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Special Education Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions of Instructing Students With Learning Disabilities

Kala Harris Johnstone
Walden University

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Kala Johnstone

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Dr. Lucian Szlizewski, Committee Member, Education Faculty

Dr. Maureen Ellis, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer

Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University
2017

Abstract

Special Education Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions of Instructing Students With
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by
Kala Johnstone

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

Walden University

May 2017

Abstract

An urban middle school in the northeastern United States was having a problem with low performance on state annual reading tests on the part of students with learning disabilities. Consequently, the middle school was not meeting the reading academic targets that were set by the Department of Education in the northeastern United States. The purpose of this exploratory qualitative case study was to explore special education teachers' experiences and perceptions about how teaching reading to students with learning disabilities was affecting special education teachers' pedagogy. Glasser's choice theory, which theorizes that an individual's behavior is chosen, formed the conceptual framework. Research questions guiding this study focused on special education teachers' perceptions and experiences teaching learning-disabled students to read and how experiences and perceptions affected pedagogical practice. The qualitative methodology included a purposeful sample of 5 special education teachers who provided reading instruction to learning-disabled students who participated in semistructured interviews. Typological analysis of data followed an open coding process to identify categories and themes. The findings indicated special education teachers' experiences led them to feel underprepared to adequately instruct due to a lack of a specified special education curriculum and materials. The resulting project included a professional development series for secondary education teachers to enhance reading instructional practices and locate special education resources. The findings may lead to improved pedagogical practice for special education reading instruction, resulting in positive social change through increased reading achievement for students with learning disabilities.

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Dedication

This doctoral degree is dedicated to my family who taught me to always care for the minority in the community. This degree is dedicated to my parents, Ike and Ann, for ensuring that I grew up with the understanding that gaining an education should be my number one priority. My father and mother did not receive a college education, and I believe this is what drove them to ensure that my siblings and I received a college degree. Education was always a priority in our house. My father passed away while I was working on this degree, and admittedly I gave up for awhile. I did not have the motivation to finish because deep down inside I was doing it because my dad once said, "I'm looking forward to seeing Dr. in front of our last name." When he died, so did my motivation. Awhile after his death, I told my mother I was not going to finish the program, and she quietly said, "I don't live with regrets. My only regret is that I did not get my college degree. Kala, never give up on getting an education." At that moment, I realized I had to finish, not for me but for my father and mother. Therefore, I dedicate this degree and all of my accomplishments to my parents. I also dedicate it to my best friend, my twin, Maya, who encouraged me throughout the research work and made me learn that even the greatest task can be finished if it is done one step at a time.

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First, I would like to thank God for giving me the strength and resources required throughout the research period thereby his guidance and aid to finish this program. I want to also acknowledge my brothers, Lance and Brent, for always providing the necessary encouragement and support to accomplishment any of my goals. My brothers have truly taught me what it is to be “mentally strong.” Additionally, I want to acknowledge my nieces, Gianna and Farrah, and my nephews, Kingston, Mason, and Guru for being an inspiration. I want to be a better person in hopes to be a model for them.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	vi
Section 1: The Problem.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Definition of the Problem	3
Rationale	7
Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level.....	7
Definitions of Terms.....	9
Significance of the Study	11
Guiding/Research Questions.....	12
Review of the Literature	13
Introduction.....	13
Conceptual Framework.....	14
History of Special Education	15
Before Public Law 94-142	15
Public Law 94-142.....	17
From PL 94-142 to IDEA	18
Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004	18
Individualized Educational Program.....	19
No Child Left Behind Act.....	20
Race to the Top.....	21
Every Student Succeeds Act.....	21

Effects of Teachers’ Beliefs on Their Pedagogy	22
Teachers’ Comfort With Teaching Students With Learning Disabilities.....	24
Teachers’ Pedagogy—Instructional Practices	26
Achievement of Students With Disabilities.....	27
Assessing Students With Learning Disabilities	28
Implications.....	28
Summary.....	29
Section 2: The Methodology.....	31
Introduction.....	31
Overview of the Study	31
Research Design and Approach.....	32
Participants.....	35
Criteria and Justification.....	35
Setting and Sample Participants.....	35
Procedures for Gaining Access.....	37
Working Relationship.....	38
Ethical Concerns.....	39
Data Collection	39
Interviews.....	40
Field Notes	41
Data Collection Instruments	42
Role of the Researcher	42

Data Analysis	44
Interview Analysis	44
Validity and Reliability.....	45
Discrepant Cases.....	47
Limitations	48
Data Analysis Results	48
Theme 1: Lack of a Curriculum.....	49
Theme 2: Students With Learning Disabilities Are Not Tested On Academic Level	51
Theme 3: Extensive Focus on the Use of Software	54
Theme 4: Effectiveness of Direct Instruction	55
Subtheme: Special education students have the ability to be proficient.....	56
Theme 5:	57
Theme 6: No Assessment Schedules Or Procedures	59
Theme 7: The Development Of Self-Selected Pedagogy	59
Evidence of Quality	61
Outcomes	62
Theme 1 – Lack of a Curriculum.....	62
Theme 2- Students With Learning Disabilities Are Not Tested On Academic Level	63
Theme 3- Extensive Focus On The Use of Software.....	63
Theme 4- Effectiveness Of Direct Instruction	64

Theme 5- Middle School Students Reading Between Kindergarten Through Third Grade.....	64
Theme 6- No Assessment Schedules Or Procedures	65
Theme 7- The Development Of Self-Selected Pedagogy.....	65
Research Question 1	66
Research Question 2	66
Research Question 3	66
Summary.....	68
Section 3: The Project.....	69
Description and Goals.....	74
Rationale	75
Review of Literature	77
Background.....	78
Professional Development	79
Ideal Components of Professional Development.....	81
Professional Development and Special Education Teachers	82
Professional Education Theory	85
Discussion of the Project	86
Needed Resources, Existing Supports, and Potential Barriers.....	88
Implementation of the Project.....	89
Project Evaluation Plan.....	91
Overall Evaluation Goals and Stakeholders	93

Project Implications	94
Importance of the Project.....	94
Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions.....	96
Introduction.....	96
Project Strengths.....	97
Limitations and Recommendations for Alternative Approaches.....	98
Scholarship.....	99
Project Development.....	100
Leadership and Change.....	101
Analysis of Self as Scholar	101
Analysis of Self as Practitioner.....	102
Analysis of Self as Project Developer	103
Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research.....	104
Conclusion	105
References.....	106
Appendix A: Project Study	132
Appendix B: Description of the Study Proposal.....	149
Appendix F: Email Informing Potential Participants About the Study’s Purpose.....	151
Appendix E: Interview Protocol and Questions.....	152
Appendix F: Letter of Cooperation.....	155

List of Tables

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes 53

Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (1997) was enacted in an attempt to ensure that disabled students received an appropriate education (as cited in Wright & Wright, 2013). IDEA required states to develop performance goals and indicators for disabled students and include them in assessments (Aleman, 1997). Additionally, the educational system was altered by federal legislation, No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) act. The NCLB act called for students to perform proficiently in reading and mathematics on state assessments by 2014 (Shirvani, 2009). Byrd-Blake et al. (2010) suggested that NCLB was enacted as an attempt to hold states and schools accountable and erase the achievement gap between nonminority and minority students, English-language learners, and students with disabilities. Shirvani (2009) also noted that NCLB was created with the intention of enhancing the quality of teachers' pedagogies. To measure student growth and teachers' instructional practices, state assessments were used as a tool (Chapman, 2007). However, on December 10, 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law (U. S. Department of Education, 2015) that was to determine student performance targets and school ratings that were to be state-driven and based on multiple measures, as opposed to NCLB where student performance targets and school ratings were set by the federal government and only used standardized assessments. The ESSA (2015) was a bipartisan bill developed to build an equitable school system that includes high expectations for

every child and the resources to fulfill those expectations (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

The results from the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) in an urban middle school in the northeastern United States disclosed that the students did not make annual yearly progress in 2012 (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2012). The results of the PSSA (2012) also indicated that scores for learning-disabled students declined significantly in comparison to the prior year. When the special education students did not meet the state's reading targets, they contributed to the school not making annual yearly progress (AYP; School District of Philadelphia, 2014). Historically, in the district, the reading scores of special education students tended to be frequently reviewed and discussed; however, based on the school district's goals found in its action plan created by the superintendent, special education teachers' pedagogies and reading methodologies were not being carefully examined (School District of Philadelphia, 2014).

In the following sections, I describe the definition of the problem, the rationale for this exploratory qualitative case study, and the purpose of the study. Additionally, definitions of terms, the significance of the study, and the research questions are included. Finally, a literature review and this exploratory qualitative case study's implication are provided. Throughout this qualitative case study, participants were labeled with a letter and number in personal communication to protect the identity of individuals when establishing credible sources.

Definition of the Problem

Students with learning disabilities at the urban middle school under study were failing to meet state reading targets (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013). An assortment of causes contributed to this problem, for instance, special education teachers' perceptions, experiences, and their pedagogy. The student population at the study's site was approximately 460, a number that was predominantly African American students (Philadelphia School District, 2013). On average, 92% of students attended school daily (Philadelphia School District, 2013). Students affected by learning disabilities made up approximately 25% of the total student population (School District of Philadelphia, 2012). Students who met the AYP targets were identified as basic or below basic (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014). Overall, students with learning disabilities made up a quarter of the population; their underachievement on the PSSA was affecting the school's overall academic results, thereby increasing the number of students categorized as basic or below basic.

Students with learning disabilities presented an ongoing challenge as their reading achievement increasingly fell below their nondisabled peers (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013). Special education teachers did not have a standard curriculum, and students received instruction from different textbooks that the teachers chose (M. Howard, personal communication, March 8, 2014). Students with learning disabilities were given a roster structured on their individualized education program (IEP) and were assigned to a literacy class with other students who were on their reading level; this class was taught by a special education teacher. Special education teachers at this middle

school were not required to teach from a certain text or implement particular educational practices. In fact, they were able to choose what grade level they instructed on between Grades 6 to 8. For example, an eighth grade special education literacy teacher instructed on a sixth-grade level throughout the school year if the teacher believed it was best for the students with learning disabilities.

At the end of the academic year, the middle school students, inclusive of special education, were administered a state assessment to measure their reading and math levels (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014). The results of the assessment were used by the district administration to determine a school's ranking. A low ranking would possibly lead to school closure or consolidation (Philadelphia School District, 2014). Schools in the study sites that were designated Title 1 schools based on the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965) received financial assistance from the federal government. Schools that were designated Title 1 had a large student population of students that were from economically disadvantaged families, and federal funding was provided to aid with assuring that students were able to meet challenging state academic standards (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014). The middle school under study was a Title 1 school (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014).

The Required Federal Reporting Measures ordered federal accountability designations for all Title 1 schools (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014). Title 1 designations were categorized as follows:

- Reward: high-performing, schools that performed highest in the state as far as school-wide proficiency, subgroup proficiency, and graduation rates;
- Reward: high progressing, schools that had high level of student growth;
- Focus: on schools where 95% of students participated on the PSSA, had a graduation rate lower than 60%, or ranked in the lowest 10% of schools in reading and mathematics;
- Priority: schools that ranked in the bottom 5% in reading and mathematics.
(Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014).

Schools that did not fit into any of the aforementioned categories were categorized as *undesignated*.

The school district where the middle school was located used the weighing system within its school progress report (SPR) to determine the ranking of schools (Philadelphia School District, 2014). SPR was an accountability tool that reflected the goals and priorities such as student growth. The following areas were weighed when determining district middle school ranking: achievement, 30%; progress over 3 years, 50%; and climate, 20% (Philadelphia School District, 2014). The weighed areas in the SPR were inclusive of students with disabilities, as the district believed that all students regardless of disability ought to be held to the same standard (Philadelphia School District, 2014). The SPR performance tiers were *intervene*, earned 0 to 24% possible points; *watch*, earned 25 to 49% of possible points; *reinforce*, earned 50 to 74% of possible points; and *model* earned 75 to 100% of possible points. The middle school under study was designated "intervene" (Philadelphia School District, 2014).

The PSSA was a high-stakes assessment given annually in Pennsylvania created to measure all students' achievement in reading, math, science, and writing (PSSA, 2014). The PSSA also determined the level at which schools prepared students to gain proficiency with the state standards. The results from PSSA were to enable administrators, parents, and teachers to identify students' strengths and weaknesses in order to improve their academic achievement (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014). A standardized assessment was thought to be beneficial because the assessment would yield results that were perceived by many to allow for a comparison of students (Betz, Eickhoff, & Sullivan, 2013).

The reading achievement of the special education students at the middle school under study indicated a significant decline (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2015). Cortiella (2011) noted that 2.5 million students in public schools nationally experienced learning disabilities in 2009 and could receive educational services under IDEA (1997). Additionally, the dropout rate among high school students affected with learning disabilities was 22% nationally in 2008 (Cortiella, 2011). Therefore, there was a need to address students with learning disabilities who were not meeting the state's reading achievement targets to increase their retention and decrease dropout rates.

The prior research addressed methods to avoid and remediate reading struggles for students with disabilities (Connor, Alberto, Compton, & O'Connor, 2014). However, additional research was needed about teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions around providing reading instruction to students affected by learning disabilities and these outlooks on achievement. Quantitative research studies had been conducted on the

attitudes of teachers instructing students with learning disabilities using inclusive practices (Ross-Hill, 2009). However, conducting an exploratory qualitative case study was useful because the interviews could provide data that offered insight into why a teacher's pedagogy was in a particular way.

State and federal policies such as IDEA (1997) and NCLB (2001) increased the necessity for schools to focus more of their efforts on increasing teaching accountability in order to improve achievement for all students. Students' abilities were affecting teachers' beliefs and perceptions about what they could achieve when instructing reading. Moore and Esselmann (1992) noted that teachers' beliefs about themselves were predictors of how students would perform on standardized assessments. Historically, students with learning disabilities had underachieved on standardized assessments; therefore, this study was necessary to conduct.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

The problem at the middle school under study was that the majority of students with learning disabilities were reading below state standards (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014). Students with learning disabilities were not meeting state reading targets, and PSSA scores were declining (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014). Specifically, in 2012, only 16.2% of special education students were proficient or advanced in reading on the PSSA, a decrease of 30.6% from the previous year's result of 46.8% (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2012). Special education students scored significantly less than general education students at their middle school, 35% of sixth

graders scored proficient or advanced in reading on the PSSA, while 47% of seventh graders scored proficient or advanced, and 59% of eighth graders scored proficient or advanced (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2012). Additionally, in a larger context, statewide, 45% of special education students scored proficient or advanced on the PSSA (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2012).

IDEA (1997) required each state to report the academic performance on the annual assessment of students with disabilities and how those students compared to nondisabled students (Thurlow, Lazarus, Thompson, & Morse, 2005). Reading achievement trends at the middle school under study indicated a substantial decrease on the state's assessment for students with learning disabilities, which warrants attention. Additionally, the pedagogy of special education teachers also warranted attention due to the low reading levels demonstrated by their students and the requirement of meeting the state's proficiency targets each year. At the middle school under study, the majority of students affected by learning disabilities were unable to meet reading proficiency.

In order for the middle school to meet AYP targets in the future, students with learning disabilities who were having difficulties reading on grade level were expected to improve their achievement on the state assessment (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014). The NCLB (2001) guideline for student achievement required that 100% of students score either proficient or advanced on the 2013-2014 PSSA in reading (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014). Students affected with learning disabilities struggled with staying on pace and academically improving as their general education peers (Cummings, Atkins, Allison, & Cole, 2008). However, Melekoglu and

Wilkerson (2013) pointed out that the majority of adolescents with disabilities read below basic levels even though they were still tasked with completing grade level literacy assignments. Attaining the goal of having all students with learning disabilities reach reading proficiency at the same rate as the nondisabled counterparts presented a problem at the study site.

The PSSA required all students to demonstrate reading proficiency in comprehension skills, which included the ability to interpret and analyze fiction and nonfiction through multiple-choice and open-ended questions (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014). According to Israel, Maynard, and Williamson (2013), in order for students with learning disabilities to develop content literacy, there must be an educational paradigm shift away from relying on students' independent reading and the dissemination of facts and abstractions. Instead, there should be a focus on ways to incorporate primary authentic texts into learning. Allington and Walmsley (2007) noted that students who read below their grade level would have difficulties meeting standards on assessments because reading the text in order to understand was a vital element of the test. The assessment scores of students with learning disabilities affected the entire school's overall results.

Definitions of Terms

For this study, the following terms and definitions were used:

Attitude: An agreeable or adverse action towards something or someone exhibited by an individual's beliefs, fixed behavior, or feelings (Myers, 2005).

Individualized Education Program (IEP): A program established to address the academic or behavior needs of a student that is inclusive of educational goals and action steps that teachers and the school's staff are to implement for that student in particular (Levenson & Fordham, 2012).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA): A federal act that ensures that disabled people were not excluded from education settings and resources that were provided to nondisabled people (IDEA - Building The Legacy of IDEA, 2004).

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB): A federal education action supporting standards-based education where the focal points was creating high standards and instituting measurable goals to hold schools culpable for enhancing all students' academic achievement (as cited in Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008).

Pedagogy: Teaching methods that are both act and discourse (Westbrook et al., 2013).

Perception: A process during which an individual clarifies and constructs feeling to build a meaningful world (Lindsay & Norman, 1977).

Special education: Individualized instruction to acknowledge the needs of students experiencing disabilities (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2013).

Students with learning disabilities: Students who have a neurological disorder that includes comprehending or using spoken or written language or have difficulties completing mathematical calculations (Aron & Loprest, 2012).

Teacher beliefs: An individual's reference inclusive of one's convictions, philosophies, or perspectives in association to teaching and learning (Tarman, 2012).

