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## Decision-Making Practices of Second-Grade Teachers to Support Struggling Readers With Small Group Instruction

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# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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Laura Chang

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2023

Abstract

Decision-Making Practices of Second-Grade Teachers to Support Struggling Readers

With Small Group Instruction

by

Laura Chang

MA, Western Michigan University, 2004

BS, Western Michigan University, 1999

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

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October 2023

## Abstract

Teachers must devote significant time to making the instructional decisions necessary to effectively plan and prepare small group lessons. Although small group instruction has attracted the attention of researchers, there is a lack of understanding in the effective implementation of reading interventions to support struggling readers. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to describe how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers. The study's conceptual framework included Bandura's social-cognitive theory and was supported by Pearson and Gallagher's gradual release of responsibility instructional framework. The framework helped describe how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group interventions to support struggling readers. Semistructured interviews were conducted with eight second-grade teachers who plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers in their classes. Data were analyzed using a deductive thematic coding process, resulting in multiple emergent themes: the benefits and challenges of small group instruction, that teachers differentiate instruction in a variety of ways, and teachers seek out training and resources to meet student needs. It is recommended that teachers be encouraged and empowered to utilize their experience, knowledge, and expertise when implementing small group interventions. This study may contribute to positive social change by providing teachers with a greater awareness of how to plan and implement small group reading instruction, ultimately improving student academic outcomes.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, who instilled in me a love of learning and the belief that I could achieve anything I set my mind to accomplish. This dissertation is also dedicated to my incredible husband. Steve provided constant words of affirmation, a shoulder to cry on when needed, and a listening ear. He helped keep the kids happy, healthy, and safe on the days I locked myself in our office to write. He believed in me when I did not believe in myself. I could never have accomplished this without him. To my amazing children, Cassie and Drew, I also dedicate this dissertation! Their continued support, encouragement, trips for celebratory ice cream as I finished chapters, and belief in me throughout this process helped me to reach my goal. Kids, you can achieve anything that you believe you can do!

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First and foremost, I thank God for giving me the blessings, knowledge, support system, and opportunities that led me to Walden University. Thank you, Heavenly Father, for giving me the strength and encouragement throughout this process that can only be found in You.

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Nancy Williams, who has been an incredible committee chair. Thank you for always being just a phone call or text away whenever I needed to discuss a question or concern. Thank you for your feedback which helped guide my study. Thank you for your constant encouragement and words of affirmation, which powered me through when things were difficult. Your positive reinforcement meant the world to me! I could not have done this without you.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Teachers who delivered reading instruction in a small group setting effectively improved elementary students' academic outcomes (Puzio et al., 2020). However, planning and implementing small group reading interventions is a complex process. Teachers must devote significant time to making the instructional decisions necessary to effectively plan and prepare small group lessons based on student needs (Conradi Smith et al., 2022). The problem under study was a lack of understanding about how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions to support struggling readers. Although there is abundant research on strategies that some teachers use to support struggling students through small group reading interventions, little research exists on how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions in their classrooms, including which interventions they employ and why those interventions are chosen for particular students (Nicholas et al., 2021; Paige et al., 2021; Ross & Joseph, 2019).

In this study, I described how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers. Students who struggled with a specific skill and received targeted small group instruction on that skill increased the likelihood that the students developed into proficient readers (Kuhn & Stahl, 2020; Puzio et al., 2020). This study may contribute to positive social change by providing teachers with a greater awareness of how to plan and implement small group reading instruction, ultimately improving student academic outcomes. As teachers use the

study's findings to plan and implement small group interventions in their reading instruction, students will have the opportunity to build the knowledge and skills to become competent and motivated readers.

In Chapter 1, I describe the background of the problem and align the components of the study, including the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research question, and the conceptual framework. I also present the nature of the study and provide relevant definitions. Finally, the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study are discussed.

### **Background**

Second-grade teachers are tasked with analyzing data and designing lessons to support struggling readers in their elementary classrooms (Duke et al., 2021; Urbani, 2020). Unfortunately, teachers often have few resources to use when designing these lessons and rely on their professional judgment, past training, and experience (Knight et al., 2019). The achievement gap for struggling second-grade readers widens between students who receive targeted, differentiated small group instruction and those who do not (National Reading Panel, 2000; Shanahan et al., 2010).

While Puzio et al. (2020) found that reading instruction in a small group setting effectively improved elementary students' academic outcomes, Conradi Smith et al. (2022) argued that small group instruction is complex for teachers. First, teachers must have a strong conceptual knowledge of reading development to provide effective small group reading interventions for their students (Nicholas et al., 2021). Additionally, it takes a significant amount of time to make the instructional decisions necessary to

effectively plan and prepare small group lessons based on student needs, and analyzing data and forming small groups of students based on that data to provide differentiated interventions is a complicated process (Conradi Smith et al., 2022).

Elementary students achieved the highest academic outcomes when the teacher used differentiated reading groups to provide explicit instruction in a small group setting (Kulmhofer-Bommer et al., 2022; Martinez & Plevyak, 2020). Furthermore, student motivation and confidence increased in differentiated small group settings (Martinez & Plevyak, 2020). Peters et al. (2021) affirmed that students who received differentiated learning opportunities at their instructional level in reading demonstrated increased intrinsic motivation as compared to students receiving only whole-group reading instruction. Teachers who plan and implement differentiated small group reading interventions, in addition to whole-group reading instruction, will provide opportunities for elementary students to achieve increased academic outcomes in reading (Duke et al., 2020). For this reason, it was necessary to examine how teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions in their classrooms, including which interventions they employ and why those interventions are chosen for particular students. Begeny et al. (2018) and Kuhn (2020) agreed that the most important indicator for student success was not the program or specific instructional strategy but the teacher's judgment and use of data when planning and designing small group instruction.

Hudson (2022) and Puzio et al. (2020) suggested that little research has examined the decision-making practices used by elementary teachers in reading instruction. They indicated that stakeholders should examine teachers' practices to inform instructional

decisions, including the differentiation in content, instructional strategies, and time spent on additional instruction for struggling readers (Puzio et al., 2020). Researchers recommended that future studies should examine teacher perspectives on the decision-making practices used in their classrooms (Manak et al., 2022; Paige et al., 2021).

In reviewing the research on implementing small group instruction, a gap emerged regarding the teachers' decision-making practices on which data they use to design small groups, how they use that data, which interventions they choose for their students, and why those interventions are chosen. Without more examination of the decision-making process of teachers, elementary students may not reach their full academic potential, which could be realized in a small group setting. The findings in this basic qualitative study may provide insight to teachers, empowering them to plan and deliver effective small group instruction, improving student outcomes.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem I addressed in this study was that there is a lack of understanding about how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions to support struggling readers. Although there is abundant research on strategies that some teachers use to support struggling students through small group reading interventions, little research exists on how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions in their classrooms, including which interventions they employ and why those interventions are chosen for particular students (Nicholas et al., 2021; Paige et al., 2021; Ross & Joseph, 2019). In this basic qualitative study, I gathered data to determine



how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to describe how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers. In this study, the participants were eight second-grade general education teachers who work in nonvirtual elementary classrooms and plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers in their classes. I used an interview protocol (see Appendix) as the foundation for my semistructured participant interviews to collect data.

This study begins to fill a gap in the literature regarding how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions in their classrooms, including which interventions they employ and why those interventions are chosen for particular students. By examining those instructional decisions, I extended knowledge in this discipline by identifying themes regarding how teachers make those instructional decisions. This information can also help close the gap in the effective implementation of those reading interventions for teachers who use this study to inform their small group instructional practices.

### **Research Question**

How do second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group interventions to support struggling readers?

## Conceptual Framework

The theories that grounded this study were Bandura's (1986) social-cognitive theory and Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) gradual release of responsibility (GRR) instructional framework. The logical connections between the framework presented and the nature of the current study included Bandura's theoretical work, which has been used extensively in all aspects of educational research. Bandura revised the social-learning theory to emphasize that learning occurs in a social context through active interactions with people, the environment, and behavior as primary factors.

The self-efficacy construct of Bandura's social-cognitive theory has extensively influenced the study of a teacher's confidence in their ability to be successful in classroom instruction (Martinez & Plevyak, 2020). Self-efficacy is gradually built based on past experiences and the success or failure that resulted from those experiences (Bandura, 1986). As second-grade teachers grow in their ability to plan and implement small group instruction, they have a greater chance of building self-efficacy by using data to plan instruction, overcoming challenges with planning and implementing small group instruction, and are more willing to share their experiences within small group reading interventions with colleagues (National Reading Panel, 2000). A teacher's self-efficacy is integral to their decision-making practices for planning and implementing small group instruction. If teachers have decreased confidence and motivation, or low self-efficacy, in planning and facilitating small group instruction, they focus more on how they are not succeeding in the task and how it will not be accomplished (Bandura, 1993). As teacher confidence in planning and facilitating small group instruction strengthens, teachers will

plan additional opportunities for students to learn in a differentiated small group setting, which will lead to higher academic outcomes (Ardasheva et al., 2019; Martinez & Plevyak, 2020). Students benefit from teachers with strong self-efficacy as high-level decision-making practices used by teachers to plan and implement small group reading interventions take place in their classrooms (Bandura, 1993; Kearns et al., 2022).

Bandura's social-cognitive theory was supported by Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) GRR instructional framework of providing strategic scaffolded support to students in a small group setting. Teacher knowledge and decision making are valued components in operationalizing the GRR framework through small group reading instruction, also known as the guided instruction phase of the framework (Fisher & Frey, 2008; Webb et al., 2019). In this phase, teachers identify small groups of students who can benefit from additional, differentiated instruction. Strategic teacher decision making about and planning of these small instructional groups are essential to effective learning (Fisher & Frey, 2021). One session of small group instruction with a teacher will not necessarily produce increased student outcomes (Fisher & Frey, 2021). Instead, the purpose of continued, strategic, guided reading instruction is to provide the instructional scaffolds needed for students to independently demonstrate mastery of grade-level content as part of the GRR framework (Fisher & Frey, 2021; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983).

### **Nature of the Study**

I used a basic qualitative design for this study. A basic qualitative study design allows the researcher to inquire into and interpret the participants' perceptions and experiences and can be descriptive in nature (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). The qualitative

method aligned with the purpose of this study and the research question. I obtained participants through purposeful sampling within a national Facebook group of classroom teachers, followed by snowball sampling as additional participants were needed. I developed the interview protocol based on the literature review and conceptual framework to describe the phenomena of how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions to support struggling readers. A basic qualitative design approach was appropriate for the current study because the data were used to interpret the participants' perceptions and experiences (see Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

### **Definitions**

*Differentiated instruction:* The process when teachers design instruction to allow for student choice, alternative curricula when the core resource does not meet the identified student's needs, and individualized instruction in some cases (Puzio et al., 2020).

*Flexible groups:* The process of purposeful grouping that occurs when teachers continuously use data to monitor student progress and allow groups to be flexible to change based on student needs (Kuhn, 2020).

*GRR:* Three phases for designing instructional learning opportunities for students: teacher modeling, guided practice, and student application with independent practice (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983).

*Instructional scaffolding*: The teacher's role in guiding a student's development by providing support structures to help students develop as independent learners (Vygotsky, 1978).

*Multitiered Systems of Support (MTSS)*: A framework designed to support students with learning difficulties, providing struggling learners with academic and behavioral interventions that are aligned to their specific needs and coordinated with other support providers in the elementary building (Coyne et al., 2019; Leonard et al., 2019).

*Science of reading*: The vast body of scientifically based research about reading instruction, incorporating an understanding of best practices teachers should use with students to improve reading outcomes (Duke et al., 2021).

*Small group instruction*: Instruction with students in similar ability groups, mixed ability groups, performance-based groups, skill-based groups, or based on student's social-emotional needs (Ardasheva et al., 2019; Conradi Smith et al., 2022; Kuhn, 2020).

### **Assumptions**

I assumed that all the second-grade teacher participants gave accurate accounts when describing how they make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions to support struggling readers. I also assumed that all the participants had experience planning and facilitating small group interventions. Another assumption was that the teachers' willingness to participate in the study was based only on a sincere interest in sharing their perspective on small group reading planning and implementation. I assumed that teachers' responses were based on their own unique

personal experiences and not on the experiences of what they have observed other educators implement. My final assumption was that a basic qualitative research design was the appropriate method to answer the research question.

### **Scope and Delimitation**

The scope of this study included the strategies and resources that second-grade teachers use to make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers. I selected second-grade general education teachers who work in nonvirtual elementary classrooms and planned and implemented small group reading interventions for struggling readers in their classes as participants. I obtained participants through purposeful sampling within a national Facebook group of classroom teachers, followed by snowball sampling as additional participants were needed. This group of teachers was chosen for this study because there was little research on how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions in their classrooms, including which interventions they employ and why those interventions are chosen for particular students (see Nicholas et al., 2021; Paige et al., 2021; Ross & Joseph, 2019). Teachers who did not facilitate small group reading interventions were not included in this study because they would be unable to share their perspectives on how they plan and implement the instruction.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study was that transferability was limited. The current study consisted of perspectives collected from a small group of second-grade teachers and does not represent the perspectives of all elementary teachers nationwide. Burkholder et al.

(2016) suggested that caution should be used when researchers attempt to generalize their findings from one population to a larger population. The current study results may not be transferable to other grade levels; therefore, the findings and conclusions from this study are limited to the context in which this study was conducted.

