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# Reading pedagogy in today's classroom

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**READING PEDAGOGY IN TODAY'S CLASSROOM**


by
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A Dissertation


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# Dedication

*There are a few people I would like to dedicate my work to.*
*I truly believe everyone that has come into my life has done so for a reason. So many people have touched my life and without them this endeavor would not be possible. I must thank individuals who gave me wings to fly when I could not fly on my own.*


*To my husband, Mike*


*Thank you for showing me the true meaning of unconditional love.*
*Without your endless support and commitment I would not be where I am today.*
*Thank you for always being a consistent rock in my chaotic world, and giving me the freedom and support to explore my own dreams.*
*Thank you for always believing in me.*
*Without you, my life would be incomplete.*
*I love you.*


*To my daughter, Alyssa*


*You changed my life. You showed me how to love and gave me the inner strength to prove to myself that "my history does not predict my future." You gave me so much more than I can ever give you in return. With this accomplishment, I hope that I will be a role model for you. May you follow your dreams and be the best that you can be.*
*I love you.*


*To my son, Michael*


*You have given me strength and filled my heart with joy. You told me not to give up; that was the best advice I ever received. You have a natural way of making me smile and I am proud of your beautiful spirit. With this accomplishment, I hope that I will be a role model for you.*
*May you follow your dreams and be the best that you can be.*
*I love you.*


*I am forever grateful for both of my beautiful children.*

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*Thank you for dedicating your life to me, to my children and my family. You stayed when everyone else left. I will treasure your love and guidance forever.*
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"Once you learn to read, you will be forever free."
- Frederick Douglass

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**Abstract**

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The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the phenomenon of

successful primary classroom teachers' instruction, in the area of reading pedagogy. All

children who are capable of reading must be taught how to read; such is the essential

responsibility of American schooling. Moats (1999) describes reading as the most basic,

yet critical responsibility of schooling. Haycock (1998), Marzano (2003), and Nye,

Konstantopulos, and Hedges (2004) determined that the influence of an effective teacher

has the biggest impact on student achievement, independent of anything else that happens

in school. There is little research linking evidence of teacher perceptions, knowledge

base, and practice to the discourse on how to best teach children to read. The result of this

study on *Reading Pedagogy in Today's Classroom* should particularly impact, and

potentially benefit, practitioners. In addition, the research will add to the literature on

reading pedagogy. Four classroom teachers, who were identified as successful based on

their student's Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading (STAR) scores,

participated in this study. Semi-structured interviews, observations, and lesson plans were

used to capture the essence of classroom teachers' perceptions, knowledge base, and

practices of reading pedagogy. Results revealed several overarching themes: a

background or certification in early childhood, specific phonics practices, continuity of

practices across grade levels and schools, the use of guided reading, differentiated instruction, and the use of additional support staff in the classroom. This research is aimed at a broad audience as a review of research evidence on successful beginning reading instruction. The research provides successful methods and strategies for classroom teachers to implement. Such insight has the potential to raise student achievement. Threaded through these recommendations is the need for second order change with regard to instructional delivery models.

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**Chapter 1**

**Introduction**

In today's literate society, academic success, secure employment, and personal autonomy is reflected on reading and writing proficiency. All children who are capable of reading must be taught how to read; such is the essential responsibility of American schooling. Moats (1999) described reading as the most basic, yet critical responsibility of schooling. Learning to read is recognized as the most important achievement of the first years of formal education (Pearson & Stevens, 1994). Success of students, in many areas of their life, correlates to their reading ability.

The ability to read is critical. Reading success is positively correlated with other areas of success (Anderson, Herert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1995; NICHD, 2000). Therefore, having an understanding of reading instruction is equally important as identifying the reading process as an essential part of education. Understanding reading instruction is known as pedagogy. Pedagogy is the science of reading. Teaching pedagogy ranges from the full development of human beings to acquiring a specific skill. The teachers' own perceptions and beliefs affect their instruction, as well as the pupil's background knowledge, experiences, and goals developed by the state and school district. More specifically, reading pedagogy include the principles, practices, and profession of teaching reading.

Reading pedagogy is the principle method of instruction that teachers use with students. Research literature on effective literacy instruction has several recurring findings. The importance of the teacher's role and the consensus that there is not one best method for the teaching reading are the two most prominent conclusions (Bond &

Dykstra, 1967/1997; Chall, 1967; Shanahan, 2003; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Duffy and Hoffman (1999), both scholars in the field of reading, co-authored an article entitled "In pursuit of an illusion: The flawed search for the perfect method."  This research reported that in fact "there is not one perfect method" for teaching children how to read. Further stating "teachers, policymakers, researchers, and teacher educators conclude; the answer is not in the method but the teacher" (p. 10).

There is a lack of research in the literature showing evidence of teacher perceptions, knowledge base and practice that are potentially valuable and critical to the discourse on effective reading instruction. Much of the current literature on instruction surrounds knowledge that is practical and content knowledge (Fenstermacher, 1994; Hoyle & John, 1995). There is also research on reading strategies. However, little evidence is found surrounding teachers' perceptions, experiences, and knowledge base of reading pedagogy, and specifically how this can enhance practice?

Darling-Hammond (1996) asserts that teaching cannot be viewed as just a technical action. The science of teaching is much deeper than a technical action. The discourse on teachers' perceptions, knowledge, and practice would allow the classroom teacher to leave behind many mandated curriculums, standards, publishing manuals, and scripted lessons and begin to rely on their own successful understanding, knowledge, and repertoire of methods and practices.

**Context**

Research by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) indicates that many children have difficulty achieving success in reading. In a 2002 study, the NAEP found that less than one third of the fourth graders tested scored at or above the proficiency level in reading (Grigg, Daane, Jin, & Campbell, 2003). In 2002, George W.

Bush, while in office, created the *No Child Left Behind Act* also known as the infamous NCLB. This was a law designed to address students' deficiency by helping schools improve reading instruction. The act called for "the implementation of instructional programs and materials, assessments, and professional development grounded in scientifically based reading research" (US Department of Education, 2002, p. 11). The impetus of NCLB led to practical research studies conducted on a large scale, increasing the call for mandated programs, curriculums, and researched based strategies. Other laws under NCLB, such as The Reading Excellence Act (1999) and Reading First (2002), exaggerated the use of scientifically-based materials. These reform laws did not consider judgment or experiences from practitioners. There is a profound need for research that demonstrates how effective reading pedagogy is implemented in real classrooms. This is especially critical, as so much of the literature has emphasized the importance of the "programs" and not on good teaching in the area of reading.

As a reading specialist for over a decade, it is my observation that not all teachers know successful strategies for reading instruction. It has been my experience that teachers do not always understand the developmental stages of reading, and may simply rely on the manuals and prepackaged programs, ultimately making decisions based on curriculum guides or standards, not students' individual needs. Teachers lack the confidence of their own professional judgment. There are a few teachers who are successful at developing readers; they appear to have a better understanding of how children learn to read and the stages of reading development. They have an instinct on what methods to use to move children along in their reading progress. With that said, it is

critical to investigate this phenomenon of reading pedagogy, specifically with effective teachers.

Research by authors of Effective Beginning Programs: A Best- Evidence Synthesis (Slavin, 2008) reveals that children, from the first day of kindergarten to the last day of second grade, go through a remarkable transformation as readers. Typically by the end of second grade children know the letter sounds and can blend them into words, know most common sight words, and can read simple text. The kindergarten through second grade period is different from other phases of reading development, because during this time, children are learning all the basic explicit skills. Typically after third grade, children develop fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary for reading more difficult text in many genres, but the K-2 period is different in its emphasis on reading skills (Slavin, 2008). For this reason, this research will investigate successful kindergarten through $2^{nd}$ grade teachers, specifically interrogating their practice.

During the early reading process, phonemic awareness is vital. This is the ability to orally manipulate sounds. Phonics skills follow. This usually occurs during kindergarten and first grade. Decoding skills include learning to differentiate each letter of the written alphabet. It marks the development of distinguishing sounds that letters make, learning to manipulate speech sounds, as well as blending and sounding out words. As this process continues, children also begin to read decodable texts, which stimulate a challenge in this beginning process. Fluency occurs once students develop automaticity in their reading. Once fluency develops, children can process meaning and comprehension and move away from phonics skills (Institute of Reading Development, 2013).

Understanding how teachers facilitate these early skills is an important aspect of this research project.

This research study investigates successful teachers in a public school district located in southern New Jersey. According the school district's curriculum index, in August 2008, the district was honored by *Money Magazine* publication as one of America's Best Small Cities in which to live. The school district where the research was conducted scored its highest mark in education and it second-highest mark in safety.

The district excels in educational excellence and achievement. Currently there are approximately 8,500 students enrolled in 11 schools: one high school campus, 3 middle schools, 6 elementary school, and one early childhood center. Students demonstrate their knowledge using many different types of assessments including the standardized state achievement tests. According to the district's website, during the 2011-12 school year the students' performance on state testing in grades 3, 4, 6, 7, 8 and 11 *exceeded* the state mean in all tested subject areas, including language arts literacy, mathematics, and science, further documenting success in meeting students' needs and the benchmarks established by the New Jersey Core Curriculum Standards.

The district administers the STAR Literacy Assessment for use in K-8. This is a computer-based assessment. STAR is an acronym for Standardize Test Assessment of Reading and is used to assess students' literacy skills (Renaissance Learning, 2013). For the use of this research, the STAR will be used to identify reading levels and performance skills for students in kindergarten through second grade. Currently, students in the district take the STAR individual computer based assessment three times a year; September, January, and May. The assessment is scored in real-time by the Renaissance

Learning software. Each school has the capacity to review and print a variety of reports as needed. These reports are analyzed at the individual, classroom, and grade level in order to track progress, create goals, compare students to national norms, and identify students for educational services.

The assessment gives a snapshot of each student's literacy ability in several areas. The software reports grade equivalents and percentile ranks. Literacy classifications are the stages of literacy development in STAR Early Literacy Enterprise and associated with scaled scores: emergent reader (300–674 scaled score), transitional reader (675–774 scaled score), and probable reader (775–900 scaled score). Each classroom teacher, as well, is given a student growth percentile for his/her class of students. This score will determine which teachers have the highest class scores, and will be used to develop the participation pool for this research.

In addition, the district has been recognized by New Jersey Magazine as one of the top 31 schools in the state. As indicated on their website, the New Jersey Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, the New Jersey Association of School Administrators, and the New Jersey Association of Partners in Education have each recognized the public school's program as "exemplary" at the state level. Having such recognition prompts the author to understand how the school culture is lived; to truly understand, discover, and describe the instructional practices, or reading pedagogy, of teachers whose students show growth in literacy.

Two of the 11 schools will be further investigated for this study. One is an elementary school that currently houses 628 students in grades 1 through 5. This school also houses the district's English Language Learner (ELL) population. This research

study will look specifically at the first and second grade classrooms within this elementary school. There are 5 first and second grade classrooms. The second school in this study houses the district's half-day kindergarten and preschool disabled population. There are currently approximately 480 kindergarten students. There are 11 kindergarten teachers with 22 sessions of half-day kindergarten. There are an additional two full-day special education classrooms. For the purposes of this research the 11 classes and classroom teachers are used for data collection, excluding the special education classes.

**Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical framework that guides this study, draw on the tenets of social constructivism and appreciate inquiry. This study is grounded in the search for successful teachers and practices. Every school has something that works. Through appreciative inquiry, the art of appreciation, I can discover and value those factors that give students the best possible chance at learning to read. Appreciative inquiry (AI), as a strategy of inquiry, is relatively new (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). AI is based on the assumption that something "good" already exists in every organization, which can be discovered, used, and most importantly exploited. The goal of this inquiry is to identify positive teaching experiences, successful teachers' beliefs, and experiences through individuals recounting accomplishments within interviews and observations.

Appreciative inquiry is a new probe of discipline for positive change. AI searches for the best in people, their organizations, and the pertinent world in which they live. Further, it involves an overall discovery of what gives "life" to a system when it is most effective. AI involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. This strategy of inquiry seeks positive, successful strategies and methods that teachers

use to teach reading. Unpacking what teachers, who are identified as successful, know firsthand about reading instruction can be a valuable task in any educational organization, as reading pedagogy is essential to foster student success.

Developing a consciousness of philosophical premise, world-views, and researchers' beliefs and attitudes is noted, as they are all related and deeply rooted in our thinking. Researchers' beliefs and attitudes can help determine how researchers interact with, study, and understand organizations, the people within them, and their environment. Further, the researcher's beliefs and attitudes consist of an understanding of reality (ontology) and how the researcher knows what she/he knows (epistemology). In addition, the role of values in the research (axiology), the language of research (rhetoric), and the methods used in the process (methodology) are important (Creswell, 2003). Another lens through which this research is viewed is social constructivism. Social Constructivism focuses on constructing knowledge and one's experiences for meaning making (Derry, 1994; McMahon, 1997), which is closely associated with many constructivist theorists, such as Vygotsky, Bruner, and Bandura's social cognitive theory.

**Vygotsky**. According to Vygotsky's (1978) seminal work, as stated by Gauvain and Cole (2005), intelligence is a social product, also known as social constructivism. One's culture makes two sorts of contributions to intellectual development. First, through culture people develop and influence their thinking and knowledge. Second, the surrounding culture provides a person with the processes or means of their thinking, what Vygotskians call the tools of intellectual adaptation. Research on the social cognition learning model emphasizes one's culture as teaching human beings both what to think and how to think.

Cognitive development results from a process in which a person learns through problem-solving experiences shared with someone else, usually a parent, teacher, sibling, or peer. Much of what a person learns comes from the surrounding culture around and much of the problem solving is developed through another person's help, not through a person's actions in isolation. In his book, *Mind in Society*, Vygotsky (1978) describes the types of social interaction that promote cognitive development. These are interactions that take place in the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD is the range of abilities a person has with assistance but cannot yet do alone. Understanding the zone of proximal development is critical for educators as they scaffold students' instruction.

**Bruner**. Jerome Bruner is another constructivist psychologist. Bruner believed that learning is an active process. He further believed that people learn through observation. Bruner's framework includes selection and transformation of information, decision-making, creating hypotheses, and making meaning from current or past knowledge and experiences. Bruner's theories emphasize the significance of categorization to create mental images in learning. Bruner stated that learners acquire a framework for interpreting experiences, and learn how to negotiate meaning in a manner congruent with the requirements of the culture (Bruner & Haste, 1987). He also developed the theories of spiral curriculum and readiness for learning, which still exist in educational theories today. Bruner explained the concept of spiral curriculum, stating that students need to return to basic ideas again and again to solidify understanding. The repeated experiences replace simple memorization. This goes along with Bruner's discovery learning, which emphasizes building on one's current knowledge.

**Bandura**. Albert Bandura is another constructivist psychologist. He also believed learning takes place through observation. His social learning theory impacted the field of education. There are three concepts that make up the essence of social learning theory; what happens just before a behavior, the antecedent, immediately following the behavior, the feedback, and the experience or observation. Bandura believed that people can learn through observation. His theory recognized that behavior may not change just because something is learned. As with Vygotsky, Bandura asserts that learners attend to, imitate, and learn from others.

Modeling appropriate behaviors has been recognized today by teachers and parents. Other classroom strategies such as building self-efficacy and encouraging children are also rooted in Bandura's seminal work on social learning theory. Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling; from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action (Bandura, 1977).

Vygotsky, Bruner, and Bandura's ideas are rooted in social constructivism. These theories are most used by educators. These theories represent how learners construct knowledge. Therefore, social constructivism and appreciative inquiry are the basic set of beliefs or paradigms (Lincoln & Guba, 1990) that guide this research.

