's performance on the second-grade phonics standard.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. I encouraged teachers to share their perspectives regarding their professional development experiences with phonological methods and to identify their judgments and concerns with what is needed for future implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. The findings from this study may assist school administrators and professional development designers with planning future professional development.

Research Questions

The following qualitative research questions (RQs) were developed using Flavell's (1980) key concepts of metacognition to guide the study.

RQ1: What are K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods?

RQ2: Which specific professional development(s) do K–3 reading teachers believe has had the most effect on their teaching and implementation of instructional strategies to support students in phonemic awareness and phonics?

RQ3: What additional professional development opportunities do K–3 reading teachers describe as being needed to enhance teachers' implementation of phonetic instructional strategies?

Conceptual Framework

Flavell's (1980) theory of thinking about thinking, otherwise known as metacognition, was the grounding conceptual framework of this study. The contextual lens required me to analyze the literature to determine if others have made this logical connection by exploring K–3 reading teachers' perspectives on the professional development of phonological methods and implementation of instructional strategies. The act of thinking beyond or assessing one's understanding in a specific area of performance aligns with the examination of educator knowledge and application.

The logical connection between Flavell's (1980) framework of metacognition and exploring teachers' perspectives established a reflective inquiry process as K–3 educators considered their professional development and determined which experiences have been most beneficial in developing their instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics (see Duman & Semerci, 2019; Flavell, 1980). The framework of metacognition was used to address the research problem by identifying strategies previously learned and capturing specific professional development content the participants deemed valuable to the role of the K–3 reading teacher in phonemic awareness and phonics. The metacognitive experience provided a method for exploring teacher perspectives on which professional development experiences have contributed to their ability to implement instructional strategies.

The logical connections between the literature review and exploring teachers' perspectives through reflection can best be explained by teachers building capacity through professional learning and deepening their understanding through lived

experiences and reflective practices (Grant & Perez, 2018). Hattie's seminal research (2012) supports the conceptual framework, suggesting that when teachers reflect on their thinking, they create meaningful experiences. Hattie stated,

> Teachers need to be aware of what each and every student in their class is thinking and what they know, be able to construct meaning and meaningful experiences in light of the knowledge of the students, and have proficient knowledge and understanding of their subject content so they can provide meaningful and appropriate feedback. (pp. 18–19)

Meaningful and appropriate feedback directly results from teachers' lived experiences and reflects what they know and do, what their students know and do, and the implementation of instructional strategies conducive to student learning.

The contextual lens derived from the literature supported an understanding of the K–3 teachers' phonological knowledge and ability to deliver intentional phonetic instruction. Through the literature review, I examined research that proposed implementation of phonetic instruction and explored teachers' perspectives through reflective inquiry. The logical connections among key elements included understanding the role of K–3 teachers' phonological knowledge, a teacher's ability to provide intentional phonetic instruction, reflective thinking, and building teachers' capacity to implement effective phonetic instruction. These key elements were directly associated with the K–3 teacher's role of engaging in professional development and implementation of instructional strategies.

The qualitative approach used in this study was supported by the conceptual framework using an interview protocol and predetermined interview questions to collect the teachers' perspectives and thoughts about professional development and the implementation of instructional practices within the participant's school setting. Interview questions were open-ended and prompted responses that included the participants' self-reflection and an opportunity to think about what they valued regarding professional development and implementation of learned strategies. The RQs were specific to the participant's experiences in the workplace and background education. As the researcher, I used open and axial coding and thematic analysis to support the inductive approach of exploring the research topic more thoroughly and through the lens of the conceptual framework, Flavell's (1980) theory of thinking. The literature review in Chapter 2 provides a more thorough explanation of the logical connections between the key elements and the framework. These include the role of K–3 reading teachers' phonological knowledge and expertise, using a metacognitive lens to understand teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development, implementation of strategies, and building teacher capacity through intentional professional development.

Nature of the Study

The nature of the research study required me to explore K–3 teachers' perspectives through qualitative analysis. In the study, I used an interview protocol and predetermined interview questions to collect data through snowball sampling with K–3 reading teachers meeting the inclusion criteria (see Ravitch & Carl, 2019). The basic qualitative research design involved a combination of virtual and telephone interviews

depending on the participants' level of comfort and preference for the natural setting. According to Thomas (2023), "All kinds of information are valid and worthy of the name 'knowledge,' even things 'of the mind'" (p. 109). The qualitative analysis supported an inductive approach to explore the research topic more thoroughly and through an interpretive lens.

The purpose of this study was to explore K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. Semistructured interviews with open-ended questions were used as the primary research method to explore individual K–3 reading teachers' perspectives. The interview questions were designed to encourage detailed responses, individual reflection, and further investigation specific to the participants' professional learning and application of learned strategies. Ten participants were interviewed, and their responses were documented via audio recordings, detailed verbatim transcripts, and coding alignment to create categories and themes. All interviews were transcribed and coded to describe and illuminate the open coding analysis by going through the data several times to compare words, phrases, and sentences until categories and themes emerged. The aim was to use an interpretative approach to understand the meaningful perspectives constructed by the participants.

In this study, I used a consistent method to record the process of identifying the important concepts of the research, which became the foundation for thematic analysis

(see Thomas, 2023). The consistent method supported open coding and for me to read, reread, mark, and highlight the data collected from the participants and determine recurring words or patterns. Once these codes were identified and defined from the data, a second stage of coding, axial coding, was used to examine the open codes and to look for connections and relationships. I used thematic analysis to construct themes representing the qualitative data. In summary, recurring themes unfolded from the participants' responses, and those themes generated a broader scope of understanding of the data collected and provided explanations to answer the RQs.

Definitions

Instructional strategy: A technique teachers use to help students become independent strategic learners (Ehri & Flugman, 2018; Meeks et al., 2020).

Metacognition: An awareness and understanding of one's thinking and thought processes (Duman & Semerci, 2019; Flavell, 1980; Hattie, 2012).

Morphology: The study of words, how words are formed, and the relationship to other words in the same language (Park et al., 2020).

Phonemic awareness: The ability to focus and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken syllables and words (Brownell et al., 2020; National Reading Panel, 2000).

Phonics: A focus on the relationship between sounds and written symbols (National Reading Panel, 2000; Scarparolo & Hammond, 2018).

Phonological knowledge: An ability to identify and manipulate units of oral language such as words, syllables, onsets, and rimes (National Reading Panel, 2000; Nicholson & McIntosh, 2020).

Phonological method(s): A particular approach or procedure for teaching phonemic awareness and phonics (National Reading Panel, 2000; Nicholson & McIntosh, 2020).

Professional development: A universal label used for a wide variety of advanced professional learning, specialized training, or formal education, including coursework intended to improve teachers, educators, and administrators' skills, knowledge, and effectiveness (Peltier et al., 2020).

Self-efficacy: An individual's belief in their capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Hattie, 2012; Nicholson & McIntosh, 2020).

Assumptions

Despite teaching credentials awarded by higher education institutes, one assumption of this study was that certified teachers might not be equipped to teach phonemic awareness and phonics in the K–3 reading classroom. This assumption was vital to the research as the teachers in this study may not have been fully prepared to teach the essential components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (see Nicholson & McIntosh, 2020). Nicholson and McIntosh (2020) discovered that teachers in training who thought they were proficient in phonological knowledge and phonics scored higher in phonological

knowledge but failed to demonstrate higher phonics achievement than teachers who believed they were less proficient.

Another basic assumption of this study was that teaching phonemic awareness and phonics is a simple letter-to-sound association. This assumption creates a barrier between what teachers know and what the school should provide in the area of professional development. Teaching phonics involves the complexity of teaching explicit and systematic methods of the two most foundational components of reading, which requires teacher training and intentional implementation of instructional strategies. If teachers have received specific professional development in the components of phonemic awareness and phonics, then the meaningful next step was to explore their perspectives to determine what was working and what is needed for more thorough implementation within the school. Additional research suggested that K–3 teachers with multiple years of experience teaching reading had room for improvement in personal phonological knowledge, phonetic methods, and effective implementation of instructional strategies (Ehri & Flugman, 2018; Meeks et al., 2020). The correlation between teachers' perception of preparedness and the fundamental knowledge assessment suggests that those responsible for teaching children reading strategies have limited working knowledge of reading basics (Nicholson & McIntosh, 2020).

Meeks et al. (2020) indicated that teachers with limited years of teaching experience felt ill-equipped and had inadequate phonological knowledge; teachers with few years of experience felt more unprepared and expressed dissatisfaction with their training programs for transferring knowledge into practice. These assumptions highlight

the profound potential implications for both students and teachers if teachers do not feel prepared to teach the most fundamental components of reading. In this study, fully trained K–3 reading teachers' perspectives representing three different elementary schools in the midwestern region of the United States were explored regarding professional development and implementation of instructional strategies. The format included semistructured interviews while following an interview protocol with specific interview questions to ascertain the participants' experiences with professional development and implementation of learning into the K–3 reading classroom.

One assumption in this study was that all participants were open and honest while answering each interview question. A second assumption was that the participants' answers reflected their experiences, not those of other teachers. The third assumption was that my experience with literacy education would not negatively affect the study. My fourth assumption was that participants had a sincere interest in taking part in the research study and had no other motives, as there was not an offer of incentive for their participation in the study.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope and delimitations of the study are far-reaching and focused on the problem that although K–3 reading teachers have received specific professional development in phonological methods, a gap in practice exists with the implementation of instructional strategies. Therefore, there is a need for further professional development of effective instructional strategies supporting achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. The basis of my study was teacher professional development experiences and

implementation of learned instructional strategies. The specific focus was chosen because cohorts of students in Grades K–3 are the direct benefactors of phonological knowledge and implementation of instructional strategies of the K–3 teachers who participated in the study.

Potential boundaries of the demographic data in this research included the range of teacher expertise, years of experience, previous experience with reflective practice, and overall student achievement. The study supported the theory and practice of teachers in the area of fundamental phonological instruction at the K–3 grade levels. Like research by Tortorelli et al. (2021), the analysis allowed for future transferability due to the study's uniqueness in indicating a natural progression from the teachers' professional development methodologies to the facilitation of systematic phonics instruction as an initial step for long-term sustainability in teaching phonemic awareness and phonics. The research site supported transferability because it was typical and represented K–3 reading teachers trained in phonological teaching methods with ample time to implement instructional strategies. As a result, the study is more transferable to a broader range of teachers, administrators, boards of education, and higher education institutions.

Limitations

Limitations and challenges of this study included gaining access to in-person or live interviews due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions monitored and practiced by the school. Therefore, it was necessary to conduct interviews via virtual meetings or by telephone instead of in person. Virtual meetings were more convenient and efficient to record and promoted a level of comfort for the participants.

I used a reflective journal to record my thoughts to avoid personal bias. I requested the participants' permission to record the interviews and provided them with a two-page summary of the study findings. Each participant verified the interview transcript was accurate by participating in a member check. Member checking included restating, summarizing, and paraphrasing the data collected from the participants to ensure what was heard and transcribed was correct (see Thomas, 2023). The participants' validation ensured an accurate account of their perspectives and that I maintained a professional and nonbiased stance throughout the data collection process. All data were stored securely in a password-protected electronic file.

Significance

This study was significant because it provided an opportunity for K–3 reading teachers to share their perspectives regarding professional development, the implementation of instructional strategies, and what was needed for further phonological professional development. Forgie et al. (2022) and Peltier et al. (2020) highlighted the need for schools to equip educators with extensive and flexible foundational reading knowledge, including specific expertise in the components of phonological awareness, phonics, and spelling. The significance of this research study was that it provided information on teachers' perspectives and could inform administrators and professional development providers on how to plan future phonological professional development to improve the implementation of phonetic instructional strategies. Potential positive social change involves a cycle of inquiry, promoting multiple shifts within the learning

community to include a professional growth mindset, self-reflection, collective efficacy, and uniformity in best practices.

Summary

My research created an opportunity for K–3 reading teachers to reflect on their preparation to teach phonemic awareness and phonics in their classrooms. Understanding the effect of professional development on educator practice and desirable student achievement outcomes is vital for the entire school. Research findings have raised doubt that teachers sufficiently possess phonological knowledge to adequately teach phonetic skills for nearly 3 decades and continue to be a subject of concern (Malik & Asif, 2022; Moats, 2019; National Reading Panel, 2000). However, over the past 25 years, research results have not determined that a teacher's lack of phonological knowledge limits their potential to learn through professional development and implement phonics instruction (Castles et al., 2018; Moats, 2019; National Reading Panel, 2000). As a result of investigating the perspectives of K–3 reading teachers trained in phonological methods, the findings showed sustainable gains specifically related to teachers' phonological knowledge and the role of professional development, supporting effective phonological methods implemented in the K–3 setting. In Chapter 2, the literature review includes the role of K–3 reading teachers' phonological knowledge using a metacognitive lens to better understand their perspectives relevant to professional development, implementation of learned strategies, and building teacher capacity to effectively deliver phonics instruction.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Teaching is complex and requires multiple systems of self-evaluation, professional reflection, and establishing processes to serve students effectively. Despite K–3 reading teachers receiving specific professional development in phonological methods, a gap in practice in the implementation of instructional strategies suggested a need for further professional development. This literature review provides depth to this qualitative study's purpose: to explore K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics.

Decades of research have indicated that explicit phonics instruction benefits early readers. Yet, there has been little focus on the importance of equipping K–3 educators, specifically in the areas of phonological knowledge and enhancement of phonetic instructional practices (Brownell et al., 2020; Ferraz et al., 2018; Forgie et al., 2022). Alshaboul (2018) examined the effect of educators' phonological knowledge on their ability to teach reading. The researcher recognized a gap in phonological awareness manifested by educators' beliefs, specific knowledge, and the dominance of traditional teaching methods. The implications of Alshaboul's study are that reading deficits are linked to the teacher's phonological knowledge and directly related to the quality of instruction delivered in the classroom.

Hikida et al. (2019) supported the need to examine the problem and purpose of this study regarding educator preparation to teach foundational reading skills.

Additionally, their research indicated that professional development enhanced teachers' phonological knowledge and supported teacher planning of early reading instruction. Student ability to decode, an important skill for effective reading, was directly related to K–3 teachers' capacity to teach foundational reading. This significant correlation between student achievement and educators' roles is reflected in the literature review and consists of essential underlying concepts, such as educator perspective, phonological knowledge, phonemic awareness, phonics, phonetic instructional methods, professional development, and metacognition or metacognitive analysis.

Literature Search Strategy

In this comprehensive review, the sources used to search for the peer-reviewed literature were from the Walden University Library, ERIC, Google Scholar, and specific databases associated with Walden University and identified as Education Source, EBSCO, and SAGE Journals. Key search terms included *kindergarten*, *first*, *second*, *third grade* (Ed. Source), *first*, *second*, *third grade* (ERIC), *teacher*, *educator*, *instructor perspective*, *phonological knowledge*, *phonemic knowledge*, *early childhood education*, *phonics teaching methods*, and *professional development*. Keywords were selected by narrowing the focus to the two most foundational components of teaching reading and educators' roles in development as effective teachers of phonemic awareness and phonics instruction in the early childhood Grades K–3.

The literature review consists of qualitative and quantitative studies that explored teacher perspectives on how professional development in phonological methods contributed to educator efficacy to teach phonemic awareness and phonics in the K–3

classroom. The gap in the literature was the limited research on the importance of equipping teachers with the necessary methods and strategies to teach explicit phonemic awareness and phonics. The lack of research on how higher education institutions and schools prepare educators to teach the two most foundational literacy components was also a recognizable gap in the literature. Preservice teacher perspectives regarding higher education preparation programs were not investigated in this study. However, future research could be an extension of this study to include an entry year teacher approach in a similar study regarding their lived experiences with phonological knowledge development and instructional strategies. With more time and attention to the root cause of the problem, another comparable study could benefit higher education policy makers and the intentional preparation of teaching foundational reading skills.

Conceptual Framework

The framework that supported this qualitative study was Flavell's (1980) theory of thinking about thinking. The act of thinking beyond or assessing one's understanding, and performance aligns with examining teacher knowledge and application. The role of reflection can best be explained by teachers building capacity through professional learning and deepening their understanding through lived experiences and reflective practices (Grant & Perez, 2018).

Hattie (2012) elaborated on the role of reflection as teachers think about their thinking and create meaningful experiences for students:

> Teachers need to be aware of what each and every student in their class is thinking and what they know, be able to construct meaning and meaningful

> experiences in light of the knowledge of the students and have proficient knowledge and understanding of their subject content so they can provide meaningful and appropriate feedback. (pp. 18-19)

Flavell (1980) coined the term *metacognition*, which means thinking about thinking.

The critical concepts of metacognition include declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, and strategy knowledge (Demir et al., 2019). Metacognition regulation involves an individual reflecting on their scope of work and self-assessing their knowledge and capacity to implement learned knowledge (Duman & Semerci, 2019; Flavell, 1980). Oakley (2018) explored the importance of metacognition and the educator's learning regarding language structure by recognizing that teachers need to talk and think about adequate knowledge to extend their ability to use instructional language in their teaching. Oakley's research supported the framework of metacognition by elaborating on the role of effective teachers as they implement a range of instructional lessons aligned with student needs.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Teaching reading in the K–3 classroom is a complex set of actions that involves both the art and science of teaching (Paige et al., 2021). First and foremost, teachers must possess knowledge associated with the most foundational levels of the reading pyramid: phonemic awareness and phonics. Teachers must obtain the knowledge needed to be effective phonemic awareness and phonics instructors, look for resources, prepare for student engagement and diagnostics, and align phonetic instruction for individual students in systematic methods. Historically, a report from the National Reading Panel

(2000), a compilation of correlational studies, identified phonemic awareness and phonics as the two predictors for student success in reading in the initial 2 years of learning. In the report, there was an emphasis on phonemic awareness and phonics instruction for students and how effective instructional strategies implemented by educators would positively affect students learning to read (Castles et al., 2018; National Reading Panel, 2000). It is evident that additional reading research is necessary in phonological professional development methods and educators' self-evaluations regarding preparedness to ensure effective instructional strategies are implemented in all K–3 reading classrooms. Teachers will likely struggle to teach students to read if their schools do not focus on educator professional development in the foundational components of reading.

The investigation of the literature focused on aspects of educator phonological knowledge and implementation of phonetic instructional strategies to achieve a better understanding of the importance of this study. Consideration was given to the research literature that explicitly included discussions and investigations of K–3 teachers' phonological knowledge and ability to deliver phonetic instruction. Over the past 2 decades, researchers have identified the importance of early childhood students being well-versed in phonics decoding and word attack strategies; however, if the teacher is not well-versed or has limited experience with phonemic awareness and phonics, this can have a negative effect on their students (Moats, 2019). More importantly, if K–3 teachers do not feel equipped or confident with their phonological knowledge, then the expectation to teach explicit and systematic strategies to problem solve print can also

affect student learning (Burkins & Yates, 2021). For students to learn to read efficiently and in a timely manner and to address school success, K–3 teachers must reflect on their professional and instructional practices by focusing on what works and what practices can be replicated and extended to effect students who are learning to read.