My bias may have influenced this study. To reduce research bias, I refrained from personal conversations with the participants and conducted the interviews in a professional manner. I also masked the identity of the participants and their school districts in this study. In addition, Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines regarding gathering consent from participants, privacy considerations, and other related ethical issues were adhered to. Finally, I decreased bias by developing an interview protocol (see Appendix) to guide the interview process and data collection.

### **Significance**

In the field of elementary reading instruction, a social change does not have to be large to be relevant or worthwhile. As Callahan et al. (2012) suggested, even the smallest acts toward social change can have a positive impact. The results of this study can contribute to improved student reading achievement at the local or regional level. Teachers can use the findings to plan and implement small group reading interventions for their students. Based on the findings of this study, teachers will better understand how explicit, intensive reading interventions can be used with second graders. As teachers begin to use small group interventions in their reading instruction, students will have the opportunity to build the knowledge and skills to become competent and motivated readers. This study can positively impact social change by providing teachers with a

greater awareness of how to plan and implement small group reading instruction, ultimately improving student academic outcomes.

### **Summary**

The problem I addressed in this study was that there was a lack of understanding about how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions to support struggling readers. The theories that grounded this study were Bandura's (1986) social-cognitive theory and Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) GRR instructional framework. I conducted semistructured interviews to determine how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group interventions for struggling readers.

In Chapter 2, I will describe the search strategy used to conduct the literature review and present the conceptual framework that grounded the study. The chapter will also include a discussion of the empirical literature related to teachers' instructional decisions to plan and implement small group instruction in elementary classrooms, the MTSS framework, teachers' use of differentiated instruction when planning instruction, the role of the GRR model in small group instruction, instructional strategies teachers use when designing lessons, and research on the teacher decision-making process.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Second-grade teachers are faced with finding ways to support struggling readers in the general education classroom (Duke et al., 2021; Urbani, 2020). The achievement gap for struggling second-grade readers widens between students who receive targeted, differentiated small group instruction and those who do not (National Reading Panel, 2000; Shanahan et al., 2010). The problem I addressed in this study was that there was a lack of understanding about how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions to support struggling readers. While researchers have described a variety of strategies that some teachers use to provide support for their students through small group reading interventions (Nicholas et al., 2021; Paige et al., 2021; Ross & Joseph, 2019), little research exists on how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions in their classrooms, including which interventions they employ and why those interventions are chosen for particular students. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to describe how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers. In this chapter, I describe the search strategy used to conduct the literature review; present the conceptual framework that grounded the study; and review the literature on teacher decision-making practices, small group instruction, and instructional strategies teachers use in small group reading interventions.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I accessed several databases to investigate teacher decision-making practices and small group reading interventions in elementary classrooms, including Education Source, ERIC, SAGE Journals, and Google Scholar as well as in a Thoreau multidatabase search. I also used dissertations and other resources, such as the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Educational Services Practice Guides and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development report from the National Reading Panel. The search terms used for the initial search were *elementary*, *elementary school*, *grade school*, *literacy*, *primary*, *primary school*, *reading*, *literacy*, *small group instruction*, *teacher decisions*, and *teacher decision making*. Additional searches included the terms: *data analysis*, *early reading*, *guided reading*, *instructional decision making*, *instructional strategies*, *intervention*, *multi-tiered systems of support*, *reading strategies*, *response to intervention*, and *teacher judgment*. Most of the literature reviewed consisted of studies published within the past 5 years; however, literature that was published over 20 years ago was also included because these seminal works contributed to the study's foundation.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The theories that grounded this study were Bandura's (1986) social-cognitive theory and Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) GRR instructional framework. The logical connections between the framework presented and the nature of the current study included Bandura's theoretical work, which has been used extensively in all aspects of educational research. Bandura revised the social-learning theory to emphasize that

learning occurs in a social context through active interactions with people, the environment, and behavior as primary factors.

The self-efficacy construct of Bandura's social-cognitive theory has extensively influenced the study of a teacher's confidence in their ability to be successful in classroom instruction (Martinez & Plevyak, 2020). Self-efficacy is gradually built based on past experiences and the success or failure that resulted from those experiences (Bandura, 1986). As second-grade teachers grow in their ability to plan and implement small group instruction, they have a greater chance of building self-efficacy by using data to plan instruction, overcoming challenges with planning and implementing small group instruction, and are more willing to share their experiences within small group reading interventions with colleagues (National Reading Panel, 2000). A teacher's self-efficacy is integral to their decision-making practices for planning and implementing small group instruction. If teachers have decreased confidence and motivation, or low self-efficacy, in planning and facilitating small group instruction, they focus more on how they are not succeeding in the task and how it will not be accomplished (Bandura, 1993). As teacher confidence in planning and facilitating small group instruction strengthens, teachers will plan additional opportunities for students to learn in a differentiated small group setting, which will lead to higher academic outcomes (Ardasheva et al., 2019; Martinez & Plevyak, 2020). Strong self-efficacy provides teachers the confidence to set ambitious learning goals for students and complete complex tasks, like using data to inform instructional decisions to create differentiated learning opportunities in a small group setting for their students (Bandura, 1993; Schmitterer & Brod, 2021). Students benefit

from teachers with strong self-efficacy because high-level decision-making practices used by teachers to plan and implement small group reading interventions take place in their classrooms (Bandura, 1993; Kearns et al., 2022).

Bandura's social-cognitive theory was supported by Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) GRR instructional framework of providing strategic scaffolded support to students in a small group setting. Teacher knowledge and decision making are valued components in operationalizing the GRR framework through small group reading instruction, also known as the guided instruction phase of the framework (Fisher & Frey, 2008; Webb et al., 2019). In this phase, teachers identify small groups of students who can benefit from additional, differentiated instruction. Teachers may choose to differentiate the final product of an activity or assignment, the specific content, or the process used for students to reach mastery of a particular standard (Braun & Hughes, 2020; Kulmhofer-Bommer et al., 2022; Martinez & Plevyak, 2020). Strategic teacher decision making and planning of these small instructional groups are essential to effective learning (Fisher & Frey, 2021). While some teachers use formative assessment data to form the groups, other teachers create groups based on shared student interest, instructional reading level, or specific skills with which students are struggling from grade-level language arts instruction (Bear, 2022; Nicholas et al., 2021; Scanlon & Anderson, 2020). One session of small group instruction with a teacher will not necessarily produce increased student outcomes (Fisher & Frey, 2021). Instead, the purpose of continued, strategic, guided reading instruction is to provide the instructional scaffolds needed for students to independently demonstrate

mastery of grade-level content as part of the gradual release of responsibility framework (Fisher & Frey, 2021; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983).

This study begins to fill a gap in the literature regarding how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions in their classrooms, including which interventions they employ and why those interventions are chosen for particular students. By examining those instructional decisions, I extended knowledge in this discipline by identifying themes regarding how teachers make those instructional decisions that help to close the gap in the effective implementation of those reading interventions for teachers who use this study to inform their small group instructional practices. Bandura's (1986) social-cognitive theory, supported by Pearson and Gallagher's GRR framework (1983), guided the development of the interview questions for this study and my interpretation of the findings.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Factors**

In this section, I present the empirical literature related to teachers' instructional decisions to plan and implement small group instruction in elementary classrooms. The section includes a discussion of teachers' use of differentiated instruction when planning instruction, the role of the GRR model in small group instruction, instructional strategies teachers use when designing lessons, and research on the teacher decision-making process.

#### **Small Group Instruction**

Puzio et al. (2020) found that reading instruction in a small group setting effectively improved elementary students' academic outcomes; however, Conradi Smith

et al. (2022) argued that small group reading instruction is complex for teachers because they must devote significant time to make the instructional decisions necessary to effectively plan and prepare small group lessons based on student needs. Additionally, teachers must plan for activities for the rest of the class to engage with independently while teachers facilitate each small group (Conradi Smith et al., 2022)

One consideration for teachers is how to group students. Researchers identified that some teachers choose to group students in similar ability groups, mixed ability groups, performance-based groups, skill-based groups, or even based on student's social-emotional needs (Ardasheva et al., 2019; Conradi Smith et al., 2022; Kuhn, 2020). Conradi Smith et al. (2022) noted that grouping students by text level but teaching the same reading strategy to each small group is ineffective because students at a lower reading level do not have access to complex texts. Additionally, students grouped by text level who received the same strategy instruction may have already acquired that strategy knowledge and required more complex strategies to improve as proficient readers (Conradi Smith et al., 2022). Instead, Kuhn and Stahl (2022) explained that students who struggled with a specific skill and received targeted small group instruction on that skill increased the likelihood that the students developed into proficient readers. Kuhn (2020) confirmed that students' developmental needs must be considered when teachers plan small groups and maintained that it was uncommon for an entire class to struggle with a specific reading skill.

For this reason, teachers must identify specific student needs to provide effective reading interventions in a small group setting (Duke et al., 2021; Kuhn, 2020;

Kulmhofer-Bommer et al., 2022; Martinez & Plevyak, 2020; Neitzel et al., 2021). Kuhn (2020) contended that teachers must continuously use data to monitor student progress and allow groups to be flexible to change based on student needs. Duke et al. (2021) expanded on Kuhn's position and found that teachers must also consider student interest when planning small group instruction. Students who were motivated to interact with text on a topic of interest within the context of a specific skill achieved greater academic outcomes than peers working with texts on a topic that they were disinterested (Duke et al., 2021). Students who did not need additional instruction in the identified skill were provided with enrichment activities so that they could continue to grow (Kuhn & Stahl, 2022).

Stevens et al. (2020) found that small group instruction, particularly in vocabulary and content knowledge, was most effective when directly aligned with whole-group instruction. Fien et al. (2021) argued that small group instruction was most influential when used to supplement whole-group work. Although whole-group instruction is essential, Ardasheva et al. (2019) discussed the increased opportunities for peer interaction that small group instruction provides. Students receiving instruction in a small group setting have more chances to interact with classmates and the teacher in a discussion on a specific skill than in a whole-group setting (Ardasheva et al., 2019). Martinez and Plevyak (2020) found that some students were less likely to ask and answer questions in a whole-group setting than in a smaller group, which contributed to the lack of academic growth for those students in a whole-group learning environment. They argued that engagement and focus increased for all students in a small group setting.

Ardasheva et al. suggested that teachers who provided opportunities for students to combine oral communication with skill-based learning increased student academic outcomes; however, Nicholas et al. (2021) cautioned that not every small group interaction will improve elementary students' reading ability. Teachers need to have a strong conceptual knowledge of reading development and provide high-quality small group interventions to meet the needs of their students (Nicholas et al., 2021).

One way that teachers can provide high-quality small group reading interventions is to strategically scaffold learning. Vygotsky (1978) defined instructional scaffolding as the teacher's role in guiding a student's development by providing support structures to help students develop as independent learners. Small groups allow elementary teachers to scaffold instruction by providing support to students working below, at, or above grade level on specific skills (Piran et al., 2021). Piran et al. (2021) found that teachers who used scaffolding strategies during small group instruction increased student reading outcomes. These techniques included targeted teacher feedback, explicit instructions, and continuous monitoring (Piran et al., 2021). Taylor (2020) also evaluated teachers' scaffolding techniques in small group reading instruction and found that teachers who avoided overscaffolding gave students the support or challenge in small group instruction to successfully move from novice to advanced skill development.

### **MTSS and Response to Intervention**

Leonard et al. (2019) described MTSS as frameworks designed to support students with learning difficulties. MTSS systems and practices provide struggling learners with academic and behavioral interventions aligned to their specific needs and



coordinated with other support providers in the elementary building (Coyne et al., 2019; Leonard et al., 2019). The term response to intervention (RTI) is often used interchangeably with MTSS. While stakeholders who followed the RTI model focused primarily on improving academic outcomes for students who struggle, the MTSS model also included behavioral and social-emotional interventions to consider the needs of the whole child (Al Otaiba et al., 2019). In recent years, states have recommended that districts use the MTSS model to improve student reading outcomes (Fien et al., 2021).

Fien et al. (2021) found that students who struggled with foundational reading skills demonstrated increased academic outcomes after intervention within an MTSS framework of instruction. These students were identified for reading intervention after a universal screener and then provided classroom core reading instruction with additional small group instruction (Fien et al., 2021). Teachers monitored their progress and adjusted the instruction based on their response to the intervention. The interventions aligned with classroom instruction, and the students in the study outperformed students who did not receive instruction within the MTSS framework. Coyne et al. (2022) reported similar results in a study of the effect of vocabulary intervention on kindergarten students. The students who were identified for intervention with a universal screener, given a diagnostic assessment to determine specific needs, and then provided interventions in the core content with additional support in a small group setting outperformed peers who did not receive the same levels of support and coordination of services (Burns et al., 2020; Coyne et al., 2022).

Arias-Gundín and García Llamazares (2021) analyzed the effectiveness of the student identification and intervention components of the RTI/MTSS framework. They found that although there were a wide variety of methods to identify struggling readers and monitor their progress in an intervention, there was no consensus on which method was the most effective. They also found that students made academic gains when a paraprofessional provided a reading intervention, but the most significant achievement resulted from interventions provided within the classroom by the classroom teacher. Arias-Gundín and García Llamazares proposed that more time should be spent on training teachers on the RTI/MTSS framework, specifically on how to provide effective, targeted interventions in a small group setting, to replicate these results in a broader setting. Fien et al. (2021) suggested that training classroom teachers in evidence-based practices they can use in their small group intensive interventions would yield the highest academic outcomes in reading achievement for students.