**Purpose and Significance of Study**

Research has guided educators about best practices. Pedagogy is important as teachers continuously face challenging classrooms and more diverse student needs (Taylor, 2008). There is a wealth of research on reading pedagogy that goes back as far as

the late 1800s. Much of the research is used to show how pedagogy should look when put into practice within a classroom. In addition, research is often used to show a literacy deficit in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003, 2008). For true social change and educational reform, reading pedagogy has to be viewed from a new lens, from the teachers – the practitioners who are in the classroom. This research paper will look at a newer paradigm of what research has not revealed: what methods and practices classroom teachers are using, their perceptions, knowledge base, and practices that develop successful readers. This insight has the potential to affect practice, policy, and future research.

**Practice**. The result of my research study on reading pedagogy in today's classroom should particularly impact and benefit practitioners. Presently there is a need for highly adept teachers for all grade levels, specifically in the area of literacy. Educational research, during the past 15 years or so, has made strong gains in studying instruction and practices. This endeavor of research has generated important findings that are of practical implications for teacher educators, with emphasis on literacy. National reports and government mandates have heightened expectations for the formal education and training of all teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Understanding how successful teachers develop readers is essential to the discourse in education and literacy for practitioners.

This research is about effective literacy instruction, intended for kindergarten through 2$^{nd}$ grade practitioners who have a need to know what works for reading instruction. In short, the research is aimed at a broad audience who needs a reader-friendly review of research evidence of what good beginning reading instruction looks

like, one that does not require a reading background to understand. Through my research, I intend to provide successful methods and strategies for classroom teachers to implement. Such insight has the potential to raise student achievement in kindergarten through $2^{rd}$ grade students. Threaded through these recommendations is the need for second order change in regard to the instructional delivery model.

Change that is consistent with one's values and norms, consistent with agreement, and can be implemented using people's current knowledge and skills is first order change. When it is not clear how it will improve situations, it requires people to learn new skills, or it conflicts with predominant ideals, it is considered second order change. Second-order change requires educators to work far more deeply. Second order change can disrupt people's sense of well-being and the cohesion of the school community. It may confront and challenge teacher's expertise and competencies. Different ideas about the implications of change mean that a change could be a solution to one person or a problem for another (Schein, 1965). This research will look at successful reading methods that can potentially change the way educators teach students to learn how read, and provide some consistency to the field.

Further, this research is what I know and believe, based on my interpretations of my research on reading and reading instruction, but also my lived experiences as a reading specialist. I find myself, as a researcher and educator, wishing that all children could have access to classrooms like the ones I had a privilege to study. Not only were the test scores good, but the environments were happy. Most striking, these good teachers have fewer disciplinary encounters. This research study will allow other educators an

opportunity to have access to this knowledge and experience, and potentially prompt future research studies.

**Policy**. Reading instruction is a topic that has commanded a great deal of attention in recent years. One reason is that learning to read can be painfully difficult for some children. There are students in every school in the nation who are experiencing difficulties becoming readers. A second is in the eyes of policy-makers, as there has to be an obvious culprit when the nation's children cannot learn to read in school. Most often this is the teacher. Policy-makers have the capacity to contribute to the conduct and improvement of reading instruction. Policy-making should come together as a grassroots movement – looking at current successful reading instruction. This research can begin a powerful dialogue of bottom-up policy initiatives.

According to Coburn (2006), more studies are needed to understand when, and under what circumstances, research findings move through networks and into the hands of government actors who craft policy positions. This study will aide in developing an understanding of reading pedagogy to further form more productive relationships between researchers and policy makers in the critical process of improving reading instruction for all children.

Children have rights to effective instruction. This requires a willingness to constantly challenge the status quo and continually question today's classroom as it relates to meeting students' needs as readers: evaluating current policy and classroom practice. As we know children learn differently, effective teachers should develop a repertoire of proven methods for helping students develop skills. This research will document what successful reading pedagogy looks like in today's classrooms. Research

is not a one-size-fits-all approach; constantly updated data about best practices are vital to student success.

The overall goal of this phenomenological study is to understand, discover, and describe the instructional practices, or reading pedagogy, of teachers whose students show growth in literacy. As it pertains to this research, reading pedagogy is defined as the art and science of teaching. More specifically, it refers to methods of instruction used in reading, the process of extracting meaning from a written or printed text.

**Research Questions**

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

**Major question:** What are effective K-2nd grade classroom teachers' perceptions, experiences, and knowledge base of reading pedagogy; how do these factors inform practice?

**Sub questions:**

- What are classroom teachers' perceptions of reading pedagogy?
- What is classroom teachers' knowledge base of reading pedagogy?
- What are classroom teachers' practices of reading pedagogy?

**Specialized Vocabulary**

**Balanced Literacy**: is a curricular methodology that combines all methods of literacy instruction. Assessment-based planning is critical of this methodology as assessments fuel instruction. The balanced literacy approach emphasizes explicit skill instruction and the use of authentic texts: the combination of whole language and skills instruction (Pressley, 2006).

**Differentiated instruction:** is a teaching philosophy for effective instruction and learning regardless of differences in ability, by providing a variety of ways to acquiring skills.

**Direct Instruction:** is a teaching method for the explicit teaching of a skill using specific techniques or demonstrations, rather than exploratory models such as inquiry based learning. It is skills-oriented, and the teaching practices are teacher-directed.

**Guided practice:** is an activity that provides students the opportunity to practice a skill or concept while receiving prompt teacher feedback. This method requires teachers to monitor student progress.

**Independent practice:** is the opportunity for students to practice without the teacher. Independent practice is completed in different contexts so the skill/concept may be applied to a variety of situations. This gives the learner a better chance of using the skill and not only the context in which it was originally learned.

**Inquiry-based learning:** is a teaching method developed in the 1960s during the discovery learning movement. Traditional instruction used memorization, so this method was vastly different.

**National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP)**: The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was created in 1988. NAEP was a project assigned by the Department of Education to assess America's students' knowledge in a variety of subject areas; mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, U.S. history, and beginning in 2014, in Technology and Engineering Literacy (TEL) (National Center for Education Progress, 2002).

**National Reading Panel:** is a panel initiated by congress and crafted through the National Institute of Child Health Human Development (NICHD). This panel includes experts in the fields of reading education, psychology, and higher education. This panel was developed in 1997 to assess the effectiveness of approaches to teach children to read.

**No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)**: a United States policy that is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This is the government's aid program for disadvantaged students. This initiative supports standards-based education reform through setting high standards and measurable goals. NCLB increased the federal involvement in public education through annual testing, progress monitoring, school report cards, teacher qualifications, and funding changes (U.S. Department of Education (NCLB), 2002).

**Pedagogy**: is the science and art of teaching, through methods that are used in the classroom.

**Performance feedback:** process is ongoing between students and teachers. The exchange of information involves both performance expected and performance exhibited. Feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement.

**Small group instruction:** typically refers to a teacher working with a small group of students. These groups consist of 4 to 6 students and provide students with a limited student-teacher ratio.

**STAR Early Literacy Assessment:** STAR Early Literacy Assessment is a computer-adaptive diagnostic assessment that assists in determining students' understanding of key early literacy and numeracy reading skills. It provides quick and

accurate feedback on the progress of students, specifically emerging readers, to provide

them with effective instruction and practice (Renaissance Learning, 2013).

**Student Growth Percentile:** measures student academic growth by comparing

other students with similar test scores nationwide using a statistical method quartile

regression. This shows the relationship between a student's previous score and the

current score. Student Growth Percentiles range from 1 to 99. If a student has a 90, that

student showed 90 percent more growth than his or her academic peers.

**Task oriented environment:** is an approach or method to isolate the solution of

any problem into a series of tasks. The method emphasizes accomplishing tasks one by

one either by groups of people or alone.

## Limitations

Limitations are circumstances usually beyond the researcher's control. These

circumstances have the potential to affect the results of the study or how the results are

explained. Clarifying the limitations of the study is important for readers because they

provide a manner to acknowledge errors, if any, or difficulties in interpreting results of

the study. Limitations are not easily apparent at the start of some research projects and

may develop or become apparent as the study progresses. It is important to acknowledge

this upfront.

Limitations are conditions that inhibit the scope of the study. Further, limitations

may affect the results and cannot be controlled by the researcher. There are four

limitations to this research study: the sample to select participants, the study design, time,

and the role of the researcher.

Because a purposeful sample was be used, I cannot say with confidence that the sample will be representative of the population (Creswell, 2003). Participants will be selected from a sample pool of teachers whose students show growth on the STAR Assessment. There are some limitations in the sampling process used in this research. Purposeful samples can have researcher bias. It is the burden of the researcher to convince the reader that the process used to choose participants was appropriate. This is especially true of purposeful sampling. However, the main goal of purposeful sampling is to focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest, which will best enable me to answer the research questions. For this study the benefits outweigh the limitations.

This particular research design, phenomenology, has limitations. The core of a phenomenological study, according to Patton (1991), lies in the "descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience" (p. 392). The goal is to identify the essence of the shared experience that underlies all the variations in this particular learning experience. Essence is viewed as commonalties in the human experiences.

Further, Moustakas' (1994) ideas are emphasized in Creswell's (1998) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* stating for a balance between subjectivity and objectivity. Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2003) agree that "establishing the truth of things" starts with the researcher's perception. The researcher must focus on the meaning of the experience of oneself. Then continuing on by looking outward, to those being interviewed, and establish inter-subject validity. The social interaction will validate this understanding.

Finally, there should be two notions of phenomenological inquiry of the perception of lived experience: from the people who are actually living the phenomenon, and from me, because of my background and passion in the phenomenon. Creswell (1998) stated that phenomenological data inquiry is accomplished through the methodology of reduction, the inquiry of specific statements and themes, and a search for meanings. The limitation is found in that this design does not produce generalizable data because it will not quantify data and generalize results from a sample to the population of interest, or measure the incidence of various views and opinions in a chosen sample. It will, more importantly, seek to understand the underlying reasons and motivations that govern reading pedagogy and uncover prevalent trends in thought and opinion on this particular phenomenon.

Human experience has deep rooted limitations compared to human behavior. Experiences are not observable, information about experiences depends on the participants' capacity to understand their own experience and, more importantly, are able to communicate and share their behavior (Peshkin, 1993). These limitations of experiences are evident in both qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry. This quantitative inquiry will seek participants' instructional experiences through observations and interviews. Having awareness about one's experiences may not always be complete. There are concerns about participants' partial access to their own thoughts, and how that will affect the interview protocol. There may be questions about the validity of an interview protocol, for example, does the interview protocol actually capture the experiences of beliefs, perceptions, and practices that are in question? Although these

limitations are recognized, the variety of methods of data collection, observations, interviews, and material culture, are used to decrease the effect.

The role of the researcher as a participant observer is a limitation. I have a rapport with teachers; I am immersed in the field (Creswell, 2003). Basically, I am an embedded member of the group and can observe behaviors that I would not otherwise have access. Participant observation is where the researcher is embedded in the everyday life of the group while observing it. Being a participant observer is subject to the biases of the observer. This limitation can be counteracted by using multiple methods to gather data, including interviews and documentation, in addition to the observations.

Another limitation is time. The time intensive nature of this type of data collection limits the amount of data that could potentially be collected. Interviews and observations occurred over a 16-week period. These limitations may have potentially affected the results of the study or how the results are interpreted. Without the time constraints, the data collection could include more interviews and observations for data analysis. Regardless of the limitations within the study, triangulation was evident. Evidence of triangulation include confidence in the research data, understanding the phenomenon of reading pedagogy in different ways, seeking rare findings, integrating theories, and providing a clearer understanding of the problem through the use of multiple measurements in the data collection process.

## Chapter 2

## Literature Review

This research aims to understand effective kindergarten through grade 2 classroom teachers' perceptions, knowledge base, and practice of reading pedagogy; and specifically how this will inform practice. The main focus of the literature review is to provide a comprehensive synthesis of research and give a theoretical basis for my own research about reading pedagogy. As a reading specialist for over a decade, it is my perception that not all teachers know how to teach reading. It is my experience that classroom teachers do not always understand the developmental stages of reading, and may simply rely on the manuals and prepackaged programs, ultimately making decisions based on curriculum guides or standards, not students' individual needs. However, there are a few teachers who are successful at developing readers. With that said, it is critical to investigate the phenomenon of successful teachers. In doing so, one must understand the historical journey of reading pedagogy and effective teaching.

The findings in this chapter are the basis from which this research emanated and further expand this area of the literature. This literature review encompassed three main areas of reading and pedagogy research. The first area investigates the science of learning to read dating back to the 1500s. The next area looks at the historical journey of dominant reading pedagogical practices that can be divided into three distinct historical periods. The first period, known to use the alphabetical approach, is dated from the early 1900s to 1935. The second period, known to use the words to letters approach, is dated from 1935 to 1965. The last period is dated from 1965 and on, which fine-tuned and elaborated on

teaching strategies that were developed in the first third of the century and added commercial products. At that time, comprehension was deemed critical to the reading process. The last area of research reveals effective teaching. The literature in this chapter is the basis for my own research on reading pedagogy.

Although the science of learning to read dates back to the 16th century, and reading pedagogy for classroom practice began in the mid-20th century, there was a time when the importance of schools and teachers were questioned. Research from the 1966 report entitled *Equality in Educational Opportunity* and commonly referred to as the *Coleman Report* illustrates this point. Coleman et al. (1966) implicated schools as having little influence on a child's achievement. This was devastating to schools and teachers.

Most recent studies have suggested a different conclusion. A framework for effective schools became much clearer in the last decade of the 20th century. Haycock (1998), Marzano (2003), and Nye, Konstantopulos, and Hedges (2004) determined that the influence of an effective teacher has the biggest impact on student achievement; independent of anything else that happens in school.

Learning to read is not an instinctive process. A number of changes have occurred through the years for teaching reading in an attempt to make learning to read easier. In pursuit of the expert pedagogue, Berliner (1986) concludes that effective teaching is a mixture of instructional strategies combined with a deep understanding of the student's needs. The notion of teaching as part art and part science is not a new concept. Berliner characterizes effective teaching as successfully orchestrating both the art and the science of teaching.

**Historical Journey**

The science of learning to read dates back to the 1500s. During the 1500s, few people could read and write, however, by the 19th century many adults were literate - mainly in Europe. Graff (1988) emphasizes the capability to read and write only included a select few. Religion and intellectual revolutions of the fifteenth century added education and inspired a growing demand for instruction. The chances of being educated and of acquiring literacy skills once depended on many factors: wealth, religion, gender, laws, job opportunities, and employment for children. Book production also grew to 1,500 million copies in the eighteenth century. Schools were important, but not compulsory. Due to the costs, many children received short and basic education. Many children learned at home, and that is how mass reading ability was developed.

Two of the teaching aids of early literacy, battledores and hornbooks, have been used over the centuries. They present the alphabet in a linear fashion, a table of syllables, and a religious text. A hornbook was a child's first primer. This was used from the 15th to the 18th century. A hornbook was of a sheet of paper mounted on a wooden paddle (Gee, 1996). The sheet consisted of the alphabet, some pairs of letters, and a religious verse. This was often the Lord's Prayer. The paper was important to protect, as it was very expensive. Therefore, the paper was covered with a very thin piece cow's horn. Using the cow's horn gave this book its name - hornbook.

The classical method of reading instruction was syllables, which originated in Latin, then in English. Syllabary used letter-sound approximations, Pascal's invention. This method emphasized instruction of spelling and phonics together. This method used the real sounds of syllables instead of the approximate sounds of letters (Webster,

1908).  A series of books with words divided into syllables was developed in the late 1800s, based on the syllable divisions in Webster.

In 1883, Joseph Rice did a survey of public schools. He concluded that phonics led to better outcomes in students' reading than word methods. Further research showed through his spelling tests to 33,000 children throughout United States, that spelling alone was not sufficient. Students needed phonics skills as well.

DuBay (2004) compiled 80 years of research on reading, focusing on two movements of the 1920s. The two movements developed an enthusiasm for reading and reading instruction. A changing school population, especially an increase in "first generation" secondary school students, created an excitement for reading ability. In addition, the children of immigrants were searching for the ability to read. Teachers reported that these students found textbooks too difficult. This resulted in DuBay's research on reading ability and reading instruction that brought about an increasing use of scientific tools for measuring educational problems (DuBay, 2004).

