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Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Reading Struggles for Learning Disabled Students

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Betty A. Brown

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Reading Struggles for Learning Disabled
Students

by

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EdS, Cambridge College, 2012

MA, Cambridge College, 2010

BS, Georgia Southern College, 1991

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Walden University

November 2013

Abstract

The students with learning disabilities at a school in the Southeastern United States were not meeting the academic targets on the reading assessment set by the state Department of Education. Moreover, most new standards-based reform initiatives require that students with learning disabilities meet local and state competency requirements. Therefore, effective instructional practices for teaching reading in inclusive settings are crucial for ensuring the students' success with learning disabilities. The problem addressed in this study is that students are struggling to learn to read. The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine special education teachers' perceptions of why students were struggling to learn to read. The constructivist framework, the theory of learning, and the instructional process were used in this study. Teachers' perceptions of why special education students were struggling to learn to read were examined. Convenience sampling was used to gather participants for the study. The data for the study were collected using semistructured individual interviews with 12 teachers who supported reading to students with learning disabilities. After each participant's session, the data was transcribed, reviewed, and organized. The next analysis step was to code the data for the themes, concepts, and frequency of similar responses to answer the research question to identify possible patterns or relationships in the data. The findings showed special education teachers feel underprepared to adequately instruct due to a lack of specified special education instructional training, curriculum, support, resources, and materials. The resulting project included a 3-day professional development (PD) training program to enhance teachers' reading instructional practices and locate special education resources and materials.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation in memory of my beloved father James Brown (1920-1992) and my mother Susie Mae Moore Dunham Brown (1927-1996), who was very instrumental in my educational growth and development. Their encouragement and expectations were the fuel that propelled my achievements. Also, to Mr. Ben Collins a very special former friend for his encouragement.

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Section 1: The Local Problem

In this study, I examined teacher's perceptions in Southeastern United States regarding students with disabilities who were struggling to learn to read. Most students failed to achieve a grade-appropriate reading level despite the interventions used. As a result, the students routinely participated in remedial reading classes. Teachers of disabled students taught reading with a heavy focus on decoding and comprehension. However, many students with disabilities could read books below their grade level but were still unable to decode what they read. As a result, students with disabilities struggled to comprehend what they read and needed differentiated reading instruction. Most special education teachers at the school had the required training in reading instruction. However, according to the School Improvement Team at the study site, teachers felt underprepared to offer reading instruction to students with learning disabilities at the study school in Grades 6 through 8.

The student assessment results on the (2019) state National Assessment of Education Progress in Reading (NAEP) indicated that 79% of the sixth through eighth grade learning-disabled student population was not proficient in the area of reading comprehension (NAEP 2019). In addition, the reading achievement scores on the district Scholastic Reading Inventory Assessment (SRI), 2019, revealed that 68 % of sixth through eighth grade learning disabled students at the school did not meet the basic grade-level reading requirements (SRI,2019). The students' score records over a consecutive 3 to 5 academic years (2014–2019); showed a pattern of a high number of students that failed both the state and district level reading assessments for Grades 6

through 8 learning disabled students due to reading deficits (School Improvement Team, personal communication, August 1, 2019).

Rationale

Students with disabilities were struggling to learn to read in an urban middle school in the Southeastern United States. The students with learning disabilities in an urban middle school in the Southeastern United States were not meeting the academic targets on the reading assessment set by the state Department of Education. Thirty-two percent of middle-grade students with disabilities met reading achievement score requirements on the district Scholastic Reading Inventory Assessment (SRI, 2019). At the school, students with disabilities' progress in reading has stalled in the last decade, with the highest performers stagnating and the lowest-achieving students falling behind even further (SRI, 2019). This basic qualitative study was conducted to examine middle school special education teachers' perceptions of why middle students were struggling to learn to read.

Definition of Terms

I used the following terms and definitions for this basic qualitative study.

Coteaching: Referred to a teaching model wherein two educators take responsibility for planning, implementing instruction, and monitoring student success in a class (Lindacher, 2020).

Individualized Education Program (IEP): A program established to address the academic or behavior inclusive of educational goals and action steps that teachers and the school's staff implement for that student (Cavendish et al., 2018).

Intervention: An educational program, policy, or practice on how best to meet the learning needs of the students to improve their learning outcomes and achievement (Lemons et al., 2018).

Learning Disabilities (LD): Referred to significant problems and Specific developmental disorders faced by children in academic areas, often showing difficulty in reading, written expression (including spelling), and mathematics that cannot be explained by intelligence or external factors (Kohli et al., 2018).

Perception: was a mode of apprehending reality and experience through the senses to build the world's meaning, opinion, and judgment (Given, 2018).

Reading Achievement referred to the mastery of the written text or what has been taught (Vaughn et al., 2019).

Reading Comprehension (RC) referred to a cognitive and linguistic process that requires the reader to reconstruct the writer's mental world by making multiple connections to construct meaning from part of a text (Nation, 2019).

Response to Intervention (RTI:) process that was a form of progress monitoring used as a school-wide initiative. Special education personnel requirement considers an essential component of the instructional framework to monitor student progress (Cavendish et al., 2020).

Significance of the Study

I addressed the local problem that students were struggling to learn to read in an urban middle school in the Southeastern United States. The findings of this study may impact the educational setting by including a comprehensive understanding of how

literacy skills were taught, which could improve students reading skills. Additionally, teachers could use the findings of this study to work collaboratively and change pedagogy practices for teaching reading to students with learning disabilities. Finally, the data that I gathered from one-on-one interviews with teacher participants for this study can be used by administrators, and academic coaches to create professional development training teachers need to implement appropriate intervention strategies in their daily instructions for students with disabilities in Grades 6 through 8.

Students attending the school and the classroom teachers were the stakeholders in this study. Students primarily may benefit because when meaningful instruction is given and assessments are timed appropriately, student performance is enhanced and anxiety is reduced (Agboola & Hiatt, 2017). Finally, the study school can yield a higher score performance rating due to increased student growth levels in reading achievement on the state standardized tests National Assessment of Education Progress in Reading (NAEP), thus promoting social change.

Research Questions

Reading instruction among students with disabilities in middle school is a topic of debate in education research. The problem at the research site was that students were struggling to learn to read. I used the following research question (RQ) to guide this study: What were teachers' perceptions on the reasons that special education students were struggling to learn reading?

Review of Literature

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that I used in this study was the constructivist theory. I used the constructivist approach in the context of the theory of learning and the instructional process. Students can use the constructive learning style to build their understanding and knowledge through their experiences and reflection on those experiences (Elliott et al., 2000). Constructivist theorists believed that implementing research-based instructional strategies might improve student reading achievement and test scores (Kumar, 2019). According to Faris (2017), the constructivist model is based primarily on data sources to drive instruction and research-based instructional strategies. In general, constructivists focused on the culture of teaching and structures for classroom practices in the 21st century education (Faris, 2017). Constructivism, as described by Piaget (1967), Vygotsky (1978), Glasersfeld (1995), and Mathews (1998), as well as social constructivism and educational constructivism (included theories of learning and pedagogy) all have had the most significant impact on instruction and curriculum design because they seemed to be the most conducive to integration into current educational approaches (McLeod, 2019). The constructivist learning theory underpinned various student-centered teaching methods and techniques that contrasted with traditional education, whereby teachers to students passively transmit knowledge (McLeod, 2019). The teacher understood the students' preexisting conceptions, guided the activity to address them, and built on them to support their learning needs (Oliver, 2000). The constructivist approach was at the center of education in teaching and supported this

research on implementing best classroom instructional practices to ensure that all students gained knowledge, including students with learning disabilities (McLeod, 2019).

Review of the Broader Problem

In this section, I present an overview of the topics that I covered in the literature review, how I conducted the search search, and provide a critical review of the broader problem associated with the local problem addressed in this research. I focused on information pertaining to students with disabilities in the middle grades' reading struggles and teachers' perceptions of why middle-grade students struggled to learn to read. I also reviewed studies from other areas, including: (a) an explanation of the constructivist framework, (b) a brief history of special education and laws, (c) a discussion of the effect of teachers' attitudes and beliefs on their instructional practices, (d) an examination of teachers' comfort teaching students with learning disabilities, (e) an exploration of student needs, and (f) co-teaching.

I obtained peer-reviewed literature by searching multiple electronic databases, such as Walden Online Library (WOL), including Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC), EBSCO, and ProQuest. I also used the referenced works from those sources obtained to check for other relevant articles. I searched the databases for peer review articles using the keywords *teachers' perceptions, reading struggles, instructional strategies, differentiation instruction, formative assessments, learning disabled students, student achievement, teacher training/staff development, special education laws, and qualitative research*. I analyzed 40 current peer review articles within 5 years of study to establish support relevant to my research.

In the United States, children are falling behind in mastering the art of reading, especially students with disabilities (National Assessment of Education Progress, 2019). Students with disabilities are not making achievement gains in reading comprehension they should make. The achievement gap between students with disabilities has remained unchanged. The most recent (2019) NAEP confirmed the persistence of this problem. Students with disabilities posted stagnant reading scores on the NAEP in 2019 and failed to close the gap with students with disabilities. According to the (2019) NAEP, 69% of elementary grade students and 79% of middle-grade students with disabilities scored below a basic reading level, placing them well below grade level expectations. Studies show that among the population of middle school students with disabilities accounted for 80% of reading disabilities, and it was not an innate entity (Kohli et al., 2018).

According to the schools' state annual assessment data reported in reading, the students with learning disabilities in middle grades 6 through 8 in inclusive classes revealed that students were impacting the schools' effort to meet state and district level test score requirements. Consequently, students with learning disabilities were not meeting the academic reading targets on the school's reading assessment results set by the state Department of Education at a school in the Southeastern district of the United States. Because of this issue, it was vital for educators to update their training skills to enhance their knowledge to feel prepared to support teaching reading skills to students that had learning disabilities that had reading difficulties. To address the local problem of students struggling to learn to read in an urban middle school in the Southeastern United States, I investigated teachers' perceptions of the phenomenon.

Beliefs on Reading Struggles

Despite the need for reading instruction at the secondary level, several struggles and challenges exist (Leko et al., 2018). A significant number of students with significant disabilities struggle with the complex challenges and literacy tasks they encountered in their content area classes every day and required individualized modifications, adaptations, and support to access grade-level content (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2013 cited in Apitz, et al., 2017). With current inclusion trends for students with disabilities and regular students, teacher educators perceived it as a challenge to redesign their instructional teaching programs to educate such a wide range of students in whole-class settings with various disabilities without much support (Specht & Metsala, 2018). Teachers expressed that they must determine the essential literacy skills to teach, which would allow students to communicate across all areas of their lives (Apitz et al., 2017). At the same time, federal laws charged teachers with the task of providing all students access to the general curriculum (Apitz et al., 2017).

Teachers' perceptions of academic proficiency revealed that students with disabilities were unable to participate in any aspect of the curriculum due to many neurobiological learning disorders unless they were better prepared to offer more support (Kalsoom et al., 2020). The teachers believed they needed to understand reading basics, reading, and reading instruction to support reading to learning disabled students with significant disabilities (Apitz et al., 2017). Learning disabled students usually faced specific difficulties, e.g., identifying words and remembering spellings, and reading presented a challenge (Accardo & Finnegan, 2019). Because of these identified learning

disorders there is a need for targeted reading comprehension remediation and the use of research-based practices and individualized instruction for each student. However, teachers reported a lack of access to such practices (McIntyre et al., 2017). Teachers faced difficulties while teaching students with learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities did not complete their tasks on time in one class setting (Kalsoom et al., 2020). Teachers also saw other issues that included students' lack of motivation and disengagement in learning, underachievement, and special education needs (Low et al., 2019).

These issues were interrelated because students who misbehaved in class were more likely to be low-achieving learners. Students that had trouble learning tended not to be engaged (Low et al., 2019). All students with learning disabilities were previously educated in segregated settings with individualized curricula not aligned to grade-level standards, significantly reinforce the struggle to teach them and learn. Special education teachers not only felt inadequately trained to meet the demands of teaching reading skills to students with disabilities but had to provide instruction for students requiring more than regular classroom instruction (Ozdemir, 2006).

Most special education teachers expressed concerns about a lack of administrative and co-teacher support (Avramidis et al., 2000; Fuchs, 2010; Hwang & Evans, 2011) and an increase in negative teacher-student interactions (Stevenson & Harper, 2006). In addition, teachers stated that due to time constraints and a lack of knowledge, seeking out research-based practices independently was an issue (Burns & Ysseldyx, 2009; Kretlow & Blatz, 2011; Mazzotti et al., 2012). Busby et al., (2012) stated that teachers perceived

the teaching of students with learning disabilities as even more struggling and challenging when not having enough resources and the specialized skills to address the unique needs of each student who lacked reading comprehension skills.

According to Ramakrishnan and Salleh (2018), self-efficacy (SE) of special needs, inclusive teaching found that there was a gap in teacher skills and training as well as aspects of trust and self-confidence. Additionally, there was a gap relating to issues of stress and job satisfaction as well as internal and external factors. According to Filatov and Pill (2015), teachers expressed that when they were provided with appropriate training, they had high self-esteem when applying the learned skills in their teaching techniques to meet the challenge to improve student learning outcomes. Therefore, they could create an exciting and innovative learning environment. Teachers believed that quality training always positively impacted their SE and affected the achievement of both students and schools. According to Eroglu and Unlu (2015) and Wyatt (2014), most teachers had high confidence in their abilities and had high SE. The high SE and self-confidence affected the behavior of teachers in the development of their profession and their SE internally. Ramakrishnan and Salleh (2018) study found that upgrading teacher skills and skills development played an important role in teacher training to improve students' reading skills to help close the reading achievement gap among students with learning disabilities.

In addition, teachers of special education expressed their interest and concerns about their co-teacher preparing students to improve their reading growth to close the reading achievement gap (Ramakrishnan & Salleh, 2018). The teachers stated their co-

teachers were not adequately trained either to sufficiently instruct students in reading.

The teachers believed due to the lack of co-teacher training that this could affect their success in acquiring the skills and knowledge needed to help students become proficient readers to improve their reading scores (Lindacher, 2020). Additionally, this affected the learning achievement of learners with disabilities because they tend to need as much assistance and one-on-one instruction as possible to help with their reading deficits.

Teachers also perceived time constraints as a barrier to meeting the needs of the diverse learner, and the lack of knowledge to seek out research-based practices independently was an issue (Merga, 2020). Lemons et al. (2018) argued that educators perceived a challenge with implementing the RTI process for monitoring student progress, and the IEP document tool for accommodations, level of support, and goals often leaving the teacher wondering how best to meet the learning needs of these students with persistent and severe reading difficulties.

