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## Teachers' Perspectives of Declining Student Performance in K-3 Grade Reading

Mae Lee Johnson  
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# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Mae Lee Johnson

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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2024

Abstract

Teachers' Perspectives of Declining Student Performance in K-3 Grade Reading

by

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EdS, Delta State University, 2007

MA, Mississippi Valley State University, 2001

BS, Delta State University, 1992

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

February 2024

## Abstract

Reading performance in third grade has significantly declined across the United States in recent years, suggesting a critical problem that was addressed in this study. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of K-3 teachers working in a rural elementary school district regarding a decline since 2018 in the reading performance of students in third grade in one state in the southern United States. The conceptual framework was based on Chall's concept of "conventional wisdom" in reading instruction, which guided three research questions about teachers' observations of student skill in phonemic awareness, vocabulary usage, and fluency. Ten teachers participated in semistructured interviews, which were coded for thematic analysis. The results revealed that students in third grade lack mastery of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary usage, and fluency, and teachers attributed poor reading ability in third grade to lack of instructional time, poor student motivation, and failure of teachers in earlier grades to remediate learning gaps. Recommendations for future research include understanding why teachers promote students to the next grade when they have not mastered grade-level skills, investigating parents' perspectives on reading, and exploring ways to increase student motivation for reading. These study findings may contribute to positive social change by improving reading instruction and shaping administrative policies to better support students' academic success. With attention and commitment to solving the problem of low reading mastery, young students will become confident readers, ready for the fourth grade.

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## Dedication

I am filled with immense gratitude towards God for granting me the strength to overcome a difficult journey and for enlightening me about the significance of educating our future generations. The guidance from God's Word and the unwavering support from prayers have been the pillars of my perseverance. My parents, Mr. T. L. Lee and Mrs. I. D. Lee, taught me the values of hard work and kindness, which have played a vital role in my success, and I am forever grateful for their influence. My husband's constant support during long hours and restless nights has been the driving force behind my accomplishments, and I am indebted to him for his unwavering encouragement. Whenever I felt low, he was there to lift my spirits and remind me that God had a purpose for me. My children and grandchildren have also been a source of motivation, emphasizing the importance of early education. I dedicate this to my late granddaughter, Destinee Adia Jones, who will be in my heart forever. Lastly, my siblings have been my rock, providing me with constant support that has made my dream come true. Thank you; this is for all.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The topic of this study was the perspectives of K-3 teachers working in general education classrooms in public schools in one state in the southern United States, regarding a downward trend in reading achievement on third-grade assessments. This study needed to be conducted because teachers can be resourceful in reversing the decline in reading performance development. Positive change social change may result from this study if the perspectives expressed in this study are applied to aid young children in becoming strong readers. In this chapter, I describe background information about the study; the study problem, purpose, and research questions; the conceptual framework that will guide this study; and the nature of this basic qualitative study. I also described important terms; described the assumptions, scope and delimitations, and limitations that impacted this study; and presented the possible significance of the study's results.

### **Background**

Weyer and Casares (2019) reported that third grade is the final year for young children to learn how to read before transitioning to fourth grade, where they will use their reading skill to learn from diverse printed materials. To meet the challenge of raising academic achievement in reading, Brannan et al. (2020) found that student engagement in independent reading and their reading volume led to increases in reading achievement; in short, when students read more and learn new words, they become better readers. In addition, Filderman et al. (2021) agreed that explicit instruction, background knowledge, vocabulary, and content knowledge effectively increase struggling readers'

performance in reading in Grades 3 through 12. Filderman et al. (2021) described background knowledge in conjunction with other skills, that supports reading comprehension based on children's reading development, whereas content knowledge relates to topic-specific content used to improve their understanding of a text (e.g., videos).

Vernon-Feagans et al. (2022) cited that learning to read comprehensively in early grades is critically important for later success in school for younger students. In addition, noted that readers struggling in reading and the decline in reading performance are affected by factors of poverty, poor language skills in the home environment, underfunded schools, and lack of community resources. These barriers will be discussed further in the Literature Review in Chapter 2.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem that was addressed through this study is that third-grade performance in reading has declined across the United States. Jacobson (2019) reported that fourth-grade students' average reading scores in the United States dropped from a scale score of 222 in 2017 to 220 in 2019 across the United States in the fourth grade. As an example, in 2018, 93% of students in one southern state passed at the basic level on their first attempt, but only 75% reached the third level. In this state, 9% of kindergarten students were retained in grade in 2018; 8% of first graders and 6% of second graders were also retained (Amy, 2019). In the spring of 2019, 25.5% of third graders in the study state did not pass the reading assessment, and in the spring of 2022, 26.1% of third

graders did not pass the reading assessment, according to the state department of education. However, testing in the study state was waived in 2020 and 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, so there are no data reported by the state department of education, on which to assess recent performance of third-grade students on state tests.

Gentilini and Greer (2020) found that children as early as first grade demonstrated outstanding disparities in reading performance, with major direct and indirect effects of kindergarten reading skills, which affect later academic performance. These differences have long-term effects, because three-fourths of students considered poor readers in third grade are also characterized as poor readers in high school (Gentilini & Greer, 2020). Therefore, it is vital that teachers can identify struggling readers early in their school careers so that reading interventions can be implemented to avoid later reading comprehension difficulties (Grimm et al, 2018). A gap in practice is evident in that reading scores of third-grade students declined since 2018, resulting in reading failure in one-quarter of third-grade students in the study state.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of K-3 teachers working in a rural elementary school district regarding a decline since 2018 in the reading performance of students in third grade in one state in the southern United States. The phenomenon of interest in this study was the decline of third grade reading performance in the study state since 2018. Throughout the United States, reading has become a common challenge for students and society. It is vital to understand the

perspectives and knowledge of K-3 teachers' experiences in teaching reading readiness skills. Reading is a fundamental skill that many students in elementary classrooms do not attain at the expected rates of development. Only interviews were utilized to gain a better understanding of teachers' perspectives about the decline since 2018 in reading performance of students in third grade in the study state.

### **Research Questions**

Three research questions (RQs) guided this study. These questions are informed by the conceptual framework described below and support the study's purpose.

RQ1: How do K-3 teachers in the study district describe children's skill in phonemic awareness and phonics skills, and teachers' use of instruction to remedy any skill deficits?

RQ2: How do K-3 teachers in the study district describe children's skill in vocabulary usage, and teachers' use of instruction to remedy any skill deficits?

RQ3: How do K-3 teachers in the study district describe children's skill reading fluency, and teachers' use of instruction to remedy any skill deficits?

### **Conceptual Framework**

In this study, I used the concept of conventional wisdom to examine the phenomenon of declining performance in reading among K-3 students in one state in the southern United States. Further, research focusing on Chall's theory offers guidance on how young children need direct instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary usage, and learning how to read to increase their performance in reading. The conceptual



framework that supported this study of the declining student performance in K-3 reading was grounded in Chall's (1999) "conventional wisdom" of reading instruction. According to the "conventional wisdom" concept, direct instruction in early grades provides elementary students with foundational skills that increase their reading performance as they learn to read. Chall suggested that children should read for meaning from the start, using context and pictures clues to identify words after learning sight words, and to prompt application of letter sounds in correspondence with words identified in a text. Chall asserted that phonics is superior to whole word instruction and regular phonics is superior to intrinsic phonics instruction, which is affirmed in her stages of reading development. Chall's work provides a framework that informs the study RQs regarding specific aspects of direct instruction that K-3 teachers might use.

According to Matthews and Kay (2001), Chall's teacher-centered approach provides valuable focus on students' skill acquisition. When children progress through the stages of reading development, they develop a progression of skills and abilities that changes over time as they mature (Chall & Snow, 1988). Chall and Snow (1988) asserted that schools must pay more attention to the development of literacy in elementary grades if they are to solve the problem of high school low academic achievement. According to Indrisano and Chall (1995), children first learn to read and then read to learn, using reading as a tool for learning new words and new ideas beyond their scope of knowledge. Chall's concept of the conventional wisdom of direct instruction will inform my study by focusing on how teachers utilize specific skill-based teaching to address the decline in

reading performance of students in third grade in the study state. I will explore elements of Chall's conventional wisdom in current literature presented in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

I used a basic qualitative design with interviews. The phenomenon of interest in this study was the decline of third grade reading performance in the study state since 2018. Qualitative research in general is based on data collection processes that are not linear, but recursive, iterative, and inductive (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). According to Xu and Zammit (2020) a researcher can make active decisions by becoming familiar with the data, generate initial codes, look for themes, analyze themes before writing a general report.

Interviews are beneficial in qualitative research because an interview is a data collection encounter in which a one-on-one conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee that relate to a phenomenon (McGrath et al., 2019; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In addition, Rubin and Rubin (2012) stated that in-depth qualitative interviews serve as the primary tool for researchers to look for rich and detailed information, not for yes-or no responses regarding a question (Butin, 2010).

A survey is another form of collecting qualitative data however, a survey was not used because responses from surveys provide a limited amount of information based on fixed questions with no opportunity for probing or follow-up questions (Burkholder et al., 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2022). Because there would be limited opportunities to ask questions while teaching was happening and I would have to infer or make assumptions

based on what I saw, I decided against observing teachers in their classrooms (see Ravitch & Carl, 2022). According to Ravitch and Carl (2022) in-person interviewing is an effective way of building a relationship with the interviewee, but also phone interviews, Skype, and Zoom teleconferencing are effective alternative methods by which to conduct interviews. Ravitch and Carl described interviewing as a social interaction of sharing lived experiences in relation to a phenomenon. The foremost goal of qualitative interviews is to gain intensive insight into individuals' lived experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

In this study, a limited number of teachers was used to provide data that can answer the research questions based on their specific experiences and perspectives. I interviewed 10 K-3 teachers who work in public elementary schools in the study state. Data was transcribed then evaluated using thematic analysis. In vivo coding, as described by Saldana (2016) will provide the basis for this analysis.

### **Definitions**

*Fluency*: The rapid reading of individual words, reading words correctly, the speed at which one can read connected text, and reading with expression (Paige, 2020).

*Phonemic Awareness*: The ability to hear speech sounds clearly, and to differentiate them (MacPhee, 2018)

*Phonics*: A method of learning to read. Phonics works by breaking each word up into its individual sounds before blending those sounds back together to make the word. Children learn to 'decode' words by breaking it down into sounds (readwithphonic.com).

### **Assumptions**

I assumed the participants were honest and thoughtful in their interview responses. I also assumed that participants have had experience with students who struggle with reading and have experienced-based perspectives of the problem explored in this study. Such assumptions are typical in an interview-based study that relies on information as the source of (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this study was to explore K-3 teachers' perspectives regarding a decline since 2018 in the reading performance of students in third grade in the study state. This study was delimited to include general education classroom teachers of students in kindergarten through third grade, who work in public schools of a rural area of the study state. Excluded from this study are teachers of single subjects, such as art, music, or physical education; teachers of special population, such as gifted students or students with special needs; teachers who worked in non-public settings, such as private schools or therapeutic settings, or in charter schools; and teachers of other grades or who worked in other regions. Transferability may be affected by these exclusions; however, these exclusions were necessary to focus on the problem of a decline since 2018 in the reading performance of students in third grade in the study state, and to limit confounding factors that may be introduced by inclusion of some excluded populations.

### **Limitations**

My study was conducted following or during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have changed how teachers taught and how students learned in recent times. In addition, I brought to this study is my role as a lead teacher in the district that I proposed to conduct the study and my views about reading proficiency in early grades. My interest in this phenomenon was deep-rooted in my experiences as an elementary teacher, a student in the field of early education, and the challenges I have experienced with the decline in reading performance since 2018. To minimize researcher bias, I was engaged in reflexivity, as described by Hsiung (2008).

### **Significance**

This qualitative study may be significant because it addressed a problem in early literacy that was informed by elementary teachers' perspectives. This study addressed a gap in practice evident by the decline in reading scores. This study provided clues to why this decline had happened, advance teaching practices, and policies to increase students' reading success. Students, schools, and communities benefited from this research to the extent it reveals teachers' perspectives on specific instructional practices and led to changes that produced better readers and increased literacy awareness. Moreover, this study led to a positive social change in curriculum and instruction and provide students with greater reading mastery.

## **Summary**

This study addressed a problem with reading performance of K-3 students in the study state by focusing on Chall's belief that young children need direct instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary usage, and learning how to read with fluency to increase test score in reading. In Chapter 1, I described the research problem of a decline since 2018 in third grade reading across the United States, including in the study state. I described the study's purpose of exploring teacher perspectives of this problem, and the possible significance of this study. Chall's (1999) work informed my examination of teachers' perspectives and shape the research questions that guided this study. In Chapter 2, I presented a more detailed exposition of Chall's ideas and will review the literature on reading achievement and instructional practices relative to the decline of students' performance in K-3 reading.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem that was addressed through this study is that third-grade performance in reading had declined across the United States. The purpose of this basic qualitative study is to explore the perspectives of K-3 teachers working in a rural elementary school district regarding a decline since 2018 in the reading performance of students in third grade in one state in the southern United States. Third grade is the culmination year for elementary children to be able to read before entering fourth grade. When children read more, and learn new words, they become better readers. In Chapter 2, I described the process by which I searched the literature for peer-reviewed articles supporting this study of teachers' perspectives on the decline of reading scores, a more detailed description of the conceptual framework based on Chall's conventional wisdom of reading instruction, and a presentation of the current literature relevant to the problem and purpose of this study.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I used the following databases to search pertinent literature for my topic: Google Scholar, SAGE Publication, Walden Library, ERIC, EBSCOHOST, ProQuest, and the Institute of Sciences. Search terms and phrases include *best practices in reading, early reading instruction, inclusive classrooms, phonemic awareness, phonics, language skills, literacy, obesity, proficiency in reading, reading fluency, reading scores, struggling readers, teachers' perspective in reading, teaching reading tips, and vocabulary skills*. To search for literature on learning how to read, I used search terms such as *best*

*practices in reading, early reading instruction, inclusive classrooms, phonemic awareness, and phonics.* For factors that hinder young children from reaching grade level competency in early grades, I searched *language skills, literacy, obesity, proficiency in reading, reading fluency, and reading scores.* To locate literature in the stages of reading, I used keywords *struggling readers, teachers' perspective in reading, teaching reading tips, and vocabulary skills.*

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework that supports this study of the declining student performance in K-3 reading was grounded in Chall's (1999) "conventional wisdom" of reading instruction. Chall suggested that children should read for meaning from the start, using context and pictures clues to identify words after learning sight words, and encourage letter sounds from these words. Chall asserted that teachers' direction instruction must prioritize phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary usage, and learning how to read with fluency as the keys to developing literacy skills. Chall suggested that teachers' perspectives should be addressed if administrators, political leaders, and community advocates are concerned about the decline of reading scores in K-3 since 2018. In addition, a well-designed learning environment with multiple ways for students to experience reading and express themselves in reference to what they have read, creates a positive effect on reading development. When children progress through the stages of reading development, they develop a progression of skills and abilities that changes over time as they mature (Chall & Snow, 1988).



According to Indrisano and Chall (1995), children first learn to read and then read to learn. Goodman and Goodman (2013) supported Chall's theory that children learn to read different texts at different levels as they develop language and cognitive abilities needed to comprehend more difficult texts. The key concept under study is to examine the phenomenon that the academic performance in reading is at a decline in K-3 children make sense of print and thereby make sense of things provided the groundwork to define this phenomenon. However, researchers revealed that students' reading comprehension is connected to their ability to read text fluently and accurately, and to their ability to recognize and decode words (Hiebert & Daniel, 2019; Schwartz, 2019). The current study will benefit from this framework by examining teachers' perspectives regarding the decline in the reading performance of students in third grade.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables**

#### **Third Grade as a Milestone in Reading Mastery**

Learning to read is one of the most important skills to acquire in early childhood and equips children with a vital tool for lifelong learning (Schmitterer & Brod, 2021). According to the department of education in the study state, literacy acquisition is grounded in the science of reading and is implemented in early grades through a structured literacy model. The science of reading refers to the cognitive and linguistic aspect of reading based on reading experts' research on how we learn to read (Hindman et al, 2020). Semingson and Kerns (2021) explored the six developmental stages of teaching reading mastery to children from 6 months to 18 years. These include prereading

activities, such as using visuals to introduce or prompt a child's vocabulary and background knowledge, and early language skills, including decoding, introduced in the home environment. Young children's growth in social communication is vital because it helps a child connect with other people, learn language, and play concepts to set the stage for learning to read and future success in school (Chiu, 2018; Wetherby, 2019).