Understanding K–3 Teacher Phonological Knowledge

For decades, multiple research studies cited in the seminal works of the National Reading Panel report (2000) have supported teaching children to manipulate phonemes in words during the early phases of learning to read. This intentional instruction has been shown to improve students' reading more than those who learn in a classroom without phonemic awareness instruction. Teaching beginning reading and spelling was critical for student learning and appeared to be more complex and challenging than often portrayed (Moats, 2019). Alshaboul (2018) expressed that there is a gap in phonological awareness manifested by educators' beliefs and specific knowledge. Moats (2019) characterized phonics instruction as an acquired structure of language requiring explicit and systematic skill building within several levels of a teacher's instructional language. While Moats suggested the dominance of traditional teaching methods relying on a whole language approach has affected teachers' abilities to deliver phonetic instruction, other researchers indicated the Science of Reading also relies on the teacher's craft or their ability to apply the art of teaching (Paige et al., 2021).

In a separate literacy study, Oakley (2018) focused on early childhood teachers' preparedness to teach explicit phonics and spelling patterns and determined that most of the teacher-participants surveyed felt inadequately prepared to deliver spelling

instruction. The implications of poorly prepared teachers suggest that student reading deficits are linked to phonological awareness deficits and are directly related to the teacher's quality of instruction (White et al., 2020). The initial findings of Tortorelli et al. (2021) regarding teacher knowledge from preparation programs were inconclusive. However, their findings did suggest a professional approach of cyclical learning designed from explicit instruction and engagement in opportunities to practice with students benefitted implementation of phonetic instructional strategies. A correlation between the research findings and the current study exists and supports the exploration of K–3 educators' preparation and professional development experience, specifically with phonemic awareness and phonics, to determine if phonological knowledge influences an educator's ability to implement phonetic instructional strategies.

The research review by Hikida et al. (2019) revealed several insights. Knowledge of the reading process was important to teachers, yet measures suggested there was room for improvement in teachers' knowledge of primary phonics and phonology, as well as the ability to apply and deliver phonological knowledge as instruction to students. The teacher's understanding of phonological knowledge affects their ability to verbalize and teach phonemic awareness, as evidenced by Brownell et al. (2020), who examined a collection of articles focused on a vision for developing teacher quality. To expand upon the idea that teachers must possess both linguistic and phonological knowledge, Arrow et al. (2019) expressed concern regarding teachers with high linguistic knowledge but limited phonological knowledge. The researchers' concern involved participants who mainly applied implicit or incidental reading instruction, word-level prompting, and

instruction only used in context. According to Arrow et al., a teacher's linguistic knowledge alone was insufficient to ensure effective instruction for beginning readers. The relevance of this finding is two-fold. First, it is important to understand the relationship between teacher knowledge, and second, the application of phonological knowledge significantly impacts effective teaching strategies and early reading outcomes for young readers.

Scarparolo and Hammond (2018) focused on a professional development model that prepared teachers with the fundamental knowledge to address the foundational levels of reading instruction. The researchers determined the evidence-based professional development approach to be effective based on the increase in teachers' knowledge and use of instructional strategies. Xavier (2022) emphasized a historical barrier for teachers with limited knowledge known as "the Peter effect" (p. 108). The term means that one cannot give what one does not possess and that a teacher's level of phonological knowledge can be a barrier to producing effective reading instruction if they have limited knowledge (Xavier, 2022). Furthermore, Xavier explained that when teachers are properly trained in explicit and systematic methods, they are more intentional with their phonics instruction, which will benefit all students. Determining the importance of professional development for K–3 teachers was essential to explore and purposefully build phonological knowledge and skilled teachers to positively influence reading achievement.

The Role of K–3 Teachers' Phonological Expertise

Years of teaching experience is a significant factor in a teacher's phonological development. Jordan et al. (2018) explained that teachers' levels of content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge were enhanced and developed over time with professional development opportunities and years of teaching experience. According to Colomer et al. (2020), best practices can be used to develop a professional learning model, and, coupled with experiential learning embedded within a teaching assignment, help enhance teacher knowledge and practice.

School authorities play a significant part in developing teachers' phonological knowledge and effective practices at their institutions. According to the literature, the processes and programs that have benefitted teachers' phonological expertise include organized professional development, year-long mentoring programs, continuous contact and feedback from instructional coaches, and ongoing learning opportunities to reinforce and refine personal phonological knowledge (Ehri & Flugman, 2018). Mentoring programs that involve experienced teachers mentoring other teachers through demonstration and revisiting explicit instructional strategies have proven to be the most effective types of professional development (Ehri & Flugman, 2018). In Ehri and Flugman's (2018) study, the mentor tracked the progression of teachers' development and explained that they lacked sufficient knowledge in the fall, but the majority achieved mastery level by spring. Both the mentors and mentees agreed that intensive and specific professional development addressed a needed focus on the teacher's role and preparation to benefit their practice and student achievement in reading (Ehri & Flugman, 2018).

The cognitive system of learning to read words, sentences, and passages with expression has helped students achieve the outcome of comprehension; therefore, the complex task of developing teachers to teach reading should be a priority (Moats, 2019). Hudson et al. (2021) further explained that implementing and demonstrating instructional strategies required the teacher to recognize certain features relevant to print, show foundational knowledge, and demonstrate expertise in the following aspects of language: phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, and automaticity. Castles et al. (2018) comprehensively reviewed the science of learning to read. The assessment consisted of the child's initial phase of alphabetic skills, sight word recognition, and text comprehension to confirm the importance of phonics instruction. Castles et al. concluded that effective phonics instruction was foundational, and the teacher must move instructional practices beyond basic phonics to develop effective classroom practices and expert readers.

A teacher's phonological knowledge and ability to implement instructional strategies also include their aptitude to accurately identify reading deficiencies in students' early literacy skills of initial sounds, letter naming, phoneme segmentation, nonsense words, and oral reading (Torgesen et al., 2021). Gonzalez et al. (2018) and Garwood et al. (2020) elaborated on the importance of early identification and classification of a student's early reading performance and its implications for emotional and behavioral disorders. Garwood et al. focused on teachers being knowledgeable in foundational reading skills while incorporating positive behavior supports when intervening with students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Student outbursts

associated with academic frustration due to poor reading performance have challenged early childhood teachers to gain the necessary knowledge to evaluate and accurately identify reading deficits, including the necessary phonological knowledge to evaluate students (Gonzalez et al., 2018). Porter et al. (2022) characterized teacher knowledge and determined they lacked the necessary phonological information to effectively teach within the intervention tiers of instructional supports. Vines et al. (2020) determined teachers must be able to leverage their understanding to make informed decisions about their students' learning or lack of it. Collectively, Garwood et al., Gonzalez et al., Porter et al., and Vines et al. emphasized the importance of the teachers' expertise and ability to identify early those students who are at-risk of reading failure and implement specific instruction to offset this as well as and frustration for students.

School authorities have focused professional development time and resources in developing K–3 reading teachers' collective capacity to serve generations of students. Peltier et al. (2020) summed up the role of K–3 teachers, stating that primary teachers must have extensive and flexible knowledge regarding foundational reading skills, including phonological awareness, phonics, and spelling. The researchers noted that teachers' knowledge develops over time through appropriate field experiences and regular reflective practices. Arrow et al. (2019) also emphasized the influence of teachers' linguistic knowledge and their modeling of explicit phonics to beginning readers. Piasta and Hudson (2022) recognized a connection between teachers having the necessary knowledge of reading components and reading processes and providing effective foundational reading instruction. However, some researchers indicated teacher

knowledge alone is insufficient to ensure effective instruction is provided to beginning readers (Arrow et al., 2019).

A recurring theme in the research literature was that more time is needed to prepare teachers to teach reading during their preparation programs and in their initial teaching years. Hudson et al. (2021) conducted a study featuring 20 empirical studies specifically analyzing the effect of entry year elementary teachers' training. The researchers determined teachers' knowledge relevant to the Science of Reading is an essential component in preparing elementary teachers to teach reading and holding K–3 reading teachers accountable (Whittingham et al., 2021). Ehri and Flugman's (2018) study involved the timeline of a 1-year mentoring program. Ehri and Flugman suggested that beginning teachers needed more time to effectively teach the most foundational learning components of reading. Furthermore, studies have indicated the need to equip and better prepare the next generation of teachers by supporting ongoing professional learning, which has benefitted teachers in teaching phonics in the K–3 classroom (Ehri & Flugman, 2018; Hudson et al., 2021; Malik & Asif, 2022).

Reflective Inquiry and Self-Efficacy

Beal (2018) used reflective data centralized on a cycle of teacher inquiry and self-efficacy, which required the participants to use assessment data to guide their teaching. The action research helped the participants by analyzing the reading data, reflecting on their performance, and effective instructional practices. As a result of the study, the participants developed instructional objectives and lessons for the critical reading areas of phonological awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Similar to Beal's

research, Demir et al. (2019) determined that relationships between metacognition, self-regulation, and social intelligence scales predicted teachers' lifelong learning trends. Demir et al. suggested that educators self-regulated new learning via metacognitive practices.

Reflective inquiry and the professional practice of teachers' self-regulation guided the quality of professional learning best suited for teachers and, ultimately, the students they will serve (Beal, 2018; Demir et al., 2019). Ehri and Flugman (2018) tracked the progression of teachers' development in phonological knowledge from fall to spring while pairing each teacher with a mentor to demonstrate how to teach systematic phonics instruction. Both mentors and mentees agreed that the intensive modeling and demonstration of reflective practices supported the development of knowledge and explicit practices for teaching phonics in the K–3 classroom. Ehri and Flugman discovered that teachers learned through reflective inquiry and from each other as part of social interaction. Furthermore, Forgie et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of improving K–3 reading teacher quality and self-efficacy through professional development focused on the foundational literacy components.

When teachers engaged in active reflection as part of their professional learning process, the reflective practice positively affected instructional practices, with students also engaging in reflective practice as a learning strategy (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018). Reflective inquiry has enabled teachers to be active learners while sharpening their skills to observe their students, collect data, and make informed instructional decisions (Lund, 2020). Lund (2020) noted that as teachers engaged positively in reflective inquiry, they

increased their professional confidence, felt more informed regarding their daily instructional practices, and focused more on the child's academic needs to understand the instructional complexities better. The findings of Lund correlated with Pratt's (2020) results, which suggest that teachers learned specific strategies through metacognitive practices and replicated those strategies in the classroom, which would benefit both teacher and student performance.

Teachers participating in this study responded positively to local initiatives, which provided continuous professional development and the opportunity to reflect with peer-colleagues via social interactions and application of instructional methods. According to some researchers, teachers' positive perceptions about professional development and newly learned methods benefit overall implementation (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018; Colomer et al., 2020; Peltier et al., 2020). However, Meeks et al. (2020) summarized recent research findings by stating that entry year teachers felt ill-equipped due to inadequate knowledge and were dissatisfied with their ability to transfer adequate knowledge into effective instructional practices.

Pratt (2020) found that teachers increased their awareness in a two-step process by receiving explicit instruction in metacognitive reading strategies and then directly teaching them to their students. As a result, teachers' new and immediate knowledge supported their ability to self-reflect on their learning processes and adapt their teaching. Meeks et al. (2020) highlighted a potentially severe problem for schools that do not create opportunities for teachers to reflect upon practice, ask for support, and intervene when necessary to build phonological knowledge and the ability to deliver phonics

instruction. The continuous professional development and social interaction among teachers can best explain the results of reflective thinking on teachers' expertise.

The role of reflective inquiry has been critical to the success of teachers using a metacognitive lens. According to Pratt (2020), the professional action of teachers viewing their role in professional development and the instructional process has benefitted the execution of instructional practices for elementary students. If teachers and schools have not been provided an opportunity for reflective inquiry, teachers have missed the chance to practice self-efficacy and improve upon what they already know and use (Meeks et al., 2020).

Intentional Versus Incidental Instruction

As a primary method of developing teachers' phonological development, researchers have suggested that teachers increase their knowledge and ability to implement phonics instruction through classroom delivery or application of their own experiences with phonetic development (Campbell, 2020; Chapman et al., 2018). In a study by Chapman et al. (2018), some research participants used intentional phonics programs to address grade-level phonics, while others in Campbell's (2020) research referred to an approach known as incidental phonics instruction. Campbell focused on early childhood teachers' various methods to implicitly teach phonics and highlighted the correlation between literacy-play phonics and teachers' reasoning for not using commercial phonics programs. According to Campbell, teachers using incidental phonics instruction reported higher confidence when teaching phonics to elementary students. While Campbell's findings favor teachers using an incidental approach or an unrelated

sequence of phonics instruction, Chapman et al. reported that teachers who teach phonics increased students' literacy achievement in their classes. Furthermore, the teacher-participants who used explicit phonics methods believed the intentional phonics instruction empowered students to read and improved their ability to implement sound phonological methods (Chapman et al., 2018). Regardless of the argument concerning incidental versus intentional phonics, the studies by Campbell and Chapman et al. clarified that teachers had to gain a level of phonological knowledge through some means to teach the implicit or explicit strategies.

Exley and Kitson (2018) demonstrated the importance of collecting teachers' perspectives within a particular setting to determine organizational consistency and inform district leaders of professional learning relevant to the type of phonics being taught. Although the study did not assess the teachers' preference for intentional phonics versus incidental phonics instruction, the researchers explored teachers' perspectives and their views on implemented instructional strategies from professional development and if further professional development was needed to implement the intentional phonics program consistently. The current study aligns with Exley and Kitson's research to collect data regarding input from teachers who teach phonics within the English curriculum.

Without common instructional language and similar professional development experiences, it becomes a challenge for a school to scaffold intentional phonetic instruction and move student performance consistently (Flynn et al., 2021). Carson and Bayetto (2018) investigated the relationship between early childhood teachers'

phonological awareness, assessment practices, self-reported phonological awareness, and actual phonological knowledge. The study's findings indicated that nearly 80% of early childhood teachers used phonological assessments to interpret student phonological performance (Carson & Bayetto, 2018). Assessment results are based on teacher observations and interpretations of student understanding and are often performed by teachers who are not highly trained in phonics instruction or phonics assessment. Furthermore, Carson and Bayetto discovered that teachers overestimated their self-reported knowledge versus their actual phonological understanding. These findings are concerning because teachers with limited working phonological understanding make daily student performance decisions and determine the instructional process's next steps. Flynn et al. (2021) revealed a need for schools to implement intentional school-wide approaches for professional development in phonics. The findings of Flynn et al. demonstrated the same concern as Carson and Bayetto, recommending that authorities consider local needs to calibrate teachers' existing phonological knowledge more consistently throughout the school.

When considering intentional phonics instruction versus incidental phonics instruction, Ciesielski and Creaghead (2020) synthesized research literature and identified 15 different studies related to early childhood educators' review of students' phonological awareness outcomes following their professional development. The results confirmed what Campbell's (2020) research indicated, that a wide range of factors influence effective teaching, including the teacher's ability to influence literacy outcomes, provided the teacher has the required knowledge and skills to teach early

reading. According to Ciesielski and Creaghead, the prior education and experience of the teacher, the format of the professional development experience, and the content of the educational program were the leading factors in improving students' phonological awareness. While Campbell's research findings favored incidental phonics instruction, Ciesielski and Creaghead's data supported the importance of equipping early childhood teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve intentional and desirable outcomes in early childhood reading through professional development.

Teacher preparation programs coupled with appropriate curricula and professional development benefits student reading achievement. Ehri and Flugman's (2018) research determined that specific professional development improved teacher preparation, which assisted K–3 teacher practice and student achievement in reading. Ehri and Flugman's findings revealed the effectiveness of an intensive mentoring model of professional development applied to a subject that is difficult to teach and to a student population known for lower reading achievement. Similar findings from a study by McMahan et al. (2019) indicated an association between professional development in intentional literacy methods and increased teacher knowledge. Ferraz et al. (2018) examined phonological development while referencing a conceptual framework grounded in Piaget's theory of constructivism. Ferraz et al. supported a connection between teacher phonological awareness and an increase in student knowledge of letters and sounds within the instructional reading practices. An analysis of the research by Ehri and Flugman, Ferraz et al., and McMahan et al. supports the argument for intentional phonics instruction, with

multiple studies suggesting a need for district authorities to prepare teachers for this type of instruction in the elementary classroom.

According to Tortorelli et al. (2021), intentional, explicit, and systematic reading instruction supports the teacher in their role of delivering effective instruction and predicts more efficient and sustainable methods of teaching students to read. Foorman et al. (2018) compared two approaches to early literacy instruction: stand-alone and embedded. A stand-alone approach consists of an all-inclusive reading program that supports classroom instruction with specific examples, tools, lessons, and curriculum. An embedded approach is more teacher driven and determined by the instructional opportunities that present themselves in the classroom and are solely designed by the teacher. The most compelling information from the study was the stand-alone approach had significant outcomes for student achievement compared to the embedded approach (Foorman et al., 2018). Like Tortorelli et al., Foorman et al. indicated teachers adhering to a certain degree of exactness when teaching was a key factor for achieving success.

Cunningham et al. (2021) explained that the theory of fundamental phonological memory instruction showed a unique relationship leading to reading and highlighted the importance of phonological knowledge. Similarly, Foorman at al. (2018) emphasized the importance of teachers building their phonological knowledge through professional programming and development as key factors in learning to teach reading. The researchers' findings indicated a natural progression with enhancing students' phonological memory as a stepping stone for long-term phonological memory development. Cunningham et al. and Foorman et al. suggested the importance of

intentionally and systematically implementing phonetic instruction, which supports the importance of teachers having consistent phonological knowledge and instructional strategies to deliver effective reading instruction.

Considering findings from other researchers provided me with a better understanding of the metacognitive aspect of professional development and what specific opportunities have significantly affected teaching phonemic awareness and phonics instruction. Park et al. (2020) took the approach that reading includes two variables: decoding and comprehension. This research aligns with the fact that elementary reading teachers need to be equipped with the necessary phonological knowledge to teach reading. When teachers possess the skills to facilitate decoding strategies and word studies, it enhances their ability to deliver effective phonics instruction benefiting all students, including at-risk readers. According to Park et al., the desired outcomes for all students are the fundamental skills of reading fluency, spelling, comprehension, and written language achievement, especially for those with disabilities. The most significant effect regarding early reading development has been in preschool and kindergarten, but the review supports explicit, intentional, and systematic phonics instruction for grade levels first through fourth (Park et al., 2020). The findings of Park et al. were relevant to this study and demonstrated teachers' perspectives while providing an understanding of the metacognitive aspect of professional development and which specific opportunities have had a positive effect on teaching phonemic awareness and phonics instruction.

Sincere engagement in the reading and thinking process does not come easily for all students or teachers assigned to teach reading. As mentioned, researchers have

recognized that intentional and explicit phonetic instruction in the primary reading classroom builds students' abilities to problem-solve print effectively and eventually transition into the more difficult reading skills of fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Pratt, 2020). Explicit teaching strategies are a product of intentional professional development designed to increase metacognitive awareness and reflective practices relevant to what affects student achievement. Pratt (2020) referenced metacognitive strategies as those routines and procedures that foster individuals to monitor and assess their ongoing performance in accomplishing a cognitive task. Pratt's findings suggest that effective educator professional development includes a teaching model that fosters reflective decision-making practices. A teacher-driven inquiry model allows the trained teacher to make decisions based on their experience, knowledge, classroom management, and personal insight regarding instructional decisions.