Special education teachers found data collection challenging as efforts to document the progress of (IEP) goals if they were not necessarily uniform, identical, or standardized across students and settings (Ruble et al., 2018). In addition, the standardized and curriculum-based approaches were not always appropriate or readily available to teachers to measure progress in some students' skills (i.e., social skills, communication skills, and learning readiness skills; Ruble et al., 2018). This placed a burden on the special education teacher because the data collection was not readily available to measure the outcomes of instructional plans for these types of skills mentioned above (Ruble et al., 2012). Accordingly, special educators needed a wide

range of data collection and analysis skills to monitor student progress and make critical, child-specific, data-driven decisions about the effectiveness of interventions and educational programs (Ruble et al., 2018).

Most teachers of students with disabilities reported that they had limited information and experience with special education; their perceptions of inclusive special education classrooms were primarily based upon childhood memories of public-school education (Ramakrishnan & Salleh, 2018). Overall, teachers felt they needed a network of professional development and staff support to use multiple effective practices to be self-efficacious in teaching reading to learners with a spectrum of disabilities and individual needs in the classroom (Brown et al., 2013).

Factors That Influence Instruction

Teachers' beliefs played an essential role in student learning, especially for those with disabilities (Mamabolo et al., 2021). Teacher beliefs could affect the implementation and delivery of instruction. Understanding a particular education policy and knowledge of implementation practice influenced teachers' practice and beliefs (Cavendish et al., 2019). Exceptional education and institutionalized structure were often dictated by top-down regulations and requirements that deeply influenced teacher practices (Bray & Russell, 2016). Special education teachers described having to navigate policy implementation (e.g., state standard assessment preparation and RTI mandates) and they believed it to be complicated and overwhelming and did not necessarily best serve students' needs (Bray & Russell, 2016). However, to comply with federal and state legislation laws the 1997 (IDEA), 2001 (NCLB), and the 2009 (RTT) program, teachers

had to ensure that all students with disabilities received a public education tailored to meet their needs.

Laws

Federal and state legislation established national laws to protect students with disabilities. The (IDEIA, 2004) was signed into law by President George W. Bush on December 3, 2004 (Yell, et al., 2017), reauthorizing and amending IDEA (2004) was developed to coordinate with the NCLB (2001) and was established in response to the educational needs of children with disabilities were not sufficiently being met.

Additionally, the NCLB (PL 107-110, 2001) required that all students, including those with disabilities, achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP) in grade-level standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). This later became part of the NCLB (2002) legislation, which also called for assessing and assuring the teaching effectiveness of those who educated children with learning disabilities (United States Congress, Public Law 94-142, 1975). Yell et al., (2017) noted that NCLB had resulted in more pervasive involvement of the federal government in educational matters and had a profound effect on the education of students with disabilities (e.g., AYP requirements, graduation and drop-out requirements).

Additionally, the Obama administration developed and implemented RTT (2009), a competitive grant program that included incentives instead of sanctions to propel reform for all students, including those students with learning disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The (RTT) program called for states to capture and track the achievement of all students and the utilization of data to inform teacher

performance annually (Woolf, 2017). Race to the Top has helped drive states nationwide to pursue higher standards, improve teacher instruction, use data effectively in the classroom, and adopted new strategies to help struggling students improve their school's yearly progress (AYP). As of December 10, 2015, congress replaced the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law that was to determine student performance targets and school ratings that were to be state-driven and based on multiple measures, as opposed to NCLB (2001), where student performance targets and school ratings were set by the federal government and only used standardized assessments. Additionally, the new ESSA (2015) held all students to high academic standards while preparing all students for college and careers, including those students with learning disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Student Needs

Learning to read was an essential component of success in school and our literate and technological-driven society (Preston et al., 2017). However, teachers generally believed the ultimate goal in their practices was to offer instructions that were appropriate, effective, and focused on the children's developmental level, cultural level, ability level, and specific learning needs, as well as using the different, research-based teaching techniques to support students' language and literacy development (Saracho, 2017). Afacan et al., (2018) reported that effective strategies used by teachers to provide multi-component reading instruction to students with individual disabilities (ID) were to focus on one-to-one skill instruction, such as sight word reading and multi-component reading interventions that had been linked to improved reading skills across multiple

reading components for students with disabilities and in general education. Studies indicated that students with individual disabilities exposed to multi-component reading programs significantly improved their reading skills compared to their peers of the same level. The latter received traditional sight word instruction or their previous reading performance.

Direct instruction and massed trials were the most commonly and frequently used formats for teaching reading (Almaliki, 2016). The massed trials approach involved the features of a learning trial being described in the subsequent steps and simply meant repeating the same learning trial several times in a row, ensuring that the learner was prosperous multiple times at whatever step of the skill was being taught (Guilhardi et al., 2016). Direct instruction appeared to be the most effective approach for improving word recognition skills in students with learning disabilities (Almaliki, 2016). Direct instruction related to teaching skills in an explicit, direct fashion. Direct instruction also involved drill/repetition/practice and could be delivered to one child or a small group of students simultaneously. However, other strategies has also equally given positive responses and were thus effective in teaching literacy among students with multiple disabilities was the educational philosophy of differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction required teachers to tailor their learning, teaching, and assessment strategies while adjusting the curriculum to the needs of children rather than expecting students to fit the existing curriculum (Cole, 2008 & Rogers, 2007).

To ensure that student's individual needs were met, the special education teacher-supported implementation in their instructional practices of the Response to Intervention

(RTI) process as a form of progress monitoring as a school-wide initiative. The RTI process was a requirement for special education personnel and was considered an essential component of the instructional framework to monitor student progress (Fuchs & Stecker, 2010). The protocol for an RTI process required that a multidisciplinary team of the required school staff and parents work together to create a legal and binding document that offered a “roadmap” for disabled learners that teachers must follow in their instructional practices (Gartin & Murdick, 2014). The binding document to enabled schools to provide the required level of support to students with disabilities was the Individualized Education Program (IEP) that teachers used (Cavendish, 2018). The IEP included such components as academic performance and goals of improvement. The protocol for an IEP required that a multidisciplinary team of the required school staff and parents worked together to create a legal and binding document that offered a “roadmap” for disabled learners that teachers must follow in their instructional practices (Gartin & Murdick, 2014).

Teaching reading with technology has proven beneficial in transferring the effect on reading ability in children with reading difficulties by using applications on smartphones and tablets and compensating for reading deficiencies (Lindeblad et al., 2017). Teachers indicated that reading impaired children might develop at the same rate as non-impaired readers with technology use. In addition, the use of technology provided special needs children with access to the text, eliminating feelings of inferiority, thereby producing confidence (Serafini, 2017). A recent study of pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching reading skills reported that teachers who were confident in their abilities to

teach critical reading skills were more motivated to establish a learning environment for reading and employed effective instructional practices to address the reading gap (Karabay et al. 2015). In other words, teachers were inclined to implement methods they were confident using and spent time on subjects they felt prepared to teach (Sandholtz & Ringstaff, 2014).

Decoding Intervention Strategy

One of the best popular teaching tools educators used to teach students with moderate and severe disabilities to read was the tools that allowed them to decode printed words for themselves (Nation, 2019). Decoding was the ability to apply one's knowledge of letter-sound relationships, including knowledge of letter patterns, correctly pronouncing written words, word identification, and sight word recognition. Decoding of the text included noticing the details of a text, for example, phonemes, morphemes, words, sentences, and discourse, to achieve the meaning or semantic aspect of language (Alderson, 2000). As a result of using the decoding method, nonverbal students with learning disabilities (LD) were able to read on average at least nine new words of an administered designed-made test comprising trained and untrained words after eight months of daily interventions (Ahlgrim-Delzell et al., 2016). In phonics instruction, students were taught to identify letter/sound correspondences and how to use them to decode words for understanding, which helped them become proficient readers (NICHD, 2000). One of the best evidence-based practices for teaching decoding skills to develop students with reading disabilities were systematic phonics instruction (Castles et al., 2018). Below are examples of specific identifiers in Table 1 that determined

whether a student needed decoding intervention, comprehension intervention, or comprehensive intervention that addressed the two (Spencer & Wagner, 2018).

Table 1

Decoding Intervention Vs. Comprehension Intervention

When You Need Decoding Intervention	When You Need Comprehension
-------------------------------------	-----------------------------

Intervention	
1. Made frequent word identification errors	1. Could not follow the multiple-step direction
2. Has added or omitted words	2. Exhibited poor auditory memory and statement repetition skills
3. Confuse high-frequency words	3. Lacked analytical skills required to process arguments
4. Poor grasp of grapheme-phoneme	4. Has a deficit vocabulary
5. Read at a highly unbelievable slow rate	5. Lacked background or domain knowledge
6. Was unable to comprehend because of inaccurate reading	

Decoding has been a topic of discussion in studies for many years. It has shown that substantial gains were made in phoneme awareness, alphabetic decoding, word reading, spelling, fluency, and comprehension (Accardo & Finnegan, 2019). In addition, many studies showed positive effects for struggling readers and spellers using the decoding process. However, there was some indication in other studies that some students with ASD struggled with reading comprehension despite knowing the decoding method and how to recognize words (Brown et al., 2013 & Williamson et al., 2012).

Bottom-up versus Top-down Strategies

Rumelhart (1980) puts forward the interactive model. This more comprehensive theory explained bottom-up and top-down as the two reading models that has been declared a vital role in teaching reading comprehension among students with reading difficulties (Prathomwat, 2019). According to Grabeand Stoller (2002), a bottom-up reading model was a model that focused on a single-direction, part-to-whole processing

of a text. In bottom-up models, the reader was assumed to be included in a mechanical process where he or she decoded the text letter by letter, word by word, and sentence by sentence. This model was declared as a decoding process of constructing meaning at the "bottom," e.g., letters or words to the larger units at "the top," e.g., phrases, clauses, and intersentential linkages (Carrell & Eistenhold, 1983). Readers begin with decoding letters, words, and syntactic features of a text; then, they build textual meaning (Prathomwat, 2019). The reader decoded the text that the writer had previously encoded. Decoding of the text included noticing the details of a text, for example, phonemes, morphemes, words, sentences, and discourse, to achieve the meaning or semantic aspect of language (Alderson, 2000). Flesch (1955) debated that these models worked on the written text hierarchically or organization of the text (coherence), and the reader's job was to process the smallest unit of language (i.e., grapho-phonetic) and then coordinated the smaller units to discover and comprehend the higher linguistic units (e.g., sentence syntax). In bottom-up processing, the focus was on the severe function of the lower-level recognition skills. Reading was a hierarchical process, starting from the understanding of single phonemes to words, clauses, sentences, and then the whole piece of discourse. According to this processing model of reading comprehension, the reader did not miss any part of a written text and studied it consciously. Shahnazari and Dabaghi (2014) pointed out that bottom-up processing was data-driven. The role of the lower-level recognition skills involving orthographic, semantic, syntactic, and phonological processing was vital in incomprehension. According to Iran-Nejad (1987), bottom-up was the process; that was not easy to use higher-ordered reading skills such as making

inferences. The reader's background knowledge played a very restricted function in interpreting the meaning of a text. Bottom-up strategy was called local strategy or problem solving and supported strategies for readers to realize specific linguistic components. The bottom-up theory discussed that the readers made the text from the minor units (letters to words to phrases to sentences, etc.), and organized the text from those minor units that got very automatic that readers were not conscious of the process. In bottom-up theories and models, the reading process was regarded as a text-driven decoding process, so the scarce function of the reader was to reorganize meaning (McKoon & Radcliff, 1992).

The top-down reading model was a model that emphasized what the reader transformed the text into to arrive at the meaning. In top-down models, the comprehension process was not mechanical but actively controlled by the reader (Grabe, 2019). Readers determined letters and words only to gather a better understanding of the meaning of the text. In both the top-down and bottom-up models, the primary goal of reading was achieving meaning from the text rather than mastery of letters and words. According to Block (1992a, p.15), in top-down models, the comprehension process was neither mechanical nor linear but actively managed by the reader, so the primary mechanisms for the processing and learning of the text area in the mind of readers. From this perspective, readers could understand letters and words only to justify their prior knowledge about the meaning of the text. Finally, students could successfully decode a passage even if they did not know the meaning of the unfamiliar words within the text. According to Baddeley & Hitch (1974), the reader interpreted the meaning of the text and

made inferences from what was skimmed through a direct interaction between the evident and superficial make-up of the text and used its background knowledge of the topic. The use of both the bottom-up and top-down reading strategies would help the learners with a deeper understanding of the text to achieve their assigned tasks (Prathomwat, 2019). The top-down reading model was a model that emphasizes what the reader transforms the text into to arrive at the meaning. Rumelhart's (1980) interactive model was a more comprehensive theory that explained the process of reading comprehension and also was suitable for teaching reading comprehension. This model explained that any act of reading comprehension was the combined result of the top-down model and the bottom-up model. During reading comprehension, the readers had low-level skills to understand an article correctly, so they should be capable of identifying words and sentences and had high-level knowledge of general knowledge. In short, the reading psychologists and reading researchers—Rumelhart's model was generally widely accepted and stated that efficient reading was generated from the interaction between top-down and bottom-up reading strategies while consistent with the main ideas of schema theory (Xue, 2019).

Student Success and Achievement

According to studies by Whittle et al. (2018), positive teacher personalities were essential for children's success, especially those with disabilities that required special educational needs. In addition, teachers that used various collaborative instructional strategies and approaches might better assure success in increasing student achievement (Hattie, 2003; Horsley, 2012; Stronge, 2007). Three recurrent themes revealed in the review of the literature regarding successful education for disabled learners' reading

achievement were: (1) the diversity of teacher training; (2) the importance of collaboration; and (3) the effect of teacher perceptions on student achievement (Whittle, 2018). All three factors were critical teacher perceptions that might be the most significant predictor of successful inclusive classrooms for student success shortly (McDonald, 2016). In addition, teachers mastered a body of specialized knowledge as they became effective in teaching literacy. However, teachers that had masterful classroom management and flexible, effective instructional practices helped to improve their students' reading achievement skills (Whittle, 2018).

Moreover, the teachers changed their practices as new knowledge emerged. Additional potential mediators of academically successful outcomes were student engagement and motivation through interactions with the teacher, student data to drive instruction, and parental involvement (Allen et al., 2017). At the social level, teachers were essential attributes to students' overall success and enjoyment as their teachers, according to Boynton & Boynton (2017), perceived establishing a good rapport and building a relationship.