Vernon-Feagans (2022) argued that children need literacy-rich resources in the home (picture-books, letters and sounds, alphabetic models) to help support their early literacy skill development. Through engaging in language-rich conversation with parents, relatives, educators, and other caregivers, children overall learning outcome relates to their literacy trajectories starting from infancy to Pre-K and above (McDowell et al., 2018; Page et al, 2021). From a very early age, children begin to hone their reading abilities even before they embark on their academic journey (Nicholas & Rouse, 2020). Further stages include the ability to recognize familiar words quickly, the ability to figure out a new word independently, and curiosity in knowing how words are formed and used. Grammar and vocabulary are two crucial components of reading comprehension from early childhood through the upper grades, according to Jiang et al. (2018). These components are influenced by a child's natural and inheritable universe (Jiang et al., 2018, p. 910).

Children's ability to read and understand words depends on their knowledge of alphabetic expression (knowing letter names and forms), pronunciation (sounds and meanings), alphabetic sequence (using grapheme/phoneme), and letter sounds that

encompass to learn word meanings and grammatical function in early grades (Booth et al., 2019; Graham et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020). As reported by (Jiang et al. 2018), from early primary grade children's language development path is influenced by both genetic and environmental factors. In 2018, Inoue et al. revealed the importance of developmental relationships between the home learning environment, developing literacy skills (phonological awareness, vocabulary, alphabet knowledge), and reading with correctness and smoothness for children across grade levels. In the home literacy environment, parents teach their children the alphabets with sounds, read and discussed books, the concept of phonological awareness by identifying and manipulating units of sounds in oral language, and reading at a fast rate with automaticity.

Overall, in the home environment, parent teaching best supported letter knowledge and phonological awareness, whereas shared book reading is associated with vocabulary knowledge and the rate of saying word correctly. Moreover, the environmental concept of home literacy pathway enhanced reading comprehension in grade 2 and 3; in grade 1 home literacy had indirect effects on reading accuracy and fluency (Inoue et al., 2018). To support the importance of parent involvement and home literacy environment, Steiner et al. (2021) revealed book sharing simulates home literacy environment and their experiences provide a meaningful background for learning to read. Once children learn to read, with parents listening and supporting their children's reading positively boost improvements in literacy achievement (Mason et al., 2019; Steiner et al., 2021).

When young children transition to kindergarten, according to the department of education in the study state, they begin to learn to read by recognizing the letters of the alphabet and the sounds of letters, to build their vocabulary thorough read-aloud and hands on activities. Recognizing letters names and their sounds is a major development for young children the United States (Carr et al., 2020). In addition, letter knowledge is a skill that young children are often expected to know by the end of kindergarten. Therefore, these skills are also considered as a component of children's emergent literacy development. In first grade, children in the study state are taught how to connect letter patterns and sounds to reading and writing words, as well as vocabulary building in learning how to read and write familiar sight words, according to the study state's department of education.

In building vocabulary, Georgiou et al. (2020) stated that reading and spelling skills are interrelated because they both depend on linguistic skills, such as, phonological awareness, orthographic knowledge (spoken language in written form), and morphological awareness. In other words, (Coyne et al., 2022; Georgiou et al. 2020) children build their vocabulary knowledge through reading and spelling instruction and experiences during the early stages of literacy development (grapheme/phonemes). Prior to calling out words, children must understand the phonological processing by mentally associating the sound of words structure with spoken language (Bowers, 2021; Grimm et al., 2018); then apply these skills to decoding words. Notably, in Grade 1 children are encouraged to break words into syllables and sound it out into letters. In many first-grade

classrooms, students use decoding skills to translate from what is written to what is spoken (Moses & Qiao, 2018). However, Park et al, (2020) found that students who have problems with decoding battle to acquire deep knowledge with multisyllabic words during reading instruction.

In second grade children read longer texts, build vocabulary through reading fiction and non-fiction text. These skills are outlined nationally by the Common Core State Standards, according to the department of education in the study state. Puliatte and Ehri (2018) reported that in order for teachers to teach reading and spelling effectively at the second-grade level; teacher need to have knowledge of English orthography, phonemic awareness, and morphological awareness. In some cases, instructional manuals are created for teachers to follow to teach foundational and essential reading skills. Ramirez et al. (2019) reported that learning to read is known to be a developmentally challenging and multifarious task.

Reading is the foundation for successful academic learning. Therefore, teachers must identify struggling readers and implement appropriate instruction and reading strategies to support students becoming skill readers (Sutter et al., 2019). In third grade, children in the study state learn to read and read to learn, also children learn how to begin to think, write critically, and learn how to figure out the meaning of words while reading a text, according to the study state's department of education. The Common Core Standards for Grade 3 emphasizes the importance of close reading. Close reading involves students unpacking the implicit relationships within and across sentences in a

text (Mariage et al., 2020). In close reading, children read a text several times to determine what the text says, the main idea, and details in informational text. This is how the reader interacts with the text. At the third-grade level, reading comprehension is the ultimate goal of incorporating skills such as vocabulary knowledge, making inferences, and text structure to deeper understand the text (Hudson, Owens et al., 2021). In 2001, The United States Department of Education supported the Reading First Initiative presented by President George W. Bush to ensure that every child learn to read by third grade, noting, that children will receive assistance in reading before they fail too far behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

### **Third-grade Evidence of Lack of Reading Mastery**

By fourth grade, children should have mastered basic reading skills because the focus on reading changes from learning to read to reading to learn (Gutierrez et al., 2022). Students who are not reading on grade level at the end of third grade are likely to struggle as they progress in school, according to the department of education in the study state. In addition, according to the department of education in the study state, since 2017, 17% of fourth graders performed below the proficient level and in 2019 NAEP reported that only 35% of all fourth graders scored proficient in reading.

In the state that is the focus of this study, according to its department of education, all third graders in public school must pass a reading test in order to be considered for promotion to the fourth grade. A summative assessment is administered each spring to determine students' minimum level of competency in reading. If a student

fails the third-grade assessment, they have the opportunity to retest two more times. However, according to the provisions of the Literacy-Based Promotion Act, a student who fails the reading test may qualify for an exemption and be promoted to the fourth grade even though they lack the ability to read (RMC Research Corporation, 2019).

Third-grade students in the study state were not tested in reading in 2020 because of the pandemic, according to the state's department of education. In 2021, the assessment was given, but the need to achieve a passing score was waived so no retests were given. Notably, in the spring of 2022, 73.9% of third graders passed and 26.1% failed the state assessment on the first try, according to the department of education in the study state. With third grade being a critical point for many students in the United States, Smith et al. (2019) found that tracking the performance and reading growth of students on third-grade assessment can benefit instruction and identify students at risk for failing to reach the proficiency level in reading.

In 2013, the Literacy-Based Promotion Act was designed to guarantee educators had a comprehensive approach to teaching all children to read as early as kindergarten (RMC Research Corporation, 2019). The focus of this law was to identify students in K-3 who need extra help in reading. In addition, the law required educators to provide operative instruction and intervention to confirm students could read on grade level by the end of third grade (RMC Research Corporation, 2019). Paige et al. (2019) posited that poor academic outcomes are a consequence of a large percentage of students leaving third grade with inadequately developed foundational skills. Fourth grade represents a

significant transition in children’s learning, for which many students are unprepared (Gullo & Impellizeri, 2021).

Many students are unable to make this transition because of the lack of reading mastery prior to fourth-grade entrance. The “fourth-grade slump” describes children falling behind in their academic performance and failing to make the transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” (Gullo & Impellizeri, 2021). Lack of reading ability in fourth grade affects a student’s ability to learn from texts across all subject areas. Students’ achievement at the end of 2020-21 school year compared to pre-pandemic levels showed mathematics scores suffered a huge decline, so that students’ achievement in Grades 3 to 5 was lower than expected in reading and mathematics for all grades (Lewis et al., 2021).

### **K-3 Interventions to Develop Third-Grade Reading Skill**

For many young children, prekindergarten and kindergarten are the first years of formal education, which indicates how third- and fourth-grade performance will be influenced (Gullo & Impellizeri, 2021). A primary objective of policy and research is to identify entry level competencies that support academic success (Burchinal et al., 2020). Three times a year, students in kindergarten through third grade complete a universal screener and diagnostic examination that focuses on the growth of individuals. The following screening tools have been approved for use in schools in the study state: FAST Adaptive Reading, CBM Reading, and early reading English for Grades K-12; I–Ready for Grades K-12; I station Indicator of Progress (ISIP) for Grades K-5; Class Reading 3D



for Grades K-3; Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), growth for Grades K-2; MAP for Grades 2-10; STAR Early Literacy for Grades PK-3; and STAR Reading for Grade 1 (Beck, 2020). Another evaluation tool that educators employ is called DIBELS, which tracks or measures children's oral reading fluency scores and calculates whether they will pass their state test (Smith et al., 2020).

To measure reading and literacy outcomes prior to the transition to kindergarten, it is crucial, according to Kincaid et al. (2018), to evaluate early literacy gains in preschoolers. Common Core Standards are used in the study state to direct instruction in reading skills development, reading literacy instruction, and informational text reading as students move from kindergarten to first grade, building on foundational reading skills to achieve sufficient mastery before moving on to the following grade, according to the state's department of education. Also, second graders in school districts in the study state take the STAR assessment, a computer-based adaptive test run via Renaissance Learning that measures students' proficiency in reading and arithmetic (Sutter et al., 2019). Technology is used in schools for assessments, which, according to Sutter et al. (2019), helps children who struggle with reading. A kindergarten readiness evaluation, according to (Beck, 2020), is used to evaluate and enhance the quality of prekindergarten programs for four-year-old children. Based on literacy skills and standardized testing, the end of kindergarten and the third grade are important zones in early learning (Gullo & Impellizeri, 2021).

Based on the revision of the Literacy-Based Promotion Act in 2016, all students who exhibit a deficiency in reading must have an individualized reading plan, and teachers must pass a foundational reading test (RMC Research Corporation, 2019). Partanen et al. (2019) stated that third-grade students need an intensive reading intervention in place to decrease reading deficits before entering fourth grade. In addition, teachers must attend statewide training, reading coaches must be available in schools, and specific intervention services must be provided to ensure specialized instruction for students with a deficiency in reading (RMC Research Corporation, 2019). All teachers must know how to teach foundational skills such as phonics, vocabulary, phonic awareness, fluency, and reading comprehension to build better readers (Folsom et al., 2019; Hudson, Moore et al., 2021).

The department of education in the study state has designated the Common Core Standards Anchor Standards for each grade level across the curriculum. In reading, prekindergarten (four-year-old), students should have mastered specific reading standards for literature, including the ability to retell familiar stories, ask and answer questions with details, be actively engaged in shared reading experiences, to apply foundational skills of phonological awareness, print concepts, and picture reading, according to the department of education in the study state (Donegan & Wanzek, 2021). Williams et al. (2019) asserted that children who receive early education in programs such as Head Start and preschool, are likely to be successful in kindergarten and throughout elementary school.

In addition, Vadasy and Sanders (2021) found a key skill for reading improvement between first and second grade is cognitive flexibility which correlates with emergent literacy skills and reading specific. Reading is an unnatural and relatively recent human activity, and one that is difficult for some children to master (Vadasy & Sanders, 2021). According to Ehri (2020), readers move through four developmental stages to acquire knowledge in reading, writing, and vocabulary building; these stages include grapheme-phoneme knowledge, phonemic breakdown, syllabic and morphemic spelling-sound units, and spelling. The ability to read depends strongly on explicit and systematic phonics instruction (Sanden et al., 2021).

### **Known Barriers to Reading Mastery**

The National Assessment of Education Progress data disclosed that only 35% of fourth-grade students read at or above the proficient level, and 34% read below the mastery level (Hindman et al., 2020). Some barriers that are known to hinder elementary reading instruction include characteristics of individual children, factors of children's home life and neighborhood, and instructional factors that interfere with teaching of essential reading skills in the classroom (Zucker et al., 2019). The characteristics of individual children may offer challenges to learning to read. These characteristics include such factors as unfamiliarity with English, problems of attention, and lack of exposure to reading (Hlas et al., 2019; Zucker et al., 2019). For example, Hall et al. (2019) found that ELL students with difficulties with reading comprehension tend to struggle in the areas of vocabulary knowledge and linguistic skills, which affect their reading comprehension.

According to Alshahrani (2019), vocabulary is an essential skill for ELL students to achieve when learning to read. The challenges come when words sound alike, have different spellings, and different meanings, because ELL students use their native language to connect with other languages when it comes to reading, writing, and comprehension (Alshahrani, 2019; Wood et al., 2021). Hindman et al. (2020) reported approximately 65% of ELL pupils scored at the basic reading level. In addition, ELL students' difficulties with verbal communication might limit their capacity for self-expression in both written and spoken language, which has an effect on their reading comprehension in general classrooms regarding their specific linguistic and cultural strengths (Gupta, 2019; de Jong & Naranjo, 2019).

It is possible that failing to pay attention in class causes poor reading results. Cicekci and Sadik (2019) claimed that paying attention is a mental skill that deals with the capacity for concentration and focus on certain information. For example, failing to pay attention leads to communication issues and careless reading that could cause misunderstandings (Cicekci & Sadik, 2019; Hlas et al., 2019). Eisensmith et al. (2022) found that results from standardized tests, classroom behavior, and teachers' observations all supported the claim that prekindergarten and elementary students' inattentiveness has a damaging effect on their reading abilities. Francis et al. (2019) reported a connection between insufficient attention and unsatisfactory reading with some children. Chen et al. (2021) found that children's poor attention level has a negative influence on their academic achievement in the areas of reading and spelling performance.

In addition, the lack of exposure to reading can have negative effects on children's ability to read. According to Schwartz and Sparks (2019), written language is considered to be a code, and children need to be exposed to a variety of letter combinations that reflect sounds to enable them to crack the code and learn how to read words (Hlas et al., 2019). Gay et al. (2021) asserted that many children lack exposure to various reading materials to develop success in reading. To ensure exposure to a variety of reading material, children should be encouraged to read nonfiction books, novels, magazines, comic books, newspapers, and recipes, instructions, and other action-specific reading matter, to increase their familiarity with the format and content typical with different types of reading materials (Samsuddin et al., 2019). According to Grolig et al. (2019), young children's development of language skills may be positively influenced by exposure to shared storybooks and a literacy environment that can foster vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension in primary grades. Spear-Swerling (2019) asserted that all children could become good readers if more classroom instructional time were allocated for oral and silent reading; immersion in reading helps children decode print material, read with fluency, develop vocabulary skills, and increase comprehension. When children are given more time to read aloud, they benefit because they can be supported by the listener in figuring out unfamiliar words and can get feedback from the listener, which improves children's reading comprehension (Kosanovich et al., 2021; Young-Suk et al., 2019). As Young-Suk et al. (2019) pointed out, oral reading takes time, especially in a classroom of many children who need reading support. Lack of time and

opportunity for supported practice in reading a variety of written materials can be a barrier for reading mastery (Mason et al., 2019).

Factors of children's home life and neighborhood may also become barriers to children's success in reading. These factors, including socioeconomic status, parental education background, and family instability, may hinder reading mastery. Anderson et al. (2021) reported that parents' low SES and low parental education can negatively influence their children's reading performance if parents do not understand the importance of their children's reading ability in early grades. Reading is a cognitive skill that is supported by quality literacy interactions between parents and their children (Anderson et al., 2021; Canfield et al., 2022). According to Davis-Kean et al. (2021), parental expectations for children's academic success are communicated, by parents both explicitly but also by implication, so that children of poorly educated parents may absorb the idea that education and reading are unimportant. These lessons in the value of learning are transmitted at home, long before children are enrolled in kindergarten and elementary school (Dini et al., 2019). In addition, when children experience multiple issues, so that the effects of low parental education are compounded by low household income, they are at risk for low reading achievement and poor academic development (Carignan et al., 2021; Waters et al., 2020). Children who live in households experiencing financial stress and family disruption may have problems with focusing on a task, remembering what they learned, and following instructions in class (Waters et al., 2020). According to Cavanagh and Fomby (2019), changes in parents' workplace and the

instability of family structure can cause children stress and disrupt how they develop mentally and socially. Children experience insecurity when their parents become unemployed, when in the family must relocate to a different area or becomes homeless, and when the family structure changes through their parents' divorce, remarriage, incarceration, or death (Dini et al., 2019; Lehri et al., 2020).