An example of such measures, Thorndike's *Teacher's Word Book* (1921), was the original listing of words in English by frequency. The *Teachers Word Book* provided teachers with a way of assessing the difficulty of words and texts. The foundation for almost all the research on readability followed. Our vocabulary is contingent on how much reading is done throughout life. As vocabulary increases, one's ability to master longer and more complex sentences also increases. Chall and Dale (1995) convey the importance of vocabulary assessments. Knowing the meaning of words is a good predictor of verbal intellectual development. Vocabulary assessments are used in today's schools. The awareness of words has always been a strong assessment of a reader's

developmental stage. It also contributes to comprehension ability and intelligence. Chall and Dale write, "It is no accident that vocabulary is also a strong predictor of text difficulty" (1995, p. 84).

The historical journey of dominant reading pedagogical practices can be divided into three distinct historical periods: from the early 1900s to 1935 the alphabetical approach, 1935 to 1965 words to letters approach, and 1965 and on, which fine-tuned and elaborated on teaching models that were created in the first third of the century. At this time, reading pedagogical practices added commercial products and comprehension to pedagogies. In the early 1900s reading pedagogy was based on the alphabetical approach (Huey, 1908). These were classic synthetic phonics approaches students encountered, in rapid succession, letter names, letter sounds, and syllable blending activities that were organized into drill and practice. At that time, children had to master these skills before they could move on to reading literature. Most literature was created for adults. Educators considered the supreme function of reading instruction to be developing an appreciation for a permanent interest in literature (Smith, 1983).

In the early 1900s, publishers of basals began to include supplementary teaching suggestions, however, teachers relied on experiences, or their own normal school education to supply pedagogy used to teach. The teacher typically provided the proper phonics drill and practice. Reading was defined as being able to pronounce words on the page without meaning or comprehension. The role of the learner was to receive the curriculum provided by the teacher. The wars led to the discovery that thousands of U.S. soldiers could not read printed instructions, thus reading become a household concern.

During the 1950s, Flesch (1955) wrote the best-selling book, *Why Johnny Can't Read– And What You Can Do About.* He cautioned readers on faddish techniques for teaching reading, warning that American schools would evolve into a generation of illiterates. During this period reading instruction was predominately the "look-say" method of teaching. With the look-say method, students were taught to look at and recognize whole word or read the whole story. With this method children learn to recognize whole words or sentences rather than individual sounds. Whole word, also known as "Sight Word" and "Look and Say," taught skills through authentic literature, not isolated skills. Word recognition accuracy is considered less important than meaning accuracy; therefore at the time, deriving meaning was more important that reciting.

Teachers relied on scientific guidance, if not control, through manuals focusing on silent reading procedures and Thorndike's word-book. Basals and the activity method co-existed in the classroom. Students waited to take turns reading aloud, as well as silent reading, with a focus on skill development. At this time, teachers may have gone to college where special courses in the area of teaching reading may have been taken. Teachers did not provide individual instruction (Robinson, 2005). Whole group instruction was the norm as teachers wanted students to see different perspectives of a democratic society. Reading affects accuracy of information as well as morale, beliefs, judgments, and actions. Traxler (1958) noted that more needed to be done to help people reach their fullest potential, as reading clinics began to assist adults with job preparation. The reading pedagogical debate, which still continues, does not show evidence of teacher input, experiences, or perceptions, which are potentially valuable and critical to the discourse on how to best teach children to read.

Two landmark events happened in 1967. The first, The Cooperative Research

Program in First Grade Reading Instruction, published its first comprehensive report

(Bond & Dykstra, 1967) and the second was Jeanne Chall, who first published a report

written for the Carnegie Corporation of New York, called *Learning to read: The great

debate.* The professed First Grade Studies compared the basal programs of the era –

programs all characterized by controlled vocabulary, teaching sight words first, and a

relatively casual treatment of phonics – with five enhancements to basals. The Bond and

Dijkstra report concluded that, in general, the basal-plus methods performed better than

the basal-only programs, and that letter knowledge at first-grade entry was the best

predictor of word reading outcomes. The results were complex, though, and actual

outcomes varied enormously across sites and classrooms. Both of these studies led to the

*Balanced Literacy* approach to teaching reading. It is important to note that both studies

were quantitative, looking at test scores and not addressing a key element in the reading

process, the teacher.

**Important Early Literacy Skills**

Early phonological awareness and letter identification skills are both predictors of

learning to read. With respect to the former, phoneme awareness and rhyming are

important precursors to the development of more advanced reading abilities (Adam,

1990; Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 2001; Stone, Merritt, & Cherkes-Julkowski, 1998;

Wagner & Torgesen, 1987). Rhyming, a meta-linguistic capacity that emerges before

explicit awareness of the syllabic or phonemic structure of words has a strong and

specific relationship to more advanced phonological awareness abilities. Measures of

early rhyme recognition and generation have also been related to later reading (MacLean,

Bryant, & Bradley, 1987).

Familiarity with letters is another strong predictor of reading achievement (Adams, 1990; Catts et al., 2001). Letter knowledge not only helps children learn to connect orthographic symbols to sounds, it also benefits children as they engage in meta-linguistic talk about how the reading process works (Snow et al., 1998). Although speed and accuracy of letter identification is more important than merely the ability to name letters, learning letter names in an important starting place for developing fluency and automaticity (Adams, 1990).

Early access to literacy instruction that promotes interactions with print and sound is important for all children (Adams, 1990; Snow et al., 1998). Several studies have demonstrated that early literacy skills can be trained (Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1995; Wagner & Torgesen, 1987). By enhancing early literacy skills, children may be less likely to become disinterested and disengaged from the process of learning to read. In sum, scaffolding successful early literacy experiences can reduce problems associated with poor skills and low motivation for literacy activities (Catts, 1997).

There is a need for early literacy approaches that can be adjusted to meet the needs of children from diverse backgrounds and varying abilities (Lyons, 1999). Culatta, Kovansky, Theadore, Franklin, and Timler (2003) discuss group instructional approaches into three main types: naturalistic, systematic, and hybrid. Naturalistic approaches operate with the idea that literacy skills develop as children encounter print in meaningful and intrinsically motivating ways during every day events (Snow et al., 1998). Because skills emerge with experience, exposing children to purposeful uses for print and engaging them in word play positively influences literacy development (Catts, 1997; Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000). Naturalistic activities involve hands-on

exploration of interesting materials suited to a child's natural way of learning. Some children need a more systematic approach to learning.

Systematic approaches provide direct and explicit exposure to literacy rules or patterns for letter naming, rhyming, and initial sound identification (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHHD], 2000). Recognizing the importance of systematic exposure to target rules, however, has led some educators to be concerned that more teacher-directed practices will be implemented. Educators fear that focusing on early literacy skills may decrease the use of meaningful and developmentally appropriate practices when working with children in kindergarten through second grade.

Hybrid approaches blend naturalistic and systematic or direct instruction. According to Neuman et al. (2000), the idea is to expose children systematically to skills in developmentally appropriate ways. This is accomplished by constructing classroom activities that are meaningful to children and that inherently motivate them to experiment with the use of specifically embedded target skills; at the same time, individual differences in the background and abilities of students could be accommodated by adjusting instruction.

**The Great Debate**

In the world of literacy there is a deep-rooted debate over what classroom instructional methods produce efficient readers (Turner, 1989). The "great debate" stemmed from misconceptions about phonics and whole language instructional programs. William S. Gray argued for greater balance after many years of heated arguments over best practices in classrooms, research, and data. Turner (1989) suggests focusing on the best evidence of the students to provide individualized, successful instruction.

Proponents of both the phonics and the whole language found middle ground, a balance, known as balanced literacy.

Teaching phonics is not the same as teaching reading. Phonics is an adaptable resource, which can be combined with varying literacy instructional programs (Lapp & Flood, 1997). Phonics is a prerequisite for good readers because it teaches all readers strategies that help them derive meaning from word formation and letter combinations. Although phonics provides much support for readers in the elementary grades, and is backed by many theories and educational practitioners, phonics is often inappropriately applied in the classroom. Much of the confusion may come from the battle of theorists who support phonics and those who devalue its benefit in the classroom (Xue & Meisels, 1998). Phonics instruction has potential to positively affect student reading achievement when given ample time during the instructional day and is planned out (Turner, 1989). After synthesizing the literature in the field, the usefulness of phonics is strongly linked to the quality of instruction and should be taught using authentic reading and writing experiences (Kennedy & Shiel, 2010).

**Balanced Literacy**

Balanced literacy is a framework for literacy instruction in the 21st century. Balanced literacy instruction combines phonics and holistic instruction, scaffolding, personalized instruction, and the use of running records, anecdotal records, rubrics, and portfolios to connect reading and writing in the curriculum (Frey, Lee, & Tollefson, 2005; Kennedy & Shiel, 2010: Turner, 1989). According to Ivey, Baumann, and Jarrard (2000), the properly implemented programs for balanced literacy fully immerse students in the literacy experience with relevant skills lessons linked to the literature. Researchers and theorists promote balanced literacy approaches over direct literacy instruction where

participants are involved in meaningful activities (Ivey et al., 2000). The combination of communication between teacher and student, independent reading, writing, and direct literacy instruction are main elements that promote higher levels of literacy in balanced literacy classroom environments (Frey et al., 2005). Practitioners suggest that there must be a balance between child-centered and teacher-centered approaches to teaching in a balanced environment (Frey et al., 2000). In a truly balanced literacy program, how you teach is as important as what you teach (National Research Panel, 2002). A balanced literacy model is accomplished through five components or strategies of instruction; the read aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, and word study.

Reading aloud is a component in a balanced literacy model. In the read aloud strategy, the teacher reads out loud to the students. This strategy is important as the teacher models correct reading behaviors. This gives children an opportunity to develop a love for reading long before they can read with the same fluency, accuracy, and intonation. An expert teacher consistently demonstrates a clear purpose for the books and lessons. In a study by Maloch and Beutral (2010), it was determined that student interaction was the key to successful read alouds. Students should be active participants as the teacher guides their thinking in this process. Further, a study done by Warwick (1989) determined vocabulary gains can more than double when a teacher explains words from the text they are reading.

Guided reading is another component in a balanced literacy model. Iaquinta (2003) states that guided reading is an important research-based strategy that is also defined as a "best practice" method. Guided reading is a teaching approach used with all readers, struggling or independent, that has three fundamental purposes: to meet the

varying instructional needs of all the students in the classroom, enabling them to greatly expand their reading powers (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001); to teach students to read increasingly difficult texts with understanding and fluency; to construct meaning while using problem solving strategies to figure out unfamiliar words that deal with complex sentence structures, and understand concepts or ideas not previously encountered. Through guided reading, teachers are able to work with students who are on the same reading level. Students work in small groups as they read books at their level. The teacher's goal is to strive to provide the most effective instruction possible and to match the difficulty of the material with the students' abilities. Materials should provide a challenge that is just right for students.

Shared reading is another component of a balanced literacy program. In shared reading, the student and the teacher read together. It is an interactive process. The shared reading experience models strategies and the reading process for students. The teacher deliberately draws attention to the print and models behaviors in a risk free environment for students. The students' involvement ranges from reading in their heads or mouthing patterns from the book, to reading along with the teacher.

Independent reading is an important component of the balanced literacy model. It gives students a chance to practice the strategies they have learned through teacher read aloud, shared reading, and the guided reading process. Students are encouraged to read books that do not require teacher support. There are four elements in the independent reading process; choice, strategies, time, and goals. Students are motivated when they have books to choose from. The teacher should have a variety of leveled books for students to pick from and students should be taught how to pick appropriate books on

their level. Before students can become proficient readers, they need to learn strategies to keep in their toolbox. Independent reading time gives students an opportunity to use all the strategies the teacher has modeled. Teachers should set aside independent reading time for students. Proficiency is based on practice. Students should be encouraged to create realistic goals for the amount of the time and the number of books they read.

Word study provides students opportunities to investigate and understand the patterns in words. Students learn that spelling rules exist and that these patterns help to explain how to read, spell, and write words. Word study is designed to build word knowledge that can be applied to reading and spelling. Word study is closely tied to reading instruction therefore it develops students' abilities in phonics, word recognition, and vocabulary.

Bruneau (1997) provides further clarification on the effectiveness of this instructional strategy, stating that the workshop model allows for students to work on reading and writing through independent and group work. The workshop approach provides a multitude of opportunities for students to connect information with prior knowledge or other content areas that balance skill development with a combination of the whole language and the phonics approach (Bruneau, 1997: Frey et al., 2005).

**Effective Teaching**

Research on teacher behavior as it relates to student achievement has shown the need for direct instruction, continuous monitoring, performing multiple tasks simultaneously, appropriate pacing, and providing variety and challenge in work assigned. A link between classroom management skills and effective instruction, as well as a connection between teacher expectations and student achievement, has been identified. Characteristics such as setting high expectations, employing scaffolding,

integrating subject matter, and providing clear purpose and direction are all examples of practices of effective instruction (Porter & Brophy, 1988).

Porter and Brophy (1988) reviewed results from studies done at the Institute for Research on Teaching at Michigan State University. This research focused not only on the teacher's behaviors, but also on the planning and decision-making process that determined those behaviors. The author concluded that effective teachers are reflective practitioners who analyze their own instruction and make informed decisions on practice; they accept responsibility for student outcomes and are aware of misconceptions that students bring to the learning environment. Teacher effectiveness was found to be linked to the goals for academic achievement that the teacher sets during planning and decision-making. Other factors relating to effective instruction are teacher knowledge of subject matter, instructional practices, and classroom management skills.

General instructional practices that enhance learning included direct instruction by the teacher, the use of small groups for instruction, and a task oriented environment that is also warm and accepting. Specific instructional practices included demonstration, guided practice, independent practice, and performance feedback. Rosenshine and Stevens (1984) list three indices of effective instruction: academic engagement time, content covered, and the success rate of students. As these indicators relate to reading, the authors reference correlational and experimental studies that offer methods for increasing content covered. These methods include using small groups, increasing the time spent on instruction, providing succinct presentations, and questioning as teaching progresses. The authors state that experimental studies on academic engagement time have not answered questions concerning the appropriate amount of time needed for success or provided

definite ways to increase academic engagement time. In conclusion, Rosenshine and Stevens recommend more classroom-based experimental studies in the area of effective instruction.

Definite paradigm shifts since the last quarter of the twentieth century have marked transitions from behaviorists, to cognitivists, to sociocultural theories of reading instruction. These changing theories have influenced practitioners and researchers in relation to the reading process and instruction. However, overall the field has remained mainly focused on two specific areas: comprehension and reading comprehension. Other topics have been investigated, however, in terms of sheer quantity of research findings, the focus remains on reading acquisition and comprehension.

According to Taylor (2008), reading acquisition is no longer seen as a lockstep process that moves from oral language development to print literacy. Currently learning to read is viewed as a developmental process. From the time a child is born, this process emerges gradually. The role of the family is crucial in the development of a child. This is true for all areas of development, but specifically language and in creating a literacy rich environment. Researchers, policy makers, parents, and educators are constantly looking for ways to provide all children with access to print rich environments, largely because learning to read and reading to learn is thought to be key to a child's future well-being.

The Report of the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000), a major reference for U.S. education policymakers, is an evidence-based assessment of the experimental and quasi-experimental research literature on reading. The National Reading Panel used strict selection criteria in analyzing the comprehensive body of research that focused primarily on early reading. The goal of the panel was to report on effective instruction that impacts

children's reading development and achievement in school settings. The last report was published in 2000.