Al Otaiba et al. (2019) examined teacher knowledge of the RTI/MTSS framework and found that teachers clearly understood their role in Tier 1 core classroom instruction and the systems available to students within the RTI/MTSS framework but lacked knowledge on how to make instructional decisions for students based on data. If teachers lack this knowledge, they must rely on the MTSS model to provide the framework to work collaboratively with instructional staff to make data-based decisions to increase student academic outcomes (Al Otaiba et al., 2019). The team approach to MTSS provides coordinated support for students while also providing a professional learning

team as a support to teachers to build their capacity in delivering targeted classroom interventions to students.

### **Differentiated Instruction**

Martinez and Plevyak (2020) and Kulmhofer-Bommer et al. (2022) found that elementary students achieved the highest academic outcomes when the teacher used differentiated reading groups to provide explicit instruction in a small group setting. They compared the effect of whole-group instruction to small group instruction and found that small group instruction using materials specific to each child's instructional reading level, with a focus on specific skills with which students are struggling, allowed students to grow in those specific areas of need (Kuhn & Stahl, 2022; Martinez & Plevyak, 2020). Kulmhofer-Bommer et al. found that reading programs that include varied reading materials for teachers to plan and facilitate differentiated groups provide more opportunities for teachers to spend their planning time determining the specific skills each student needs; therefore, teachers are more likely to provide explicit, differentiated instruction when the teacher's time is not spent finding varied reading materials for students. Teacher lesson planning was more aligned with student needs when the curricular resources included differentiated reading materials for teachers to use with small groups of students (Kulmhofer-Bommer et al., 2022).

Martinez and Plevyak (2020) noted that student motivation and confidence increased in a differentiated setting as students could more independently interact with the texts with less direct support from the classroom teacher. Peters et al. (2021) also affirmed that students who received differentiated learning opportunities at their

instructional level in reading demonstrated increased intrinsic motivation as compared to students receiving only whole-group reading instruction. Duke et al. (2021) suggested that classroom practices must be adapted to increase student motivation as it directly correlates to improved academic outcomes in reading. They contended that teachers must differentiate instruction to allow for student choice as it is as important, if not more important than when teachers differentiate based on student reading level (Duke et al., 2021).

Puzio et al. (2020) reviewed two decades of research on differentiated reading instruction and found that elementary students have more significant academic outcomes in all areas of literacy achievement, specifically in decoding and writing, when the teacher used data to inform differentiated reading groups. They found that the most successful teachers differentiated their approaches for these small groups, allowing for student choice, alternative curricula when the core resource did not meet the identified student's needs, and individualized instruction in some cases (Puzio et al., 2020). Kuhn and Stahl (2022) cautioned that teachers must not assume that elementary students proceed through stages of reading development based on age or a specific schedule. Instead, teachers must use data to inform their explicit reading instruction and provide differentiated learning opportunities to students based on their specific needs (Kuhn & Stahl, 2022). Duke et al. (2021) concluded that teachers must take a differentiated approach to reading instruction, specifically in the area of reading comprehension development, by providing additional instructional time to students who demonstrate

need, providing genre and interest choices for students to increase their reading motivation.

Peters et al. (2021) did not find significantly increased academic outcomes for students receiving differentiating reading instruction. They pointed out that the lack of significant academic growth suggested that differentiated instruction alone may not be enough to increase student outcomes but suggested that explicit and direct structured instruction may provide more significant gains (Peters et al., 2021). Duke et al. (2020) confirmed that differentiated instruction, coupled with explicit strategy instruction based on student needs and interests, will provide opportunities for elementary students to achieve increased academic outcomes in reading.

### **GRR**

Pearson and Gallagher (1983) initially identified three phases for designing instructional learning opportunities for students: teacher modeling, guided practice, and student application with independent practice. First, the teacher models the new learning through explanations, demonstrations, and explicit whole-group instruction (Webb et al., 2019). Then, the teacher utilizes small group instruction with guided practice by using prompting, providing additional demonstrations and instructions based on students' learning needs, gradually providing more opportunities for students to take responsibility for the learning (Webb et al., 2019). Finally, the teacher passes on full responsibility to the students in the final stage of the GRR model by providing opportunities for students to independently practice the skill (Webb et al., 2019).

Fisher and Frey (2008) found that a fourth stage that included collaborative work with peers gave students additional ownership of the content and provided increased motivation and learning. Teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions to support struggling readers. Researchers found that when students could move flexibly between each of the four stages of GRR based on their learning needs, they could grow in independence, competence, and confidence (Webb et al., 2019).

Anderson (2019) found that the most effective reading strategy instruction occurs in a small group setting after whole-group instruction, using the GRR model. Teachers introduce a new reading strategy or concept in a whole-group setting and then continue the instruction based on student needs with flexible small group instruction (Anderson, 2019). However, Webb et al. (2019) pointed out that considering the complexity of the task, the text, and the reader should influence teacher decision-making practices when designing small group instruction. First, comprehension instruction often needs to be broken into smaller tasks for students based on the complexity of the task. Teachers with a flexible view of GRR can readily provide feedback in a timely way when students need additional instruction or more opportunities for independent practice (Fisher & Frey, 2008; Webb et al., 2019). Next, teachers must consider text complexity, including genre, length, ideas included, and student background knowledge when planning for small group instruction (Webb et al., 2019). Webb et al. suggested that teachers must understand what struggling readers know and what they can do with the text provided to determine which stage of the GRR model they should enter to meet student needs

effectively. The teacher is the decision maker in a classroom who considers many factors when determining how to implement small group reading interventions to support their struggling readers. Finally, teachers must consider how each student brings varying levels of complexity to their instruction. Each student in a class has varied experiences, background knowledge, interests, and academic abilities (Webb et al., 2019). Some students may need additional explicit instruction based on their unique needs, while others may be ready for guided instruction, collaborative practice with peers, or independent learning (Fisher & Frey, 2008). When teachers make instructional decisions using a flexible GRR model with small group instruction, they provide opportunities for all students to access the new learning, increasing student academic outcomes, motivation, and independence (Fisher & Frey, 2008; Webb et al., 2019).

Manak et al. (2022) identified flexible grouping practices teachers used when they considered best practices to design student reading instruction. Teachers indicated that although whole-group, collaborative group work, and individual instruction were used in elementary classrooms, small group instruction was the most beneficial for student learning (Manak et al., 2022). Each component is part of the GRR model, but guided reading in a small group setting was the most frequently articulated response for effective instruction in the study by Manak et al.

Similar to the methods used in the Manak et al. (2022) study, Nicholas et al. (2021) developed a questionnaire based on the GRR model. They found that teachers must understand the components of guided reading practices in small group instruction for students to effectively develop as readers. Additionally, Nicholas et al. contended that

when a deep knowledge of the GRR model informs a teacher's decision-making practices, there is a possibility that the small group instruction will lead to increased student academic outcomes.

### **Instructional Strategies**

The seminal study by Gersten et al. (2007) indicated that small group reading interventions must include all five components of effective reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. They contended that research-based instructional strategies must incorporate these five components, and teachers should use data to design and monitor instruction (Gersten et al., 2007).

Researchers explored teachers' use of various instructional strategies for meeting the needs of elementary students during small group instruction. Begeny et al. (2018) and Kuhn (2020) examined small group fluency instruction as a reading intervention. Kuhn reviewed four approaches to fluency instruction in a small group setting and found that the student's developmental needs must be considered first in the teacher's decision-making process. A flexible grouping structure coupled with teachers using data to inform their decisions yielded the most significant academic gains for students in the fluency intervention (Kuhn, 2020). Begeny et al. found that most students made academic gains regardless of which fluency intervention the teacher used in the small group setting. Both researchers agreed that the most important indicator was not the program or specific instructional strategy but the teacher's judgment and use of data when planning and designing the small group instruction.



Several studies explored teacher use of specific phonics instructional strategies for small group instruction. Anderson (2019) compared phonics and meaning-based strategies to improve student decoding outcomes. They found explicit phonics and word-decoding strategy instruction was important, but teacher scaffolding of those strategies from whole-group to small group to independent work was the factor that contributed to the greatest academic gains for students (Anderson, 2019). Austin and Boucher (2022) and Scanlon and Anderson (2020) investigated the effectiveness of specific phonics instructional strategies incorporating word meaning and word reading for small group instruction. Scanlon and Anderson contended that the most effective phonics instruction in a small group setting included word-based and meaning-based instructional strategies. Austin and Boucher explained how teachers used word-meaning and word-reading strategies and their knowledge of other content areas to plan authentic learning opportunities for students in a small reading-group setting. Ross and Joseph (2019) explored the effectiveness of Elkonin word boxes as a small group reading intervention. They found that students benefited from this strategy when teachers made instructional decisions during instruction to differentiate the feedback, modeling, and guided practice based on student needs (Ross & Joseph, 2019).

There is recent research on the role of the Science of Reading (SOR) in the instructional strategies that teachers decide to use in their classrooms. Duke et al. (2021) defined the SOR as the vast body of scientifically-based research about reading instruction, incorporating an understanding of best-practices teachers should use with students to improve reading outcomes. Paige et al. (2021) acknowledged that teachers

with a deep knowledge of the SOR and related instructional strategies should be compelled to adapt, modify, and innovate instruction. Researchers found that SOR and teacher decision making are each incomplete without the other in classroom instruction (Paige et al., 2021). Cassidy et al. (2022) also supported the importance of using the SOR in classroom instruction but focused specifically on teachers' familiarity with scientifically-based instructional practices. They described how teachers used recent research on effective literacy instruction to make instructional decisions for small group instruction (Cassidy et al., 2022). Urbani (2020) added that if teachers are expected to use scientifically-based instructional strategies, they must be provided with support in choosing the appropriate instructional strategy and implementing it with fidelity.

Several recent studies discussed teacher use of instructional strategies with a comprehension focus. Duke et al. (2021) found that instructional strategies with a comprehension focus should not be taught independently of other strategies, but comprehension should be embedded within all effective reading instruction. Teachers who made instructional decisions to include comprehension strategies with reading fluency instruction, phonics instruction, and vocabulary instruction increased student comprehension achievement and reading motivation (Duke et al., 2021). Urbani (2020) also acknowledged that effective educators combined comprehension instructional strategies with other reading components, including language development. Hudson (2022) explored the correlation between teacher knowledge and student comprehension outcomes. Teachers with a strong understanding of reading comprehension instructional strategies were better equipped to provide small group instruction and had students who

scored higher on comprehension measures than teachers without this foundational knowledge (Hudson, 2022). In the seminal study by Shanahan et al. (2010), the researchers emphasized the importance of comprehension instruction at an early age. Limited research showed that the components of reading should be taught in order, beginning with phonemic awareness, followed by phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and then comprehension (Shanahan et al., 2010). Shanahan et al. presented evidence-based practices teachers used to embed comprehension into small group instruction with emergent readers.

Several recent studies examined how teachers determine which instructional strategy to use in a small group setting. Shanahan et al. (2010) expressed the importance of teachers using various instructional strategies to help students become independent readers. Knight et al. (2019) surveyed teachers on 26 instructional practices and found that multiple factors informed the teachers' instructional decision making for planning small group instruction. Teachers considered student needs and used professional judgment most frequently rather than relying on a specific research-based practice (Knight et al., 2019). Bear (2022) identified a complex progression of instructional strategies and activities that emergent readers need to be successful. Teachers needed to be trained in these developmentally appropriate, research-based small group interventions that met the academic needs of their emergent readers to plan and deliver effective reading instruction (Bear, 2022). Manak et al. (2022) also indicated that teachers considered various factors when making small group instruction decisions, including their own experiences with reading instruction, their knowledge of varied instructional

strategies, and each student's unique reading development. In this meta-analysis, Seidel and Shavelson (2007) found that the most important influence of teaching on student learning is the quality of instructional strategies chosen by teachers in their instructional planning process. Researchers acknowledged a shift from teachers feeling pressure to name specific instructional strategies to recognize their expertise in choosing from an array of interwoven strategies to use with students based on their elementary students' academic and social-emotional needs (Manak et al., 2022). However, Fien et al. (2021) determined that research-based reading practices are fundamental to improving student reading outcomes. Though they acknowledged that teachers use professional judgment when planning for small group instruction, they contended that teachers must receive more training and have ample access to research-based reading practices to significantly increase elementary student reading results (Knight et al., 2019). Braun and Tejero Hughes (2020) proved that teachers had the skills and knowledge necessary to support students with disabilities by combining their expertise and experience with knowledge of research-based small group reading interventions in their elementary classrooms. Although teachers in this study consistently facilitated small group instruction, their decision-making processes varied regarding feedback provided to students, the degree to which students guided the outcome of the lesson, and whether specific comprehension questions were prepared in advance (Braun & Tejero Hughes, 2020). The researchers indicated that future studies focusing on these varied instructional decisions would be valuable (Braun & Tejero Hughes, 2020; Manak et al., 2022).

## **Teacher Decision Making**

The seminal research from the National Reading Panel (2000) found that teachers who used decision-making frameworks to implement, select, and facilitate instructional strategies for elementary phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary development yielded increased student reading achievement. The National Reading Panel findings also indicated that teachers who used data to inform decisions about flexible reading groups to vary the time, instructional strategies, and reading materials used by students also maximized academic outcomes.