Instructional factors that contribute to barriers to reading mastery include teacher preparation, inattention to relevant data, and lack of teacher support. Namen (2021) reported that teachers must pass a licensure examination in most states to gain educator licensure to teach in America's classrooms. According to Putman and Walsh (2021), however, only 23 states require training of early education and primary grade teachers in emergent literacy and oral language, meaning that more than half of the states do not require training of teachers that might support children's early literacy skill. In addition, Darling-Hammond (2020) reported that one-third of new teachers did not complete any teacher preparation program and received an emergency license to teach with no preparation at all. According to Hudson, Moore et al. (2021), insisting that educators be prepared to teach core literacy skills, like phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics, and word recognition, would lead to better reading results for students. Hindman et al. (2020) and Trumbull et al. (2020) argued that teachers should be provided with professional development and coaching sessions on new reading instruction practices. The lack of teacher training and preparation means children may not be provided with effective instruction to learn the foundational reading skills (Moon & Young, 2018).

Trumbull et al., (2020) stated that to eliminate conflicts and implement instructional practices that benefit all students, teachers must create a culturally responsive classroom.

Schildkam et al. (2020) claimed that when reporting assessment data, the main concern is how teachers utilize data to enhance student learning and to influence instruction. When data are used to make decisions about specific pupils, children will receive the higher quality education they deserve (Gleason et al., 2019; Vanlommel & Schidkamp, 2019). According to Skinner (2019), it is essential to review student data after each evaluation for tracking and advancing students' progress. To select the most effective instructional technique for tackling reading issues across all subject areas, Ehri (2020) argued that teachers must review data and monitor evaluations. However, Oliver et al. (2020) reported that the use of data does not always prompt teachers to change their practices but inspires them to look for quick solutions to yield an immediate increase in scores. Teachers often do not demonstrate that they are interested in modifying their instruction based on test results, and they may lack confidence in ways to interpret and use the data in a way that will result in engaging lessons that have the power to remediate assessed deficiencies (Denton et al., 2020; Little et al., 2019). To help teachers build their ability to use data to raise student scores in targeted subject areas, Locton et al. (2020) and Stockard (2020) contended that school districts stakeholders and administrators must collaborate to offer teachers a support system. In the end, teachers should regularly evaluate students' data to identify and improve their instructional approaches, tailor



instruction to each student's particular needs, and help all students become proficient readers by third grade (Gleason et al., 2019; Keller et al., 2020).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Although legislation intended to improve reading achievement was passed in 2013 in the state that is the focus of this study, many third-grade students still struggle with reading. According to Vernon-Feagans (2022), to achieve reading mastery, children need practice in associating letters and sounds, vocabulary-building resources such as conversations and picture-books, and practice in reading to develop their comprehension and fluency skills. Struggling readers may lack development of these key literacy skills because of lack of teacher training in instruction (Putman & Walsh, 2021), ineffective use of assessment data (Smith et al., 2020), and lack of support at home (Dini et al., 2019). If students are not reading on grade level by the end of third grade are likely to struggle throughout school (Gutierrez et al., 2022; He, 2022). In Chapter 3, I described the method by which I explored teacher perspectives regarding these issues, including the study's research design and rationale, my role as the researcher, and the method by which I conducted the study, encompassing participant selection, instrumentation, and my data analysis plan. Chapter 3 was concluded with evidence of the study's trustworthiness, and ethical procedures I followed.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of K-3 teachers working in a rural elementary school district regarding a decline since 2018 in the reading performance of students in third grade in one state in the southern United States. Chapter 3 includes information about the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, and the methodology of the study, including information regarding the process for participant recruitment, instrumentation, data collection, and the data analysis plan. I address issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures and ended with a chapter summary.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do K-3 teachers in the study district describe children's skill in phonemic awareness and phonics skills, and teachers' use of instruction to remedy any skill deficits?

RQ2: How do K-3 teachers in the study district describe children's skill in vocabulary usage, and teachers' use of instruction to remedy any skill deficits?

RQ3: How do K-3 teachers in the study district describe children's skill in reading fluency, and teachers' use of instruction to remedy any skill deficits?

The phenomenon of interest in this study was the decline of third grade reading performance in the study state since 2018. I used a basic qualitative design, as described by Caelli et al. (2003) to explore this phenomenon. Qualitative research, according to

Caelli et al. (2003), aims to identify and comprehend a phenomenon based on the viewpoints and worldviews of those involved. A research tradition is based on interviews is appropriate to understand and learn more about an experience or event (Caelli, et al., 2003). To explore the decline of third grade reading performance in the study state since 2018, I conducted interviews with teachers to get their perspectives and draw knowledge from their experiences.

Interviews were suitable for this study because they provided me a window into participants' real-life experiences (McGrath et al., 2019). Open-ended questions in individual conversations created a rich set of information on which results were based. As an alternative, a survey could have been used to gather information from teachers, but surveys cannot produce the rich or contextualized data required to respond to the research questions and the study's purpose, and surveys could only measure what was previously known (see Busetto et al, 2020; see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Although group interviews in a focus group was another option, my study did not lend itself to this design because group interviews can lead to a group discussion, may not have provided the rich data on personal experiences of individual teachers, and could have been less suitable for discussing delicate subjects that participants might have been unwilling to share in a group environment (Busetto et al., 2020). An examination of district records, curriculum, and teacher's lesson plans might have been able to discern patterns of practice that contributed to the problem that is at the heart of this study, but this method of document analysis would not have provided insight into the perspectives of classroom teachers in

their lived work (see Zhao & Watterston, 2021). In sum, use of a basic qualitative study with interviews offered an opportunity to inform this study and fulfill its purpose.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role as researcher was as an observer. As an observer my task was to ask questions and build a rapport with participants; observe participants' body language, hesitations, and facial expressions; and collect and analyze the data with fidelity. My current professional role as a lead teacher for sixth grade teachers enabled me to collaborate with teachers and students daily regarding teaching and learning. As a lead teacher, my job is to coteach, assist teachers in planning lessons, provide educational resources, model lessons, and to provide instructional coaching for teachers one-on-one to improve students' learning. Finally, my role as a lead teacher is to teach a sixth-grade learning strategy language arts class two periods a day. I have worked in this role for 6 years at one school in the district that is the focus of this study. I started my career in education as an assistant teacher and later became a certified teacher. My educational background and teaching practices as a sixth-grade teacher sparked my concern in learning more about the importance in kindergarten and primary grades of teaching foundational skills in reading. These skills included phonemic awareness and phonics skills, vocabulary, and fluency. After observing year after year, the decline in the number of successful readers, I decided to become a change agent in my district. I enrolled in graduate school to study early childhood education, and to explore the perspectives and experiences of teachers who taught reading in early grades.

None of the study participants worked in the same school as the one in which I worked. We knew each other only from an annual district-wide meeting with the superintendent and central office staff. I do not supervise or provide any instruction or advice to K-3 teachers. I do not hold any power or influence over anyone who might have volunteered to be a participant. I took care to not inject my individual experiences into the interview conversations but listened to participant teachers' perspectives as they respond to posed interview questions. To reduce the effect of other ethical concerns, I ensured all participants that their identities are kept confidential in data collection and study reports, and their perspectives would be recorded accurately, without judgment, and without identifiable attribution. I assured participants that my position is only to explore teachers' perspectives regarding the decline of student performance in reading, and to learn from those things I did not know about teaching in kindergarten through third grade.

To manage any biases, I brought to this study, I used a reflective journal to document my thoughts about the interviews and participants' responses, and to provide an appropriate location in which to isolate these thoughts from the data (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). It was important that I manage my own opinions when performing this research because I was a main instrument for collecting data. I was careful to listen intently to the participants, refrained from interjecting my thoughts or judgments, and made sure the setting was appropriate for the interview process, as described by Ravitch and Carl (2021). Reflexivity, according to Mahon and O'Neill (2020), necessitates time,

effort, and a readiness to question one's own behavior, fundamental beliefs, and values. It was my duty to be receptive to and learn from participants' actual experiences.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection**

This basic qualitative study was designed to gain insights into the participants' knowledge of the phenomenon by sharing their experiences and perspectives on the topic of declining K-3 reading performance. The population that was the focus of this study included K-3 teachers in rural elementary schools in the southern United States. I used purposeful sampling to identify volunteers who worked at one of three schools in a rural district in the study state. Each of these schools enrolled students in K-6 with three teachers per grade level, creating a pool of prospective participants of 36 teachers (three teachers in each of four grade levels K-3 in three different schools). I intended to interview 10 to 12 participants, with a balanced number of teachers across the four grade levels and three school buildings. According to Hennink and Kaiser (2022) 10 to 12 interview participants is sufficient to achieve data saturation. Saturation validates the sample size, and sample size data creates saturation (Guest et al., 2020). Saturation occurs based on the amount of data collected from the sample size, and sample size refers to the size of the participant pool that will be most useful in a study for collecting adequate data (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). In addition, depending on the population sample size, Guest et al. (2020) reported that saturation might be reached in as few as six interviews. I was able to interview 10 teachers.

Participants were identified from a school staff roster published in each school's newsletter. I contacted each teacher via email to invite them to participate in the study. As prospective participants replied to my email, I emailed them a consent for them to review. Both the recruitment email and the consent form outlined inclusion criteria for participants. If individuals wished to participate, they were directed in the consent form to reply via email with the words, "I consent."

### **Instrumentation**

In this basic qualitative study, I used interviews for the data collection process because interviews supported the purpose of the study. I created 10 open-ended interview questions, based on the study's conceptual framework, relative to my three RQs to allow participants to share their lived experiences regarding the research study. Interview question 1 (IQ1) was to begin the conversation leading into the discussion to guide this study. IQ2 was about how children's ability to read depends on their knowledge of letter expression and pronunciation of words. IQ3 asked how teachers teach the decoding skills they described in IQ2. IQ1, IQ2, and IQ3 were associated with RQ1 because they related to perspectives and delivery of instruction surrounding decoding. IQ4 and IQ5 were associated with students' level of vocabulary knowledge and what teaching strategies teachers used to build vocabulary (IQ5). These two interview questions were associated with RQ2, regarding children's vocabulary and teachers' instruction. IQ6 and IQ7 asked about students' level of fluency (IQ6) and their ability to comprehend what they read (IQ7). IQ8 asked how teachers support children's development of fluency and

comprehension; these three interview questions (IQ6, IQ7, and IQ8) helped to address RQ3, regarding how teachers viewed students' reading fluency and their instruction to build fluency and comprehension. IQ9 asked teachers to describe in general the strategies they think work best in helping children learn to read well and informed any of the three RQs. IQ10 asked teachers directly about the decline in reading scores in the study district since 2018, and what they thought could be done to reverse that trend. The association of research and interview questions are illustrated in Figure 1.

To establish content validity, I asked an expert in the field to evaluate the effectiveness of my interview questions based on my study and the research questions. I had a conversation with a former instructor at Walden University, who holds a doctorate in education, to review my interview questions considering the study's purpose and research questions. They advised me to focus on the research questions and make sure the interview questions were aligned with them, so the research questions could be answered with the interview data. Following that advice, I did not revise my interview questions because they were determined to be clear and well-aligned to collect the data desired.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

My target participants were elementary teachers in my district who taught reading. I emailed an invitation to all teachers in grades K-3 from each district elementary school using the email address assigned to each teacher in the district.



**Figure 1***Research Questions and Associated Interview Questions*

Research Question	Interview Questions
<p>RQ1: How do K-3 teachers in the study district describe children's skill in phonemic awareness and phonics skills, and teachers' use of instruction to remedy any skill deficits?</p>	<p>1: Introduction to the topic of the interview</p> <p>2: Children's knowledge of letter expression and pronunciation of words</p> <p>3: How teachers teach the decoding skills they described in IQ2</p>
<p>RQ2: How do K-3 teachers in the study district describe children's skill in vocabulary usage, and teachers' use of instruction to remedy any skill deficits?</p>	<p>4: Introduction to the topic of the interview</p> <p>5: Introduction to the topic of the interview</p>
<p>RQ3: How do K-3 teachers in the study district describe children's skill reading fluency, and teachers' use of instruction to remedy any skill deficits?</p>	<p>6: Teachers' perspectives of children's reading fluency</p> <p>7: Teachers' perspectives of children's ability to comprehend what they read</p> <p>8: How teachers support children's development of fluency and</p>
<p>All RQs</p>	<p>9: Strategies teachers think work best in helping children learn to read well</p> <p>10: Teachers' perspectives about the decline in reading scores in the study district since 2018, and what they think could be done to reverse that trend</p>

handbook. As teachers responded with an indication of interest, I emailed them a consent form. Teachers who wished to volunteer replied to my email with the consent form with

the words, “I consent.” I scheduled an interview with each teacher, on a mutually convenient day and time outside of school hours. When I reached my target number of 10 consenting volunteers, I thanked any subsequent volunteers and informed them that I had filled all the interview slots, but their name would be held in reserve in case a scheduled interviewee withdraws. No one withdrew, so I did not use any of the reserved volunteers.

Interviews were conducted by cell phone or by Zoom, depending on the preference of each participant. I audio recorded the interviews, using Zoom tools or a recording application on my phone. As each interview was in progress, I used a reflexive journal to write notes as needed regarding participants’ answers, current ideas that occurred to me, and probing questions to extend the conversation in depth.

I transcribed the audio files using an automated transcription tool, Otter.ai. I then reviewed each transcription and made corrections of errors, referring as needed to the audio file. I sent the finished transcripts to each participant, so they could review their transcript and confirm its accuracy or request changes. I waited 1 week for participants’ input on their transcript. No one requested any changes, so I used my edited transcripts as the basis for data analysis.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Thematic analysis was used to first extract codes and then organize them into themes, using data from interview transcripts. I began my analysis by reading the corrected or confirmed transcripts to get a general sense of the issues participants raised. Saldana (2021) stated that it is an innovative idea to use this precoding process to make

an initial identification of similarities and differences in the data, by highlighting, circling, underlining, color-coding, and bolding directly on each participant's transcript. I also inserted in brackets any clarifications or editorial changes necessary to improve the sense of a participant's statement or to preserve confidentiality. For example, if a participant uses a child's name, I replaced that in brackets with something like "the child." At this time, I assigned each participant a code, such as P1, P2, and so on, to replace their name in all files going forward. A file that associated these code names with participants' actual names are kept separate from other data in a unique folder on my computer. I then created a spreadsheet using Microsoft Excel to receive participants' transcripts and facilitate coding.

The spreadsheet included three columns: the first column indicating the code name of the participant who said something, the second column the raw data from each transcript separated into individual thought units with one thought per spreadsheet row, and the third column contained my preliminary categories. I prepared each transcript in Word for transfer to Excel by first removing my own questions and comments, and any extraneous parts of the conversation, such as talk about the weather. I then separated the transcript into individual sentences by inserting a line break at the end of each sentence. I eliminated any indents, so all sentences were with the left margin. I then copied and pasted the entire transcript into the second Excel column, which automatically placed each sentence in its own row. I added the participant's code name into each row for every row of their transcribed data, so that each row was identified in the first column with who

said the sentence in the second column. I continued in this manner with the remaining transcripts, creating a single spreadsheet that included all data in the second column, and participant identifiers in the first column.

According to Saldana (2021), a code is a short phrase that captures relevant data. I used in vivo coding to assess each participant's verbatim words or phrases, to determine the relevance of a sentence to the study's purpose, and divided sentences as needed to ensure that only a single idea was offered in each sentence. The resulting series of sentences, on rows in the transcript column, constituted codes. Next, I read the sentences in the transcript column and considered what was the point or idea distilled from each sentence. This idea I inserted in the preliminary category column for each sentence. Saldana (2012) suggested that in axial coding, a researcher look for patterns that link each participant to specific concepts. I used an emergent process of categorization and did not attempt to shape the data to pre-existing expectations of categories. I tried to standardize my assignment of ideas in the preliminary category column, to arrive at identifiable patterns in the data. Then, I used Excel's sort function to sort all the data by preliminary category.