According to the Report of the National Reading Panel (NRP) (NICHD, 2000) and Snow et al. (2008), phonemic awareness and letter recognition are said to be the best predictors of a child's success in reading during the first years of schooling. Phonemic awareness is not an inherent skill, meaning it must be taught. Children have phonemic awareness skills when they demonstrate the ability to manipulate the smallest units of sound known as a phoneme. The NRP found that children, regardless of socioeconomic class, who receive at least 15 to 18 hours of phonemic awareness instruction, prior to reading instruction and, or before, entering the first grade benefit the greatest.

The NRP concluded further the importance of phonics instruction. Children who received phonics instruction in the first years of schooling show strength in word recognition skills than do children who received no such instruction. This was regardless of socioeconomic class. Phonics refers to the blending of the sound-symbol correspondences that make up spoken words in the alphabetic language. Phonics is a tool for decoding; it is not a reading program. Knowledge of phonics does not ensure that one will comprehend printed text because reading is a far more complex process than simply sounding out words.

According to the NRP (2000), phonemic awareness and phonics are methods for helping children learn to read. Good readers can decode words without hesitation and correctly with good comprehension. Caution needs to be exercised, however, in understanding and applying these findings. Processing well-developed word recognition skills is associated with having knowledge of phonics. However, these skills alone do not

necessarily develop fluent readers. As the NRP pointed out, fluency develops when individuals have many opportunities to practice reading. This practice is associated with independent, school, or recreational reading out of school. At this point, however, only correlational data exist to support the connection between increased reading practice and improved reading achievement.

Further, reporting research by the NRP (2000) emphasizes guided oral reading practices as a method to increase children's reading development. This method attempts to increase the amount of time a child engages in independent and/or out of school reading. The panel concluded that students need guidance during oral reading stating that the guidance has consistent conclusive effects on word recognition, reading comprehension, and fluency. However, researchers have yet to agree on the single most effective method for instruction. To conclude, it is important to understand the literature and the findings of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency as important reading methods. Although many have respected the results of the NRP for its concise compilation of relevant research pertaining to reading methods, others have criticized the panel for failing to address the critical early learning that occurs before a child goes to school, and for failing to provide information about home support for literacy development.

**Conclusion**

Many studies have quantified the impact of effective teaching that is correlated to student achievement. The teacher is relatively independent of anything else that occurs in the school system. Most compelling is the study by Nye et al. (2004), because it involved random assignment of students to classes controlled for factors such as previous achievement of student, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, class size, and whether

or not an aide was present in class. Among a number of findings, the study dramatically answered the question of how much influence the individual classroom teacher has on student achievement. Nye and colleagues (2004) summarize the results by suggesting that the difference in achievement resulted from having an effective teacher in terms of pedagogical competence, outgaining students who have a teacher who does not. One can conclude that the question as to whether an effective teacher can make a significant difference in student achievement has been answered. Nye and colleagues' (2004) study was not intended to identify specific characteristics of effective teachers, as does this research study. Research will never be able to identify instructional strategies that work with every student in every situation, however, this study can provide guidance for the "art" of teaching, referring to Berliner (1986), as pedagogy characterized as both the art and the science of teaching.

There is a lack of research in the literature showing evidence of teacher knowledge, practices, or perceptions that are potentially valuable and critical to the discourse on how to best teach children to read. Much of the current research on teaching encompasses craft knowledge, practical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge, also known as the science of teaching reading. There is little evidence on teacher input of their understanding or the art of teaching reading. The result of my research study on Reading Pedagogy in Today's Classroom should particularly impact and benefit practitioners. In addition, my research will add to the literature on reading pedagogy.

Educators have gained a wealth of knowledge from research about what it takes to help all children in the elementary grades succeed in reading to the fullest potential. Teachers must focus and reflect on the content and the pedagogy of their reading

instruction as they continuously make good instructional choices to meet student needs. For true social change and educational reform, reading pedagogy has to be viewed from a new lens, from the teachers, the practitioners who are in the classroom. This research paper will look at a newer paradigm of what research has not revealed; what methods and practices classroom teachers are using that develop successful readers. This insight has the potential to affect practice, policy, and future research.

**Chapter 3**

**Methodology**

Philosophically, qualitative and quantitative research differs in the approach taken to explore research questions. Quantitative research is often considered scientifically based because the variables that are measured are done so in a quantifiable way – the basic element of analysis is numbers. It is a process of creating an empirical test to support or refute a knowledge claim. Through deductive reasoning, the quantitative researcher uses instruments to test hypotheses and theories developed prior to the gathering of data. The researcher's role in quantitative analysis is detached and impartial. Through component analysis, the quantitative researcher is seeking generalizability, prediction, and casual explanations. Most studies in the area of reading are quantitative in nature.

Qualitative research involves the use of words instead of numbers to arrive at conclusions. It is focused on the process with basic assumptions that the problem is context dependent. Inductive reasoning is involved where the researcher seeks to interpret or understand the participants' perspectives to reach holistic understanding of the phenomenon. The researcher's role is one of active participation, as the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection (Creswell, 2002).

The design for this study is qualitative. It is important to be immersed in the everyday life of teachers who ultimately have the greatest impact on students. As the researcher, I seek a better understanding of a phenomenon; classroom teachers'

knowledge and experiences with reading instruction. In this approach, as the researcher I make knowledge claims based on the social constructivist perspectives.

**Philosophical Worldviews**

This study is grounded in participants' views of reading pedagogy, and as the researcher, I seek an understanding of each participant's perceptions and experiences in which they work. Understanding and interpreting the meaning of the teachers' experiences will be formed through interactions with others; hence it follows the social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978). The research question is broad and general so that the participants can help develop and construct the meaning of reading pedagogy, a meaning forged in discussion and interactions with others. Constructivist researchers address the process and recognize that their own backgrounds shape their interpretations. Constructivist worldview naturally manifests in phenomenological studies, in which the researchers acknowledge how their own interpretations construct the meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

This study is also grounded in the search for the best people and practices in their organization. Every school has something that works. Through Appreciative Inquiry, the art of appreciation, I will discover and value those factors that give students the best possible chance at learning to read. Therefore, social construction and appreciate inquiry are the basic set of beliefs or paradigms (Lincoln & Guba, 1990) that guide this research.

**Strategies of inquiry**

A phenomenological approach was deemed the most appropriate design for this study. The focus is placed on exploring and understanding the lived experiences of teachers who teach reading. A qualitative method of research was selected for this study so that meaning and understanding can be derived in a holistic, natural framework. As

cited in Creswell (2003), Hodder (1994), and Tjora (2006), phenomenological studies require multiple data sources, therefore semi- structured interviews, participant observations, and lesson plans were used in this study.

Another strategy of inquiry that was used is appreciative inquiry (AI). Appreciative inquiry, as a strategy of inquiry, is relatively new. It is used with the intent to study human behavior by utilizing a qualitative methodology (Cooperrider et al., 2008). AI is based on the assumption that something "good" already exists in every organization, which can be discovered, used, and most importantly exploited. AI is the inquiry for the best in order to find and create more other bests (Cooperrider et al., 2008). The nature of this line of inquiry is to identify the positive core of people (their beliefs and experiences) through individuals relating accomplishments through life stories.

Appreciative inquiry is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives "life" to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. This strategy of inquiry will find positive successful strategies and methods that teachers use to teach reading. Unpacking what teachers know firsthand about reading instruction can be a valuable task in any educational organization, as reading is essential to foster student success.

**Sample/participants**

Qualitative researchers usually work with small samples of people, nested in their context and studied in-depth (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therefore a purposeful sample

of four kindergarten through second grade, effective classroom teachers who teach reading, and have students who show growth on the STAR Early Literacy Assessment participated in this phenomenological study. Growth is looked at through an overall average increase in the students' score, within the 10 subgroups: Alphabetic Principle, Concept of Word, Visual Discrimination, Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Structural Analysis, Vocabulary, Sentence Comprehension, Paragraph Comprehension, and Early Numeracy. Each child has an increase or decrease in his or her scaled score. These scores were averaged for each classroom teacher. The classroom teachers with the highest student averages were included in the participation pool. The teachers are ranked by their numerical increase in student growth. As shown in Appendix A the range is from a class average of 11 to 147.

From this ranking, the top four teachers were asked to take part in the study. Purposeful sampling facilitates the ability to discover participants' lived experiences (Patton, 1991) and increases the likelihood of finding a variety of realities. Those teachers who were placed in the participation pool were asked to participate in this study through interviews and observations. Five lesson plans from the four participants were collected as well. Participants are teachers whose students show growth on the STAR Early Literacy Assessment. As the researcher, I looked for a maximum variation sample within the sample. This is a deliberate hunt for classroom teachers with different backgrounds (number of years teaching, different teaching certifications, genders, and ages) within the participation pool. For example, if three teachers have the same overall increase for their class, I looked for differences between the teachers to use for interviewing and observations. Each person from the participation pool, read and signed

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an informed consent (Appendix B) form prior to participating that promised their complete anonymity. This participation pool served as the purposeful sample, which implies intentionally selecting individuals to gain an understanding of the central phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Setting**

Data were collected for this study at a public school located in southern New Jersey. Two of the 11 schools in the district were used as the setting for this dissertation. The school district has been recognized by New Jersey Magazine as one of the top 31 schools in the state. In addition, the New Jersey Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, the New Jersey Association of School Administrators, and the New Jersey Association of Partners in Education have each recognized this public school's program as "exemplary" at the state level (New Jersey Department of Education, 2011). Having such recognition prompts me to understand how the school culture is lived. This recognition has been based on children's accomplishments in the areas of phonemic awareness, word recognition, comprehension, and sound/symbol correspondence (phonics), all of which are identified by the National Reading Panel as key to reading development. Ninety six percent of the students' first language is English; the remaining languages include Vietnamese, Tagalog, Spanish, Arabic, Arabic, Bangba, and Cantonese.

More specifically, one school is an early childhood center which houses approximately 500 students in kindergarten and preschool. For the purposes of this study, only the kindergarten population was used. There are 13 kindergarten teachers. Two of the teachers teach full day learning disabled children. The other 11 teachers teach two

half-day sessions of kindergarten. The class sizes range from 16 to 22 students. Ninety-five students are classified low socioeconomic status and 12 are classified as an ELL.

The research was also conducted at a second school. According to the district's website, enrollment at this school is approximately 580 students, with class sizes ranging from 20 to 25 students. This school currently has 5 classes of first grade and 5 classes of second. These two grades are used for this study. The school also houses third, fourth, and fifth grades, and one self-contained Special Needs classroom. There is a teaching staff of 55, a Principal, a Supervisor of Elementary Education, and support staff of 30, who assist with the school programs on a part-time and full-time basis. The district's elementary English Language Learning students also attend this elementary school where staff helps to meet their diverse needs.

**Data Collection**

This study used semi-structured interviews, observations, and lesson plans for data collection instruments which began in April 2013. A research binder with four sections, one for each participant, was utilized to organize the data. Within each section, I included the one interview transcript, 20 observations, and 20 lesson plans. In qualitative research, interviews and observation are the research instruments (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I interviewed the four participants first. I have developed and maintained good relationships with participants as colleagues. These relationships are important for the credibility of the interviews. A high level of trust is needed to conduct qualitative research. After the interviews, I observed each participant five times. Some of the observations had to be video tapped due to scheduling conflicts. I have worked in the school district for over 10 years and have established a professional relationship with the classroom teachers in the two particular schools. It was important to reiterate that the

participants' comments and actions would be confidential, and that maintaining the current rapport is important to the research process. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed for analysis. I collected five lesson plans from each participant. All of the data were stored on my personal computer, which requires a password to gain access. All hard copies were stored in a locked filing cabinet to ensure confidentiality.

**Interviews**. Four semi-structured interviews were completed, one interview with each participant within a 2-week time frame, during April 2013. An interview protocol was used, that I develop as shown in Appendix C. Before any interview can occur, analysis must be given to the questions that will be asked, because "at the heart of interviewing is an interest in gaining an understanding of the people's experiences and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 3). The means to access those experiences range widely, from open-ended, unstructured approaches that may seem more a friendly conversation than a data-gathering interview (Seidman, 2006) to highly structured protocols with preset and standardized questions from which there is little variance. My interview protocol included a range of questions. The first four questions concerned perceptions and interpretations of reading pedagogy. For the purpose of this interview *perception* refers to insight and understanding of reading pedagogy. *Reading pedagogy* is defined as the methods and strategies used to teach reading.

1. How do you describe successful reading pedagogy?
2. How do student learn to read?
3. What is the student's role perceived to be, in the reading process?
4. What is the teacher's role perceived to be, in the reading process?

The next set of questions concerned knowledge base of reading pedagogy. For the purpose of this interview *reading pedagogy* is defined as the methods and strategies used to teach reading.

1. How many years of teaching experience do you have?

2. What degree (s) do you have? What certification(s) do you have?

3. What professional development do you have in the area of reading?

4. How do you describe reading acquisition?

5. How were you taught to read?

The last set of questions reflects the practice which teachers implement to teach reading.

1. What strategies do you use to help students learn to read?

2. In your experience, what is the most successful strategy to help student learn to read?

3. What materials do you find most helpful to effectively teach reading?

The protocol served as a guide, however, it was flexible to allow for each participant's story to be told. Lastly, an audiotape was used to capture data and transcripts were developed for data analysis.

**Observations and reflective field notes**. Direct observations took place in the natural setting to gather data (Tjora, 2006). Each of the four participants was observed five times. Each observation lasted 30 minutes. The observations took place over a 6-week period in April and May of 2013. Reflective field notes were used to understand how teachers are developing readers in their classroom. There was a conscious effort to balance what I observed and what I knew as a reading practitioner. My experiences are important to the process, but I had to allow the participants' experiences to come through

in the observations and field notes. Field notes were gathered throughout the observation process to provide insight to the researcher's thoughts and reactions. Often referred to as "reflective notes," the information represents my personal feelings, and impressions of the research process (Creswell, 2003). Reflective notes were utilized to substantiate the findings and provide creditability to the data collected.

I developed an observation protocol. The form consists of two columns – one for descriptive notes to be taken during the time of the observation and one for reflective notes to be written after the observation (Appendix D). Descriptive notes illuminate the context of the observation by capturing detailed, specific instances, while reflective notes record impressions, ideas, feelings, and interpretations (Glesne, 2006).

**Material culture.** Qualitative research involves investigation beyond what one can see on the surface. The use of material culture analysis can enable the exploration of "multiple voices" and aide in the triangulation process. Twenty lesson plans were collected and included in the data analysis. Material culture is the written texts and cultural artifacts that can provide another layer of meaning to research. Hodder (1994) states that material culture can represent the "underlying lived cultural group's experience," and provide research with more insight. The lesson plans provided insight into the classroom teachers' perceptions, knowledge base, and practices.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative research encompasses large amounts of raw data therefore it is essential to maintain the data in a timely and organized fashion (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The majority of qualitative researchers code their data both during and after collection for analysis, for coding *is* analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A code in qualitative inquiry is usually capturing a word or short phrase that represents a

summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or attribute for a portion of data. The data in this research consisted of interview transcripts, participant observations, and field notes. The portion of data was coded during First Cycle coding processes and ranged in magnitude from a single word, to a full sentence, to an entire page of text. In the Second Cycle coding processes, the portions coded are the exact same units, longer passages of text, and even a reconfiguration of the codes (Saldana, 2009).

Coding is a cyclical act. Rarely is the first cycle of coding data perfectly attempted. The second cycle of recoding further manages, filters, highlights, and focuses the salient features of the qualitative data record for generating categories, themes, and concepts to grasp meaning. Qualitative inquiry declares meticulous attention to language, as well as a deep reflection on the emergent themes, patterns, and meanings of human experience. Recoding can occur with a more attuned perspective using First Cycle methods again. Second Cycle methods to review data explain those processes that might be implemented during the second and possibly third and fourth, if needed.

I looked for common themes through inductive analysis of data. The data from interview transcripts, observation transcripts, and lesson plans were coded in three ways: first through labeling phrases and sentence, and then axial coding, as recommended by Saldana (2009), to compare the labels and merge data into categories. Lastly, selective coding, which allows the researcher to refine categories and begin to understand the emerging concepts, was completed. The themes, through triangulation, emerged (Creswell, 2003).