Kearns et al. (2022) examined teacher practices with a systematic data-based decision-making protocol. They found that the data-based individualization process changed teachers' perspectives on using data to inform instructional decisions (Kearns et al., 2022). Fien et al. (2021) confirmed that schools using the MTSS process increased evidence-based practices in reading instruction, including data-based decision making. Since research supports data-based decision making (Kuhn & Stahl, 2022; Martinez & Plevyak, 2020; Puzio et al., 2020), increasing teacher buy-in for using systematic practices to inform instruction will increase the likelihood of teachers using decision-making protocols as a regular instructional practice in the classroom. Nicholas et al. (2021) also suggested the benefit for teachers to use a decision-making framework when planning reading instruction for elementary students. They found that when teachers used a framework to combine their knowledge of guided reading practices with assessment data, teacher planning, and practices led to increased academic outcomes for students (Nicholas et al., 2021).

Other studies examined the types of data teachers use to make instructional decisions. Schmitterer and Brod (2021) found that teachers relied on students' spelling ability to make decisions for small group reading instruction in the classroom rather than specific data related to phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, or fluency. Previous studies have indicated that student spelling ability does not directly correlate with reading ability (Schmitterer & Brod, 2021). These teachers also used anecdotal data on student motivation and students' self-concepts as readers to inform decision-making practices (Schmitterer & Brod, 2021). Conradi Smith et al. (2022) found that teachers needed targeted professional development to use data to make decisions, specifically using formative assessments to create small groups for reading instruction. Many teachers relied on student text level to make instructional decisions for students, while the research showed that using assessment data should guide teacher decisions for forming and facilitating small group instruction (Conradi Smith et al., 2022).

Ardasheva et al. (2019) studied the decision-making practices of elementary teachers regarding student grouping and found that teachers utilized a variety of similar and needs-based groups as well as specific need-based groups, depending on the content area. Although multiple studies found that teachers using data-driven decision-making practices for small groups yielded the highest academic outcomes (Kuhn & Stahl, 2022; Martinez & Plevyak, 2020; Puzio et al., 2020), Ardasheva et al. observed that teachers utilized mixed-ability groups to increase student motivation for reading instruction. Teachers indicated that student motivation was an essential factor relative to student success, which is one reason they varied grouping from mixed-ability to needs-based,

depending on the particular student (Ardasheva et al., 2019). Ardasheva et al. added that teachers indicated targeting specific skills was the primary purpose for small group instruction, but other considerations in their decision-making practice included equity, access to the curriculum, and students' social-emotional needs. Qualitative data, including informal teacher observations, informed these teacher decisions (Ardasheva et al., 2019).

Kulmhofer-Bommer et al. (2022) investigated how elementary teachers analyzed student assessment data to make instructional decisions and design reading lessons. Their study highlighted the need for teachers and reading curriculum publishers to recognize the importance of assessment data as a tool to support students' learning process (Kulmhofer-Bommer et al., 2022). Begeny et al. (2008) compared teachers' judgment of students' reading abilities to student assessment data and found that teacher judgments were moderate to high for student reading fluency, instructional reading levels, and ranking students' overall reading ability. Researchers found that teachers could use observational data in those specific areas to design appropriate instruction to meet the specific needs of their students (Begeny et al., 2008; Manak et al., 2022). Although Begeny et al. indicated that additional research is needed based on the small sample size in this study, they generalized that data-based decision making can yield similar instructional decisions as informal teacher decision-making practices in some cases. Manak et al. maintained that teachers make instructional decisions in their reading classrooms by drawing on their wealth of knowledge and expertise. Teachers use quantitative and observational data to inform decisions in their classrooms but also

consider their students' collective learning experiences and social-emotional needs when making decisions about instructional next steps (Manak et al., 2022; Nicholas et al., 2021).

Teachers commonly use a combination of assessment data, observational data, and guidance from the district curriculum to make instructional decisions when planning for learning opportunities in reading for their students. However, Taylor (2021) suggested that teachers must also use decision-making practices to determine if students require a different type of feedback, instruction, collaboration, or management. Taylor argued that planning for additional support was less effective than planning for different support when considering data to inform instructional decisions. Urbani (2020) also examined the layers of decision making required for teachers to make informed instructional decisions. Urbani found that most decision making occurs before the lesson as the teacher determines groupings, plans reading activities, and considers lesson alignment moving forward. However, facilitating learning conversations and providing effective feedback during the lesson also requires significant decision making from the elementary teacher, from which they rely on classroom experience and familiarity with the learning progression of the content (Urbani, 2020). Webb et al. (2019) referred to the teacher decision-making process during teaching as responsive instruction and stressed the importance of flexible teaching adaptable to students' needs. Teachers must be equipped with the tools to make informed decisions to adjust instruction before, during, and after reading instruction (Webb et al., 2019).



Braun and Hughes (2020) contended that teachers have the skills and knowledge to support their students' reading comprehension. Teacher instructional decisions, which often extended beyond the core resource prescribed by the district, were centered on evidence-based instructional practices for reading comprehension (Braun & Hughes, 2020). Kuhn and Stahl (2022) affirmed that teachers must have a strong understanding of the progression of reading skill acquisition to make informed instructional decisions for their elementary students. Reading instruction is complex, and teachers must understand how reading ability develops and the role of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary development. Teachers should be encouraged to draw on their training and expertise when making decisions to inform classroom reading instruction (Hudson, 2022; Kuhn & Stahl, 2022; Paige et al., 2021). Hudson (2022) and Knight et al. (2019) examined the factors teachers consider when determining which instructional strategies to use with students. Teachers primarily relied on professional judgment, strategies from recent professional learning opportunities, and recommendations from colleagues to make instructional decisions rather than assessment data or research-based practices (Hudson, 2022; Knight et al., 2019). Knight et al. suggested that since teachers used their professional judgment and recent learning to make instructional decisions for students reading instruction, professional learning focused on using comprehensive decision-making models should be initiated by school districts and preservice teacher training.

Peters et al. (2021) indicated that future studies should examine how teachers analyze quantitative student data to inform small group reading instruction. In addition,

examining how teachers work collaboratively with colleagues to analyze common formative assessments and examining the decision-making processes that lead to adjustments to small group instruction to meet the need of elementary readers would also be beneficial (Peters et al., 2021). Hudson (2022) and Puzio et al. (2020) also suggested that little research has examined the decision-making practices used by elementary teachers in reading instruction. They indicated that stakeholders should examine teachers' practices to inform instructional decisions, including the differentiation in content, instructional strategies, and time spent on additional instruction for struggling readers (Puzio et al., 2020). Manak et al. (2022) and Paige et al. (2021) recognized that teachers draw on research, training, experience, and expertise to provide students with comprehensive literacy instruction. Researchers maintained that future studies should examine teacher perspectives on the decision-making practices used in their classrooms (Manak et al., 2022; Paige et al., 2021). Ardasheva et al. (2019) acknowledged the need for future research on novice and experienced teachers' decision-making practices in small group instruction, specifically related to their interactions with the district curricula and school setting.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Elementary teachers must consider factors including students' formative and summative data, social-emotional needs, and discrete skill levels to facilitate effective small group reading interventions. In comparing articles on implementing small group instruction, a gap emerged regarding the teachers' decision-making practices on which data they use to design small groups, how they use that data, which interventions they

choose for their students, and why those interventions are chosen. The findings in this basic qualitative study may provide insight to teachers, empowering them to plan and deliver effective small group instruction, improving student outcomes. Puzio et al. (2020) found that reading instruction in a small group setting effectively improved elementary students' academic outcomes. Therefore, without more examination of the decision-making process of teachers, elementary students may not reach their full academic potential, which could be realized in a small group setting.

In Chapter 3, I will present the research design, including the research methodology, setting, and sample chosen for this study. The procedures, data analysis method, and ethical concerns used in conducting this study will also be described.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to describe how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers. Although there is abundant research on strategies that some teachers use to support struggling students through small group reading interventions, little research exists on how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions in their classrooms, including which interventions they employ and why those interventions are chosen for particular students (Nicholas et al., 2021; Paige et al., 2021; Ross & Joseph, 2019).

Reading instruction in a small group setting effectively improves students' academic outcomes, specifically when the teacher provides explicit, differentiated instruction to small groups of students (Kulmhofer-Bommer et al., 2022; Martinez & Plevyak, 2020; Puzio et al., 2020). Researchers noted that teachers must use data to inform small group instruction, but student interest is also an essential factor for teachers to consider when planning for small groups (Duke et al., 2021; Kuhn, 2020). Reading instruction is complex, and teachers must understand not only how reading ability develops but the role of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary development when providing explicit small group instruction. In the current study, I interviewed second-grade teachers who facilitate small group reading interventions to describe how they make instructional decisions to plan and implement the small group reading interventions for struggling readers in their class.

In Chapter 2, I provided a concise synopsis of the empirical literature related to teachers' instructional decisions to plan and implement small group instruction in elementary classrooms as well as discussed teachers' use of differentiated instruction when planning instruction, the role of the GRR model in small group instruction, instructional strategies teachers use when designing lessons, and research on the teacher decision-making process. In this chapter, I describe the research design, rationale, and methodology used for this study. A discussion of the participant selection logic, data collection instrument, participant recruitment procedures, and data collection and analysis plan is also included. Finally, trustworthiness issues are addressed before the chapter concludes with a brief summary.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

I conducted this basic qualitative research study to describe how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers. The participants were limited to second-grade general education teachers who worked in nonvirtual elementary classrooms and planned and implemented small group reading interventions for struggling readers in their classes.

The research question that guided this study was: How do second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions to support struggling readers? This phenomenon was best researched using a basic qualitative research design because this design allows the researcher to inquire into and interpret the participants' perceptions and experiences and can be descriptive in nature (see Ravitch & Carl, 2019). When phenomena are explored, described, or explained, a

researcher must choose a conceptual framework to determine how the method will answer the research question; this increases the rigor and validity of the study and ensures that the method is aligned with the topic and research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). This evidence relates to my choice of conceptual framework for the study as the phenomena were described through the lens of the self-efficacy construct of Bandura's (1986) social-cognitive theory and Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) GRR instructional framework.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Ravitch and Carl (2019) pointed out that the researcher is the primary instrument in a qualitative study, and for this reason, the researcher's role, positionality, and identity are critical considerations in each stage of the research process. My roles in this field as a former second-grade teacher and reading interventionist as well as current instructional coach led to my interest in this topic and has shaped my experiences in describing how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers. In these roles, I saw that although students from different second-grade classrooms were taught the same content with identical curricular resources, teachers supplemented their learning needs differently. Knowing that students came to me for reading intervention with vastly different abilities, I began to question what role small group instruction played in their acquisition of early literacy skills. I informally observed teachers facilitating small group instruction based on their expertise and materials culled from years of teaching and noticed a vast difference in instruction from classroom to classroom.

As a researcher, I understood that I may not be open minded enough and biased in my views on my area of expertise, which could have negatively affected the data collection and analysis. Although it was challenging to separate biases and beliefs from the data collected, the first step was to recognize those biases and set them aside. Ravitch and Carl (2019) suggested that researchers must be aware of their roles and identities and use that awareness to engage critically in the research. As a researcher, I described my biases in the study to address them formally. This structure ensured that my personal experiences did not overshadow the findings from the study.

To avoid research bias, I refrained from personal conversations with the participants and conducted the interviews in a professional manner. I also masked the identity of the participants and their school districts in this study. In addition, Walden University's IRB guidelines were followed throughout the study regarding gathering consent from participants, privacy considerations, and other related ethical issues. Finally, I developed an interview protocol (see Appendix) to guide the interview process and data collection.

### **Methodology**

In the following subsections, I discuss the participant selection process, instrumentation, recruitment procedures, and data collection and analysis processes. The focus of this basic qualitative study was to describe how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The sample population for this study was eight current second-grade teachers who planned and implemented small group interventions for struggling readers. I obtained participants through purposeful sampling within a national Facebook group of classroom teachers. Purposeful sampling involves the intentional selection of participants with specific characteristics as required by the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). I also used snowball sampling methods because purposeful sampling did not yield an adequate number of participants for the study. As a member of the Facebook group used for recruitment, some interested participants had a personal connection or association with me as a colleague. I did not interview any teacher who reports to me or by whom I have been supervised by because this would have been an ethical concern and potential limitation to the study had they been chosen as a participant.

As potential participants responded to my request, I provided a consent form for participants to complete to indicate they consented to participate in an interview. Eight participants were invited to interview via Zoom. Each participant and I agreed on a day and time for their interview. I informed participants and sought permission to audio record the interviews for transcription purposes only. I provided participants with the option to receive a transcript of the interview to authenticate their spoken responses.

### **Instrumentation**

Rubin and Rubin (2012) stated that in-depth qualitative interviews collect rich and detailed information rather than “yes” or “no” responses. I used an interview protocol (see Appendix) designed with my doctoral committee members as the foundation for the



semistructured participant interviews. Open-ended questions with multiple subsequent follow-up questions based on the participant's initial answers were asked in the interviews to collect data. Broad questions came early in the interviews, with more specific questions being asked later. I carefully sequenced questions to gain more detailed responses as participants returned to previous answers and added additional information (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

### **Recruitment**

Possible participants were identified using a national Facebook group of classroom teachers. I then emailed potential participants an invitation, including a description of the study and a request to reply if they were interested in participating. Participants were sent an invitation only if they were current second-grade teachers and had planned and implemented small group interventions for struggling readers in their classrooms. I chose the first eight participants who responded to the request to participate, informed them that they had been selected for the study, and provided them with a consent form to read and sign.