I was alerted during this process to codes that did not seem to fit any category, and so might be discrepant. Discrepant codes were set aside on the spreadsheet for later consideration. When I was satisfied with the coding and categories that I established, I used Excel's copy-and-insert function to move entire categories on the spreadsheet so related categories follow each other. In this way, I distilled themes that ran through the

data and included various categories of similar concepts. This process of grouping categories into coherent themes that are described by both Rubin and Rubin (2012) and Saldana (2021). Then, I used these themes to assist in answering the research questions. As indicated, I was prepared for any irregularities in the data. Discrepant data in an interview study, according to Saldana (2021), often involves removing data that seems irrelevant. If any contradictions from previous interview sessions appear, I will attempt to resolve the situation with other follow-up or probing questions to reexamine a data code, category, or theme (Saldana, 2021). Much of the data did not apply to any of the research question but seemed relevant to the problem of lack of reading mastery. These unexpected data were not discrepant but instead offered an opportunity for me to frame the problem in broader terms than simply skills deficits and instructional practices. No truly discrepant data were found in the study.

Discrepant data can be used to lead to new avenues of research, so it should be considered carefully (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

### **Trustworthiness**

Qualitative researchers followed explicit techniques that advocate the trustworthiness of their outcomes (Astroth & Chung, 2018). According to Nassaji (2020), quality standards have been created for qualitative research to evaluate the research's validity. The quality criteria for all qualitative research are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Credibility refers to the truth of the research finding of internal validity (Daniel, 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

The objective of qualitative research is not to apply the same results from one study to another but make suggestions based on the latest information (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I ensured credibility in my study by talking with participants to check their knowledge and experiences regarding my topic. I listened for in-depth details, patterns, and specific examples of shared practices used to describe their views. I ensured all data was carefully collected and analyzed for the purpose of answering the research questions.

Transferability relies on external validity; when results from the qualitative research can be transferred to broader setting or context to make comparisons (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). According to Cepni et al. (2018), in a qualitative study it is difficult to generalize results from a study, but transferability means to provide an explanation step by step of the process of how, where, and when the study was conducted. In my study, I have shared in detail the participants' experiences so others can make a comparison using the information provided to conduct a similar study.

Dependability refers to the consistency of findings over time are supported by the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To ensure dependability, I established a good rapport with the participants (see Bergen and Labonte, 2020) and created a comfortable boundary with them before and during the interview to confirm trust (see McGrath et al., 2019). I tried to talk less and listen more to the participants as they shared their lived experiences. In addition, in this report, I have been consistent and provided a detailed account of my experiences and assumptions regarding my topic (see Daniel, 2019).

Confirmability relates to the degree to which the findings can be confirmed by other researchers based on the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I established confirmability by describing and recording all the steps regarding the data collection and data coding process so they can be assessed in a way that will permit my study to be reproduced (Nassaji, 2020). In reporting the data, I established themes from the data, compared themes grounded in the data, and recorded direct quotes from participants to confirm raw data during the interview (see Xu & Zammit, 2020).

### **Ethical Procedures**

I applied for and received permission (approval 06-12-23-0140290) to conduct my study from Walden University's Institutional Review Board. I emailed the consent form to prospective participants and only interviewed volunteers who replied with "I consent." I kept the participants' identities and location of the study site confidential to protect the privacy of each participant and the community. I did not share the data with anyone except my committee members.

Data will be stored in a protected file on my personal computer using the internet with security measurements to allow participants to view the data from archival files by using their assigned password. I will preserve the participant data for at least 5 years following the study as required by Walden University. After 5 years, I will shred the paper file and will digitally remove the data from my computer.

## **Summary**

This study has addressed a problem with reading performance of K-3 students in the study state by focusing on Chall's belief that young children need direct instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary usage, and learning how to read with fluency to increase test score in reading. In Chapter 3, I described my role as the researcher, and my choice of a basic qualitative study with interviews as the research design. I described the methodology by which I conducted this study, including the process for recruitment and selecting participants, the instrument I used for data collection, and my data analysis plan. I addressed issues of trustworthiness and described the ethical procedures I followed to protect participants. In Chapter 4, I describe the results of this study.



## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of K–3 teachers working in a rural elementary school district regarding a decline since 2018 of students in third grade in one state in the southern United States. The RQs for this study were:

RQ1. How do K-3 teachers in the study district describe children’s skill in phonemic awareness and phonics skills, and teachers’ use of instruction to remedy any skill deficits?

RQ2: How do K-3 teachers in the study district describe children’s skill in vocabulary usage, and teachers; use of instruction to remedy any skill deficits?

RQ3: How do K-3 teachers in the study district describe children’s skill reading fluency, and teachers’ use of instruction to remedy any skill deficits?

Chapter 4 contains information on the study setting, data collection, data analysis, and final results to answer the research questions.

### **Setting**

This study was conducted in one state in the southeastern United States. The research was carried out in a rural district during the summer school session, when teachers from grades K–3 provided remediation and enrichment lessons for elementary students. All of the teachers in the study were females from a diverse social-cultural background. All teachers hold a valid teacher’s certification, and each participant currently teaches at an elementary school in the study district.

The air conditioning unit stopped working the day before the interviews, which made the building too hot to conduct them. Despite feeling disappointed, I managed to find several portable fans and set them up in a separate room to conduct the interviews. I was impressed that despite the intense heat in the building, all teachers agreed to participate in the study. The one-to-one interviews by Zoom were recorded in different rooms where the portable fans were set up, while I was in another building away from the teachers.

### **Data Collection**

I selected 10 participants for this study based on their employment as a K-3 classroom teacher in an elementary school in the study district in the southeastern region of the United States. For collecting data, I used semi structured interviews. I used in-depth qualitative interviews to gain understanding of the perspectives of 10 participants and to identify themes regarding teachers' perspectives related to the RQs. I used 10 open-ended interview questions and follow-up questions based on the study's conceptual framework. This allowed me to collect rich and detailed information related to teachers' perspectives regarding the decline of student performance in K-3 reading.

Each interview lasted no more than 45 minutes or less. I recorded the interviews using my Dell laptop computer software on Zoom. I used Otter.ai to transcribe the interviews. After the transcription was finalized, I shared with each participant via email their individual transcripts for accuracy. During the interview, I referred to my journal notebook with each participant's name on an interview question sheet to indicate and

highlight relevant responses to each interview question. I analyzed my notes to see how each participant data according to their lived experiences related to each of the interview questions.

The general information about each participant, gathered in an introduction to each other at the start of each interview, included their grade level taught. Participants 1, 2, and 9 taught grades K-1; participants 3, 4 and 7 taught grade 2; participants 5, 6, 8 and 10 taught grade 3. P1 and P6 were White teachers, and P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, and P10 were African American teachers.

**Table 1.**

*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Grade level taught	Race
P1	K-1st grade	White
P2	K-1st grade	African American
P3	2nd grade	African American
P4	2nd grade	African American
P5	3rd grade	African American
P6	3rd grade	White
P7	2nd grade	African American
P8	3rd grade	African American
P9	K-1st grade	African American
P10	3rd grade	African American

Participants were from four different schools. In summary, this study's data collection did not deviate from the process, and I upheld the confidentiality and fidelity of all participants and their point of view.

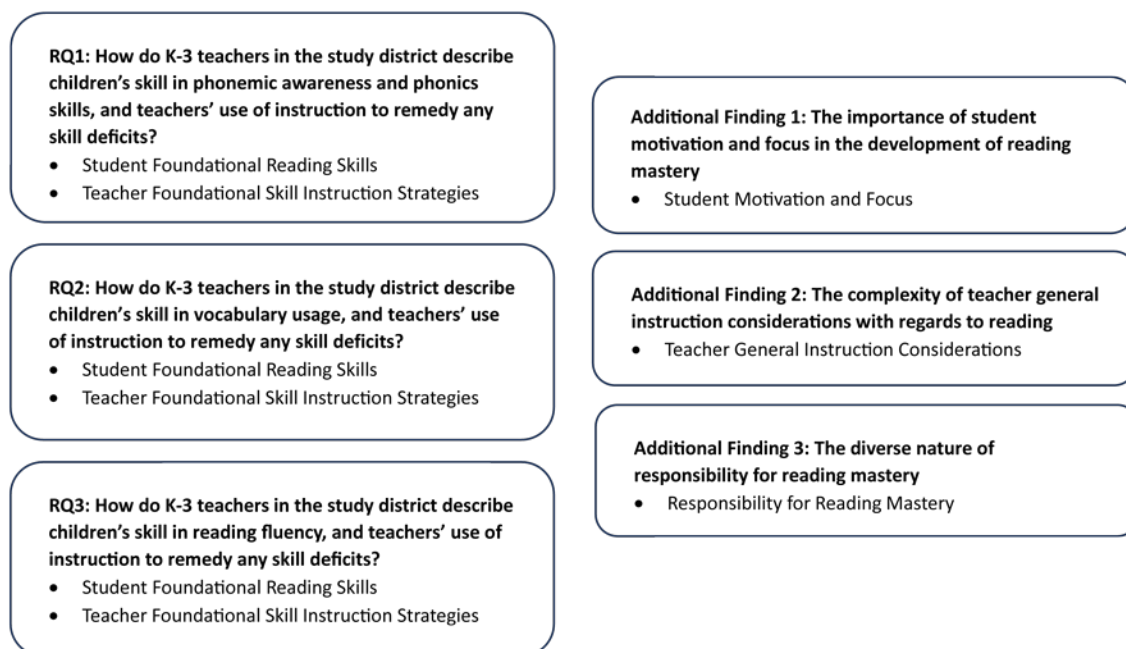
### **Data Analysis**

I followed the plan as described in Chapter 3, and generated 620 codes, 17 categories, and 5 themes. These categories cover a wide range of topics, including *assessment issues, comprehension instruction, comprehension skills, fluency instruction, fluency skills, instruction in general, levels of reading skill, parent responsibility, peer teaching, phonics instruction, phonics skills, student focus, student responsibility, teacher responsibility, time limitations, vocabulary instruction, and vocabulary skills*. I then grouped the 17 categories into five themes, including *student foundational reading skills, teacher foundational skill instruction strategies, teacher general instruction considerations, student motivation and focus, and responsibility for reading mastery*. Categories assigned to each theme were organized like so: the theme of student foundational reading skills included categories of comprehension skills, fluency skills, phonics skills, and vocabulary skills; the theme of teacher foundational skill instruction strategies included categories of comprehension instruction, fluency instruction, phonics instruction, and vocabulary instruction; the theme of teacher general instruction considerations included categories of assessment issues, instruction in general, levels of reading skill, and time limitations; the theme of student motivation and focus included categories of peer teaching and student focus; and the theme of responsibility for reading

mastery included categories of parent responsibility, student responsibility, and teacher responsibility. The organization of categories by theme is illustrated in Figure 1.

The research questions focused only on foundational reading skills and teachers' instruction of those skills. The themes of student foundational reading skills and teacher foundational skill instruction strategies therefore applied to all three RQs. Three additional findings emerged from the data, beyond the boundaries of the RQs. These additional findings included the importance of student motivation and focus on the development of reading mastery, the complexity of teacher general instruction considerations with regards to reading, and the diverse nature of responsibility for reading mastery. The connections among themes and research questions are illustrated in Figure 1.

Discrepant data are instances found throughout the data collection process that do not fit a predefined pattern to understand the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Many data did not apply to any of the research question but seemed relevant to the problem of lack of reading mastery. These unexpected data were not discrepant but instead offered an opportunity for me to frame the problem in broader terms than simply skills deficits and instructional practices. No truly discrepant data were found.

**Figure 1.***Themes and Categories by Research Question and Additional Findings***Results****Results for RQ1**

RQ1 asked, “How do K-3 teachers in the study district describe children’s skill in phonemic awareness and phonics skills, and teachers’ use of instruction to remedy any skill deficits?” The data included how teachers described students' skills in decoding words using sounds associated with letters of the alphabet and with combinations of letters, and skill in pronouncing words correctly, and how teachers teach phonics skills at their respective grade levels. Responses from participants regarding interview questions 2 and 3 were used to answer this question. Two themes

connected to this question are student foundational reading skills and teachers' foundational skill instruction strategies.

Foundational skills, such as knowing letter names and sounds, and being able to combine letter sounds to decode words, are essential for children to function in early grades. P9 stated, "If they're not familiar with the alphabet or whatever, they can easily miss pronounce a word." P9 continued, saying, "Challenges I face getting students to read is that they struggle with alphabetic recognition, they struggle with knowing the vowel sounds and they struggle with just phonemic awareness all together." P2 specified, "It goes with saying things like, the short vowel sounds and long vowel sounds, like the long vowel sound in *eight* and the short vowel sound in *apple*." P7 pointed out that "the problem comes when the letters have multiple sounds." P1 said, "They usually can sound out the words, it's when we start to blend it." For example, P1 shared, "Ch" makes a sound that goes together, why make it separate? So, going over the basic of the sounds and spending a lot of time on one sound." In addition, P7 reported, "When they make those other sounds and when they are paired with other letters, that's what causes them problems, because they don't have that foundation." P9 added, "And some kids struggle with just getting it sound, and you know, you have some students that struggle with sounding it out." P10 summed it up, saying, "They have a problem with decoding, breaking words down, and sounding out [words] as a whole."

According to P8, "If they don't have that phonics and decoding skill, they are

going to have a very hard time with vocabulary skills.” This leads to another factor regarding student foundational reading skills, decoding. P1 reported, “They can say the sounds, but then they can’t blend them, when they are having trouble reading, that’s one of the things I’ve noticed.” P8 replied, “decoding is being able to blend two sounds together to make a complete word.” P8 mentioned using something called blending cards, “when the student points at each letter they see, then they blend it together to make a word.” P1 said, “One letter is good when we start decoding; we need to make sure, they know how to blend sounds correctly to make a word.”

The second concept revealed from RQ1 is how teachers teach phonics skills per their respective grade level. P1 stated,

There are different techniques that I try to teach decoding skills. I try to write on little whiteboard, I love to be able to write on there and maybe go teach sound and maybe put a dot under the [sound], and then maybe draw a line to blend the sounds.

In addition, P1 shared, “Anything that gets them to use more than one modality to learn, not just hearing it, I want them to see it and I want them to touch it.” Whereas, P3 mentioned, we have [students] who may have to revisit those skills, and I may do that in a remediation block.” Some schools have phonics programs for teachers to use in teaching phonics. According to P4, “So, we have a phonics program. I’ll say we have a research-based phonics program that we use.” P5 mentioned, “We use the Elkonin boxes to teach phonics, it’s like a BINGO game.” P4 agreed, saying, “I use the Elkonin



counting boxes where we use our fingers to write in the air, I use my blending board for my visual learners.” P4 added, “We can touch the alphabet and say the sound, which helps a lot.” Participants believe that children will become good readers because of the phonics program.

P6 suggested a different approach: “I like to teach phonics myself. I have been using the phonics program they okayed through the state [education] department; we were trained on it. I’m not a big program person, and it is phenomenal.” P7 mentioned, “Most of the time, when they are reading, I encourage them to sound it out until you can put the sounds back together to say the word.” Some students do well, but P8 stated, “Those that are not grasping the concept, I constantly work with those students, and my assistants can pull aside those children who are struggling with the coding.” P10, a third-grade teacher stated, “We still have challenges, we do code reading in the classroom to practice the phonics in the time limit, I teach them through choral reading, we decode using patterns v-c-b, cc-v patterns, which is called syllabication.” P6 added, “There’s a lot of phoneme substitutions, vowel cards, and different things you do with children, you can call out words and they can hold up the vowel sound card.”

P9, a K-1 grade teacher, commented, “It always goes right back to the basics, alphabet recognition sounds, knowing the consonants, and going over sight words.” P1, another K-1 grade teacher, shared,

When I’m teaching them decoding, especially if I see they’re having problems with it, just going through the steps starting with phonemic awareness, like the

sounds. I'm also a speech therapist; actually, how you say this, like forming the [sounds] in your mouth correctly and how you say the word is very important.