Co-Teaching

Co-teaching was the fundamental practice commonly used in inclusive unique education class settings. According to Cook and McDuffie (2019), co-teaching was described as a collaborative teaching model as a team approach with the special educator responsible for the students with disabilities and regular educators responsible for teaching the core curriculum to all students in the general education class setting. However, many schools implemented the way co-teaching was implemented, which

varied considerably in establishing and allocating instructional responsibilities and did not always follow a standardized pattern, which often presented a problem for teacher educators (Lindacher, 2020). Unfortunately, one of the many problems in inclusive educational practices was that co-teachers had little or no training. According to Chitiyo's (2017) reviewed, 77 teacher educators working in inclusive settings in the North Eastern United States were surveyed regarding their perceptions of the barriers that might hinder co-teaching practices. Results indicated that (a) teachers lacked the necessary skills required for implementing co-teaching, (b) co-teaching might require many resources for its successful implementation, and (c) must include the characteristics of a school (i.e., its routines and systems, competing priorities, policies, and senior leadership support (Chitiyo, 2017). Many educators felt that co-teaching did not meet the students' needs and saw no advantage in using the co-teaching model. Murawski & Swanson (2020) completed a meta-analysis of co-teaching studies to determine the impact of co-teaching on students, reviewed six studies, and found the overall mean impact of co-teaching to be 0.40, suggested that it was only somewhat a moderately effective procedure for influencing student outcomes. Many qualitative research studies had been conducted to explore co-teaching in kindergarten through Grade 12 (K-12) and the importance of effective communication, created constructive dialogue and resolved conflicts (Graziano & Navarrete, 2017). However, limited research supported this model as effective for increasing outcomes for students with disabilities, indicated that co-teachers had difficulty providing students with specialized instruction to meet individual learning needs (Cook et al., 2019). For students and teachers to achieve maximum benefit from

co-teaching, specific elements, including the components, methods, benefits, and barriers, should be addressed.

Teachers' behavior was essential in affecting the outcomes of inclusive co-teaching educational practices (Martinez, 2003 & Sharma et al., 2006). Being favorable toward inclusive educational practices and mainstreaming students positively affected educators' educational practices. Conversely, being negative often reflected in the educational environment in a manner of their open or hidden refusal of these inclusive educational practices (Avramidis & Norwich, 2020). Hwang and Evans's (2016) study revealed that younger and less experienced teachers' beliefs toward inclusive education (IE) than older and more experienced teachers were more positive. Many studies attempted to obtain teachers' perceptions of inclusive education practices. In most of these studies, it has been concluded that having inclusive education courses led to positive changes in the thinking of teachers or prospective teachers on inclusive education (Avramidis & Norwich, 2020). This created a better learning environment for students to achieve success.

Teachers' Comfort With Teaching Learning Disabled Students

Many teachers of students with disabilities held negative attitudes toward students because of their emotional and behavioral disabilities (Saloviita, 2020). A significant concern was that those students with disabilities' behavior problems disrupted the classroom setting (Low et al., 2019). Classroom disruptive behaviors negatively interrupted the learning environment, contributing to the loss of instructional time for teachers and students, an environment not conducive to learning, endangered the

classroom's safety, and interfered with student assessment results (Low et al., 2019).

Students with or at risk of reading disabilities and behavior problems arguably might have had more difficulty negotiating the classroom environment's complexities (Conner et al., 2016).

Hagans et al., (2020) conducted a study that examined the current understandings of best practices for literacy instruction and how those practices might have affected reading development for students with and without behavior problems. The findings from Hagans et al., (2020) studies indicated that the best practices of instruction that integrated phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, and decoding and were explicit, systematic, and code-based noted positive results in students learning and that such rigorous reading instruction might rid the influence of disruptive problem behaviors on reading acquisition among students in all grade levels. Little research has explored how teachers' self-perceptions (e.g., self-concepts) were related to their willingness to teach challenging disabled students. One exception was Baker (2005) investigated teachers (i.e., competence and willingness) to teach challenging students. Like many other studies, the focus was only on students with social, emotional, behavioral difficulties, disorders, or disturbance behaviors. Those students accounted for only a tiny class population, although their inclusion in mainstream schools had posed a significant challenge to teachers (Low et al., 2019). Despite teachers' willingness to work with challenging disabled learners, research studies on pre-service teachers and beginning teachers consistently showed that challenging or emotionally disturbed disabled students were one of their primary concerns (Sokal et al., 2017). They often felt less confident and

unprepared to work with challenging students. These teachers were more likely to feel stressed, depressed, and burned out (Low et al., 2019). Nevertheless, despite the difficulty, teachers strived to continue to commit themselves to do their job by providing all the help needed to all students, regardless of their unique needs and how to bring about success. On the contrary, teachers who did not enjoy the challenge might create adverse classroom environments that could cause sustaining harm to students and their learning achievement (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Implications

The problem was that students in an urban middle school in the Southeastern state were struggling to learn to read. The study examined special education teachers' perceptions of why students struggled to learn to read. This project study was a basis for establishing teacher professional development training opportunities that provided a better understanding of the best instructional practices to support teaching reading skills to 6th through 8th-grade students with disabilities. Training special education teachers at the school of study on teaching reading skills could improve student-reading achievement to help close the reading achievement gap among middle grades learning disabled students. This study has implications for positive social change because, with an improved understanding of the reading struggles for Learning Disabled Students in middle grades, better practices might be developed to eliminate or alleviate those struggles. Considering the issues of students with disabilities' reading struggles, teacher expectations, and teacher preparedness could all indicate possible approaches for making adjustments, innovations, and improvements in teacher preparation for special education

teachers at the school of study to enhance pedagogy practices and student learning outcomes. Furthermore, this project study might be a basis for special education teachers to collaboratively develop instructional methods and share their perceptions on how to support teaching reading skills to disabled learners in middle grades 6th through 8th with reading difficulties that might improve their reading achievement.

Summary

The problem to be addressed in this study was that students in an urban middle school in the Southeastern United States struggled to learn to read. This study was guided by the conceptual framework of Constructivism as described by Piaget (1967), Vygotsky (1978), Glasersfeld (1995), and Mathews (1998), as well as social constructivism and educational constructivism (including theories of learning and pedagogy). The framework centered on effective teaching and learning in classrooms, whereas teachers encouraged students to construct their understanding and knowledge through their experiences and reflection on those experiences. Learners used their previous knowledge as a foundation and builded on it with new things. In addition, the related research questions were also shared, and the terms and concepts of this study were all well-defined. During my literature review, I discovered an abundance of articles that supported this project's study on "Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Reading Struggles for Learning Disabled Students" that was best suitable to enhance teacher instruction and students with disabilities reading comprehension skills. Many teachers wanted to feel adequately prepared to meet the demands of disabled learners in the inclusive class setting when teaching reading skills (Salisbury, 2019). Competence in any profession was directly

related to the extent of education and training. This was especially the case in education. More importantly, this study might improve teacher reading instruction, teacher training, and student reading skills to close the reading achievement gap among students at the school study in a Southeastern district.

In Section 2 of this basic qualitative study, the methodology was described that would be employed for this research. The criteria for selecting participants for this research study was explained, and the methods for establishing the researcher-participant relationships. The measures taken for the protection of participants were outlined, and data collection and analysis were described. Section 3 included a thorough description of the intended project study. Section 4 focused on the strengths and weaknesses of this study and included a personal reflection on the doctoral study process.

Section 2: The Methodology

Overview of Study

The problem that I investigated in this study is that students in an urban middle school in the Southeastern United States were struggling to learn to read. This study allowed me to investigate teachers of students with disabilities' perceptions of students' reading struggles and the need for training that might better prepare them to teach their students how to read. This section describes the criteria for selecting participants and justification, data collection, data analysis, validity and reliability, and the limitations of this project study.

Relationship of Research Design to the Problem and Research Questions

This research question focused on the research topic that addressed the research problem.

RQ: What were teachers' perceptions on the reasons that special education students were struggling to learn reading?

A basic qualitative study research design was appropriate for this study, as it used a constructivist framework approach to support the research on teacher perceptions of the reasons students with disabilities at a middle school in the Southeastern United States struggled to learn to read. The data for the study were collected using semistructured individual interviews with teachers who supported reading to students with learning disabilities. Qualitative research was beneficial for exploring complex phenomena that was difficult to measure with quantitative studies. The emergence of theory from data

allowed the researcher to construct and reconstruct theories where necessary, based on the data generated, instead of testing data generated elsewhere by other researchers.

Other research approaches such as mixed-method and quantitative were inappropriate for this study. Qualitative data was collected for this study; hence, the mixed method was not an option. However, the quantitative approach study for this research was not an option either. Both quantitative and qualitative research's general goal was to understand the world better, their methodologies and focused in certain respects differed substantially (Aspers & Corte, 2019). However, quantitative research involves variables of interest or research expressed in numbers or graphs, and qualitative research involves variables not about numbers (Aspers & Corte, 2019). The standard quantitative methods included experiments, observations recorded as numbers, and surveys with closed-ended questions to gather data. Qualitative research was expressed in words with open-ended questions and answers to collect data and literature reviews that explored concepts and theories. The narrative approach weaved together a sequence of events, usually from just one or two individuals, to form a cohesive story and was excluded as an option for this study.

In addition, the ethnographic approach was not appropriate for this study either because the researcher did not study a particular culture or group. In a study, when someone wants to describe an event, activity, or phenomenon, the aptly named phenomenological study would be an appropriate qualitative method. However, this study was not structured to understand a phenomenon as a lived experience; thus, a phenomenological theory was eliminated. Finally, the grounded theory was not

applicable as it sought to provide an explanation or develop a theory that described the relationship, action, or system, and interpretations were continually derived from raw data. Basic qualitative research was appropriate for this study. Data collection in qualitative research described qualities or characteristics. The data for this study could be collected using questionnaires, interviews, or observations and frequently appears in narrative form. The data could examine for patterns or meaning, sometimes through coding. Qualitative data considers two essential requirements of any qualitative project: the appropriate tools to perform the work and an organized system for organizing, reducing, and analyzing the data (Watkins, 2017).

The constructivist framework approach for this qualitative study was appropriate. Constructivism focuses on the importance of the individual knowledge, beliefs, and skills through the experience of learning. The constructivist approach was used in order to reveal teachers' pedagogy, experiences, and perceptions about the reasons why students with disabilities were struggling to learn to read. A constructivist approach is useful when a researcher aims to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from participants' perspectives. This research design relies heavily on the participants' views, beliefs, and perceptions of the problem being studied (Creswell, 2009). Consistent with a qualitative research design, this study was to gather and interpret teachers' perceptions on teaching reading to students with learning disabilities who struggle to learn to read and the reason why. The data for this qualitative study was gathered through semistructured individual interviews with teachers who supported reading to students with disabilities in Grades 6 through 8.

Participants

Criteria for Selection

A convenience sampling method gathered participants from a public middle school in a Southeastern district with a representative sample drawn from Grades 6 through 8 special education teachers who taught reading to students with disabilities. According to recent publications in prestigious journals in developmental science, convenience samples were the norm and were over 16 times more likely to be used than probability samples in studies (Bornstein et al., 2013). Using convenience sampling, valuable results could be obtained, but volunteers could also present bias because of the participant's differences from those who were not volunteers. According to Jager et al. (2017), bias extended to estimates of population effects and subpopulation differences in a study. The convenience sampling method was far less expensive, more efficient, and simpler to execute (Bornstein et al., 2013). The criteria for this study were (a) teachers who held a special education certificate, (b) teachers who supported reading to students with learning disabilities at a Southeastern middle school, and (c) teachers who had more than 3 years of teaching experience. Twelve participants were selected from a pool of 16 special education teachers who instructed reading to students with disabilities in Grades 6 through 8. These teachers participated in sentence completion and individual interviews at the school of study. The participants' sample size would allow me to gather enough detailed information for the qualitative study.

Procedures for Gaining Access

Once I had received a letter signed by the superintendent from the school district (Appendix B) and the site administrator (Appendix C) for the project study, I sent an email that included informed consent, specifically to teachers who met the participant criteria at the school of study. In the email, I asked the sixth through eighth-grade special education teachers (a) who held a special education certificate, (b) teachers who supported reading to students with learning disabilities at a Southeastern middle school, and (c) teachers who had more than 3 years teaching experience whether they agree to participate in the study. I had begun scheduling times and days to meet with individuals via email when I received participation agreements from individuals. The consent form included information such as the purpose of the study, the study's benefits, participants' rights, and the interview process, and a signature of all participants was required. In addition, I asked three subject matter experts to review my interview protocol for the study.

Working Relationship

It was essential to establish a positive and professional relationship with the participants at the study site. To ensure the participants were comfortable during the interviews and sentence completion, I allowed each participant to choose the video platform, time, and date. Establishing stakeholders trust is essential for project success (Karlsen et al., 2020). Furthermore, I advised the participants that the study would be a learning experience. The intent was to examine special education teachers' perceptions of

why students were struggling to learn to read and the challenges to support reading to students with disabilities.

Ethical Concerns

The ethical research standards established by the IRB of Walden University's were adhered to, including participants' rights, confidentiality, informed consent, and protection from harm. All participants were treated with respect and, not be harmed, and were fully informed. This researcher followed all guidelines and procedures not only established by University's IRB for the protection of participants' rights, but all protocols and procedures deemed mandatory by the district as well. Teacher identifier codes protected their identities. In addition, the teacher-researcher is the only person with access to the data storage for confidentiality.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is employed to protect the participants' identity. As individuals agreed to participate, the individual was assigned a code rather than the name of Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), and so on so that data collection was anonymous and confidential. The assigned code will eliminate all identifying information. All data were stored in a locked file cabinet on my password-protected Laptop computer to which only I would have access, and after 5 years, the data will be destroyed. Lastly, participants are informed that participant identity will not be shared with anyone, and all specific information will be removed from the data.

Informed Consent

To protect participants' rights, I used informed consent. Informed consent was a critical component in promoting trust with the study participants. By obtaining informed consent, I could ensure that participants were thoroughly informed about the purpose of this study. I sent an email to the participants, stating the purpose of the study, the process by which participants were chosen, the identification of any risks, and the required time of commitment of potential participants. Additionally, I asked for permission to audio record interviews in the informed consent letter. I provided the participants with multiple opportunities to ask questions and share comments or concerns about the project study. Furthermore, I communicated to participants that participation in the project study is voluntary and that individuals may choose not to continue participating. Finally, I asked three subject matter experts to review my interview protocol for the study.

Protection from Harm

As the researcher, I ensured that participants were protected from harm. As with all research, ethical issues must be a priority. Obtaining informed consent and maintaining confidentiality and integrity was of the most significant importance. Therefore, no research was completed until there was approval from Walden University's IRB. In addition, interviews with participants were conducted via recording using the Rev application on my touch ID Apple iPhone for the individuals' comfort and safety. Additionally, to minimize bias and to remain cognizant of my integrity, I maintained a self-reflection journal to aid in recognizing possible issues during the study process.

Data Collection

A basic qualitative study design was selected to examine special education teachers' perceptions of students who struggled to learn to read. Qualitative researchers study within a natural setting and attempt to comprehensively and thoroughly understand a phenomenon of participants' experiences, perceptions, beliefs, thoughts, and attitudes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative research frequently uses data collection methods to triangulate the participants' experiences and perceptions (Fusch et al., 2018). Data used in qualitative research could be in various forms that include interviews individual or focus groups, observations, and documentation (Aspers & Corte, 2019). According to Paradis et al., (2016) interviews can be structured, unstructured, or semistructured and could follow a tightly written script or a loose set of questions that invited interviewees to express themselves more freely. In this basic qualitative study, semistructured interview questions were created and structured to answer the research question precisely. In addition, each participant who supported reading to students with disabilities was provided the opportunity with follow-up questions from the semi-structured interview questions (Appendix E). The interview questions were developed to align with the study's research question. The data were collected using my AT&T touch ID protected Apple iPhone during 30 – 40- minute individual interviews with 12 special education teacher participants from the study site. One-on-one interviews with participants maintained confidentiality. Using the phones' Rev Application the teacher-researcher audio recorded and transcribed verbatim questions asked and answers given during the interviews. The interviews were scheduled at a time that fitted the participants' schedule.