Triangulation of the multiple data sources was built into my data collection, as shown in Table 1, and analysis for the purpose of achieving trustworthiness.

Triangulation is considered a process that uses multiple perceptions to help clarify

meaning and verify the repeatability of an observation or interpretation. Triangulation can

also be used to provide meaning by identifying different ways that the phenomenon is

being seen. Table 1 illustrates that more than one data source was used to corroborate the

findings. Member checking is an important part of triangulating the researcher's

observations as well as interpretations. Also, my reflective notes provided data about my

journey. When the research participants reviewed the interview transcripts, observation

notes, or narrative text, they provided corroboration.

Table 1

*Triangulation Matrix*

| Research Question | Data Source 1 | Data Source 2 | Data Source 3 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| What are classroom teachers perceptions' of reading pedagogy? | semi-structured interviews | observations | |
| What is classroom teachers knowledge base of reading pedagogy? | semi-structured interviews | observations | lesson plans |
| What is classroom teachers practice of reading pedagogy? | semi-structured interviews | observations | lesson plans |

**Trustworthiness**

According to Creswell (2003), diverse standards exist in validity of research. In

qualitative research, trustworthiness is among those standards. Angen (2000), as cited in

Creswell (2003), suggests that within interpretative research, validation is a judgment of

the trustworthiness or goodness of a piece of research. In any qualitative research project, four issues of trustworthiness demand attention: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Toma (2006) refers to this as the trustworthiness approach and notes that this is a standard of rigor when applied to research. Further, Creswell discusses validation strategies that make interpretive research worthy of trust. These strategies include, but are not limited to, external audits to examine both the process and product; rich, thick, description; peer debriefing; and triangulation. Researchers seek an affluence of evidence to feel confident about observations, interpretations, and conclusions. Researchers must begin to be more systematic about establishing the trustworthiness of data by formulating self-corrective techniques that will check the credibility of data and minimize the distorting effect of personal bias. I implemented the *trustworthy approach* that Toma (2006) refers to as a standard of rigor.

**Credibility**

To address credibility in the data collection process I employed several techniques: observations, interviews, and narratives from field notes.

**Transferability**

Transferability refers to the likelihood that emergent themes could be utilized in another situation (Lincoln & Guba, 1990). In this study, transferability was limited to the specific schools and classrooms studied. There was an attempt by the researcher to develop transferability in the selection of the diverse population to be interviewed, the use of peer debriefers, and the data collected described the experiences of a specific population's behavior, however, due to the limitation of the schools and classroom, transferability lacks these essential traits.

**Dependability**

In order to ensure dependability as the data gathered, the data were coded and themes were developed to fit the phenomenon under study; however, as new data were discovered, the themes were modified to reflect the data (Creswell, 2003). As a second method of assuring dependability, I documented my actions, and placed them in the chronological order as I followed in their execution.

**Conformability**

A phenomenological study is not generalizable to the group of individuals, rather, the study describes the phenomenon as it naturally occurs in a specific setting. The present study assumes that only the readers know the applicability of the research findings.

Member checking is another method of increasing validity within the data collected. Member checking involves follow up meetings with the participants to determine their feelings toward the accuracy of the transcribed interview data collected. There are differing opinions to the usage of member checking. Creswell (2003) suggested that transcripts of the initial interview should not be made available to the participants because it allows the participants to manipulate or change the data. Maxwell (2004) recommended member checking as verification that the researcher has not misrepresented the meanings of the participants. Member checking may provide alternative interpretations of the events observed by the researcher. Maxwell (2004) further suggested that the researcher seeks out situations that do not support her conclusions. Identifying discrepant data and analysis of these data supported the conclusions reached in the study. Researchers tend to notice information that supports their conclusions while ignoring those that do not.

In this study, member checking is considered a form of validity procedure. As the researcher of the study, I concur with Creswell (2003) and chose not to make the transcripts of the interviews available to the participants. Similarly, peer review was utilized as a method of providing creditability to the data gathered. Peer review is an evaluation of the researcher by others in the same field, in order to enhance the reliability and creditability of the research. The reviewer aims to seek out errors or weaknesses in the data, hoping to provide an impartial evaluation. To avoid biases, the reviewer was selected outside the influence of colleagues, relatives, or friends, thus avoiding any conflicts of interest. The word peer is often referred to as someone of equal standing; however, in this context peer review is utilized in a broader context to refer to someone of a higher standing.

**Timeline**

As the researcher, I went through two levels of "gatekeeper" to receive permission to observe and interview at the two schools located in southern New Jersey. Within schools themselves, teachers, principals, and superintendents serve as legitimate gatekeepers whom research must heed (Seidman, 2006). The superintendent of the school district and the principals of individual schools granted permission through written letters.

The STAR Early Literacy Assessment was administered in September and then again January of the 2012 – 2013 school years. Looking at these data, I analyzed the results to see which students had growth in reading. The STAR assessment, also known as standardized test for assessment of reading, was used to determine which teachers were interviewed and observed. As the researcher, I looked for students who showed growth in reading development, as indicated on their stanine score, to build the

interviewee participant pool. Interviews and observations took place during the spring of 2013. Data analysis of the interviews, observations, lesson plans, and field notes were coded during the summer of 2013. The findings and final report was written in the fall of 2013. Defending the document and edits recommended by the committee were made following the committee feedback.

**Summary**

The chapter presents a thorough discussion of the processes for the present study. The chapter presented the justification for the use of a phenomenological study in examining the lived experiences of classroom teachers to understand reading pedagogy. This process involved evaluating reading pedagogy, breaking down the data into small fragments or categories, and then re-constructing the information into meaningful description of the event (Maxwell, 2004). The phenomenon was based on the gathered textual data generated from transcripts of the study participants. The chapter also presented the techniques used in coding the data and generating themes that aim to provide answers to the research question sought for the present study.

Through the use of rigorous qualitative phenomenological and Appreciative Inquiry research, the purpose of this study answered the guiding question: What are effective K-2nd classroom teacher's perceptions, experiences, and knowledge base of reading pedagogy; and how this will inform practice?

**Chapter 4**

**Findings**

The results of the qualitative procedures used to analyze classroom teachers' perceptions, knowledge base and practice, as it relates to reading pedagogy, are summarized in this chapter. Semi-structured interviews, observations, and lesson plans were used to gather data on reading pedagogy. Four classroom teachers were chosen to be interviewed and observed because of their overall student growth on the Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading (Renaissance Learning, 2013). Their students' growth, based on the scores, was overall higher than their colleagues and therefore, for the purposes of this research, considered *effective teachers*, specifically in the area of reading pedagogy. The findings are summarized in four categories; teachers' perceptions, knowledge base, teachers' practices of reading pedagogy, teachers' perceptions and how this can inform practice.

**Data Sources**

Data for this study are qualitative in nature. The data were gathered from three sources: semi-structured interviews (Appendix C), observations (Appendix D), lesson plans, and reflective journal (Appendix F). I looked for similarities among the data that related to my research question. The data sources provided data which were coded through a series of iterations grounded in the research question: What are effective K-2nd grade classroom teachers' perceptions, knowledgebase, and practice of reading pedagogy; how does this inform practice? The data were first analyzed to draw out statements or phrases that best glean participants' experiences (Creswell, 2003; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). I went through interview transcripts, observations, reflective field notes,

and lesson plans to highlight frequently used sentences, statements, or phrases that reflected perceptions, knowledgebase, and practice of reading pedagogy. This is also known as value process strategy to coding data (Saldana, 2009). The process was repeated several times. Key phrases were grouped into similar categories through a second iteration of analysis. The third iteration of identified theme was used to develop teachers' perceptions, knowledge base, and practice that are presented below.

**Teacher 1**

Teacher 1 is considered a veteran teacher and has been teaching for 22 years. Her interview revealed the following. She taught for seven years, left the teaching field to raise her children and then returned to teaching for the past 15 years. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree, with certifications in elementary education and early childhood education. The majority of her experience is with first grade where the interviews and observations took place.

As I entered the classroom of Teacher 1, I noticed an accumulation of books, papers, and materials. There is an abundance of books on the shelves and the tables. The physical arrangement of the room is set up for small group and large group instruction. Opposite the teacher's desk is a kidney table for small group reading. This table also had materials on it: wipe boards, markers, erasers, magnetic tiles, and pencils. The students' desks are set up in five groups of four in a "U" shape. There are informational posters such as the Fundations Sound Chart and a student Word Wall for students to reference. In the back of the classroom there is a small rug and a classroom library. It looked cozy and inviting, a place where students could read comfortably. There is also a student bathroom in the back of the classroom. This is next to the coat closet. The whiteboard is on the right hand wall and the Smart Board is directly in front of it. As I walked further past the

whiteboard, the teacher's desk is in the front corner of the room facing the wall. It appears the teacher rarely sits at her desk. The students in teacher 1's classroom were happy and engaged in the activities of the day.

**Perceptions of reading pedagogy.** Teacher 1's perception of successful reading pedagogy is defined as the students showing the application of skills for that grade. She noted that students have a responsibility to learn the rules of the classroom, so they are ready to learn. Whereas the teacher's responsibility, she believes, is to make modifications so that students learn the material or skills taught.

During my observations, I noted another adult in the room during small group and large group reading instruction. The other adult worked one on one with children during the whole group time, calling at least five students to the back of the room individually during a 40-minute block of time. During the small group time, the adult provided immediate feedback to students who were independently reading, organized make-up work, and provided individual conferencing with students at the writing center. Teacher 1 explained that she had a special education teacher with her during part of her day for a student who had a visual impairment. The special education teacher not only made modifications for the visually impaired student, but for any child who needed additional assistance.

**Knowledge base of reading pedagogy**. Teacher 1 talked a lot about her own professional development that influenced her knowledge of reading pedagogy. The Fundations Reading Program® was at the heart of this conversation. Not specifically the program, but the components used. Fundations® is a phonological/phonemic awareness, phonics and spelling program used for the general education population. Fundations® is

based on the Wilson Reading System® principles and serves as a prevention program to help reduce spelling and reading failure. Teacher 1 explained that the school district adopted pieces of the program in grades K through grade 2, for consistency within the 7 schools and 34 kindergarten classrooms through second grade classrooms. The district is using the a-z letter/sound/key word chart and chant (Appendix E) that is specific to this program, as well as tapping procedures that isolate phonemes to blend and segment. Teacher 1 also talked about workshops on literacy centers, grouping students, and guided reading as being helpful:

> The professional development of guided reading has been helpful. Because I started teaching when, you know, you taught the same thing to everyone in the same way. If you got it, you got it. If you didn't...(teacher shrugged her shoulders). It is hard when you have taught a long time. But groups are fluid and change throughout the year; it was a new concept that students are instructed at their own level. I balked at it at first, I couldn't grasp it once I embraced it I think that has been most beneficial. (Personal Communication, 2013)

Teacher 1 is referring to guided reading as a strategy that helps students become better readers by providing instruction at each child's individual reading level. Students are divided into groups based on reading levels. A child must read a leveled reader with 90% accuracy in order to be considered instructional at a particular book level. Each classroom typically has students with a variety of reading levels, therefore the teacher expressed that she has many instructional groups. Teacher 1 noted that she had six reading groups this year. Upon observation I observed three students, who appeared to need intense instruction, in more than one group. The teacher gave these students an hour of individualized instruction because they met with the teacher two times, in two different groups. Lesson plans further showed evidence that guided reading is planned for at least four times a week.

Teacher 1 explained that she was taught how to read using basal readers. Basal readers are organized stories that emphasize a skill that was taught. Teachers' manuals that accompany the stories are typically scripted with teacher questions. She reminisced of round robin reading and glad that she was "good" at reading. She also recalled workbook pages, however, stated that she did not recall being "taught" how to read aside from completing these drill based tasks.

**Practices of reading pedagogy.** Teacher 1 explained her reading practices to include: small group instruction, whole group instruction, centers, phonics, vocabulary, writing, and guided reading.

> Every day I do whole group instruction. This is where I review a phonics skill, introduce a piece of literature, or work on comprehension. This is a time to introduce or review skills the entire class needs. Then I have centers everyday where students work on specific skills they need individually. At this time I meet with a guided reading group. Students are reading at their own level and getting individualized help on reading strategies. (Personal Communication, 2013)

As for materials, Teacher 1 uses wipe boards the most for word building and dictation. She also uses leveled readers. She has a collection of leveled readers from a variety of publishers. She noted that when students are reading higher levels books, she borrows books from the higher grades. She utilizes the scope and sequence in the manual that the district is currently implementing. She also uses composition books for writing, and phonics practice. Teacher 1 talked about assessments as one of the materials she needs for effective teaching. She believes it is a combination of informal and formal assessments that help her hone in on the skills her students need development in.

**Teacher 2**

Teacher 2 is also considered a veteran teacher with 30 consistent years of experience in the education field, currently teaching first grade. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree with certifications in elementary education and early childhood education.

As I entered this classroom from the hallway I immediately saw the whiteboard to the right hand side and the teacher's desk. The white board is full of charts and posters. In the opposite corner of the room is the teacher's desk. Looking at the room, the students' desks are set up in rows of pairs looking at the whiteboard. Alongside of the wall closest to the hallway there are a two student computers closest to the door. A small rug with a classroom library is nestled in the corner. Also on this rug are all of the Fundations® charts, as well as other anchor charts for students to reference. On the opposite side of the classroom, the wall closest to the outside windows, there is a kidney table for small group reading. Behind the table sits many bins with leveled readers. In the back of the classroom there is a student bathroom and a coat closet. The students in Teacher 2's classroom were smiling and eager to work.

**Perceptions of reading pedagogy.** Teacher 2 believes that reading strategies are based on student needs and that one strategy cannot be viewed as better than another. She further suggested that it is every teacher's responsibility to instill confidence within children and build a rapport with every student so that instruction can flourish. Teacher 2 wants every child to participate and progress at their own rate.

**Knowledge base of reading pedagogy**. Teacher 2 recalls many professional development workshops that the district provided over the years. She could not remember all of the titles or topics, but concluded that she always took something away from the information and added it to her repertoire of knowledge.

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Every system or strategy that I have learned throughout the years has worked with different students. I just don't abandon all that I am doing when a new initiative comes down the pike. I pick and choose what will work best for my students. It gives me more tricks to pull from my bag. (Personal Communication, 2013)

Teacher 2 believes that she was taught to read through the use of the Dick and Jane series. This was a series used from the 1930s to the 1970s that relied on sight word or whole word method of teaching. She thought it was through a phonics program, but could not recall instruction other than reading Dick and Jane.

**Practices of reading pedagogy.** Teacher 2 states that she has used every strategy there is to reach her students. She believes they are all successful strategies if they help students reach their potential in reading.

Some students did not do well with whole language; some did not do well phonics. I think the thing is you must touch upon each strategy until you find the one that works best for each student and have the confidence to get rid of the ones that don't work with that student. Even if it is a mandated curriculum strategy. Just focus on what works best for each student. (Personal Communication, 2013)

The most successful strategy is that one strategy that works with a child who needs help.

Teacher 2 described the materials that she found most useful to teach reading are the guided reading books she has collected over the years. During my observation I noted that behind her semi-circle table, where she was conducting a reading lesson to a group of three children, there were bins lined up along the wall. Each bin was marked with a letter to indicate the reading level. Although Teacher 2 never named a particular method to teach reading during her small group instruction, she had students make connections to their own life many times. She also asked students to tap out words.

During my observations I noted that there was another adult in the room during Teacher 2's small group reading lesson. The assistant was monitoring the center work of the other students that the teacher was not directly working with. This person did provide

a writing conference with some children and moved them along in their writing work. She also checked another group's word work and challenged the students to do more. Teacher 2 explained later that she has an assistant who works in her room each day. The assistant rotates through the first grade classrooms therefore Teacher 2 utilizes her during her reading instruction block of time.