P4, a first-grade teacher, noted, "I like to enlarge the print especially for my visual learners, and I add pictures with letters." P6, a third-grade teacher, reported,

I'm already playing with the words, flash cards, and you then put cards on the blending boards, and you take the card away and you add another one, they blend that and replace the ending sounds fast, and they get where they can blend it in and just start saying the word. It's amazing, this has been the best process for me.

In summary, P10 reiterated, "You have to be engaged in every way of communication."

The main objective of RQ1 was to determine how teachers teach decoding skills to assist with phonics and what they observe of students' master of phonics. According to these teachers, some students struggle with understanding phonics and the decoding process. To provide students with practice in decoding skills, teachers have implemented phonics lessons into their daily reading instructional time. They described using games, and interactive techniques to help students stay engaged in learning phonics and decoding. Teachers indicated that they have the resources they need to help students master phonics.

## **Results for RQ2**

RQ2 asked, "How do K-3 teachers in the study district describe children's skill in vocabulary usage, and teachers' use of instruction to remedy any skill deficits? The data included how teachers described students' skills in appropriate word usage, vocabulary

development, and how teachers teach vocabulary skills at their respective grade levels. I used participant responses from interview questions 4 and 5 to answer this question.

Themes that are connected to this question are student foundational reading skills and teacher foundational skill instruction strategies.

One goal of RQ2 was to determine the level of children's vocabulary skills and how their vocabulary usage can affect student foundational skills. Several teachers shared their perspectives on students' vocabulary skills. For example, P10 said, "They have low vocabulary skills; they have it in reading communication because first it is phonemic awareness and then vocabulary." P1 stated, "I feel like vocabulary helps you remember why and what you're learning." According to P9,

Vocabulary skills, again, I think a lot of that has to do with what they acquire at home. Like, there are words that you don't hear kids say, because I've heard my own daughter use words that surprise me. I like to talk from my own experience.

According to P1,

I've noticed that it depends on how well their background of language. So, if they have a rather good background in language, it's a little easier to explain things, but if they don't understand certain words, it's hard to explain.

P2 agreed, saying, "Those vocabulary words that they come to school with, is what they either heard at home, or they practice saying with their parents or their guardians, it's typically the words that they typically use during their everyday lives." P7, a third-grade

teacher, shared, “They like to use words they have heard before.” P4 added, “They may know what a dog is but if I say a German Shepherd, then we lose them.

P2 pointed out how lack of vocabulary skill affects students’ success in class:

Some students may have a different kind of level of vocabulary words than other students, some students, they get to third grade, and they’re still reading on the first level, which means that nobody has taken time to expand their vocabulary and expand their horizons when it comes to reading.

P9 stated,

I recommend that kids always do their sight words, and then what I see for the ones who are behind; they don’t know a lot of those sight words from when they were to have learned in first and second grade. Now, it’s like a double whammy trying to catch them up. Making sure they know what they do know and introducing to them that they do not know.

P2 shared, “I don’t think vocabulary is the forefront of teachers’ minds. If we can get kindergarten through second to focus on vocabulary, it will be easier for those third graders to pass the [assessment] at some point.”

Another goal of RQ2 was to determine how teachers’ instruction in the classroom was used to expand students’ vocabulary. Teachers in this study reported explicitly teaching vocabulary in three different ways. This includes explicit teaching of vocabulary, the application of vocabulary in various text, and conversation. Teachers found that the use of visual aids and learning modalities, rote practice, and word walls are

effective tools in vocabulary building. Teachers used visual aids and learning modalities to teach vocabulary skills.” It is important that teachers recognize their student’s vocabulary weaknesses, and to use strategies to improve their vocabulary building. According to P1, a K-1 teacher, shared,

They had never heard the word “bagel”, and I found a picture of a bagel so, they could see what it looks like, and hopefully the next time they see that word, it would make sense to help them to remember.

At the same time, other teachers shared different strategies, P8 added, “Say for instance though, I read dog, but I don’t know what dogs look like, you can associate the dog with a picture, and now they know that’s the word dog.” P1 indicated that, “When I’m working with the younger kids, I might have the actual object, just to get them another modality that I can teach.” P3 stated,

With their practice with this lesson, “I would give them 4 or 5 words, I probably would just have them read at their tables, I’m going to have then underline the word, and probably clap the word into syllables.

To indicate exposure of new words, P2 suggested,

They go back and look at those words, let them highlight or underline words, you know they think it is coloring, let them highlight words they know and let them underline words they don’t know; that way when I write it on the whiteboard, they can write that way to me.

Effective vocabulary strategies help children learn new words. P1 stated, “Do the objects, if I can use pictures, I work with the younger group most of the time.” Another visual aid that teachers use in their classroom to build vocabulary and comprehension are word walls. For example, word walls have become relevant. To encourage children in learning new words, P8 stated, “We create like a vocabulary word wall, and every word that we create, I would put that word on the wall.” P5 resonated with P8, “We have a vocabulary word wall; we just stick the words on the wall, while we construct things in class like use each word in a sentence correctly.” In addition, P9 stated,

I will pick words with three parts and have the student pull out the beginning or the ending to build a new word, that way when they go to the wall; they are adding more words to use in sentences and to know their meanings.

In addition, rote practice, this practice is meaningful in teaching vocabulary in a fun way. With additional resources needed to teach vocabulary building, some teachers used different pathways, P8 stated,

I have this website called “Seesaw” and “Seesaw” is something like a game but it’s educational, and I can set it up to play games or it can read to them in every word, highlight words, and the next time they read it; they take the highlight out.

At the third-grade level, sight words are essential in reading. Knowing sight words allows students to read fluently. Several teachers shared their perspectives. According to P2,

When it comes to third grade level, you know, we can break those words down and get them to sound them out using index cards, flashcards and things like the

sight words and reading, that helps you whenever we get to the actual test, and you will see those words again.

P1 added,

Teaching more of the sight words, I found that for some kids that is very hard so, we didn't use flashcards, I figured it out, I went through the list and figured out which word they were not getting.

Also, keep in mind the use of phonic skills to build their vocabulary. Since decoding is vital in teaching reading, P3, said, "I'm probably going to have to teach them how to first decode the word." P2 indicated, "You can know when to use the different short and long vowel sounds and the different consonants in sounding those words out." According to P5, "When they start using the words that they have learned; When I pick them out and get the letter sounds; they put those word phrases together, letters together to create new words."

When it comes to applying vocabulary skill building, teachers use various text to ensure that their students are learning. Also, teachers use other instructional strategies to help children expand their vocabulary. These include vocabulary usage in shared reading, word meanings, and in conversations. Shared reading is when students share what they learned from a book or text with another student. P3, a second-grade teacher, said, "We use Common Lit, Read Works, most of their reading material that I get comes from Read Works and I-Ready, I could assign them another article where they can get to find more vocabulary words." Using books as a tool to reinforce vocabulary skills,

P1, a K-1 teacher, said, “We do and then we might take some basic level books that have that word in it, and a lot of times in the book, while engaging them we go to the whiteboard.” P2, a K-1 teacher, suggested,

You let them go to the bookshelf you have, for instance, you let them pick out a book that they normally wouldn’t pick out, and you must read that book, and tell me what word it is you’re not familiar with, it was an unfamiliar so, we go through and sound those words out.

P5, a 3rd grade teacher, mentioned, “Try to get books on their grade level; we got to constantly give them things to reflect on vocabulary.” Exposing students to various levels of vocabulary allows them to use words across different contexts. P1, suggested for a start, “I start with basic things that are more familiar, with familiar items, and then I move to, you know, slowly to expand, read a story and discuss the vocabulary of the story first. In addition to shared reading, word meaning is essential in expanding students’ vocabulary level. P3 explained,

It’s important to read informational text to build your vocabulary at the level of teaching them and to enhance that vocabulary skill, I must keep reminding them the importance of learning to read those words, and if it’s a word they don’t know the meaning of then we must stop and find the meaning of the words using context clues.

P2 explained, “Once you learn what you learned in different grade levels, or you know, in reading their vocabulary words, what you learned to say, those are words we teach even



to kids or grownups.” To understand word meanings in a text, P3 stated, “When we are reading a story just say about dinosaurs, and they get to the word fossils, I will ask them about clues surrounded by that word to help them figure out the meaning of that word.”

P4 added, “When we read stories, “I pre-read the story before I gave it to them, I’m going to pick out those vocabulary words that I think are probably new and allow them to pick our unfamiliar words.” Building vocabulary at various levels allows students to become good readers. P2 stated that,

At different grade levels, that helps them to be able to identify those words again, so, if we have simple words for third grade, then you mix in a fourth or fifth grade, where within, you know; they gave some practice with sounds, and those words were sound out correctly.

Having a conversation with another person is relevant to knowing what a word means in a sentence.” Teachers shared their perspectives regarding expanding student’s vocabulary. P2 described how important it is to ask questions, “Tell me what you think that word might mean, and if they’re off track, you get them back on track.” P5 said, “I feel like they got a good vocabulary, but they don’t know when or how to use the word.” P3 added, “I guess I could access them constantly by asking them about other vocabulary words and their meanings to expand their vocabulary knowledge.” P4 suggested by saying, “Let’s build on that vocabulary expanded beyond the class.” In addition, P4, saying, “Kind of going back to picking up those vocabulary words allow kids to pick up their vocabulary words even though they’re first grade.” To expand their vocabulary

usage, P10 stated, “There you find a way to expand vocabulary by making sure that you do things with them.” For example, P5 also noted, “You have to hear them use those words in conversation.” Another example, shared by P4 saying, for example, P4 reported,

[Children] may know what a dog is but if I say “German Shepard” then we lose them. So, are you going to categorize things and say what a dog really is, the name of dogs, and they can’t really identify it.

P6, a third-grade teacher, explained,

Talk to them with real talk, and if they look at you, they don’t know what you’re saying. I have a lot of students; they’ll say, what does that mean? I’m like, what do you think it meant or does it make a text connection to the word?

The second research question (RQ2) aimed to investigate how teachers teach vocabulary skills to help children improve their vocabulary and usage. In summary, according to the findings, teachers believed that using various tools such as word walls, books, technology, visuals, context clues, rote practice, and phonics in their teaching instruction can elevate students' vocabulary level. In addition, applying various vocabulary usage in share reading, word meaning, and conversations can affect how children’s reading ability improve in the classroom. P8, a third -grade teacher stated, regarding to student’s vocabulary level that, “But at the beginning, it’s going to be kind low vocabulary.” Therefore, teachers noticed the importance of developing instructional strategies to focus on building vocabulary. P5 said, See, it comes back to

the experiencing with new vocabulary per week, you know what we did back in the days; they gave us 10 words on Friday.” In general, P2 emphasized, “If you don’t teach those things to kids, you can’t expect much from them.”

### **Results for RQ3**

RQ3 asked, “How do K-3 teachers in the study district describe children’s skill. reading fluency, and teachers’ use of instruction to remedy any skill deficits? The data included how teachers described students’ skills in reading with proper speed, recognizing words automatically and getting meaning from a text. I used participant responses from interview questions 6, 7, and 8 to answer this question. Themes that are connected to this question are student foundational reading skills and teacher foundational skill instruction strategies. There are four concepts that participants shared their perspectives regarding RQ3. These concepts include comprehension skills, comprehension instruction, fluency skills, and fluency instruction. Comprehension and fluency skills are skills that students use to understand the meaning of a text, and to read it with accuracy. Student success in reading depends heavily on comprehension and fluency skills. Although none of the research questions referred to comprehension, participants talked extensively about comprehension as an element of reading fluency.

The first concept related to RQ3 is comprehension skills, but before students can gain skill in comprehension, they need basic skills of decoding and word recognition. P10, a third-grade teacher, stated that, “some basic skills [are needed] in getting children to read; skills like decoding are needed for comprehension speed.” P4, a second-grade

teacher, agreed and asked the question, “What did we read about? We don’t know because we’ve spent time trying to decode some words.” P7 noted that lack of basic skills affects students’ ability to do well on reading assessments, saying, “It’s those little passages that you give them to read - they have the sight words. Do they have to sound them out when they say the word?” P4 said, “If we’re stumbling over the words, trying to sound out words, what do you know when you finish the passage? We’re not comprehending anything. So, learning the words before we start reading the novel, that is a good idea.” P2 summarized teachers’ frustration with lack of basic skills this way: “if basic skills are taught, if teachers teach their students properly, [students] will be able to comprehend what they read.”

Even when basic skills are mastered, students still have trouble with comprehension of texts. P9 stated,

They are not comprehending what they are reading. I’m like, ‘Okay, you said, the man ran down the hill? What did the man see?’ They say, ‘Well, he ran down the hill.’ Now, in the passage, it may say, the man saw a horse, but they are not comprehending that the man saw a horse.

P7 noted that,

with nonfiction, the answers are right there, but they don’t recognize them. With fiction you have to determine how the character feels and what the character is thinking, and you have got to use your clues. Whereas with nonfiction, most of it is applying yourself in the simplest way to really recognize a fact and pull it out.

P5 added,

They just read it because you told them so. But when it comes back to those questions after reading the book, they've got to go back and reread the book, because you just read it, but they didn't understand it.

P9 said, "There are students who can read okay, but they don't understand what they read. They can call out sight words, they can read fluently, but they don't understand."

Lapses in comprehension include inability to comprehend what is being asked or to understand how to find a fact in a text. P9 said, "If we do some questions about the textbook, especially critical thinking, skill questions, they have a hard time interpreting what the question was asking them." P8, another third-grade teacher, added,

And I will come back, and I will ask them, 'So, where are Scott and Bill okay, what color was the dog, Scotty? Okay, when did Sally get lost?' How did they find that information? How did they find it? So, when you go and start pulling it out, you know they comprehended. Once they dig into the [story], they're going to be able to read it with comprehension.

P9 said, "I say if you get that, you will be able to get through the sentences and get some understanding, because you can sit there and read anything, but if you're not comprehending it, it's not going to help." P9 added,

I always tell students, when you're reading something, if there's a question, go to where exactly where they say, in paragraph five, okay, the man ran down the hill, somewhere, so whatever, right? Don't go back to paragraph one, right? Don't go to

paragraph “follow directions,” go back to paragraph five, and try to understand what they're asking you to do.

P2, a kindergarten and first grade teacher stated, “That way you're comfortable with knowing what's going on, you know who ate the toy.”

Teachers in this study suggested that by third grade, students should be able to understand a text even when facts are not stated explicitly. For example, P5, a third-grade teacher expressed that, “The main idea of the story is [not] who's the main characters [but] saying, ‘Okay, where's the conflict?’” P9 added,

It could be drawing inferences from the story. Why would he see a horse? Where is he? Where do you think the man is? It's just not like the horse is just there, you see a horse and understand why.

P8, a second-grade teacher, suggested,

Simply, use [mental] dialogue with sentences then you move to paragraphs. Then you move to passages? What happens in between those three things: the sentence, the paragraph, and then the passage. What I want to happen as they're reading the sentence, the paragraph, and the passage, I want some comprehension to come in there somewhere.

P7 shared,

I have discussions and they talk to me and to me that's when I've determined whether they understand what they're reading and writing, by the amount of information [they] can give me back [in their] own words, not read to me what

[they] just read. Talk to me and tell me what you understand about what you know.

P2 explained,

Comprehending is something that you will have to use, not just for third grade, but you're going to have to use it for the rest of the grades. Even through life, even as adults, if you don't comprehend what you're reading, or you're reading a contract, you've assigned your life away. Students reach a certain level, and don't even know comprehension is a lifetime skill.

P9 reported,

if they can improve in their fluency and comprehension, they're not going to ever have a problem understanding exactly what they read, breaking down things, understanding exactly what the question is asking. In order to be able to comprehend, you have to be fluent at reading what you're looking at.

Finally, P3 said, "I have readers who can't read but if I read to them, they can comprehend it."

Instruction to improve comprehension often starts with review of basic reading skills, according to these teachers. According to P1, "I go over the vocabulary that I'm going to be using in the directions How you know that we're looking for this?"