A convenient and appropriate interview setting and time was essential (Glesne (2019). I introduced myself and took a few minutes to chat to put the participant at ease before asking for permission to record the session. I reminded the participants of the purpose of the interview and asked if the individual had any questions before beginning. The participants interviews were conducted individually in locations that was private to ensure confidentiality and convenience to the participants so that they felt comfortable sharing their experiences.

The interview protocol (Appendix E) consisted of 10 open-ended questions. Next, the participants will complete four sentence completion stems, which can be found in (Appendix F), and are presented in a structured manner in which their specific perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, and experiences could be revealed. Participants responded orally to the sentence stems, and their responses were audio recorded using the Rev application on my iPhone. The series of four-sentence stems were to help the participants start speaking without thinking about how to correctly formulate a response during the interview session. With the participants' permission interviews were recorded and transcribed for future coding. According to Paradis, (2016) interview data are often used to generate themes, theories, and models. I used a reflective journal to collect the data for this qualitative research after the interviews. The journal was to serve as a tool to reflect on the thoughts and experiences and refine the understanding of the participants' interview responses in the study. In addition, the journal was used to reflect the researcher's methodology. Only the teacher-researcher, for consistency and confidentiality, collected the data. The information was stored on the researcher's password-secured laptop computer.

Data Collection Instruments

I used an interview protocol, and sentence completion stems to collect data while recording the interview sessions. The interview protocol listed in (Appendix E), and the sentence completion stems listed in (Appendix F). I audio recorded the participant interview sessions using the Rev application on my mobile touch ID Apple iPhone. The Rev Transcription application allowed me to capture any audio directly from your phone, record your audio, and transcribe it through the app (Wilkerson, 2019). In addition, a reflective journal for reflections and insights on the researchers' procedures and methodology of the study and participants' interview responses was used.

Source of Data Collection Instruments

I developed the interview protocol (Appendix E) and sentence completion stems (Appendix F) for the participant's interview session. The researcher created an interview protocol to be reviewed by a panel of subject matter experts. The panel consisted of three special education reading specialists with a master's degree or above from the districts' reading department to ensure the interview protocol was appropriate for gathering the intended data. Edits were made based on any recommendations from the panel of experts (Appendix G & H). Although content special education reading specialists played a vital role in content validity, instrument review by a sample of subjects drawn from the target population was another critical component of content validity (Zamanzadeh et al., 2015). These individuals were asked to review instrument items because they were familiar with the construct of direct personal experience (Zamanzadeh et al., 2015). In addition, the instruments provided a way for participants to voice their opinions and perceptions about

instructional strategies that supported teaching reading to students with disabilities in middle school. Finally, these data collection instruments listed below were selected as the most feasible method for this qualitative research to complete an in-depth analysis.

Sufficiency of Data Collection Instrument

The interview protocol and sentence stem completion activity was sufficient for this basic qualitative study and aligned with the research question. However, with consent from a few teachers who were not participants in the study, I conducted a practice test on the instructions using the Rev application on my mobile AT&T touch IDprotected Apple iPhone. The research question addressed middle school teachers' perceptions of why students with disabilities in grades 6th through 8th struggled to learn to read. Using interview questions and sentence completion stems, participants were provided with a route to express beliefs. During interviews, the open-ended questions yielded in-depth data and clarification as needed (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Interviews allowed the interviewer to probe and prompt further to collect richer data. Interviews were ideal for documenting participants' accounts, perceptions, or attitudes toward and responses to certain situations or phenomena (Paradis, 2016). The following interview questions below demonstrate the alignment of the research questions.

Interview for Participants

Questions

1. What do you think about students struggling to learn to read?
 2. What reading levels are your students reading on?
 3. What curriculum did you use to teach reading to students with disabilities?
-

-
4. What is your definition of a student with learning disabilities?

 5. How many years have you been instructing students with learning disabilities?

 6. What were your concerns about teaching reading to students with disabilities?

 7. Please describe training by the school district to help you teach students learn to read.

 8. Please describe how students learn reading.

 9. What instructional reading strategies did you routinely use, and how do you differentiate reading instruction in your classroom?

 10. If a student continues to struggle with reading, what was your alternative strategies?
-

In addition to the interview questions are stems. The sentence completion stems would narrow participants' responses to fundamental answers to provide insights (Barton, 2016). Each research question was used to generate the stem question. The following stems demonstrate the alignment of research questions:

- (a) I would describe students struggling to learn to read as..., (b) I would describestudents with learning disabilities as... , (c) I would describe my training to teach students to read as..., and (d) I would describe the strategies to teach reading as...

Systems for Tracking Data

All data were tracked consistently and systematically (i.e., reliability), establishing an ongoing system for evaluating and recording changes to the project protocol (i.e., validity). Interviews and sentence completion stems were audio-recorded and then transcribed using my AT&T touch Id protected Apple iPhone. The Rev record application was used during interviews and then again later for transcriptions of the

interviews. The data were kept on my personal laptop computer, which required a personal passcode to gain access, and would be in a locked file cabinet where only I had the keys. Additionally, a reflective journal was to help maintain integrity and minimize bias (Sutton & Austin, 2017). The reflective journal was an ongoing system in which the researcher thought about the research process, questions, and ideas for a while (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The journal was also used to detail what the researcher had done and why and track any changes in the research procedures or methodology. Besides, the journal was used to document any questions, comments, or concerns I might have had during the research process. In addition, the journal was used to reflect on the researcher's thoughts and experiences and reflections and insight into the participant's interviews.

Systems for Tracking Emerging Patterns

As new understandings emerged, I used a reflective journal as a way to track my thoughts, feelings, and ideas. A reflective journal is a valuable tool used to develop good research practices, formulate ideas for changes in practice, and have a chance to reflect on questions about research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). After each interview I used a reflective journal to record key points that I might need to refer to later. The reflective journal provided an avenue for me to track the research process and any emergent patterns, themes, and ideas to help me remain cognizant of researcher bias and establish the trustworthiness of the research study's findings.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I had experience in the study setting. I worked in the school district for 28 years, from 1992 to the present. My official teaching assignment during

this time was as a middle-grade teacher. Therefore, I might have had a past acquaintance with some of the potential participants; however, I had never supervised any of the possible participants, we were not on the same team, and my relationships with all individuals could be described as positive and mutually respectful. My role as the researcher was to conduct interviews, record the data, and analyze the content obtained.

Impact of Experience in the Setting on Data Collection

My role in this basic qualitative study was to gather data from the interviews and sentence completion stems activity. Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated that the researcher's positionality was an integral part of the interview process; therefore, I was cognizant of my stance, relations, and ideologies during all aspects of the research process. My role was that of a learner, and I was cautious not to carry forward any predispositions during the study. As a preventative measure to approach my research with as little bias as possible, I wrote a researcher identity memo. An identity memo was to identify any bias I might have brought to the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The memo included my reflections on experiences and biases that might influence my approach to the study at a school in a Southeastern district in Georgia. Additionally, I used subject matter experts to review the data from the participants' responses. According to Ravitch & Carl (2016), the job of subject area expert review was to determine if the data supported the conclusions.

Data Analysis

The information in this section includes a detailed summary of how the data collected was analyzed. Data analysis is an iterative, transparent process to establish rigor

and validity (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data analysis began after the semistructured interviews had been recorded using the Rev Application voice recorder on my AT&T touch ID protected mobile Apple iPhone. The reflective journal notes were gathered and reviewed, sentence completion was completed, and transcriptions were finalized. Interviews and sentence completion were audio recorded to ensure accuracy. If the researcher was audio- or video-recording data collection, the recordings must be transcribed verbatim before data analysis begins (Sutton & Austin, 2017). Initially, I began the analysis of participants' responses by looking for similarities, differences, and frequency of similar responses to answer the research question to identify possible patterns or relationships in the data. Subsequently, the participant's responses were analyzed to answer the research question and overarching themes by relating the outcomes of the data to the research question using the Rev application on my iPhone. The Rev Transcription application on my touch Id iPhone allowed me to capture any audio directly from my phone, record the audio, and then send it to the Rev app for transcription. The goal of the data analysis process was to maintain fidelity to the participants' lived experiences.

Data Organization

Data organization was how researchers managed data, used transcripts for analytical considerations, and precoded the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). By maintaining a data management plan, I was able to keep data organized, develop familiarity with the data, and minimize an overwhelming amount of data to engage with at once. Lastly, as questions arose during data collection, I checked in with peers or participants regarding

the validity and any other emerging issues. All data was stored on my password-protected home laptop computer, to which only I would have access. I maintained a folder with all audio recordings, transcripts, participants' responses, and my reflective journal on my computer. To maintain confidentiality and organize audio recordings and transcripts within the folder, participants were identified as Participant 1 and Participant 2. So on, each with their folder and each file within each participant's folder was further identified with a label of audio or transcript. The data analysis process began as soon as possible after each participant's session. Part of the data organization plan included how the data was transcribed. The Rev application was used to audio record and then transcribe interviews and sentence completion sessions. The transcriptions had page and line numbers for notating. During the data analysis process, the original audio recordings and transcriptions were referred to maintain fidelity to the participants' lived experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Precoding was completed before beginning a formal coding of the data. Precoding was used to draw attention to significant participant responses and areas for further interpretation and consideration. The process consisted of color coding and highlighting text, underling keywords or phrases, and writing down questions or notes in the margins. Using precoding, I would begin to become familiar with the data and generate possible codes (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Additionally, precoding was an opportunity to determine which data was noteworthy, if any of the interview questions were leading, and if I was influencing the data.

Coding Procedures

The second step of data analysis was coding, that was, examining and organizing the information contained in each interview and the whole dataset. It forced the researcher to begin to make judgments and tag blocks of transcripts. Coding helped researchers interpret data, find patterns and emerging themes in participants' responses and categorize data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saldana, 2016). The coding process would break data down into manageable segments so I could begin to make sense of the data (Schwandt, 2015). Rev coding used the participants' own words and would allow me to stay accurate with the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

In contrast, causation coding helped discern the participants' belief systems (Saldana, 2016). In qualitative research, causation coding was used to define what the participants' data was about and identify causes, outcomes, and links between them. Accordingly, a cyclical approach to coding would be used to generate an exhaustive list of themes, patterns, and categories and a color-coding system to organize the data and allow multiple occasions to interpret further and make meaning of the data. Data analysis tended to be an ongoing and iterative (nonlinear) process in qualitative research. The term used to describe this process was interim analysis (i.e., the cyclical process of collecting and analyzing data during a single research study (Saldana, 2016).

As soon as I began coding the data, I developed definitions for each code, which consisted of a few words that would distinguish each code from another. Because data analysis was an ongoing process, it was essential to revisit data sets to ensure consistency in codes and code definitions. As I coded the data, I reflected on what I was learning

systematically, the connections between codes, and how the codes were being developed, revised, refined, and categorized (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). During the coding process, I used the sum of participants' responses to begin answering the research question.

Themes

As the cyclical coding process occurs, themes begin to develop from the data. Themes represented critical concepts within the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Ongoing engagement with the data through the analysis process would uncover relationships between codes and the combining and discarding of other codes. At this point, I would be looking for overlaps, patterns, and what the presence or absence of specific pieces of data might mean. Once the themes were established, I coded the data using the themes and again determined what might be missing. Finally, I examined how the data supported the themes and connected them to the research question and conceptual framework.

Evidence of Quality of the Data

Member Checking

Member checking was employed to provide evidence of accuracy and quality data and ensure internal validity from the participants interviewed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The strategies employed for member checking were ongoing at multiple points during the research process to establish the credibility of data interpretations and analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). One strategy in which member checking would occur was informal during interviews. Additionally, the participants would receive an emailed copy of their transcribed interview to confirm the transcription. The transcription also allowed the participants the opportunity to review for confidentiality. Once the transcriptions had

been reviewed for accuracy, each participant was asked to provide any additional feedback. I responded to any feedback, interpretations, or suggested additions to the data from the participants.

Triangulation

I used triangulation to enhance the validity of a study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To achieve triangulation in this study, multiple methods for collecting data were used to answer the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). These methods included the participants' responses to the interview questions and sentence completion stems. Using the two data collection sources was to have enough data to provide quality and depth of information to answer the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data triangulation was used to identify the convergence of data obtained through multiple data sources and methods (eg, observation field notes and interview transcripts) to avoid or minimize error or bias and optimize accuracy in data collection and analysis processes (Johnson, Adkins, & Chauvin, 2020). Triangulation played a role in data analysis, as the term was used to describe how multiple sources of data can be used to confirm or refute interpretations, assertions, themes, and study conclusions. Johnson, Adkins, & Chauvin, (2020) stated if a theme or theory can be arrived at and validated using multiple sources of data, the result of the study has greater credibility and conformability. Should any competing or controversial theories emerge during data collection or analysis, it was vital to the credibility and trustworthiness of the study that the author disclosed and explored those negative cases. Negative case analysis refers to actively seeking out and scrutinizing data that did not fit or support the researcher's interpretation of the data (Johnson, Adkins, &

Chauvin, 2020). Triangulation is among the common standards of rigor applied within the qualitative research paradigm.

Researcher Bias and Validity

Being cognizant of bias and validity was paramount during any research study. Validity was considered the central value of the research process and should occur throughout the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To ensure validity and maintain dependability during the study, multiple reviews of the data and findings compared to the participants' experiences would occur. Member checking, as well as triangulation with multiple data sources, would establish credibility. Reflexivity was obtained through the self-reflection journal. By reflecting regularly, the researcher could be cognizant of any potential bias that could affect the research, which in turn would help strengthen the trustworthiness of the research process. Lastly, transferability happened by providing detailed descriptions of the data and findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Procedure for Addressing Discrepant Cases

Discrepant cases did not fit into a particular pattern or current understanding of the data, which could affect the validity (Ravitch & Carl, 16). By using different sources, discrepant cases would be easily identifiable (Flick, 2018). If discrepant cases appeared in the data, I used those situations to consider why the discrepancies had occurred, beginning with a reevaluation and analysis of the interview questions. I recorded the findings appropriately and discussed the disconfirmed evidence in the research findings. By thoroughly questioning the discrepant cases, the analysis and interpretation of the data were reinforced (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Data Analysis Results

I examined the information obtained from the semistructured interviews with the teacher participants. The interviews provided insight into the special education teachers' perceptions of why students were struggling to learn to read. After completion, each interview was transcribed through the transcription application available on my touch Id iPhone. I reviewed each transcript while listening to the interview recording to manually correct any errors in the transcripts. Very few errors were found, with most pertaining to proper nouns and spelling.