Significance of the Study

A significant increase in reading achievement among students with learning disabilities on the PSSA was needed for the study site middle school to meet AYP targets. An exploration of the experiences, perceptions, and pedagogies of special education teachers held importance for many reasons. There appeared to be an abundant amount of literature about teachers' perceptions and how those perceptions affected their instruction; however, there was limited research describing how teachers' experiences and perceptions were directly affecting student reading achievement or how teachers tended to work with the population of students with learning disabilities. Gambrell, Morrow, and Pressley (2007) described teachers as instructional designers who had the ability to employ meaningful best practices to enhance student learning. According to The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2009), the importance of understanding teachers' pedagogies, beliefs, and attitudes were discussed in order to advance their educational practices. Westbrook et al. (2013) noted that a teacher's pedagogy is based on ideas, beliefs, and attitudes. Given the importance of teachers' perceptions and experiences and how it affects their pedagogy as well as the problem of reading below state standards by students with learning disabilities at the middle school under study, it was a necessity to conduct this exploratory case study.

The findings from the proposed exploratory qualitative case study suggested improved teaching practices for students with learning disabilities. The ultimate objective of the exploratory qualitative case study was to understand special education teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding providing reading instruction to students who have

learning disabilities. The study was developed to further the expanding research on the effect of teachers' perceptions on their pedagogy. The findings from this study were vital, as the data could assist special education teachers and students with learning disabilities at the middle school in an effort to increase their reading achievement, thus promoting social change.

Guiding/Research Questions

There was ample research about the effects teachers' perceptions and attitudes had on instructional practice. However, in this study, I explored perspectives about special education teachers who instruct reading to students with learning disabilities who were underachieving at a local urban middle school. Therefore, in this study, I sought to gain understanding about special education teachers' experiences and perceptions about providing reading to students affected with learning disabilities using the following research questions:

- Research Question 1 (RQ1): What were middle school special education teachers' experiences teaching learning-disabled students to read?
- Research Question 2 (RQ2): What were middle school special education teachers' perceptions about teaching learning-disabled students to read?
- Research Question 3 (RQ3): How did middle school special education teachers' experiences and perceptions affect pedagogical practice?

An understanding of special education teachers' perceptions about how they teach reading was to help to identify best pedagogical practices.

Review of the Literature

Introduction

The goal of this exploratory qualitative case study was to illustrate special education teachers' experiences and perceptions of teaching reading to students with learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities were not meeting the state's reading standards, impacting the school's overall academic scores. Understanding how special education teachers' experiences and perceptions were affecting their pedagogy was necessary when trying to increase reading achievement for students with learning disabilities. Therefore, I chose to review the following literature as it provided information about historic special education lawsuits that led to IDEA (1997) and NCLB (2002). Further, studies were reviewed to contribute data about the effect of teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences on their instructional practices.

The review of literature for this exploratory qualitative case study included six areas: (a) an explanation of Glasser's choice theory, (b) a brief history of special education, (c) a discussion of the effect of teachers' beliefs on their instructional practices, (d) an examination of teachers' comfort teaching students with learning disabilities, (e) an exploration of teachers' instructional practices, and (f) suggestions on ways to assess students with learning disabilities. When searching the databases (SAGE, ProQuest, Education Research Complete, Teacher Reference Center, and ERIC) for peer-reviewed articles, the key words *special education laws*, *assessing students with learning disabilities*, *teachers' experiences perceptions*, *teaching reading*, and *teachers'*

perceptions and attitudes about students with learning disabilities were used between 2009 and 2014.

Conceptual Framework

Glasser's (1998) choice theory supported the conceptual framework for this exploratory qualitative case study. According to choice theory, people choose everything they do, including feeling miserable (Glasser, 1998), since when individuals choose their actions and thoughts, they also choose their feelings. Further, choice theory helped to explain why an individual constructed a unique world that was authentic to him or her, which Glasser referred to as the "quality world" (p. 45). Glasser's quality world is developed in memory soon after birth and may be continually created and recreated during life through small, distinct pictures. Glasser categorized the distinct pictures into three sections: "(1) the people we most want to be with, (2) the things we most want to own or experience, and (3) the ideas or systems that govern our behavior" (p. 45). Further, Glasser pointed out that individuals only control themselves; this is an essential aspect of the choice theory that each person is internally, not externally, motivated.

According to Glasser (1998), an individual is not in control of another person's feelings. The central basis of the choice theory is that individuals are more in control of their lives than they realize. Individuals, according to Glasser, choose to establish beliefs and attitudes about certain situations based on their lived experiences. As a result, teachers' pedagogy, beliefs, and perceptions about providing reading instruction to students with special needs may be determined by their personal experiences, which create the framework for their quality worlds. Glasser concluded that an individual's

quality world is cultivated by positive interpersonal and personal relationships. In summary, Glasser's choice theory encompasses the belief that individuals are responsible for their thoughts and actions. Accordingly, Glasser's (1998) theory supported this study's conceptual framework because gaining an understanding of teachers' established beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes about instructing students with special needs was vital to understanding the pedagogy individual teachers employed in the classroom.

History of Special Education

In this section, I discuss the history of special education that includes federal and state legislation that have been created to ensure students get a fair and appropriate education. Additionally, I briefly describe lawsuits that contributed to changing the environment where students with disabilities receive an education. Finally, educational acts that were put into law are also described.

Before Public Law 94-142

Federal and state legislation have established national laws to assure that learning-disabled students' needs are included in all public school environments. Legal steps for improving the right of special needs children to get a public education were initiated in the 1970s. Two landmark suits were the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (1971) and Mills (1972) cases. In 1971, the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children sued the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The lawsuit was the first "right to education" suit filed in the United States (Kirp & Jensen, 1983, p.6). The right to education lawsuit was filed in 1971, affording the state public schools the right to deny education to certain students, particularly those that mentally functioned as a 5-year-old.

The lack of legislation holding public schools accountable for educating all students led to excluding such students as those with learning, physical, and emotional disabilities. Therefore, the purpose of the lawsuit was to ensure that all students received a quality education regardless of their disability status. The *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971) lawsuit established individualized education and the requirement to place students in the least restrictive environments. The United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania swiftly ruled in favor of Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children and a consent decree was developed, with the state agreeing to provide a free and appropriate public education to mentally retarded children (Claire, Church, & Batshaw, 2007).

Following the *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971) consent decree, Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (1971) promptly reached the Supreme Court with a similar lawsuit called *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972). The Mills (1972) lawsuit was filed by seven parents of disabled children on the grounds that their children could not be refused an education (Itkonen, 2007). Because the local school board had labeled the children as "exceptional" (mentally handicapped, hyperactive, or emotionally disturbed), the students were denied a public education; further, they were not given alternative placement nor were their statuses periodically reviewed. In 1971, the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and the District of Columbia Public Schools estimated that 12,300 disabled children did not receive an education in the 1971-72 academic school year. The United States District Court for the District of Columbia

ruled that the Board of Education of the District of Columbia was to provide a free and appropriate education to every school-aged child disregarding any disabilities (*Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia*, 1972).

Public Law 94-142

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA), which is also referred to as Public Law 94-142 (PL94-142), was created to amend the Education of the Handicapped Act. The intent of the EAHCA was to ensure those students experiencing disabilities receive a free appropriate education. EAHCA also ensured that students with disabilities, as well as their parents, were protected, and it provided funding to states to aid in providing education to students with disabilities. EAHCA, which later became part of the NCLB (2002) legislation, also called for assessing and assuring the teaching effectiveness of those who educated children with disabilities (United States Congress, Public Law 94-142, 1975).

Bensky (1980) conducted a study to examine the link between teacher stress and the act, PL 94-142, 5 years after the passage. The study included 14 full-time educators who were enrolled in special education classes, and the data showed a link between act and teacher stress. Bensky found that when teachers were given unclear roles in relation to compliance with PL 94-142, stress levels rose. However, when teachers received clear expectations, the teachers tended to experience less stress.

Thirty years after the PL94-142, Leafstedt et al. (2007) again examined the effect of PL 94-142, by holding a panel discussion with seven stakeholders, including families and educators affected by the law. Prior to the passage of PL 94-142, educational programs

did not exist for students affected by disabilities because there were no state requirements. After PL 94-142 was passed, educational programs changed swiftly, and the effect of these changes positively affected the students' lives beyond the classroom as the assistance helped them become productive in society (Leafstedt et al., 2007). Each of the panelists stated that their lives were enhanced because of PL 94-142.

From PL 94-142 to IDEA

The IDEA that was enforced in 1990 and amended in 1997 and 2004 is a legislation that grants disabled children a free, applicable education in the least confining environment in states that get federal funds for education (Sheldon-Sherman, 2013). In order to gain protection under IDEA (2004), an individual is not to be over the age 21 and has impairments such as one or more of the following: mental retardation, deafness, hearing or language, an emotional disorder, a defined learning disability (Sheldon-Sherman, 2013).

Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) was signed into law by President George W. Bush on December 3, 2004 (Yell, Shriener, & Katsiyannis, 2006), reauthorizing and amending IDEA (2004). In 2006, the U.S. Department of Education released regulations enforcing IDEIA. The intention of IDEIA was to increase the results for students experiencing physical and/or learning impairments by declaring the requirements of the special education teaching and learning the process. IDEIA was developed to coordinate with the NCLB (2001), thus having an impact on the middle school that was under study as all of the students with learning disabilities were

expected to be proficient or advanced in reading by 2014 (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2012).

Individualized Educational Program

The concept of the IEP is the core of IDEIA 2004 (Rotter, 2014). Students affected with disabilities have different needs than their counterparts. Therefore, each IEP is to be reflective of the individual child (Marx et al., 2014). An IEP is a legal document that states the student's disability and services that are to be provided by the school. An IEP also includes assessments that are to be given to determine if learning or behavioral goals are met, accommodations that are to be afforded to the student, and parental input (Marx et al., 2014). An IEP includes such components as academic performance, goals of improvement, assessment accommodations, and services offered to the student (Gartin & Murdick, 2014).

Rotter (2014) noted that an IEP approach to education is considered a process and a product. The protocol for an IEP requires that a multidisciplinary team of the necessary school staff and parents work together to create a document that offers a "roadmap" for a student who is disabled (Rotter, 2014, p. 1). Rotter identified an IEP as a process because it includes advocating that students participate and self-determination. In addition, Gartin and Murdick (2014) stated that an IEP is not to be simply developed, but also analyzed and updated. Legislation that focuses on giving students with special needs a fair and appropriate education requires that their IEP be maximized.

No Child Left Behind Act

The NCLB (2001) was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Terry, 2010). NCLB was developed to offer plans to repair preschool through 12th grade schools in an effort to raise the achievement of students. Powell, Higgins, Aram, and Freed (2009) described NCLB (2001) as a legislation that charged schools to make AYP on state assessments in reading and mathematics in order to regularly collect federal funding. Gardiner, Canfield-Davis, and Anderson (2009) described the four components of NCLB as follows: (a) enhanced accountability, (b) flexibility for control over school operations, (c) school choice for parents, and (d) an emphasis on effective teaching.

On the state assessment, subgroups of a school's population have to perform adequately to meet AYP requirements. Subgroups include socially disadvantaged students, ethnic students, English language learners, and students with disabilities. Students' assessments results are given in the following categories: below basic, basic, proficient, or advanced. NCLB (2001) requires that each year, the percentages increase of students making AYP until ultimately all students obtain proficiency in reading and mathematics (Gardiner et al., 2009). All four pillars of NCLB, accountability, flexibility, parents, and methods, are to be addressed by schools. Vannest, Mahadevan, Mason, and Temple-Harvey (2009) noted that programs that schools employ should be research-based. Additionally, NCLB addresses the quality of teachers and requires that every teacher, inclusive of those who teach students with disabilities, be certified and highly qualified (Sindelar, Brownell, & Billingsley, 2010). Since NCLB requires that special

education teachers show competency to be highly qualified, it is necessary that a component of this study includes special education teachers' pedagogy.

Race to the Top

NCLB (2001) did not include specific systems that ensure states are compliant (as cited in Woolf, 2015). Therefore, the Obama administration developed and implemented Race to the Top (RTT; 2009) a competitive grant program that included incentives as opposed to sanctions to propel reform (as cited in McGuinn, 2012). The RTT program called for states to capture and track the achievement of students and the utilization of data to inform teacher performance annually (as cited in Woolf, 2015). RTT is a voluntary program that includes a system in which the federal government gives substantial grants once to selected states that develop sustainable programs in four areas developed by the federal government. The four areas include maintaining benchmarks and assessments, measurable data systems for student achievement, improving teacher effectiveness, and transforming schools that are significantly underachieving (as cited in U.S. Department of Education, 2010b). Overall, RTT is a competitive grant developed to reward innovation and reforms that increased student achievement in school districts throughout the United States (McGuinn, 2012).

Every Student Succeeds Act

The ESSA (2015) reauthorized the federal government's K-12 national law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), which was developed to ensure equal opportunity for all students (as cited in Department of Education, 2016). Although the NCLB Act (2001) included a system where students' progress was monitored and school

districts were held accountable, some provisions of NCLB (2001) were not workable. Therefore, ESSA included provisions that were to assist with assuring success for students and schools (as cited in Department of Education, 2016). ESSA ensured that more children had access to high-quality preschools. Additionally, ESSA holds all students to high academic standards while preparing all students for college and career. ESSA also assured that the necessary steps were being taken for the improvement of schools and students (as cited in Department of Education, 2016). Through ESSA, there was to be a reduction of the emphasis on standardized assessments' results while still maintaining annual information for parents and students. Finally, ESSA was to promote and reward educational innovation that works (as cited in Department of Education, 2016). Although this law was enacted after the middle school under study received its academic performance scores and ranking under the NCLB Act, ESSA was ultimately to have an impact on the future educational system.

Effects of Teachers' Beliefs on Their Pedagogy

There is an expansive amount of literature about how teachers' beliefs affect their pedagogy. Fives and Buehl (2012) pointed out that teachers' individual beliefs are important as they could habitually influence what a teacher focuses on or chooses to exclude from a curriculum. Watson (2012) observed a shift over the previous 20 years from concentrating on teachers' beliefs to determining which factors influence student achievement the most. The shift from focusing on teachers' beliefs to influential factors of student achievement coincided with making improved results a priority and was more practical for disabled students. Therefore, special and general education teachers need to

be better equipped to instruct in diverse contexts and directly enhance student achievement (Gehrke & Cocchiarella, 2013). Abawi and Oliver (2013) agreed that schools have been placed under a considerable amount stress to accommodate diversified student populations with varied learning needs. Working with the students requires that schools incorporate productive and innovative pedagogies.

Choi and Ramsey (2009) examined the effect an inquiry-based science course had on teachers' experiences and practical knowledge. Choi and Ramsey showed that the teachers were influenced by the science course and that most of the study's educators improved their pedagogical knowledge and skills of inquiry instruction. Consequently, their pedagogy, principles, and outlooks around employing inquiry-based instruction became more positive. These findings from the aforementioned study also support the notion that the teachers' beliefs and attitudes affect their teaching practices (Choi & Ramsey, 2009).

Begeny, Eckert, Montarello, and Storie (2008) investigated teachers' perceptions of students' reading abilities using a continuum of assessment methods. The data showed that teachers' perceptions were close to accurate in estimating students' abilities when students' oral reading fluency skills were strong (Begeny et al., 2008). However, Begeny et al.'s assessments were not as accurate for students with average to low oral reading fluency skills. The findings from the study conducted by Begeny et al. indicated that teachers' opinions of students' academic abilities affected their thought process, instructional practices, and implementation of special education policies.

Lyon and Weiser (2009) found, in a correlation study, that a teacher's knowledge and pedagogical instructional expertise were linked to students' reading achievement. Lyon and Weiser also noted an ineffective teacher, especially one with low-quality pedagogy, can yield devastating results, negatively influencing a student for years. A teacher's pedagogical quality helps to determine his or her effectiveness and is a vital component of student academic growth. The findings from this particular study illustrate the importance of a teacher's pedagogy.

Teachers' Comfort With Teaching Students With Learning Disabilities

Research has shown that teachers instructing students with special needs do not always feel comfortable and often do not instruct on an advanced level. Abernathy and Taylor (2009), using a mixed-method survey about teachers' perceptions of students' knowledge and understanding of learning disabilities, found that teachers frequently used jargon and euphemisms when assisting students who had learning difficulties. Teachers' lack of understanding of students with special needs affected the instruction that was provided. Kolb and Jussim (1994) noted that teachers with low expectations of their students develop a learning environment that breeds underachievement. Brady and Woolfson (2008), meanwhile, explored the relationship between a teacher's role, self-efficacy, attitudes about disabled people, and teaching experience and training in relation to a teacher's attribution for students' difficulties in learning. The level of comfort that teachers felt around disabled people in general molded their attitudes about providing instruction to students affected by disabilities (Brady & Woolfson, 2008). Educators who

were self-assured about their instructional skills to provide learning were more inclined to modify their instructional style to accommodate students with disabilities.

In a quantitative study, Cook, Cameron, and Tankersley (2007) investigated the attitudes of inclusive teachers toward their students with disabilities, finding that teachers often limit their connection to disabled students because many such students have behaviors that are considered problematic. Teachers' beliefs are influenced by their students' special education label, which in turn affects the instructional practices utilized in classrooms (Cook & Cameron, 2010). In this study, I aimed to gain insight into special education teachers' experiences and perceptions about providing reading instruction to students affected with learning disabilities. The data obtained from this study was to aid district and school administrators in determining the criteria of the educators who are appointed to instructing students with disabilities. A qualitative analysis of special education teachers' experiences and perceptions related to teachers that provide reading instruction to students with disabilities was yet to be performed.

Although a study of special education teachers' attitudes, in particular, was lacking, Taylor, Ahlgrim-Dezell, and Flowers (2010) found that a structured literacy curriculum positively affected teachers' effectiveness and self-efficacy as well as student learning, thus showing the extent to which pedagogical practices matter in special education contexts. The researchers also suggested that if teachers believed they could accomplish positive outcomes, such as high student achievement, they were more likely to persevere through challenging daily experiences (Taylor et al., 2010). Thomas (2013) observed that teachers' actions were greatly affected by their beliefs around topics such

as inclusion, the ability of all students to learn, and how to deal with students with behavior problems. I built on these studies by examining the pedagogy, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of special education teachers at one particular site.