### **Data Collection**

To collect data for this study, I interviewed the second-grade teacher participants who responded to my invitation and identified themselves as teachers who plan and implement small group reading interventions. I sought participants for this study only after receiving Walden University IRB approval. I provided an informed consent form to participants and received their permission to audio record the virtual interviews with Open Broadcaster Software on my laptop computer. Although the interviews were audio

recorded, I also took notes during and after each interview to monitor the data collection progress. I compared these notes to the interview recordings to confirm the data as I began the data analysis process. I listened to the recorded interviews multiple times and reviewed my written notes. I also asked participants to review the transcription of their individual interviews to make corrections if needed.

### **Data Analysis**

After reviewing the audio recordings of the interviews, the transcripts, and my notes, I interpreted the data using descriptive codes for the first cycle coding and looked for patterns to emerge. In the second coding cycle, I looked for categories in the collection of codes. Coding starts with the researcher identifying codes in the data, moving to categories for those codes, and eventually to themes that develop from the categories (Saldaña, 2016). Saldaña (2016) noted that the researcher must keep the research question in mind to remind themselves of the question they are trying to answer in the data collection and research process. The researcher's themes based on the categories can represent an aspect of the phenomenon that the researcher will present in the study's findings to answer the research question (Saldaña, 2016). For the third cycle of coding, I took each set of codes and put them in a document list to look for commonalities.

Reflexive journals contributed to the analytical process in this basic qualitative study. Ravitch and Carl (2019) suggested that this tool should be used for personal reflection, theory building, to describe the research process and procedures, to address issues that may emerge with detail and transparency, and to document new questions.

Using a reflexive journal, I traced my thinking and examined how patterns and themes emerged as I coded each data source the first, second, and third time.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is essential in a qualitative study because it is the degree to which a stakeholder can be confident in the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness includes the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I established trustworthiness by adhering to these criteria so that stakeholders can be confident that the findings of this study can be used to inform their practice.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility means that the findings of the qualitative research study are plausible based on the data presented (Burkholder et al., 2016). In the current study, I ensured credibility by using data triangulation from multiple sources with a wide range of participants (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Shenton (2004) stated that when the researcher uses individual viewpoints and experiences and verifies them against other respondents, rich data can be constructed due to the contributions of this range of people.

I ensured that the interviews were correctly transcribed by cross-checking the transcripts with the interview audio. I also asked participants to review the transcription of their individual recordings to make corrections if needed. In addition, the words and perspectives shared by the participants were the data analyzed to determine the findings of this study. This data accurately described how second-grade teachers make

instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions to support struggling readers.

### **Transferability**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined transferability as determining if the qualitative study findings are applicable across various contexts. Although the purpose of a qualitative study is not to generalize from a small sample to a larger population, the study must still provide meaning larger than the study itself (Burkholder et al., 2016). Strategies to ensure transferability include the researcher's use of thick descriptions, reflexive journals, or maximum variation (Burkholder et al., 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the current study, I used reflexive journals in the coding and data analysis processes. I began coding the data by identifying codes, then moving to identify categories for those codes, and eventually, to identify themes that developed from the categories. In my reflexive journal, I described my experiences from my perspective, including my reactions to the situations shared by respondents and reflections on the research process. The reflexive journal also consolidated my ideas about data collection and contributed to the transferability of this basic qualitative study. Thick descriptions were included in the reflexive journal as I drew conclusions based on the codes, categories, and themes identified.

### **Dependability**

Ravitch and Carl (2019) defined dependability as the consistency and reliability of a qualitative study's data collection, data analysis, and data reporting processes. I articulated detailed descriptions of the research methods and procedures for data

collection. I increased dependability by using the same self-designed interview protocol with each research participant. The process I used to analyze data ensured consistency in identifying the themes and patterns that emerged from participant interviews.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability ensures that the researcher's bias is not reflected in the study's findings but that the findings reflect the research participants' ideas, experiences, and perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I built confirmability in my study by analyzing the interview data accurately and remaining neutral during the data analysis process. The participants' views were interpreted accurately, rather than my subjective views, which included my own bias, motivation, and interests. Additionally, the reflexive journal that I used during the data collection and analysis processes supported the confirmability of my basic qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Ethical Procedures**

Ethical issues can arise in qualitative studies, so researchers must conduct field research responsibly to combat these potential concerns. I carefully considered ethical issues in this research study to ensure both the participants' protection and the study's integrity. First, I sought Walden University's IRB approval before conducting this research. After receiving IRB approval, I recruited participants without coercion and provided them with a consent form to read and sign before participating in this research study. The informed consent included the purpose, procedures, the expected duration of participation, and information granting the participant permission to withdraw from the study at any time.

When participants share their personal perspectives and actions, they risk the public disclosure of what they have shared privately (Babbie, 2017). To ensure the confidentiality of each participant, I used pseudonyms in all data collection records and refrained from using any identifying information in the published study (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Participants were made aware of these protocols that I implemented to minimize their risk in participating in the study. Paper copies of the study remain locked and secured in a cabinet in my home office, and all electronic files are kept on a personal laptop protected with a password. All data collected will remain confidential and secure and will be destroyed after 5 years from the date of study publication.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to describe how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers. Snowball sampling was used to identify participants who are current second-grade teachers and plan and implement small group interventions for struggling readers in their classrooms. Individual interviews were conducted virtually using an interview protocol (see Appendix). I analyzed the data collected from these interviews by first identifying codes in the data, moving to categories for those codes, and eventually to themes that developed from the categories (Saldaña, 2016). I detailed steps to ensure trustworthiness and addressed potential ethical concerns before, during, and after the study.

The results of this study will be addressed in Chapter 4. First, I will describe the qualitative study setting, followed by data collection and analysis details. I will conclude Chapter 4 with the study results related to the research question.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to describe how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers. The conceptual framework was based on Bandura's social-cognitive theory and supported by Pearson and Gallagher's GRR instructional framework. The following research question guided this study: How do second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group interventions to support struggling readers?

In this chapter, I describe the findings from the study. This chapter also includes a discussion of the setting, demographics, data collection techniques, analysis of the data, and evidence of trustworthiness in the study before concluding with a summary.

### **Setting**

I conducted this basic qualitative study in an online setting using the Zoom video conferencing platform. Each participant chose the date and time of the interview, and each interview was conducted in one session. Each participant chose to conduct their interview after school was dismissed for the summer because many mentioned that the end of the school year is a very busy time, and they had more flexibility in their schedule after the school year was over.

### **Demographics**

I selected a sample of eight current second-grade general education classroom teachers who planned and implemented small group interventions for struggling readers. Each participant taught in a district in Michigan. Seven participants taught in a public



school district, and one participant taught in a private, parochial school. All participants were White females. I obtained participants through purposeful sampling within a national Facebook group of classroom teachers, followed by snowball sampling as additional participants were needed. Ravitch and Carl (2019) maintained that data saturation is reached when the researcher no longer finds emergent themes in the data collection process. In this study, data saturation was reached when the participant interviews did not yield new coding information.

The participants had experience ranging from 4 to 23 years of teaching at the second-grade level. The average number of years of teaching was 16 years, with three participants having less than 10 years and five having more than 10 years of teaching experience at the second-grade level. The collective second-grade teaching experience of the eight participants was 128 years. The participants had experience ranging from 5 to 27 years of planning and facilitating small group reading interventions, with an average of 13 years. When presenting data from the participants, I used pseudonym letters to ensure that teacher names and school districts could not be affiliated with their responses. Professional information for the eight participants is listed in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Professional Information on Participants*

Participant code	Years of experience	Years of experience planning and facilitating small groups
1	4	12
2	19	10
3	8	10
4	7	7
5	23	12
6	22	5

7	18	18
8	27	27

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### **Data Collection**

After receiving approval from the Walden University IRB (IRB Approval # 5-24-23-1010150), I began participant recruitment by posting a message on a national Facebook group of classroom teachers. I then emailed potential participants an invitation, including a description of the study and a request to reply if participants were interested in participating. Participants were emailed only if they were current second-grade teachers and planned and implemented small group interventions for struggling readers in their classrooms. I chose the first eight participants who responded to the request to participate, informed them that they had been selected for the study, and provided them with an informed consent form to read and sign.

During the recruitment period, eight participants consented to participate in the study and chose a date and time for the interview. As shown in Table 2, the interviews took place on the Zoom virtual meeting platform between June 12, 2023, and June 19, 2023. The interviews lasted between 22 and 41 minutes. Before each interview, I ensured that each participant understood the terms of their voluntary participation. No unusual circumstances occurred during the interviews. One interview was interrupted by a dog barking, and the participant briefly moved away from the camera to put her dog in another room.

#### **Table 2**

##### *Interview Schedule Frequency and Duration*

Participant code	Interview date	Duration
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1	June 19, 2023	27 min 29 s
2	June 19, 2023	22 min 29 s
3	June 13, 2023	41 min 20 s
4	June 19, 2023	25 min 41 s
5	June 19, 2023	33 min 38 s
6	June 12, 2023	26 min 53 s
7	June 13, 2023	27 min 17 s
8	June 12, 2023	25 min 14 s

For this basic qualitative study, I collected data through semistructured interviews to describe how the teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers. The interviews were audio recorded with Open Broadcaster Software on my laptop computer. At the end of each interview, I reminded the participants that they could withdraw their participation at any time and that a copy of the interview transcript would be sent to them to check for accuracy. After each interview, I used Otter.ai online transcription software and imported the transcript to a Microsoft Word document. I then read the transcript while listening to the audio recording to add punctuation and correct mistranscribed words. During this transcription process, I made notes of my thoughts and ideas for codes, patterns, and themes in my reflexive journal. I placed each transcript on a separate document and labeled it with the participant code (i.e., Participant 1–8). I sent each participant a copy of their interview transcript to check for accuracy. All eight participants indicated that their transcript accurately reflected their perceptions, and no participants asked that their transcript be revised or edited. In this study, data saturation was reached when the participant interviews did not yield new coding information.

### **Data Analysis**

After conducting and transcribing the eight interviews, I created a matrix to identify descriptive codes for the first cycle of coding and looked for patterns to emerge. Then, I examined the phrases and experiences described by the participants to determine similarities and differences in the perceptions that they shared. I compared my initial codes to the framework, research question, reflexive journal, and transcripts to identify the emerging codes, patterns, and themes throughout the process. The codes that emerged in this first cycle were: benefits English learners, benefits student's social-emotional learning skills, causes some anxiety for students, classroom management, concerns about students not in the small group, difficult to plan, duration, explicit skills-based grouping, frequency, grouping based on assessment, how it is differentiated, instructional focus, lack of district-provided professional development, lack of resources, meaningful activities for students not in small groups, meets academic needs of all learners, plan and implement small groups, professional learning improved small group instruction, qualitative data, quantitative data, resources used, teacher expertise, district provided materials that did not meet student needs, teacher instructional decisions, team approach to small group instruction, and time consuming.

In the second coding cycle, I looked for categories in the collection of codes. Coding starts with the researcher identifying codes in the data, moving to categories for those codes, and eventually to themes that develop from the categories (Saldaña, 2016). The categories that emerged from the second coding cycle included: benefits to small

groups, challenges to small groups, data-driven instruction, demographics, planning, resources, and training concerns.

For the third cycle of coding, I took each set of codes and put them in a document list to look for commonalities. Saldaña (2016) noted that the researcher must keep the research question in mind to remind themselves of the question they are trying to answer in this data collection and research process. The researcher's themes based on the categories can represent an aspect of the phenomenon that the researcher will present in the study's findings to answer the research question (Saldaña, 2016). I identified three major themes that addressed the research question:

Theme 1: There are benefits and challenges to teachers and students when planning and implementing small group instruction.

Theme 2: Teachers differentiate instruction in a variety of ways in a small group setting to meet the needs of students.

Theme 3: Teachers seek out their own training and resources to meet student needs.

Table 3 displays examples of codes, categories, and themes from the data analysis matrix.

**Table 3**

*Example of Codes, Categories, and Themes*

Participant code	Line #	Response	First cycle descriptive codes	Second cycle categories	Third cycle themes
1	144	"I don't expect students to master all skills before you move on. We work on a skill all year."	Teacher instructional decisions	Data-driven instruction	Teachers differentiate instruction in a variety of ways in a small group setting to meet the needs of students.
6	27	F&P Benchmark, NWEA – if they're below the 60 <sup>th</sup> percentile in NWEA, then they look at F&P reading level	Quantitative data	Data-driven instruction	Teachers differentiate instruction in a variety of ways in a

1	232	"having worked in several districts in Michigan, districts are lacking curricular resources to support teachers in implementing small groups. I think that that's a big barrier, especially for new teachers who want to implement small group instruction."	Lack of district-provided professional development	Training concern	small group setting to meet the needs of students. Teachers seek out their own training and resources to meet student needs.
7	82	Teachers meet during PLC to plan every 5-6 weeks, lay out all data and determine as a team where students are working and what the small groups will be (3 teachers and 8 paraprofessionals), they do this to prep in advance of their data meeting so that they can direct the bigger team toward where their kids are struggling	Team-approach to small group instruction	Benefits to small groups	There are benefits and challenges to teachers and students when planning and implementing small group instruction.
3	79	to assess comprehension for struggling readers, teacher also reads passages aloud on assessments (early in the year) and asks them, "What did it say? What did I just read to you?"	Qualitative data	Data-driven instruction	Teachers differentiate instruction in a variety of ways in a small group setting to meet the needs of students.
4	132	helps teacher to know her students, helps teacher to be more intentional, student progress is much faster when learning in a small group setting, teacher meeting the specific skills that they need help with	Meets academic needs of all learners	Benefits to small groups	There are benefits and challenges to teachers and students when planning and implementing small group instruction.
8	71	District purchased F&P and teachers are supposed to be using it - sometimes teacher uses it word-for-word, but finds that she needs to supplement the phonics and word work parts. As the year went on, she was getting away from F&P with fidelity and adding more and more of her own phonics resources	Lack of resources	Training concern	Teachers seek out their own training and resources to meet student needs.