The first analysis step was to code the data for the theme and concept. I manually coded the data using in vivo, descriptive, and axial coding to analyze the data from the participant interviews. Each participant read through an emailed copy of their transcript to verify the accuracy of the transcript and make corrections or changes to their data. None of the participants changed their responses other than to spell proper nouns correctly.

First Cycle Coding

I read the transcribed data several times and used it in NVivo and descriptive codes by highlighting directly in the transcripts and making notes in the margins (see Saldaña, 2021). I wrote short phrases and word codes on sticky notes where I found connections to the research questions and Dewey's (1938) theory of experience and education. Each participant was assigned a color of a note.

Second Cycle Coding

As each code fell into a pattern, I placed the sticky notes under a category determined to fit the code on a paper matrix. I read through the transcripts to confirm the accuracy of the patterns I was finding. Along with pattern coding, axial coding was used to find relationships between the codes (see Saldaña, 2021). The categories and codes were then input into a coding matrix using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Overall, I discovered four themes and three subthemes that emerged through the coding process from the participant's interviews regarding their perceptions and experiences that were relevant to the research question:

RQ: What were teachers' perceptions on the reasons that special education students were struggling to learn reading?

The four predominant themes that resulted from the data analysis included the need for a curriculum that provided the necessary resources and materials, coteachers and administrative support, and collaborative professional development training needed to help teachers provide adequate instruction to struggling readers. The next major theme was a need for teacher acquisition of additional instructional reading strategies, a need to increase student interest, and lastly, a need to combat students' discipline issues. These themes were presented in the table below which showed the alignment to the research question. The research question served as a focus for the data collection for this study. To maintain confidentiality to present the themes participants were identified as Participant 1 and Participant 2 and so forth.

Theme 1: Lack of Curriculum

The first theme that arrived from the data collection was the lack of curriculum. The participants interviewed explained that there was a district curriculum established for special education that utilized the state standards for excellence, but lacked the necessary materials, support, and training needed to help teachers provide adequate instruction to students with disabilities to develop critical reading skills. Each teacher stated the curriculum problem was simply and directly related to the fact that each teacher had to find academic resources to use in the classroom. With students on so many different learning levels, finding the necessary resources for teaching presented a challenge to the teacher. The lack of resources in classrooms caused extreme distress not only to the teachers but students' as well because they were unable to learn to their fullest potential without being given the proper materials and resources (Serry et al., 2022). The participants also explained that not having enough administrative and co- teacher support and teacher training for special education teachers was a critical issue for the teachers of students with disabilities. During the data analysis, I noted materials, support, and training as three emerging subthemes from the teacher perceptions of the school and district reading curriculum that did not support the student's needs or teachers.

Subtheme 1: Lack of Materials

The participants stated during the interview that the school district no longer purchased textbooks and other reading materials for students. The participants explained that most of the time computers were the only available resources they had to help achieve their academic goals and not enough computers were available for each student.

This presented a challenge for teachers having to find enough computers for student use and a problem for students having to wait for available computers or to share one with another student. This problem contributed to a loss of instructional time and student learning. All the teachers during the interview stated it's hard for schools to be able to afford laptops for each student, which then meant that the teachers had to come up with a way to compensate for that. That could mean they turned to textbooks if they had any or enough. Regardless of what they had to do, the participants believed that the lack of resource materials in schools was a disadvantage to the students' learning and the teachers' class instruction.

Participants 1, 3, and 4 stated they borrowed and shared other teachers' materials along with finding their own to focus on students' reading needs. These participants explained that they focused on read-aloud short stories in small groups. To check for reading comprehension question and answer techniques about the stories were used as well as focusing on the main idea and summarizing. Additionally, participants used technology in their teaching to provide all students with access to the text or reading stories. The participants explained this eliminated inferiority with students when they are faced with difficult text or words above their level before their peers. When they did not have enough computers for each student to use with text and audiobook assignments the problem was they had to share class sets.

Interviewees 3, 5, and 7 stated that they relied heavily on the schools' library give aways such as books, and other reading materials to help fill in the gap to build students reading comprehension and vocabulary skills. These participants believed that reading

aloud was an important activity for students to engage in as they work toward becoming proficient readers, improving fluency, and expanding vocabulary. Regardless of the widespread use of electronic versions and audiobooks, they stated that she still needed to use regular reading books and library books to help struggling readers with their reading skills. However, these participants also stated oh well that they had so many demands on their teaching that they did not have enough time to focus on the numerous literacy skills required for students to understand the wide variety of reading material and lacked the necessary materials to do so.

Participants 1, 3, and 4 stated that students with disabilities struggled to read a text and, in the process, failed to gain or understand any meaning of the text. The participants mentioned that most of the time the students were exhausted with decoding and pronunciation. However, those participants stated during classroom instruction they used read-aloud short stories, but stated for many students reading aloud presented many problems with discipline issues. Therefore, participants believed that discipline issues disturbed the learning environment and hindered the reading process. Participant 1 stated that students got more frustrated and acted out in class because they read on a very low level and did not want anyone to notice that they lacked reading skills. Participant 3 stated she enjoyed working with disabled kids with reading difficulties but often the behavior problems were the issue with many students. The students disrupted the learning environment to stop the teacher from teaching because they did not want to be embarrassed when they got called on to read aloud or answer questions from reading a story. Therefore, this was one reason I liked working one-on-one with students who were

fearful of being embarrassed when they did not know how to read fluently and pronounce certain vocabulary words. However, when asked participant 7 what their concerns about students with disabilities and discipline issues were, she responded that if the students were not motivated enough to want to learn sometimes this contributed to the students disrupting the learning environment and some students only wanted to work hard when it was close to the end of the nine weeks for grades. Therefore, I had concerns with that and I used incentives to try to motivate my students to work. I gave them lots of rewards and praise even just for trying. Students with reading difficulties (SWRD) were more likely than students reading at grade level to demonstrate co-occurring problem behaviors such as externalizing behaviors (e.g., conduct disorder and oppositional defiant disorder; Lin, et al., 2013; Morgan, Farkas, & Wu, 2009), internalizing behaviors (e.g., overanxious disorder and generalized anxiety disorder; Lin et al., 2013; Morgan et al., 2009), and hyperactive and inattentive behaviors (Carroll, Maughan, Goodman, & Meltzer, 2005; Pennington, 2006).

Reading comprehension, being defined as the ability to construct meaning from interacting with a text, was critical for students to succeed in today's educational settings (Snow, 2002). For students with reading disabilities, reading comprehension was often difficult and teachers needed different resources and materials to support them in an attempt to assist students with reading comprehension skills (Kim et.al., 2012). All the participants stated that using different materials and resources contributed to a lack of cohesiveness among the teachers due to a lack of curriculum. Most current theories argued that one of the primary causes of reading disabilities was a struggle to decode

written text (Smythe, 2005). This had a direct negative effect on reading comprehension by decreasing word reading accuracy and speed. The participants' perceptions of why students struggled to learn to read felt the curriculum did not focus enough on students with disabilities' reading needs and the proper resources and materials to support them. Nevertheless, the interviewees said they still needed to use regular class reading books and library books to help meet the needs of struggling readers regardless of the takeover in recent years with computer technology to teach reading using electronic versions of books and the text-to-speech capabilities.

Subtheme 2: Lack of Support

The teachers all stated there was a lack of support related to coteachers and administrative help. The participants explained that relationships with the coteachers oftentimes presented problems and challenges for the teachers as well as the students. All participants felt that most of the workload fell on them and not their coteacher or the paraprofessional. All of the teaching, class preparational work, class resource materials, and grading fell on the regular teacher. Participants 1, 2, 3, and 5 stated that their coteacher or paraprofessional was often absent from the classroom due to being assigned other school duties and responsibilities or absent from work. Students that needed that one-on-one or extra help with reading intervention strategies could not receive it due to the lack of support from the special education paraprofessional or coteacher that was supposed to be in the classroom. Having a second teacher or qualified paraprofessional in the classroom could provide elements of individualization of the teaching, such as giving students frequent relevant feedback, adapting materials and teaching methods to the

individual needs of the student, and using adequate methods to track progress (Szumski, Smogorzewska, & Grygiel, 2021).

In addition to supporting, all participants stated there was a lack of administrative support when it came to student discipline issues like classroom disruptive behaviors. Participants 2, 3, and 4 stated the teacher had to deal with the disruptive child that was disturbing the learning environment and continue to teach. Besides, a lack of student discipline support all the teachers also experienced a lack of support with professional development training opportunities focused directly on enhancing special education teachers teaching skills on how to teach the struggling reader.

Subtheme 3: Lack of Training/ Professional Development

Teacher training in literacy instruction proved an important issue to teachers of students with disabilities with reading deficits according to the interviewees. Although, participants reported that students with reading difficulties were present in most classes, confidence to work effectively with these students with disabilities was the same. All the participants described feeling inadequately trained and underprepared to teach reading to students with disabilities to meet the reading score requirements on the state assessment test at the school. All the participants agreed that the school and the school district provided some training in teaching reading skills to students with disabilities but, felt that neither the preservice programs, inservice programs nor staff professional development programs provided them with enough knowledge and teaching strategies to serve these students optimally.

Participants 1, 3, and 4 stated they needed more education about reading difficulties, classroom strategies, and practice. P1 stated that to help the struggling reader that teachers needed to learn and know what reading strategies are most likely to improve reading deficits. The participants further stated that a need for literacy coaching was needed to help provide training and support to teachers of struggling readers focused directly on enhancing teachers reading instruction and special education students' reading achievement. All the participants stated that they felt underprepared to adequately meet the needs of their students with reading difficulties. Based on my understanding from the interviews all of the participants agreed that students' reading achievement was basically a direct result of having knowledgeable, trained, motivated teachers who were versed in utilizing an array of instructional strategies to teach reading. The teachers during the interview expressed that they needed ongoing opportunities to build their understanding and ability and wanted to feel competent in their teaching and classroom instruction and that professional development training was an approach for helping to improve teacher performance.

Theme 2: Instructional Strategies

Reading comprehension was not something that came naturally to students with disabilities, especially students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The teacher participants felt that having this knowledge, their lessons would have to be planned with the appropriate instructional strategies to give students the appropriate instruction combined with the appropriate materials, and resources to meet the needs of the struggling reader. However, the participants were honest and clearly stated if there is a

lack of teacher understanding towards teaching specific reading skills to the struggling reader that the student will continue to struggle with reading difficulty. Effective teaching techniques must be used so that a struggling reader understands the technique to master the skills. The participants also mentioned that many teachers sometimes focused on the student not being able to read, rather than an awareness that inadequate teaching could be a contributing factor or a primary cause of why many students struggled to learn to read. The list below shows the strategies that the teachers used in daily class instructions that taught reading to students with disabilities.

Strategies used by Participants

Strategies Name

1. Re-teach and review

2. Identify areas of students strengths and weaknesses

3. Review phonics, vocabulary, comprehension strategies

4. Provide reading books on student level

5. One-on-one direct instruction

6. Step-by-step instructions provided

7. Small group reading

8. Oral class reading

9. Short stories question/answer

10. Repeated reading

11. Online audio books

Participants stated that the general education teacher had some ideas of teaching strategies to provide the struggling reader support however, the intervention was usually the job of the special education or specialist teacher. The participants further stated that often in some classrooms rather than having a certified highly qualified special education teacher the specialist teacher was a paraprofessional that lacked knowledge and the necessary training skills to adequately provide the struggling reader with the appropriate instructions needed.

Participants 1, 2, and 3 stated that students who had difficulty in learning because of their disabilities tended to shy away from effective teaching fearing being embarrassed because of their reading struggles. Participant 5 shared that many students enter middle school with poor reading levels and continued to due to: (a) Lack of reading at home or outside school, (b) Lack of reading practice on computers and resources, (c) Lack of parental support, (d) Lack of acknowledging their reading problem, and (e) inadequate teacher training. The participant felt that the greatest challenge was time constraints and the required standards that they were expected to teach.

During the interviews, the participants expressed that they would love to be able to provide consistent one-on-one instruction with each student but found it impossible to do with so many struggling readers and time constraints. In addition, the participants confessed that many times teachers taught only for students to pass the state standardized test. This has been a major concern in the school and school district for many years and believed that this was also a contributing factor as to why so many students with disabilities are struggling to learn to read. Nevertheless, many of the students still failed

to achieve a passing score on the state reading assessment test. The participating interviewees expressed that students with disabilities were required to take the same assessment test as regular education students and saw this as a hinderance to the students success.

Theme 3: Student Motivation

The participants expressed during the interview that student motivation was a contributing factor to students' success in school. and saw this as one of the greatest challenges. The participants stated that they were faced with the challenge of working with unmotivated learners on a daily basis. Revealed during the interviews from the participating teachers that most students were not interested or engaged in their learning. The slow reader felt embarrassed because of they could not read and felt they could not learn because of their disability. Often they feared being challenged and did not want to participate in class especially during oral class reading and discussions.

Participants 1, 2, 5, and 7 added that one of their greatest fears was being teased by their peers. The teachers stated that many of the students were lazy and just didn't care. In addition, the interviewees added that many students wanted to learn, but felt they were incapable and "hide behind the scenes so to speak" and "fall through the cracks." The interviewees had witnessed that students became filled with anxiety when faced with difficult text, or text above their comfort level. Often these students shut down and refused to participate in the lesson, resulting in them further losing ground in the area of reading.

Participants 1, 2, 4, and 10 felt that trying to capture their students' interest was one of their biggest challenges and asked themselves the question. How do I capture my students' interest to get them motivated to learn to read? The participants kind of answered this question by saying that they needed to encourage the unmotivated students that they could learn (a) get to know their students, (b) let them know that you care about their learning; (c) what activities and lessons sparked their attention,(d) give praise and rewards, not constructive criticism, (e) use a variety of student active teaching techniques, and (f) activities, as well as making learning fun. Participant 3 mentioned giving out candy, and Friday morning donuts for students' work performance motivated many of the students to want to excel in their reading ability or performance and join the school reading book club.

Theme 4: Student Behavior Issues / Discipline

During the interview with participants, a question was asked to the participating teachers what were their concerns about teaching reading to students with disabilities? This question elicited one major response from all the participants. That response was the concerns about students with disabilities, classroom behavior challenges, and discipline issues. The teachers clearly expressed that behavior challenges were common to struggling readers in their classrooms. The participants expressed that the reading difficulties sometimes triggered the students' frustration, agitation, acting out, shying away, avoidance, and even withdrawal from the learning tasks. The teachers stated they were faced with behavior problems in their classes such as playing, talking out, arguing

with classmates or the teacher, and in many instances fighting especially when teased by peers.

Participants 1, 3, and 5 stated that the students often created conflicts to disrupt the learning environment and to throw the teacher off task with teaching. The interviewees expressed that when students felt they could learn because they lacked reading skills, they tended to act out instead of asking for help. It's common because they are embarrassed to ask for help in front of their peers and friends. The teachers believed the off-task disruptive behaviors most definitely interfered with classroom instruction and hindered the student reading and learning process. All the interviewees believed that reducing those behaviors that were interfering with the students learning could help to improve the student's reading ability. In addition, the participants revealed that if student's reading abilities improved then this could help to improve students' assessment test scores.