Teachers' Pedagogy—Instructional Practices

Teachers' instructional practices are a large component of RTT as teachers' effects on students' achievements are measured (Polikoff & Porter, 2014). Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, and Salovey's (2012) multi-method, the multilevel study provided evidence that an amiable classroom was created when students' emotional needs were met. The participants in the study conducted by Brackett et al. were fifth- and sixth-grade literacy teachers and a diverse group of students in an urban school district in the northeastern United States. The results from this study showed that there was a direct, positive relationship between the emotional classroom climate and a positive teacher connection. Brackett et al. also noted that there was a recent shift in schools to educate the "whole child," which includes a focus on social and emotional learning (Brackett et al., p. 219). Since teachers are the direct providers of social and emotional learning, their attitudes can greatly affect the implementation and sustainability of the program. Pajares (1992) remarked that teachers' beliefs are vital because they are key indicators of their perceptions, which consequently affect their instructional practices. For these reasons, this study is vital to understand how special education teachers' beliefs and perceptions affect their pedagogical practices.

Hollenbeck (2013), for example, made some headway in investigating reading comprehension practices employed with students who experience difficulties with

learning by exploring a special education teacher's beliefs and practices related to reading comprehension in particular. There is a complex interaction between participants' beliefs, particularly the belief that their students' reading difficulties were due to the complexity of the text as opposed to any potential limitations of their pedagogies or practices (Hollenbeck, 2013).

Also examining special education teachers' attitudes, LePage, Nielsen, and Fearn (2008) found that the majority of teachers in a traditional special education program believed that most children could learn and that students with learning disabilities could overcome their challenges. For students who found school challenging, a teacher's dedication and the quality of their pedagogy helped to shape individual academic and social development, which played a vital role in establishing the educational success of these students. Conversely, Rubie-Davies, Peterson, Irving, Widdowson, and Dixon (2010) explored the expectations that students, teachers, and parents had of one another. Rubie-Davies et al.'s qualitative study, which obtained data from focus groups, revealed that the majority of teachers believed that students' academic success was more related to student motivation than to a teacher's beliefs or perceptions. A strong link between teachers' attitudes and their pedagogical practices, in other words, was shown.

Achievement of Students With Disabilities

Students who are affected with disabilities are tasked with accomplishing the same academic tasks as the nondisabled peers. Oyler, Obrzut, and Asbjornsen (2012) noted that students who experience reading difficulties performed significantly lower than peers who are nondisabled. Aron and Loprest (2012) also pointed out that

nondisabled students academically exceed far above their disabled peers, who usually are given low expectations. However, due to federal legislation such as IDEA (1997) and NCLB (2001) as well as the RTT (2009) program, states and schools have increased their focus on underachieving students (Elsenman, Pleet, Wandry, & McGinley, 2011). Since students affected with learning disabilities are expected to academically perform as their peers, it is essential to gain an understanding of teachers' pedagogy when providing instruction. Although IDEA and NCLB included components that attempted to close the achievement gap, this legislation also mandated that students with disabilities be given the same assessments as their nondisabled peers.

Assessing Students With Learning Disabilities

Standardized testing has become the primary tool used throughout the United States to measure teachers' and students' performance (Smyth, 2008). Since special education students are required to take the same standardized assessments as other students, many teachers are left with anxiety that the scores of students with special needs could have a negative affect on the school's overall performance. Special education teachers may also believe that standardized assessments are inappropriate for the purpose of assessing special education students (McCray & McHatton, 2011). However, to comply with IDEA (1997), NCLB (2001), and the RTT program, teachers have little choice but to assess special education students in ways they may oppose.

Implications

The goal of this exploratory qualitative case study is to illustrate special education teachers' pedagogy, experiences, and perceptions about teaching learning-disabled

students to read. Given that the emphasis is on effective teaching, assessing all students, and transforming low-achieving schools, a logical next step for the school district was to learn about teachers' perceptions in regards to teaching learning-disabled students to read and how these teachers' experiences are affecting their pedagogy as well as to suggest changes in teachers' pedagogical practices. The study's data acquired from studying how special education teachers provided reading instruction to students is affected by learning disabilities. After gathering the data, a possible project was to develop a professional development series for special education teachers. The professional development series could offer special education teachers with effective instructional strategies needed to increase reading achievement of students with learning disabilities.

Summary

The problem that was addressed by this exploratory qualitative case study was the reading achievement of the special education students at an urban middle school. The goal of this exploratory qualitative case study was to illustrate special education teachers' experiences and perceptions of teaching reading to students with learning disabilities. The study's research questions were structured to gain insight into special teachers' experiences and perceptions about providing reading instruction. This study was guided by the conceptual framework of Glasser's (1998) choice theory, which centers on the belief that individuals choose their actions and thoughts, and indirectly their feelings.

In summary, the review of literature for this study addressed major themes and plenty of data that had been collected on issues related to teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions and their pedagogy and their comfort with teaching students with

disabilities. There was little research that documented special education teachers' perspectives about teaching reading to students with disabilities. Therefore, there was a justification to conduct this exploratory qualitative case study. In the review of the literature, I also found research articles that addressed the history of how students with disabilities were treated and the legislation that was created to assure they received a fair and appropriate education. Further, Glasser's (1998) choice theory was also described as well as how it related to this study.

In Section 2 of this exploratory qualitative case study, I describe the methodology that was employed for the research. This section includes a description of the qualitative case study research design that was used. The criteria for selecting participants for this study are explained as well as the methods for establishing the researcher-participant relationships. The measures that were taken for the protection of participants are outlined, and data collection and analysis is described. Lastly, the limitations of this study are explained.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

The objective of this exploratory qualitative case study was to gain insight about special education teachers' experiences and perceptions about teaching reading to students affected with learning disabilities. Secondary, but as essential, was to understand the possible effect of special education teachers' experiences and perceptions on their pedagogy. With this in mind, in Section 2, a description of the methodology is explained. Further, this section also consists of a description of how participants were selected, and justification, data collection, data analysis, validity and reliability, and the limitations of this particular study are discussed.

Overview of the Study

The problem addressed was the below-standard levels in the reading of some students with learning disabilities at the middle school under study. The lower achieving students with learning disabilities' state assessment scores affected the school's overall scores and its AYP rating. The purpose of the qualitative case study was to illustrate special education teachers' pedagogy, experiences, and perceptions about teaching reading to students with learning disabilities. Using a case study approach enabled me to collect data in the natural setting where the problem was occurring (Creswell, 2009). Adelman, Jenkins, and Kemmis (1980) asserted that a case study design grounds data in reality, allows for generalizations, provides multiple viewpoints, and helps the researcher to develop an archive of descriptive material for others to interpret.

In this case study, I conducted semistructured interviews and used data from the questionnaire in order to understand participating teachers' pedagogies, experiences, and perceptions and answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: What were middle school special education teachers' experiences teaching learning-disabled students to read?
- RQ2: What were middle school special education teachers' perceptions about teaching learning-disabled students to read?
- RQ3: How did middle school special education teachers' experiences and perceptions affect pedagogical practice?

Research Design and Approach

In this study, a qualitative research paradigm and a constructivist approach was used in order to reveal teachers' pedagogy, experiences, and perceptions about instructing reading to students with learning disabilities. According to Creswell (2009), a constructivist approach is useful when a researcher aims to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from participants' perspectives. This research design also relies heavily on the participants' views of the problem being studied (Creswell, 2009). The previous literature suggested that a teacher's experiences and perceptions can affect the instruction provided, and a case study design enables the researcher to gain in-depth insight into the participants' perspectives (Creswell 2009). A case study includes a bounded integrated system with working parts (Stake, 1995) in which the researcher decides what is and is not included in the boundaries (Glesne, 2011). The bounded system in this study was the participants' and classrooms in the middle school where the interviews occurred.

A qualitative case study research design was chosen because it allowed me to capture realities whereas a quantitative research design does not efficiently capture in-depth realities (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). Quantitative research methods include instrument-based questions, statistical analysis, and statistical interpretation whereas qualitative research methods include open-ended questions, text and image analysis, and the interpretation of themes and patterns (Creswell, 2009). Consistent with a qualitative research design, this study was to gather and interpret teachers' perspectives on teaching reading to students with learning disabilities. The data for this case study was gathered through interviews. Merriam (2009) noted that a case study offers a rich, thick description and analysis of a certain phenomenon that can be transferred to similar situations. A further benefit of a case study design includes its insight into effective ways of enhancing the readers' experiences that lead to advancing the field's knowledge base.

Because I employed a case study design, conducting interviews was advantageous because they provided useful information when an observation could not be performed. This research design also allows the interviewer to have more control over the information that he or she collects by specifying certain questions that yield the necessary information (Creswell, 2012). Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2010) recommended that the researcher construct an interview protocol including a brief script that explains the study's purpose to the participants. Further, Lodico et al. also recommended that the researcher identify places to record the data and background information on the participant. Finally, the researcher should write the preliminary questions that will be

asked during the interview (Lodico et al. 2010). In this study, selected participants were provided with an interview protocol.

A case study design also allowed me to examine a problem by collecting data from various sources. Glesne (2011) recommended that the observer try to examine everything that is occurring, taking notes and writing thoughts without narrowly or focusing on the research problem. For this study, notes were kept based on information gained from using all the senses (Glesne, 2011).

Other research approaches such as mixed-method, ethnographic, phenomenological, and grounded theory were not appropriate to use. Although a mixed-method approach provides a more in-depth understanding of a research problem, only qualitative data were collected for this study; hence, the mixed method was ruled out. The ethnographic approach was not applicable for this study because a particular culture or group behavior was not studied. The methodology and research questions for this study were not structured to understand the lived experience of a phenomenon; thus, a phenomenological theory was eliminated. Lastly, the goal of this study was not to explore or develop a theory that describes the relationship, action, or system; therefore, grounded theory was deemed unsuitable to use (Merriam, 2009). I sought to gain insight and explore an educational innovation (Merriam, 2009), which made a qualitative case study applicable to use.

Participants

Criteria and Justification

The target sample for this study's population was purposely sampled. Purposeful sampling guarantees the researcher selects participants who fulfill a certain criterion (Creswell, 2007). The criteria for this study were (a) teachers who had a special education certificate, (b) teachers who offered reading to students with learning disabilities at a northeastern, urban middle school, and (c) teachers who had more than 3 years teaching experience. A purposive sampling technique was employed because it allowed me to use key informants who had some knowledge of the subject being studied (Lodico et al., 2010). Special education teachers were appropriate as participants for this study because their jobs required them to work with students who were exhibiting difficulties with reading. The study included a bounded system, which was a component of a qualitative case study (Yin, 2009). Special education teachers who provided reading instruction were included in the bounded system. Teachers who provided instruction in nonreading subject areas such as math, science, and social studies were considered outside the bound system. These teachers were omitted from this study because they were not providing direct reading instruction to students with special needs. The bounded system for this study was the urban middle school.

Setting and Sample Participants

The location of the bounded case was an urban middle school that was located in a northeastern state. The selected middle school consisted of approximately 120 students with disabilities, 90 who received learning support for reading. This middle school was

selected after several considerations. The middle school was conveniently selected because although students with learning disabilities historically struggle throughout the school district (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2015), this school was located in my principal neighborhood cohort. A principal cohort is a collection of schools that are based on similar structures, such as student demographics, located in the same neighborhood, and grade levels. I met with representatives of all schools in the cohort once per month, and at that time, each school's data were reviewed. Using the proposed middle school made it convenient for me to collect data; thus, the convenience sampling method was applicable for this study.

Patton (2002) explained that there are no exact rules when selecting a sample size for a qualitative inquiry. The sample size is dependent upon what can be studied based on time availability and resources, what is being studied, the usefulness of the participants, and what will yield credibility. Qualitative inquiry employs purposeful strategies as opposed to using methodological guidelines (Patton, 2002). However, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) argued that a qualitative researcher should set numerical targets. Before entering the field of research, a researcher should “know many interviews to budget for and write into their protocol” (Guest et al., p. 60).

Morse (1994) also suggested that the researcher should identify a number of participants; at least one individual should be used in a case study. However, due to the quest to find rich, in-depth data, it was necessary to use more than one individual. Creswell (2007) suggested using four to five participants in a single case study because this number allows “ample opportunity to identify themes of the cases as

well as conduct cross theme analysis” (p. 128). Further, Creswell (2012) advised against using too many participants in a qualitative study, as doing so makes it difficult for the researcher to provide an in-depth picture. Since qualitative research mainly focuses on interpretation and meaning, five special education teachers who served approximately 90 students whom received learning support provided a sample size that yielded saturation. Eight special education teachers made up the participant pool at the middle school under study. Having a minimal number of participants allowed for a concentrated exploration of the research problem as well as assisted with reducing any threats to validity. In a qualitative research study, the researcher’s capacity to present an in-depth picture diminishes as the number of participants grows (Creswell, 2012). Charmaz (2006) concurred that there is a probability of reaching saturation in a small study. Collecting data from participants who share equivalent experiences within a similar environment renders acceptable data (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003). Homogeneous purposeful sampling, in particular, was used to ensure that the study participants had similar attributes (Lodico et al., 2010)

Procedures for Gaining Access

I first got permission to conduct this study from the Walden University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix B). Once I was granted permission from the IRB, I provided the onsite middle school principal a brief description of the study proposal (see Appendix C), and the permission to conduct research form (Appendix E). I sought permission to conduct the study from school district administrators by completing the district’s required forms available via the school district’s website. The forms briefly

described the study's purpose and methodology. I then gained access to the participant pool from the site's principal. After gathering this list of contacts, I informed the potential participants of the purpose of the study via email (see Appendix F). This email was considered the introduction email that consisted of an attachment of a consent form for the possible participants to review, sign, and instructions to email to me if they were willing to participate in the study (see Appendix D). The attached consent form is a written form that is signed before the teachers participate in the study was given to the participants via the aforementioned email. The consent form included information such as the purpose of the study, rights to ask questions, and the study's benefits (Creswell, 2012). The consent form also informed the participants that participation was voluntary and gave the participants the option to stop participating in the study at any time (Glesne, 2011). Additionally, the participants were informed that their principal was not to receive any raw data. The participants were also informed that the initial semistructured interview was to take approximately 60 minutes. Finally, I explained my role in the study, which was included in the introduction email.

Working Relationship

Although I was an administrator within the district and neighborhood cohort, I did not have a working relationship with any of the potential participants in this study. Further, I had never supervised any of the possible participants. In order to ensure the participants were comfortable during the interviews, I allowed each participant to select the location of the interview as well as dates and times (Glesne, 2011). I advised the participants that this was also a learning experience, as the participants were to get an

opportunity of reflecting on the study's procedures and findings. Being the researcher at the same time placed me in the position to learn from and with my participants as opposed to being an authority. Glesne (2011) also advised researchers to be careful when conducting a study as an expert, as it discourages the researcher to become forthcoming.

Ethical Concerns

Harry, Sturges, and Klingner (2005) acknowledged that biases in qualitative research are not considered problematic as long as the biases, assumptions, and possible influential backgrounds are noted. The identities of all participants in this study were protected with the removal of all distinguishing information from the data set. A letter and number were used instead of names. Conducting the study at the participants' school—their natural work setting—presented minimal risk to them. Additionally, conducting the research at a site that is commonplace for the participants reduced potential internal and external threats (Creswell, 2012).

Participants had access to all information that pertains to the study. All data pertaining to the study are stored and password protected on my computer. The data will be kept on my computer for a period of 5 years; entry into the data file requires a password so as to avoid unauthorized access to the same.

Data Collection

A qualitative case study design was employed in order to obtain insight into the special education teachers' experiences and perceptions about teaching reading to students with special needs and to decipher the findings. This study's research questions were constructed on the premise that "there were multiple perspectives to be uncovered"

(Lodico et al., 2010 p. 264). The data collection process for this exploratory qualitative case study included procedures created to answer the research questions and accomplish the purpose of the research. Merriam (2009) noted that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis when conducting a qualitative study. I collected data from semistructured interviews (see Appendix G) to gather information concerning special education teachers' experiences and perceptions about teaching reading to students with special needs.

Interviews

Appendix F contains the interview protocol and questions. Individual semistructured interviews were used to gain insightful data from the participants. Semistructured interviews consist of preestablished questions that enabled me to ask more probing questions that yielded in-depth data and clarification (Fontana & Frey, 2000). The initial interview consisted of 19 open-ended questions that were asked of the participants during the interview process in order to allow the participants to best voice their experiences and perceptions about teaching reading to special education students. The interview questions were structured to precisely answer the research questions.

Once the questions were finalized and approval by Walden IRB was granted, they were given to the participants; all interviews were conducted with the participants in a private meeting room at the public library to ensure confidentiality. The initial interview, which took approximately 60 minutes to complete, consisted of questions that offered the participants an opportunity to share their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes about

instructing reading to students with special needs. A follow-up interview occurred, as needed, to gather additional data. The approximate time for each follow-up interview varied depending on the number of questions. Follow-up interviews occurred within 7 days of the previous interview in order to allow the participants enough time to reflect on the previous interview and prepare for the next one, as suggested by Seidman (2013; see Appendix G).

For reliability and cross checking each interview was recorded using iPhone Voice Recorder. Glesne (2011) stated that interviews provide an opportunity to discover information that cannot be observed and to explore novel interpretations of what is seen. Therefore, there was a need to record the raw interview and make my interpretations later. As the interview was taking place I could observe other features of the teacher that provided in-depth information on the teachers' perspectives that may not be immediately evident to outside observers.

Field Notes

When interviewing the participants, I took the field notes. Field notes are notes recorded by the researcher during an observation (Creswell, 2012). However, in this case, I took notes while conducting each face-to-face semi-structured interview. I wrote information in my notebook. Using a notebook to record information is a tool primarily used by qualitative researchers (Glense, 2011). I recorded information such as reactions of the participant and the physical setting. This notebook also aided in an attempt to reduce researcher bias, as it was used as a bracketing method (Wall, Glenn, Mitchinson, & Poole, 2004). I used the notebook throughout the study and recorded my feelings and

reflections. Finally, the fields were used so that I could recall key points of the interviews that were later used when analyzing the study's findings.

Data Collection Instruments

I used an interview protocol, which includes the list of questions that were asked. The interview protocol also consisted of a script, which included important components of the potential study. I used a digital recorder to record each semi-structured, one-on-one interview. A digital recorder enabled me to upload the recordings to a transcription app, TranscribeMe that made it easier to transcribe into text. After the transcriptions were created I read each transcript several times to get insight about the information given by each participant. The recordings and transcription of each interview was saved on my personal laptop. Additionally, I had field notes from each interview; those notes were electronically scanned and uploaded to my personal laptop as well. On my personal computer, I will store data obtained from interviews as well as field notes in a password-protected form for a period of 5 years.