P2 said,

You must break down the word in syllables, that way they can, you know, sound it out, it's easier for them to sound it out. It helps to immediately to sound it out, you can sound it out, see it and say it.

One technique described by several teachers was asking questions. P3 said, "I rely on my five W's." P7 explained this, saying,

The five W's - the who, what, when, and where - those type of questions, I asked the children to find out. Then, what does that mean to you? Why do you think they care to behave that way.

P1 said, "First I'm going to ask who, we'll read something and when you read, you're looking for the who, and so, when I ask the question, you're going to say again who."

P2 explained,

The first read is very important, because you've gone through it, and you've been able to ask different questions and, you know, poke, poke their little brain for a moment to see what they they're catching on to.

P1 added, "And I'll do a basic quick thing with them read a sentence and ask a question or let them read a sentence and I ask a question." P3 mentioned,

I don't try to wait to the end of the text and ask questions. I stop it like in the first paragraph, and I ask him, okay, what do we learn after we read this first paragraph? Okay, you know, then, you know, because they get tired and they'll forget, right, so I try to stop them there to see you know what they comprehend. On the test some of the questions that say, what is it that the first paragraph



teaches us? and it'll say the answer will be that the first paragraph introduced the main character.

P6 concluded, "If you have a question, write it down. Sometimes I'll put words in there knowing that they might not know how to figure out what it means." According to P1,

If they can't answer it, I might say, well, okay, let's try start reading the paragraph two times, or the sentence twice, and then I'm going to ask the question. And then they kind of get to know, oh, wait, let me read it. And I'm looking for who? Or that's another way I do it as I break it down.

P3 stated,

And there's something else I'll commonly do that is when the kids read a certain part, I'll ask him a question, only about this certain part. He won't get to move on until they answer that for you. Those particular questions kind of measure the comprehension level, because they can read something and give it back to you and then you go from there.

P1 shared,

So, sometimes I'll let them read it, I'll ask the question and If they're not getting it, then I'll try to read it aloud. You can maybe let a story be read aloud because you're just looking for comprehension.

P3 added, "Once you start asking the students questions, they keep their mind focused on what they're doing." P7 added, "I like to hear the answer to the question 'what was

interesting,' right? That way you get more out of them. That way you find out what they comprehend from what they read, and they can't make it up."

Several teachers use writing as a tool for comprehension. P9 noted, "Like put down [in writing] what we talked about, or you know, ask him a question. And that helps for the students who are shy and don't want you to know that they're having problems. P7 reported, "For comprehension, I like to get them to write. What questions do you have? What would you like to know more about, you know, a certain character or certain information or what?" P2 noted,

We read it, they write it, read it, write it. I mean, it doesn't have to be in that order, but if you most time, if you really, like if I'm reading it out, when you read it, I'm reading, and then we write it down.

The skill of comprehension comprises many parts, so instruction must focus on those elements. For example, P10 stated, "My children who struggle, I really work with them more one on one on comprehension skills in answering questions, context clues, and cause and effect, in those different types of reading." P8 shared,

Context clues are where around that word; it's going to give you the meaning of that that word. It's a lot of things you can do to find your main idea, what is the main idea for this and just keep reading. I promise you the more you read the better reader you would come.

P8 added,

You create some points to answer, and that can make them become a better reader.

When you read, use your context clues, say a word is in there. And I tell them about the boy [in the story] or their words, therefore, it's important. What does that word mean?

P7 asked,

'So, you didn't understand anything you just read? But why didn't you understand it?' I think that's why I started focusing on a lot of those questions that they do execute, it's right, what to look for which words help you determine what you're looking for.

P7 explained how elements of comprehension can frustrate a student:

It's kind of like difficult for them to read the prompt on their test. It's like they can fail to read all the words from the text, okay. But when they get to a question, you can tell that they didn't understand what they just read, because it may ask them to go back, might tell them go back to it.

P1 reported often saying, "Let's look at main idea, let's look at cause and effect, we can then gradually get one skill under control before we move on to the next one." According to P9, "Because if I've taught you the day before how to draw conclusions, I cannot skip to something else without assessing that knowledge."

As P8 noted earlier, "more you read the better reader you would come," so providing opportunities for free reading and reading aloud to the class were included in

teachers' strategy to improve comprehension. P8, a third-grade teacher described this in detail:

You're going to get to your book from the table. Nobody has the same book as your book from the table. I'm going to set my timer so you can start reading and once we set our timer, we'd say for 10 minutes, we read that book, and then I might just randomly ask, "okay, you Rachel, what did you read in your book?"

P5, another third-grade teacher stated, "I like doing reading time daily. They are fighting over books, but they just want me to read; they want me to read with them but at the same time you reach them, and you can check their comprehension." P5, added, "It depends on that background knowledge, their prior knowledge. If you're not familiar with [what the story is about], you won't know much. So, you must read the book to gain knowledge."

Another technique described by teachers in this study was doing multiple readings of the same text or passage. For example, P2, a kindergarten and first grade teacher explained,

So, you take a long passage, and on Monday, we read one thing. And next thing, read another paragraph, next day, read another one, then like Thursday we read all together. Okay, so we probably won't be to the conflict resolution part until the last week. The first week we don't focus on main idea and the character. By Friday, and when it's test time, you know what you've read, you've already comprehended what's going on in the story.

P6 said,

We read the text together a lot of times, and then I will make them have questions for them. And they will find evidence in the text, you're going to highlight how they found it in the text. I don't care if you know the answer, and you've written it down, you must show it to me where it is.

P2 noted,

Nine times out of 10 we discuss what we read during the first read talked about the first and second reading. So, knowing that first read if we were to read something, and it says 'Henry had two apples on Monday.' Okay, 'who had the apples, children?' They know that Henry had the apples. "When did he have the apples?" 'On Monday.' "What did he have on Monday?" 'The apples.' You know, that gets them to be able to identify what's in the sentence that's important, what's happening, when it's happening, and who it has happened to.

The second concept related to RQ3 includes fluency skills and fluency instruction. Teachers reported that fluency is a skill they emphasize with their students. According to P2, fluency is defined as, "Reading without pausing, so being able to read a sentence, or a paragraph without pausing or stumbling throughout." P10 said simply, "It's not being choppy." P1 expressed the idea that "Fluency is very related to concrete comprehension, because if they're having to go over each word at a time, they're not getting the whole concept of the sentence, because they can't." P9 agreed, saying, "When you read it fluently, and understand what you're reading, it makes sense, and all the words come together." P8 noted,

When they read fluently it's going to be smooth. It's a difference between reading and just calling words. I could call words all down the street, that's fine, but when you read it as if you were there, you saw that dog, right? So, I tell them to read it smoothly as if I'm there. So, the dog ran down the street and then it's like, I got to be there to see him.

P10 added, "Fluent reading is less error." P8, noted, "When you have these common words but you're not reading them. That is something wrong." P7, said, "You have the children that have struggled with fluency. They're afraid to try."

P1 said, "I've found that if a child can read the sentence a little faster, and they're not stuck on each word trying to sound it out, they understand and they comprehend better." P2 also suggested that fluency is both necessary for and an indicator of comprehension; P2 said, "What needs their attention; they can read fluently? Can they comprehend what it is they're reading?" However, teachers also noted the child who can read fluently but cannot comprehend. For example, P7 stated, "I have some they can read with fluency and not understand a thing. They've learned to pronounce the letter sounds and they can, but they have no comprehension or understanding." Some children find learning to read can be a challenge. P4 added, "I've had a fluent reader, but they couldn't comprehend anything really."

Fluency is an essential skill that teachers often found was lacking. P3 stated, "They don't have to be able to just read but be able to fluently read it. So, I tell them 'When you read on your own, what did you learn from the passages, with this part?'" P8

suggested, “We are going to read it smoothly, because I want to be able to understand and your classmates want to be able to understand.” Fluency is usually necessary for comprehension.

As previously noted by these participants, comprehension and fluency are related. P4, a second-grade teacher remarked, “I think reading fluency is very important; fluency helps them to comprehend better.” Many teachers devote time to improving students’ reading fluency. P3 shared, “We do about 15 minutes every day. We read a fluent passage every day. The first time I read something, the second time, we read it together. And then the third time, they read it on their own independently.” P4 said,

I have a fluency block, because fluency is very important, because you can know how to read but can you read at a pace? You have to read at a pace where you can keep up and won't put your classmates to sleep.

According to P2,

So, the first time the first reading will be the teacher reading, the second reading, you have the student reading, and then the third time, we can read together that way. ‘You know you've heard me; you've had a chance to practice saying that way, you are getting the chance to sound the word out.’

P5 mentioned, “When we do modeling, they try to do the same thing they hear you do.”

Many teachers suggested timing students while they read as a way to improve fluency. P8 reported, “And so, I will the time and they will read it in one minute. So now, let me see, okay, you get your meaning.” P1 suggested, “Let them go back and then try to

time it, and then I do it again, and time it.” P7 noted that in a challenge to read as far as they can in a preset time there can be problems:

They know the timer is going, okay. They don't want to move forward, like I've had children say to take it off if they want to get it right. And then I have a kid stop. They just stop reading. They just stop. They just stop whatever word they're stuck on. They'll stop right there. I think that, that time we'll just do something to encourage their course. Their demeanor is something I could tell they just don't want to try, and I'm happy it's over when the timer goes off, okay.

Nonetheless, P6 shared,

Fluency is a big thing for me. I do it every day, especially in the tier process. my tier two and three, I do it every single day. And then my tier one students, I do it every day or every other day, we'll read a passage. We read it together, and then they read it and I time them. We'll read one passage a week. And each day, they'll time themselves.

In addition to time, P8 described using an audio recorder:

You record yourself and then you would listen to yourself, we hear what happened right when you were reading, and thank you, we'll go back. Okay, so you heard yourself that first time, you will go back and record yourself again.

Fluency instruction involves a lot of practice. P1 said, “Let's work on this one sentence, and let's get it going fluently before let's move on to the next.” P2 suggested reading a sentence in different ways, such as, “You let them read it out. Then if you



change this up, 'the toy was eaten by my puppy,' it's just helping them to read it aloud and read it again." P1 agreed with this technique saying, "They feel really confident and then maybe change simple sentences, repeating back, quick, also works with fluency." In addition, P1 said, "I might do something simple, maybe repeat back these three numbers or something. I'm just working on timing, because sometimes they just don't feel like they have to go quick."

P5 suggested working on fluency with familiar material, saying,

When I start reading fluently, stories were sort of a review or something you read to them recently. If a student got stuck on a word, I didn't really help them sound it out, then we go back and reread it again.

P1 suggested, "I try to really get that to where it's just, it's second nature and it's not, 'I must think about it,' because I haven't moved on to the next step." Then P5 explained, "I try to say, like, 'you got to use expression.' So, whatever they're reading, they can read with style, the words are alive and say something funny, they probably just act it out." P3 mentioned, "The students just all read by themselves or with a partner. The students read it orally and then they read on their own. So, that takes about the whole 15 minutes." P1 suggested, "You know, maybe read the same one a couple of days in a row. And sometimes that works for them because they say, 'see, I read it faster, I'm getting better and better.'"

In summary, the objective of RQ3 was to determine how teachers thought about children's fluency skills and how they used different reading strategies to help improve those skills. Teachers were concerned about students paying attention while reading, reading a text smoothly, and understanding what they read. In addition, teachers were concerned about explicit fluency instruction and how teaching fluency in context can improve their reading ability. I discovered that teachers of children in grades K-3 used some of the same strategies to give their students practice and training so that they can read at an appropriate rate and understand the material. Teachers use sight words, passage reading, questioning, probing for cause and effect, and guidance in using context clues to teach their students how to read fluently and to comprehend a text. In addition, teachers require extra time to teach their fluency lessons and to provide their students with examples, and practice of what reading with fluency sounds like and look like.

### **Additional Findings**

In this study, I found that teachers in grade K-3 are using similar techniques to provide their students with foundational skills and best teaching practices to become successful readers. Much data did not apply to the three research questions but new information to this investigation. These additional findings included the importance of student focus and motivation, teachers' consideration of general aspects of instruction, and how teachers assigned responsibility for reading mastery. Teachers' perspectives on these three issues made important contributions to the data.

### *The Importance of Student Focus and Motivation*

Teachers in this study talked about the importance of getting students engaged in reading. P1 noted,

I can't if I can't get them to focus on what I'm trying to say or show them, it's harder for them to do it. If they're paying attention, and focusing on what they're reading, I feel they remember it. If I can make it real and relatable, it helps them remember, it makes it easy.

Teachers' efforts to make reading "real and relatable" included engaging their senses, providing interesting material to read, and making reading a social experience. P6 said, "I play lots of hands-on manipulative games, if I see things are not going great." P1 stated, "I have seen sometimes when you're teaching, they're not focused on you because they're not looking at you." Teaching sensory engagement was described by P8 as a deliberate instructional task: "I'm teaching listening now, because she's listening." P6 suggested, "I've always been told that if children get off the subject, they're probably off the subject to something you said right, something that's connected to somebody. You get them, and then reel them back into where you are." Reading for a poor reader can be an upsetting experience, as described by P7, who said, "He's just frustrated trying to figure it out. And they'll take it as you're angry or they are." So P5, said, "I praise them each time they get things correct."

P2 said, "Keeping their interest is another challenge. We have to make sure that whatever they're reading is very important and interesting." P6, a third-grade teacher,

said, “When we talk about the book and kind of get into the book, make it real, okay, kind of connect it to your life.” Allowing students to select their own reading materials or books is a key element in increasing the interest they have in reading. P3 explained,

One of the big challenges with getting children to read is finding reading material that they are interested in reading. Children tend to want to read things that maybe sports or things are about toys, or Barbie dolls, or things of that nature. But reading materials that are put in front of them are mostly informational texts and students aren't interested in that type of text. So, you must try to make the reading material fun for them to read, try to get them engaged in that type of material.

P5 explained,

Because some of them have different interests. So, okay, you can give our children a book about planes, and you don't know they really like planes, and I they really like them. The kids and all have a choice to read. I have got a little library in the corner. We have like 30 minutes of reading time every day.

According to P4, a second-grade teacher,

Since the world is technology based, a lot of them are coming in not even wanting to hold the book, you know, ‘I would rather read it on the phone, or I really read on the iPad,’ and I don't have access to enough iPads to give to everybody.

P7 suggested, “Bring books or magazines that interest them, like even if they do the social media thing.” P4 noted, “Allowing them to choose books of interest is important because, of course, most of the books that I want you to read, nine times out of 10, are

not going to be ones that they want to read.” Access to books at home is another issue. P6 reported:

A lot of times the challenge is they don't have the material at home to read, and they don't have anybody to read with them. So, giving them the text for them to read is important. I've tried to let them, if they do want to take books home. If they don't bring them back, I'll just replace them.

According to P9, “We want the kids to read, but we tend to tell them what to read. We should just be happy that they're wanting to read in the first place.”

P6 added that it's essential to make reading a social experience: “It takes me forever to read a book [to students] because we're going to stop and talk, whatever they need to do.” P5 described opportunities for free reading in class, saying,

Really independent reading: they grab a book and read. So, they have their reading time, they can share books, they can share ideas, and that type of thing; they like to do it with peer reading. They can talk to each other and just do what they want.

P10 agreed, saying, “So, shared reading is when I share stories with them and then they break off into groups and read. They reach each other; they correct each other while they relate to each other. Cheers. That's good.” According to P4,

They share knowledge, okay, they have the opportunity to share knowledge again with their peers. Soon they gave me an answer and I'm like, ‘I was I've been

trying to tell you this,' but they say, 'I work with my partner, and we work together, and she helped me.'

P2 added, "A student will read a sentence wrong, and another student is like, 'no that's not how you read that. That's not what's going on here.'" P4 said, "As I'm waiting for you to get to me if I didn't get it right, my partner gives me a second chance to do it. So, I was able to get through the process a little more easily." Peer teaching works when some of the peers are knowledgeable enough to be helpful. P6, said, "They can help each other, they can time each other and things like that. Sometimes I have a low ability group, that's a little harder when nobody can read.