*Note.* F & P = Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System; NWEA = Northwest Evaluation Association reading assessment;

PLC = professional learning community

### Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is essential in a qualitative study because it is the degree to which a stakeholder can be confident in the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness includes the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I established trustworthiness by adhering to these criteria so that stakeholders can be confident that the findings can be used to inform their practice.

#### Credibility

Credibility means that the findings of the qualitative research study are plausible based on the data presented (Burkholder et al., 2016). I ensured the interviews were

correctly transcribed by cross-checking the transcripts with the interview audio. I also asked participants to review the transcription of their individual recordings to make corrections if needed and sent each participant a copy of their interview transcript to check for accuracy. All eight participants indicated that their transcript reflected their perceptions accurately, and no participants asked that their transcript be revised or edited.

I consulted with my chair during and after coding the interviews to seek feedback on the codes, patterns, and themes that emerged. In addition, the words and perspectives shared by the participants were the data analyzed to determine the findings of this study. In the current study, I ensured credibility by using data triangulation from multiple sources with a wide range of participants (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I triangulated the data by using the interview responses and notes in my reflexive journal to identify the three common themes that emerged. This data accurately described how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions to support struggling readers.

### **Transferability**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined transferability as determining if the qualitative study findings are applicable across various contexts. Although the purpose of a qualitative study is not to generalize from a small sample to a larger population, the study must still provide meaning larger than the study itself (Burkholder et al., 2016). Strategies to ensure transferability include the researcher's use of thick descriptions, reflexive journals, or maximum variation (Burkholder et al., 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used reflexive journals in the coding and data analysis processes in this study. I began coding

the data by identifying codes, then moving to identify categories for those codes, and eventually, to identify themes that developed from the categories. In my reflexive journal, I described my experiences from my perspective, including sharing my reactions to the situations shared by respondents and reflections on the research process. The reflexive journal also consolidated my ideas about data collection and contributed to the transferability of this basic qualitative study. Thick descriptions were included in the reflexive journal as I drew conclusions based on the codes, categories, and themes identified.

### **Dependability**

Ravitch and Carl (2019) defined dependability as the consistency and reliability of a qualitative study's data collection, data analysis, and data reporting processes. In this study, I have provided detailed descriptions of the research methods and procedures for data collection. I increased dependability by using the same self-designed interview protocol with each research participant. I also confirmed that all data were consistent with the participants' spoken words by cross-checking the audio recording to the transcript. A spreadsheet was maintained to analyze the results, and the process used to analyze data ensured consistency in my identification of the themes and patterns that emerged from participant interviews.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability ensures that the researcher's bias is not reflected in the study's findings but that the findings reflect the research participants' ideas, experiences, and perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I ensured confirmability in the current study by



analyzing the interview data accurately and remaining neutral during the data analysis process. The participants' views were interpreted accurately rather than being affected by my subjective views, including my own biases, motivations, and interests. I sent each participant a copy of their interview transcript to check for accuracy. All eight participants indicated that their transcript accurately reflected their perceptions, and no participants asked that their transcript be revised or edited. To avoid bias, I cross-checked emerging codes, patterns, and themes after creating a matrix of the participants' interview responses. Additionally, the reflexive journal that I kept during the data collection and analysis processes supported the confirmability of this study (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Results**

Using a theoretical framework of Bandura's (1986) social-cognitive theory supported by Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) GRR instructional framework, I identified three major themes that addressed the research question:

Theme 1: There are benefits and challenges to teachers and students when planning and implementing small group instruction.

Theme 2: Teachers differentiate instruction in a variety of ways in a small group setting to meet the needs of students.

Theme 3: Teachers seek out their own training and resources to meet student needs.

In the following subsections, I present data from the participants to support each theme.

## **Theme 1**

The first theme that emerged was that there are benefits and challenges to teachers when planning and implementing small group reading instruction to support struggling readers, as well as benefits and challenges specific to second-grade students. In response to interview questions focused on the specific benefits and challenges faced by students and teachers, all eight participants described the benefits and challenges they have experienced firsthand. Additionally, all eight participants described the benefits and challenges that they observed in their students.

### ***Benefits to Small Group Interventions***

All eight participants confirmed that small group interventions allowed teachers to meet the academic needs of all students in their classrooms. P2 found a major benefit to be that she “can focus on skills they need and not bore students who don’t need that information.” P4 shared how small group interventions are beneficial:

Small group instruction helps the teacher to know her students, helps the teacher to be more intentional, and that students progress is much faster when learning in a small group setting because the teacher is meeting the specific skills that they need help with.

P5 asserted that their whole-group basal resource is a “one-size-fits-all approach,” but “having a smaller group of students to hone in on skill with which their struggling can provide tailored instruction and even challenge them a bit.” P7 discussed how small group interventions met the needs of individual groups of students and hoped that “it

locks it in for some of those students.” She said, “Small groups are where you really make the impact of changes for the kids that need it.”

All eight participants confirmed that small group interventions benefitted not only second-grade students’ academic skills but also their social-emotional learning skills. P1 pointed out that “students can focus better and can work more collaboratively with their like peers” in a small group setting. P2 found that students feel successful when they learn in a small group. She mentioned, “We talk a lot about how we all have different strengths...some kids are better at math, some kids are better at reading. And so just because you’re not in the advanced group, it doesn’t make you bad.” P3 added that students are “not afraid to make mistakes in a small group setting. They help each other.” P4, P6, and P7 suggested that students look forward to the small groups and enjoy the “one-on-one” time with their teacher. P5 noted that small group instruction increased student confidence. P8 shared that “students enjoy small groups and don’t need a lot of reminders to do their best.”

P1 mentioned that English learners also benefit from the “lower-risk environment” in a small group setting. She noted, “English learners who are really resistant to participate in whole group, but it’s a lot safer to participate in a smaller group or group that has kids with the same language needs as them.”

P2, P5, P6, and P7 agreed that planning and implementing small group interventions to support struggling readers has benefitted their teaching team as a whole, as they have taken a team approach to planning and implementing these groups. Although P2 teaches second grade, she works closely with a third-grade teacher, and they share

students during small group instruction. Students can receive instruction at their level due to this team approach to small group interventions. P7 described the professional learning community (PLC) that has developed within her team of three second-grade teachers in her building:

Teachers meet during PLC to plan every 5 to 6 weeks, lay out all data, and determine as a team where students are working and what the small groups will be with the three teachers and eight paraprofessionals. We do this to prep in advance of their data meeting so that we can direct the bigger team toward where their kids are struggling.

### ***Challenges to Small Group Interventions***

Although all eight participants noted that the benefits outweighed the challenges, they did suggest that challenges to teachers and students are a part of planning and implementing small group interventions to support struggling readers. Six of the eight participants noted that planning and implementing small group interventions is time-consuming. P4 noted that “both instructional time and planning time” was a concern. P6 described the concern as “fitting in all the groups, planning for all of the groups, and coordinating schedules of aides who push in is overwhelming.” P7 contended that “overall material gathering, pulling all of the materials that you need, finding materials housed in different spots, and getting things printed from the internet” takes far more time than she has available during her regular school day. P8 reflected on how the current resource mandated by her district does not require as much planning as a previous

resource that she used, but that she preferred the resource that took more time to plan than her current resource:

Fountas and Pinnell does not take as much time for teachers. You just open up to the next page and read the lesson. There is really limited planning needed. This is much different from Richard C. Owens because it took hours to plan those lessons. But I feel that those were more effective for students even though it took much more time and effort for teachers. Even though it took so much more time it was better for the students and I didn't mind the planning needed to do it well.

Not only is planning and implementing small group interventions to support struggling readers time-consuming, but five of the eight participants noted that it is also difficult to plan. P5 and P6 mentioned that planning engaging activities to maintain student interest is difficult. P6 added, "Being prepared and ready to go is a challenge because you can lose them (students) in a second." P1 pointed out that planning small group interventions is difficult because it "requires teacher flexibility and responsiveness" which is often difficult to plan for ahead of time. P4 also suggested the difficulty in "developing the groupings because all students are not exactly in the same place, even in small groups."

Classroom management was a challenge reported by all eight participants. P2 acknowledged that small group intervention can be "noisy for other learners in the classroom and can be distracting for students," P6 mentioned that when she is focused on facilitating a small group, "sometimes other students are lost and not doing what they're supposed to be doing." P2, P7, and P8 all pointed out that students not in the small group

are often more concerned about what others are doing rather than focusing on their own tasks to complete during their independent work time. P1 explained that struggling students often “seek attention and lack confidence, so it is difficult for the teacher when facilitating a small group to respond to the needs of the rest of the class.”

## **Theme 2**

The second theme that emerged was that teachers differentiate instruction in a variety of ways in a small group setting to meet the needs of students. In response to interview questions focused on how they plan and implement small group reading interventions to support struggling readers, all eight participants described the ways that they differentiate instruction to plan and implement interventions to meet the needs of their students, including considerations of duration and frequency, data-driven instruction, instructional decisions, instructional focus, and explicit instruction.

### ***Duration and Frequency***

When planning for small groups, teachers made instructional decisions to differentiate both the duration and the frequency of groups based on the needs of the students, their schedule, and the support personnel available. Groups ranged from 12 to 30 minutes per group, with an average duration of 22 minutes. The range for group frequency was quite varied. P1 described that she worked with four to six groups each week but met with the most struggling students daily and higher-achieving students at least two times per week. P4 also met with her two higher-achieving groups of students twice a week but met with her two lower-achieving groups of students four times each week. P5 also implemented small group reading interventions four times each week with

her students but pulled all four groups for the same amount of time each of the 4 days. P6 met with her most struggling students daily, but the rest were pulled for small group interventions two to three times each week. P7 utilized a team approach for implementing small group interventions. Students who struggled with reading from three classrooms were split into 11 groups and received daily small group instruction from one of eleven educators (three teachers and eight paraprofessionals). P2 implemented small group instruction three days a week. Although she planned instruction for all three groups, she facilitated instruction with just one group, while paraprofessionals facilitated instruction for the other two groups.

### ***Data-Driven Instruction***

Teachers used a variety of qualitative and quantitative data to differentiate instruction when planning small group interventions to support struggling readers. The quantitative assessment included Words Their Way (WTW), Fountas & Pinnell benchmark assessments (F & P), Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), Informal Decoding Inventory (IRI), Phonological Awareness Screening Test (PAST), and the Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress assessment (NWEA). P1 pointed out that she used the WTW assessment to determine phonics needs, the F & P assessments to determine reading level, and the NWEA assessments to determine vocabulary and comprehension needs for her students. P2 used DIBELS and DRA as screeners but preferred to use the IRI as a diagnostic tool to determine explicit skills to teach in the small group setting. P3 noted that although the district mandates using NWEA, “it is a

struggle to go through all of the data for the purpose of informing small group instruction, but plans to use this to determine comprehension needs in the future.” Instead, she preferred to use the PAST assessment to assess phonemic awareness along with various assessments that she has found online. P4, P6, and P7 reported using the STAR instructional planning report to determine specific skills to address in small group instruction. P4 also used pieces of the PAST and WTW assessments to diagnose explicit skills in which her students needed additional support. P6 and P7 reported that student data from the F & P benchmark had been helpful in planning for small group instruction, but P6 also used the NWEA assessment as a screening tool to determine if additional diagnostic assessments would be needed for her students. P5 found that DIBELS and NWEA were the most useful assessments to determine student reading deficits. Overall, teachers used a variety of assessments in many ways to determine student needs. All eight participants analyzed quantitative data to plan for targeted small group interventions to support struggling readers in their classrooms.

The participants also described their use of qualitative assessments to plan small group interventions. P1, P6, and P7 expressed that anecdotal notes, including listening to students read, running records, notes on fluency, responses to texts, and accuracy, and notes from small group intervention time were helpful in planning small group instruction for students. P2 sought out data from previous teachers to determine student needs. P2 also initiated data conversations with her paraprofessional and co-teacher to “move students fluidly between groups, as needed.” P3 found that assessing comprehension was best done by collecting anecdotal data. In a small group setting, she would ask her



students about the text with questions like, “What did it say?” and “What did I just read to you?” P3 would then make notes about their responses and follow up with students on comprehension skills with which they struggled. P3 and P4 mentioned that writing samples were especially helpful to determine student support needed that could be addressed in small group instruction.

### *Instructional Decisions*

Teachers made a variety of instructional decisions to differentiate instruction when planning and implementing small group interventions to support struggling readers. P1 stated, “I don’t expect students to master all skills before you move on. We work on a skill all year.” She pointed out that she made instructional decisions during instruction to determine if students were ready to move on to the next skill. P1 mentioned, “So if I think they can do the skill that we’ve been working on with little to no prompting, then we’re able to move on.” P4 shared how she determined when to move students from one skill to the next in a small group reading intervention:

That’s why I like UFLI because I felt confident in moving them on to a new skill because I knew they would still have repeated exposure and practice with prior skills, because that was something that I would struggle with.

Other teachers used progress-monitoring assessments built into their resources to determine when students were ready to move to the next skill. P2 noted that assessments are built into the Differentiated Reading Program. She uses these assessments to check students’ progress during and after small group instruction. P4 also pointed out that assessments are built into the WTW resource. She felt confident administering those

assessments to determine if a student was progressing on a specific phonics skill. P6 found that running records, informal observations, and exit tickets were helpful in determining the next steps and pointed out that she made those instructional decisions regularly when planning and implementing small group interventions.