Role of the Researcher

With 13 years of experience in the educational field, nine years as a teacher and four years as an administrator. I am currently an administrator at an urban middle school where I supervise students in grades six through eight. I had spent my entire career in the same urban district in the northeastern United States, where I had only taught general education students. Only during my years as an administrator I was exposed to special education classrooms and instruction, and in those years my training in this area was minimal.

My role as the researcher was to conduct interviews, record the data, obtain data from the questionnaire I created, and analyze its content. I did not work at the site of the potential study, was not an administrator there, and had no administrative control over the teachers and educators that were surveyed and or observed. However, I intended to spend ample amount of time at the study site. In full disclosure, the principal at the potential site of study is my sister. However, the principal had no direct access to any of the information gathered. Further, the principal did not know the identity of the study's participants. The participants were made aware that she had no access to the information. I had no relationship with the participants and did not visit this school on a regular basis. Therefore, I did not anticipate the study being compromised. I did not foresee my educational background or my relationship with the principal negatively affected the study.

Data Analysis

Typological analysis, development of related but specific categories within a phenomenon that divided across the phenomenon was utilized for the analysis of the data collected in this study (Ayres & Knafl, 2008). Hatch and Freeman (1988) explained that a researcher's preconceived topics, when the study was created, would be a reasonable start when looking for typologies to anchor other analysis. Following the suggestions of Creswell (2007), the study was structured to collect vital statements and themes that described the phenomenon's meaning of special education teachers' experiences and perceptions of teaching learning-disabled students to read.

Interview Analysis

The data analysis examined the information gathered from the semi-structured interviews. The interviews provided insight concerning the special education teachers' perspectives. Each interview was analyzed separately because their contents differed. I analyzed the transcripts, used open coding, and interpretative methods. To identify the themes emergent from the data, I used transcription and the same coding methods. I used interpretive analysis to summarize and explain themes and patterns (Lodico et al., 2010). Creswell (2012) recommends using interpretive analysis to explain themes in relation to the participants' personal views while also possibly comparing to previous studies. I used the Hyper RESEARCH program to assist with coding, retrieving, building theories, and conducting my analyses of the data (as recommended by Merriam, 2009). The purpose of using these analytical methods was to examine how the data relates to the research questions.

The answers obtained during the interviews were promptly transcribed at the conclusion of each interview. Member checks, allowed participants to determine the accuracy of the findings and to confirm that the researcher's interpretations are fair and representative, I helped to ensure the internal validity of this study (Merriam, 2009). During the member check process, in which they were invited to review the study's findings, participants made suggestions to ensure that their experiences were fully captured (Merriam, 2009). The participants were given up to three days to read and return the transcripts.

Once the approved transcripts were collected, I input the transcripts into the electronic matrix. Then open coding was employed to assist with sorting, developing, and classifying categories that have common themes. A color-coding system was utilized to connect collateral themes in order to support an organized process (Creswell, 2012). The findings of the data analysis were described based on the replies to the research question being addressed. Finally, using the themes, a narrative was developed to convey the study's findings.

Validity and Reliability

Creswell (2012) defined validity as the development of evidence that shows test interpretations aligns with the recommended ones; reliability is the results from the study's instruments substantial and continual. Brink (1989) stated that to ensure credibility, the research procedure has to be valid and reliable. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for this exploratory case study, which enabled me to choose the wording of each question, this also allowed for probing. Probing, was a suitable tool

for establishing the reliability of the data because it provides opportunities to gain clarity of intriguing and applicable issues that were mentioned by the interviewees (Hutchinson & Skodol-Wilson, 1992). Reliability was also achieved through probing as the interviewer could resolve interviewees' inconsistencies of accounts and allow for detailed information (Barriball & While, 1994). Probing also provided the opportunities for the participants and the interviewer to build a rapport and reduce the risk getting socially undesirable answers, responses that were socially preferred as opposed to what is truthful (Patton, 1990). A smartphone application known as iVoice was used to record the entirety of each interview. Having audio recordings helped with validating the accuracy of the complete information collected. Capturing audio also reduced the potential for interviewer error, because the interviewer could not write a response that was given (Barriball & While, 1994).

Merriam (2009) offered several methods to assure that qualitative research have reliability and validity, audit trail, reflexivity, member checks, and rich thick descriptions. The notebook I used to collect data was my audit trail, which included the complete procedures used during research (Merriam, 2009). An audit trail procedure was used to dependability (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Trustworthiness was gained through audit trail because it allowed my thoughts and judgment to be traced throughout the study (Merriam, 2009). An audit trail established validity because it provided a detailed narration of the decisions made during the entire research process (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Reflexivity is another method that was used to ensure the reliability and validity of the study. Using the notebook to bracket my thoughts during the bias stage, in which I recorded my personal speculations and perceptions about the special education teachers' perceptions and experiences effect on their pedagogy, was essential as it assured that the findings were based solely on the participants' responses (Creswell, 2012). Member checking was also used to assure the validity of my interpretations as a researcher of the participants' replies to the questions asked during the semi-structured interviews. The study's findings from the semi-structured interviews were given to each participant. I also used peer review in order to ensure this study's dependability and reliability. Merriam (2009) defined peer review as a process that includes the researcher asking a peer to review and comment on the findings. I asked a colleague who most recently earned her doctoral degree in education administration to discuss my results. My colleague had been in the education field for over 20 years and had been a school administrator for ten years. After signing a confidentiality form, I asked my colleague to read each interview transcription after the coding process, the final interpretations, and the summaries.

Discrepant Cases

McMillan and Schumacher (1997) defined discrepant cases as irregular or altered patterns within the data. Heinecke and Blasi (2001) suggested that discomfoting evidence could be used to refine the assertions until discrepant cases cannot be identified. When I incurred discrepant cases, I recorded the information, then analyzed it, and properly reported it. If I found discrepant cases, I was able to explain them in association to the disseminated findings.

Limitations

This case study presented two limitations: the site's location and its sole focus on special education students. This study was performed in an urban middle school, and it was difficult to correlate the findings to other geographic areas. Additionally, this study only focused on reading instruction for students with disabilities; therefore, the findings were not applicable to teachers of general education students.

Data Analysis Results

While re-reading the transcripts and highlighting reoccurring phrases and concepts I discovered seven themes and two subthemes emerged which are presented in Table 1.

Study's Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
1. Lack of a curriculum	A1: Lack of materials A2: Lack of support
2. Students with learning disabilities were not tested on academic level	
3. Extensive Focus on the Use of Software	
4. Effectiveness of Direct Instruction	
5. Middle School Students Reading Between Kindergarten Through Third Grade	
6. No Assessment Schedules or Procedures	

The aforementioned themes played a vital role in the teacher's pedagogy during reading instruction. To present each theme in explicit detail I used quotes from each participant. To assure each participant's identity was protected I used a letter and number: P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5.

Theme 1: Lack of a Curriculum

Each participant stated that neither the school district nor the school provided a special education curriculum that was inclusive of textbooks and other academic materials. Each teacher found personal academic resources to use in the classroom.

Locating the necessary resources presented a challenge to the special education teachers. The participants explained that there was not a district-issued curriculum, which made it difficult to find support when needed. During the data analysis I noticed two subthemes emerged within the lack of a curriculum theme: lack of materials and lack of support.

Subtheme A1: Lack of materials. P1 and P2 explained how they looked for their own materials to use for instruction. The lack of curriculum led to lack of cohesiveness among teachers as they used different resources. Taylor, Scotter, and Coulson (2007) noted that in order for enhanced student achievement occurs when teachers implement a designed program students are more likely to make gains.

P1 explained,

Well, for the curriculum-- oh well, for small groups I found these-- they're the short stories, and then what they had-- after the short story were questions that they read throughout. And then they had a different focus. So it could be a focus on main idea or summarizing or predicting. So I used those with the small group and I found-- my sister gave me those, and then I use those for my smaller group things. Now, when I think about it, a curriculum that is focused on students with reading needs. We have our new thing - collections - and it's good, but there's

only really one section that I can use, the closed reader. Because the rest of it, they wouldn't necessarily be able to do.

P2 explained,

So right now the only thing that I'm using that I'm not finding on my own and making my own, is for the interventions. So for Corrective Reading, I do, and that's an actual program. And then Academy of Reading is their research-based intervention online. And then everything else is just what I create.

P3 explained,

As I said before earlier, without linguistics I don't see reading happening. We were-- the materials and things that we used in the core curriculum, to me, were not designed for my children. It was doing too advanced, too vague. Nothing that I thought that they could grab onto. So, I would go outside and use other sources, bring back maybe my Basals, using things online. I had to find supplements for the curriculum.

Besides the lack of materials, the participants also described the lack of support received. The participants explained that district administrators did not develop continuous opportunities for special education teachers to learn about differentiated instructional approaches. Further, the participants expressed frustration about not having opportunities to work with other professionals to provide support to the students.

Subtheme A2: Lack of support. The participants explained that there was also a lack of support from district administrators as there was little professional developments focused directly on enhancing special education students' academic

achievement. The teachers were tasked with finding webinars or other forms of training to assist with their instructional practices. P2 explained, “I think I would have loved to have conferences with-- and work with a reading specialist. Having a reading specialist in the building would have been amazing.” P5 concurred that more school personnel would be beneficial, “more one-on-one support just to work with the child. I need more time, and I need someone to come in here like an aid even, for the child that really not getting it. A teacher coach, that'll be nice.

P4 explained,

We need to understand that I know they want the kids to be at grade level.

Everybody's not there. But everything is still like you have a seventh grader, that kid needs to do seventh-grade work. And I get it, and it's just hard to try to teach an IEP goal and to teach a seventh-grade goal when they don't always mesh.

Coupled with the lack of support the participants also expressed their frustration with the state requirement that students with learning disabilities have to take state assessments on grade level. The problems are myriad, and the lack of District support is problematic; but the issue of support for teachers is only one of the challenges that administrators face. Other factors come in to play.

Theme 2: Students With Learning Disabilities Are Not Tested On Academic Level

Each participant expressed frustration when explaining why state standardized assessments' results are useless. Participants expressed their frustration with administering an assessment where the majority of the questions were above the students' academic level listed on their IEP. The participants explained that all of their students

read between 3 or more levels below their current grade level. However, the students are given a state assessment that is on grade level.

P5 stated, "It appears it's (state assessment) not differentiated. It's one test for every student, and that's not fair." No subthemes emerged during analysis of the data.

P4 stated,

We have some kindergarten-level kids who took the seventh grade assessment. And for what? You can't read anything to them besides the directions, so that was kind of pointless. You have kids who are closer to grade level who should make the attempt because they're closer, and they should be pushed. But the ones that are three or more years behind, it's pointless. It's just frustrating for them.

P1 explained,

I don't think they should at all because they're not effective. I'll give you an example. We gave the benchmark, so it's multiple choice, it's at sixth grade reading level. I have kids on a kindergarten level, first grade reading level, but the child-- one of my two kids who, at the end of the year he was at a zero, he got to a one, finally, and first grade reading level. He was my highest score on the benchmark. Why? Because he guessed. He guessed well, yeah. So I don't find it to be that effective. Also, by the time-- those stories are really long and that intimidates my kids, especially they're reading it and they know they can't read it, so they're struggling with it, it intimidates them.

P2 explained,

I think a standardized test like the PSSA or something is, for some of these kids, is impossible. I think that they need to have it-- if it's a literature test, I think they should have it read to them. If you're in a K-reading level, it's not-- you can't even tell what they know, as far as grade-level content, because they cannot read any of it. They can't read the questions, they can't read the passages, and they can't read anything.

P3 stated,

I think that students should be tested based on what is taught, based on what's in their IEP. We can continue to test kids at-- special needs students at grade level well we would only be getting information that we already know. I would think that, at this point, to really see a special needs child's growth we would have to test where they are. Or a level above where they are to really see the growth and to use those results to instruct. I can't see having kids tested on their grade level. To me, it doesn't make sense. It's insane.

While students are being tested on their grade-appropriate level, they are not always on grade level, which frustrates both administrators and students alike. It does not appear that the stakes are weighted fairly; the participants agree that students should be tested on what they learned, which is in accordance to their IEP. The participants explained their grievances with the state assessment requirement, but they also described how the recent trends in educational focus have shifted towards focusing on technology.

Theme 3: Extensive Focus on the Use of Software

Four of the participants have been teaching for over 15 years and noted the recent extensive focus on using software as an intervention. P1, P4, and P5 discussed the various forms of technology training that they have recently received. P5 stated, “Recent trainings consist of a lot of differentiation and tech. A lot of tech stuff. I was born at the wrong time [chuckles]. So I fell behind a lot on my fellow peers. P4 explained, “Most of them have been computer-based - Google, implementing, computer-based interventions. While analyzing the data a subtheme did not emerge within this theme.

P1 stated,

We had a Lexia training that was for reading, a reading program training. That stood out because I use it. Academy of math, academy of reading program. Those also stood out because I use them. We had a program-- a training here last year where you could download free workbooks or make your own books. So the Lexia, that's done every week for a certain amount of minutes. I can't get out of it, I have to do that every single week for-- depending on what their prescription says, at least 80 minutes a week.

Although there had been an extensive focus on technology, the participants explained that they saw the biggest academic growth when they use direct instruction. Teachers do not have a universal curriculum, yet the teachers have found education software is less effective. In other words, the education software was to be more a universal program but the special education teachers were not using it. While the use of

technology in classrooms has become a widespread intervention for teachers and administrators, it still is not a panacea for all that ails our schools.

Theme 4: Effectiveness of Direct Instruction

The participants shared what strategy works effectively in their classrooms. Each of them had their own way of instructing depending on the circumstance of the conditions in each of the participant's classroom. P4 explained, "Group reading. We do a lot of group reading." P5 also explained how group work is utilized in the classroom, "A lot of one-on-one, as much as I can, and then the group together." When analyzing the data, a subtheme emerged: special education students have the ability to be proficient or advanced readers.

P1 explained,

Those guided reading little groups. I think because in those groups then it's-- you go from, say 11 kids to even the smaller groups. So some groups were only have one person in it, so they're getting all my [chuckles] attention for at least 20 minutes while I'm in a group with them.

P2 explained,

Guided reading, all the time. Guided notes, for everything, because they have a hard time writing, obviously. I do a lot of peer work, reading to each other, editing each other's papers. And then I also have them do interventions, which also help. Blended learning.

After the participants described the effectiveness of direct instruction the

participants explained why they believed their students had the ability to be proficient learners.

Subtheme: Special education students have the ability to be proficient or advanced readers.

The participants expressed a genuine belief that they believed that although their students were below grade level, they all had the ability to eventually become proficient or advanced if given the appropriate learning environment and materials. P2 stated, “Yes. If the majority of their curriculum in schools is geared towards reading instruction. Which I don't know if that's possible.”

P1 explained,

Because I can see the growth that was in my class, and I think what happens is-- I'm thinking two kids in particular, they were in a regular-ed class because they were reading on their IEP instead a fourth grade reading level. But they're both really quiet and shy, and they don't talk a lot. So I think if you have a class with 30 something kids, they're just going to get overwhelmed. So I pulled them-- so they wound up coming to my group and they both did so well because it's a smaller class size. So I think with support, yes, I do think that some kids can read at a proficient level.

It is clear that teachers hold themselves and their students to high expectations; they want their students to achieve in the classroom and often they can see growth, if only minimal. Although the participants shared their beliefs that the students have the ability to learn proficiently they admit that the students are struggling by reading several levels below grade level.

Theme 5: Middle School Students Reading Between Kindergarten Through Third Grade

Although the study's site was a middle school which consisted of grade sixth through eighth the age range of the students are 11 through 14; the participants stated that the majority of the students were reading on kindergarten through third grade. The participants explained that teaching students literacy to students that are far below their reading level presents many difficulties such as other job duties and the lack of instructional skills. P1 explained that time management is an issue when teaching students who were below level because one has to first teach them what they haven't learned and then get them on or close to grade level all in just one school year. P2 explained her lack of training in the area of phonics because the teacher was certified in secondary education, whereas elementary school teachers receive phonics training. When analyzing the data no subthemes emerged.

P1 explained,

So I have kids who are in first grade reading level are all usually in a group. Second, if the site gets large I split it up between-- they're between a 2.0 and a 2.4 down in one group, 2.5 to 2.9 in another group. So if I have-- this year I had 11, 12 kids in a classroom, I still might have five different reading groups because they're all over the place. My hope is that people move in and out, so it's like my second grade group got a lot smaller, the ones in the second grade. My first grade group stayed pretty much the same. And then my third they-- someone stayed third, some moved into fourth. And then because I have other job duties I'm in

and out the building, I'm doing stuff, there is just time to sit down with them and actually focus. I really wanted to work with that first group, that group who's being on the first grade reading level, and I'm getting pulled for this, being pulled for that, it's hard.

P2 explained,

The difficulty I face is when you have a class and you have such a range and you have K, first grade, second grade readers, and you're responsible for teaching them grade level content, but they don't know how to read but you can't-- how much time can you dedicate to teaching them how to read? Like phonics. Like just, how to read. And also, to be honest as a secondary educator, your training's not - I mean I took one college class about teaching reading because that's an elementary type, and I'm not a reading specialist. I don't have that much experience teaching someone how to sound out words.

P3 noted,

You could have four to six levels, meaning from K to five was usually it. As a special-ed teacher for many years, I often noticed that the breakdown would always be somewhere between second and third grade. That would be the average (reading level).

The participants discussed the lack of an explicit type of special education assessment, schedules, and procedures provided by the district. Special education teachers are tasked with finding assessments and creating their own schedules and procedures when they do assess students.

Theme 6: No Assessment Schedules Or Procedures

The participants explained how they find assessments and when they decided to assess. The range for the amount of times special education students were given a standardized assessment, other than the state assessment, PSSA by their teacher were between once to four times a year and weekly assessments. P4 noted, “We do the yearly assessments for the IEPs. We do weekly assessments to see if they are learning the skills that we're trying to teach for that week. P2 stated, “Well we do the yearly regular for the IEPs and stuff. We'll do it like that. So really only reading yearly.”