Structured literacy practices for the K–3 classroom include the teacher explicitly modeling phonological awareness, teaching decoding skills, and instruction in developing students' executive function and working memory of phonological knowledge (Walton, 2020). According to Walton (2020), this intentional development of higher-level thinking and processing of printed text is facilitated in the K–3 classroom by trained teachers. Those trained teachers have a skillset acquired through intentional professional development guided by demonstration of shared strategies and years of experience following a structured literacy approach. Wilsenach's (2019) research added that a student's level of phonemic awareness and phonological knowledge is significantly more likely to predict reading success. Zolgar-Jerkovic et al. (2018) also demonstrated the

importance of intentional and explicit teaching of phoneme correspondence, leading to desirable reading outcomes, which helps students learn to read more efficiently. The findings of Walton, Wilsenach, and Zolgar-Jerkovic et al. are relevant to this study and highlight the connection between phonological professional development and effective teaching practices involving the implementation of phonics instruction.

Regarding intentional versus incidental instruction, the literature reviewed indicated that specific and deliberate phonics instruction in the K–3 reading classroom is needed for students to learn to decode and problem-solve print. This intentional practice involves understanding the hidden issues and challenges of literacy instruction shared during collaborative educator meetings and professional development. The supportive literature suggested teachers need to approach the most foundational components of the literacy framework intentionally with a structured instructional plan that includes explicit phonics instruction.

Building Capacity

A child's phonological awareness significantly affects other areas of literacy, such as phonological decoding, visual word recognition, fluency rate, and reading comprehension. Zarić et al. (2021) determined a strong correlation between building phonological awareness and orthographic knowledge. The researchers demonstrated a positive contribution to the bigger picture of literacy by explicitly teaching the representation of letter patterns to achieve student outcomes of successful reading and spelling. The findings of Zarić et al. are relevant to this study because they give weight and traction to understanding teacher perspectives regarding their experiences with

specific professional development and building capacity to implement effective instructional strategies.

Professional development is essential for building teacher capacity to facilitate phonemic awareness and phonemic-grapheme knowledge to enhance instructional supports for all learners, including English learners. Specific phonemic awareness instructional supports implemented for English learner students included rhyming, segmentation, isolation of letter-to-sound correspondence, substitutions, and blending of sounds to articulate words, which proved to help them (Eslick et al., 2020). There is also a strong correlation between logical operations, phonological knowledge, and students' early exposure to phonemic awareness involving letter and sound instruction (Ferraz et al., 2018). Again, the relevant exposure and lived experiences regarding phonological knowledge development that teachers bring to the K–3 classroom enhance their teaching ability and can benefit all students they serve.

Not only do teachers need to build their students' capacity to read, but they must also reflect upon their level of expertise and ability to implement strategies that target the student's needs and address learning deficits (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020). Gonzalez et al. (2018) elaborated on the need for expertise, early identification, and specific interventions to offset reading failure and potential emotional and behavioral disorders. Considering the profound impact of building teacher capacity within the area of phonological knowledge, more awareness and emphasis should be placed on training teachers. An organized effort focusing on building K–3 teacher capacity would ultimately

benefit the enhancement of learner capacity and, as a result, create a sustainable system for teaching phonics in the K–3 classroom.

Hattie and Zierer (2018) referenced Sinek's theory on leadership and the golden circle effect in their book, *10 Mindframes for Visible Learning: Teaching for Success*, stating, "How we think about the impact of what we do is more important than what we do" (pp. ix-xi). The point Hattie and Zierer emphasized was that educators in all aspects of the school must be reflective in their thinking and apply effective practices to build both teacher and organizational capacity to meet the academic needs of students. One method that supports building capacity was presented by Jordan et al. (2018), who examined levels of content knowledge and pedagogical content to determine if teacher knowledge of reading could equal knowledge across the domain. The researchers found that a teacher's years of experience were significantly related to their knowledge, along with experiential learning embedded within teacher education programs and professional development. Jordan et al. shifted important talking points toward building organizational capacity to reflect on professional development and make it relevant to their internal response or their self-efficacy relationship with teaching. Furthermore, additional researchers have found that the self-efficacy relationship to teach phonics-based instruction determined that teachers with higher levels of phonological knowledge gave beginning teachers more self-confidence in their ability to support all students in reading (Nicholson & McIntosh, 2020; Scarparolo & Hammond, 2018).

Teachers demonstrating high levels of phonological knowledge show more self-confidence to support all students in learning to read (Nicholson & McIntosh, 2020).

Nicholson and McIntosh (2020) surveyed reading teachers in training to determine if there was a relationship between phonological knowledge and self-efficacy. The teachers in training who thought they were proficient in phonological knowledge and phonics scored high in phonological knowledge but failed to show higher phonics achievement than teachers who believed they were less talented (Nicholson & McIntosh, 2020). Scarparolo and Hammond (2018) and Xavier (2022) demonstrated that an evidence-based professional model, which consisted of a workshop, classroom observations, and routine coaching sessions, benefitted the teacher-participants' growth, specifically with the implementation of instructional strategies. The information regarding teacher self-efficacy and building teacher capacity through a specific professional model was most relevant.

Successfully improving teachers' abilities to teach fundamental reading strategies through professional development opportunities, specifically in the literacy components of phonemic awareness and phonics, will benefit student learning (Jordan et al., 2018). Paige et al. (2019) examined the relationship between foundational reading skills and third grade students' achievement on the third grade reading achievement test. Paige et al. concluded that students proficient with the foundational reading skills of phonemic awareness and phonetic decoding were 7 times more likely to score proficient on the state reading assessment. In another study, Jordan et al. (2018) discovered that third graders benefitted from their teacher completing 90–180 hours of face-to-face training in the reading fundamentals of the five domains of phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. McNeill (2018) had similar

findings with teachers trained for 10 hours in phonological awareness, morphological awareness, and orthographic awareness outperforming teachers trained in 30 hours of metalinguistic knowledge relevant to spelling instruction. Paige et al., Jordan et al., and McNeill found that when teachers are trained in the intentional instructional strategies to teach phonemic awareness and phonics, their students are set up to achieve the desirable outcome of proficiency in foundational reading skills.

Building teacher and organizational capacity through conversation, reflection, and professional development practices supports applications for a broader perspective of the simple view of reading, which represents word recognition and language comprehension. Castles et al. (2018) provided a comprehensive review of the simple view of reading with a focus on fluent word recognition as a result of critically important phonics instruction. The researchers reinforced the importance of developmentally informed teachers and a deeper understanding of how language and writing systems work.

Piasta et al. (2020) reported that practical efforts to build teacher capacity depended on the type of professional development implemented, the participants' perspective on the professional development experience, and whether they valued the professional learning opportunity. Similar to Piasta et al., Mullikin et al. (2021) suggested teachers should have input and reflect upon their professional needs to inform next steps with professional development. According to Mullikin et al., the practice of reflective inquiry is an essential part of the professional development process for schools. Beal (2018) and Demir et al. (2019) found that an effective school will promote educator capacity and foster self-efficacy, which will benefit the entire school system. The

research of Piasta et al., Mullikin et al., Beal, and Demir et al. is relevant to the topic of study because it implies that effective teacher professional development includes reflective practices designed to encourage teachers to analyze their thinking and consider their role in developing quality instruction.

Brownell et al. (2020) synthesized multiple literature reviews and compared patterns among the studies that investigated the advancement of teacher education practices. Based on their findings, Brownell et al. noted a significant need to prioritize professional development to develop teacher quality. The information was relevant to the current study because it highlighted teacher preparation, professional development, and building capacity to implement best practices to equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to teach students effectively. Arrow et al. (2019) supported the findings of Brownell et al., suggesting that a teacher's knowledge plays a significant role in teaching students how to read in the early stages of word recognition. Furthermore, Arrow et al. indicated that how teachers perceive their own knowledge versus how those same teachers implement instructional practices may indicate a gap in practice. The findings of Arrow et al. indicated that overuse of incidental approaches governed teachers' instructional practices and that despite having high linguistic knowledge, the teachers relied heavily on implicit phonics instruction. The study's results suggest that a teacher's knowledge alone is not sufficient, and there needs to be an intentional planning effort to train them to implement explicit and intentional phonics instruction.

Summary and Conclusions

The major themes in the literature review included understanding the K–3 teacher's phonological knowledge, the role of the K–3 teacher's phonological expertise, reflective inquiry and self-efficacy, intentional versus incidental instruction, and building capacity in implementing effective phonics instruction. The many qualitative peer-reviewed studies on teacher perceptions of their phonological knowledge suggest that most teachers do not feel prepared to teach the two most foundational levels within the Science of Reading framework (Hudson et al., 2021). The literature review revealed the importance of professional development relevant to developing teacher quality. According to the literature, there is plenty of room for developing teacher quality in phonological knowledge and methods, which leads to effective instructional practices (Hikida et al., 2019). One literature review mentioned teachers' preparedness to teach phonics instruction and suggested teachers who are assigned and responsible for teaching children effective reading strategies may feel unprepared and have limited working knowledge of reading basics (Oakley, 2018). Hudson et al. (2021) supported dedicating more time to preparing teachers to teach reading and advocated for professional development that provided teachers an opportunity to apply their newly learned knowledge and skills under the supervision of an expert. Unfortunately, the assumption that teachers are entirely prepared to teach phonemic awareness and phonics to the youngest, most at-risk learners has been generalized and ignored by higher education institutions and school administrators because of the supply and demand for licensed K–3 teachers. Once graduated from college and certified to teach, it becomes the concern of

the individual teacher or the school district to secure specific professional development. Regardless of teachers' years of experience or types of undergraduate experiences, the literature review highlighted the importance of K–3 reading teachers having extensive and flexible knowledge of the two most foundational reading skills, which include phonemic awareness and phonics (Forgie et al., 2022; Peltier et al., 2020; Piasta & Hudson, 2022).

In the literature review, there was a recognizable gap in phonological awareness manifested by teachers' beliefs, specific knowledge, and a dominance of traditional teaching methods, which influenced their ability to deliver effective phonetic instruction (Alshaboul, 2018; Moats, 2019; Oakley, 2018). Alshaboul (2018) indicated a teacher's phonological knowledge is directly related to the quality of instruction delivered in the classroom. Moats (2019) emphasized an abundance of ineffective teaching methods dominating reading instruction, the opposite of intentional phonics instruction. Oakley (2018) focused on early childhood teachers' preparedness to teach explicit phonics and determined that most teacher-participants surveyed felt inadequately prepared to deliver instruction. The implications of poorly prepared teachers are that student reading deficits are linked to phonological awareness deficits and directly related to the teacher's quality of instruction. A strong correlation between the research literature and the current study exists and supports the exploration of K–3 educators' preparation and professional development experience, specifically with phonemic awareness and phonics, to determine if professional development influences a teacher's ability to implement phonetic instructional strategies.

What is not demonstrated in the literature is if educators are aware of the importance of their phonological knowledge and the effect of delivering effective phonics instruction in an intentional delivery model. The research literature does not indicate if educators routinely participate in reflective inquiry with themselves, colleagues, or instructional coaches to build the capacity to teach and deliver phonics instruction based on professional development and specific instructional strategies resulting in intentional phonetic instruction for K–3 students. With these unknowns, it was important to explore teachers' perspectives to determine their beliefs, judgments, and opinions on the phenomenon of professional development in phonological methods and the intentional implementation of instructional strategies.

Two different groups of researchers concluded that educators cannot deliver effective reading instruction if they have not had ample training in phonological knowledge attainment (Hikida et al., 2019; Hudson et al., 2021). The present study addressed the gap in practice regarding a teacher's professional development and the implementation of instructional strategies through a lens of reflective inquiry and an opportunity to think about their understanding and application. The present study supports examining K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their lived experiences with professional development and the implementation of phonetic instructional strategies.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. The following sections include the study's RQs, research design and rationale and the role of the researcher. The chapter also details the study's methodology, including participant selection, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, data collection, and data analysis, as well as the trustworthiness of the study and ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

The study extended knowledge in the area of professional development in phonological methods and teachers' implementation of phonetic instructional strategies by obtaining data that answered the following RQs:

RQ1: What are K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods?

RQ2: Which specific professional development(s) do K–3 reading teachers believe has had the most effect on their teaching and implementation of instructional strategies to support students in phonemic awareness and phonics?

RQ3: What additional professional development opportunities do K–3 reading teachers describe as being needed to enhance teachers' implementation of phonetic instructional strategies?

A basic qualitative study was conducted using an interpretative lens with a focus on K–3 reading teachers' perspectives directly relevant to the problem, purpose, and RQs. A basic qualitative research design was appropriate for the study to explore and understand teacher perspectives while making meaning of the specific phenomena (see Thomas, 2023). In the study, I explored K–3 reading teachers' perspectives on their experiences with professional development in phonological methods and their implementation of instructional strategies.

The basic qualitative research design consisted of an interview protocol with open-ended questions to collect data from the participants via virtual meetings or telephone interviews. I chose this design because it aligned with the conceptual framework of metacognition, the act of thinking about thinking (see Flavell, 1980). Additional seminal works by Dewey (1910) revealed that reflective thought is the hallmark of a good research project. I considered Dewey's research and the opportunity to explore the teachers' reflections when I designed my interview questions. I asked the participants to think for themselves and provide evidence of what they believed and practiced due to their lived experiences with professional development in phonological methods and implementation of instructional strategies. My rationale for designing and using the interview questions was to achieve an understanding of the teachers' professional experiences and interpret their reactions. Furthermore, the rationale for using semistructured interviews was to investigate what teachers valued, learned, and implemented from their professional development in phonological methods and what was needed to establish consistent implementation for future professional development.

Role of the Researcher

The role and experience of being an observer and active in the interview process shaped my view as the researcher, which allowed me to explore the phenomenon through engagement in the iterative design. My role as the researcher allowed me to capture the essence of the phenomenon through notes in my reflective journal and audio recordings of virtual or telephone interviews. Detailed transcripts documented the qualitative data retrieved from the participants' responses. I facilitated virtual meetings, telephone calls, and recordings of the interviews to avoid exposure to COVID-19.

As the researcher, my role involved the facilitation of individual interviews to include diverse views. I remained unbiased in the research setting and participated as a process observer during data collection. I used open-ended interview questions to encourage dialogue while providing support for the participants to share personal experiences. Any bias identified was managed by recording it in a reflective journal to foster awareness and document its root cause, which could have interfered with the interpretation of data.

Data were collected from participant interviews; I communicated effectively and fostered a trusting professional working relationship with all participants. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants from three elementary schools in a single school system in the midwestern region of the United States. I did not need to request participants from any social media group.

I was previously employed by the school system in which the research setting was located. I worked previously as an instructor alongside some of the participants over 12

years ago and then as a curriculum supervisor of programs. However, I never evaluated any K–3 reading teachers and assumed a new role outside of the school system. I no longer work directly with the participating school system. Some of the participants were former colleagues with whom I had built trusting relationships and used the opportunity to share their perspectives. There was no conflict of interest or power differential. There was no compensation for participating in this study.

Methodology

To address the RQs designed for this study, I used a basic qualitative design, recruiting 10 K–3 reading teacher-participants to gather data. The basic qualitative design fostered a professional conversation that highlighted the problem and purpose. This approach also allowed me to explore the K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding the implementation of instructional strategies and what further phonological professional development is needed for consistent and effective teaching of phonics instruction (see Campbell, 2020).

Participant Selection

The research site was in the midwestern United States, consisting of elementary schools with K–3 reading teachers currently trained and teaching the phonics curriculum known as Reading Horizons Discovery. It had been 5 years since the initial training began, including professional development and specific phonological methods in the K–3 classroom. K–3 reading teachers hired by the schools were trained for 2 full days on phonological methods and granted access to additional online professional models. Trained teachers had access to tangible teaching resources, the student learning platform,

and a scripted curriculum. In addition to the Reading Horizons Discovery professional development, several teachers, although not all, also participated in training in various phonological methods, including but not limited to: Orton Gillingham Phonics, Heggerty Phonics, Reading Mastery, and the Science of Reading.

The research site was initially selected because of the large number of teachers trained in a variety of phonological methods who had ample time to implement strategies learned from their professional development experiences. The recruitment of participants was completed using snowball sampling, beginning with three participants who met the inclusion criteria. The three participants recommended additional individuals to recruit. All participants met the following criteria: (a) were K–3 reading teachers who completed phonological methods professional development, (b) had implemented strategies for at least 1 year, and (c) were currently teaching K–3 reading. The selection allowed for diversity among participants, a range of years of teaching reading experience, participation in a variety of phonological professional development, implementation of phonics instructional strategies, and a sincere engagement from those interested in sharing their perspectives on professional development specifically related to the teaching of phonemic awareness and phonics. The goal was to purposefully sample at least 10 participants who had no less than 1 year to implement strategies in the K–3 classroom and were currently teaching K–3 reading. The rationale for a minimum of 10 participants was based on similar studies that investigated educator perspectives and used qualitative analysis with an inductive approach to explore the research topic more thoroughly.

Initial procedures for recruitment included emailing an invitation to participate and a consent form to three potential participants. Both the invitation to participate and the consent form explained the purpose of the study and how data would be collected. The invitation to participate and consent form were only shared with teachers who were recommended as information-rich participants. From the candidates who responded to the recruitment request and gave consent, a brief checklist consisting of the eligibility criteria was reviewed prior to the interview. This ensured that each participant had completed phonological professional development training, had implemented phonological methods for at least 1 year, and were currently teaching K–3 reading. Including those who had an interest in participating in the study narrowed the number of participants to those who wanted to share their perspectives and felt a genuine desire to inform what they deemed were best practices regarding the phenomenon.

Instrumentation

I used semistructured personal interviews with one-on-one questioning as the instrument to collect detailed data on the participants' lived experiences regarding the phenomenon. This type of qualitative instrument was optimal for facilitating conversations and provided an opportunity to repeatedly review recordings to transcribe and categorize the data on participants' exposure, experiences, and perspectives relevant to the study (see Ravitch & Carl, 2019. For the research design and to address the purpose of the study, I used a participant interview protocol (see Appendix) as a guide for conducting the individual interviews consistently with specific interview questions to determine how K–3 reading teachers perceived their professional development and any

further need for this to implement effective instructional strategies. The interview protocol was consistent with instruments previously used in Walden University's qualitative research course requirements and recommended for researcher-conducted interviews. The interview protocol and data analysis aligned with the framework's metacognition concepts, encouraging K–3 reading teachers to self-reflect on meaningful experiences and strategies learned from professional development.

The semistructured interviews helped me collect sufficient data consisting of the participants' reflections. The interviews created an opportunity for K–3 educators to view their professional development and determine which experiences were most beneficial for developing their instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics (see Duman & Semerci, 2019; Flavell, 1980). The metacognition framework was used as a lens to address the research problem and allowed the participants to reflect on strategies previously learned and identify the specific professional development content that they deemed valuable for the K–3 reading teacher in phonemic awareness and phonics. The metacognitive experience provided a method for exploring teachers' perspectives on which professional development experiences have contributed to their capacity to implement instructional strategies and support effectiveness in teaching phonemic awareness and phonics.

The interview questions were developed in advance and reviewed by a Walden University methodologist who specialized in qualitative research. The methodologist reviewed the questions for content validity and helped me to refine them so they would prompt information- rich responses. Table 3 demonstrates the alignment of the individual

interview questions with the conceptual framework and key concepts explored in the literature review. Each interview question was designed to encourage open-ended responses for reflection and further investigation specific to the participants' professional learning and application of learned strategies.