Summary of the Findings

However, despite differing notions on teachers' perceptions of the reasons that special education students were struggling to learn to read the findings revealed most of the teachers perceived themselves as ill-prepared to properly support struggling readers in their classroom. In addition, the findings revealed teachers being bogged down by time constraints, lack of materials and resources, needed support, student behavior issues, and perhaps most significantly, lack of knowledge were also contributing factors to student underachievement in reading. The participating teachers stated that not only were they unsure of how to accurately assess and define reading difficulties, but also how to deal

with the implications in terms of skill level, motivation, and engagement. All of the interviewees felt that staff development training was of particular importance in increasing teacher knowledge to improve instruction. Thus, affecting teacher quality which was positively related to increasing student reading achievement and success.

Overall, the findings of this qualitative study suggested that teachers of students with disabilities needed more education about reading difficulties, classroom strategies, and teaching practices. The research study indicated a need for more optimal use of specialist teacher time, professional development training, and literacy coaching as well as common lesson planning time for teachers of students with disabilities. As such, it was extremely important for teachers to identify the needs of their students individually and plan differentiated instruction to specifically meet the needs of those individual students. The struggling readers had differing needs especially those with disabilities. Therefore, teachers to possess the knowledge to use literacy strategies to meet those needs coupled with the necessary resource materials and needed support. The data collected from the semistructured interview questions from the participants for this qualitative study on “Middle School Teachers’ Perceptions of Reading Struggles for Learning Disabled Students was directly related to the research question. The research question was what were special education teachers’ perceptions of the reasons why students struggled to learn to read? The themes in this study captured or described the different facets of a pattern or relationships across the data set concerning the research purpose. I searched for common themes across codes moving back and forth between the codes to identify

commonalities taken from the participant's perceptions for this study during the interviews.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative project study was to examine special education teachers' perceptions of why students with disabilities were struggling to learn to read. The study included participants from a public middle school in a Southeastern district with a representative sample drawn from Grades 6 through 8 special education reading teachers of students with disabilities. The participants for this study were experienced teachers who held a special education certificate with more than 3 years of teaching experience, and who supported reading to students with learning disabilities at a Southeastern middle school in the United States. The goal of this project was to determine why students with disabilities were struggling to learn to read and ultimately to better address the problem by improving student reading achievement on state assessments through teacher- effective pedagogy. Semistructured interviews with teachers who taught reading to students with disabilities were used to collect data for the study. The themes that emerged from the data analysis showed the need for a curriculum that provides resources, materials, and support for teachers of struggling readers, the need for collaborative professional development training, and the need for vocabulary and reading comprehension instructional strategies.

Genres of Project

The genre of this project was professional development/training curriculum, resources, and materials to assist middle grade special education teachers with teaching students with disabilities to read. This qualitative study design allowed for an in-depth

investigation of teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of the reasons why students with disabilities struggled to learn reading. In addition, explores how teachers perceived the recommendations and strategies for delivering reading instruction and what they believed they most needed to improve reading instruction in the middle grades for students with disabilities. To better support and prepare teachers to deliver reading instruction in the middle grades 6 through 8 to students with learning disabilities professional development training was selected. Ultimately, the goal was to provide a program to improve student reading achievement reading achievement at the study school in Grades 6 through 8.

Once approval was received from the administration to conduct the professional development training program, I began planning for the training. The proposed professional development/training curriculum sessions included workshops that were conducted over a 3-days and five follow-up weekly professional development training sessions that afforded teachers the opportunity to collaboratively discuss and plan literacy strategies to incorporate into their classrooms. The focus of these subsequent five sessions was to increase student reading achievement which was determined by teachers after an analysis of student data. The workshop series was titled, "A Professional Staff Development Reading Workshop/Training for Middle Grades Sixth through Eighth Special Education Teachers." The professional development workshops were held at a middle school in a Southeastern district of the United States during the week before students returned to school. All special education teachers who taught reading as well as other reading teachers and reading coaches were invited to attend the workshops at the

middle school. This professional development session was voluntary, as participants were only to receive the knowledge gained and not any reward or compensation. The professional development training was conducted over 3 full school days. Each day began at 8:30 a.m. with a break at 10:30 a.m., lunch beginning promptly at noon and ending at 12:30 p.m.. and finishing the day at 3:00 p.m. The proposed project provided three initial professional learning sessions, that included the following:

1. Day 1 session the topic consisted of first a meet and greet, an introduction to the purpose of professional development training/curriculum, followed by a discussion on the types of activities on various primary reading strategies to improve student reading achievement.
2. Day 2 session included professional development video viewing on effective teaching strategies to teach reading comprehension skills and increase vocabulary comprehension to students with disabilities, and review research-based software or programs to use.
3. Day 3 session included professional development for participants analyzing students' IEPs. Next, the participants drafted a literacy plan based on the students' IEP's goals.

The primary reading strategies were included in the literacy plans that were identified and discussed on Day 1. Finally, the training sessions culminated with sharing and discussing the literacy plans among the teachers. During each day, participants were able to participate in a question and answer session. Professional development was selected as the project format. Burns and Lawrie, (2015) stated to develop teachers

professionally and continuously throughout their careers to be effective there is a need for professional training opportunities. Further, professional development was considered a vital plan for school improvement, improving teacher quality, and enhancing student learning achievement (Girvan et al., 2016). According to Garet et al., (2001), teachers' teaching effectiveness and their students' performance could be improved by teachers participating in professional development programs.

Description and Goals

The project genre was professional development to address the local problem in an urban middle school in the Southeastern United States described in Section 1. The goal was to provide teachers with evidence-based pedagogical practices and methods to implement in their classrooms through professional development. The problem of low reading achievement skills among students with learning disabilities was addressed to the invited special education teachers, regular education teachers, and literacy coaches to the professional development training sessions that were structured to build their knowledge and understanding of how to teach reading to students with disabilities in Grades 6 through 8. In addition, the professional development training was for professional development participants to gain an understanding of effective reading strategies, inspect software, examine students' IEPs, develop a literacy plan, and have collaboration time with their colleagues. The professional development sessions that allow for participant interaction have a meaningful impact on teachers' changes in instructional practices (Sun et al., 2013). Additionally, increased evidence of high-quality professional development shows that teachers benefit more when professional

development is conducted for more than 1 day or one time. The project was created to enhance special education teachers' knowledge of various effective instructional reading strategies to instruct students with learning disabilities. Further, the project provides participants opportunities to work collaboratively to develop literacy plans and review students' IEPs' for an understanding of the necessary modifications and accommodations per student needs. This study's findings suggested that special education teachers were frustrated with the lack of materials, support, and training designed for special education. Additionally, the participants shared how materials were randomly gathered for instruction. This professional development will allow the teachers more opportunities to dialogue to create a truly shared vision and goals.

Rationale

The choice of genre for the project was determined by the project goals. The data analysis revealed that teachers felt the need to be more adequately prepared by seeking more professional development training to expand their knowledge and expertise to better support reading to Grades 6 through 8 students with disabilities who struggled to read. The participants' responses also indicated the need for collaboration offers among their colleagues to discuss vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies to meet the demands of the struggling reader. Successful teachers learn by reviewing instructional strategies and best practices through collaborative professional development (Trust, 2012). They expressed the need for more administrative support, coteacher support, materials, and resources. During the interviews, the teacher participants in the study revealed that they often struggled to offer effective literacy instruction to students who

read on multiple reading levels and below their grade level. The content of this project addressed and provided a solution to the literacy/reading problem at the school by providing teachers with instructional reading, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies through professional development training. In turn, these materials, resources, and instruction could enhance teachers' learning, which could positively improve students' learning of informational text in content classes, thus improving student reading skills at the school in a district in the Southeast. In the end, teachers' learning positively affects students' learning (Levine, 2010).

Review of the Literature

This review of literature supported the professional development curriculum training project sessions as an appropriate genre. The literature review also supported the development of the project and the subject matter of the project. Themes developed from the data analysis indicated that a professional development training project would be appropriate for aiding teachers to offer effective reading instruction to students with disabilities reading below grade level. The review of the related peer-reviewed literature was obtained by searching multiple electronic databases, such as Walden Online Library (WOL), including Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC), EBSCO, SAGE, and ProQuest. Besides the sources obtained from database searches, I also used the referenced works from those sources obtained to check for other relevant articles. Using these keywords, the databases were searched for peer-reviewed articles: *professional development training, collaborative professional development, teacher collaboration, reading skills, reading across the curriculum, teaching strategies, special education,*

students with learning disabilities, IEP, and teacher common planning time to narrow the research. I analyzed current peer-reviewed articles within 5 years of study to establish support relevant to the professional development training/curriculum sessions A Professional Staff Development Reading Workshop/Training for Middle Grades 6 through 8 Special Education Teachers.”

Professional Development

Professional development is defined as a source of excitement, the set of tools, resources, and training sessions for educators to improve their teaching quality and effectiveness (Chandran et al., 2021). According to Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (2011), professional development is a collection of experiences linked to an individual’s occupation and developed to enhance performance and outcomes. Teacher professional development provides teachers with evidence-based pedagogical practices and methods to implement in their classrooms. Further, professional development should increase teachers’ capacity to support student learning (Patton et al., 2015). There was a strong perception that teachers’ teaching effectiveness and their students’ performance could be improved by teachers participating in professional development programs (Garet et al., 2001). In fact, the domain of effective professional development was attracting more and more attention from scholars, and the features of an effective professional development program were one critical topic. Studies have addressed this problem and provided answers on the features of effective professional development, such as a focus on curriculum and subject content, connected with teachers’ daily practice, aligned with

educational standards for teachers, and providing learning opportunities for teachers (Hammond et al., 2017).

Leko et al., (2015) conducted a mixed-methods study to examine the effects of secondary teachers' adaptations when using a research-based reading intervention program. Interviews, observations, and artifact data were the study's instruments used to collect data from five middle school intervention teachers. Findings from the study indicated the teachers were willing to adapt explicit components of the program that focused on their own qualities as teachers, their contexts, and their students' needs. The teachers who accurately implemented the program benefitted from their own skills and the programs in order to provide more engaging activities to their students (Leko et al., 2015). Research showed that when collaboration time was given to teachers it positively affected their instruction. For example, Sun et al.,(2013) conducted a study on how high-quality professional development could support and strengthen the distribution of effective instructional strategies by the teachers that worked collaboratively. This was a longitudinal study that covered over 39 schools. The findings from the study revealed that teachers' participation in professional development was linked with supporting additional help to colleagues about instructional concerns. Researchers suggested that a professional development program should be designed in relation to real practice within classrooms and meet the needs and requirements of teachers (Rotherham et al., 2008). Therefore, identifying professional development needs for teachers and confirming that teachers could conveniently participate in professional development programs were regarded as a solution to the misalignment in the design of professional development programs and

would gain the attention of more researchers than ever before (Hammond et al., 2017). An effective professional development should include the following principles (a) in-depth, sustained, and linked to practice, (b) student-centered and content-specific, (c) connected to the school's goals, and (d) develop strong collaboration among teachers (Marrongelle et al., 2013). Effective, professional development was advantageous to teachers because it allowed for opportunities for teachers to bond with other teachers who instructed students' similar learning styles (Maddox & Marvin, 2012). When developing professional development, an emphasis should be placed on having components that allow teachers to enhance their knowledge and be related to their students' needs.

Needs for Professional Development

Many teachers felt inadequately trained to meet the demands of an inclusive classroom (Loreman & Deppeler, 2002). The tension between teaching all students and completing the curriculum was an issue that constantly plagued teachers, especially those teaching in inclusive settings. We believed that most teachers wanted to provide extensive educational experiences for all children. However, the pressures of state testing caused the students with disabilities to sometimes be forgotten. The teachers were as different as the students they taught. The job of the principal was to celebrate their strengths and help them identify the areas needing improvement. When teachers felt respected and supported, they found the courage to take risks and grow professionally (Rooney, 2010). One of the principal's responsibilities was to provide the necessary support through ongoing professional development for the teachers. Principals needed to ensure that staff was provided professional development that focused on instructional

strategies, communication, problem-solving, team building, conflict resolution, and stress management. This training also needed to focus on differentiated instruction or as Tomlinson (2010) calls it in her article. Sometimes we had to rethink our theories and learn how to teach one student at a time, “personalized instruction”. Teachers needed to learn about the various types of disabilities. They also needed to learn about what physical access and safety issues needed to be considered for students with disabilities (Elkins, 2005).

Addressing teachers’ professional development needs was critical in the design of an effective professional development program (M. L. Zhang et al., 2015), while there were various needs in terms of teachers’ teaching subject, teaching experience, or position within schools (Kabilan & Veratharaju, 2013; Zein, 2017; S. Zhang et al., 2019). When considering teachers’ general needs in professional development, M. L. Zhang et al. (2015) investigated in-service teachers’ need for professional development with respect to some specific science domains based on the theory of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK; Shulman, 1987). This study revealed that teachers needed professional development training in teaching the specific domains of topics like science, math, and literacy skills as well as various aspects of PCK, such as knowledge of students, instructional strategies, and knowledge of curriculum and assessment (M. L. Zhang et al., 2015).

Another study integrated technology with teaching, especially with respect to detailed topics was an urgent need for literacy and mathematics teachers’ professional development (Bennison & Goos, 2010). Another study compared the needs of American

novice and veteran teachers in professional development and indicated that overall novice teachers had stronger needs in professional development, especially in the aspect of knowledge training, while veteran teachers had stronger needs in technology-related training, such as ICT use in the classroom and new technology in workplaces (Zhang et al., 2019). Researchers have always recognized that teachers' professional development was essential to changing classroom practice, improving schools, and ameliorating pupils' learning outcomes (Borko, 2004).

Components of Professional Development

To understand what supported professional development, it was useful to identify components that comprised effective PD. Garet et al. (2001) did this as they examined the relation between PD features and changes in teacher knowledge and practice. McMaster et al., (2021) found that specific features (content focus, active learning, coherence with other learning) and structures (a study group format, extended duration of activities, groups of teachers participating together) related to changes in teacher practice. Desimone (2009) summarized these practices into a framework that specifies that PD should (a) focus on subject matter content and how students learn that content; (b) include active learning, with opportunities to observe expert teachers, receive feedback, engage in discussion, and analyze student work; (c) align with school priorities and student needs; (d) be ongoing over a period of time; and (e) allow teachers from the same grade, subject, or school participate together and build a learning community. The effects of any professional development relied largely on teachers' motivation to learn and

willingness to adjust their instructional practices. When teachers are not motivated to learn they are likely to forget what was taught during the professional development (Kennedy, 2016).