P1 explained,

I assess it four times, but then I also do oral reading fluency checks. That's four times a year too. I give the GACE twice a year, and then just what they do on quizzes and stuff like that. Lexia, I can use. Every week I can see where they're at in there and what they're struggling with. Sometime I pull a Lexia small group aside while we're in a lab, like, "Come here." And then do something really quick with them.

While analyzing the data the themes that emerged illustrated how the participants had to develop their own materials which leads to them developing the pedagogy utilized in the classroom.

Theme 7: The Development Of Self-Selected Pedagogy

The participants explained how their pedagogy developed. Although each participant provided instruction to students with learning disabilities, their pedagogy

differed. The participants explained that their pedagogy was selected based on the outcomes they wanted to see from their students.

P3 explained,

When I initially started out and that's where I was talking about creating a trust in children. That I was there for them to achieve. This is our job and this is what we have to do. I think that when I started to learn who I was teaching and that that child. I guess - when you say that what is my, what was my pedagogy, or what is my pedagogy I'm thinking of how did I - how do I show my practice and my study. I had to show kids that first that I cared about them and where they were going, and that they were my future and if we don't help you to get to 12th grade and get a diploma. Well that's my future at stake. I created a belief, a buy-in system with them. That is what helped me to actually instruct them and have them learn in a classroom.

The following themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) lack of a curriculum, (b) students with learning disabilities were not tested on academic level, (c) extensive focus on the use of software, (d) effectiveness of direct instruction, (e) middle school students reading between kindergarten through third grade, (f) no assessment schedules or procedures, and (g) the development of self-selected pedagogy. In the following section I describe the methods that were employed to ensure the accuracy of the study's findings.

Evidence of Quality

To ensure the study's accuracy and credibility safeguards were implemented. I first received permission from Walden University' Internal Review Board approved my study's proposal and I then received permission from the school district's committee. I also made sure to bracket my personal opinions within my notebook to avoid any biases. Additionally, I used the member checking strategy, which includes allowing each participant to read the transcript to check for accuracy of the interview and the findings. I emailed each participant a copy of the participants' transcripts. Audit trail and reflexivity was also used to ensure validity.

I also used typological analysis of data then an open coding process was employed to find categories and themes. Then open coding process allowed me to sort, develop, and classify categories where the themes were common. To connect collateral themes in order to support an organized process I used a color-coding system. I created a narrative using the themes to convey the study's findings. To ensure the participants' identities were protected, by I used letters and corresponding numbers for identification. Lastly, my study was reviewed by colleagues that also have a doctoral degree as well as my Walden University chairperson.

The data sources used for this study included audio recordings and interview transcripts, and field notes. All of the information obtained can be accessed on my personal computer which is password protected. My smartphone iVoice application, which was used also requires a password to access. The field notes and transcripts are locked in a cabinet in my home.

Outcomes

The data analysis resulted in the following themes emerging: lack of a curriculum, standardized assessment results were useless, extensive focus on the use of software, effectiveness of direct instruction, middle school students were reading between kindergarten through third grade, and no assessment schedules or procedures and the development of self selected pedagogy. The themes that emerged were directly relevant to the study's research questions. These themes were selected to address study's research questions:

RQ1: What were middle school special education teachers' experiences teaching learning-disabled students to read?

RQ2: What were middle school special education teachers' perceptions about teaching learning-disabled students to read?

RQ3: How did middle school special education teachers' experiences and perceptions affected pedagogical practice?

The following sections include a narrative summary and the data's interpretation in regards to the study's research questions.

Theme 1 – Lack of a Curriculum

The first theme was lack of a curriculum. Olson, Leko, and Roberts (2016) pointed out that it is beneficial to expose students with disabilities to a general education curriculum because it enables them to have expanded academic options, increases expectations of students, allows students to develop skills such as academic and social, and allows them to work with their peers. However, all of the participants explained that

there was no district assigned research-based curriculum for all students inclusive of special education students. Therefore, the participants did not have a universal system to expose the students to a standard curriculum. The teachers then described how they received materials from family members or through searching the Internet. Participants explained that every school in the district was given a curriculum for the upcoming school year (2016-2017), however that curriculum included little materials and lessons for special education students.

Theme 2- Students With Learning Disabilities Are Not Tested On Academic Level

The second theme was special education students' assessment scores were not useful. The participants expressed frustration with giving students an assessment that was on grade level but not on their personal IEP level. They agreed that data are important as they drive instruction; however, the data received from the assessment were not as useful because the students' performance was low and showed that the students were "below basic," which the teachers knew before giving the assessment. All participants believed state assessments were vital in order to truly gauge students' academic growth. The participants articulated a need to change the state assessments that are given to students with learning disabilities.

Theme 3- Extensive Focus On The Use of Software

The third theme was extensive focus on using computer software as a resource within the classroom. The participants explained that most of the school district's recent professional developments were advocating implementing technology into the classroom.

Although the district and school's focus was on technology implementation, the participants' found that direct instruction was more effective.

Theme 4- Effectiveness Of Direct Instruction

The fourth theme was direct instruction seemed to be more effective than the software program where students were asked to independently use a computer. Botts, Losardo, Tillery, and Werts (2014) described direct instruction as instruction that emphasizes learning in small increments, explicit step- by -step instruction, mastering a skill, error correction, and cumulative review. However, many of the software programs that were utilized in the participants' classroom did not require the teachers to first provide direct instruction.

Theme 5- Middle School Students Reading Between Kindergarten Through Third Grade

The fifth theme was that students with learning disabilities at middle school with grades sixth through eighth reading levels were between kindergarten through third grade with most students reading on a second or third grade level. Each participant stated that there were 20 students on their caseload. Some participants said they did not believe that they were adequately trained as a middle school teacher to provide elementary reading instruction. Older students need intensive reading remediation that is conducted in small groups offered by teachers that are deemed highly skilled. However, Wanzek, Vaughn, Roberts, and Fletcher (2011) pointed out that reading remediation is infrequent in most educational settings which perhaps is no coincidence that there were no noticeable growth among students who received special education services.

Theme 6- No Assessment Schedules Or Procedures

The sixth theme was the school district did not have a universal assessment system where special education teachers were given assessments to test levels nor were they given information such as how often the students should be assessed. Squires (2012) noted that districts that adopted textbooks and students spend a significant amount of time completing activities that are tested can have a significant affect on student achievement. However, this was not occurring in the middle school, as textbooks were not provided to the school. Due to the lack of a system the participants created their own timeline of when to give assessments and what activities to give the students. The process led to an uneven assessment system.

Theme 7- The Development Of Self-Selected Pedagogy

The seventh theme that emerged was how the participants developed their pedagogy. A teacher's pedagogy is vital as it is their teaching methods. Zippay (2010) noted that it is essential that teachers' pedagogy assists students with obtaining a quality education and the curriculum's content should be relevant and appropriate. Teachers that use effective pedagogy to students often have higher levels of student achievement (Riley, 2013). The participants discussed how their pedagogy was developed based on what they believed the students needed.

In the section that follows the three research questions were answered according to the data that were gathered. Further, the section also provides an explanation of why I decided to develop a professional development series as the genre. I also described the structure of the professional development series.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 was the following: What are middle school special education teachers' experiences teaching learning-disabled students to read? The participants described the difficulties that they faced when teaching reading to students with learning disabilities such as the lack of resources, procedures, and supports. The participants have not experienced a uniformed instructional process. The lack of having a universal system led to varying materials and assessments being used. Several participants stated that there was a need for a uniformed instructional system that solely focused on instructing students with learning disabilities.

Research Question 2

Research question two was, "What were middle school special education teachers' perceptions about teaching learning-disabled students to read?" Although, the participants discussed the pleasure in seeing academic growth, they admitted that it was difficult to provide reading instruction to middle school students that read on elementary levels. The participants explained the difficulties encountered that included providing instruction that covered numerous reading levels. The participants also discussed not having the proper skills to teach on an elementary level as secondary teachers.

Research Question 3

Research question three asked, "How do middle school special education teachers' experiences and perceptions affect pedagogical practice?" The participants explained that it was necessary to tailor a pedagogical approach based on the students that were in the class. A participant explained that there was a need to build relationships

with the students first in order to build a level of trust. Once trust was established the participant realized that it was necessary to instruct on individualize levels as opposed to teaching “above their heads.”

The teachers mentioned the lack of resources and training specifically for special education and the difficulty of providing elementary instruction to secondary students. Therefore, as a result, the project for this study targeted the enhancement of special education teachers’ knowledge and strategies for providing primary literacy instruction. The study’s project focuses on instructional reading strategies in order for teachers to obtain the skills for adequately instructing middle school students to increase student achievement. Further, Barrett, Butler, and Toma (2013) pointed out that to enhance teacher quality it is vital for teachers to participate in professional development programs. Each of the participants discussed being unprepared to provide the necessary reading instruction to middle school students who read three or more levels below the grade level. Two participants stated needing the support from a reading coach. Additionally, all of the participants stated they had not received professional development that focuses on primary literacy instruction.

Consequently, professional development is the project genre for this study. The professional development will be delivered to special education teachers during a series of workshops that span over three days. The professional development series will provide chances for the teachers to collaborate and use materials specified for students with learning disabilities.

Summary

Section 2 described the methodology and results from the case study. This section included the study's research design, criteria, and justification for selecting participants, gaining access to the participants, data collection, data analysis, and validity and reliability procedures. A rich narrative that presents the study's findings was included in Section 2. Section three includes a comprehensive description of the recommended project study, project's objectives, a justification for the project genre, and a description of how the project focused on the problem. A literature review about professional developments is included in this section. A project description and evaluation plan is detailed in this section. Finally, this section outlines the project implications that includes a summary for possible social change implications and provide the project's importance to local stakeholders within a larger context.

Section 3: The Project

The problem addressed in this study is that the students at the school under study did not make annual yearly progress in 2012 (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2012). Further, the results of the PSSA (2012) also indicated that scores for students with learning disabilities declined significantly in comparison to the prior year. The findings from this current study reveal that special education teachers perceived teaching learning-disabled students to read as difficult due to a lack of instructional training and materials available. The literature review and findings explained in Section 2 showed teachers' perceptions about their ability affects the probability of the teachers implementing instructional recommendations for students with learning disabilities. Further, most students who struggle to read on grade level perform significantly lower than their nondisabled counterparts (Oyler et al., 2012). Kane, Taylor, Tyler, and Wooten (2011) pointed out that there is sufficient evidence between teachers' practices and student learning, as a classroom teacher has the most influence on student achievement. Morrow (2011) asserted that exemplary teachers provide explicit instruction in a meaningful context with the belief that all students are capable of progressing on their individual developmental level. Evers, Van der Heijden, and Kreijns (2016) stressed that professional development is vital in order to close the gaps in skills of new teachers and the continuous development of expertise of veteran teachers. A successful professional development requires active learning by the teachers that is well-planned, collaborative, long term, and focused on content (Guskey & Yoon, 2009). In addition, Bolt (2012)

noted that previous researchers showed that professional development effectiveness for veteran middle school teachers cannot occur in just one session.

Therefore, to assist special education teachers with teaching learning-disabled students to read, I propose to develop a professional development series that includes workshops that will be conducted over a 3-day period. The workshop series will be titled, “The Basics- A Reading Workshop for Secondary Special Education Teachers.” The professional development series will be held at the middle school under study in September 2017 during the week before students return to school. All special education teachers who teach literacy will be invited to attend the series as well as other literacy teachers at the middle school. This professional development series will be voluntarily, as participants will not be compensated.

The professional development will be conducted over 3 full school days. Each day will begin at 8:00 a.m. with a break at 10:00 a.m., lunch between 12:00 p.m. -12:30 p.m., and finishing at 3:00 p.m. The topic on Day 1 will consist of professional development attendees learning various primary reading strategies. Day 2 will include professional development attendees viewing videos of secondary students receiving instruction to view various effective teaching strategies and review research-based software. Day 3 will include professional development attendees analyzing students’ IEPs. The attendees will then draft a literacy plan based on the IEP’s goals. The literacy plans will include the primary reading strategies that were identified and discussed on Day 1. Lastly, the literacy plans will be shared and discussed among the teachers. During each day, participants will participate in a question and answer session.

Professional development was selected as the project format because there is increasing awareness about the need for teachers to develop themselves professionally continuously throughout their careers to be effective (Burns & Lawrie, 2015). Further, professional development is considered a vital plan for school improvement, improving teacher quality and enhancing student learning (Girvan, Conneely, & Tangney, 2016). Diaz Maggioli (2012) noted that professional developments should have collective participation, which includes teachers who work at the same location, subject department, or grade level in order for them to establish a familiar understanding of instructional goals. This project was developed to allow teachers to collaborate, identify effective primary instructional strategies, identify appropriate software, and apply newly gained knowledge and develop literacy plans based on students' IEPs.

This study's findings suggested that special education teachers were frustrated with the lack of materials and supports designed for special education. The participants described various ways in which they obtained materials, such as by family members and making up the material. Further, the participants described their lack of confidence with using primary reading strategies to secondary students. The study's participants did not believe that they were providing an efficient reading program that addressed all the students' needs. In order to address the teachers' concerns, the first day of professional development focuses on primary reading strategies. This is necessary to provide attendees with reading strategies. As Wanzek and Vaughn (2011) pointed out, for students to be considered proficient readers, they must master reading foundation skills. The reading foundation skills include phonic awareness, phonics, and word recognition. Additionally,

students should demonstrate reading fluency, vocabulary, and the ability to comprehend various texts. The general goal for the first day of the professional development is to provide knowledge about foundation reading strategies in order to address the special education teachers' concern about how to adequately provide reading instruction to secondary students.

The second day of the professional development will include professional development attendees viewing videos of special education students receiving reading instruction to learn various reading strategies. The second half of the day will include professional development attendees viewing some research-based software. The participants in the case study discussed how the vast majority of the professional development they previously attended focused on how technology was used within the classroom. However, they each discussed different software programs. Further, the participants in the study did not have many opportunities to collaborate and work as a team while learning about software. The participants in the study described technological professional development sessions that they were required to attend, and then they were required to use the program. In contrast, this professional development will be set up to allow attendees to have the opportunity to view several software programs and select a program that best suits their students. Allowing the professional development attendees to make a decision about the software and then to connect it to the students in their classroom motivates the professional development attendees to be active participants during the professional development. As Gresalfi and Cobb (2011) stated, adults' motivation to learn is derived from encountering real-life situations. Therefore,

the structure of the second day will allow the participants to view real-life situations and develop strategies to implement.

The third day of the professional development will be structured so the professional development attendees can begin to create literacy plans based on their students' individual IEPs. Blackwell and Rossetti (2014) described a student's IEP as the single most important document to districts, schools, and parents, as the IEP is a guideline for creating an individual academic plan to enhance student achievement. Therefore, it will be necessary and beneficial for the professional development attendees to take time and carefully analyze each IEP. Due to the importance of IEPs, it is important that teachers take the time to analyze and address students' goals that are listed in the IEP. During each professional development session, the participants will have chances to ask questions.

In order to provide a comprehensive narration of this project, Section 3 consists of the project goals as well the rationale for choosing a professional development series as the genre. Additionally, a literature review is included in this section. The literature review includes current literature about professional development. Further, this section includes the project description, consisting of its implementation, needed resources, existing supports, potential barriers and solutions, and timetable. Lastly, the implications for social change of the project to local stakeholders and the extended community are described in this section.

Description and Goals

Professional development was selected as the project genre to address the local problem described in Section 1, where special education students' reading scores significantly declined on the state assessment. The problem of declining reading achievement among special education students will be addressed by inviting special education teachers and other literacy teachers to the professional development that is structured to build their literacy toolkit. The objective of this professional development is for professional development attendees to gain an understanding of effective reading strategies, view software, analyze students' IEPs, develop a literacy plan, and have collaboration time. The professional development series was created because a professional development that allows for participant interaction has a meaningful impact on teachers' changes in instructional practices (Sun, Penuel, Frank, Gallagher, & Youngs, 2013). Additionally, increasing evidence of what is high quality professional development shows that teachers benefit more when professional development is conducted for more than one day or one time. Only continued influences will strengthen different, effective behaviors and increase the likelihood that teachers will adjust their current practices (Sun et al., 2013).

The overall structure of the project was created to enhance special education teachers' knowledge of various effective reading strategies in order to adequately instruct students with learning disabilities. Further, the project will provide participants opportunities to work collaboratively to develop literacy plans. The data collected during the study yielded information where the participants shared their frustrations about lack

of materials and training that solely focuses on enhancing the academic achievement of special education students. In addition, each participant shared how materials were randomly gathered for instruction. This professional development will allow the teachers more opportunities to collaborate.

Rationale

The professional development series was chosen to assist with enhancing special education teachers' reading instruction toolkit. This project consists of collaboration opportunities and chances to learn primary reading strategies. Meissel, Parr, and Timperley (2016) stressed that professional development is most effective when teachers' needs are addressed. A sufficient professional development program can be effective for the entire school community. Effective professional development can lead to vital qualitative results such as a skilled, helpful school culture, academic growth of individual teachers, enhancement of peer learning, and citizenship (Willemse, Dam, Geijssel, van Wessum, & Volman, 2015). Teachers should be entrusted to advance their skills in subject matter, technologies, and additional important elements that develop high quality teaching (Korkko, Kyyro-Ammala, & Turunen, 2016; Witte & Jansen, 2016).

I have structured this project with the intent to enhance special education teachers' reading instruction by providing them with vital reading strategies and resources. The purpose of this exploratory qualitative case study was to illustrate special education teachers' experiences and perceptions of teaching reading to students with learning disabilities. Data yielded through semistructured one-to-one interviews formed distinctive themes and subthemes: lack of a curriculum, lack of materials, lack of support,

students with learning disabilities who were not tested on academic level, extensive focus on the use of software, effectiveness of direct instruction, middle school students reading between Kindergarten through third grade levels, and no assessment schedules or procedures. The themes indicated that special education teachers were frustrated with the minimal professional development that solely focused on instructing students with learning disabilities.