After reviewing Teacher 2's lesson plans, it is evident that she uses assessments weekly to determine grouping and reading levels of the students in her classroom. Teacher 2 used running records and student observations in her reading lessons.

**Teacher 3**

Teacher 3 is a novice teacher with four years' teaching experience, including her student teaching experience. She currently teaches kindergarten to two sections of half-day kindergarten. She also completed her student teaching experience in the same school she secured a teaching position. Teacher 3 holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in elementary education and writing arts, with an early childhood certification.

Teacher 3 is young and enthusiastic with the children. Her classroom is chock full of students' work. Lining the front wall is a white board that is covered with instructional posters and tools. On the white board there is the Fundation® letter/picture/sound chart, a word wall, anchor charts, and sight word cards. In front of the white board is a big book stand that is used to hold all big books, as well as large poster paper for journal modeling and the creation of anchor charts. The bulletin board to the right of the white board consists of all calendar and Everyday Math materials used for opening exercises. The front of the room has a large rug for all the students to sit comfortably with a rocking chair for Teacher 3.

The back of the room is dedicated to individualized and small group instruction. In front of the large classroom is Teacher 3's small group table that consists of six student chairs. Next to the small group table is a book shelf that holds all of Teacher 3's small group materials. Four color-coded tables fill the middle of the floor that hold six students each. On top of the table is a pencil box for each student that holds all supplies and has a Fundation® name plate on top. Lining the edge of the room are four shelves and a play kitchen that create sections for Math Centers, Literacy Centers, and Play Centers.

The back of the room is lined with closets that are used for storage and the students' belongings. The classroom sight words are hanging on the closet doors for the students to practice while waiting in line to leave the room. Anchor charts that were created throughout the year are hung on the walls and window shades. Students appear happy and engaged in Teacher 3's classroom.

**Perceptions of reading pedagogy**. Teacher 3 defines successful reading as applying the skills that are taught to assist with reading such as using picture clues, using letter sounds, tapping out different blends or sound patterns, using picture clues or context clues. Teacher 3 believes her responsibility in the reading process is to give students the strategies they need to be successful and to model the strategies so that students can implement the strategy correctly. Teacher 3 views the students' role to be active: to participate and stay motivated to complete each task. She also expects students to practice within each area that they need to practice in with her - also known as guided practice.

**Knowledge base of reading pedagogy**. Teacher 3 stated that she has participated in some professional development within the two years since graduation. This included a kindergarten conference where she learned many reading strategies, noting that the music and literacy workshop provided her with a wealth of ideas that 'inspired" her. At this particular workshop, she learned many songs to help students remember sight words. Teacher 3 also stated that she participated in building level "voluntary sharing sessions," where such topics as guided reading, centers, and Fundations® were covered.

Teacher 3 remembered her mom using Hooked on Phonics with her at home to learn to read. Other than that, she did not recall any instruction in school in the area of reading. She vaguely recalled reading books. However, there was "only questions to answer" and not explicit instruction. Teacher 3 describes reading acquisition as a very hands-on, multisensory activity.

> Even with me, it is I have to see things and see them in different ways. So when learning a new word or sound in the reading processes is best to associate them with a picture or....make sure you have a lot of different activities that are multisensory or hands on such as singing. Singing helps my students remember sight words and things like that. (Personal Communication, 2013)

Further, Teacher 3 stated that reading acquisition was a process of practice - that begins before the actual act of reading itself.

**Practices of reading pedagogy.** Teacher 3 reiterates that using such strategies reflect a multisensory approach to reading: singing to remember letters of the alphabet and sight words, signing color words, or encouraging students to make letters with their bodies. Teacher 3 also referred to "tapping out" words and using the Fundations Reading Program® strategies, letter chart and sound chant as successful strategies to help students to learn to read. Teacher 3 believes the Fundations Reading Program® sound cards, as

well as wipes boards or magnetic boards, are important materials needed to teach reading. In addition to the resources, she researches ideas to motivate the students. Teacher 3 uses the district's curriculum guide and publishers' manual as a guide to determine which skills students need for that grade. However "assessments ultimately tell me what students need to know."

During my observations I noticed that Teacher 3 modeled everything she expected a student to complete. In one lesson on blending sounds, she modeled in three ways. Teacher 3 provided several models on her wipe board first, where she verbally said the word slowly enunciating each sound. She then tapped each sound and blended it with her fingers, and she also wrote the letters on the board to make the word. This gave the children an opportunity to see it in multiple ways prior to working on the blending activity alone.

During my observation it was also noted that Teacher 3 had at least four other adults who work in the room with her during reading instruction (not all at one time but they do overlap on some days). During one observation, the class had three instructional groups going on at one time, as well as students in centers working independently. During another observation, an adult was at the side table working with a small group on a skill, while the teacher did a whole group read aloud. At another observation, while the teacher worked with a small group, another adult monitored centers and provided instruction and feedback as needed to students. Teacher 3 explained that she had an assistant scheduled in her room at least four times a week. She has a reading specialist scheduled to provide intervention to students at least three times a week. Teacher 3 also

used parent volunteers, who are trained by the school, to assist during writing and centers.

**Teacher 4**

Teacher 4 has been teaching kindergarten for 10 years. Prior to that, she worked in a preschool setting, both as an assistant and as a teacher. She holds a Bachelors of Arts degree in education and psychology, with an early childhood certification.

Upon entering Teacher 4's classroom, I immediately noticed the buzz of the students. The students were scattered about the classroom. The teacher sat on a child size chair as she worked with a student. Although five groups of five desks were together, the students were not in their seats. Some students were on the rug working, others were at a table in the back of the room. A few lingered at the desks, however, they were not seated. This classroom has two computer stations for student use. The teacher's desk is at the back of the room with a bookcase in front of the desk. The bookcases are overflowing with materials. There are boxes of letter tiles and magnets, chalkboards, dry erase boards, sight word games, and letter sound games. Standing on top of the bookcase are the student mailboxes. As students complete an activity, they put it in their mailbox to go home. The students appear to be very busy and happy in Teacher 4's classroom.

**Perceptions of reading pedagogy.** Teacher 4 defines successful reading as when children retain information and show growth. Teacher 4 strongly asserts that the students' role is having awareness, really understanding the meaning or skills they are developing and constantly adding to their knowledge. In the reading process, she states that her role is to guide the students and bridge the known to the unknown. To accomplish this she uses informal and formal instruction to really understand where a child is and try to process her understanding to guide the instruction.

**Knowledge base of reading pedagogy**. Teacher 4 discussed her own

professional development as it relates to reading instruction. She stated that she

participated in building level and district level professional development. One building

level in-service was in the area of guided reading. One district level in-service was from

the publishing company of *Being A Writer* when the district adopted the writing program

in 2010. In addition to the professional development, Teacher 4 is involved in a

professional learning community (PLC) at the building level. She briefly described that

the PLC was currently meeting to discuss sight words, specifically, strategies to teach

sight words. Teacher 4 felt that she learned to read through visualization, repetition, and

memorization, when asked how she learned to read.

**Practices of reading pedagogy**. Teacher 4 uses self-exploration and interaction

as reading strategies with her students.

> Kids look for teachable moments, when you can take the time to explain to each child individually what it is they need in order to understand something. Children take more meaning away from something they asked instead of me forcing them to understand something. Things always arise that you may not expect. So every group I meet with I cover something different but they are all getting what they need, at their individual level. Not necessarily what I think they need. This is all done within the parameters of the standards and skills I set up. (Personal Communications, 2013)

Teacher 4 states that guided reading is her number one reading strategy because

each child is reading at his own level in a small group setting, where different skills can

be worked on. She also uses word and letter cards in addition to the leveled readers. She

finds wipe boards and magnetic letter tiles helpful for skill development. She uses the

teacher manuals to see where students should be, and to which skills they should have

exposure.

**Commonalities Across Perceptions of Reading Pedagogy**

Findings from interviews, observations, and material documentation reveal two overarching themes in the area of teachers' perceptions. The two themes are students require individualized instruction and instructional support within the classroom is key in facilitating reading progress. The teacher student relationship was also noted as important to the teachers. This relationship is the foundation from which the reading process can develop (Table 2).

The findings in this research revealed that all four teachers believed that instruction should be individualized to each student's unique needs (Table 2). The small groups were made up of three students, which is smaller than a traditional small group. A traditional small group is made up of six to eight students. The teachers in this research taught to the needs of the students and not to groups of students. Many traditional reading groups are created so that students fall into a high, middle, and low group - usually creating three reading groups within the class. Then the teacher instructs the group, often times not really meeting all the needs of the students in the group. More often than not, students in a classroom have a variety of needs – that range is much bigger than just three instructional levels. However, due to time constraints, materials, or sheer number of students, a teacher will not meet with more than the three groups. The teachers in this study created as many groups as the students' needs dictated. One teacher had six instructional groups. In addition, teachers in this study took students in more than one group to optimize instructional time. Managing students in more than one group is unique to this study and can be correlated with effective reading pedagogy.

In all four classrooms, instructional support was provided either by an assistant, another teacher, or a parent volunteer who is trained by the school. The instructional

support was provided during each teacher's reading block of time. The instructional support person typically assisted the other students who the teacher was not meeting with; however, these students were still working on literacy base skills. Three out of the four teachers identified utilizing support in their classroom as a successful strategy, as shown in Table 2. These additional support people, although not teachers themselves, made an enormous difference in the efficiency in the way the reading time frame was utilized. The teachers in this district value instructional support in their classroom.

Table 2

*Perceptions of Reading Pedagogy*

| Define Successful Reading Pedagogy | Rapport with Students Teacher/Student Relationship | Utilize Support | Individualized/ Differentiate Instruction |
|---|---|---|---|
| Participants | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| Percentage | 100% | 75% | 100% |

Note: Four participants answered this question

**Commonalities Across Knowledge Base of Reading Pedagogy**

Findings from interviews, observations, and material documentation reveal two overarching themes in the area of teachers' knowledgebase. The two themes are early childhood education and professional development, specifically professional learning communities.

There is a reoccurring theme among all four teachers in the area of training and experience; each participant has an early childhood foundation. All of the teachers are trained either formally through college education or through experience in an early

childhood setting. Having training in early childhood education means teachers are focused on more than academics. Language and vocabulary development, social and emotional skills are equally important for early childhood educators. These teachers viewed reading, and learning in general, as a process or a continuum emphasizing that each child is unique and develops at his/her own pace. Literacy, according to current experts, begins to develop long before children enter school (NICHD, 2000). The difference between an early childhood educator and an elementary educator calls into question the very notion of readiness. Early childhood educators believe that every child is ready to learn, it is finding out what a child is ready to learn (Stipek, 2002). This philosophical approach on learning has been carried over to reading instruction in this situation. Therefore, effective teachers who demonstrate success with reading pedagogy in this study expect and understand differences in children's ability. The participants showed an acceptance and expectation of student differences and a stronger perseverance to find out what works with a child to move them along the continuum of reading development.

In the spring of 2013, I conducted four semi-structured interviews. All four participants are classroom teachers. Two are kindergarten teachers and two are first grade teachers. The interviews revealed that all four teachers have a *Bachelors degree* and are certified in early childhood education (Table 3).

Table 3

*Knowledge Base of Reading Pedagogy*

|  | Degree | Certification | Experience |
|---|---|---|---|
| Teacher 1 | *BS degree* | Elementary/Early Childhood Certification | 22 years |
| Teacher 2 | *BA degree* | Elementary/Early Childhood Certification | 30 years |
| Teacher 3 | *BA degree* | Elementary/Early Childhood Certification | 4 Years |
| Teacher 4 | *BA degree* | Early Childhood Certification | 10 years |

All four teachers did not remember how they themselves learned to read, nor could they pinpoint when they learned how to read. However, all four participants recalled participating in professional development through the school district, and attending state or national conferences. All of the participants had professional development in the area of reading, specifically guided reading, centers, music, and literacy and tapping or blending sound techniques. According to Tatum (2004), professional development produces significantly higher reading achievements and improves the instructional practices of teachers. In addition to professional development at the district level, two teachers spoke of involvement in professional learning communities.

Professional learning communities are much more than traditional in-services. The major difference, according to DuFour and Eaker (1998) is in the accountability that is part of the PLC culture. A PLC's main focus is to improve student learning, based on

student data. Learning problems are viewed as challenges over which teachers have control. Dufour and Eaker (1998) identify five characteristics of the Professional Learning Community. They include a shared mission, collective inquiry, collaborative teams, action orientation, and continuous improvement. This study suggests participation in professional learning communities contributed to teacher effectiveness and successful reading pedagogy.

**Commonalities Across Practices of Reading Pedagogy**

Interviews, observations, and lesson plans reveal three overarching themes in the area of teachers' practices. The three themes are consistent letters sound chart/chant across K-2 grade levels, guided reading, and use of assessments to fuel instruction.

The district is using the a-z letter/sound/key word chart and chant that is specific to a program, as well as tapping procedures that isolate phonemes to blend and segment. These two instructional practices are phonics based and are consistent procedures across the three grade levels: kindergarten, first, and second grade. There is little research on consistent methods across grade levels. In this particular study implementing a consistent phonics piece during reading instruction proves to be an effective practice. Researchers have documented the correlation between children's phonological awareness/phonics skills and early achievement in reading and spelling (Catts, 1997).

Each teacher talked about guided reading or implemented a guided reading lesson during my observation. Each teacher had guided reading in her daily lesson plans, although the number of times per week varied (see Table 4). Guided reading is a reading strategy that falls under a balanced literacy model of reading instruction. More specifically, guided reading falls under "Readers' Workshop." Readers workshop includes a read aloud that models reading to students, shared readings that allow

opportunities for students to read parts of the text, guided reading, and independent reading. Guided reading is a strategy that allows students to read books on their own level with some help from the teacher. The teacher is expected to scaffold instruction to move the child along in their reading development. During the guided reading process, the teacher is highly responsive to the student's needs and provides direct feedback and instruction during the process. The guided reading strategy proves to be a successful strategy in today's classroom.

Twenty lesson plans were collected and analyzed to glean information on each teacher's practice of reading; five lesson plans per teacher were collected and coded. Each lesson plan reflected one day of teaching. The first cycle of coding noted which lessons used literacy methods. The second cycle of coding generated a type of lesson; phonics/systematic or whole language/naturalistic. As the literature reveals best practice is a combination of both methods for teaching reading. Teacher 1 had forty one literacy methods in the five lesson plans that were reviewed. Of the forty one lessons, thirty eight methods, or ninety three percent, were phonics based lesson. Twenty five of the methods, or sixty one percent, were guided reading instruction. Some of the guided reading instruction did have a phonics component incorporated however there were thirteen lessons that were strictly phonics based (see Table 4). Teacher 2 delivered twenty four total literacy methods over the five days that the lesson plans reflected. Nineteen methods, or seventy nine percent, were phonics based and twenty methods of instruction, or eighty three percent, provided students with guided reading instruction. There was an overlap in the phonics and guided reading methods of instruction. Only one guided reading lesson did not have a phonics component. Teacher 3 implemented thirty seven

literacy methods within the five days that the lesson plans reflected. As shown in table 4, twenty one, or fifty seven percent, of those methods were phonics based and thirty, or eighty one percent, provided guided reading instruction. Teacher 4 implemented thirty nine literacy lessons within the five days that the lesson plans reflected. Thirty five, or ninety percent, were phonics based methods of instruction and thirty, or seventy seven percent, provided guided reading instruction (see Table 4). Overall eighty percent of the literacy methods in this study were classified as phonics based, and seventy four percent of the literacy lessons were guided reading or whole language based. Twenty percent of the methods were classified as other; this included shared reading, independent reading, and vocabulary instruction as noted in Table 4.