Stakeholders generally agreed that effective literacy instruction was dependent upon the teacher as opposed to the methods used. Further, stakeholders also agreed that professional development could assist with improving instruction effectiveness (Stephens et al., 2011). In order for professional development to improve teachers' instruction Vaughn and Fletcher (2012) recommended that professional development should be ongoing and inclusive of research-based reading programs. Whereas Fischer et al. (2016) recommended professional development should include active learning that involved the participants being actively engaged in the thinking process whereas knowledge was self-constructed. Active learning tasks included participants analyzing student work, observing teachers who were considered experts, or partaking in a teacher observation (Fischer et al., 2016). Professional development that included concrete tasks of teaching that were cultivated through active learning opportunities and sharing experiences with colleagues, was more than likely to provide participants with increased knowledge. Learning is not an individualized process, knowledge and skills are produced unidirectionally (Dingle et al., 2011). In addition, Dierking and Fox (2012) suggested that learning should occur in a collaborative environment. Therefore, professional development should create communities of experts who collaborate in order to enhance their own instructional practices while increasing education at additional levels (Dierking & Fox, 2012). In addition, Driel and Berry (2012) suggested that professional

development be rooted in constructivism and situative theories as opposed to behavioral approaches. A component of constructivist theory involves making connections to real-life situations (Liang & Akiba, 2015). The other theory, situative was described by Koellner and Jacobs (2015) as a learning process that involves the acquisition and use of knowledge. Regarding professional development, situative theorists recommended that teachers should be given opportunities to collaborate in order to improve their instructional practices (Koellner & Jacobs, 2015). The teaching profession requires ongoing professional development and learning. This ongoing learning should take place in professional learning communities, structured professional development settings, and literacy coaching contexts. Professional development should positively influence teacher knowledge and practice and, in turn, student learning. Hammond et al., (2017) research team examined the wide body of literature on professional development. High-quality professional development created space for teachers to share ideas and collaborate in their learning, often in job-embedded contexts that related to new instructional strategies for teachers' students and classrooms. By working collaboratively, teachers could create communities that positively changed the culture and instruction of their entire grade level, department, school, and/or district. "Collaboration" could span a host of configurations—from one-on-one or small group collaboration to schoolwide collaboration to collaboration with other professionals beyond the school. Outcomes demonstrated promise for increasing teachers' instructional skills and student achievement when professional development incorporated elements of the framework.

Professional Development and Special Education Teachers

Effective professional development training should be ongoing and allow participants to self-reflect. The Research acknowledged the benefits of specialized professional development being relevant content as opposed to generic or content – neutral. When special education teachers received targeted, relevant professional development, they reported greater levels of confidence in working with students with disabilities (Woulfin & Jones, 2021).

A study administered by Brownell et al. (2016) included two professional development models for teachers in order to draw a comparison of teacher and student outcomes. One model included special education teachers who participated in literacy learning cohorts (LLC), developed to enhance the teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge for teaching students with disabilities to read. The LLC professional development plan included the participants receiving 2 days of professional development, follow-up meetings, coaching, and video self-analysis. Whereas the participants in the second model of professional development only consisted of a 2- day session. The findings showed that the participants in the LLC instructional practices significantly changed in the areas of instructional time allowed for word study and fluency instruction. Additionally, LLC teachers made great gains in the area of fluency knowledge. In order for teachers to provide proficient instruction it was essential that they had the necessary resources to plan effective lessons.

Research conducted by Klehm (2014) showed that the attitude of teachers toward the learning ability of students with disabilities was found to predict if the students would

score proficiently on state assessments. The participants were 52 special and general education teachers who worked at public middle schools. An analysis of the data showed that the vast majority of teachers held high expectation for students but low expectations for students performing proficiency on the state assessment. Additionally, findings revealed that two-thirds of the teachers stated that they did not have the necessary resources and materials available to plan lessons to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Klehm (2014) recommended that professional development that included reviewing evidence-based practices and interventions should be offered to teachers in support to further their knowledge. Software programs that could be used on such devices as iPads and computers were being utilized in classrooms, therefore it was necessary to train teachers on how to accurately use the programs.

A grounded theory study conducted by Courduff et al., (2016) was to expand a theoretical model that explained the process of effectively integrating technology and special education instruction. The findings from the study indicated that special education teachers were willing to adopt technology when given in small increments (Courduff et al., 2016). The findings from this study supported the idea of providing special education teachers with professional development that focused on effective software usage. Collaboration was favorable for special education teachers because they instructed students with similar disabilities.

A qualitative study was conducted by Leko et al. (2015) to investigate the discourse, and learning in collaborative groups patterns of special education teachers while they collaboratively participated in a professional development group and the

impact of individual discourse patterns that influenced the other participants' chances to gain knowledge about reading instruction for students with disabilities. During a two-year period, the participants' cohort meetings were videotaped and then analyzed. The findings showed that special education teachers benefitted from opportunities that allowed friendship and collaboration among a group of people within the community. The findings from this study supported my professional development sessions, that allowed the special education teachers to collaborate with each other to improve communication and increase success. Although a content area specialty provides one type of expertise, there is much more to teaching than that knowledge. We could all learn from each other the most effective methods of adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of all students (Byrd, 2020). Woulfin & Jones, (2021) revealed that a research study suggested that many Special education teachers felt a disconnect between their daily work and what was addressed in their current PD opportunities. Ultimately, this was why specialized training matters . The study offered suggestions for how practitioners could improve PD for special educators. As Woulfin and Jones, (2021) summarized, it helped to develop an "understanding of norms, routines, rituals and the language of the special education profession.

Professional Education Theory

Professional education theory is described by Gabriel (2011) as being a process that involves teachers learning from within and from practice. This theory guided the implementation of this project study's genre. Professional education theory included three primary requirements: conception of practice, a sense of purpose that included what

was necessary for people to learn, and how to gain knowledge, skill, and other qualities that were absolutely necessary or important to instruct teachers (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Gabriel (2011) also revealed that professional education could not be accomplished without enhancing a substantial professional discourse and a commitment to practice in communities. The goal was to establish a more useful language of practice because it could develop vital intellectual work (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Leko et al. (2015) noted that teachers were more likely to partake in desired discourse about their practices when they were attempting to solve problems and tended to seek advice from their colleagues. Teaching and learning were an interactive practice (Edwards et al., 2012). Effective professional development takes into account how teachers learn (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Professional development programs that were structured so that there was a precise focus on subject matter content allowed them to learn central facts and concepts of the subject and how the ideas were linked. Professional development was effective when there were opportunities for teachers to engage as learners (Borko, 2004). In turn, effective professional development was needed to help teachers learn and refine the instructional strategies required to teach the needed skills.

Project Description

Once approval was received from the administration to conduct the professional development training program, I began planning for the training. The professional development training program for this study was conducted using Microsoft PowerPoint to present the presentation. Being the researcher, I was the facilitator to administer the sessions. The professional development for this project session was conducted over a 3-

day period. Each day began at 8:30 a.m. with a break at 10:30 a.m., lunch beginning at promptly at noon and ending at 12:30 p.m., and finishing the day at 3:00 p.m. sharp. The proposed project's three day initial professional learning sessions included the following: Day 1 session the topic consisted of the first meet and greet, the introduction of purpose, and materials distributed. Each professional development attendee was given a pen and notebook for note taking during the sessions about strategies learned. Next, since all schools had issues with students in middle grades who read far below grade level, a strong focus was placed on brainstorming exercises to help the teachers come up with specific instructional strategies to address this issue. activities on various primary reading strategies to improve student reading achievement. Day 2 session included professional development video viewing on effective teaching strategies to teach reading comprehension skills and increase vocabulary comprehension to students with disabilities and reviewed research-based software or programs to use. Day 3 session included professional development for participants analyzing students' IEPs. Next, the participants outlined a literacy plan based on the students' IEP goals. The literacy plans included the primary reading strategies that were identified and discussed on Day 1. Finally, the training sessions culminated with sharing and discussing the literacy plans among the teachers. During each day, participants were able to participate in a question and answer session. During the collection of data, I was afforded the opportunity to connect with the study's participants and understand their needs and frustrations. The connection I built allowed me to present a meaningful professional development session. The presentation explained the results of this study and the factors identified by the

teachers that impacted how they were able to teach reading skills to their students. It also included recommendations for specific changes including greater teacher autonomy, and additional professional development programs for district teachers to improve their reading/literacy instructional skills. At the end of the day, the participants were asked to participate in a self-sharing activity called 3, 2, 1. The first part of this strategy asked the participants to list three things that were learned during the sessions; the second part was for participants to list two things that they found interesting and that they would like additional information about, and the third part participants would list one question they still had in regards to the material presented during the professional development sessions. Lastly, the participants were asked to write the three things in their notebooks and asked to share their answers with the group. The PD program sessions allowed time for participant interaction and collaborative learning. Additionally, the participants were asked to evaluate the professional development training program sessions. A detailed description of the professional development sessions is available in Appendix A.

Resources, Supports, Potential Barriers, and Solutions

To conduct this professional development, I used my laptop to access the internet and a video projector to show the PowerPoints. I also distributed handouts of the presentation, pens for writing, and notebooks for notes and self-reflection. I would need the support of the building administrator as I would need access to the faculty meeting room to use for the location of the professional development training sessions. Possible barriers to this professional development included technical issues that might occur with the internet or my laptop. To address the possibility of technical issues I asked that a tech

specialist and a librarian be available. In addition, in case the faculty meeting room became unavailable for some reason, I asked for permission from the administrator to use the school's library.

Project Evaluation Plan

The ultimate goal of this project was to improve student reading achievement in the school in the Southeastern district of the United States. This was a serious ongoing problem among middle grades students with disabilities and was not an easy fix. Additionally, the goal of this project study was to improve the schools' reading instruction by providing appropriate professional development training for teachers that supported reading to students with reading struggles. Furthermore, the goal of this evaluation plan was to measure improvements in teacher understanding of research-based reading instructional strategies to utilize in their classroom for students with disabilities. The professional development training sessions were based on the needs expressed by the teachers involved. The evaluation of this project study focused on the success of the professional development training sessions for teacher preparation.

The key stakeholders included the teachers who participated in the professional development training sessions, their students, and the administrators of the school involved. The learning outcomes for the professional training sessions were that the teachers expressed a better understanding of the research-based instructional reading strategies presented and felt more confident in their ability to utilize those strategies in their classrooms. This outcome was measured by using a post-training evaluation that assessed their learning and confidence in the instructional strategies presented in the

professional development training. The evaluation form from the school under study included questions about additional training needed, and which research-based instructional strategies the teachers would like included in future professional development training sessions. The presentations all had the ultimate goal of improving student reading achievement by helping teachers be more effective in reading instruction in their classrooms. To evaluate the project in the near term, each presentation of the professional development training ended with a comprehensive evaluation survey of the program. In addition, a specific measure of success was that teachers established a reading improvement team at the school to provide ongoing discussions and collaboration sessions on issues the teachers faced daily with instructions to low -level readers. However, this project, if maintained for multiple years, might help bring teacher performance to higher level standards and all students up to grade level reading skills.

Project Implications

The findings of this project's study might lead to improved instructional practice for special education reading instruction, resulting in positive social change through increased reading achievement for students with learning disabilities. The professional development sessions were structured to provide opportunities for teachers to learn through collaboration with their colleagues and enhance reading pedagogy practices. Additionally, the project was a basis for special education teachers to develop instructional methods to address students who are reading significantly below grade level. The components of this professional development program could be utilized at other schools within the district to address special education teachers' need for curriculum

support, resource materials, and knowledge of primary reading strategies to improve student reading skills.

Importance of the Project

There are several reasons why the implementation of this project was important to local stakeholders. First, this project addressed the concern of special education teachers' lack of knowledge about using effective reading strategies. Secondly, teachers were able to learn about research-based reading software that could positively supplement teachers' instruction. Thirdly, teachers were given time to examine students' IEPs to develop effective lesson plans for reading. Finally, the special education teachers were given ample opportunities to collaborate, sharing their knowledge and experiences that could advance instruction and positively affect student reading achievement.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

This basic qualitative study was conducted to examine middle school special education teachers' perceptions of why middle students were struggling to learn to read. I reviewed the reasons demonstrated in the findings and the need for professional development training to improve teacher reading instruction in the classroom and teacher communication. After reviewing the results, a professional development training program was designed for special education teachers in Grades 6 through 8. The goal of the training was to improve teacher instruction and student reading achievement in Grades 6 through 8. The section provides a piece of information on the strengths and limitations of the project as well as recommendations for practices and possible further research.

Project Strengths and Limitations

There are several strengths that exist within this project. The project genre, professional development, is a recommended form of practice to improve teachers' instructional practice (Zhang et al.,2014). The project strengths also include presenting research-based resources, allotting time for teachers to collaborate, observing other teachers, and time to review students' IEPs.

The project's first strength was that the teachers were afforded opportunities to learn about research-based resources and instructional strategies to use in their classrooms and various components of the software and activities that the students with disabilities could complete.

This professional development training session is structured so teachers are able to learn about research-based instructional strategies and software programs that are beneficial to teachers. The participants will learn about the various components of the software, such as reading activities the students can complete, assessments that can be administered to students, and the ability to use progress monitoring tools. The participants can play an active role in selecting a program that best addresses their students' needs.

The strength of the project also was the allotted time for collaboration among teachers. The participants worked with each other often during the professional development training sessions to discuss various reading instructional implementations. Allowing teachers to share would give the participants opportunities to learn from each other.

Another strength of the project was the participants viewed videos of other teachers providing effective reading instruction. Viewing videos of other teachers allows the teachers to see other teachers instructions and make comparisons. While the participants were viewing the videos, I would pause to give them the opportunity to discuss the strengths of the lessons and ways they could implement elements in their daily class instructions.

Lastly, another strength was the participants were given time to analyze their students' IEPs. The participants would be given time to create lesson plans based on students' readiness goals listed in their IEPs. Overall, the project's strength was in providing special education teachers with the instructional strategies and tools that they could implement in their classrooms upon completion of the 3-day professional

development training session. The project included five follow-up sessions that would allow teachers to speak openly in a trusting environment, feeling safe to share and provide feedback to their peers.

Every research project has limitations, which are anything that might influence or affect the generalizability or reliability of the outcomes of a research study (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). A key limitation of this project study was that it could not provide all the resources beyond those that this school district already supplies. However, the greatest limitation was trying to improve student reading achievement in this district and the demand for more professional development training programs to improve teacher pedagogy. The teacher participants indicated a need for additional training throughout the school year to ensure consistency of the implementation of the coteaching model in inclusion classes. Staff members mentioned receiving some training but stated that additional training was needed for both the regular education teacher and the special education teacher. Another limitation of the project was that teachers might have difficulties implementing unfamiliar strategies. The limitation those co-teachers might be at different levels of familiarity with the inclusive special education teaching model and might have difficulty adjusting to the new framework. Additionally, the school, the district, and the state requirements also created implementation challenges for the teachers. Time constraints presented a major limitation. Based on the building and district calendars, the availability of substitute teachers for the duration of the 3-day training and subsequent sessions presented further challenges of professional development training

which included coordinating and planning further training sessions. Understanding project constraints is important because they affect project performance.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

Aside from the professional development project in this study, alternative approaches to special education professional development training could include online professional development training programs such as the MindsetMaker. The MindsetMaker online course could provide educators with a solid foundation for growth in mindset theory and practice. The core training comprises five modules that include online assessments with feedback, videos, discussion forums, tools, and activities that help staff teams and individual teachers implement mindset practice. The school district could also incorporate peer observations of class instruction and modeling of the inclusion teacher framework. Bryant et al. (2001) argued that several factors contributed to successfully implementing reading in content areas following teacher professional development training.