Ball and Cohen's (1999) practice-based theory of professional education will be used to guide the delivery of "The Basics- A Reading Workshop for Secondary Special Education Teachers" professional development series. The professional education theory is based on the notion that teaching is a profession that has to be learned in and from practice. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to attend trainings while teaching and to learn from others in the profession. Professional education theory includes three requirements: conception of practice, a sense of purpose that includes what is necessary for people to learn, and concepts about knowledge, skill, and other qualities vital to instruct teachers (Ball & Cohen, 1999).

The data analysis indicated that the special education teachers expressed concern about not having the appropriate materials in middle school to instruct reading to students with learning disabilities. Additionally, the special education teachers described how they felt underprepared to provide primary reading strategies to assist students with learning disabilities. Therefore, I developed this 3-day professional development session to ensure the teachers will receive reading strategies and resources in areas that they deem areas of weakness. I intend to demonstrate primary reading strategies that are

strategies taught in elementary school during the first 8 years of school. It is necessary to provide the special education teachers with these strategies because all of the participants in the case study stated that their students' reading levels were between Kindergarten through third grade. Further, the participants explained that as secondary teachers, they were not familiar with what reading strategies to use with students reading on elementary reading levels. Next, the professional development attendees will view how other teachers provide effective reading strategies to students with learning disabilities. Viewing other teachers effectively using reading strategies will allow the professional development attendees to see the reading strategies in action. Additionally, the participants will be given software resources to continue to expand their tool kit. Finally, once the professional development attendees have been equipped with reading strategies and resource, they will be given time to examine students' IEPs and develop literacy plans to address students' needs. In conclusion, it was evident that the special education teachers needed opportunities to collaborate with each other and receive reading strategies and resources in order to improve the reading instruction provided to students.

Review of Literature

In Section 1, I described the study's conceptual framework, Glasser's choice theory. The literature review in Section 1 consists of the history of special education, effects of teachers' beliefs on their pedagogy, teachers' comfort with teaching students with learning disabilities, teachers' pedagogy, achievement of students with learning disabilities, and assessing students with learning disabilities. The second literature review is included in Section 3, which describes the benefits of professional

development, special education, and reading interventions. Further, I explain how this project study appropriately addressed the problem. Additionally, I describe how professional education theory guided the development of the project. I structure the literature review in a manner that supports the project's format and rationale.

The majority of the cited sources were found on Walden University Library education databases. SAGE and ERIC were the primary databases used to obtain sources. The search terms used for this literature review were *professional development, adult learning, elementary reading strategies, special education, technology and students with learning disabilities, IEP, teacher common planning time, and guided reading*. This current literature review includes 27 sources that addressed the study's project goal to provide special education teachers with reading strategies, resources, and collaborative time to work with their colleagues.

Background

Urban schoolteachers are tasked with preparing their students to meet the state's academic targets just like their nonurban peers. However, urban teachers are less likely to be adequately prepared and have minimal accessibility to the necessary materials and resources (Gottfried & Johnson, 2014). Special education teachers at the urban middle school under study are tasked with teaching learning-disabled students to read. Koyama (2012) pointed out that one of the main reasons schools do not make AYP is because of their students with disabilities; the students struggle to maintain the same academic proficiency as their nondisabled counterparts. Further, to enhance student achievement, it is beneficial for teachers to attend training. Additionally, for student achievement to

improve, teachers should be given opportunities to collaborate with each other. You and Conley (2016) noted that special education teachers expressed some factors that lead to their dissatisfaction: They are given little training in teacher preparation programs and are given minimal opportunities to form collegial relationships. Although research has shown that it is beneficial for teachers to collaborate, Wei, Darling-Hammond, and Adamson (2010) noted that teachers do not frequently engage in a deliberately designed, thorough collaborative professional development that supports the development of their pedagogical knowledge and skills necessary to implement research-based instruction.

Middle school students that have reading difficulties need supplemental reading instruction that is intensive and implemented efficient fidelity. In order to implement intensive and efficient reading instruction to close the reading achievement gap in middle school teachers should implement instruction that is research-based and with fidelity (Benner, Nelson, Stage, & Ralston, 2011). Additionally, other methods that enhance middle school students' reading achievement include direct instruction and strategy instruction as well as the combining the two forms of instruction (Solis, Ciullo, Vaughn, Pyle, Hassaram, & Leroux, 2012). Furthermore, Vaughn and Fletcher (2012) stressed middle school students with disabilities can benefit from teachers who provide explicit reading instruction.

Professional Development

Professional development is defined by Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (2011) as a collection of experiences linked to an individual's occupation and developed to enhance performance and outcomes. To increase student achievement and change

teachers' behaviors professional development offered to teachers should be sustained over time. Further, the goal of professional development should be to increase teachers' capacity to support student learning (Patton, Parker, & Tannehill, 2015). To support teachers' capacity Hord and Tobia (2012) recommended that professional development should be grounded in social learning. An effective professional development should include the following principles (a) in-depth, sustained, and linked to practice; (b) student-centered and content specific; (c) connected to the school's goals; and (d) develop strong collaboration among teachers (Marrongelle, Sztajn, & Smith, 2013). An effective, professional development is advantageous to teachers because it allows opportunities for teachers to bond with other teachers that instruct students' similar learning styles (Maddox & Marvin, 2012).

When developing a professional development, an emphasis should be placed on having components that allow teachers to enhance their knowledge and relates to their students' needs. A mixed-methods study was conducted by Leko, Roberts, and Pek (2015) to examine the effects of secondary teachers' adaptations when using a research-based reading intervention program. Interviews, observations, and artifact data were the study's instruments used to collect data from five middle school intervention teachers. Findings from the study indicated the teachers are willing to adapt explicit components of the program that focuses on their own qualities as teachers, their contexts, and/or their students' needs. The teachers that accurately implemented the program benefitted from their own skills and the program's in order to provide more engaging activities to their students (Leko et al., 2015).

Research showed that when teachers are given collaboration time it can positively affect their instruction. For example, Sun, Penuel, Frank, Gallagher, and Youngs (2013) conducted a study that examined how high-quality professional development can bolster the distribution of effective instructional strategies by the teachers working collaboratively. This was a longitudinal study that spanned over 39 schools. The findings showed that teachers' participation in professional development is linked with supporting additional help to colleagues about instructional concerns. Additionally, the result of the professional development on participants' instructional practice dissipates through the system of helping.

Ideal Components of Professional Development

Effects of any professional development rely largely on teachers' motivation to learn and willingness to adjust their instructional practices. When teachers are not motivated to learn then they are likely to forget what was taught during the professional development (Kennedy, 2016). Stakeholders generally agree that effective literacy instruction is dependent upon the teacher as opposed to the methods used. Further, stakeholders also agree that professional development can assist with improving teachers' instruction effectiveness (Stephens et al., 2011). In order for professional developments to improve teachers' instruction Vaughn and Fletcher (2012) recommended that professional developments should be ongoing and inclusive of research-based reading programs. Whereas, Fischer et al. (2016) recommended professional development should include active learning that involves the participants being actively engaged in the thinking process whereas knowledge is self-constructed. Active learning tasks include

participants analyzing student work, observing teachers who are considered experts, or partaking in a teacher observation (Fischer et al., 2016). Professional development that include concrete tasks of teaching that are cultivated through active learning opportunities and collaboration with colleagues, are more than likely to provide participants with increased knowledge.

Learning is not an individualized process, knowledge and skills produced unidirectionally (Dingle, Brownell, Leko, Boardman, & Haager, (2011). In addition, Dierking and Fox (2012) suggested that learning should occur in a collaborative environment. Therefore, professional development should be ongoing and create communities of experts that collaborate in order to enhance their own instructional practices while increasing education at additional levels (Dierking & Fox, 2012). In addition, Driel and Berry (2012) suggested that professional development be rooted in constructivist and situative theories opposed to behavioral approaches. A component of constructivist theory involves making connections to real-life situations (Liang & Akiba, 2015). The other theory, situative is described by Koellner and Jacobs (2015) as learning is a process that involves acquisition and using knowledge. Regarding professional development situative theorists recommended that teachers should be given opportunities to collaborate in order to improve their instructional practices (Koellner and Jacobs, 2015).

Professional Development and Special Education Teachers

An effective professional development is ongoing and allows participants to self-reflect. A study administered by Brownell, Kiely, Haager, Boardman, Corbett, Algina,

Dingle, and Urbach (2016) included two professional development models for teachers in order to draw a comparison of teacher and student outcomes. One model included special education teachers who participated in literacy learning cohorts (LLC), developed to enhance the teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge for teaching learning-disabled students to read. The LLC professional development plan included the participants receiving 2 days of professional development, follow-up meetings, coaching and video self-analysis. Whereas, the participants in the second model professional development only consisted of a 2- day session. The findings showed that the participants in the LLC instructional practices significantly changed in the areas of instructional time allowed for word study and fluency instruction. Additionally, LLC teachers made great gains in the area of fluency knowledge.

In order for teachers to provide proficient instruction it is essential that they have the necessary resources to plan effective lessons. Research conducted by Klehm (2014) showed that the attitude of teachers about the learning ability of students with disabilities was found to predict if the students would score proficient state assessment. The participants were 52 special and general education teachers that worked at public middle schools. An analysis of the data showed that majority of teachers had high expectation for students but low expectations for students performing proficiency on the state assessment. Additional findings revealed that two thirds of the teachers stated that they did not have the necessary resources available to plan lessons to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Klehm (2014) recommended that professional development

that includes reviewing evidence-based practices and interventions should be offered to teachers.

Software programs that can be used on such devices as an iPad and computers are being utilized in classrooms, therefore it is necessary to train teachers on how to accurately use the programs. A grounded theory study conducted by Courduff, Szapkiw, and Wendt (2016) to expand a theoretical model that explains process of effectively integrating technology and special education instruction. The findings from the study indicated that special education teachers were willing to adopt technology when given in small increments (Courduff et al., 2016). The findings from this study support the idea of providing special education teachers with professional development that focuses on effective software usage.

Collaboration is advantageous for special education teachers because they instruct students with similar disabilities. A qualitative study was conducted by Leko et al. (2015) to investigate the discourse, learning in collaborative groups patterns of special education teachers while they collaboratively participated in a professional development group and the impact of individual discourse patterns that influenced the other participants' chances to gain knowledge about reading instruction for students with disabilities. During a two-year period the participants' cohort meetings were videotaped and then analyzed. The findings showed that special education teachers' benefitted from opportunities that allowed camaraderie and community. The findings from this study support my professional development series format, which allows the special education teachers to collaborate with each other.

Professional Education Theory

The professional education theory will guide the implementation of this project study. Gabriel (2011) described professional education theory as a process that involves teachers learning from within and from practice. Professional education theory encompasses three basic requirements: conception of practice, a sense of purpose that includes what is necessary for people to learn, and concepts about knowledge, skill, and other qualities vital to instruct teachers (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Gabriel (2011) noted that professional education cannot be accomplished without enhancing a substantial professional discourse and a commitment in communities of practice. Too often teachers rely on vague terminology as opposed to forming their communication in true phenomena of practice. The goal is to establish a more useful language of practice because it can develop vital intellectual work (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Leko et al. (2015) noted that teachers are more likely to partake in desired discourse about their practices when they are attempting to solve problems and seek advice from their colleagues.

A great deal of money is spent on professional development for teachers in the United States yet the trainings are superficial and disconnected from the curriculum (Ball & Cohen, 1999). The educational system inability to develop and implement the necessary programs for researchers and teachers is due to innate opposition to reform, but largely in poor understanding of language for teaching and learning (Webster-Wright, 2009). Teaching and learning is an interactive practice (Edwards-Groves and Hoare, 2012). An effective professional development takes into account how teachers learn (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Professional development programs that are structured so that

there's a precise focus on subject matter allows them to learn central facts and concepts of subject and how the ideas are linked. Professional developments are effective when there are opportunities for teachers to engage as learners (Borko, 2004).

Discussion of the Project

The professional development will be conducted using Microsoft PowerPoint 2016 to present the presentation. The professional development will be conducted over a 3-day span. Each professional development attendee will be given a notebook in order to take notes during the sessions about future possible implementation of strategies learned during the series. A detailed description of the professional development series is available in Appendix A.

I will administrate the project I developed titled, The Basics- A Reading Workshop for Secondary Special Education Teachers to middle school special education teachers during the beginning of school year, September 2017. Leading the professional development personally I thought will be beneficial for the series' participants since I was the researcher of the study. During the collection of data, I had the opportunity to connect with the study's participants and understand their needs and frustrations. The connection I have build allows me to present a meaningful professional development. Special education teachers and literacy teachers at the school will be invited to attend the professional development. The series will begin at 8:00 a.m. on each of the three days, with a lunch break at 12:00 p.m., and concludes at 3:00pm. I will tell the professional development attendees that this series was created based on the data were obtained during the study in which participants expressed areas of need which are: reading strategies for

secondary students, resources for students with learning disabilities, and collaboration time. The participants shared that all of their students are reading at least three levels below their peers. Therefore, the purpose of the first day of the series is to provide knowledge about foundational reading strategies to address the study's participants concern about having little knowledge about primary reading strategies. There is a necessity to equip middle school teachers with effective reading strategies as Kethley (2005) noted that middle school could possibly be the final opportunity for teachers to remediate students who have persistently struggled with reading. Middle school possibly being the last opportunity to address students' reading deficiencies demonstrate an urgent need to address the students learning difficulties before they graduate middle school. The first day's general goal is to heighten the participants' knowledge about primary reading strategies that can be used with secondary students.

The second day of the professional development will include two sessions; the morning session in will include the attendees viewing videos of special education students receiving reading instruction. The professional development attendees will be given opportunities to collaborate during and after the videos to discuss the reading strategies their viewing and how it may be implemented in their classrooms. During the second session, attendees will various research-based software. This session will allow the participants to possibly find a program that can be used in each classroom. Allowing the attendees to select the same program enables them to collaborate and have someone in the school to work with and work through any possible issues. Throughout each

session the participants will have the opportunity to ask questions and share any concerns or suggestions about how to implement the strategies or software.

The third day of the professional development will include attendees creating literacy plans based on their students' individual IEPs. The participants will have their students' IEPs available so they can view students' levels and goals. This day will be structured as a working session to allow the participants to apply the recently gained knowledge about effective reading strategies and software. At the end of the day the participants will be asked to participate in a self-reporting strategy called, 3, 2, 1. The first part of this strategy asks the participants to list three things that was learned during the series; 2- participants will list two things that they found interesting and that they will like additional information about, and 1 - participants will list one question they still have in regards to the material made available during the professional development series. The participants will be asked to write the three things in their notebook and ask to share their answers with the group.

Needed Resources, Exiting Supports, and Potential Barriers

In order to conduct this professional development, I will use my laptop and a video projector to show PowerPoints and to access the Internet. I will also distribute packets of the presentation, notebooks for self-reflection, and index cards. I will need support of the building administrator as I will need access to the school's library to use for the location of the professional development.

Possible barriers for this professional development include technical issues that might occur with the Internet or my laptop. To address the possibility of technical issues

I will ask that a tech person be available. In addition, in case the library becomes unavailable for some reason, I will hold an alternative meeting room in reserve.

Therefore, I will ask the school's administrator for a possible second location within the building.

Implementation of the Project

I was the author of the study, and so I am the person most knowledgeable about the problem and potential solutions. Therefore, I will lead the professional development series. However, I will ask for collaboration with the series' attendees. Including the attendees throughout the professional development will be effective as Runhaar and Sanders (2016) noted knowledge sharing among teachers benefits them and the school. Through knowledge sharing, teachers generate new ideas, exchange ideas of ways to deal with students, and discuss pedagogy that can lead to new insights (Runhaar & Sanders, 2016). During the professional development, attendees will have the opportunity explain or demonstrate best practices that implemented in their classroom. I also intend to work with the school's administrator to setup the professional development and when presenting the findings. At the beginning of the series I will provide each attendee with a packet that includes a handout with images of the PowerPoint slides, a notebook for the participants to record their thoughts, and index cards to record the attendees' responses to the formative assessment. The PowerPoint handout will include data obtained during the study and information about various reading strategies. During this day the attendees will have the opportunity to demonstrate any effective reading strategies that are employed in the classroom.

On the second day, I will show three videos of teachers who provide instruction in comparable academic environments teaching students similar to the attendees. The first video demonstrates the usage of a reading decoding program, SIPPS. The second video illustrates how to incorporate literacy centers in middle school. The third video demonstrates the implementation of guided reading with struggling readers in middle school. On the second day, I will also show two software programs that are efficient and research-based resources that they can be used in the classroom. The first software program will show the usage of Voyager Passport, a reading program that focuses on word study, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. The second software program that will be shown is i-Ready, which is a reading program measures students' reading levels and provides next steps activities.

The attendees will be given time to collaborate and analyze the videos of reading instruction and share what they have learned. The attendees will also be asked to share with the group about how the software will be used in their classroom. Finally, on the last day the attendees will apply their knowledge and use the notebook to begin to create a literacy plan based on students' IEPs. During each session the participants will be encouraged to ask questions and share implementation ideas.

I will complete a "use of facility" form in order to use the school's library. Once I receive permission to use the library I will submit the agenda for the professional development, a request for a use of projector screen, and the PowerPoint presentation. I will invite the school's principal to attend any portion of the professional development.

Project Evaluation Plan

An evaluation plan is important as it determines how and if a particular intervention or program was successful and identifies areas that need improvement (Pal, 2014). Plans are considered vital as they are the blueprint or vision for the community's stakeholders (Ryan, 2011). Throughout the implementation of this project I will think about the strengths and weaknesses and if the stated project objectives were accomplished. In order to evaluate this project, I will employ formative and summative assessments.

Formative assessment is a process where an individual providing a program or instruction can adjust the program based on early feedback, thus the adjustments can possibly significantly enhance the overall outcomes (Dorn, 2010). During the implementation of this project I will work together with the participants to gain an understanding of effective reading strategies, locate research-based software, understanding students' IEPs and how to develop a literacy plan, and collaboration time. At the conclusion of each session I will give the participants opportunities to reflect by giving them feedback forms in which they will be asked to describe the professional development series' strengths and weaknesses. The participants will not be asked to identify themselves on the feedback form. The feedback provided will enable me to make the necessary adjustments to improve upcoming presentations.