When children share openly with each other, it motivates them to become more active in the classroom. P7 shared, "I think with first grade class I did; I had a child she would not open up, but when I paired her with the right group of kids, she opened herself and she started trying, she was more comfortable with them." P4 offered a similar story: "I would say 'go find a partner.' And by the end of the year, she was there. So that, you know, brought her out, she was a social butterfly by the end of the year." P7, expressed, "I like peer-pairing because it's building each other's confidence."

### ***Teachers' Consideration of General Aspects of Instruction***

Teachers in this study cited four factors that affect their instruction, in addition to students' level of mastery of phonics, vocabulary, and fluency. These four factors are the range of reading skill level present in the group, general instructional factors, assessment

as an element that influences instructional practices, and the limits placed on goal accomplishment by lack of time. I will consider each of these four factors in turn.

**Levels of Reading Skills.** Reading instruction must be adjusted according to children's reading ability. K-3 teacher P1 said, "Everybody has different levels, of course, and I feel like the higher the level it's easier." P10 stated, "I have 20 students in nine groups, and I get my weakest groups, I really focus on them first. And I work with them just in a small group with one-on-one instruction." P2, explained, "Some students, they get to third grade, and they're still reading on the first level, which means that nobody has taken time to actually expand their vocabulary and expand their horizons when it comes to reading those big words."

P9 said, "Those who are below level, this is something they didn't get in K through second grade. And it's, it's not an easy task, because you don't want to move on, but you don't want to leave those kids behind."

P4 expressed,

When it comes to my lower babies, I notice that the letter sound is not there, then they can't put it together in words, which also goes back to reading being very difficult. they shy away from it. They don't want to read it and they just seem to give up if I don't push them through.

According to P5, "Sometimes they don't know how to sound the words out. When you walk around and observe them in their little group, they are doing some reading, and they can't even sound out words themselves."

In addition to the low level of some students with respect to their grade placement, within students there can be a mix of abilities that add to the complexity of reading level instruction. According to P2,

Sometimes it's different. You have a group of students who are able to fluently read, they can sound out words, and they can read the sentence together, but they're not comprehending what they're reading. And then you have another group of students who can't read the sentence, like front to back, but they know what you are reading.

P3 said, "Some students read a lot. So, they're going to have a bigger vocabulary than those that don't read a lot." P9 stated, "I have some that are above now. Okay, then I have those that are a little bit average." A certain amount of triage is applied: P9 said, "You let [more capable readers] go ahead, so that that gives me time to sit back and work with students who really, really need help."

In short, teachers in this study felt it important to manage all levels of reading skill, despite the difficulties of working with a diverse ability group. P9 commented,

As teachers, we're there to help the students, right. You know, I look at every child, it's like, I got to teach them from scratch whether they're advanced or not, because I want to make sure that they get everything that they need.

P2 describe the third-grade teacher's charge in this way: "Can [the student] make sense on the jump from second grade to fourth grade?"



**Instruction in General.** General instructional techniques were cited by teachers in this study as elements necessary to provide students with adequate skills to be successful. For example, teachers suggested that providing individualized instruction is key. P1, a K-1 teacher, said, “When they're having trouble, I like to do a little smaller group one-on-one. I like small class sizes.” P8 agreed, saying, “I pulled them we came up with we called a teacher led table. Okay, that table, my bottom nine, I pulled them.” P5 added, “I really think that one on one instruction matters, because you can't say just because you hear children throwing out answers, the whole class, they all participate. It really comes to the one on one, you must make sure kids understand.” P1 noted that children may not speak up in the group because they fear being wrong: “Let's bring them over and kind of do a one on one, maybe where the others can't hear. So, if it's an anxiety problem, shy, they are not going to be engaged.” Paraprofessionals can do some of this small group work. For example, P8, a third-grade teacher, said, “We have what's called redo centers, where the assistants will work with those children, while the other ones will move on to what they are supposed to be doing.” All in all, individualized instruction is necessary to help students become good readers, as P1 said: “I think smaller groups, if we can have it, should be how we arrange our classes.”

In addition, teachers reiterated earlier points made about engaging children in reading work. P1 said, “I try to incorporate everything and have a game, but the game is going to be associated with reading.” Online resources were also suggested. P9 mentioned,

They do have a program called [phonicsfirst.com](http://phonicsfirst.com). That'd be a good video resource that you can use in your class. This generation of students have it so much better, because anything you want to know is at home, they have videos, everything, you have so many websites. You definitely want to use those websites to your advantage. All those sites are a tool to help those students and you know, try to get them engaged.

P3 reported, "I give them their homework assignments, you know, for the week, and it's just like a daily reading passage, with about three questions at night, so that helps a lot"

P6 repeated the earlier point made, that having a range of interesting reading materials, is important: "We need to make sure that we do have those resources in place so our kids can say, okay, I want to read that."

**Assessment.** Some teachers in this study questioned the validity of reading assessment. For example, P7 pointed out,

Because they've lowered the scores, and there's a decline in the expectation of the kid. I'm older person, this average of 73 was a D, right? What do they call it?

Proficient and Advance pace, and if you tell a child that was 65, or 69 is passing, I feel like you've lowered that expectation. To me, that's not right. You're still not where you should be. I can't see how that will prepare them for college.

P4, a second-grade teacher added,

I can remember doing testing last year, there was a story on the benchmark test about a Spanish ballerina, I was clueless, and they were clueless. They had to read

that it didn't resonate with anything and didn't touch on with them. So, they, you know, they didn't want to read it. So, that's a big challenge for them not being exposed.

Young children seem to feel flummoxed by the testing process. P2, a K-1 teacher, mentioned, "When the gate test comes, they don't know what to be prepared for." P10 suggested a disconnect between test performance and reading skill, "At the beginning of the year, I must give them a diagnostic and at the end to see growth by working with them and give them immediate feedback and it's all about growth." P7 summed up feelings of many teachers when she said, "I feel like sometimes they put more emphasis on the test, and we keep saying really don't, it's not sustainable."

At the same time, assessment was acknowledged by other teachers to serve an important function. P9 mentioned,

And, I see now, we don't have a strong [academic] presence in pre-K and kindergarten. I feel like it's more of a lot of playing. And sometimes you're not taking the time to really assess these skills with these students. And that's a big problem. And K through third is so important. When students don't do well, from K through third, they're going to struggle. All right. And I know there's a study out there saying that if a child fails, like third grade is more than likely fail high school, because those are like transition.

When assessment leads to curricular improvements, good things can happen. P6, a third-grade teacher, stated, "I talked to one of the principals, she had some of the highest test

scores that she's ever had in the 10 years she's been there, so the scores are on the rise because we're implementing phonics.”

*Time Limitations.* Lack of time for reading instruction and practice was a problem noted by many teachers. To some extent, the need to prepare for assessments impinged on actual reading activities. P7 noted, “I'm just always preparing them for the test. It's more time spent on dealing with getting prepared for a test.” In addition to test preparation, teachers suggested that too much time is reserved on the daily schedule for subjects other than reading. P7 noted,

When you're following a schedule, you may not have time to do this. I try to incorporate as much [reading] as I can with other subjects, especially with science or social studies. From my experience, they don't see the importance of you know, science and social studies.

P3 agreed, saying, “I must work with my whole group in like 30 minutes, and then for reading stations, it's about 45 minutes, that's every day. They focus more on their math, science, and social studies [than on reading].” P5 expressed, “Day after day it's also the next subject, I think reading should be longer because of the time [reading takes] and what you need to hear that you need to teach.” Not only do content subjects encroach on reading instruction, but also initiatives required by the district, as reported by P7: “Based on what [the district] needs done, or what they require for testing and things like that, the time gets cut down. Time is limited, right? “

Reading requires intensive instruction and time for practice. P8 stated, “You think the student would do much better if you had more time with all kinds of foundational skills and important skills they need to know. P7 reported that:

It's never enough time within one school year to get all those sounds in, okay.

And so, when they see them, it's like, they want to do the basic sound, but you must pair it with another letter, and but they must know when to do this. And just never have enough time to where they can practice enough, see enough words.

P4 warned, “If you didn't stop at that moment to correct what you're doing and find out what they need to know and do, then you're wasting a lot of time, since we have only 45 minutes' worth of center time.” The short time blocks affect struggling students more than others, as described by P7:

You don't have enough time to go through the whole process and make sure the kids are learning that information. That's the foundation. That's the foundation they need more time for. So, to make decisions that will, this is, we can do this for 20 minutes this for 30 minutes, but this is, again, bits and pieces of it. Sometimes it will click with some kids, but with the struggling child, they'll continue to struggle because they're trying to figure out what it means.

P1 agreed, saying “I feel like I'm pushing them a little too quickly.” In the end, P5 noted, “They don't have but 15 minutes to do the independent practice.” Although, as P5 reiterated, “you got to be able to read and comprehend,” without more time, teaching struggling students to read can be challenging. P7 noted that additional time can be found

at home, if parents help, but “Unless you have a parent who is thorough when they say, ‘I work with my child,’ evidence you can see, okay, we just really don't have the time.”

### ***Teachers' Assignment of Responsibility for Reading Mastery***

Teachers in this study suggested that teachers, students, and parents all share responsibility for children's achievement of reading mastery. However, teachers expressed frustration over the level of responsibility others assume in helping students achieve reading mastery.

**Parents' Responsibility.** Teachers generally supported the notion that parents must actively assist their children in becoming good readers. P9 explained,

I feel that it starts at home. If they did not have a very important support system at home, where they're being read to, or they have older siblings that can read to them or read with them, or encourage them to read books, they're not going to be as interested [in reading].

P5 added, “It always starts at home. If they don't have books at home, and they don't pick up a book at school... kids who become good readers, they have to have those resources in both places, school and at home.” P5 stated, “I really think they should read every day, like at night before they go to bed, they should have a reading log when they go home. I think parents should get involved more with their kids' reading.” P5 said, “When we are working on their phonics at school, it should be easy but so, what if they do not have anybody at home to work with them.” P6 added, “I think a lot of [vocabulary] is based on how much the parent talks to him and communicates with them and how much adult

interaction they get is just interaction with children.” P7 said, “It's the exposure. They're in their homes and their parents are reading newspapers or they see them reading, that may help.” P9 noted, though, “Their parent doesn't have a strong upbringing, or has not been to school, they might not see it's important to read.”

Some teachers were wary of putting too much responsibility for teaching on parents. P6, a third-grade teacher, reported,

Parents that are willing to come and talk to me, I will show them how to read with their children. A lot of them don't know how to help them and don't know how to read with them. They want them to sound out all the words. So, showing them that just hearing you read a sentence has helped a lot of parents who just don't understand.

P9 said, “Most kids are taught [language] when they're at home with their own people, and they will use older words and not saying them correctly.” P6 reported,

I don't typically ask parents to teach them how to sound out words, because I think you must be very structured with that. And you must know exactly how to not say b. and d you know, and my parents don't understand that.

P10 explained,

One of the problems is if the students just are not encouraged to read, if the child picks up a book and shows it to the parent. Do not discourage him. Even if you just read a page, look at the pictures, you know, you are opening their child's mind that reading books is a remarkable thing.

P6 reported sending parents instructions: “For summer, I've typed out a whole packet, just do easy how to do it. I put on there, it will take less than five minutes a day.” At the same time, P6 expressed concern that parents would take their responsibility too seriously. P6 said,

I always tell the parents not to get something they cannot read. It will be so frustrating. That is why I teach children to love school. Will they make mistakes? Is that a big deal? No. It can be fixed, so do not worry about it, we'll get to that stage.

Lastly, P3, a second-grade teacher indicated, “Third grade is supposed to be doing it independently. Because if you give them something to read, did they do it independently, or is it something that comes back in from the parents?”

**Student Responsibility.** Teachers in this study expressed frustration that students do not read. P7, a second-grade teacher, stated, “There is a challenge getting them to read. They do not have a love for reading. Nothing.” P3, another second-grade teacher, share similar views, saying, “I just know that reading is incredibly different. You just had a reading assignment or something for them to read. You expect them to read, or parents read to them.” P7 reported, “You give them an assignment to read, but they do not read very much. They will get free books, but they don't read them. They do not really.”

Students read so little that teachers expressed doubt if the students do the work they are assigned. P3 stated, “If I told him just highlight for me your main topic. And by



being able to [do that] I know how to do it because the parents do not know something that only the kids know how to write.” P3 continued, saying,

I heard a teacher say that one time that she did not know if that student did it themselves or not. So, a teacher will look at the work just to see, are doing your homework or your parents doing it for you?

Rewards and games are used to try to inspire student interest. P6 stated,

Okay, when they get through 100 words, they get like a treat and then get the next list. So, it's kind of based on their ability. Well, they can learn them at home, they can learn them in the room, and when you feel like you want me to check them off. We will play games with them and make sentences with the words.

Finally, P8 said, “So, now they must record themselves reading at home so that helps out with their reading skills and it's for teachers to access.” In short, early grades students have not developed interest in reading and do not take responsibility for learning to read.

**Teacher Responsibility.** Teachers at every grade level expressed puzzlement that children do not arrive in their classrooms having mastered the skills taught at previous grade levels. For example, P2, a kindergarten-first grade teacher, said,

I feel if at least K to second grade, it is just spending a little more time with teaching the children to read so that by third grade, they are prepared. They are prepared for the gate test; they're prepared for those longer passages.

P4, a second-grade teacher, explained,

We got to get these kids' reading because reading is especially important. So just exposure and making sure that our babies that are coming into school in kindergarten and have a solid foundation with our kindergarten teachers. Because they come in as blank slates.

P4, who teaches second grade, stated, "I don't think it's fair. It's not. All teachers need to do their part, each grade level, until it's sure that their kids are doing what they need to do before they go to the next grade."

By third grade, teachers were explicit in their frustration with the lack of success of previous teachers in instilling reading skill mastery. For example, P3 suggested,

They should have learned [reading basics]; I teach third grade. So, in third grade, we really are not supposed to be teaching them how to read, they should know how to read we just supposed to be enforcing those skills and just, you know, reading and applying those readings skills they should know. Also, I taught first and second grade. So, we do teach those things.

P5 remarked, "Hopefully the first-grade teacher is doing what she's supposed to do, and the second-grade teacher is doing the same thing. Once the child is in third grade, you will say okay, this student ought to be ready."

P10, a third-grade teacher, agreed, saying,

During the prior levels, kindergarten, first, and second graders should be learning to read. By the time they get to me they should be reading to learn. We need to

work properly to get that done at the lower level so by second grade they need to teach the children how to read.

P10, a third-grade teacher, said, “By the time they come to me, they should be able to read. I should be focusing more on them building their fluency and comprehension.”

Teachers pointed out how lack of prior-grade preparation in reading affects their own instruction. P4, a second-grade teacher noted,

There could be an intervention block, right. But if I have a whole classroom, if more of my kids need this alphabet recognition than don't, that means that you've got to go back and teach kindergarten, and then come back and try to teach out things you need to.

P9 said, “So this kid was held back in kindergarten, and he failed second grade, and that's the problem, it's a problem, I'm going to need to work super hard with him.” P4 stressed the fact that remediation should happen at the time when a skill is supposed to be mastered: “I have seen where first grade classes have, locks for these [basic skills lessons]. No, no, no, no, let's go back and talk to this kindergarten teacher, what happened right here? Where's the intervention?” P5 wondered why, with the extra help typical in kindergarten classrooms, children are sent forward to first grade without having learned what is expected. P5 said, “See in kindergarten, you have an assistant teacher who checks their reading. So therefore, was the level increased? You've got to master this book before you can move on.” In summary, P4 suggested, “If I'm in third grade, and

I'm teaching decoding skills, we should not wait until third grade to teach all this. No, it should have been taught previously.”

Some teachers recognized that they have a personal responsibility to do what needs to be done to help children master grade level skills. P5 stated,

Well, I can do better, honestly. Incorporate reading more. But you have so many topics to cover with math, English, you don't have time to just focus on one. So I give them their reading time at the end of the day, like 30 minutes of reading, [but] I can make it longer. I can really encourage them to read other books.

P10 seemed to wonder what more she, as a third-grade teacher, could do in addition to what she is already doing:

My children struggle in my classroom. I really work with them more one-on-one on comprehension skills. I just ask and answer questions about content clues and main idea in those different types. When they read with each other, they correct each other. While they read and talk about what they read.