Table 4

*Practice of Reading Pedagogy*

| Lesson Plans (20) | Literacy Methods | Phonics Methods | Guided Reading | Other Methods |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Teacher 1 | 41 | 38 | 25 | 4 |
| | | 93% | 61% | 7% |
| Teacher 2 | 24 | 19 | 20 | 4 |
| | | 79% | 83% | 17% |
| Teacher 3 | 37 | 21 | 30 | 7 |
| | | 57% | 81% | 19% |
| Teacher 4 | 39 | 35 | 30 | 3 |
| | | 90% | 77% | 10% |
| Total | 141 | 113 | 105 | 28 |
| | | 80% | 74% | 20% |

*Note*: 20 lesson plans were reviewed, with a total of 141 literacy methods analyzed. The phonics and guided reading lessons often overlapped. The other literacy methods included shared reading, independent reading and vocabulary instruction.

Referring back to the literature review, Culatta et al. (2003) discuss instructional approaches into three main types: naturalistic, systematic, and hybrid. Naturalistic

approaches operate with the idea that literacy skills develop as children are exposed to print in meaningful and intrinsically motivating ways during every day events (Snow et al., 1998). Because skills emerge with experience, exposing children to purposeful uses for print and engaging them in word play positively influence literacy development (Catts, 1997; Neuman et al., 2000). Naturalistic activities involve hands-on exploration of skills that students naturally would explore. Some children need a more systematic approach to learning.

Systematic approaches provide direct and explicit methods of teaching. Systematic instruction refers to carefully planning a sequence of instruction. The same procedures or techniques are used on a repeated basis to target a skill. In early reading instruction, these skills fall under the umbrella of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Educators fear that focusing on early literacy skills may decrease the use of meaningful and developmentally appropriate practices when working with children in kindergarten through second grade.

Hybrid approaches blend naturalistic and systematic approaches. According to Neuman et al. (2000), the idea is to expose children systematically to skills in developmentally appropriate ways. This is accomplished by constructing classroom activities that are meaningful to children and that inherently motivate them to experiment with the use of specifically embedded target skills. Adjusting instruction based on students' needs and differences are at the heart of hybrid approaches.

When analyzing the observations, I specifically made the connection to the literature. I categorized the 20 observed lessons into naturalistic, systematic, or hybrid

(see Table 5). Eighty five percent of the observed lessons were hybrid. Fifteen percent

were systematic and none (0%) of the observed lessons were naturalistic.

Table 5

*Instructional Methods*

| Participant Observations | Naturalistic Instruction | Systematic Instruction | Hybrid Instruction |
|---|---|---|---|
| Teacher 1 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Teacher 2 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Teacher 3 | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| Teacher 4 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Total observations | 0% | 15% | 85% |

*Note:* 20 observations were reviewed, 5 for each teacher.

**Implications of These Findings**

These findings can inform practice, policy, and future research. In the United

States, educators and children increasingly face comprehensive reform measures that

require adherence to curricular mandates and accountability regulations (Ryan & Graue,

2009). Increasingly, policy makers evaluate reform success by measuring outcomes,

whether through proven instructional and assessment tools or standardized systematic

approaches to reading instruction. In K-2nd grade classrooms, the emphasis is placed on

early reading development. Often educators label the children who do not master such

competencies within the proper time as struggling or at risk. Teachers face increased

pressure to observe children's literacy development through a singular construct, a discrete set of benchmarks taught through explicit instruction and a perspective that not only narrowly attends to those skills that delineate reading success or failure, but also derive from a deficit orientation (Spencer, 2009).

Using the qualitative data gathered I analyzed two kindergarten and two first grade classroom teachers, and their literacy practices. The findings conclude several themes that are practical and influential for classroom pedagogies.

Teachers that teach kindergarten and first grade, who are early childhood trained, use the same philosophical views for child development that they use for reading development. They view reading development as a continuum, not a discrete set of skills to master. The teachers in this study showed not only an acceptance of difference in students' abilities, but an expectation that students develop at their own rate in general, and more specifically in reading. Currently in the state of New Jersey, teachers are certified to teach grades kindergarten to fifth grade with a standard certification. Based on these findings it is recommended that teachers who teach kindergarten through second grade have an early childhood background, either through formal school, with an early childhood certification, or through experience.

Further findings suggest that professional development, more specifically participation in professional learning communities, is instrumental in teachers' pedagogy. The teachers in this study looked for continuous improvement in their teaching. Through this mindset came opportunities for professional development. The professional development came from the district at each building based on the needs of the students, teachers, and curriculum. Professional learning communities were also evident as teacher

generated groups that researched student needs based on school data. They voluntarily got together to share ideas and plan and implement new strategies towards a common goal. The professional learning communities were not evident as a school or a district as the professional development was; small pockets of teachers participated in PLCs.

Another finding that can inform instructional practices in reading pedagogy is a standard phonics system at each grade, for all teachers. Teachers within seven schools used the same letter/sound chart and chant, as well as tapping procedures to blend and segment sounds. The four teachers in this study confirmed using the standard methods, and contributed their students' success to the strategy. Students in kindergarten, first, and second grade in regular education programs, special education programs, basic skills support, ELL programs, and the like were all exposed to the same letter identification chart to learn the letters and sounds of the alphabet. Students used this chart as a resource when writing, and to sound out words during reading. Students were all exposed to the same tapping procedures to segment and blend sounds. Having the consistent phonics component gave all the students an advantage as they each had a springboard for which additional phonics instruction could be developed. It gave the teachers an advantage because they could plan their instruction based on the assumption that each student had this foundation and exposure to skills that all other skills could be developed from. Creating a consistent phonics foundation across the grade levels proves to be an important method in reading pedagogy, and can be implemented by teachers in today's classrooms.

Another finding that can inform reading instruction is the use of guided reading. Guided reading is an important strategy that teachers can implement in their classrooms.

Guided reading is a focused and purposeful strategy that allows teachers the time and flexibility to instruct each student at her level. In kindergarten, a teacher could be doing a shared reading focused on rhyming with one group and reading level readers focused on fluency with another group. Students can move at their own pace, with some challenge, as teachers provide instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Students' needs, interests, and attitudes are kept in mind when developing groups and lessons. Guided reading is the cornerstone of a balanced literacy classroom (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). The four teachers in the study structured the guided reading grouping slightly different than a typical guided reading group. Students were placed in more than one group to maximize instructional time. Therefore, instruction was even more individualized for students' needs. To meet the diverse needs of students, group size was smaller than typical group sizes of 6 to 8. The use of guided reading and small group size is important for today's classrooms and can impact reading pedagogy.

Lastly, an embedded belief and implementation of support staff was evident in the findings of reading pedagogy in today's classrooms. The use of support staff is a recommended practice for student success. Currently the state of New Jersey has assistant positions for paraprofessionals. These positions require a two-year degree, but courses are not specific to literacy. Based on these findings, that the use of another person in the classroom impacts student outcomes, it would be important to create programs for literacy paraprofessionals who could officially work in the K - 2 grade setting supporting classroom teachers in the area of literacy. School districts could also train their assistants by offering the same professional development that teachers receive in the area of literacy.

**Limitations**

Limitations are factors, usually beyond the researcher's control, that may affect the results of the study or how the results are interpreted. Stating limitations of the study may be very useful for readers because they provide a method to acknowledge possible errors or difficulties in interpreting results of the study. There are limitations to this study. Limitations include the design, the sampling technique, time, and the presence of the researcher.

This particular research design, phenomenology, has limitations. The core of a phenomenological study according to Patton (1991) lies in the "descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience" (p. 392). The goal is to identify the essence of the shared experience that underlies all the variations in this particular learning experience. Essence is viewed as commonalties in the human experiences. The limitation is found in that this design does not produce generalizable data, because it will not quantify data and generalize results from a sample to the population of interest, or measure the incidence of various views and opinions in a chosen sample. It has, more importantly, investigated the underlying reasons and motivations that govern reading pedagogy, and uncovered prevalent trends, in thought and practice, on this particular phenomenon.

The role of the researcher as a participant observer is a limitation. I have a presence within the schools that was used in the research. Basically, I am an embedded member of the group and can observe behaviors that I would not otherwise have access. Participant observation is where the researcher is embedded in the everyday life of the group while observing it. Being a participant observer is subject to the biases of the

observer. I have worked in the school district for over a decade as a reading specialist. Being immersed in the reading field also makes it hard for me to be objective to the subject matter. As I reported the findings, it was important to write as if the reader did not have a reading background. I had to consciously remind myself that not all educators have experience or knowledge in reading pedagogy. I often wondered if the participants were engaging in practice that they thought I wanted to see or gave me answers to the interview questions that they thought I wanted to hear. I had to make a conscious effort to remind myself that these particular teachers were selected based on exemplary student growth. I also reminded myself that their experiences and instructional strategies were consistent. I had to acknowledge that I bring assumptions, viewpoints, and biases to the research. I made an attempt to counteract this limitation by using multiple methods to gather data: interviews, observations, and material documentation.

Another limitation is time. The time intensive nature of this type of data collection limits the amount of data that could potentially be collected. Interviews and observations took place over a 16-week period. These limitations could potentially affect the results of the study or how the results are interpreted. Without the time constraints, the data collection could include more interviews and observations for data analysis. Regardless of the limitations within the study, triangulation is evident. Evidence of triangulation include confidence in the research data, understanding the phenomenon of reading pedagogy in different ways, seeking rare findings, integrating theories, and providing a clearer understanding of the problem through the use of multiple measurements in the data collection process.

**Summary**

The findings from this research study are important and provide insight when asking the most important question in the qualitative research process, what does this mean? Based on the findings, several insights can be made for the field of education, specifically teacher practices in the area of reading pedagogy. First, the findings deem early childhood educators appear to be better equipped to teach reading to kindergarteners through grade 2 students. School districts should note that teachers with this particular training, certification, and experience understand the different abilities in students and are proficient at meeting the needs of diverse learners. Next, professional learning communities are evident in successful learning environments. Professional learning communities were also evident as voluntary teacher generated groups that researched student needs based on school data. Participants voluntarily got together to share ideas and plan and implement new strategies towards a common goal.

Further findings reveal that the practice of using support staff was evident and critical in reading pedagogy in today's classrooms. Another finding is the emphasis on individual learning needs and how the teachers in this study addressed each student's instructional level. This philosophy contributed to a successful environment. Lastly, two classroom practices were found to be beneficial: consistent phonics elements across grade levels and guided reading. These two practices are proven to be an effective strategy within reading pedagogy. The standard methods of guided reading in this study contributed to successful student outcomes. These findings can have a significant impact on current reading practice in classrooms, policy, and future research in teaching and learning.

# Chapter 5

## Conclusions and Implications

This chapter focuses on the conclusions and implications resulting from the qualitative study on reading pedagogy in today's classroom, specifically on the phenomenon of the successful teaching of reading. The study attempts to fill in grey areas within current research on effective reading methods based on kindergarten and first grade teachers' experiences and knowledge base. With staggering statistics showing that less than one third of fourth graders tested scored at or above proficiency level in reading, it is evident that classroom teachers are in need of proven practical and effective strategies and classroom practices. This is especially critical as so much of the literature has emphasized the importance of programs and not on good teaching. This chapter provides detailed recommendations for future studies. Additionally, this chapter includes my personal comments on the change process and my personal leadership experiences during the study, as well as implications for the future.

The findings from this study correlated to successful reading pedagogy include specific phonics practices, continuity in instructional strategies among grades and schools, the use of guided reading practices, individualized student instructional philosophy, additional instructional support in classrooms, and early childhood certification or experience for kindergarten and first grade classroom teachers. These findings can inform practice, policy, and future research. In the United States, educators and children increasingly face comprehensive reform measures that require adherence to curricular mandates and accountability regulations (Ryan & Graue, 2009). Increasingly,

policy makers evaluate reform success by measuring outcomes, whether through proven instructional and assessment tools or standardized systematic approaches to reading instruction. In K-2nd grade classrooms the emphasis is placed on early reading development. Often educators label the children who do not master such competencies within the proper time as struggling or at risk. Teachers face increased pressure to observe children's literacy development through a singular construct, a discrete set of benchmarks taught through explicit instruction and a perspective that not only narrowly attends to those skills that delineate reading success or failure, but also derive from a deficit orientation (Spencer, 2009). Using the qualitative data gathered, I answered my research question: What are effective K-2nd classroom teachers' perceptions, knowledge base, and practice of reading pedagogy; how does this inform practice? After interviewing and observing two kindergarten and two first grade classroom teachers, and their literacy practices, I conclude with several themes that are practical and influential for classroom pedagogies and policy.

**Practice**

The implications from this research study, that investigated successful kindergarten through grade 2 classroom teachers in a public school setting, can inform classroom practice. Referring back to Darling-Hammond (1996), teaching cannot be viewed as just a technical action. The science of teaching is much deeper than a technical action. The discourse on teachers' perceptions, knowledge base, and practice would allow the classroom teacher to leave behind many mandated curriculums, standards, publishing manuals, and scripted lessons and begin to rely on their own successful understanding, knowledge, and repertoire of methods and practices.

Based on the findings, phonics instruction is still at the foundation of reading instruction. As the literature presents, phonics instruction dates back to the 15th century with the use of early teaching aides: hornbooks and battledores. As far back as 1883, Joseph Rice concluded that phonics led to better outcomes in students' reading. All of the teachers in the study emphasized phonics methods as part of their reading instruction. Phonics is the connection between letter symbols and sounds. Phonics instruction has a positive impact on the reading abilities of young children. The teachers in this study used two specific phonics methods: a letter, key word, sound chart with chant and a tapping method to isolate and blend sounds. Both of these strategies are from the Fundations Reading Program®. All of the teachers in this study concluded that the success of their students were a direct result of the school district having the continuity of a standard phonics element across grades and schools. In all of the seven schools and 42 kindergartens, first, and second grade classrooms, students are expected to use the letter, key word, sound chart and chant as well as the tapping strategy. This was evident in the classrooms where I interviewed teachers and observed reading lessons. It was also evident in the lesson plans. Phonics is considered *systematic* instruction within the hybrid pedagogy of reading.

In addition, guided reading is another evident classroom practice that contributes to student success in the area of reading. Guided reading is a strategy that allows students to read books on their own level with some help from the teacher. The teacher is expected to scaffold instruction to move the child along in their reading development. In this learning environment, the teacher is a guide, providing a bridge or scaffolding, helping to extend the leaner's zone of proximal development. During the guided reading process the

teacher is highly responsive to the students' needs and provides direct feedback and instruction during the process. The guided reading strategy proves to be a successful strategy in today's classroom. Guided reading is a *naturalistic* method of instruction within the hybrid pedagogy of reading. Both methods, systematic and naturalist, are evident in today's classrooms.

**Policy**

Policy-makers have the capacity to contribute to the conduct and improvement of reading instruction. Policy-makers should come together as a grassroots movement – looking at current successful reading instruction. This research can begin a powerful dialogue of bottom up policy initiatives. This involves collaboration between all the stakeholders in education, starting with those closest to the students.

The implications from this research study that investigated successful kindergarten through grade 2 reading teachers in a public school setting, can inform policy and education reform efforts. Based on the findings, classroom instruction should be individualized to student needs. Children have rights to effective individualized instruction. This requires a willingness to constantly challenge the status quo and continually question today's classrooms as they relate to meeting students' needs as readers: evaluating current policy and district practices. As we know children learn differently, effective teachers should develop a repertoire of proven methods for helping students develop skills. Developing professional learning communities is one way to document what successful reading pedagogy looks like in today's classrooms. Research is not a one size fits all approach; constant updated data about best practices is vital to student success.

Differentiated instruction is an instructional theory that allows teachers to take individual student needs into account when they are planning and implementing instruction. The learning environments in this study addressed the various learning needs within each classroom. Differentiated instruction does not happen by accident. It requires planning, commitment, and knowledge of this instructional practice. The first step to individualized instruction is to understand how each student learns. By nature we are curious beings. That curiosity is smothered in the education system when learners are expected to process information in ways that are not individually intrinsic. In order for *no child* to truly not be *left behind,* unique and individualized programs should be at the core of education programs and classroom activities. Acknowledging at the very least, that our current school system may produce good students, but not always good leaners, is critical.