Table 3

Alignment of Interview Questions With Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

Interview question	Alignment
How many years of teaching experience do you have in K-3 reading?	Demographics
Tell me how you teach phonics.	Conceptual framework, intentional vs. incidental instruction
What professional development(s) specific to learning how to teach phonics have you received?	Reflective inquiry and self-efficacy.
Describe the process of a successful phonics lesson.	Understanding K-3 knowledge, intentional vs. incidental instruction.
Describe any challenges you have experienced with implementing phonics instruction.	Conceptual framework, the role of K-3 teachers' expertise.
Identify the most beneficial professional development you've received to benefit your phonics instruction.	Conceptual framework, understanding K-3 teacher knowledge.
How did the professional development impact your ability to support student learning?	Conceptual framework, intentional vs. incidental instruction.
Describe impactful instructional strategies that you have learned as a result of professional development.	Conceptual framework, the role of K-3 teacher expertise, building capacity.
What changes, if any, are needed to enhance your ability to implement phonics instructional strategies?	Reflective inquiry and self-efficacy.
If additional training is needed, identify specific professional development that would enhance your ability to teach phonics.	Building capacity.
If needed, what format of professional development would be most widely received by K-3 teachers? (Follow-up training, workshop, virtual, coaching, colleague observation/feedback, other.)	Understanding K-3 teacher knowledge, building capacity.

The participants were interviewed and their responses documented via audio recording and detailed transcripts. I conducted open and axial coding along with thematic analysis, leading to the development of categories and themes. The interview protocol and data analysis aligned with the framework's metacognition concepts and encouraged K–3 reading teachers to self-reflect on their meaningful experiences and strategies

learned from professional development. The goal was to purposefully sample willing participants meeting the criteria and gather their perspectives directly relevant to the problem, purpose, and RQs. All data collected were stored electronically and password protected.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Before beginning any recruitment efforts, I received approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once the IRB had approved the study, a notice was forwarded to K–3 teachers eligible to participate. IRB number 06-17-22-0759715 was added to the consent form and shared with K–3 reading teachers who met the criteria. Additional information was provided in a message explaining the reason for the study, its focus on teacher perspectives regarding the phenomenon, how the results would be used and reported, what the teachers and potentially other staff members would gain from the study, any risks, and steps to ensure participant confidentiality throughout the research process.

Procedures for recruiting participants included emailing the invitation to participate and a consent form that explained the purpose of the study and the steps to ensure confidentiality. The consent form provided directions for emailing me directly and indicating consent via email. The email response confirmed their interest and consent for me to contact those teachers who agreed to participate. The schools in this study have trained 100% of all K–3 teachers assigned to teach reading in specific phonological methods and provided resources and professional development opportunities in a variety of phonological methods, including but not limited to Reading Horizons Discovery,

Orton Gillingham, Heggerty Phonics, and the Science of Reading. In addition, to ensure the participants met the criteria, the email and the consent form included the following stipulations for participation: (a) were K–3 reading teachers who completed phonological methods professional development, (b) had implemented strategies for at least 1 year, and (c) were currently teaching K–3 reading.

The research began with three participants who completed professional development, implemented phonological methods, and were from three different elementary schools. Snowball sampling was then conducted to reach the desired number of 10 participants. Data collection consisted of telephone interviews or a virtual meeting platform, Google Meet, depending on the participant's electronic devices and applications. Some participants felt more comfortable taking part in a phone interview, while others preferred the convenience of virtual meetings. The type of meeting, whether by phone or virtual, was decided by the participant to establish a level of comfort and transparency, recognizing the most effective qualitative research is conducted in the participant's comfortable, natural setting. The natural setting was of the participant's choosing and included any place they felt comfortable. Collection dates and times were set at the convenience of the participants and occurred before school, after school hours, or on a weekend.

The frequency of data collection was two to four participant interviews a week over 4 weeks to collect data on 10 teachers' perspectives. Each interview took approximately 45–60 minutes and consisted of open-ended questions focused on the phenomenon. Data collection included audio recordings of telephone or virtual

interviews. I transcribed each audio recording within 48 hours of the interview and double checked the transcription with the audio to ensure accuracy.

Follow-up procedures included closing the interview by asking the participant if they had any questions or concerns as well as confirming the accuracy of the transcripts and member checking. When confirming the accuracy of the transcripts, I restated, summarized, and paraphrased the information collected from the respondent (see Thomas, 2023). Participants were debriefed individually and reminded how the results would be used and reported and what they and other staff members may gain from the study. Maintaining participant confidentiality during the research process was a priority. Participants were reminded that they would have access to a two-page summary of the study results and the research study once it was published. The participants' validation via member checking ensured an accurate analysis of their perspectives and that I maintained a professional and nonbiased stance throughout the data collection process.

Data Analysis Plan

Data from each participant's responses were analyzed by reviewing interview transcripts multiple times to identify themes and patterns. I used qualitative thematic analysis to support an inductive approach by exploring the RQs more thoroughly and interpretatively. I designed the interview protocol to guide each aspect of the participant interview and aligned specific questions to help answer the RQs. Questions 1–5 were used to answer RQ1 and addressed the importance of K–3 reading teachers' phonological knowledge development, expertise, and the role of phonological knowledge in delivering effective phonics instruction. Questions 6–8 were designed and used to answer RQ2.

These questions required the participants to use a metacognitive approach and think about how their phonological methods, learned through professional development, have built teacher capacity to provide phonics instruction. Questions 9–11 were asked to answer RQ3. These questions allowed the participants to continue using the metacognitive lens and reflect upon what they learned regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what was needed to improve training methods for future generations of teachers. Specific interview questions aligned with the RQs were asked consistently with all 10 participants. Follow-up questions were asked as needed throughout the interview process for clarification.

Data analysis strategies included open coding, axial coding, and thematic analysis to assist in determining patterns and trends in repeated terms derived from the interview transcripts (see Thomas, 2023). In this study, I used a consistent method to identify the most important concepts of the participants' experiences with phonological professional development methods and their implementation of instructional strategies, which are the foundation blocks for the thematic analysis (see Thomas, 2023). The consistent method allowed me multiple opportunities to read, reread, mark, and highlight the data collected from the participants and determine recurring key words to identify open codes that applied to the participants' interview responses. A second stage of coding, axial coding, was used to determine connections between the first phase of open coding and the participants' responses, identifying how they were linked. This final stage of coding allowed me to focus on the categories and map how they were related to themes to answer the RQs. Microsoft Word and Excel were the software used for data analysis.

I did not force codes to fit into a specific category, and I was open to different teacher perspectives that may not have represented the majority. I included all data collected and clarified if a participant was confused by the question to ensure their understanding and focused response. There was no evidence in the data of discrepant cases. All information was reported and represented in my documentation, including interview transcripts, participant debriefing, and thematic analysis using tables to present themes. During the debriefing and to close the interview process, I briefly reviewed what was stated by the participant during the interview and asked them if they had any questions or clarifications. During the member check, participants were given a two-page summary of the study findings and asked to make comments or ask questions. No participants had any comments or questions.

Trustworthiness

My aim in this study was to research teacher perceptions regarding the specific phenomenon and collect their input. I consistently used specific interview questions prepared in advance with all participants to determine how K–3 reading teachers perceived their professional development in phonological methods and any need for further professional development to implement effective instructional strategies. Although this basic qualitative study had a small sample size specific to participant criteria, as the researcher, I consistently and intentionally took precautions with data collection by using an interview protocol that was aligned with my RQs and followed up with member checking to establish quality and trustworthiness throughout the study.

Credibility

Credibility is the measure of truth in a qualitative research study (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Credibility was important to establish in this study to ensure the findings were correct and accurate. The interview protocol was designed to establish credibility and confidence in the study's results and to create a consistent method throughout the entire data collection process. I used several data collection methods to ensure validity (see Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Those collection methods included an audio recording of each personal interview, the exact wording of the participants' responses detailed in a formal script, and using a reflective journal to highlight any personal bias and any cause-and-effect relationships. The audit trail included details of open coding, axial coding, and categorization of themes to provide detailed information specifically related to the RQs. I used the documentation to consistently compare K–3 reading teachers' perspectives. The audit trail allowed me to explore the teachers' perspectives multiple times regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. These accurate and credible measures, along with follow-up procedures, such as member checks, established credibility and fostered the trustworthiness of the research because the findings accurately reflected the participants' reality and lived experience (see Thomas, 2023).

Transferability

The transferability of the research was a goal throughout the initial phases of the study by providing a thorough explanation and description of all aspects of the research process. This included the research setting, how participants were selected, criteria or eligibility for participation, the minimum number of participants, and the use of the interview protocol with open-ended questions. Ravitch and Carl (2019) suggested strengthening the transferability of the typical study by using snowball sampling to reflect the whole population. To recruit a sample typical of the research population, I began with three individuals from different elementary schools in the midwestern region of the United States. After selecting three relevant and information-rich interviewees, I asked them to recommend additional contacts known to be knowledgeable candidates, which represented a population trained in various phonological methods. Snowball sampling provided different participant perspectives or confirmed the previous responses. It also allowed others to recommend knowledgeable participants as good sources of information focused on the inquiry. I provided a detailed description of the data collection process, which included procedures, context, and participation. As a result of these detailed descriptions, readers will have an opportunity to transfer my findings to similar settings, make comparisons with other contexts, or potentially replicate the study.

Dependability

The interview protocol consisted of detailed questions and data collection and reporting measures utilized consistently with all participants to ensure dependability. Furthermore, the study's dependability was grounded in the audit trail for each

participant consisting of detailed interview transcripts, debriefing, member checks, and thematic analysis using tables with essential information. Coding the participants' responses and putting them into categories to determine patterns and themes was done to accurately record and reflect the data collected.

Confirmability

Establishing confirmability was essential because of the overall generalization and subjectivity of qualitative research. To ensure confirmability, I used member checks by emailing each participant a two-page summary of the study's findings with a request to respond with any questions and comments. No one indicated they had any concerns. To establish confirmability and avoid bias, I maintained a reflective journal and noted any bias I experienced during the data collection or analysis phases of the research process. This reflective journal was also a place to note any cause-and-effect relationships concerning the phenomenon. By using these strategies, I was able to ensure confirmability and be objective throughout the study, relying solely on the data to determine results and not my assumptions or preconceived ideas.

Ethical Procedures

Upon receiving Walden University's IRB approval, I began the study. The purpose of the IRB is to approve and monitor research methods and ensure ethical compliance aligns with university standards and federal regulations while protecting the rights of participants in the study. The IRB approval process required clearance and approval of all procedures before the research took place. I used thick descriptions of

how the study would be conducted and assurances that protective measures were in place for the safety and protection of all participants (see Thomas, 2023).

Once the IRB approved the study, I took steps to gain participant consent. First, I recruited three individuals who could recommend additional participants via snowball sampling. Next, I corresponded with the participants, providing a detailed explanation of the study and its purpose; guaranteeing their confidentiality and rights, fair treatment, and respect; and an opportunity to speak about their experiences. The notice explained to participants that they were allowed to withdraw their participation at any time without penalty. All potential participants were sent an email that included an invitation to participate, explained the study's purpose, steps to ensure their confidentiality, and confirmed they met the eligibility criteria. The email also contained a consent form as an attachment, which provided an in-depth explanation of safety protocols to ensure confidentiality. Interested candidates responded directly to me via email with their decision to participate. The consent to participate was documentation that the participants had read the eligibility criteria, indicated they fulfilled the criteria, understood the low level of risk, if any, associated with the study, and that their participation was voluntary.

The research study was conducted by treating all participants respectfully, valuing their contribution, and with a sensitivity that protected their privacy and confidentiality. Any information collected from participants was secured in a password-protected computer. After the interviews, I transcribed the audio recordings, which were deleted from the recording device following the verification of the transcripts. Furthermore, the participants' consent forms are kept in a password-protected computer; notes in my

reflective journal are stored in a locked box to be destroyed at the end of the 5-year period designated by Walden University's research policy and participants' rights for protection and confidentiality. Adhering to these protective measures made the participants feel safe and comfortable presenting their perspectives regarding the specific phenomena.

Summary

I focused my research study on a small number of K–3 certified reading teachers and their perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. A basic qualitative research design was appropriate to explore and understand teacher perspectives while making meaning of the specific phenomenon (see Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Participants were selected using snowball sampling and met the following criteria: (a) were K–3 reading teachers who completed phonological methods professional development, (b) had implemented strategies for at least 1 year, and (c) were currently teaching K–3 reading. This type of selection allowed for diversity among participants, a range of years of teaching reading experience, and a sincere engagement from participants interested in sharing their perspectives on professional development regarding phonological methods and implementation of instructional strategies.

Research and documentation methods included interviews, audio recordings and transcriptions, coding, and analysis to identify recurring categories and themes. This

study's qualitative nature allowed me, as the researcher, to be both reflexive and reflective with the data as well as transparent, achieving transferability with member checks to ensure the credibility of the data. While my priority was to protect the validity and credibility of the study, there was an equal awareness and effort to protect the participants' rights and confidentiality. In Chapter 4, I detail the results of the data collected and analyzed and report my findings.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to explore K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. The RQs that guided this study were the following:

RQ1: What are K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods?

RQ2: Which specific professional development(s) do K–3 reading teachers believe has had the most effect on their teaching and implementation of instructional strategies to support students in phonemic awareness and phonics?

RQ3: What additional professional development opportunities do K–3 reading teachers describe as being needed to enhance teachers' implementation of phonetic instructional strategies?

In this chapter, I describe the setting, participant demographics, and how the data were collected. I also detail the process I used for open coding, axial coding, and thematic analysis to identify the important concepts from the data. In Chapter 4, I provide specific examples of participants' responses to support the results. I also provide evidence of trustworthiness and how I implemented consistent strategies to achieve credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Setting

The research site was in the midwestern region of the United States and involved three different elementary schools. The research setting consisted of three elementary schools in which all the current K–3 reading teachers were specifically trained in phonics professional development. Organizational conditions that influenced the participants at the time of the study involved their participation in a state-sponsored professional development on the Science of Reading. According to the participants, the Science of Reading training provided credence for implementing an intentional phonics instructional approach.

The participant pool at each research site provided access to information-rich individuals with ample experience in various phonological teaching methods. I conducted the study with 10 K–3 reading teachers from three different elementary schools meeting the inclusion criteria. All participants were currently teaching K–3 reading, and the years of experience ranged from 8 to 28, with an average of 19 years teaching K–3 reading. Each participant was assigned an alphanumerical code: T1–T10. The information compiled in Table 4 was collected from each participant's interview. The professional development each participant mentioned was as follows: college courses, Heggerty Phonics. Literacy Collaborative, Orton-Gillingham, Reading Horizons, Reading Mastery, Reading Recovery, Science of Reading, state initiatives, and Success for All. Table 4 demonstrates the participants' years of teaching K–3 reading and the various types of phonological professional development they had received at the time of the interview.

Table 4

Research Participants Demographics

Research participant	Years of teaching experience	Professional development completed
T1	18	College courses, Literacy Collaborative, Reading Horizons, Reading Recovery, Science of Reading
T2	27	College courses, Reading Horizons, Science of Reading
T3	21	College courses, Reading Horizons, state initiatives
T4	8	Heggerty Phonics, Reading Horizons, Science of Reading
T5	26	Literacy Collaborative, Reading Horizons, Reading Recovery, Success for All, Science of Reading
T6	18	Literacy Collaborative, Reading Horizons, Science of Reading
T7	9	College courses, Reading Horizons, Reading Mastery, Science of Reading
T8	28	Literacy Collaborative, Reading Horizons, Science of Reading
T9	10	Literacy Collaborative, Orton-Gillingham, Reading Horizons, Science of Reading
T10	26	College courses, Literacy Collaborative, Reading Horizons, Reading Recovery, Science of reading

Data Collection

I began data collection after receiving approval from Walden University's IRB (No. 06-17-22-0759715). A snowball sampling method was initiated by emailing three teachers in three different elementary schools. Each potential participant was emailed an invitation to participate and an explanation of consent, including the purpose, background, procedures, risks, benefits, privacy, and the voluntary nature of the study. The explanation instructed the potential participants to email me directly with the words "I consent" to ensure they were interested and willing to participate in the study. The three teachers responded to my email and provided consent. I corresponded with each participant by providing a mutually agreed upon date and time to participate in the interview. The three initial participants then provided names of other potential

participants as part of the snowball sampling method. The same process of emailing the invitation and explanation of consent was followed for all other potential participants.

At the beginning of each interview, I used the interview protocol (see Appendix) to revisit the purpose of the study, described the interview process, and reminded each participant of those elements in the consent form. The length of each interview ranged from 45–60 minutes. Each participant was asked the interview questions in the same order to ensure the reliability of the data collected. Each interview began with a demographic question to identify how many years of teaching reading experience each participant had in the specific grade levels of K–3. I also used a reflective journal during each interview to record my thoughts, feelings, and judgments to manage any potential bias. Google Meet and telephone call options were used to conduct the interviews as Google Suite matched what the participants had access to and what they were familiar with as a virtual option. Seven participants chose the phone interview option because they lived in rural areas and connectivity was not always available depending on their location. Three participants preferred to use Google Meet for their interviews. Cameras were turned off when recording the participants' interviews. I used the audio recorder on my computer to record the 10 individual interviews. After completing each interview, I immediately stated that I was ending the audio recording. I debriefed each participant, asking if they had any questions about the interview process, and I reminded them that their interview responses would remain confidential. I thanked each participant for their contribution and willingness to provide professional perspectives.

During the debriefing, the participants were reminded how the results would be used and reported and what they and other staff members may gain from the study. Each participant and I reviewed what was stated during the interview and confirmed accuracy. If needed, the participant revised and adjusted their transcript to clarify their intentions, but once the error had been addressed, no further revisions were made. During member checks, the participants were given a two-page summary of the study findings and asked to comment or ask questions within 48 hours of receipt. No participants had any comments or questions.

Those participants recommended by the first three teachers were considered information-rich in the research topic and could then acknowledge other information-rich teachers who had completed professional development in phonological teaching methods and currently teaching K–3 reading. I continued snowball sampling until the minimum number of 10 participants were interviewed, their responses transcribed, and member checks completed. A total of 14 invitations were emailed to potential participants, and 10 teachers responded with "I consent." The invitation to participate remained open for 1 month from the initial date snowball sampling began. Not all K–3 teachers in the three different elementary schools were invited to participate. Only those teachers who were referred by one of the teachers who had previously participated in an interview, met the inclusion criteria, and provided consent were eligible to participate. The entire data collection process took approximately 4 weeks from start to finish. I was particular and intentional in following the data collection plan outlined in Chapter 3. No unexpected or unusual circumstances affected or interfered with data collection.

Data Analysis

Each interview consisted of the same 11 questions administered in the same order for each interview. To familiarize myself with the data, I transcribed each interview word for word, which provided multiple opportunities to examine the participant's responses and ensured complete accuracy and congruity between the audio recordings and transcriptions. Once each interview was transcribed, I read over the transcript at least three times before creating my interview coding workbook using Excel. Each participant's interview transcript was represented on a separate tab within the workbook along with the alphanumeric code assigned to them and labeled T1–T10.

Once I recorded the participants' transcripts in the interview coding workbook, I began the first cycle coding process of generating open codes. This was done by rereading the transcripts line by line and highlighting, copying, and pasting key excerpts from each participant's responses into Column G. and coding it with an open code in Column H. I created a second Excel document, a code book, and represented each open code along with a definition for each and one corresponding example excerpt from the participants' responses. The code book included the following individual sheets representing the entire coding process throughout data analysis: first cycle codes or open codes, second cycle codes or axial codes, subthemes, Themes 1–4, and a code count for accuracy. A total of 77 open codes were determined from the first cycle data analysis. Table 5 represents a sample of the open codes and examples of the participants' responses collected from the interview data.