P3 mentioned that checklists have been helpful to determine the next steps for students. She created some of these checklists independently, and some had been embedded in the resources she used to facilitate small group instruction. P7 used her judgment when determining when students were ready to move to the next skill and shared that she “looks at how they’re reading and comprehending, and as students meet their goals, we move to the next skill.”

### ***Instructional Focus***

Teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group instruction when they determine the instructional focus of each group and ensure that the focus is differentiated to meet the needs of each student. P1, P3, P6, and P7 included phonics instruction in their small group interventions based on student needs. P1 mentioned that her group instruction always “includes an element of targeted phonics and phonemic awareness instruction for all of my students, and then work in text, and then some work in comprehension.” P3 used specific fluency benchmarks to determine the instructional focus for phonics instruction. P7 referred to her small group phonics instruction as “word-attack skills,” where she would support students in “breaking apart words” to decode fluently. P7 also mentioned that phonics instruction was often not planned but emerged during the small group instruction as students encountered a word

or spelling pattern with which they struggled. She described, “If students are struggling with those [sight words], then I would switch gears and focus on the specific vowel teams, as needed.”

P4, P5, and P8 noted that most of their small group instruction time is focused on building students’ comprehension skills. P4 incorporated vocabulary instruction within the comprehension instructional focus, while P5 emphasized fluency instruction within her small group comprehension instruction. P5 also pointed out that the whole-group lesson would often continue in the small group setting to provide additional support for struggling readers to access the text “so that we were piggybacking on what we were learning together, and that they were getting more instruction when they met with me.” Although the district provided a set of books that were prescribed for small group instruction, P5 preferred “rich literature,” so she would “use text sets and focus heavily on vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency in the groups, using sticky notes to make inferences or write a question that they were wondering about.” P8 described how she used the F & P guided reading books and lesson plans to implement small group interventions to support struggling readers. However, she added word work and writing as additional components to the instruction. Students in her small groups “start with prereading and a book walkthrough, make predictions, do choral or round robin reading, connect it to writing, and then follow that with phonics or word study.” P8 pointed out that she drew on her extensive training in Richard C. Owens' techniques to provide high-quality instructional activities for students she supported with small group reading interventions.

***Explicit Instruction***

P1, P3, P4, and P5 noted that in the past few years, they have shifted from ability-based grouping to learning-target based grouping. P1 noted that “depending on the level of the students, there might be more time spent on phonics and more time spent on comprehension, but all of them get those things.” P4 pointed out that small group intervention is “when I pull a small group of kids who have a certain skill that they need to work on into smaller groups.” These teachers plan and implement small group interventions to support struggling readers by differentiating instruction in various ways to meet their students' specific needs.

**Theme 3**

The final theme that emerged was that teachers seek out their own training and resources to meet the needs of students when planning and implementing small group reading interventions to support struggling readers. In response to interview questions focused on their training and resources used to plan and implement small groups, Participants 1-8 described the training they received from their district and their district-provided resources. P1, P3, and P4 pointed out that the Heggerty resource had been helpful when planning and implementing small group interventions for struggling readers who needed additional support with phonemic awareness. P4 and P5 mentioned that some parts of their district-provided WTW resource have been effective for small group instruction. P4 expressed that she would have students “read decodable or the poem that goes with WTW” in small group instruction. However, P4 also expressed that WTW uses a “discovery method” for students to learn phonics skills in which they discover the

pattern independently. Based on additional training that she has received in effective phonics instruction, P4 found that “explicitly teaching patterns” was more effective than the prescribed method from WTW. P1, P6, and P8 mentioned that the district had provided the F & P resource, and they were required to use it with fidelity, but they found that other resources were more effective for their students. P6 suggested that F & P phonics were “weak,” but she sometimes used the phonics lessons as a guide in her small group interventions. P8 agreed that she needed to “supplement the phonics and word work parts” of F & P and was “getting away from using it with fidelity” and instead “adding more and more of her own phonics resources” for small group reading instruction.

Additionally, all eight participants described the training they sought independently and the resources they found most beneficial to support struggling readers in small group instruction. P1, P3, P4, and P5 mentioned that they sought out the opportunity provided by the state of Michigan for the Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training. Each teacher acknowledged that the LETRS training had transformed their small group reading instruction. P5 pointed out, “We now use sound walls and little mirrors to look at our mouths.” P4 described how her small group instruction has changed since her LETRS training and that she “now uses assessments from PAST and divides them (students) into groups based on the results of that test.” P3 mentioned ways that her instruction has changed since being trained in the LETRS methods:

We now call blends by their names – digraphs, diphthongs and with very low students, I have added a focus on letter formation, using mirrors when teaching letter sounds, feeling the difference with hands on our throat for voiced and unvoiced sounds, and a new focus on correct tongue placement.

P1, P2, and P4 heard about the UFLI resource from colleagues in other districts and purchased it to use with their students for small group interventions. P4 expressed, “Then when I got UFLI, everything changed. My life became so much easier.” She noted that she had spent a great deal of time pulling various resources to plan for small group interventions to support struggling readers in her class. When she heard about, researched, and ultimately purchased the UFLI resource, she found that she did not have to spend excessive time planning and instead could focus on implementing small group interventions.

All eight participants agreed they needed to seek out training and resources to meet student needs. P3 contended that there is a “lack of information and training on what to do if students are not progressing” in her district. She acknowledged that consistent instructional coaching and the opportunity to “see what successful teachers are doing in small groups” would benefit her instructional practice and her students’ academic progress. P3 had access to Heggerty, the PAST assessment, and various decoding inventories to assess students’ phonics skills. However, she wished she could find out what other resources might be available to support her students. P5 also reported that the opportunity to observe effective teachers in action would help her to effectively

meet student needs when planning and implementing small group interventions to support struggling readers:

I really wish that I could observe other teachers doing this sort of thing and doing it well. We are so trapped in our own classrooms that we're not given the opportunity to go and observe other teachers, whether it be young teachers who are fresh out of college that have new ways of implementing things, or even visiting other districts that might be a little more ahead of the game than maybe where we are. So I think that it is important that school districts still give every teacher an opportunity to see how other teachers implement small group reading instruction.

P1 mentioned that her students struggled with phonemic awareness, but she did not have training or resources to address this deficit in a small group setting. She pointed out that “I’m kind of doing some research outside of that” to find assessments and resources to use to support her students. P5 acknowledged that “teachers aren’t given the tools about how to plan small groups, but yet are forced into mandated blocks of time to facilitate small groups.” P1 had a unique perspective to share as she has taught in several districts as a second-grade teacher: “Having worked in several districts in Michigan, districts are lacking curricular resources to support teachers in implementing small groups. I think that’s a big barrier, especially for new teachers who want to implement small group instruction.”

## Summary

In Chapter 4, I described the setting, participant demographics, data collection, and analysis processes and provided evidence of trustworthiness. I also reported the study results. The study results showed that there are benefits and challenges to both teachers and students when planning and implanting small group instruction. Benefits included a focus on students' social-emotional learning skills and that small group interventions allow the teacher to meet the academic needs of all of their learners. Challenges included that small group planning and implementation require a great deal of time, can be difficult to plan, and provides classroom management challenges.

Next, the results showed that teachers differentiate instruction in a variety of ways in a small group setting to meet the needs of students. When planning and implementing small group interventions, teachers consider duration and frequency, data-driven instruction, instructional decisions, instructional focus, and explicit instruction. Teachers use various qualitative and quantitative assessments to make data-based decisions to plan and implement small group interventions.

Finally, although some districts provide training and resources, all teachers seek their own training and resources to meet student needs when planning and implementing small group interventions to support struggling readers. Participants noted a common lack of district-provided professional development and effective resources for small groups. However, they have taken the matter into their own hands and sought out their own training and resources, which they have found effective in supporting struggling readers in a small group setting.



In Chapter 5, I will present an interpretation of the study's findings and discuss the study's limitations. In addition, I will describe recommendations for further research and provide implications for positive social change as a result of this study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to describe how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers. In this study, the participants were eight current second-grade general education teachers who plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers in their classes. Ravitch and Carl (2019) maintained that data saturation is reached when the researcher no longer finds emergent themes in the data collection process. In this study, data saturation was reached when the participant interviews did not yield new coding information. By examining the participants' instructional decisions, I extended knowledge in this discipline by identifying themes in how teachers make those instructional decisions, and this knowledge can be used to begin to close the gap in the effective implementation of those reading interventions by teachers using this study to inform their small group instructional practices.

Data analysis indicated three main themes regarding participants' perceptions of how they make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group interventions to support struggling readers:

Theme 1: There are benefits and challenges to teachers and students when planning and implementing small group instruction.

Theme 2: Teachers differentiate instruction in a variety of ways in a small group setting to meet the needs of students.

Theme 3: Teachers seek out their own training and resources to meet student needs.

In this chapter, I present my interpretation of the findings in the context of the conceptual framework and literature review, which is followed by a discussion of the limitations of the study, my recommendations, implications to social change, and a conclusion.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The results of this study have extended knowledge in this discipline by indicating how teachers make instructional decisions about small group interventions to support struggling readers in their second-grade classrooms. Participants identified challenges to planning and implementing small group instruction that teachers must consider while they plan and implement these targeted interventions. Participants also shared clear benefits to student social-emotional learning and academic progress. Participants also identified various ways they plan for differentiation to meet the needs of their struggling readers and shared ways that they have sought out training to build their knowledge and resources to support their students in small group instruction. In this section, which is organized by the three emergent themes, I describe how the findings were supported the literature review and conceptual framework for this study.

#### **Theme 1**

The findings from this study confirm that teachers must consider benefits and challenges when planning and implementing small group interventions to support struggling readers. These findings support the work of Conradi Smith et al. (2022) who argued that a challenge of small group reading instruction is that it is complex for teachers because they must devote significant time to make the instructional decisions necessary to plan and prepare small group lessons based on student needs effectively.

Additionally, teachers must plan for activities for the rest of the class to engage with independently while teachers facilitate each small group (Conradi Smith et al., 2022). Six of the eight participants in the current study indicated that the time required to plan and implement small group interventions was a significant factor. The current study findings added to the literature in that the participants indicated that although much time is required to plan effective small group interventions, it did not prevent the participants from facilitating student learning in this setting.

All eight participants indicated that small group interventions benefitted not only second-grade students' academic skills but also their social-emotional learning skills. These results support the findings of Ardasheva et al. (2019) who discussed the increased opportunities for peer interaction that small group instruction provides. Students receiving instruction in a small group setting have more chances to interact with classmates and the teacher in a discussion on a specific skill than in a whole-group setting (Ardasheva et al., 2019). In the current study, all eight participants indicated various ways students increased their social-emotional learning skills through small group interventions. These findings also supported the results of Martinez and Plevyak (2020) who found that some students were less likely to ask and answer questions in a whole-group setting than in a smaller group, contributing to the lack of academic growth for those students in a whole-group learning environment. They argued that engagement and focus increased for all students in a small group setting (Martinez & Plevyak, 2020), which is also supported in the findings of the current study as indicated by all eight participants.

**Theme 2**

The findings from this study confirm that teachers differentiate instruction to plan and implement interventions to meet the needs of their students, including considerations of duration and frequency, data-driven instruction, instructional decisions, instructional focus, and explicit instruction. Bandura's (1986) social-cognitive theory grounded this study with support from Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) GRR instructional framework. The logical connections between the framework presented and the findings of the study included Bandura's theoretical work, which has been used extensively in all aspects of educational research. In the context of the conceptual framework, this study confirmed that strong self-efficacy provides teachers with the confidence to set ambitious learning goals for students and complete complex tasks, like using data to inform instructional decisions to create differentiated learning opportunities in a small group setting for their students (see Bandura, 1993; Schmitterer & Brod, 2021). Students benefit from teachers with strong self-efficacy because high-level decision-making practices used by teachers to plan and implement small group reading interventions take place in their classrooms (Bandura, 1993; Kearns et al., 2022). Findings from this study confirm that teachers use qualitative and quantitative data when planning small group interventions and when making instructional decisions while implementing those interventions with students. While some teachers use formative assessment data to form the groups, others create groups based on shared student interest, instructional reading level, or specific skills with which students are struggling from grade-level language arts instruction (Bear, 2022; Nicholas et al., 2021; Scanlon & Anderson, 2020).

The findings from this study confirm that teachers must identify specific student needs to provide effective reading interventions in a small group setting (see Duke et al., 2021; Kuhn, 2020; Kulmhofer-Bommer et al., 2022; Martinez & Plevyak, 2020; Neitzel et al., 2021). The current study findings support the work of Kuhn (2020) who contended that teachers must continuously use data to monitor student progress and allow groups to be flexible to change based on student needs. The current study's participants used qualitative and quantitative data to inform instructional decisions when planning and implementing small group interventions. All eight participants used data to plan which students would be part of each group and the explicit skill that would be addressed in each group. All eight participants also used some form of progress monitoring to determine when students were ready to move to the next skill in the small group setting.