This project will include three forms of formative assessments, partner talk, two roses and a thorn, and the self-reporting strategy 3, 2, 1. Partner talk will be the first formative evaluation employed; partner talk allows the participants to collaborate and

discuss how they will accomplish a particular task, explain an idea, or share about recently gained knowledge. During this time the presenter rotates throughout the room and listen to the discussions. Partner talk will be conducted throughout the first day of presentation. During the first day a PowerPoint will be shown that consist of various primary reading strategies. After each strategy is shared the participants will have the opportunity to participate in partner talk and I will rotate throughout the room and listen to the discussion.

On the second day, the professional development will consist of participants viewing videos of teachers implementing effective reading strategies and demonstrations of research-based software. After each video segment is shown, the participants will be asked to complete the two roses and a thorn evaluation. Two roses and a thorn asks the participants to describe two things that they liked about an activity or lesson and one thing that they did not like or an area they still need clarity. The participants will be given an opportunity to share their responses, and I will also collect the sheets. On the third day of the professional development the participants will examine their students' IEPs and begin to create a literacy plan. During this day the 3, 2, 1 evaluation strategy will be utilized.

At the conclusion of the project, I will administer a summative assessment. During the third day of the professional development series I will ask the participants to complete the 3, 2, 1 evaluation activity. The participants will be asked to write three instructional strategies that were learned during the professional development. The three things that the participants write will be used as the summative assessment. Jiang (2014)

justifies using formative assessment because the priority is to improve instruction and advance learning by extracting, explaining, and utilizing evidence. Formative assessment can allow the instructor or presenter to make data-driven decisions impacting learning (Cornelius, 2013). Tolgfors and Ohman (2016) explained that a summative evaluation is an effective method to determine what individuals learned and measure the results of what an individual learned.

Utilizing the professional education theory was beneficial to guide the implementation of this professional development as it allows teachers to learn from each other, build on current knowledge, and dissolve the tradition of teachers working in isolation and increase their opportunity to learn (Ball & Cohen, 1999). The purpose of this project was to provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate, identify effective primary instructional strategies, and identify software to use to supplement instruction. Further, this project will allow special education teachers opportunities to apply newly gained knowledge and develop literacy plans based on students' IEPs.

Overall Evaluation Goals and Stakeholders

The project's evaluation was implemented in order to gauge if the project was effective in responding to special education teachers' concerns about providing efficient learning-disabled students to read. Further, the evaluation was intended to gauge if the teachers' instructional practices improved. Improving teachers' instruction could positively affect student achievement as their learning achievement will be enhanced. Additionally, the information that the evaluations yielded will allow for future implementation of professional development within the education community that answer

special education teachers' interests and worries in relation to providing effective reading instruction. Thus, teachers' instructional strategies are enhanced and students learning opportunities are improved.

Project Implications

This project study has social change implications. The findings may lead to improved pedagogical practice for special education reading instruction, resulting in a positive social change through increased reading achievement for students with learning disabilities. The professional development series was structured to provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate and enhance reading instructional practices. The project will be a basis for special education teachers within the middle school to work collaboratively and develop instructional methods to address students that are reading significantly below grade level. Enhanced teacher instructional reading practices can lead to improved student achievement on standardized assessments. The components of this professional development can be adapted at other schools within the district thus developing an instructional system that addresses special education teachers need for a curriculum, materials, and knowledge of primary reading strategies.

Importance of the Project

There are several reasons why the implementation of this project is important. First, this project addresses the concern of special education teachers' lack of knowledge about employing effective primary reading strategies. Secondly, teachers are able to learn about research-based reading software that can effectively supplement teachers' instruction. Thirdly, teachers are given time to examine students' IEPs to develop

effective reading plans. Lastly, the special education teachers are given ample opportunities to collaborate with each other. Section 4 will include the project's strengths and limitations and recommendations for alternative approaches. Further Section 4 will consist of scholarship, project development, and leadership and change and a reflection on the importance of this work and what was learned. Additionally, implications, applications, and directions for future research will be included.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

A qualitative research method using a case study approach was employed to explore special education teachers' pedagogy, experiences, and perceptions about providing reading to students with learning disabilities. The project that followed the study was structured to address the concerns of special education teachers who perceived teaching learning-disabled students to read as difficult due to lack instructional training and materials available. The study's results as well as the knowledge gained through the multiple literature reviews enhanced my scholarship, thus allowing me to create a project that was guided by the professional education theory.

While conducting this study, I found research that focused on successful instructional practices by teachers who instructed students with learning disabilities. I had to ensure that I conducted a thorough review that led to saturation. Then, I conducted the case study to gain insight of special education teachers' perceptions and experiences about teaching reading to students with learning disabilities. Next, I conducted another review of literature in order to design my project genre, a professional development series. Then, I designed a professional development that spanned over 3 days in which activities were employed to enhance the special education teachers' knowledge of various reading strategies and software programs. While conducting this study and the development of the professional development series, I had ample opportunities to reflect. My reflections as well as conclusions are presented in Section 4. Additionally, a self-reflective analysis is included in Section 4.

Section 4 also includes the project's strengths and limitations as well as recommendations for alternative approaches. Additionally, I include what I learned about scholarship, project development, and leadership and change. Additionally, I discuss the importance of the overall study and what I learned. Further, I discuss the implications for social change, applications, and directions for future research.

Project Strengths

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

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

The second strength is allotting collaboration time among teachers. The participants will work with each other frequently during this professional development to discuss various instructional implementations. The participants will constantly be encouraged to share their instructional successes. Allowing teachers to share will give

the participants opportunities to learn from each other. Collaboration time also gives teachers the opportunity to build a community among themselves.

The third strength is the participants will view videos of other teachers providing effective reading instruction. Viewing videos of other teachers allows the teachers to see teachers instructing students similar to theirs. While the participants are viewing the videos, I will pause to give them the opportunity to discuss strengths of the lessons. The teachers will also be given opportunities to discuss ways they can implement elements of the lessons they viewed.

The fourth strength is participants will be given time to analyze their students' IEPs. The participants will be given the opportunity to apply newly gained knowledge of effective reading strategies and software programs. The participants will be given time to create literacy lesson plans based on students' literacy goals listed in their IEPs.

Limitations and Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

There are limitations within this study that should be acknowledged. First, the study only included special education teachers. Second, I focused on literacy instruction provided only to special education students. The third limitation of the study is the sampling group, which was five participants. Fourth, all the participants were from the same middle school in an urban school district. In the future, this study can be broadened to include teachers who teach other subjects. Additionally, since this study had a limited number of participants, future research can include teachers from other schools and grade levels.

Another approach to address the problem of declining reading achievement among special education students would be to develop a special education program that includes a curriculum and established resources and materials. Additionally, all teachers who provide any form of instruction to special education students would be invited to attend professional development in order to develop a collaborative environment. Currently, the teachers within the district receive professional development throughout the school year. If the school district developed professional development that solely focused on special education and also provided research-based materials, special education students' reading achievement can be improved.

Scholarship

I have been in the education field for 16 years. However, I have never taught in a special education classroom and had minimal training about instructing special education students. Therefore, this was the first time I have delved into the history of special education and analyzed special education materials. This was also the first time that I gained in-depth insight of special education teachers' perspectives about providing reading instruction. While collecting data, I realized the frustration among the special education teachers because of the lack of continuity among special education teachers. Additionally, the participants were frustrated with the lack of materials and curriculum with the special education department. The lack of materials and curriculum were the focus of my project development. The findings from the study allowed me to understand that although special education teachers are certified to teach reading to secondary students, they are not trained to use primary reading strategies. Therefore, the

professional development can assist with enhancing teachers' knowledge about reading strategies and available resources. Additionally, a collaborative environment can be fostered throughout the school where teachers can network to resolve problems.

While conducting this study and designing the project, my knowledge of scholarship was enhanced. I now understand that scholarship involves time management, willingness to accept feedback, persistency, and self-motivation. Additionally, scholarship involves beyond the surface and ensuring that enough sources have been reviewed to the point of saturation. I also gained an understanding of the importance of solely reporting the findings and restraining from interjecting my thoughts during the semistructured interviews. I learned to allow the findings to mold my project study as opposed to me assuming what the participants needed. I also learned how to analyze data to formulate themes.

Project Development

While designing the project, I gained an understanding of the professional education theory. I understood the necessity of considering the professional education theory as it involves teachers learning from within and from practice. Since I was designing a project that focused on teachers learning, it was important to understand how they learn. Therefore, I structured the professional development to take place within the attendees' school environment and collaboration time for them to learn from each other. I also learned the necessity of evaluations; therefore, I included a formative evaluation. The formative evaluation allowed me to understand what the attendees learned and what they were still struggling to understand.

Leadership and Change

As a leader conducting this study, I learned the importance of obtaining in-depth data about what affects student achievement. Further, as a leader, I learned that teachers should be given time to voice concerns as well as offer suggestions to enhance student achievement. I learned the importance of focusing on all teachers as opposed to just general education, literacy, and math teachers. As a leader, it is important to include all teachers to create a collaborative work environment. Further, as a leader, it is important to ensure all students are given effective resources to enhance achievement.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

This study's approach enabled me to obtain knowledge in an area that was unfamiliar to me. As a scholar, I realized that there must be a connection between the researcher and the topic as it increases the motivation to present a quality study. The entire process of developing a study problem that occurred in the early stages throughout the prospectus taught me how to write a concise problem. During the beginning of the study, I learned how to use the appropriate sources when writing my first review of literature. While collecting data, I learned how to ensure that I restrained from being biased. I also learned how to connect the literature review to the problem at the urban middle school. The study's findings led me to design a professional development series to address the local problem.

Admittedly, I did not realize when I enrolled in this program the amount of time I would have to devote to conducting a study. I had no idea how much sacrifice was involved with being a doctoral student. Before this program, I considered myself a

procrastinator; I now know that to assure I submit quality work, I have to plan ahead. I had to learn how to accept constructive feedback and not become frustrated when told to rewrite certain sections. Obtaining this degree has humbled me more than I imagined when initially enrolling.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

While conducting this study and becoming a practitioner, I learned that writing this study is an ongoing process. Additionally, I learned as a practitioner the necessity to connect the information learned through literature reviews and the study's findings. Further, I recognized the importance of ensuring that theories were used to guide both the study and the project. I also recognized the need for me to ensure that the study would promote social change. Promoting social change through the professional development series allows for teachers to change their instructional practices ultimately impacting student achievement.

During this study, as a practitioner, I learned the importance of being persistent. Before becoming a scholar, I did not like to repeatedly ask questions or make frequent requests. However, while waiting to receive permission from the school district where the study occurred, I sent frequent emails requesting to be updated where I was in the process and when should expect to receive an answer. Additionally, I had to make sure that I stayed in contact with the study's participants to ensure accurate interview appointments. Additionally, as a practitioner, I increased my level of scholarly writing and the ability to find meaningful sources.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

Admittedly, this study actually began as a mixed-method study, and then became a phenomenological study, and finally I decided to use a case study approach. It also was a lengthy process when I determining what genre to select for my project. Initially, I wanted to create a curriculum plan since the participants expressed frustration about the lack of a special education curriculum and materials. However, after conducting a brief literature review about professional development, I realized the benefits of teachers receiving professional development. Further, after analyzing the findings and themes, I found it necessary to design a project that would enhance the attendees' instructional practices and make them aware of available resources.

While completing my second literature review about professional development, I found many research articles that pointed out the benefits of a series of professional development seminars as opposed to just one training session. Therefore, I designed the project to occur over a 3-day timespan. Additionally, I found an in-depth study that discussed the benefits of creating a collaborative school community, thus me adding collaboration time throughout the professional development (Marrongelle et al., 2013) I also learned the importance of conducting an evaluation of the project. An evaluation is critical when conducting the project and forthcoming sessions. Developing this project has assured me that I now have the capability to design future professional development series that can enhance teachers' instructional practices.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

There are implications for this project, which include adding resources to the special education department and adjusting the teachers' instructional practices. This project can expand throughout the entire school district and foster a learning environment that allows for collaboration among all special education teachers that provide reading instruction. Further, the project can be structured to include special education teachers who provide math and science instruction.

The project's applications can lead to enhancing teachers' pedagogy, thus positively affecting students' reading achievement. In addition, this project provides teachers reading strategies and resources to add to their professional toolkit. This project includes time for teachers to begin to create literacy plans that align with their students' reading goals. The structure of this project lends itself to future professional development designers, as components of this project can be employed when developing teachers.

The study's findings were limited because it only included five participants' perspectives from the same middle school. Future research could be extended to include other schools with other grade levels within the same school district. Further, future research could include schools in suburban and rural areas. In this case study, I focused on special education students' reading results on the state assessment. A future study might include an expanded case study that involves the researcher conducting observations of the participants. The observations of the participants providing reading instruction can give the researcher a first-hand insight of the participants' pedagogy. In

addition, an expanded case study inclusive of a quantitative approach can be conducted by future researchers. A quantitative study could be used to investigate the influences of professional development in the following areas: teachers' instructional practices and students' reading achievement.

Conclusion

The study's purpose was to explore special education teachers' experiences and perceptions about how teaching reading to students with learning disabilities was affecting special education teachers' pedagogy. The study's project was a professional development session that would occur over 3 days and was structured to enhance attendees' toolkit. While reflecting when writing Section 4, which required me to write about scholarship and analyzing myself as a scholar, I realized my growth as a student. Being a doctoral student has taught me how to analyze data and conduct thorough research. Finally, conducting this study and creating a project to address the local problem enhanced my social awareness about improving the educational field.

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78

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Appendix A: Project Study

Professional Development PowerPoint Slides with Presentation Notes

This professional development is intended for district and school site level teachers who provide reading instruction to learning-disabled students. The professional development will be conducted over a three-day span. Additionally, this professional development will include research-based instructional approaches. The professional development is structured to enhance teachers' instructional toolkit, thus enhancing teachers' pedagogy.

On the Day One the professional development I will provide information about foundational reading strategies about primary reading strategies. Day Two will include professional development attendees viewing videos of secondary students receiving instruction to view various effective teaching strategies and review research-based software. Day Two session will include collaboration time for attendees to discuss the instructional strategies that were viewed and how those strategies can be efficiently incorporated within the classroom. Day Three of the professional development will involve the attendees creating literacy plans for each of their students based on the student's IEP.

Slide 1: Title of Project

The Basics- A Reading Workshop for Secondary Special Education Teachers

Slide 2: The Study's Problem

The problem with low performance on state annual reading tests on the part of students with learning disabilities. As a result, the school was not meeting the reading academic targets that were set by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Slide 3: The Study's Purpose

The purpose of the qualitative case study was to illustrate special education teachers' pedagogy, experiences, and perceptions about providing the reading to students with learning disabilities.

Slide 4: Study's Results

The findings indicated special education teachers' experiences led them to feel underprepared to adequately instruct due to a lack of a specified special education curriculum and materials.

Slide 5: Themes that Emerged Within the Study

Lack of a curriculum, standardized assessment results were useless, extensive focus on the use of software, effectiveness of direct instruction, middle school students were reading between kindergarten through third grade, and no assessment schedules or procedures and the development of self selected pedagogy.

Slide 6: Subthemes

Lack of Materials and lack of Support

Slide 7: The Project

This project was developed to provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate, identify effective primary instructional strategies, identify appropriate software and apply newly gained knowledge to develop literacy plans based on students' IEPs.

Slide 8: Social Change

This project study has social change implications. The findings may lead to improved pedagogical practice for special education reading instruction, resulting in a positive social change through increased reading achievement for students with learning disabilities.

Slide 9: Importance of the Project

There are several reasons why the implementation of this project is important.

This project addresses the concern of special education teachers not knowing primary reading strategies to respond to secondary students reading on elementary school levels.

Teachers are able to learn about research-based reading software that can effectively supplement teachers' instruction.

Teachers are given time to examine students' IEPs to develop effective reading plans.

Special education teachers are given ample opportunities to collaborate with each other.

Slide 10: Professional Development Agenda

Day 1: Participants will learn about various reading strategies used in elementary schools.

Day 2: Morning Session- Participants will view videos of secondary students receiving instruction to view various effective teaching strategies

Afternoon Session- Participants will review research-based software.

Day 3: Participants will analyze students' IEPs and draft a literacy plan based on the students IEP's goals.

Slide 11: Project Evaluations

Formative: This project will include three forms of formative assessments, Partner Talk, Two Roses and a Thorn, and the self-reporting strategy 3, 2, 1.

Summative: During the third day of the professional development series I ask the participants to complete the 3, 2, 1 evaluation activity. The participants will be to write three things that was learned during the professional development. The three things that the participants write will be used as the summative assessment.

Slide 12: Theory

The professional education theory will guide the implementation of this project study. Gabriel (2011) describes professional education theory as a process that involves teachers learning from within and from practice.

Slide 13: Primary Reading Strategies

The following are reading strategies that are frequently used during reading by elementary school teachers.

Phonological Awareness

Read- Aloud

Guided Reading

Literacy Centers

Vocabulary

Slide 14: Phonological Awareness

According to Gillon (2004), “Phoneme awareness performance is a strong predictor of long-term reading and spelling success and can predict literacy performance more accurately than variables such as intelligence, vocabulary knowledge, and socioeconomic status” (p. 57)

Slide 15: Phonological Awareness (cont..) Age of Acquisition

BIRTH to 2 YEARS				
Literacy Socialization	Phonological Awareness	Print Knowledge	Reading	Writing
-Enjoys joint book reading -Learns to hold book right- side up -Learns to turn pages -Answers questions about pictures	-Rhyme awareness emerges at 24-30 mo.	-Learns to distinguish print from pictures	-May pretend to read when others are reading	-Learns to hold crayon, scribble
2 to 5 YEARS				
Literacy Socialization	Phonological Awareness	Print Knowledge	Reading	Writing
-Interested in books -Learns the need to turn page to get	-Segments sentences into words -Segments words into syllables	-Learns alphabet song -Learns to recognize and	-Learns to recognize name in print -May recognize	-Begins representational drawing -Learns to write

to next part of story - Learns print is stable; anyone reading a book reads the same words -Recognizes familiar books, may know their titles	(emerges at 48- 60 mo) -Counts syllables (50% by age four) - Recognizes/produces rhymes (ability to produce rhyme emerges at 30-36 mo) Recognizes/produces words with the same beginning sound Segments/blends words by onset/rime (s+un=sun) OR given sounds, can blend them into a word	name letters -Knows some letter names, can identify 10 (usually if it's in their name) -Learns letters "have" sounds (i.e., grapheme-phoneme relationship awareness) -Knows that print is what you read -Learns clusters of letters separated by space, form words	environmental print on signs and labels (reads "Stop" sign) -Knows to read from front to back -Learns left-right progression of print	name -Distinguishes drawing from writing -Learns to write some letters -May use invented spelling to label drawings -Experiment by writing/scribbling strings of letters or numbers, or similar forms -May write left to right, right to left, or up, down, and backwards
References: Johnson, K. L., & Roseman, B. A. (2003). The source for phonological awareness. East Moline, IL: Linguistics, Inc.. Paul, R. (2007). Language disorders from infancy through adolescence: Assessment & intervention (3rd ed.). St. Louis: Mosby, Inc.				