Table 5

Examples of Open Codes

Code	Participant	Excerpt
Challenge: time	T1	"The biggest challenge when we started teaching a separate phonics program away from a basal reader or a literacy collaborative type setting was the time."
	T5	"I think time is a definite constraint for us. I feel like in education, we are expected to teach the width of a subject and not in depth."
Challenge: self-taught	T4	"I pretty much self-taught myself how to use the book with going through each example."
	T8	"I felt like I had to really dig into the book and practice certain things. I feel more comfortable now teaching it in the classroom because I taught myself."
Individualization	T2	"Being able to go back for those kids that are struggling and do the intervention and build that foundation that they need."
	T3	"I don't know that I need any changes; the biggest thing I can see is the kids who struggle with it; it takes a lot of time, small group, one-on-one. I'd like to see those kids get more individualized attention."
Common terminology needed	T4	"The terminology needs to be used across the board and not in isolation. We all need to be doing the same thing to build. Not just doing bits and pieces or whatever we want."
	T10	"Teachers teaching in the same manner, using the same script, [and] the same language that I'm using."
Prioritize phonics instruction	T1	"The time, even though that always comes as an issue, it is more of a priority issue that people need to adjust and realize their time is better spent teaching phonics, getting the mastery of phonics, and the success will come easier to kids once they have their basics down with phonics."
	T6	"They need that background, and I think there definitely needs to be time set aside for phonics instruction."
Consistency across classrooms & grades	T4	"Each grade level needing to build up on it. Not just one grade level doing it in isolation."
	T6	"And I think it has to be explicitly taught, and I think that has to be expected across the board from everyone in K-3.
Sequential Instruction	T2	"I think if we all would follow the Reading Horizons' scope and sequence, it would be—no matter [if] they are in first grade, second grade, third grade–you'd know what they've been taught and been exposed to."
	T7	"In the Science of Reading, it talks about a scope and sequence, and Reading Horizons is the closest scope and sequence, so that's what we are going to use."
Most beneficial PD	T1	"I would say Reading Horizons overall has been the most beneficial program to myself, and I feel, like, to our district."
	T7	"Reading Horizons, hands down. It made phonics so clear in a way that I would have never ever understood myself, let alone teach it."
Coaching model	T3	"Coaching, if you can get a quality coach. When I look back on my most valuable training, I feel like it came from those coaches because they were able to tailor their instruction more for me and on a one-to-one basis and based on my classroom's experience."

When I finished open coding, I began axial coding by sorting and grouping similar open codes into categories. I created additional Excel sheets within my code book to represent the second cycle coding process. I color-coded codes with similar meanings and condensed or consolidated them until they were in groups based on commonalities. The groups became categories; I assigned each category a label to describe its content. The axial coding process produced 17 categories. Table 6 represents a sample of the categories derived from axial coding, open codes, the participant's identifier, and excerpts of their responses.

Table 6

Examples of Open Codes and Categories

Category	Code	Participant	Excerpt
Intentional phonics instruction	Phonetic rules	T9	"They have to mark them to prove this is an adjacent vowel rule or this is a short vowel or a long vowel."
	Sequential instruction	T5	"It is supposed to start in kindergarten with Book 1 being completed, and then, in first grade, we are supposed to do a review of Book 1, do Book 2, and introduce Book 3."
Scope & sequence challenges	Consistency across classrooms & grades	T5	"If you don't follow the sequence, then it kind of messes the kids up, and typically, that's what we find as a problem within our school system."
	Pacing instruction needed	T10	"Keeping a pace that helps the child excel without hindering their growth."
Most beneficial PD	Most beneficial PD	T6	"Reading Horizons so far has been the most beneficial. Reading Horizons instruction teaches you how to do it."
	Most beneficial PD	T10	"Reading Horizons training was the most beneficial. I was able to give my students a developmental program."
Teacher control	Student engagement	T8	"We make it fun, and they pick up on things more."
	Teaching in the moment	T3	"I also do a lot of things in the moment while I'm teaching in context with worksheets in journaling."
Using data to inform	Assessment	T7	"I watch and quiz a couple of my students to see where they are because those assessment pieces help guide everything."
	Using data to guide	T10	"Keeping track of data that guides my teaching to know what phonics patterns they have a grasp on and which ones they do not."
Effective professional practices	Building teacher capacity	T7	"Once I understood how to break apart words, then I could teach my kids how to break apart words. Once I understood the basic rules, I could teach it to others."
	Cohesiveness needed	T4	"Our programs need to be utilized across the board, not in isolation."
Structure of professional development	Coaching model	T8	"I think coaching is your best bet, even though I hate that. You learn more from coaching than anything."

Upon completing the second coding cycle, axial coding, I reviewed the categories again to search for patterns and trends across the data. In reviewing the themes, I found it necessary to improve upon them and ensure the thematic analysis represented the data collected and analyzed. After I completed the data analysis, I considered the following three RQs again and whether the themes answered them:

RQ1: What are K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods?

RQ2: Which specific professional development(s) do K–3 reading teachers believe has had the most effect on their teaching and implementation of instructional strategies to support students in phonemic awareness and phonics?

RQ3: What additional professional development opportunities do K–3 reading teachers describe as being needed to enhance teachers' implementation of phonetic instructional strategies?

I reviewed the themes multiple times and collapsed and improved their wording to better represent the findings and answer the RQs. Four themes emerged from the analysis that represented the participants' accounts and characterized their perspectives and lived experiences. The four themes represent the importance of the data, aligned with the purpose of the study, and answer the RQs:

- Theme 1: Merging multiple professional developments leads to inconsistent implementation.
- Theme 2: Teachers prefer curriculum alignment and instructional integrity.

- Theme 3: Teachers value professional development leading to intentional phonics instruction.
- Theme 4: Teachers want organizational commitment to continuous improvement.

Table 7 represents the 15 final categories and the four themes derived from the data analysis.

Table 7

Four Themes and Axial Codes or Categories

Themes	Axial codes or categories
Theme 1: Merging multiple professional developments leads to inconsistent implementation.	Types of professional developments Instructional delivery methods Systemic challenges Inconsistent implementation
Theme 2: Teachers prefer curriculum alignment and instructional integrity.	Common terminology needed Prioritize phonics instruction Scope & sequence challenges Teacher control
Theme 3: Teachers value professional development leading to intentional phonics instruction.	Most beneficial professional development Intentional phonics instruction Specifically stated strategies Student learning drives implementation Using data to inform
Theme 4: Teachers want organizational commitment to continuous improvement	Structure of professional development Effective professional practices

Collectively, the data analysis provided K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what further actions with professional development are needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic

awareness and phonics. Exploring K–3 reading teachers' perspectives using an interview protocol with relevant questions, I created a consistent process of data collection and analysis, which allowed me to identify the most important and common concepts that became the foundational blocks of open coding, axial coding, and, ultimately, the thematic analysis. The consistent method and documentation allowed me to determine connections between participants from the interview question responses by continuously revisiting and repeating application of the data analysis.

Results

I explored K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what further actions with professional development are needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. In this section, I present the results of the data I collected from 10 interviews with K–3 reading teachers meeting the inclusion criteria and demonstrating a willingness to participate in the research study. I asked the same 11 open-ended questions to each participant. I designed the interview questions in the interview protocol to answer the three RQs. Questions 1–5 were designed to answer RQ1, Questions 6–8 were created to answer RQ2, and Questions 9–11 were developed to answer RQ3.

Research Question 1

RQ1 focused on K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods. The interview questions aligned with the RQ and allowed participants to clarify their teaching experience and how they teach phonics,

identify professional development completed and relevant to teaching phonics, describe a successful phonics lesson, and define any challenges experienced with the implementation of phonics instruction. Two themes emerged from the data collected that aligned with RQ1, which indicated teachers merge instructional approaches from multiple professional developments leading to inconsistent implementation.

Theme 1: Merging Multiple Professional Developments Leads to Inconsistent Implementation

Collectively, the 10 participants experienced a variety of phonological professional developments that represent a blending or merging of instructional approaches. The participants communicated several varied instructional methods they learned over the years from various professional developments. The list of professional developments in phonological teaching methods that the 10 participants completed included college courses, Heggerty Phonics, Literacy Collaborative, Orton-Gillingham, Reading Horizons, Reading Mastery, Reading Recovery, Science of Reading, state initiatives, and Success for All. Subsequently, the number of different professional development opportunities the teachers participated in suggests unforeseen systemic challenges of inconsistent teaching methods among teachers.

Types of Professional Developments. All participants mentioned multiple professional developments they received either in college or specifically sponsored by the school or state. The types of professional development relevant to each participant are represented in Table 4. The data relayed a challenge for teachers as they attempt to merge professional content learned from multiple developments to deliver phonics instruction.

All 10 participants were trained in at least three different types of phonological professional development, and several were trained in up to five different types. The following statements provided the teachers' perspectives regarding the various types of professional development they completed. T7 highlighted their earliest experience with professional development and stated, "In college, I received several college courses on phonics for my reading endorsement." T4 mentioned a different type of professional development than the other participants: "Last summer, I did do a Heggerty training to get more solidified on how to do it." T3 explained her perspective on professional development: "I feel like I've been adequately trained in Reading Horizons, but I also feel if I hadn't had Literacy Collaborative, I wouldn't know how to teach foundational things in my classroom." T4 expressed an opposing view and voiced concern with their professional development experience: "The only phonics PD through the district was Reading Horizons." T7 agreed with T3 and explained: "We did Reading Horizons as well as many other smaller trainings in building with colleagues demonstrating." T6 mentioned another type of professional development: "We did Literacy Collaborative, but that was more on the process of reading, not so much as phonics in what I've participated in."

Two participants expressed another type of professional development that was trending. T2 stated:

> Science of Reading really opened my eyes to things that I was not doing right, or just a shift in the perspective to get back to phonics instead of relying on pictures when they're reading and use your best guess or use the context clues.

In addition, T9 shared, “I just completed a Science of Reading training—Professional Development. That was an eye-opener, for sure. I’m like, woah! What! So come next year, things are going to change.” T5 noted another type of professional development: "Success for All, it’s for first grade. That did have a phonics piece with it as well. It was actually all-encompassing with phonics, comprehension, and fluency.” After initially mentioning Reading Horizons as one of their professional developments, T7 said, “I know there’s more, but when I first came to the district, I was taught Reading Mastery.” Not long after their first response mentioning Success for All, T5 recalled: “Reading Horizon training was a 2-day in-person training. Then we did do some professional development after that, but it was a very quick review.” Similarly, T10 discussed an extension professional development to the initial Reading Horizon 2-day training: “Train the Teacher Reading Horizons training within the last year. That was approximately 30-35 hours, along with the modules, which were approximately 45 hours.”

Instructional Delivery Methods. The participants shared a variety of instructional delivery methods they used to provide phonics instruction because of the various professional developments they experienced. Those methods included a gradual release of responsibility, teacher and student demonstration, multisensory instructional methods, and their recall of impactful instructional methods. The concepts of direct instruction or teacher modeling, guided practice, and student independent practice were referenced by four participants. Five participants described the gradual release of responsibility model but did not refer to the instructional approach by the official name but in less technical terms, such as the “I do, we do, you do” approach of instructional

delivery. T6 shared their thoughts: “The I do, we do, and then you do. I think that’s an impactful strategy for them. It creates a level of security for them.” In like manner, T9 expressed:

> I would introduce a skill. I would model that skill. So, I would follow the I do, we do, you do. So, I would do it by showing them the skill. Showing them how to mark the word and prove it. And then we would do it together.

Similar to T6 and T9, T8 explained the importance of teacher modeling and student application: “Multiple opportunities for students to practice the skill through teacher modeling, students demonstrating learned knowledge through reading and writing. Students would also work in guided reading with the teacher, and through centers, we will do phonics practice.”

A variety of learning approaches was mentioned by four of the participants as part of addressing student needs while merging multisensory methods with phonics instruction. T4 shared how they introduced a new letter-sound relationship in kindergarten: “Introduce the letter sound through a song. Do a visual representation of it through the grapheme. Then do a hand motion with it. And then I do kinesthetic as well.” T2 provided a similar explanation using auditory and kinesthetic learning methods: “Like Apple—A says ‘ah.’ You have a little motion for each letter and that little phrase that would go with each letter.” T3’s explanation was nearly identical: “I’m not up there asking them to repeat after me but actually involving kinesthetic motion to it.”

One participant defined their thinking as they considered the opportunity to share their perspective on impactful strategies. T3 clarified what was most effective: “So,

specific instructional strategies that I consider impactful? Those are strategies that I continue to use over time whether I'm supposed to do [so] because I have to or because I find it meaningful." T3 continued their explanation of core components with a phonics lesson:

> I love to do a quick review of all the different phonemic awareness activities. I believe there are seven different types: rhyming, segmentation, blending, substitution, onset, rhyme, [and] things like that. I think the most important one of all of them is segmentation.

T10 emphasized the importance of teacher modeling and student application:

> That your phonics lesson needs to include modeling at the beginning. It needs to include students being able to visually see. And then students being able to manipulate—whether it be magnetic letters or just writing on the whiteboard. And then for students being able to apply that skill within a text.

In contrast to the other instructional delivery methods mentioned by the participants, T4 was the only one who mentioned that "orthographic mapping has seemed to really had an impact the past year."

Systemic Challenges. The term systemic is derived from the word, system. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) describes systemic as what affects an entire system and explains that system changes affect the organization, including its most basic operations. The participants shared a variety of systemic challenges they experienced as a result of the many different professional developments they had completed. T1 noted that time was a systemic challenge when they implemented two programs simultaneously:

"The biggest challenge when we started teaching a separate phonics program away from a basal reader or a literacy collaborative type setting was the time." T2 confirmed T1's statement regarding the time and implementation of two different programs: "Having that Reading Horizons and trying to merge those two resources, basal reader and a separate phonics curriculum, and having the time to do it was very difficult." T5 also noted time as a systemic challenge: "I think time is a definite constraint for us. I feel like in education, we are expected to teach the width of a subject and not in depth."

One systemic challenge included access to ample instructional resources. T7 mentioned limited resources relevant to a specific learning objective: "Greek and Latin root words, there aren't a lot of resources for elementary teachers that I've found. It isn't easy to find prefix and suffix information that's consistent and quality examples." Another participant suggested a concern with the most foundational skills taught throughout the school. T6 noted, "The biggest challenge that I have encountered is the lack of phonemic awareness. And I feel like that's a true foundational block in today's readers." Four participants shared how professional development has created unforeseen challenges, such as confusion and inconsistency, among teachers. One participant explained a separate systemic challenge that arose while completing a recent professional development in the Science of Reading and contradicted what they previously knew about teaching phonics. T1 asserted:

> One of the things that shook people up the most was that 80% of kids learn to read the same. Everyone was like, "What does that mean? We don't all learn the same." We've spent years trying to differentiate instruction.

T4 recalled a systemic challenge when they requested additional training from the administration: “Saying that we needed further development or further trainings and being told we did not necessarily need those trainings. So those have been the bigger challenges.” T8 indicated a different systemic challenge with the current professional development:

> I don’t feel like I’ve been formally trained in phonics, meaning I can’t recall any former trainings specifically learning how to teach phonics. I took Reading Horizons training, but it was a lot of learning how to code words like the vowels, blends, digraphs, and using the online program.

T8 communicated an overall concern with the way professional development was presented:

> Instead of the training being just on coding and more on word origins and how words work, teaching me to teach them [students] how to read the word necessary and not get hung up on all the extra coding and proving/marking a word that goes along with it.

T9 confirmed what other participants had shared:

> I need more training. The Science of Reading says that in order for more students to comprehend what they’re reading, two things play a key part, and that is word recognition and oral language. The language part—the vocabulary is where I need more training.

Two participants confirmed an overall systemic challenge with self-taught professional development. T4 shared how they had to engage in an independent study to

learn the content: “I pretty much self-taught myself how to use the book with going through each example.” T8 confirmed T4’s self-taught engagement: “I felt like I had to really dig into the book and practice certain things. I feel more comfortable now teaching it in the classroom because I taught myself.”

Inconsistent Implementation. The most relevant concerns regarding inconsistent implementation were communicated by T5, T6, T9, and T3 based on their experiences with student outcomes from one year to the next. The participants shared the challenges they experienced with cohorts of students having varied skill sets depending on their experience with phonics instruction, inability to apply phonetic knowledge to decode reading, and a lack of the basic phonemic awareness skills of blending and segmentation. T5 noted concerns with students in one grade level advancing to the next with widely different skill levels:

> We have some kids that come to us in first grade that are already readers. We have kids that come to us that do not know letters and sounds and do not know how to manipulate those. So that’s a wide range of skill level.

T9 described transferring student knowledge as a result of inconsistent implementation: “The challenge is with students transferring their knowledge from being able to decode to actually reading and writing.” T3 explained the inconsistent implementation of the foundational blocks of blending and segmenting: “My biggest issue is getting kids to be able to blend and segment phonemes. I think, for some reason, it doesn’t get a lot of attention. I think it is very critical and fundamental building block of phonics.” Finally, T6 referenced another example of inconsistent implementation of phonics instruction:

> They come to you, and they can't blend the sounds. I'm just dumbfounded, like, "How can you not blend sounds?" This is a real stumbling block to teachers and their first graders. They can't rhyme and do word families. There's so many connections that they're missing because they don't have that phonemic awareness.

Theme 2: Teachers Prefer Curriculum Alignment and Instructional Integrity

The second theme also answered RQ1 and provides a viable solution for addressing inconsistent implementation with the teachers' preference for professional development including curriculum alignment and instructional integrity. The use of common terminology learned from professional development experiences that specifically prioritized phonics integration within the school was important to teachers. Equally important to the teachers was addressing the challenges with the scope and sequence of curriculum alignment to ensure instructional integrity. Nine of the 10 participants recognized how they controlled phonics instruction in their classroom, which indicated teachers would benefit from curriculum alignment to improve instructional integrity throughout the organization.

Common Terminology Needed. The participants expressed a need for common instructional language among teachers in the school using common phonics terminology. T5 noted the benefits of common terminology throughout the K–3 curriculum: "And hearing it all the way from kindergarten up through third grade was a benefit for them as well." Likewise, T4 explained, "The terminology needs to be used across the board and not in isolation. We all need to be doing the same thing to build. Not just doing bits and

pieces or whatever we want." Lastly, T10 emphasized that common terminology was needed: "Teachers teaching in the same manner, using the same script, the same language that I'm using."

Prioritize Phonics Instruction. Several participants mentioned prioritizing phonics instruction in the K–3 reading classroom. T1 expressed the importance of teachers prioritizing instructional time to teach phonics:

> The time, even though that always comes as an issue, it is more of a priority issue that people need to adjust and realize their time is better spent teaching phonics, getting the mastery of phonics, and the success will come easier to kids once they have their basics down with phonics.

In another example, T5 was concerned with the importance of prioritizing phonics instruction: "I don't feel like phonics has ever been looked at as an important factor until recently." T5 elaborated on prioritizing phonics instruction as the most important component and that they learned to teach phonics first. T6 supported what other participants had stated about prioritizing phonics instruction: "I think overall, there needs to be more of a focus on phonics, and I think that there needs to be more focus on phonemic awareness prior to coming to me in first grade." T6 concluded, "I think there definitely needs to be time set aside for phonics instruction."