P4 stated, “I tell people I have them, for 8 hours a day but I don't have them for reading 8 hours but for only 90 minutes a day.” It is clear that failures along the way in supporting reading skill mastery may land on the doorstep of fourth grade teachers, perpetuating the cycle. As P2 said, “[Reading mastery] just helps them to be prepared. Just be prepared for what's coming next. It's just setting them up for failure if you have not started [preparing them] throughout the school year.”

## **Summary of Results**

Analysis of data collected in this study revealed that teachers do find gaps in students' mastery of basic reading skills, including skill in phonic, decoding, sight word recognition, vocabulary level, reading comprehension, and reading fluency. Teachers described using various tools and methods, such as word walls, books, technology, visuals, context clues, rote practice, and explicit instruction, in their efforts to elevate students' reading level. The research questions were all answered in the affirmative, in that teachers do see lack of skill in phonics, vocabulary, and reading fluency, and they are proactive in teaching these skills. Additional findings added to the data collected in regard to the research questions, and revealed that teachers find student focus and motivation to read are key factors in reading success; they find various instructional factors, such as time available for reading and access to materials, important in supporting their work in reading; and teachers find that responsibility for reading mastery is shared by parents, students, and teachers, but failures are largely attributed to lapses in teaching. Many teachers wondered why students who had not mastered reading skills in a grade were promoted to the next grade with those problems unremedied. Teachers pointed out that lack of attention to reading skill mastery at each grade level compounds the problem and contributes to reading failure on third grade assessments.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

As stated in Chapter 3, a qualitative researcher follows explicit guidelines to establish the criteria for trustworthiness (Astroth & Chung, 2018). The quality criteria

include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Before collecting data, I sought expert opinion to validate the data collection instrument, ensuring appropriate interview questions were asked. Credibility refers to the internal validity of truth of the research finding. I used field notes, audio recordings, and explicit quotes from participants to validate credibility in the data. Credibility was established with participants in an ongoing dialogue for about 45 minutes each that represented their perspectives of declining student performance in K-3 grade reading. Transferability refers to the external validity where the qualitative research can be extended to other settings, and extensive contexts with different respondents (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Transferability was supported when I described the setting, how participants were selected, and how the interviews were conducted; these detailed descriptions offer the reader opportunity to make comparisons to apply to their set of circumstances.

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), dependability refers to the consistency of the data. Dependability was established when I used the step-by-step process in my data collection plan to collect the data that will support this study. I use my reflective notes to guide my thoughts and to analyze the data collected from each interview to answer my research questions. Therefore, dependability is supported by the findings and if the process was repeated by another researcher comparable results will be noted.

Confirmability refers to the findings from the data that can be checked and rechecked to validate the results (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I reviewed the audio recordings and transcripts several times to ensure I captured clear and precise raw data. I shared with

each participant a via email a clean copy of the transcripts to confirm their responses and to ensure that no biases were discovered in their responses. In addition, I used data columns to sort quotes with themes, organized the themes by research questions and additional findings, therefore, I relied on my reflective notes to confirm reflexive practices throughout the study. As a result, confirmability was supported by transcripts, quotes, and the actual recordings of each participant to truthfully gain teachers perspectives on declining student performance in K-3 grade reading.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 4, I described the setting and conditions at the time of the study. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), the role of the researcher is primarily to serve as a tool in conducting fieldwork in a study using engagement of participants to collect data and findings during the research process with fidelity. I described the participants' demographic attributes relevant to this study. Also, I described the data collection, and data analysis process to capture the participants' perspectives on declining student performance in K-3 reading. I sorted 620 codes into 17 categories, and five themes. The five themes included: *student foundational skills*, *teacher foundational skill instruction strategies*, *student motivation and focus*, *teacher general instruction considerations*, and *responsibility for reading mastery*.

The most significant facts from this study revealed that teachers do find gaps in students' mastery of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary usage, and fluency. Teachers described using various tools and methods, such as word walls, books,

technology, visuals, context clues, rote practice, and explicit instruction, in their efforts to elevate students' reading level. The research questions were all answered in the affirmative, in that teachers do see lack of skill in phonics, vocabulary, and reading fluency, and they are proactive in teaching these skills. Additional findings added to the data collected in regard to the research questions, and revealed that teachers find student focus and motivation to read are key factors in reading success; they find various instructional factors, such as time available for reading and access to materials, important in supporting their work in reading; and teachers find that responsibility for reading mastery is shared by parents, students, and teachers, but reading failures are largely attributed to lapses in teaching. Many teachers wondered why students who had not mastered reading skills in a grade were promoted to the next grade with those problems unremedied. Teachers pointed out that lack of attention to reading skill mastery at each grade level compounds the problem and contributes to reading failure on third grade assessments. In conclusion of this section, I provided evidence for trustworthiness of the results achieved in the study.

In Chapter 5, I will present an interpretation of these findings and note any limitations to be considered in evaluation of the results. I also will discuss recommendations for future research that might arise from this study and implications for practice that might demonstrate the significance of this study.



## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of K-3 teachers working in a rural elementary school district regarding a decline since 2018 in the reading performance of students in the third grade. This study's influence was a combination of the collected perspectives from 10 K-3 grade teachers from one state in the southern United States. This study addressed the need to better understand many third-grade students' failure to achieve reading proficiency. The analysis of data collected in this study revealed that teachers did find gaps in students' mastery skills in phonics, vocabulary usage, and fluency. Additional findings of this qualitative study showed that teachers identified factors that influence student reading mastery, including (a) student motivation and focus, (b) general instructional factors, and (c) responsibility for reading mastery. The participants expressed their concern for the lack of attention to reading mastery at each grade level, contributing to failure on third grade assessments.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The key findings of this study were reflective of third grade students' level of academic performance in reading since 2018. Teachers in K-3 grade confirmed and extended knowledge of the state of reading mastery and instructional practices linked with the reading performance of students in ways that can be connected to the literature and conceptual framework presented in Chapter 2. Teachers in this study reported that they actively try to capture and maintain students' attention to reading instruction and cultivate their interest in reading for pleasure. This finding aligns with

the work of Chall (1999), who suggested that teachers' direction instruction must prioritize phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary usage, and learning how to read with fluency as the keys to developing literacy skills. In addition, Chall and Snow (1988) found that a well-designed learning environment with multiple ways for students to experience reading and express themselves in reference to what they have read, creates a positive effect on reading development. When children progress through the stages of reading development, they develop a progression of skills and abilities that changes over time as they mature. According to the Literacy-Based Promotion Act in 2016, all students who exhibit a deficiency in reading must have an individualized reading plan, and teachers must pass a foundational reading test (RMC Research Corporation, 2019). Partanen et al. (2019) stated that third-grade students need an intensive reading intervention in place to decrease reading deficits before entering fourth grade.

Teachers described various aspects of general instruction that affect their instruction of reading. Teachers supported individualized and small group instruction for struggling readers. This was supported by Hall et al. (2019), who found that ELL students with difficulties with reading comprehension tend to struggle in the areas of vocabulary knowledge and linguistic skills, which affect their reading comprehension. Hindman et al. (2020) reported approximately 65% of ELL pupils recorded at the basic reading level. In addition, ELL students' difficulties with verbal communication might limit their capacity for self-expression in both written and spoken language, which influences their reading

comprehension in general classrooms regarding their specific linguistic and cultural strengths (Gupta, 2019; de Jong & Naranjo, 2019).

Teachers also questioned the validity of reading assessment, citing the fact that students often struggle to read the questions on assessments and are confused by the assessment process. Problems with assessment were described by Schildkam et al. (2020), who wrote that when reporting assessment data, the main concern is how teachers utilize data to enhance student learning and to influence instruction. When data are used to make decisions about specific pupils, children will receive the higher quality education they deserve (Gleason et al., 2019; Vanlommel & Schidkamp, 2019). In addition, Skinner (2019) found that it is critical to review student data after each evaluation for tracking and advancing students' progress. However, to select the most effective instructional technique for tackling reading issues across all subject areas, Ehri (2020) contended that teachers must review data and monitor evaluations. In fact, (Locton et al., 2020; Oliver et al., 2020) reported that the use of data does not always prompt teachers to change their practices but inspires them to look for quick solutions to yield an immediate increase in scores.

Lack of time for reading instruction was another general instruction factor that teachers said affected their ability to help struggling readers achieve mastery. Lack of instructional time was described by Spear-Swerling (2019), who found that all children could become good readers if more classroom instructional time were allocated for oral and silent reading; immersion in reading helps children decode print

material, read with fluency, develop vocabulary skills, and increase comprehension. When children are given more time to read aloud, they benefit because they can be supported by the listener in figuring out unfamiliar words and can get feedback from the listener, which improves children's reading comprehension (Kosanovich et al., 2021; Young-Suk et al., 2019). As Young-Suk et al. (2019) reference, oral reading takes time, especially in a classroom of many children who need reading support.

The third finding in addition to the findings relevant to the research questions was teachers' assessment of responsibility for students' lack of reading achievement. Teachers suggested that students are to some extent responsible for becoming good readers, but they assigned more responsibility to parents. This matches the findings of Anderson et al. (2021) who suggested that parents' low SES and low parental education can negatively influence their children's reading performance if parents do not understand the importance of their children's reading ability in early grades. Inoue et al. (2018) revealed that in the home environment, parent teaching best supported letter knowledge and phonological awareness, whereas shared book reading was associated with vocabulary knowledge and the ability to say words correctly. Also, to support the importance of parent involvement and home literacy environment, Steiner et al. (2021) reported that book sharing is a key element of the home literacy environment and provides a meaningful background for learning to read.

Teachers expressed frustration, though, not with parents, whom they admitted may not be qualified to assist students who struggle to read, but with their colleagues and

themselves. Teachers wondered how children could be passed from grade to grade without having mastered the reading skills required. The failure of responsibility among teachers was a factor cited also by Hudson, Moore et al. (2021), who reported that educators must be prepared to teach core literacy skills, like phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics, and word recognition, which would lead to better reading results for students.

The findings in this study align with the conceptual framework. As Chall (1999) described, teachers in this study supported the “conventional wisdom” of basic skills as a focus in reading instruction. In addition, teachers in this study confirmed that direction instruction must prioritize phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary usage, and learning how to read with fluency as the keys to developing literacy skills. Teachers suggested additional ideas, though, not included in Chall’s concept of conventional wisdom, including the importance of students’ focus and motivation to read as key factors in reading success. In addition, teachers in this study reported the value of various instructional factors, such as time available for reading and access to materials, as important in supporting their work in reading. Finally, teachers suggested that responsibility for reading mastery is shared by parents, students, and teachers, but reading failures are largely attributed to lapses in teaching.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations of this study include that during COVID-19 pandemic, school adjustments to preserve students’ and staff health may have changed how teachers taught

and how students learned, changes that may have affected mastery of reading that still have an effect in current times. In addition, the air conditioning unit in the target school stopped working the day before the interviews, which made the building very hot for teachers who were doing interviews from school. I accommodated each teacher with a portable fan in their classroom for comfort. No other problems arose during the interviews, with Zoom, or after the interviews, during the transcription process.

### **Recommendations**

Based on this study's findings and literature reviews, I have several recommendations to explore probable further research regarding the participants' knowledge of this phenomenon of declining K-3 reading performance. The first recommendation is to have this study replicated in another state or region of the United States to see if the results are similar. My study took place in a rural school district where most of the teachers and students were African Americans. Some teachers taught two grade levels in the same classroom at the same time with different standards and with one assistant teacher. To expand this study, I recommend it be replicated in urban areas in private or parochial schools. It would be interesting to know how schools in the urban area would address this problem of reading.

Additionally, I recommend future research start with prekindergarten students in the study state or region to see if reading skills are missing from daily instruction, which might affect the achievement of students in kindergarten. Another area for further research would be to explore the perspectives of administrators in implementing new

policies and practices in education to improve teachers' instructional performance in reading. Future research could explore how parents feel about reading, the importance they associate with reading well, and what they think are some of the reasons why children struggle with reading. Additional research might investigate ways to increase motivation for reading among struggling students. I also recommend future research to understand why teachers promote students to the next grade without mastering grade-level skills and what may hinder teachers from teaching the required standards per grade level with fidelity.

### **Implications**

The participants in this study revealed the importance of having enough time to teach reading skills. Having an assistant teacher in the classroom could allow teachers to individualize instruction and customize teaching for students with learning issues. Administrators might reduce extensive paperwork, so teachers have more time to teach.

During this study, it was revealed that many third-grade students lack the necessary reading skills for their grade level. To address this issue, administrators should require all incoming third graders to take a reading assessment to determine their current reading abilities. Teachers can then use the assessment data to identify areas where students need improvement and plan appropriate interventions using grade-level reading materials.

Another implication from this study is to ensure teachers are equipped with more training and resources. Administrators should provide teachers with state designed

workshops or professional development sessions that can demonstrate to teachers how to teach the Common Core State Standards for reading per grade level. As a resource, administrators could hire a highly qualified literacy coach to assist teachers in how to apply new knowledge to their instructional practices in reading.

This study also highlighted the importance of making reading engaging for students. Educators may consider offering a diverse selection of reading materials, including interactive computer games, videos, and audio books that are both compelling and motivational. In addition, school administrators can enhance the reading experience by outfitting classrooms with state-of-the-art technology, internet access, and an online reading program designed to elevate reading proficiency.

During the study, the participants expressed concerns regarding the issue of social promotion and pondered about the steps that teachers and administrators could take to address it. One suggestion is for administrators to convene a day-long teacher workshop on the reasons for social promotion, including pressure teachers might feel from the principal, parents, and each other, and collaborate in developing strategies to ensure that all children end each school year with the knowledge and skills they need for the next grade. Teachers and administrators should create a rapid-response plan for intervention with students in danger of missing grade-level goals and work closely with parents and the students themselves to increase reading mastery. Administrators might add a free summer enrichment program to maintain students' reading skills over the summer and to build skills in those who ended the school year with precarious skill attainment. In



addition, administrators could consider reducing class sizes to enable teachers to connect with each student in a more structured manner. These practical applications of the study findings could improve student reading ability and ensure greater academic success for years to come.

### **Conclusion**

Ten K-3 teachers working in a rural elementary school district participated in semi-structured interviews in a basic qualitative study designed to explore their perspectives regarding a decline since 2018 in the reading performance of students in third grade. The study was guided by Chall's (1999) "conventional wisdom" of reading instruction, which supported the explicit teaching of basic skills that lead to reading mastery.

The study findings underscore the importance of equipping teachers with the necessary training and resources to effectively teach reading. Recommendations include offering workshops, professional development sessions, and a literacy coach to support teachers in implementing new instructional practices and meeting reading standards. Additionally, the study highlights the need to make reading more engaging for students. One solution proposed is to leverage technology to enhance the teaching and learning experience. As leaders within their schools, administrators are encouraged to invest in state-of-the-art computers, promethean boards, and online reading programs for each classroom. Another key finding pertains to social promotion. To address this, it is suggested that administrators address this issue directly with teachers and collaborate

with them in developing strategies to ensure grade-level achievement in reading.

Administrators can further support this effort by minimizing class sizes to ensure that every student receives personalized attention. These elements are essential for improving reading proficiency and overall academic success.

The findings suggest that positive social change is achievable. When teachers and administrators work closely together, children will benefit by becoming good readers and communicators; test scores will increase on state assessments; students will feel confident in their work, and they will be ready for the fourth grade. Teachers will be able to teach reading at their grade level, and students will be successful. These practices will change the school culture, and students will become productive individuals in the community and future advocates for education. These positive social changes are within reach when the problem of low reading mastery is addressed with the attention and commitment it deserves.

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## Appendix: Interview Questions

1. What are some challenges you face in getting children to read?
2. When reading, what do you notice about the how children sound out letters and words?
3. What do you do to teach decoding skills to children who need help with phonics?
4. Tell me about children vocabulary: what do you think about the level of children's vocabulary skills?
5. What sorts of things do you do to help children expand their vocabulary?
6. Tell me about children's reading fluency and their ability to read smoothly?
7. How much do your students comprehend what they read?
8. What do you do to help children improve in fluency and comprehension?
9. Describe some strategies you think work best to help children become good readers.
10. Reading scores have declined in our district since 2018. What do you think could be done to improve children's reading ability?