First and foremost, professional development researchers needed to inquire about teachers' knowledge of their students and design collaborative professional development training with relevant strategies that were apt to the needs of their students. Teachers needed substantial teachers' professional development time to learn, prepare, and implement professional development content in their content area classrooms. Cantrell et al. (2008) reported that middle and high school teachers were willing to alter their belief in literacy instruction in their content areas classes if they were supported by professional development focused on coaching, peer collaboration, and team planning. Additionally,

since this project study had a limited number of participants, I recommend future research could include teachers from other schools and grade levels.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

For this project study, scholarship was considered to begin with a concern for the special education inclusion framework and the challenges it presented. During my data collection, I realized the frustration among the special education teachers of middle grades because of the lack of preparation and the continuity among the teachers. Additionally, the participants were frustrated with the lack of curriculum, resource materials, and support from the special education department. The findings from the study revealed that even though special education teachers were certified to teach reading to secondary students, they were not trained to use primary reading strategies. Enhancing teachers' knowledge about effective reading strategies and the availability of materials and resources could be achieved through professional development training. Additionally, teachers could network to gain knowledge from their peers and resolve problems through collaborations that could be fostered throughout the school. As a leader, it was important to include all teachers to create a collaborative work environment. While conducting this research study and designing the project, my knowledge of scholarship was enhanced greatly. The findings helped to shape my project study and not to assume what the participants needed. Additionally, I also gained a better understanding of the importance of reporting the findings and restraining from being biased during the semistructured interviews. I learned how to analyze data to formulate themes. To build upon this scholarship, I reviewed relevant peer-reviewed

research articles within 5 years to assist in identifying solutions to the challenges that middle school special education teachers faced. As an agent of social change, data were collected that were beneficial to members of the learning community. Furthermore, in my role as a scholar practitioner, I was able to use the knowledge gained from the data gathered and apply it to my existing knowledge. The doctoral program at Walden University has provided caring, knowledgeable professionals to address my individual needs. Throughout the development of my research study and project, my committee chair, second chair, and the IRB ensured that educational standards were met with the highest of standards.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

There was nothing more important than having an educated populace that was literate and fluent in their reading and writing skills. A lack of reading limits one's quality of life (Bradford et al., 2016), and yet only 1 in 5 students with intellectual disabilities reached minimal literacy levels (Calkins & Tolan, 2015). Teachers' knowledge and practices influence students' learning and academic performance (Avalos, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 1998, 2000; Spear-Swerling, 2009). Spear-Swerling (2009) argued that increasing teachers' reading knowledge better prepared them to assess students' current reading levels, differentiate instruction, and provide appropriate feedback. The key to this project was the design of a specific professional development training program to prepare teachers to improve the reading instruction offered to the students. That process could ultimately increase the reading achievement of the children in this school setting.

This project was an essential first step to resolve the problem in the school district that students with disabilities struggle to learn to read. This study provided teachers who supported reading the opportunity to speak out about their problems. This project, allowed teachers to suggest changes that might help teachers become more sufficiently prepared to teach their students with reading deficits effectively. All participants interviewed in this project expressed strong loving concerns about their students and their learning. The teachers stated they wanted to teach to the best of their ability. They recounted many obstacles they had to surmount, but their desire to improve their instructions and their students' reading skills was very clear in their responses. Providing these teachers with a training program to increase their knowledge to support teaching reading effectively to students with disabilities was an important part of this project.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

There are implications for this project, which include that professional development training sessions could be beneficial to both students and teachers. The results of this study showed that ongoing professional development aligned with inclusive team building, and teacher collaboration could strengthen and improve special education teacher's instructional practices in reading which could improve students reading achievement. Additionally, the professional development training sessions incorporated research-based strategies, resources, and materials needed to support teachers' instruction. The project encompassed 3 days of training with an additional 5 days of follow-up sessions. The project's impact on social change provided the special education teachers with support and guidance to successfully implement effective

changes in teaching strategies in reading instruction to produce better assessment reading outcomes among students with disabilities. According to Ozdemir et al., (2015), social change and development require competencies to change circumstances to be met. This project could be expanded throughout the school district and foster a learning environment that allotted time for collaboration among all special education teachers in middle grades that supported reading to students with disabilities.

Applications

The project's applications could lead to enhancing teachers' pedagogy, therefore positively affecting students with disabilities' reading achievement. The training sessions were constructed such that the teachers would transform the standard of the implementation of the special education inclusion model. The teachers were provided with reading strategies, materials, and resources to add to their professional toolkit through this project study. This project included time for teachers to begin to create reading/literacy plans that aligned with their students' reading goals. In addition, when developing teachers the elements of this project and the structure of this project loaned itself to future professional development training sessions.

Directions For Future Research

Future research might expand the scope of this project to determine whether professional development training sessions increased teachers' ability to implement reading instruction effectively among students with disabilities. Additionally, future research could be extended to include other schools middle- grade students with disabilities in the district. Further, future research could include schools from other

nearby school districts. A future study might include an expanded project study that involves the researcher conducting training sessions in the class of the participants with students. Lastly, educational leaders could implement an instructional approach to observe, analyze, and provide feedback to the practices with suggestions for improvement or modifications to the practices.

Conclusion

The study's purpose was to examine special education teachers' perceptions of the reasons students with disabilities were struggling to learn to read in an urban middle school in the Southeastern United States. The study's project was a professional development training session that would occur over 3 days and was structured to enhance the participants' toolkit. Additionally, the training would allow the special education teachers of students with disabilities to reflect on and review the findings of this study to meet the needs of teachers and students. Besides, the impact on social change would be the positive changes in the special education teachers' instructional reading practices in inclusive classrooms that resulted from professional development training. The overall goal of this project was to enhance teacher pedagogy to increase students with disabilities' reading skills to help increase their state reading assessment scores. Lastly, this project was an extremely long journey that took an enormous amount of time but afforded me to self-reflect on the process and include a self-analysis of what I learned through the doctoral process of scholarship, social change, and project development.

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Appendix A: Project Study

Once approval was received from the administration to conduct the professional development training program, I began planning for the training. The professional development project for this study was conducted using Microsoft PowerPoint to present the presentation. Being the researcher, I was the facilitator to administer the sessions. The professional development for this project session was conducted over a 3-days. Each day began at 8:30 a.m. with a break at 10:30 a.m., lunch beginning promptly at noon and ending at 12:30 p.m., and finishing the day at 3:00 p.m. sharp. The proposed project's three-day initial professional learning sessions included the following: Day 1 session the topic consisted of the first meet and greet, the introduction of purpose, and materials distributed. Each professional development attendee was given a pen and notebook for notetaking during the sessions about strategies learned. Next, since all schools had issues with students in middle grades who read far below grade level, a strong focus was set on brainstorming exercises to help the teachers come up with specific instructional strategies to address this issue. activities on various primary reading strategies to improve student reading achievement. Day 2 session included professional development video viewing on effective teaching strategies to teach reading comprehension skills and increase vocabulary comprehension to students with disabilities, and reviewed research-based software or programs to use. Day 3 session included professional development for participants analyzing students' IEPs. Next, the participants drafted a literacy plan based on the students' IEP's goals. The literacy plans included the primary reading strategies that were identified and discussed on Day 1. Finally, the training sessions culminated

with sharing and discussing the literacy plans among the teachers. During each day, participants were able to participate in a question and answer session. During the collection of data, I was afforded the opportunity to connect with the study's participants and understand their needs and frustrations. The connection I built allowed me to present meaningful professional development. The presentation explained the results of this study and the factors identified by the teachers that impacted how they were able to teach reading literacy to their students. It also included recommendations for specific changes including greater teacher autonomy, and additional professional development programs for district teachers to improve their reading/literacy instructional skills. At the end of the day, the participants were asked to participate in a self-sharing activity called 3, 2, 1. The first part of this strategy asks the participants to list three things that were learned during the sessions; the second part was for participants to list two things that they found interesting and that they would like additional information about, and the third part participants would list one question they still had in regards to the material made available during the professional development series. Lastly, the participants were asked to write the three things in their notebooks and asked to share their answers with the group. The PD program sessions allowed time for participant interaction and collaborative learning.

Appendix B: Permission to Conduct Study

June ---, 2022

Dear [Superintendent]:

I hope this letter finds you well as we experience the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) this school year. My name is Betty A. Brown, and I am pursuing a doctorate at Walden University in Curriculum and Assessment. For my doctoral dissertation, I would like to request permission to conduct a project study with the 6th through 8th- grade teachers of students with disabilities at xxxxx Middle School of Research in your district. My project study is entitled “Middle School Teachers ‘Perceptions of Reading Struggles for Students.’”

The purpose of this study is to explore teachers' perceptions of the reasons why students struggle to learn reading and to support teaching reading to students with disabilities. This project will encourage special education teachers to share their beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about instructional training needs regarding preparation to support teaching reading skills to middle grades 6 through 8 students with disabilities and reading deficits.

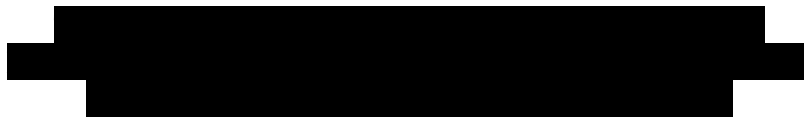
The data I will collect will be the responses to semistructured interview questions from each participant. I will interview ten to twelve teacher participants for 30- 40 minute one-on-one session. Due to COVID-19 and teachers being at home, I will ask the building administrator if I could have the 6th through 8th-grade teacher participants' email addresses to contact them to participate in the study. I will use a Rev application on my mobile Apple iPhone to record each interview transcribed verbatim.

The results of my study may benefit students, teachers, and administrative staff. My overall goal for this project study is to help close the reading achievement gap among learning disabled students in middle grades by gaining better insight through teachers' perceptions of instructional practices that support reading.

Sincerely,

Betty A. Brown Ed.S., Walden University

Appendix C: Permission to Access Teachers



June---, 2022

Dear [building principal],

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study with sixth through eighth-grade special education teachers of _____ Middle School. I am currently enrolled at Walden University in the Doctor of Education program and am writing my Doctoral Dissertation. The study is entitled “Middle School Teachers’ Perceptions of Reading Struggles for Learning Disabled Students.” The study will be outside of the contract period or workday.

I am asking for your approval as the school administrator to conduct interviews with eight to ten teachers from the school. Due to COVID-19 and teachers being at home, I will ask the building administrator if I could have the 6th through 8th-grade special education teachers’ email addresses to contact them to participate in the study. Potential participants interested in joining, will receive a letter of invitation/consent form to view and understand the investigation before deciding whether to participate. If they choose to move forward, they will need to reply, “I consent” to the email.

The interviews will take place for 30- 40 minute one-on-one sessions remotely via Skype or Google Meets using my Apple iPhone. Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. The educational benefits may be numerous, as students with disabilities develop reading comprehension skills needed to perform reading tasks on state assessments as required by the district. I will follow up with an email in two days and be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have, and your comments and suggestions are welcome at that time. If you agree to provide me with the sixth through eighth-grade teachers of special education email addresses, please reply “I consent.” Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Betty A. Brown Ed.S., Walden University

Appendix D: Interview Protocol, and Questions, for Teacher Participants

Topic of Study:

Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Reading Struggles for Learning Disabled Students.

Introduction

Hello colleagues, you have been asked to participate in this interview on a volunteer basis to participate in this study. This research project aims to help educators close the reading achievement gap among students with disabilities by improving instructional strategies to increase student reading achievement. This qualitative case study examines perceptions about the reasons students are struggling to learn to read . I want you to know that this study is not to evaluate your teaching strategies. Rather, the researcher is trying to learn more about the best instructional practices for reading instruction that may be beneficial to administrators and academic reading coaches in creating professional development opportunities for special education teachers to equip them with the skills needed to implement effective reading instruction.

Appendix E Cont.: Interview Protocol, and Questions, for Teacher Participants

Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Reading Struggles for Learning Disabled Students.

Interview Questions

Alignment of Research Questions to Interview Questions

1. What did you think about students struggling to learn to read?
2. What reading levels were your students reading on?
3. What curriculum did you use to teach reading to students with disabilities?
4. What was your definition of a student with learning disabilities?
5. How many years have you been instructing students in learning disabilities?
6. What were your concerns about teaching reading to students with disabilities?
7. Please describe your training by the school district to help students with disabilities learn to read.
8. Please describe how students learn reading.
9. What instructional reading strategies did you routinely use, and how do you differentiate reading instruction in your classroom?
10. If a student continues to struggle with reading, what was alternative strategies?

Appendix F: Stems for Teacher Participants

Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Reading Struggles for Learning Disabled Students.

Alignment of Research Questions to Stems

-
1. I would describe students struggling to learn to read as...
 2. I would describe students with learning disabilities as...
 3. I would describe my training to teach reading as ...
 4. I would describe the strategies that I use for reading instruction to students as...
-

Appendix G: Edits Made Based On Subject Matter Experts Feedback

Interview Protocol, and Questions, for Teacher Participants

Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Reading Struggles for Learning Disabled Students

1. What are your perceptions about students struggling to learn to read?
2. What reading levels are your students reading on?

Edit Expert 2: On average how many different reading levels are students on per class?

3. What curriculum do you use to teach reading?
4. What is your definition of a student with a learning disability?
5. How many years have you been instructing students with learning disabilities?

Expert- 3: How many years have you been teaching students with disabilities?

6. What are your concerns about teaching students with disabilities?

Edit Expert 3: How do you feel about teaching students with learning disabilities?

7. Please describe your training by the school district to help students with disabilities learn to read.

Edit Expert 1: How would you describe your preparedness for teaching reading to students with disabilities to meet the reading score requirements on the state reading assessment test at the school?

8. Please describe how students learn reading.

Edit Expert- 1, 2: Please describe how students learn to read.

9. What reading instructions do you routinely use and how do you differentiate Reading instruction?

Expert 3: What literacy interventions do you implement in your instruction to help students with learning disabilities better understand how to read and comprehend their textbooks?

10. If a student continues to struggle with reading, what are your alternative strategies?

Appendix H : Edits Based On Subject Matter Experts Feedback

Stems for Teacher Participants

Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Reading Struggles for Learning Disabled Students

Alignment of Research Questions to Stems

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1. I would describe students struggling to learn to read as...
 2. I would describe students with learning disabilities as... Expert 1:
I would describe a student with a learning disability as...
 3. I would describe my training to teach reading as ...Expert 1, 2, 3:
How would you describe your training to teach reading ...
 4. I would describe the strategies that I use for reading instruction to students as...
-