Scope and Sequence Challenges. Consistency with curriculum alignment while using a scope and sequence across grade levels was mentioned as a challenge along with the need for pacing phonics instruction. T1 preferred using a scope and sequence with district-approved programs: "It needs to be done with fidelity and with programs

provided by the district." T4 supported T1's comment about implementing with fidelity: "Each grade level needing to build up on it. Not just one grade level doing it in isolation." T5 emphatically stated: "So, if you don't follow the sequence, then it kind of messes the kids up. And, typically, that's what we find as a problem within our school system, [which] is that the script isn't followed. T6 followed up the trend for scope and sequence: "I think it has to be explicitly taught, and I think that has to be expected across the board from everyone in K–3." T10 clarified how using a curriculum with a scope and sequence can produce instructional integrity: "Keeping a pace that helps the child excel without hindering their growth." T10 justified using a scope and sequence for the teacher to know what had been taught, where students were in the curriculum, and to create a system of keeping track of instructional planning.

Teacher Control. Nine of the 10 participants provided specific examples of how teachers control phonics instruction. T1 shared how their grade level team approached phonics instruction: "We use that program roughly 20–35 minutes a day depending on the lesson that is being taught, and it is reinforced in small reading groups 3 days a week." However, T3 and T8 stated they controlled the curriculum by teaching phonics in the moment. T3 explained what this looks like in their classroom:

> I also do a lot of things in the moment while I'm teaching in context with worksheets in journaling. We do lots of segmenting and blending, sounding out words, and then I do a lot of Elkonin boxes [physically drawn sound boxes on paper] in [a] small group and sounding out CVC [consonant vowel consonant] words with whiteboards whole group.

T8 also explained how they control the instructional process and how phonics is taught: "I sort of do some of the things I've learned over time through early literacy, such as teaching phonics as a whole group with interactive writing, shared reading, and then small group, guided reading, and through the students' journals." Furthermore, T8 supported a preference for boosting student engagement while teaching phonics: "We make it fun, and they pick up on things more."

A distinction between a more structured literacy approach versus an individual teacher-controlled instructional plan arose with three different participants. T9 suggested, "The Science of Reading made me more aware of how to teach reading to students, how to teach phonics to students. They're saying that you need to have 60 minutes of explicit phonics instruction daily." More evidence regarding a difference in how teachers control curriculum alignment and instructional integrity was provided by T5 when they explained how they use a structured reading program, Reading Horizons, to teach a phonetic coding system and ensure instructional integrity:

> A short vowel sound would get an "x" under it. Long vowel sounds get a long vowel mark over them, and you teach them how to code the words so that also teaches them that they can read the word if they know the coding system.

Similarly, T10 illustrated how they control phonics instruction while using a structured program: "I teach phonics within the text and outside of the text. I use Reading Horizons to teach phonics and to teach how to visualize how words work and understanding that words do typically have a pattern or rule."

Research Question 2

RQ2 focused on which specific professional development(s) K–3 reading teachers believe had the most effect on their teaching and implementation of instructional strategies to support students in phonemic awareness and phonics. Interview Questions 6–8 addressed this query and asked the participants to name the most beneficial professional development they have received, explain how the professional development benefitted their teaching, and describe impactful strategies learned as a result of the most beneficial professional development. A third theme emerged from the data collected from the participant interviews, indicating teachers value professional development leading to intentional phonics instruction.

Theme 3: Teachers Value Professional Development Leading to Intentional Phonics Instruction

Each participant identified a specific phonological professional development as the most beneficial for their phonics instruction. Five of the 10 participants named the same professional development program the most valuable to their teaching. The remaining five mentioned more than one professional development adding benefit to their teaching. Eight of the 10 participants specifically highlighted training known for its intentional phonics instructional approach. The results indicated the role of professional development leading to intentional phonics instruction also includes the teachers' role in learning specific teaching strategies, recognizing that student learning leads implementation, and using data to inform instructional planning.

Most Beneficial Professional Development. Each participant identified a professional development they believed to be the most beneficial for building their professional knowledge to teach phonics. Five participants communicated Reading Horizons was the most beneficial professional development because it provided a systematic, sequential, and developmental program for the teacher to use. T1 confirmed this: "I would say Reading Horizons overall has been the most beneficial program to myself and I feel, like, to our district." T7 described the professional development for Reading Horizons as a clear and easy to use program: "Reading Horizons, hands down. It made phonics so clear in a way that I would have never ever understood myself, let alone teach it." T5, T6, and T10 also agreed with other participants that Reading Horizons was the most beneficial professional development they had received. T6 confirmed:

> Reading Horizons so far has been the most beneficial. I think there needs to be a system in whatever you do. It has to be systematic. There has to be a system on purpose there, and I think Reading Horizons instruction teaches you how to do it.

T10 supported a preference for professional development that provides a developmental and sequential approach to their teaching: "Reading Horizons training was the most beneficial. I was able to give my students a developmental program and sequential program." According to T8, the Reading Horizons professional development was beneficial but a challenge to learn all at once: "We had Reading Horizons training, and that taught me several things, but to be honest with you, when you're first taking something in, it's hard to grasp everything."

However, participants T2 and T9 mentioned the professional training program, Science of Reading, as the most beneficial development they had received. The correlation with previous responses was confirmed when T6 mentioned both Reading Horizons and Science of Reading as the most beneficial professional development received. T6 justified both by explaining: “I think the Science of Reading was good as far as opening my eyes to just why it’s so essential. But as far as the impact on my teaching, I would say Reading Horizons.”

Despite most participants preferring a professional development focused on an aligned curriculum and intentional phonetic approach, three identified three professional developments that were not identified by the others. T3 adamantly stated without additional explanation: “Hands down. Literacy Collaborative.” Separate from the majority and the only participant who had been trained in the specific professional development, T4 promoted Heggerty Phonics as the most beneficial training received. However, T5 mentioned Reading Recovery as being the most influential for teaching phonics.

Intentional Phonics Instruction. Participants expressed a value in professional development that trains and supports teachers to implement intentional phonics instruction. T7 and T2 referenced professional development in programs that use a scope and sequence to intentionally teach phonics. T7 stated that a plan was more intentional with phonics instruction: “In the Science of Reading, it talks about a scope and sequence, and Reading Horizons is the closest scope and sequence, so that’s what we are going to use.” T2 shared a similar thought: “I think if we all would follow the Reading Horizons’

scope and sequence, it would be—no matter [if] they're in first grade, second grade, third grade—you'd know what they've been taught and been exposed to." T5 described a scope and sequence while explaining the importance of being intentional with phonics instruction:

> It is supposed to start in kindergarten with Book 1 being completed, and then, in first grade, we are supposed to do a review of Book 1, do Book 2, and introduce Book 3. The hope is that we would master all the skills.

T9 and T1 also supported the importance of professional development that leads teachers to be more intentional with phonics instruction. T9 noted, "They have to mark them to prove this is an adjacent vowel rule or this is a short vowel or a long vowel." Similarly, T1 explained:

> Reading Horizons has provided direction. There is a sequence from letters to sounds, to blends, to digraphs, to syllables—just top to bottom. They've sequenced the lessons based on research and when it is taught in that fashion. In my personal opinion, the growth of students seems to be faster and more connected to it. They hold onto it and master it better than just a weekly focus on this or that.

Specifically Stated Strategies. Participants mentioned specific strategies they learned from phonological professional developments and continue to use. T3 provided an example of an often-used strategy: "Foundational skills where they can write any [consonant vowel consonant] CVC word just by blending and segmenting it." T6 explained that teaching phonemic awareness is essential to establishing a strong phonics

foundation. Other participants mentioned decoding and dictation as teaching strategies they used within their phonics instruction. T1 shared, “One of the instructional strategies we use is dictation.” T9 emphasized the importance of showing students how to decode:

> Walk through talking about each step, how to mark it, why to mark it that way, and then I would release them, and they would do it. I would give them words following that same skill. They would practice on their whiteboards, proving it.

T5, T6, T8, and T9 specifically mentioned Elkonin boxes, physically drawn sound boxes on paper, as a specific and intentional instructional strategy for teaching students to hear and see letter-sound relationships.

Student Learning Drives Implementation. Participants indicated evidence of student learning and noticed that when students apply new knowledge, their application of learning drives teacher implementation. T1 explained this process:

> You want to build on the knowledge they have, and then when you see students get it right away and able to utilize it, or you see students who struggle with it, and finally, a light bulb moment comes, and they’re like, “Oh. This makes sense.”

T1 elaborated:

> Both immediate success as you’re teaching it, and you’re seeing them grasp it, or in long term success when they are actually utilizing as they are writing or reading, and you see that long term connection, mastery of those skills.

Seven participants acknowledged student application of phonics and their flexible application between reading and writing as successful factors of professional development leading to effective implementation of phonics instruction. According to T5,

there is an association between student learning and successful implementation: “They can take their old knowledge and build in new knowledge and be able to successfully manipulate on their own to problem solve during difficulty in reading and writing.”

Using Data to Inform. Participants mentioned the importance of using data to inform next steps in the process of planning phonics instruction and how the relevant data are extracted from assessment data to determine student mastery. An explanation provided by T7 reinforced the importance of teacher observation, assessment, and using data to guide next steps: “I watch and quiz a couple of my students to see where they are because those assessment pieces help guide everything.” T10 had a system to use data to inform instructional practices by

> keeping track of data that guides my teaching to know what phonics patterns they have a grasp on and which ones they do not. I think the tracking system is key to keep a focus on where I need to go, what I need to review, and what the students are strong in, so I can also build upon that too.

Likewise, T2 shared a common approach to using data by “making sure they have those letters and sounds and word parts down pat before moving on.” Lastly, T6 shared a similar understanding of why assessment data are essential for informing the teacher’s instructional plan: “I check their mastery, and if they truly understand the process of that skill that we’re working on.”

Research Question 3

RQ3 focused on what additional professional development opportunities K–3 reading teachers describe as being needed to enhance their implementation of phonetic

instructional strategies. Interview Questions 9–11 addressed RQ3 and asked the participants to identify changes, if any, needed to enhance the implementation of phonics instruction, which specific professional development would enhance the teaching of phonics, and which format of professional development would be most widely received by teachers. A fourth theme emerged from the data collected from the interviews, indicating that teachers want organizational commitment to continuous improvement.

Theme 4: Teachers Want Organizational Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Theme 4 did not suggest a specific program for professional development but clarified the teachers' desire to work within an organization where its leaders are committed to continuous improvement and work to establish a structured professional development plan that addresses building teacher capacity regardless of a specific program. Examples from the participants' interviews highlighted teacher accountability and advocated for professional development that provides them with an opportunity to enhance their skills. Similarly, Theme 4 demonstrates teachers' desire for the organization to plan and coordinate structured professional development to build teacher capacity and replicate effective professional practices throughout the school.

Structure of Professional Development. Participants described what they specifically wanted in the structure of professional development. Seven participants mentioned coaching and demonstration. T3 explained why a coaching model had developed effective teaching practices:

> Coaching, if you can get a quality coach. When I look back on my most valuable training, I feel like it came from those coaches because they were able to tailor

> their instruction more for me, and on a one-to-one basis and based on my classroom's experience.

Similarly, T5 mentioned a coaching model for constructive feedback: "A professional coach that would come in and critique and do follow-up professional development would be good." T8 reluctantly and honestly shared a personal opinion about coaching: "I think coaching is your best bet, even though I hate that. You learn more from coaching than anything." T2 also shared a reluctancy to suggest a coaching model because some teachers may feel threatened:

> Coaching. Because if we stick with Reading Horizons, we all have the basics, probably, except for new teachers, but coaching may seem threatening to some people who feel like maybe they don't know it or aren't doing it exactly right.

Similar to teachers working with a coach or colleague, T1 expressed: "It could even be someone demonstrating a lesson just to refresh your mind."

Several participants had additional suggestions for promoting commitment and continuous improvement. One participant was adamant about the professional development being job-embedded and mandatory for all K–3 teachers. T6 shared a concern regarding teachers who choose not to participate in professional development:

> If it's not built into our school year, like in a workshop or professional development during the day, then I just don't think people are going to do it. . . . I don't see people doing it otherwise unless it is mandatory and we have to do it.

T4 and T5 expressed their preference for in-person professional development and their dislike for participating in these online. T4 asserted, "I prefer in-person, hands-on." T5

stated their dislike of online professional development: “Having them online doesn’t work for me. I am a very much in-person kind of person.” Many participants who preferred a coaching model also favored an in-person approach; a few were open to a virtual option because it allowed for flexibility with teacher schedules. T9 explained why a virtual professional development option works for some teachers:

> I would also like to have access to virtual throughout the year so that if there was a question, or I do have concern, or I would like someone to receive a video of me teaching and say, “Give me suggestions.”

Matching T9’s preference for virtual professional development but for a different reason, T8 mentioned: “Also, I like virtual. Just because you can tend to do it on your own time. If you missed a session, you could have a make-up session.”

Effective Professional Practices. Participants mentioned several professional efficacy attributes that would benefit an organization’s commitment to continuous improvement. Two participants noted the importance of feedback in effective professional practice. T1 shared why constructive criticism is important for teacher development:

> I would say, and this is really hard because I don’t think teachers want to be judged or have people watch them, but I do think it’s good to have people give you feedback on what you’re doing. Some constructive criticism is helpful.

T1 suggested teachers may become complacent if they are not getting appropriate feedback focused on continuous improvement: “I think sometimes you get complacent if

you don't have a little constructive criticism." T5 elaborated on the concept of constructive criticism with the need for accountability:

> I feel like that's the only way you get better because it's very easy to get in a stale routine and think you're doing things right when you're not. I think that's an accountability piece that we all need. It's not someone there to evaluate you for your contract, but it's someone there to evaluate you as an educator on how well you're implementing what you're doing.

Regarding effective professional practices, T4 and T7 explained the importance of building teacher capacity to teach effective phonics instruction by sharing how they learned the "why" behind phonics instruction. Once they knew the "how," they could teach students. Comparatively, T5 suggested building teacher capacity through effective professional practices as a way to provide a scaffolding system for teacher development:

> I think just having the professional development—not only for me but for the people that are before me and after me—to make sure that what I'm implementing is being continued and is being scaffold [*sic*] and sequenced from the time they walk in the door to the time they walk out the door.

Participant responses focused on a desire for effective professional practices that included a need for cohesiveness and commitment throughout the organization. Two participants voiced a critical concern with teachers at the school who needed to be fully committed to teaching phonics using a cohesive, collective approach and not just pieces or sections of the phonics program. T4 shared their experience at one school: "Our programs need to be utilized across the board." T5 conveyed a similar need for

cohesiveness and commitment: “Whatever program we pick, stick with it and give it time to be implemented, perfected. I think it’s more of an implementation in time with professional development and building teacher capacity to teach rather than a program.”

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Ravitch and Carl (2019) emphasized trustworthiness in qualitative research by stating the importance of thoroughly describing the approach to the research methods during the data collection process. In this study, I used an interview protocol and questions specifically designed to explore K–3 reading teachers’ perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement. Specific interview questions were developed in advance and reviewed by a Walden University methodologist specializing in qualitative research. The methodologist reviewed the interview questions for content validity prior to submitting the interview protocol for the initial phase of the university research review (URR) approval. Working with a methodologist was done to establish trustworthiness. The methodologist provided constructive feedback, which allowed for reflexivity, the opportunity to determine the details needed for each question, and to improve the interview questions before my committee approved them. I consistently used the approved interview questions word for word in the same sequence with each participant. The following sections demonstrate how I created trustworthiness by establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability for this study.

Credibility

Establishing confidence in the accuracy of the findings is the researcher's way of establishing credibility (Burkholder et al., 2019). To establish credibility, I created and used an interview protocol that guided me through every aspect of the interview, including the pre- and postinterview process. During the preinterview, I thanked the participant for volunteering, restated the purpose of the study, and described the interview process. I reminded each participant of the information shared in the invitation to participate and the consent form, which included the background of the research, risks and benefits of participating, privacy, maintenance of confidentiality, treatment of data, and the right to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study without penalty.

During the individual interviews, the data collection process involved starting the audio recording feature or device before asking the first question and recording until all 11 interview questions were asked. After the participant answered all questions, I ended the audio recording. The postinterview involved a debriefing. I asked each participant if they had any questions about the interview process, and I reminded them that their interview responses would remain confidential. I ended the telephone call or virtual meeting with a thank you for the participant's willingness to take part in the study. During member checks, the participants were given a two-page summary of the study findings and asked to comment or ask questions within 48 hours of receipt. No participants had comments or questions. The data collection methods used to ensure credibility included the implementation of the interview protocol with specific questions and an audio recording of each participant, which was saved and transcribed verbatim

into a Word document and labeled with the participant's alphanumeric code (e.g., T1-T10). I also kept a reflective journal to record personal bias throughout data collection.

Transferability

The transferability of the research was a goal throughout the study, which was accomplished by providing thorough explanations and thick descriptions of all aspects of the research process. Transferability was strengthened from the beginning by presenting the demographic data (see Table 4), which indicated the participants' years of experience in teaching K–3 reading and a list of the phonological professional developments the participants had completed. Additionally, the research site supported transferability as it was a typical setting and represented K–3 reading teachers trained in various phonological teaching methods with ample years of teaching experience to implement instructional strategies.

Transferability of this study was also strengthened by clearly communicating the details of the sample population, sampling method, and inclusion criteria for participation as well as using an interview protocol with sequenced procedures and explicit interview questions. Through a detailed description of the research and the findings, readers will be able to judge the appropriateness of transferring my findings to future research on K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement. The context of the study was described to assist the reader in determining the transferability of the

findings from the study to other schools experiencing similar concerns with professional development and implementation of instructional strategies.

Dependability

Dependability of the study's findings was achieved by consistently following the interview protocol as it was designed to protect the study's data collection process and ensure consistency with all participants. The detailed interview protocol provided a guide for ensuring participants understood the purpose, risks, and benefits of participating as well as a consistent reference for adhering to the sequence of interview questions while ensuring the participants felt safe to share their experiences. Allowing the teachers to participate by virtual meeting or phone ensured they felt comfortable in their natural setting, which created an environment of trust and allowed the participants to provide lengthy responses to the open-ended interview questions.

Confirmability

Establishing confirmability was a goal throughout the data collection process and was achieved by focusing on the exact wording of each participant's response to each interview question. I focused on reading and rereading the participants' responses and included their exact wording in the transcripts. The explicit and precise data collection and analysis methods resulted in a detailed audit trail that allowed me to focus on the participants' perspectives and held me, as the researcher, accountable for objectivity throughout the study. The audit trail provided a consistent system for relying solely on the collected data and accurately reflecting the participants' responses. Furthermore, relying only on the participants' responses ensured that my personal bias, beliefs, and

assumptions were not applied to the study or data and created transparency in the process—from the participants' interviews to the final themes answering the RQs.