Slide 16: Phonological Awareness (cont..) Age of Acquisition

5 to 7 YEARS				
Literacy Socialization	Phonological Awareness	Print Knowledge	Reading	Writing
-Reads picture books for pleasure, with assistance (e.g., audiotaped book) -Reads picture books for pleasure, independently -Knows parts of a book and their functions	-Identifies (names) first and last letters and sounds in words -Lists words that start with the same sound -Counts sounds in words (50% of children by age 5) -Tells which of three words have common sounds (e.g., ball, bat, pen) -Tells which of three words is different (e.g., sit, sit, sat) -Blends 3-4 sounds to make a word (/h/+ae/+n/+ /d/=hand) -Segments words into 3-4 phonemes (hand= (/h/ + /ae/ + /n/ + /d/) -Manipulates syllables (e.g., delete, substitute, reverse) -Manipulates sounds in words (What's hop without the /p/? [/ha/])	-Learns alphabetic principle: Words are made up of sounds; sounds can be represented by letters -Learns all letter names, letter sounds for consonants -Learns sounds for vowels -Matches letters to sounds (grapheme-phoneme correspondence) -May recognize words by sight	-Learns to decode by identifying sounds for printed letters and synthesizing sounds across letters to form words -Learns some words by sight -Starts to track print when listening to a familiar story -May read a few short, regularly spelled words (e.g., their names or their classmates names)	-Learns conventional spelling for some words -Writes many uppercase and lowercase letters -Learns to spell by using phonemic awareness and letter knowledge -Makes errors based on phonetic correspondences -Writes most letters and some words from dictation -Writing is simpler than speech -Writing begins to be more common than drawing

	-Manipulates letters to make new words (can change hat to cat)			
7 to 9 YEARS				
Literacy Socialization	Phonological Awareness	Print Knowledge	Reading	Writing
-Reads “chapter books” for pleasure independently -May read non-fiction for pleasure, as well	-Plays with sounds in words, as in pig latin and other secret codes -Uses phonological awareness skills when spelling	-Begins to learn conventions for punctuation, capitalization, other conventions of print	-Transitions from emergent to “real” reader -Recognizes more words by “sight” -More phonic patterns are recognized to increase automaticity of decoding (e.g., “silent e rule”) -As reading becomes more automatic, more attention is focused on comprehension -Reading moves	-Learns spelling patterns (e.g., -ight pattern words) Increases vocabulary of known spellings -Makes fewer spelling errors -Uses writing to send messages -Begins school-sponsored writing, such as book reports -Writing resembles level of complexity in speech

			toward fluency	-Oral and literate styles are mixed in writing -Narrative writing predominates
References: Johnson, K. L., & Roseman, B. A. (2003). The source for phonological awareness. East Moline, IL: Linguisticsystems, Inc..				
Paul, R. (2007). Language disorders from infancy through adolescence: Assessment & intervention (3rd ed.). St. Louis: Mosby, Inc.				

Slide 17: Phonological Awareness Activities

1. Sequencing Sounds Have the children listen to prerecorded, easily identified common sounds such as animals and vehicles, or make your own sounds. When they are done listening, have them tell you what order they heard the sounds in.

2. What Sound Was Missing? Present a sequence of three prerecorded sounds, or make your own sounds. Repeat the sequence, leaving out one sound. Have the children identify which sound was missing.

<http://www.phonologicalawareness.org>

3. Integrate phonics instruction with word study: Teach students how to identify word parts, break words down into syllables, and use word families. Use content-area words for this exercise that students are likely to find in their academic work.

Slides 18: Read- Aloud

Read-aloud is an instructional format, included formally in elementary reading programs and as an instructional activity in all areas and levels of the curriculum. A primary purpose of a read- aloud is to create a community of readers in the classroom and establish a known text as a basis for related literacy activities. Reading aloud allows teachers to model important components of literacy, such as fluency, expression, and

interacting with texts while exposing students to vocabulary that is just beyond their instructional level and demonstrating how reading is a source of information and enjoyment.

<http://www.washoeschools.net/cms/lib08/NV01912265/Centricity/Domain/228/Instructional%20Strategies%20List%20Fall%202014.pdf>

Slide 19: Guided Reading

Guided reading gives teachers the opportunity to observe students as they read from texts at their instructional reading levels.

Guided reading is subject to many interpretations, but Burkins & Croft (2010) identify these common elements:

Working with small groups

Matching student reading ability to text levels

Giving everyone in the group the same text

Introducing the text

Listening to individuals read

Prompting students to integrate their reading processes

Engaging students in conversations about the text

The goal is to help students develop strategies to apply independently.

Slide 20: Guided Reading (cont...) Preparation for Guided Reading Instruction

Here is a general task list to consider before initiating guided reading instruction.

Assess students to determine instructional reading levels (IRLs). At IRL, students should sound like good readers and comprehend well.

Look for trends across classroom data. Cluster students into groups based on their IRLs, their skills, and how they solve problems when reading. Make groups flexible, based on student growth and change over time. If you must compromise reading level to assemble a group, always put students into an easier text rather than a more difficult one.

Select a text that gives students the opportunity to engage in a balanced reading process.

If a student looks at words but doesn't think about the meaning or consider the pictures, find an IRL where the student uses all of the information the text offers. If there are more than a few problems for students to solve during reading, the text is too difficult.

Plan a schedule for working with small groups, and organize materials for groups working independently. Independent work should be as closely connected to authentic reading and writing as possible; try things like rereading familiar texts or manipulating magnetic letters to explore word families.

Slide 21: Guided Reading (cont...) The Guided Reading Session

Individual lessons vary based on student needs and particular texts, but try this general structure.

Familiar rereading—Observe and make notes while students read books from earlier guided reading lessons.

Introduction—Ask students to examine the book to see what they notice. Support students guiding themselves through a preview of the book and thinking about the text.

Students may notice the book's format or a particular element of the print.

Reading practice—Rotate from student to student while they read quietly or silently.

Listen closely and make anecdotal notes. Intervene and prompt rarely, with broad questions like “What will you do next?”

Discussion—Let students talk about what they noticed while reading. Support their efforts to think deeply and connect across the whole book. For example, a student may notice that an illustration opening the text shows ingredients in a pantry, and at the end, they are all over the kitchen.

Teaching point—Offer a couple of instructions based on observations made during reading. Teaching points are most valuable when pointing to new things that students are demonstrating or ask for reflection on how they solved problems.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/using-guided-reading-develop-30816.html>

Slide 22: Literacy Centers

What is a Literacy Work Station?

A literacy workstation is an area within the classroom where students work alone or interact with one another, using instructional materials to explore and expand their literacy (Diller, 2003).

Materials are taught and use for instruction first. Then they are placed in the work station for independent use.

-Stations remain set up all year long. Materials are changed to reflect children’s reading levels, strategies, being taught, and topics being studied.

-Stations are used for students' meaningful independent work and are an integral part of each child's instruction. All students go to work stations daily.

-Materials are differentiated for students with different needs and reading level.

-The teacher meets with small flexible groups for guided reading or skills instruction during literacy workstations.

Slide 23: Literacy Centers (cont...) Benefits of Literacy Work Stations

Provides students with meaningful literacy practice activities.

Meets the individual instructional needs of all students.

Provides students with opportunity to work independently to practice using their reading skills.

It is fun and engaging for students.

Slide 24: Literacy Centers (cont...) Focus of Literacy Work Stations

Key Components of Reading

Phoneme Awareness: the ability to isolate and manipulate the sounds of language

Phonics: "the alphabetic principle" mapping print to sound

Vocabulary: the ability to understand and use a broad variety of words

Fluency: the ability to read with accuracy, automaticity and expression

Comprehension: the ability to understand what is read by applying appropriate strategies

<https://inclusived.wikispaces.com/file/view/Literacy-Work-Stations.pdf>

Slide 25: Vocabulary

Word Walls

A word wall is an organized collection of words prominently displayed in a classroom and frequently used as an interactive literacy tool for teaching vocabulary and spelling to children. There are many different types of word walls, such as high frequency words, word families, and story- or unit-related names. Due to the flexible nature of word walls and their potential to "grow" alongside the students, they are used in classrooms ranging from pre-school through high school. Word walls are considered to be interactive and collaborative tools, since they are student-created and student-centered artifacts. Many variations of the word wall are currently in use, including those featuring illustrations of the words and color-coded lists. They teach children to recognize and spell high frequency words, see patterns and relationships, apply phonics rules, and provide reference support during reading and writing activities. Students gain independence by using a word wall in daily activities.

<http://www.washeschools.net/cms/lib08/NV01912265/Centricity/Domain/228/Instructional%20Strategies%20List%20July%202015.pdf>

Day Two

Slide 1: The Basics- A Reading Workshop for Secondary Special Education

Teachers

Slide 2: Morning Session- Participants will view videos of secondary students receiving instruction to view various effective teaching strategies

Slide 3: Reading Program Used with Older Students

Video link (<https://youtu.be/q2nEagtEeWo>) that illustrates SIPPS (Systematic Instruction in Phoneme Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words) program, 2nd edition, is a solution

for struggling readers, is a decoding curriculum that teaches the prerequisites for developing reading fluency and comprehension. It can serve as either an intervention program or as an initial decoding program.

Visit <http://www.devstu.org/sipps> to learn more about SIPPS.

Slide 4: Middle School Literacy Center

Reading centers for middle schools are perfect for differentiated instruction, among other techniques. Video link, https://youtu.be/pb4AD_rc9TI

Slide 5: Guided Reading (8th Grade)

Video link, <https://youtu.be/ywzqEwxi4y8>

Components to watch for:

00:18- Learning Objective/Target for small group

1:27- Teacher is roving to monitor class during small group

1:55- Students share thinking

3:08- Students are doing the thinking...not teacher

3:25- Chunking the text

4:10- Monitoring Notes

5:00- Guiding the conversation

7:08- Student generated discussion

7:43- Textual support

10:50- Teacher guiding thinking

11:32- Connecting back to purpose

12:03-Classroom supports

16:15- Connecting back to purpose

16:53- Transparent with monitoring notes/immediate feedback

17:22- Student reflection on process

Slide 6: Afternoon Session- Participants will review research-based software.

Slide 7: Voyager Passport with eBooks

This blended solution includes:

Targeted instruction in word study, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, writing, listening, and speaking

Differentiation for diverse student populations, including English language learners

Integrated progress monitoring, re-teaching procedures, correction support, and online data management

Online reading practice through Ticket to Read interactive, rewards-based learning

<http://www.voyagersopris.com/curriculum/subject/literacy/voyager-passport/overview>

Slide 8: i-Ready

Identifies why students are struggling.

i-Ready Diagnostic adapts to each student, providing easier or harder questions

depending on students' answers to previous questions. By adapting across grades K–12,

i-Ready Diagnostic helps teachers understand the root causes behind student challenges.

Provides a valid and reliable measure of student growth with detailed diagnostic results

and individualized next steps for instruction.

Measures growth across a student's career.

Use i-Ready across the district to track yearly student progress and to optimize administrative decision making for long-term performance improvements.

Slide 9: i-Ready (cont...)

Supports data-driven differentiated instruction.

i-Ready automatically provides individualized online and teacher-led instruction targeted to each student's unique needs. In addition, easy-to-read reports provide teachers with a detailed action plan for individual and group instruction and the tools to deliver that instruction in any style learning environment.

<http://www.curriculumassociates.com/products/iready/iready-adaptive-diagnostic-assessment.aspx>

Appendix B: Description of the Study Proposal

My research study is titled *Special Education Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions of Instructing Students with Learning Disabilities*. I will conduct the exploratory case study through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. It is my goal to explore special education teachers' experiences and perceptions about how teaching reading to students with learning disabilities may affect special education teachers' pedagogy. The participants for this study will be purposively selected, as I will solely select special education teachers that instruct reading to students with learning disabilities. After I conduct the individual semi-structured interviews, each participant will be asked to partake in the member checking process, where each participant will check for accuracy by reading and analyzing my transcription of the data I collected from the interview. The accurate findings will then be written in an in-depth narrative. I will then create a professional development plan to address the problem within the school. Finally, the findings from the study will be released at a meeting at the school under study where community stakeholders will be asked to attend.

Appendix D: Permission to Conduct Research Form

May 17, 2016

Ms. Kala Johnstone Walden University

Please allow this letter to serve as notice that [REDACTED] through the Office of Research and Evaluation's (ORE) Research Review Committee, has granted PARTIAL approval to the proposed study #2016-04-423, "Special Education Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions of Instructing Students with Learning Disabilities,"

However, your approval is subject to the following conditions:

(1) You must receive approval from Walden University's IRB and present the proper documentation to

the Research Review Committee (RRC).

(2) Copies of revised consent forms must be submitted to the RRC.

(3) You must complete evaluation activities during out-of-school (OST) time.

Your data collection must be consistent with the activities described in your proposal and you must adhere to the attached Standard Terms for Research Data License Agreement.

Entry into SDP schools is contingent on the principals' approval. Once a principal has agreed to participate in your study, he/she must complete the Principal Support to Conduct Research Form (<http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/offices/r/res-eval/forms>). Please return completed forms to ORE by email (researchreviews@philasd.org) or fax (215-400-4252) prior to commencing your project.

Any researcher working in schools must have FBI clearance as well as completed child abuse and criminal checks. Please submit copies of all clearances to ORE prior to entering schools. As with all research in the District, all student data must remain strictly confidential. In addition, you are required to provide a copy of your final report to ORE at the conclusion of your study,

Good luck with your project and feel free to contact us if you have any questions.

Best regards,

Tonya Wolford, Ph.D.

Deputy Office of Research and Evaluation

Appendix F: Email Informing Potential Participants About the Study's Purpose

My name is Kala Johnstone and I am the principal at XXX. I am a doctoral student at Walden University and I would like to invite you to participate in my study. My research study is titled *Special Education Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions of Instructing Students with Learning Disabilities*. The purpose of this study will be to explore special education teachers' experiences and perceptions about how teaching reading to students with learning disabilities may affect special education teachers' pedagogy.

The one-on-one semi-structured interview will last approximately one hour. Within this email there is a consent form attached that outlines an explanation of your rights as a participant in the study. The consent form will also provide a description of the study's procedures and protocol, the role of the researcher, and the study's goal. After I receive your consent via email by replying, "I Consent," I will then notify you via an email and asked that we setup a time to call and discuss the setup of the one-on-one interview. Finally, please be assured that your participation in this study will be confidential, as I will assign you a pseudonym in order to ensure privacy. I will not submit information to the district that discloses any information about you nor will the district seek this confidential information. Please do not hesitate to contact me via an email or a phone call if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank You,

Kala Johnstone, Walden University Student

Appendix E: Interview Protocol and Questions

Study Topic: Special Education Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions of Instructing Reading to Students with Learning Disabilities

Introduction

You have been asked to participate in this interview based on you volunteering to partake in this study. Furthermore, it is believed that you have a great deal to share about teaching and providing reading instruction to students with disabilities. The objective of this research project is to help educators improve the reading instruction of students with learning disabilities and to assist special education teachers in the planning and implementation of instruction. This exploratory case study will not aim to evaluate your pedagogy or experiences. Rather, I am trying to illustrate special education teachers' pedagogy, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions about providing reading to students with learning disabilities, and hopefully learn about pedagogy that will help improve students' reading achievement.

Interview Questions:

1. At what grade levels are your students reading?
2. How many years have you been instructing students with learning disabilities?
3. What was the focus of the trainings or professional developments you attended in the last three years?

Possible Follow-Up Prompt:

- Describe trainings offered by the school district.
- Describe the trainings offered within your school.

4. Please describe any trainings or professional developments that improved your instructional practices.

Possible Follow-Up Prompt:

- Describe how the improved instructional practices look in your class.

5. What is your definition of a student with learning disabilities?
6. Please describe how students learn reading.
7. What instructional reading strategies do you routinely use?

Possible Follow-Up Prompt:

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

8. How do you differentiate reading instruction in your classroom?

Possible Follow-Up Prompt:

- On average, how many different reading levels are students reading on within one class?

9. What curriculum do you use to teach reading to students with learning disabilities?
10. Do you think the curriculum that you use is designed to improve your students' reading achievement?
11. How often do you assess the reading level of your students?
12. How do you think students with learning disabilities should take standardized assessments? Please explain.

13. Are the results from standardized assessments useful for you when planning your instruction?
14. What difficulties do you routinely face when teaching learning-disabled students to read?

Possible Follow-Up Prompt:
 - What methods did you implement to address those difficulties?
15. Do you think students who struggle to read can ever read on a proficient or advanced level? Please explain.
16. Are there reading instructional strategies that have been successful with your students? Please explain.
17. What supports should be offered to you in order to assist with improving reading achievement for students with learning disabilities?

Appendix F: Letter of Cooperation

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

e [REDACTED]

April 15, 2016

I am writing this letter in support of Ed.D. candidate, Kala Johnstone, who asked requested permission to conduct a case study at my school, XXX. After reading a description of the study's purpose and methodology I believe I have the special education teachers that will like to participate in this study. Further, I think this study will be beneficial to the field of education and I would like my staff to contribute. Finally, I believe we all will benefit instructionally by the strategies presented in the project study, which will be created based on the study's findings.

I am confident that Kala can strengthen the field of education by conducting this study at my school.

Sincerely,

Maya Johnstone