Vygotsky (1978) defined instructional scaffolding as the teacher's role in guiding a student's development by providing support structures to help students develop as independent learners. The findings in this study confirm that small groups allow elementary teachers to scaffold instruction by supporting students working below, at, or above grade level on specific skills (see Piran et al., 2021). All eight participants in this study expressed that they identified explicit skills, as indicated by quantitative or qualitative data, to support struggling readers in a small group setting. The current study findings also support Kuhn's (2020) results in that a flexible grouping structure coupled with teachers using data to inform their decisions yielded the most significant academic gains for students in the reading intervention. All eight participants in this study indicated that they used explicit phonics or word-decoding strategy instruction in their small group

interventions, confirming the literature review findings. The current study results support the findings of Anderson (2019) who compared phonics and meaning-based strategies to improve student decoding outcomes. Anderson found explicit phonics and word-decoding strategy instruction was important, but teacher scaffolding of those strategies from whole-group to small group to independent work was the factor that contributed to the greatest academic gains for students.

### **Theme 3**

The findings from this study confirm that teachers will seek out their own training and resources to meet student needs, demonstrating strong self-efficacy as indicated by the literature review. The self-efficacy construct of Bandura's social-cognitive theory has extensively influenced the study of a teacher's confidence in their ability to be successful in classroom instruction (Martinez & Plevyak, 2020). The current study confirmed the seminal research that showed that when teachers grow in their ability to plan and implement small group instruction, they have a greater chance of building self-efficacy by using data to plan instruction, overcoming challenges with planning and implementing small group instruction, and are more willing to share their experiences within small group reading interventions with colleagues (see National Reading Panel, 2000). A teacher's self-efficacy is integral to their decision-making practices for planning and implementing small group instruction. If teachers have decreased confidence and motivation, or low self-efficacy, in planning and facilitating small group instruction, they focus more on how they are not succeeding in the task and how it will not be accomplished (Bandura, 1993). As teacher confidence in planning and facilitating small

group instruction strengthens, teachers will plan additional opportunities for students to learn in a differentiated small group setting, leading to higher academic outcomes (Ardasheva et al., 2019; Martinez & Plevyak, 2020). In this study, all eight participants indicated that they were not using their district-provided resources with fidelity because they felt that the resources did not meet the needs of their students. Instead, the participants sought out additional training and resources to use. The participants confirmed findings from previous studies when they demonstrated strong self-efficacy in planning and implementing small group interventions because they could recognize where they lacked information and resources and were motivated to seek it out independently.

The current study findings support the work of Braun and Hughes (2020) who contended that teachers have the skills and knowledge to support their students' reading comprehension. Teacher instructional decisions, which often extended beyond the core resource prescribed by the district, were centered on evidence-based instructional practices for reading comprehension (Braun & Hughes, 2020). The current study findings also support the results of Kuhn and Stahl (2022) who affirmed that teachers must have a strong understanding of the progression of reading skill acquisition to make informed instructional decisions for their elementary students. Kuhn and Stahl asserted that reading instruction is complex, and teachers must understand how reading ability develops as well as the role of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary development. Teachers should be encouraged to draw on their training and expertise when making decisions to inform classroom reading instruction (Hudson, 2022;



Kuhn & Stahl, 2022; Paige et al., 2021). Findings from the current study confirmed the extant research in the assertion that when participants did not have the knowledge or resources needed to plan and implement small group instruction, they looked beyond the district to find it on their own, relying on opportunities provided by their state Department of Education, conversations with colleagues, and their independent research on current practices in small group reading instruction. The current study results confirm evidence from the literature review in that teachers primarily relied on professional judgment, strategies from recent professional learning opportunities, and recommendations from colleagues to make instructional decisions rather than assessment data or research-based practices (see Hudson, 2022; Knight et al., 2019). In addition, the current study findings extended knowledge in this discipline regarding that teachers seek out their own opportunities for professional learning when the district does not provide the relevant training needed to plan and implement effective small group interventions for struggling readers.

Findings from this study support the work of Manak et al. (2022) who indicated that teachers considered various factors when making small group instruction decisions, including their own experiences with reading instruction, their knowledge of varied instructional strategies, and each student's unique reading development. Researchers have acknowledged a shift from teachers feeling pressure to name specific instructional strategies to recognize their expertise in choosing from an array of interwoven strategies to use with students based on their elementary students' academic and social-emotional needs (Manak et al., 2022). Findings from the current study indicated that teachers felt

pressure to use the district-mandated resources but instead relied on their own training and expertise to make instructional decisions to support struggling readers through small group interventions. This collective perception indicated by participants in this study extended knowledge in the discipline by providing examples of ways teachers use their professional judgment when faced with district mandates to meet the unique needs of their students.

Four of the eight participants in this study indicated that they sought the opportunity the state of Michigan provided for LETRS training, which is tightly aligned with SOR. The findings from this study support the results of Paige et al. (2021) who acknowledged that teachers with a deep knowledge of the SOR and related instructional strategies should be compelled to adapt, modify, and innovate instruction. All four participants in the current study acknowledged that LETRS training had transformed their small group reading instruction, as indicated by the research. The current study adds to the literature by presenting new data demonstrating that second-grade teachers who participated in LETRS training have increased self-efficacy in planning and implementing small group interventions for struggling readers.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of this study was that transferability was limited. This study consisted of perspectives collected from a small group of eight second-grade teachers and does not represent the perspectives of all elementary teachers nationwide. Additionally, the study results may not be transferable to other grade levels. Therefore, the findings and conclusions from this study are limited to the context in which this study was conducted;

however, the thickness of the data may increase possible transfer to other grade levels, specifically lower elementary levels.

My bias as a researcher may have influenced this study. To reduce researcher bias, I refrained from personal conversations with the participants and conducted the interviews in a professional manner. I also masked the identity of the participants and their school districts in this study. In addition, the Walden University IRB guidelines regarding gathering consent from participants, privacy considerations, and other related ethical issues were adhered to throughout the course of the study. Finally, I decreased bias by developing an interview protocol (see Appendix), which guided the interview process and data collection.

Gender bias may have influenced the findings because the sample of teachers was comprised of eight female educators. The responses of male teachers may have differed from the female teachers who participated in this study. Additionally, all eight teachers currently teach in Michigan, so regional bias may have influenced the findings. Teachers in other regions of the United States or across the world may have opportunities for different professional learning, training, or access to resources for small group interventions that may have influenced the results of this study in a different manner.

### **Recommendations**

Research has shown that teachers who delivered reading instruction in a small group setting effectively improved elementary students' academic outcomes (Puzio et al., 2020). However, research has also indicated that planning and implementing small group reading interventions is a complex process, and teachers must devote significant time to

make the instructional decisions necessary to effectively plan and prepare small group lessons based on student needs (Conradi Smith et al., 2022). Teachers often have few effective resources to use when designing these lessons and rely on their professional judgment, past training, and experience (Knight et al., 2019). Teachers must identify specific student needs to provide effective reading interventions in a small group setting (Duke et al., 2021; Kuhn, 2020; Kulmhofer-Bommer et al., 2022; Martinez & Plevyak, 2020; Neitzel et al., 2021). The perspectives of the participants aligned with the findings from the literature review. However, the small sample of participants did not provide enough data to generate generalizable findings, specifically for additional grade levels. Future research could explore teacher perspectives on planning and implementing small group interventions with struggling readers at other grade levels and in other regions across the United States.

Future research might explore the professional development teachers seek on their own when the district does not provide the relevant or adequate training for teachers to do their jobs effectively. Researchers may examine teacher perspectives on how they choose professional learning opportunities and explore the motivation that drives teachers to pursue this learning independently, outside of their regular contracted school day.

Researchers might also use a quantitative or mixed methods approach in future studies. Using a quantitative approach, a researcher could examine which strategies a teacher uses in small group settings, including the frequency and duration of groups, and the effectiveness of those strategies. Data from this study might reveal which factors have a significant positive effect on student academic and social-emotional learning.

Three participants in this study indicated that it would be beneficial to observe other teachers facilitating small group interventions or receive instructional coaching services to strengthen their skills in planning and implementing small group instruction. Future studies could explore the relationship between teacher observations or instructional coaching and effective small group instruction. Teacher perspectives on the effectiveness of observing colleagues facilitate small group interventions and how teachers apply that knowledge in their classrooms after the observations is a future study that should be conducted.

### **Implications**

In the field of elementary reading instruction, a social change does not have to be large to be relevant or worthwhile. As Callahan et al. (2012) suggested, even the smallest acts toward social change can have a positive impact. The findings from this study may contribute to improved student reading achievement at the local or regional level. Teachers may use the findings to plan and implement small group reading interventions for their students. Findings from this study may help teachers identify the challenges of planning and implementing small group instruction so that they can address those in advance to facilitate more effective small group experiences for their students.

The findings from this study will provide teachers with a better understanding of how explicit, intensive reading interventions can be used with second graders. As teachers begin to use small group interventions in their reading instruction, students can build the knowledge and skills to become competent and motivated readers. This study can positively impact educators for social change by providing teachers with a greater

awareness of how to plan and implement small group reading instruction, ultimately improving student academic outcomes.

Findings from this study may also help school and district administrators determine relevant, effective professional learning opportunities to offer to their teaching staff. By allowing teachers to have a voice in determining their professional learning needs, administrators may be able to seek out relevant training for teachers, which will affect positive social change by giving more educators an opportunity for the same training opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to describe how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group reading interventions for struggling readers. By examining those instructional decisions, I extended knowledge in this discipline by identifying themes in how teachers make those instructional decisions. This began to close the gap in the effective implementation of those reading interventions for teachers who use this study to inform their small group instructional practices.

Findings from this study showed that much time is required to plan and implement effective small group interventions for struggling readers. However, there was strong evidence that teachers should invest the time needed to plan differentiated small group interventions and implement them with struggling readers in their classrooms. Research shows that students who struggled with a specific skill and received targeted

small group instruction on that skill increased the likelihood that the students developed into proficient readers (Kuhn & Stahl, 2020; Puzio et al., 2020).

Findings from this study showed that teachers do not always feel confident with what they are doing, but they are the experts. They know their students' academic and social-emotional needs better than an administrator or the authors of a published, scripted program. When faced with a district-mandated curricular resource, teachers should not feel that they must hide behind closed doors when determining which resource components they use to do what is best for kids. Instructional decisions should be made with confidence by teachers. The self-efficacy construct of Bandura's social-cognitive theory has extensively influenced the study of a teacher's confidence in their ability to be successful in classroom instruction (Martinez & Plevyak, 2020). Self-efficacy is gradually built based on past experiences and the success or failure that resulted from those experiences (Bandura, 1986). Students benefit from teachers with strong self-efficacy, as high-level decision-making practices used by teachers to plan and implement small group reading interventions take place in their classrooms (Bandura, 1993; Kearns et al., 2022). Teachers should feel confident in their instructional decisions. That feeling of self-efficacy will bleed into their daily work, positively affecting student academic and social-emotional outcomes in the small group setting. The data presented in this study indicate that teachers need to be encouraged and empowered by their colleagues and administrators to rely on their experience, knowledge, and expertise when implementing small group interventions.

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### Appendix: Interview Protocol

Research Question: How do second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement small group interventions to support struggling readers?

#### Greeting:

“Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview for my doctoral study. My name is Laura Chang, and I am an instructional coach in a public school district. As you know, the purpose of this interview is to provide me with the opportunity to collect information related to my study. You were invited to participate because you are a second-grade teacher in a non-virtual school setting who currently plans and implements small group reading interventions for struggling readers in your class. You have perspectives and experiences that may be beneficial to my study about how second-grade teachers make instructional decisions to plan and implement those small group interventions to support their struggling readers.

Your name, school district, and all personal information will remain private, and I will use a pseudonym for you for my doctoral study. Please remember that your participation in this study is confidential and voluntary, and you may stop this interview at any time. This interview will be 25-40 minutes and audio-recorded, with your consent. This recording will allow me to transcribe your exact words, ensuring greater accuracy in capturing your authentic responses to my questions. Do I have your permission to record this interview? Do you have any questions before we begin? Are you ready to begin?

## Interview Questions

1. How long have you been teaching second grade?
2. How long have you planned and implemented small groups to support struggling readers?
3. What does small group reading instruction look like in your classroom?
  - a. What is the teacher doing?
  - b. What are the students doing?
4. Tell me about how you plan small group reading interventions.
  - a. Tell me about the instructional decisions that you make to plan reading interventions.
    - i. How do you use quantitative data (e.g., lesson/unit assessment data, benchmark assessment data, diagnostic assessment data) when making instructional decisions to plan reading interventions?
    - ii. How do you use qualitative data (e.g., observational data, informal reading inventory data) when making instructional decisions to plan reading interventions?
  - b. Tell me about the types of reading interventions that you use.
  - c. Tell me how you determine which intervention resource to use with a student and/or groups of students.
  - d. Tell me about the resources and materials you use to plan small group reading instruction.

5. Tell me about how you implement small group reading interventions.
  - a. Tell me about the instructional decisions that you make when implementing small group reading interventions.
  - b. How do you know when students are ready to move on to a new skill?
6. Tell me about some of the benefits of planning and implementing small group reading instruction.
  - a. What are the benefits to you as a teacher?
  - b. What are the benefits to your students?
7. Tell me about some of the challenges of planning small group reading instruction.
8. Tell me about some of the challenges of implementing small group reading instruction.
  - a. What are the challenges to you as the teacher?
  - b. What are the challenges for your students?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share on the topic of small group reading instruction?

Closing:

“Thank you so much for your time today. I truly appreciate that you took the time to share your perspectives on planning and implementing small group reading interventions in your second-grade classroom. I want to remind you that your name or school district will not be affiliated with your responses, as I will use a pseudonym for

you in my doctoral study. Please also remember that you may withdraw participation at any time.

I will follow up with you within two weeks to review my notes and the transcript of this interview so that you may check them for accuracy. Do you have any questions for me about this interview or doctoral study?

Thank you again, and have a great day!”