Summary

In Chapter 4, the data collected and analyzed were presented with examples of direct quotes from the participants. The study was formed from three RQs that served the purpose of the study, which was to explore K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. Individual semistructured interviews allowing for open-ended responses were used during the data collection process to obtain the perspectives of 10 K–3 reading teachers from three different schools with teaching K–3 reading experience ranging between 8–28 years. The participants also shared common experiences with school-sponsored professional developments and training opportunities they pursued on their own. The list of professional developments in phonological teaching methods that the 10 participants received included: college courses, Heggerty Phonics, Literacy Collaborative, Orton-Gillingham, Reading Horizons, Reading Mastery, Reading Recovery, Science of Reading, state initiatives, and Success for All.

A consistent method of exploring the participants' interview responses was used with open coding and axial coding, which allowed me to read, mark, and highlight the data collected from the participants' quotes and determine recurring themes (see Thomas, 2023). Four themes emerged from the data analysis, which indicated the K–3 reading

teachers' perspectives on their professional development in phonological methods and what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. The consistent process of exploring the interview data allowed me to perform the data analysis; once the analysis was completed, four themes emerged to answer the three RQs.

Theme 1, merging multiple professional developments leads to inconsistent implementation, emerged and answered RQ1. The participants described the number of professional developments they received and how they currently teach phonics in their classroom based on their previous experiences with professional development opportunities made available to them by the school or other learning opportunities labeled as professional development. The majority of participants relied on what their schools provided as professional development in phonological methods but also on what they believed had prepared them to teach and what they preferred to use. However, their responses suggested some inconsistencies with implementation of instruction. The data collected on the participants' number of professional developments and the variation in instructional delivery methods indicated that teachers merge methods learned from several professional development approaches, leading to inconsistent implementation among teachers. Although most participants referenced using a systematic approach to teaching phonics in their classroom, all explained that strictly using one program over another was not their only method of instructional delivery. Participants shared aspects of explicit and sequential phonetic instructional methods, but they also communicated their

individual preferences for several varied instructional methods they learned over the years from a variety of professional developments.

Theme 2 reflected the teachers' responses that they prefer curriculum alignment and instructional integrity and also addressed RQ 1, which focused on K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods. The participants included their preferences for common terminology, prioritized phonics instruction, scoped and sequenced curriculum, and structured lessons. The data collected from which Theme 2 emerged also indicated that teachers have autonomy or control over what they do in their classrooms when it comes to phonics instruction. According to the participants' reflections on instructional implementation, these teacher controls were not consistent from participant to participant.

Theme 3, teachers value professional development leading to intentional phonics instruction, emerged to answer RQ2, which focused on the specific professional development(s) that K–3 reading teachers believed to have had the most effect on their teaching and implementation of instructional strategies to support students in phonemic awareness and phonics. Theme 3 provides insight into what teachers value about their professional development in terms of its greatest effect on their teaching phonics. Theme 3 also demonstrates evidence of the importance of intentional phonics instruction, with the teachers sharing the specific strategies they used year after year, not because they had been instructed to, but because they valued the student learning outcomes from intentional phonics instruction.

Theme 4 reflected that teachers want organizational commitment to continuous improvement and addressed RQ3, which focused on additional professional development opportunities K–3 reading teachers describe as being needed to enhance teachers' implementation of phonetic instructional strategies. The majority of participants did not identify a specific professional development by name but expressed their perspectives on the ideal structure of professional development and effective professional practices from teachers. The participants shared how professional development should be more consistent and inclusive but indicated multiple times the need for constructive feedback. The participants clarified that quality coaching was the best method to incorporate constructive feedback and that it would not necessarily be well-received by K–3 teachers, but that it is what was needed to establish consistency and implementation of effective instructional practices. Lastly, many participants preferred effective professional practices in the form of accountability, commitment to building teacher capacity, and cohesiveness across the K–3 classrooms. The participants wanted the organization to provide professional development in a structured approach that would engage all K–3 teachers and increase efforts to consistently implement phonetic instructional strategies.

In Chapter 5, I provide an interpretation of the study's findings, limitations, recommendations, and implications. I compare the findings to the literature review in Chapter 2 to determine if the current study extends knowledge in the discipline. I describe the study's limitations and provide recommendations for future research. I end Chapter 5 by discussing the potential implications of positive social change for K–3 reading teachers and student reading outcomes.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. I collected data from 10 participants with 8–28 years of K–3 reading teacher experience currently teaching in three different elementary schools. One-on-one semistructured interviews were conducted from my home via Google Meet and telephone. While using a basic qualitative research approach, I developed an understanding of the K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement. Four themes emerged from exploring the reading teachers' perspectives: merging multiple professional developments leads to inconsistent implementation, teachers prefer curriculum alignment and instructional integrity, teachers value professional development leading to intentional phonics instruction, and teachers want organizational commitment to continuous improvement.

In this chapter, I explain the findings of this study and explore how the results provide a better understanding of the common practices and challenges of consistently and effectively implementing the phonological methods learned as a result of K–3 reading teachers' professional development using the participants' input. In Chapter 5, I compare the research findings with current literature and the conceptual framework of

Flavell's (1980) theory of metacognition. This final chapter also includes the study's implications, limitations, and recommendations.

Interpretations of the Findings

This basic qualitative study was conducted using snowball sampling to recruit participants for interviews to obtain the perspectives of a typical K–3 reading teacher population. The data collection process featured 10 one-on-one semistructured interviews. As a result of using an interview protocol, I created a consistent process of data collection. My audit trail and concise documentation allowed me to identify the most important and common concepts that became the foundation for open coding, axial coding, and thematic analysis (see Thomas, 2023). I read, reread, highlighted, and annotated critical information from each participant's statements several times, which evolved into four themes that answered the three RQs. The findings of this study help fill the gap in practice and provide important information relevant to the role of professional development in the implementation of phonetic instructional strategies to improve student achievement. The following RQs guided this study:

RQ1: What are K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods?

RQ2: Which specific professional development(s) do K–3 reading teachers believe has had the most effect on their teaching and implementation of instructional strategies to support students in phonemic awareness and phonics?

RQ3: What additional professional development opportunities do K–3 reading teachers describe as being needed to enhance teachers' implementation of phonetic instructional strategies?

During each interview, I used an interview protocol consisting of 11 open-ended questions to explore K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement. Four themes emerged from the participants' interview responses. Theme 1, merging multiple professional developments leads to inconsistent implementation and Theme 2, teachers prefer curriculum alignment and instructional integrity, were directly related to Flavell's (1980) theory of thinking about thinking, or metacognition, which was the grounding conceptual framework of this study. Theme 1 identified the problem of practice and Theme 2 extended knowledge in the discipline by suggesting a solution to the problem of practice. I used Flavell's theory to engage participants in reflecting on their practice and to illuminate their lived experience with the phenomenon.

Theme 3, teachers value professional development leading to intentional phonics instruction, aligned with Ciesielski and Creaghead's (2020) work. Ciesielski and Creaghead supported the importance of equipping early childhood teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve intentional and desirable outcomes in early childhood reading through professional development. Like Ciesielski and Creaghead's findings, Theme 3 indicates that the content of the professional development is critical for

developing quality teaching in the area of phonological knowledge to achieve consistent implementation of intentional phonics instructional strategies.

Theme 4, teachers want organizational commitment to continuous improvement, is aligned with the school and district's responsibility of building teacher capacity to support student achievement. This theme also aligns with literature supporting building teacher capacity to improve teacher quality. Mullikin et al. (2021) and Piasta et al. (2020) reported that an organized effort to build teacher capacity depended on the type of professional development agreed upon, the participants' perspectives on the professional development experience, and whether they valued the professional learning opportunity. The current study's findings extend knowledge by identifying what teachers want as part of their structured professional development and affirm a commitment to effective professional practices as important components for continuous improvement.

Theme 1: Merging Multiple Professional Developments Leads to Inconsistent Implementation

Participation in several professional development opportunities combined with a variety of approaches to teaching early reading has resulted in the inconsistent implementation of phonics instruction (Moats, 2019; Paige et al., 2021). Moats (2019) demonstrated that the dominance of traditional teaching methods relying on a whole language approach affected teachers' ability to deliver systematic phonetic instruction. However, Paige et al. (2020) advocated for the Science of Reading coupled with an individual teacher's craft as an effective approach. The participants referenced a total of 10 different types of professional development in phonological methods either sponsored

by the specific school, school system, or a professional development opportunity they sought for themselves. All 10 participants were trained in at least three different types of phonological professional development, and several were trained in five. Each type of professional development offered a separate approach to phonetic instruction in the K–3 reading classroom. T6 stated, "We did Literacy Collaborative, but that was more on the process of reading, not so much as phonics in what I've participated in." T2 added their perspective:

> Science of Reading really opened my eyes to things that I was not doing right, or just a shift in the perspective to get back to phonics instead of relying on pictures when they're reading and use your best guess or use the context clues.

T4 shared, "Last summer, I did do a Heggerty training to get more solidified on how to do it." T3 explained further: "I feel like I've been adequately trained in Reading Horizons, but I also feel if I hadn't had Literacy Collaborative, I wouldn't know how to teach foundational things in my classroom."

Peltier et al. (2020) summarized the role of K–3 teachers by stating that they must have extensive and flexible knowledge regarding foundational reading skills, including phonological awareness, phonics, and spelling. Some researchers have expressed concern about teachers obtaining the necessary knowledge to evaluate and identify reading deficits and leveraging their knowledge to address them with all students (Garwood et al., 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2018; Porter et al., 2022; and Vines et al., 2020). The findings of this study suggest that the participants were flexible with their knowledge and application of a variety of strategies from multiple professional development opportunities. T6

discussed their strategy: “The I do, we do, and then you do. I think that’s an impactful strategy for them. It creates a level of security for them.” T8 explained, “Multiple opportunities for students to practice the skill through teacher modeling; students demonstrating learned knowledge through reading and writing. Students would also work in guided reading with the teacher, and through centers, we will do phonics practice.” T3 discussed what they found effective: “So, specific instructional strategies that I consider impactful? Those are strategies that I continue to use over time, whether I’m supposed to do [so] because I have to or because I find it meaningful.” T3 shared their strategy:

> I love to do a quick review of all the different phonemic awareness activities. I believe there are seven different types: rhyming, segmentation, blending, substitution, onset, rhyme, things like that. I think the most important one of all of them is segmentation.

Hudson et al. (2021) and Tortorelli et al. (2021) explained the effectiveness of implementing and demonstrating instructional strategies required the teacher to demonstrate foundational knowledge and expertise in the following aspects of language: phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, and automaticity. When teachers applied Flavell’s (1980) metacognitive approach to thinking about their thinking, and in this case, thinking specifically about the professional development practices and their implementation of instructional strategies, the participants expressed concerns with the daily challenges and inconsistent implementation. T1 stated, “The biggest challenge when we started teaching a separate phonics program away from a basal reader or a literacy collaborative type setting was the time.” T5 explained, “I think time is a definite

constraint for us. I feel like in education, we are expected to teach the width of a subject and not in depth." Ehri and Flugman (2018) suggested that more time was needed for teachers to consistently teach the most foundational learning components of reading effectively.

The findings also indicated inconsistent implementation was an outcome of several different types of professional developments that promoted a variety of instructional delivery methods. Castles et al. (2018) concluded that effective phonics instruction was foundational, and the teacher must move instructional practices beyond basic phonics to develop effective classroom practices and expert readers. The literature review contains findings relevant to foundational reading skills. Two participants had concerns with the most basic and foundational skills being implemented consistently throughout the school. T6 noted, "The biggest challenge that I have encountered is the lack of phonemic awareness. And I feel like that's a true foundational block in today's readers." Similarly, T1 emphasized:

> The time, even though that always comes as an issue, it is more of a priority issue that people need to adjust and realize their time is better spent teaching phonics, getting the mastery of phonics, and the success will come easier to kids once they have their basics down with phonics.

Oakley (2018) focused on early childhood teachers' preparedness to teach explicit phonics and spelling patterns and determined that most teacher-participants surveyed felt inadequately prepared to deliver specific instruction. Hikida et al. (2019) concluded that educators cannot deliver effective reading instruction if they have not had ample training

in phonological knowledge attainment. The findings of this study confirm the information found in the literature review. Participants shared how professional development created unforeseen challenges, such as confusion and inconsistency among teachers. T4 elaborated,

> Saying that we needed further development or further trainings and being told we did not necessarily need those trainings. So those have been the bigger challenges. . . . I pretty much self-taught myself how to use the book with going through each example.

T8 expressed concern with professional development:

> I don't feel like I've been formally trained in phonics, meaning I can't recall any former trainings specifically learning how to teach phonics. I took Reading Horizons training, but it was a lot of learning how to code words like the vowels, blends, digraphs, and using the online program.

T8 communicated a concern with the way professional development was presented:

> Instead of the training being just on coding and more on word origins and how words work, teaching me to teach them [students] how to read the word necessary and not get hung up on all the extra coding and proving/marking a word that goes along with it.

T9 expressed, "I need more training. The Science of Reading says that in order for more students to comprehend what they're reading, two things play a key part, and that is word recognition and oral language."

Reading is an essential skill, and learning to read involves the complex cognitive task of orchestrating strategies to problem-solve print. The metalinguistic study conducted by Hikida et al. (2019) determined that teachers cannot teach what they do not know. White et al. (2020) explained the implications of poorly prepared teachers and suggested that student reading deficits are linked to phonological awareness deficits, which are directly related to the teacher's quality of instruction. The findings of this study confirmed the information found in the literature review, specifically that learning to read is a complex cognitive task for students and that teachers must be fully equipped to consistently provide quality instruction (see Hikida et al., 2019; Hudson et al., 2021; Moats, 2019; Xavier, 2022).

The findings included challenges the K–3 reading teachers have experienced with cohorts of students with varied skill sets, students unable to apply phonetic knowledge to decode reading, and students lacking basic phonemic awareness skills of blending and segmentation. T5 noted,

> We have some kids that come to us in first grade that are already readers. We have kids that come to us that do not know letters and sounds and do not know how to manipulate those. So that's a wide range of skill level.

T9 added, "The challenge is with students transferring their knowledge from being able to decode to actually reading and writing." T3 discussed another challenge:

> My biggest issue is getting kids to be able to blend and segment phonemes. I think, for some reason, it doesn't get a lot of attention. I think it is very critical and fundamental building block of phonics.

T6 emphasized a lack of phonemic awareness:

> They come to you, and they can't blend the sounds. I'm just dumbfounded, like, "How can you not blend sounds?" This is a real stumbling block to teachers and their first graders. They can't rhyme and do word families. There's so many connections that they're missing because they don't have that phonemic awareness.

Theme 1 reflected that teachers merge multiple professional developments, which leads to inconsistent implementation of phonics instruction. Participants shared their perspectives and gave specific examples of the multiple professional developments they completed. The participants' responses also suggest there are systemic challenges that have likely resulted in inconsistent implementation among teachers with students with various skill sets. There is evidence in the literature review in Chapter 2 that support the theme, but the findings also extend knowledge to include a cause-and-effect relationship when there is an abundance of different types of professional development that absorb instructional time, leading to inconsistent implementation.

Theme 2: Teachers Prefer Curriculum Alignment and Instructional Integrity

Common instructional language and similar professional development experiences within a school will scaffold intentional phonetic instruction and move student performance consistently (Carson & Bayetto, 2018; Flynn et al., 2021). The literature review highlighted the concept of schools or learning organizations fostering structures that include curriculum alignment and instructional integrity by using common terminology and a sequenced curriculum to prioritize phonics instruction. Carson and

Bayetto (2018) and Flynn et al. (2021) stated a need for schools to implement intentional school-wide approaches for professional development and recommended that authorities consider local needs to calibrate teachers' existing phonological knowledge more consistently throughout the school. The participants in my study communicated preferences for several various instructional methods they have learned over the years from several professional developments. Collectively, the 10 participants experienced a variety of phonological professional developments, including college courses, Heggerty Phonics, Literacy Collaborative, Orton-Gillingham, Reading Horizons, Reading Mastery, Reading Recovery, Science of Reading, state initiatives, and Success for All. The findings support evidence in the literature review, indicating a need for curriculum alignment and instructional integrity.

The literature comparing phonetic instructional approaches suggested that a standalone or an all-inclusive phonics program is preferred over an embedded method (Chapman et al., 2018; Foorman et al., 2018). The participants in my study preferred professional development with curriculum alignment and instructional integrity because it provides an all-in-one approach to teaching reading, beginning with the two most foundational components. T5 expressed a need for prioritizing phonics instruction as the most important component and that they have learned to teach it first. T6 commented, "I think overall, there needs to be more of a focus on phonics, and I think that there needs to be more focus on phonemic awareness prior to coming to me in first grade."

According to Campbell (2020), Chapman et al. (2018), and Tortorelli et al. (2021), teachers increased their knowledge and ability to implement phonics instruction

through classroom delivery or application of their own experiences with phonetic development. Some research study participants have used intentional phonics programs to address grade-level phonics (Chapman et al., 2018; Tortorelli et al., 2021), whereas others referred to an approach known as incidental phonics instruction (Campbell, 2020). Participants in the current study indicated some implicit and incidental teaching of phonics might occur in the school, like what Campbell reported. However, the participants' reflections on what they believe needed to change aligned with the findings of Chapman et al. on using an intentional program to teach phonics. T5, T4, and T10 emphasized the importance of curriculum alignment and instructional integrity. T5 stated, "Hearing it all the way from kindergarten up through third grade was a benefit for them as well." T4 explained, "The terminology needs to be used across the board and not in isolation. We all need to be doing the same thing to build. Not just doing bits and pieces or whatever we want." T10 also emphasized curriculum alignment and instructional integrity when reflecting upon teaching practices: "Teachers teaching in the same manner, using the same script, the same language that I'm using."

Cunningham et al. (2021), Park et al. (2020), and Tortorelli et al. (2021) indicated a natural progression with enhancing students' phonological memory as a steppingstone for long-term phonological memory development. The research findings collectively suggest the importance of intentionally and systematically implementing phonetic instruction, which supports the significance of teachers having an aligned curriculum with a scope and sequence to establish instructional integrity (Cunningham et al., 2021; Park et al., 2020; Tortorelli et al., 2021). T5's statement supported this concept: "So, if

you don't follow the sequence, then it kind of messes the kids up, and, typically, that's what we find as a problem within our school system is that the script isn't followed." T6 added, "I think it has to be explicitly taught, and I think that has to be expected across the board from everyone in K–3." T10 clarified that using a curriculum with scope and sequence can produce instructional integrity by "keeping a pace that helps the child excel without hindering their growth." Theme 2 confirms what was found in the peer-reviewed literature in Chapter 2, which suggested adhering to a degree of exactness with curriculum alignment and instructional integrity as they are key factors for success with consistently teaching phonemic awareness and phonics.

Theme 3: Teachers Value Professional Development Leading to Intentional Phonics Instruction

According to the findings of this study, professional development is essential in leading K–3 teachers to consistently implement intentional phonics instruction. Colomer et al. (2020), Jordan et al. (2018), and Tortorelli et al. (2021) noted that teachers' levels of content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge were enhanced and developed over time with professional development opportunities and years of teaching experience. Chapman et al. (2018) reported that teachers who teach phonics increased students' literacy achievement in their classes. Furthermore, the teacher-participants who used explicit phonics methods believed the intentional phonics instruction empowered students to read and improved their ability to implement effective phonological methods (Chapman et al., 2018). Colomer et al. had similar findings—when a professional

learning model is coupled with experiential learning embedded within a teaching assignment, the combined effort enhances teacher knowledge and practice.

Most participants identified a specific phonological professional development as the most beneficial. Five participants named the specific type of phonological professional development that was the most beneficial and explained that it was because it provided a systematic, sequential, and developmental program for them to use. T1 stated, “I would say Reading Horizons overall has been the most beneficial program to myself, and I feel, like, to our district.” T5, T6, and T10 agreed with other participants that Reading Horizons was the most beneficial professional development they had received. T10 summed up most responses: "Reading Horizons training was the most beneficial. I was able to give my students a developmental program and sequential program.”

Moats (2019) suggested the cognitive system of learning to read words, sentences, and passages with expression has helped students achieve the outcome of comprehension. Moats also noted that the complex task of developing teachers to teach reading should be a priority. T7 described Reading Horizon’s professional development as clear and easy to use: “Reading Horizons, hands down. It made phonics so clear in a way that I would have never ever understood myself, let alone teach it.” T7 explained their thinking and processing when reflecting on the benefits of professional development: “Once I understood how to break apart words, then I could teach my kids how to break apart words. Once I understood the basic rules, I could teach it to others.” The current findings confirm what Hudson et al. (2021) stated regarding trained teachers implementing and

demonstrating instructional strategies that required them to recognize these features, show foundational knowledge, and demonstrate expertise in the following aspects of language: phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, and automaticity.

Castles et al. (2018) and Paige et al. (2021) shared a comprehensive review of the Science of Reading and a student's initial phase of gaining alphabetic skills, sight word recognition, and text comprehension to confirm the importance of phonics instruction. These researchers concluded that effective phonics instruction was foundational, and the teacher must move instructional practices beyond basic phonics to develop effective classroom practices and expert readers. The findings of this study confirm suggestions in the literature review and promote professional development for K–3 reading teachers. T2, T6, and T9 mentioned Science of Reading as the most beneficial professional development received, although T6 recognized both Reading Horizons and Science of Reading as equally beneficial. T6 explained their reasoning: "I think the Science of Reading was good as far as opening my eyes to just why it's so essential. But as far as the impact on my teaching, I would say Reading Horizons."

Evidence in the literature review supports Theme 3, which expands and substantiates what professional development teachers value and what the participants believe leads to intentional instruction. Arrow et al. (2019) and Brownell et al. (2020) discovered that a teacher's knowledge plays a significant role in teaching students how to read in the early stages of word recognition. The findings in the current study indicated that K–3 teachers value professional development leading to intentional phonics instruction. T1 explained,

> Reading Horizons has provided direction. There is a sequence from letters to sounds, to blends, to digraphs, to syllables—just top to bottom. They've sequenced the lessons based on research, and when it is taught in that fashion, in my personal opinion, the growth of students seems to be faster and more connected to it. They hold onto it and master it better than just a weekly focus on this or that.

Hikida et al. (2019), Hudson et al. (2021), Moats (2019), Park et al. (2020), Vines et al. (2020), and Xavier (2022) suggested that elementary reading teachers need to be equipped with the necessary phonological knowledge to teach reading, specifically in the two components of decoding and comprehension. Several participants identified professional development that has an intentional approach to training teachers in an explicit and systematic approach to teaching phonics. T2 shared their perspective on which professional development would lead to intentional phonics instruction: "I think if we all would follow the Reading Horizons' scope and sequence, it would be—no matter [if] they're in first grade, second grade, third grade—you'd know what they've been taught and been exposed to." The study's findings and the literature review in Chapter 2 provide evidence that understanding the role of professional development leads to intentional phonics instruction and extends knowledge regarding which specific opportunities have had a positive effect on teaching phonemic awareness and phonics.

Theme 4: Teachers Want Organizational Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Theme 4 demonstrates that the organization's leaders must be fully committed and establish structured professional development requiring all teachers to complete the

same type of program. Carson and Bayetto (2018) and Flynn et al. (2021) demonstrated a need for schools to implement intentional school-wide approaches for professional development in phonics. The findings of the study confirm those in the literature review and indicate that authorities should consider local needs to calibrate teachers' existing phonological knowledge more consistently throughout the school. One participant requested that the professional development be job-embedded and mandatory for all K–3 teachers. T6 shared:

> If it's not built into our school year, like in a workshop or professional development during the day, then I just don't think people are going to do it. . . . I don't see people doing it otherwise unless it is mandatory and we have to do it.

Participants also expressed their likes and dislikes with current professional development practices. T4 and T5 noted their preference for in-person professional development and their dislike for online professional development. T4 asserted, "I prefer in-person, hands-on." T5 stated, "Having them online doesn't work for me. I am a very much in-person kind of person." Many participants who preferred a coaching model also favored an in-person approach, and some were open to an extra virtual professional development option because it allows for flexibility with teacher schedules. T9 explained,

> I would also like to have access to virtual throughout the year so that if there was a question, or I do have concern, or I would like someone to receive a video of me teaching and say, "Give me suggestions."

Similarly, T8 mentioned, "Also, I like virtual, just because you can tend to do it on your own time. If you missed a session, you could have a make-up session."

Hudson et al. (2021) and Whittingham et al. (2021) highlighted teacher accountability and advocated for professional development that provides them the opportunity to enhance their skills under the supervision of an expert. The concept of professional development under the supervision of an expert was apparent in the study's findings when participants expressed the importance of constructive criticism as being part of the organization's commitment to continuous improvement and holding each other accountable. T1 stated:

> I would say, and this is really hard because I don't think teachers want to be judged or have people watch them, but I do think it's good to have people give you feedback on what you're doing. Some constructive criticism is helpful. . . . I think sometimes you get complacent if you don't have a little constructive criticism.

T5 supported T1's perspective when they confirmed the concept of constructive criticism and added the need for accountability:

> I feel like that's the only way you get better because it's very easy to get in a stale routine and think you're doing things right when you're not. I think that's an accountability piece that we all need. It's not someone there to evaluate you for your contract, but it's someone there to evaluate you as an educator on how well you're implementing what you're doing.

Theme 4 demonstrates teachers' desire for the organization to plan and coordinate structured professional development to build teacher capacity and replicate effective professional practices throughout the school. Scarparolo and Hammond (2018)

showcased an evidence-based professional model that benefitted teachers' growth, specifically with implementing instructional strategies. The findings of Colomer et al. (2020) and Tortorelli et al. (2021) were similar to Scarparolo and Hammond's professional development model and included the cyclical nature of developing teachers' knowledge through workshops, classroom observations, and routine coaching sessions involving actual students. Seven participants specifically mentioned coaching and demonstration as their preferred structure of professional development. T3 explained:

> Coaching, if you can get a quality coach. When I look back on my most valuable training, I feel like it came from those coaches because they were able to tailor their instruction more for me and on a one-to-one basis and based on my classroom's experience.

T5 also supported a coaching model, "A professional coach that would come in and critique and do follow-up professional development would be good." T8 shared, "I think coaching is your best bet, even though I hate that. You learn more from coaching than anything." Similarly, T2 expressed:

> Coaching because if we stick with Reading Horizons, we all have the basics, probably except for new teachers, but coaching may seem threatening to some people who feel like maybe they don't know it or aren't doing it exactly right.

The findings of this study indicate a need for professional practices in conjunction with professional development to address the consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. Nicholson and McIntosh (2020) stated that teachers who demonstrate high levels

of phonological knowledge show more self-confidence to support students in learning to read. Paige et al. (2019) discovered a relationship between foundational reading skills and third grade students' achievement on that grade's reading achievement test. Paige et al. concluded that students proficient in the foundational reading skills of phonemic awareness and phonetic decoding were 7 times more likely to score proficient on the state reading assessment. Jordan et al. (2018) discovered that third graders benefitted from their teacher completing 90–180 hours of face-to-face training in the reading fundamentals of the five domains of phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Jordan et al., McNeill (2018), and Paige et al. noted that if teachers are trained in the intentional instructional strategies to teach phonemic awareness and phonics, their students are set up to achieve the desired outcome of proficiency in foundational reading skills.

The findings of this study add to the information found in the literature review and indicate the importance of teachers' self-regulating professional practice best suited for developing teacher quality (see Demir et al., 2019; Mullikin et al., 2021). Forgie et al. (2022) and Jordan et al. (2018) shifted important talking points toward building organizational capacity to reflect on professional development and the teacher's self-efficacy relationship with teaching. Furthermore, the teachers' participation in intentional professional development to teach phonics-based instruction demonstrated that teachers with high levels of phonological knowledge gave beginning teachers more self-confidence in their ability to support students in reading (Nicholson & McIntosh, 2020; Scarparolo & Hammond, 2018).

Similar to the literature review, many participants expressed they wanted organizational commitment because it would develop effective professional practices in accountability, commitment to teacher quality, and cohesiveness across K–3 classrooms. Participants mentioned that teachers in the school need to be fully committed to teaching phonics using a cohesive, collective approach and not just using pieces or sections of it. T4 shared experiences at one school: "Our programs need to be utilized across the board, not in isolation." T5 conveyed a similar need for cohesiveness and commitment: "Whatever program we pick, stick with it and give it time to be implemented, perfected. I think it's more of an implementation in time with professional development and building teacher capacity to teach rather than a program." The findings of this study support evidence in the literature review and suggest effective schools promote teacher capacity and foster self-efficacy (see Beal, 2018; Demir et al., 2019; Forgie et al., 2022).

Limitations of the Study

Limitations and challenges of this study included access to participants meeting the inclusion criteria, navigating COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, and researcher bias. I received URR and IRB approval to conduct virtual meetings or telephone interviews to address the limitations and challenges of navigating COVID-19 restrictions. This approval allowed me to offer participants safe meeting options as they might have been otherwise reluctant to meet. Some participants were accustomed to using Google Meet with their students and colleagues; I conducted three online interviews and seven via telephone calls.

The study included a small sampling of 10 participants from three different elementary schools who met the following inclusion criteria: (a) were K–3 reading teachers who completed phonological methods professional development, (b) had implemented strategies for at least 1 year, and (c) were currently teaching K–3 reading. I used a snowball sampling method to recruit teachers from three different schools by emailing one potential participant from each school. The first three potential participants received an invitation to participate in an email that explained the research study, asked if they met the inclusion criteria, and were willing to consent. All three participants met the inclusion criteria, understood the assignment, and consented to participate in the study by directly emailing their consent and recommending other potential participants. Data saturation was achieved because the participants represented a wide range of years of experience teaching K–3 reading, had completed multiple professional developments in phonological instructional methods, and had worked at three typical elementary schools. Data saturation was achieved and strengthened the transferability of the findings by including participants who met the study's criteria through a snowball sampling and were therefore considered by their peers as information-rich in the research topic.

To address the challenges of researcher bias, I used a reflective journal throughout the data collection and analysis process to avert inferring biases and assumptions. I used reflexivity to help me set aside my biases and direct my attention solely to the collection and interpretation of the data. A comprehensive audit trail was maintained throughout the research process and included my reflective views, development of the findings, and the

research resources used in the study. I ensured my interpretation of the findings remained unbiased using the audit trail.

The interviews were based on the participants' self-reporting, which could have been a limitation. The participants could have wanted to present socially desirable answers or were reluctant to honestly share their experiences. Other participants seemed to have trouble expressing their thoughts and feelings completely. To address these limitations, I was congenial and welcoming to make the participants comfortable; I asked follow up questions and actively listened to encourage their responses. I informed the participants that their answers would remain confidential. I also explained that I would use an alphanumeric code instead of their name when writing the study to protect individual privacy.

Recommendations

In this basic qualitative study, I explored K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. From the data collected from the participants' responses, four themes emerged:

- Theme 1: Merging multiple professional developments leads to inconsistent implementation.
- Theme 2: Teachers prefer curriculum alignment and instructional integrity.
- Theme 3: Teachers value professional development leading to intentional phonics instruction.

- Theme 4: Teachers want organizational commitment to continuous improvement.

As a result of the findings, I recommend an additional study be conducted with the same inclusion criteria, in different elementary settings, and with more participants. As with this study, it would be essential that future participants have substantial background training in phonological professional development and proven experience with implementing specific, intentional, and explicit phonetic instructional strategies. The benefit of replicating this study in different settings and including more participants would be to determine if teachers from different geographical regions exposed to other types of phonological professional development would have similar or different perspectives on the topic. Next, I recommend follow-up studies to explore K–3 reading teachers' perspectives on barriers to implementation, including teacher beliefs and attitudes about professional development affecting the implementation of instructional strategies.

Finally, I recommend organizational stakeholders consisting of K–3 administrators, curriculum specialists, teachers, and instructional coaches jointly create systems and processes for professional development. The processes would involve annual and advance professional development planning based on specific needs, including dates, times, targeted training audience, professional content, expectations for instructional implementation of effective practices, and an evaluation of performance data to determine overall effectiveness. This recommendation addresses the need for consistency, cohesiveness, and stakeholder accountability within the organization.

Implications

This study may contribute to positive social change by providing professional development designers, education leaders, and teachers with information when making decisions about the structure of professional development in phonological methods. It may also assist in determining what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. The nature of the study encouraged open dialogue and triggered reflective thinking, supporting the participants' professional growth mindset, self-reflection, collective efficacy, and uniformity with implementation. According to Bruno and Dell'Aversana (2018), Fischer et al. (2018), and Meeks et al. (2020), teachers who engaged in reflective practices had as much of an effect on teacher performance as it did on student achievement in reading. Lund (2020) suggested that when teachers reflect upon their teaching, they become active learners while sharpening their skills to observe their students, collect data, and make informed instructional decisions about their pupils. In this study, teachers with 8–28 years of teaching K–3 reading who were experienced and trained in specific phonological methods had the opportunity to reflect on their professional experiences and practices with phonological professional development and their implementation of instructional strategies.

This study may contribute to a positive social change concerning future decisions on the structure of professional development and establishing consistent methods for implementing instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics. The participants elaborated on the importance of the organization's commitment to continuous

improvement through consistency, constructive feedback, and accountability within the school and across grade levels. Implications of this study may include future planning that involves school administrators, curriculum specialists, teachers, and instructional coaches to use perspective data to inform decisions regarding the process of designing professional development and recognizing which types of formats would be most conducive to benefitting their K–3 teachers future professional learning. Suggestions for additional positive social change would be to rely on the trained teachers' lived experience with professional development and replicate what they have identified as successful implementation.

Recommendations for professional development practices are based on the findings and include curriculum alignment, professional development in intentional phonics instruction, and a coaching model to develop K–3 reading teacher quality with consistent implementation of instructional methods. The coaching model supports and connects multiple aspects of the themes derived from the perspective data, including consistent and effective instructional practices through professional development in curriculum alignment, instructional integrity, and the teaching outcome of intentional phonics methods. An effective coaching model would be comprehensive and include the components of instructional observation, constructive feedback, consistency across and among grade levels, and job-embedded professional development. More importantly, the coaching model would foster a collaborative effort within the organization to create consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics.

Conclusion

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods and what professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. Limited research exists, specifically on K–3 reading teachers' experiences with phonological professional development and consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics. The research participants shared examples of their lived experiences regarding the subject and purpose of this study. The 10 participants reflected on and stated their concerns, challenges, successes, and the role of professional development in developing teacher quality to consistently implement instructional strategies.

The problem addressed in this research study was that although K–3 reading teachers have received specific professional development in phonological methods, a gap in practice existed with implementing instructional strategies. Four themes emerged from the data: merging multiple professional developments leads to inconsistent implementation; teachers prefer curriculum alignment and instructional integrity; teachers value professional development leading to intentional phonics instruction; and teachers want organizational commitment to continuous improvement. The findings of this study addressed the gap in practice, which indicated a need for further professional development for effective and consistent instructional strategies supporting student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics.

The study provided a voice from trained teachers who have completed specific training relevant to the phenomenon to share their experiences, insights, opinions, and judgments. Thomas (2023) stated, “Don’t ignore your own ability to reflect on a problem and don’t minimize its significance in helping you to understand the problem” (p. 12). By exploring the problem, the study confirmed previous research and extended knowledge regarding how K–3 reading teachers perceive their professional development and how to implement consistent instructional strategies. The findings of this study may provide professional development designers, education leaders, and teachers with information when making decisions about the structure of professional development in phonological methods and what further professional development is needed for consistent and effective implementation of instructional strategies to support student achievement in phonemic awareness and phonics.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Participants: Grade K–3 teachers

Length of interview: 45–60 minutes

Demographics: Participants from elementary schools.

Date: _____

Time: _____

Interview Code: ____(10–12 participants identify with alphanumeric code)

1. Thank participant for volunteering to participate
2. Describe the purpose
3. Describe the interview process
4. Review informed consent and obtain interviewee's verbal consent
    - Researcher's background
    - Risks and benefits of participating
    - Privacy
    - Maintenance of confidentiality
    - Treatment of data
    - Right to refuse to participate and to withdraw at any time without penalty
5. Opportunity for questions
6. Statement of consent
7. Begin recording of interview
8. Begin the interview
9. After all questions have been asked and answered, end recording

Postinterview

10. Thank interviewee for participating
11. Remind interviewee of treatment of data and confidentiality
12. Inform participant that you will contact them to provide a summary of the findings for them to review for accuracy.

Specific Interview Questions Linked to Research Questions

RQ1: What are K–3 reading teachers' perspectives regarding their professional development in phonological methods?

Interview Questions 1–5 address the importance of K–3 reading teachers' phonological knowledge development, expertise, and the role of phonological knowledge in delivering effective phonics instruction.

1. How many years of teaching experience do you have in K–3 reading? (Demographics.)
2. Tell me how you teach phonics. (Conceptual framework, intentional vs. incidental instruction.)
3. What professional development(s) specific to learning how to teach phonics have you received? (Reflective inquiry and self-efficacy.)
4. Describe an example of a successful phonics lesson. (Understanding K–3 knowledge, intentional vs. incidental instruction.)
5. Describe any challenges you have experienced with implementing phonics instruction. (Conceptual framework, the role of K–3 teachers' expertise)

RQ2: Which specific professional development(s) do K–3 reading teachers believe has had the most effect on their teaching and implementation of instructional strategies to support students in phonemic awareness and phonics?

Interview Questions 6–8 require the participants to use a metacognitive approach and think about how they learned phonological methods through specific professional development have built teacher capacity to provide phonics instruction.

6. Identify the most beneficial professional development you've received to benefit your phonics instruction. (Conceptual framework, understanding K–3 teacher knowledge.)
7. How did the professional development impact your ability to support student learning? (Conceptual framework, intentional vs. incidental instruction.)
8. Describe impactful instructional strategies that you have learned as a result of professional development. (Conceptual framework, the role of K–3 teacher expertise, building capacity.)

RQ3: What additional professional development opportunities do K–3 reading teachers describe as being needed to enhance teachers' implementation of phonetic instructional strategies?

Interview Questions 9–11 allow the participants to continue with the metacognitive lens and reflect upon what they have learned about their professional development in phonological methods and what is needed to improve training methods for future generations of teachers.

9. What changes, if any, are needed to enhance your ability to implement phonics instructional strategies? (Reflective inquiry and self-efficacy.)
10. If additional training is needed, identify specific professional development that would enhance your ability to teach phonics. (Building capacity.)
11. If needed, what format of professional development would be most widely received by K–3 teachers? (Follow-up training, workshop, virtual, coaching, colleague feedback, other.) (Understanding K–3 teacher knowledge, building capacity.)

Potential follow up question prompts to use to clarify participants' responses:

What did you mean by ….?

Can you tell me more about …?

You mentioned …. Can you please elaborate?