**Future Research**

Continued research on these practices could offer additional examples of exemplary instruction. Teachers can benefit from these examples of success by implementing the same strategies and techniques in their own classrooms, tailoring these strategies to meet the particular circumstances of their students. Typically, teachers are not required to use the same exact strategy from kindergarten to grade 2 within a school district. A study to compare one district that uses this method with another district that does not would further corroborate if this practice is in fact one that other school districts should consider to increase students' reading progress. Further, a study to inquire if it was the consistency or the actual strategy would be of equal importance to capture the true essence behind this finding. An in-depth study of these effective literacy methods are recommended for further research, specifically studying different student populations,

such as low socio economic students, English Language Learners, and special education students. Leadership for social justice identifies schools that demonstrate tremendous success not only with white, middle class, and affluent students, but also with students from varied racial, socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds (Theoharis, 2007).

**Building Capacity**

Leadership is having an awareness of task importance that motivates people (Bass, 1990), a focus on an organization to do better work, a continual process of making meaning based on relationships between all involved and not simply the imposition of top down reform (Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2001). Further, leadership is the passion of accepting responsibility, the willingness, confidence, and passion to act and accept consequences. In school cultures, leadership can be found at all levels and not just from those in leadership positions. Until recently, most research assumed that leadership must come from the school principal (Riordan, 2003). However, leadership can come from various levels of the school community. This research will give me an opportunity to utilize my leadership skills by sharing the outcomes with other colleagues.

Leadership affects the success and failure of every type of organization because it is almost impossible for any single individual to possess all that is required to lead an organization. Even when a culture does not have a leader, there are always certain individuals who initiate actions and have critical roles in the group's decision-making. Such shared leadership is now representative of many scholarly and practical ideas about school structure in the twenty-first century, when no one member of the educational system has all of the expertise and experiences to create a successful school culture, not

even the school principal (Begley, 2005). Although I am not in a formal leadership position, my school principal has created the capacity for me to lead the school on a variety of projects, specifically in the area of literacy and curriculum, as well as daily operations of the school. Therefore I can share these findings at the building level and district level to ensure that all teachers, not just the ones in this study, are consistently using these particular phonics methods, as well as guided reading, for the success of all students.

The implications from this research study, that investigated successful kindergarten through grade 2 reading teachers in a public school setting, can inform district level practices. Based on the findings, professional learning communities produced successful teachers that demonstrated significantly higher student reading achievements and successful instructional practices. Professional learning communities are much more than traditional in-services. The major difference, according to DuFour and Eaker (2010), is in the accountability that is part of the PLC culture. A PLC's main focus is to improve student learning, based on student data. Learning problems are viewed as challenges over which teachers have control. PLCs correlated to effective teachers and successful reading pedagogy in this study.

These finding prompt the need for future research studies on professional learning communities. Continued research on how professional learning communities work within schools is indicated. In PLCs, we need to be "continually rediscovering and recommitting ourselves to our sense of purpose, to core values, and to particular aspirations" (Sparks, 2001, p. 46). "Profound change can't be imposed; it has to be nurtured" (Sparks, 2001, p. 42). Learning organizations are a place where conversations take place that provide

understanding, convey integrity and respect, and realize and appreciate the differences that exist. Real learning is doing, it is contextual, and it provides genuine motivation. How do you take ideas and help them to become relevant? Will relevancy generate passion? The stakeholders involved in a learning organization need opportunities to take on leadership roles so that their work becomes meaningful and relevant (Senge et al., 2012). It is the people within the organization that have a multitude of resources. It is important to really listen with intent to what people have to say and always appreciate their efforts. It is my responsibility to coordinate and nurture this change process through continued implementation of professional learning communities that will ultimately continue the school district's focus on student learning.

This finding, of using professional learning communities, can inform my own leadership. According to Coburn (2006), more studies are needed to understand when and under what circumstances research findings move through networks and into the hands of government actors who craft policy positions. This study has developed an understanding of reading pedagogy to further form more productive relationships between researchers and policy makers in the critical process of improving reading instruction for all children. There are currently building level professional learning communities within this school district. Professional learning communities can be extended, not only to the distinct level, but to the county level.

This could be demonstrated through moving beyond single loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1974), which occurs when participants learn and change their behavior without challenging the existing culture. Bridging this organizational learning – from the small pockets to the entire school culture and beyond, would then be promoted through double

loop learning (Argyris & Schön). Double loop learning is challenging the fundamental

nature of the entire school culture. One way to achieve this as a leader is to build capacity

so that organizational learning is attainable and essential to meet the needs for continual

innovation and change (Friedman, Lipshitz, & Overmeer, 2001). As a leader in my

school, I am going to have teachers share their small pockets of learning communities

and success stories to begin to build that bridge. This will be shared with the larger

teacher population in the district. A democratic process and keeping a clear focus on how

any change is connected to a school's underlying principles will help schools see their

options more clearly and maintain a sense of mission through what may be a long and

difficult process if change is needed.

**Recommendations**

　　**Re-examining school cultures.** The structures that guide a school community

through its day-to-day operations—its master schedules, the length and frequency of class

periods, how students and teachers are grouped, and how financial resources are

allocated, reflect the beliefs and values of the school. If a school believes that all students

learn in the same way and at the same pace, then traditional structures, in which all

students attend classes for a specific amount of time and sit in rows to listen to teacher

lectures, might make sense. However, when a school recognizes that students learn in

different ways, and is willing to provide learning opportunities so that all students will

succeed, traditional school structures need to be reexamined. Re-examining school

structures should be undertaken with the goal of promoting greater equity of access to

rigorous learning opportunities so that all students can achieve at high levels (Jackson &

Davis, 2000). Within this research, good teachers are recognized and good teaching is

explicitly designed. Once the strategies for teaching reading are identified, it is my hope

that these ideas will be shared to the larger teacher population. It is now my responsibility, as an instructional leader, to emphasize greater equity of access to rigorous learning opportunities for all students.

**Educating pre-service teachers.** To ensure that all teachers are equipped to differentiate instruction, policies should be put into place for pre-service teachers to have a firm understanding of differentiated instructional practices prior to entering a classroom. Pre-service teachers need to understand the role of naturalistic and systematic methods of reading instruction. Teachers that are currently teaching reading are encouraged to have professional development in the area of differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all learners.

**Additional instructional support.** In all classroom observations and interviews instructional support was evident, either by an assistant, another teacher, or a parent volunteer who was trained by the school. The instructional support was provided during each teacher's reading block of time. The instructional support person typically assisted the other students who the teacher was not meeting with, however, these students were still working on literacy base skills. These additional support people, although not teachers themselves, made an enormous difference in the efficiency of the reading time. The teachers in this study developed an instructional support system in their classroom. It is recommended that classroom assistants have literacy training to be even more effective in their support. In addition, other districts should consider utilizing instructional support in the kindergarten through grade 2 classrooms during the reading block of time.

**Early childhood certification or experience.** Teachers that teach kindergarten through second grade, who are early childhood trained, use the same philosophical views

for child development that they use for reading development. They view reading development as a continuum, not a discrete set of skills to master. The teachers in this study showed not only an acceptance of difference in students' abilities, but an expectation that students develop at their own rate in general, and more specifically in reading. Currently in the state of New Jersey, teachers are certified to teach grades kindergarten to fifth grade with a standard certification. Based on these findings it is recommended that teachers who teach kindergarten through second grade have an early childhood background, either through formal school, with an early childhood certification, or through experience.

**Reflection, Leadership, and Change**

The implications from this research study, that investigated pedagogy, can inform my own leadership. As an instructional leader I can structure the climate to encourage and inform teachers in my building and within the district. Empowerment in this sense translates into teacher leadership and encourages a paradigm shift with the decisions made by those working most closely with students rather than those at the top. Empowering the teachers in this study to be teacher leaders can put teachers at the center of reform movements. In this capacity of instructional leader, I can draw on the strengths of the teachers, and act as a catalyst for all teachers. Today's leadership roles have begun to emerge and promise real opportunities for teachers to impact educational change - without necessarily leaving the classroom.

Leadership style is critical in the organizational change process and how planning models are implemented. I am an instructional leader committed to excellence in curriculum and instruction. All instructional practices need to be of quality. Practices should be evaluated often and by all involved and changes made when necessary to

nourish success. I will encourage teachers to learn and grow by being an example of a lifelong learner. I am a humanistic leader. I understand that teachers will perform to their best ability when I believe in them and care about their work. I will encourage effective change through a process that is driven by this research and other research in the area of reading pedagogy.

I believe in shared decision-making when applicable. Decision-making involves all stakeholders. For me, this is a critical piece of the decision-making process. In the broader sense of education, the stakeholders should be anyone who is invested in the education process: parents, teachers, board members, students, community businesses, etc. A key element in shared decision-making is the collaboration that takes place among stakeholders, to explore open problem-driven questions. What is relevant in one school and community may not be in another school and community. Therefore the shared process has to be current and relevant to the students and circumstances at hand. Too many school reforms fall short because of this. An idea or plan may sound wonderful in middle class suburbia, however when it is implemented in the inner city, it falls short. For me, the shared decision-making has to represent all stakeholders, include a collaboration that will explore problem driven dialogue, and be relevant to the schools and community it serves. All school districts aim to have students reading on grade level. The findings on reading pedagogy are relevant and have the potential to inform practice in all schools.

I believe in strategic planning, the process of developing a long term plan to guide an organization towards a clearly articulated mission, goals, and objectives. It is the process of ascertaining the challenges and opportunities that present themselves and determining what destination is most desirable and how to get there. Simply put, strategic

planning determines where an organization is going over the next year or more, how it is going to get there, and how it will evaluate if it got there or not. The focus of a strategic plan is usually on the entire organization, while the focus of an action plan is usually on a particular project or program. Strategic plans involve having a vision. The vision within my own research is to inform classroom practices that will not only benefit students in my school district, but all students.

There are a variety of perspectives, models, and approaches used in strategic planning. The way that a strategic plan is developed depends on the nature of the organization's leadership, culture of the organization, complexity of the organization's environment, size of the organization, and expertise of planners. Planning for comprehensive school reform or change requires significant time and effort on the part of school and district staff. Key aspects of any school planning/change effort includes understanding historical perspectives, current strategic planning trends, implementing a SWOT, examining personal conflict/negotiation styles, building capacity, and thinking about schools as learning organizations. Each is a critical aspect of successful and sustainable initiatives and should be included in a planning model.

As an advocate of transformational leadership, I believe that educational leaders are expected to be transformative; to work for social justice, as well as academic achievement. Socially just leaders have an ultimate underlying concern – central to their advocacy, leadership practice and vision - for situations of marginalization (Theoharis, 2007). My continued involvement with students as a reading specialist, embedded in my own practice and research, had proven to be vital and significant in the area of social justice. This study specifically investigated equitable pedagogy. Finding classroom

practices that are successful continues my commitment to foster equitable educational outcomes for all students. Today's classrooms are more diverse than ever, students come from various cultural lifestyles, values, languages and socioeconomic backgrounds. It is critical to determine where each child is in terms of their reading abilities, and scaffold the instruction to meet their individual needs. In addition, classroom teachers must have a repertoire of successful strategies to address these diverse learners. The findings presented in this study are intended to support and acknowledge differences in students. In today's faced paced world, poor reading skills will steal a child's future rendering them unprepared for the 21st century. I passionately believe that no student should be unable to read, given that we, as educators, have a plethora of instructional strategies to offer.

My own life experiences have prepared me for the immense challenges inherent in a social justice approach to education. This research study adds to the discourse on effective pedagogies. The strategies and recommendations from this research promote social justice through teaching, and equitable pedagogies. Equitable pedagogies are a continued effort to ensure that every child becomes a proficient reader and every teacher has the support and knowledge needed to teach effectively. Regardless of a child's situation, teaching and learning has to ensure all children have equal to teaching and learning. Educational leaders should provide opportunities for all children to learn in school communities that are socially just and deeply democratic. Socially just learning should be embedded in deeply democratic ideas and in pedagogy. Educational organizations are often uncomfortable with differences – we fail to acknowledge some of the diverse voices that make up our schools and classrooms. These discomforts manifest in what Shields (2004) calls *pathologies of silence*. Pathologies of silence are misguided

attempts to act justly, to display empathy, and to create democratic and optimistic educational communities.

In all organizations there are rules of power that operate to the inclusion of some people and the exclusion of others. As Theoharis (2007) states, there are no fixed or predictable meanings of social justice prior to actually engaging in educational leadership practices. Within any organization, it is critical to focus on the relationships among all those who constitute the school and the nature of the school circumstances in which children learn (MacKinnon, 2000). As an educational leader, I strive to embed strategies for sustained social justice change. I will consider Theoharis's (2007) strategies for change and transformation in my own leadership role: raising student achievement, improving school structures, enhancing staff capacity, and strengthening the community and school culture. The last two strategies are particularly important when I think about my current leadership role and workplace. It will be important to remember that education and learning that are democratic, offer all legitimate stakeholders opportunities to participate.

As an educational leader I will embed reflection into my practice. Reflection is critical in organizational learning. One strategy to ensure reflection is to get on the "balcony" (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Achieving a balcony perspective means taking yourself out of the dance, in your mind, to get a clearer perception of the bigger picture. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) assert that it could be tempting to stay on the balcony as a safe observer. However, this process must be iterative, not static. My goal is to move back and forth from the balcony, as observer, to the dance floor, as a participant. More critical is to ensure that while I am observing, I have the capacity and awareness to observe my own

actions as well as those of others. Being able to reflect on the bigger picture will allow me, as a leader, to keep the students' needs at the heart of my decision-making.

**Conclusion**

My goal as a researcher and an educator is to find instructional strategies that work with students. As a reading specialist for over a decade, it has been my experience that classroom teachers struggle to meet the needs of all their students. There are a few teachers that have the ability to teach and reach every student in their classroom. This phenomenon of successful teaching is the basis of my research. Four teachers were identified as successful based on their students' overall growth in reading as determined by the Standardize Test of Assessment of Reading. Two kindergarten and two first grade teachers were chosen from a participation pool of 23 teachers. The sample of four teachers were interviewed and observed to glean their perceptions, knowledge base, and practices of reading pedagogy. Lesson plans were also collected for analysis and corroborated the findings.

Based on the findings, several insights can be made for the field of education, specifically teacher practices in the area of reading pedagogy. First, the findings deem early childhood educators appear to be better equipped to teach reading to kindergarteners through grade two students. School districts should note that teachers with this particular training, certification, and experience understand the different abilities in students and are proficient at meeting the needs of diverse learners. Next, professional learning communities are evident in successful learning environments. Professional learning communities were also evident as voluntarily teacher generated groups that researched student needs based on school data. Further findings reveal that the practice of using support staff was evident and critical in reading pedagogy in today's classrooms.

Successful classroom teachers utilize support staff to assist in the instructional process. Support staff in this research refers to anyone the teacher relies on to help with instruction. This varied from paraprofessionals, special education teachers, basic skills teachers, and parent volunteers.

Another finding is the emphasis on individual learning needs and the amazing ability of the teachers in this study to address each student's individual instructional need. This philosophy contributed to a successful environment. Lastly, two classroom practices were found to be beneficial: consistent phonics elements across grade levels and the use of guided reading. Based on the findings, phonics instruction is still the foundation of reading instruction. Creating a consistent phonics foundation across the grade levels proves to be an important method in reading pedagogy, and can be implemented by teachers in today's classrooms. The standard methods of guided reading in this study contributed to successful student outcomes. To meet the diverse needs of students, group size is smaller than typical group sizes of 6 to 8. The use of guided reading and small group size is important for today's classrooms and can impact reading pedagogy. These findings have a significant impact on current reading practice in today's classroom. Further it can add to the literature and discourse of educational policy and future research in teaching and learning.

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# Appendix A

## Student Growth Data
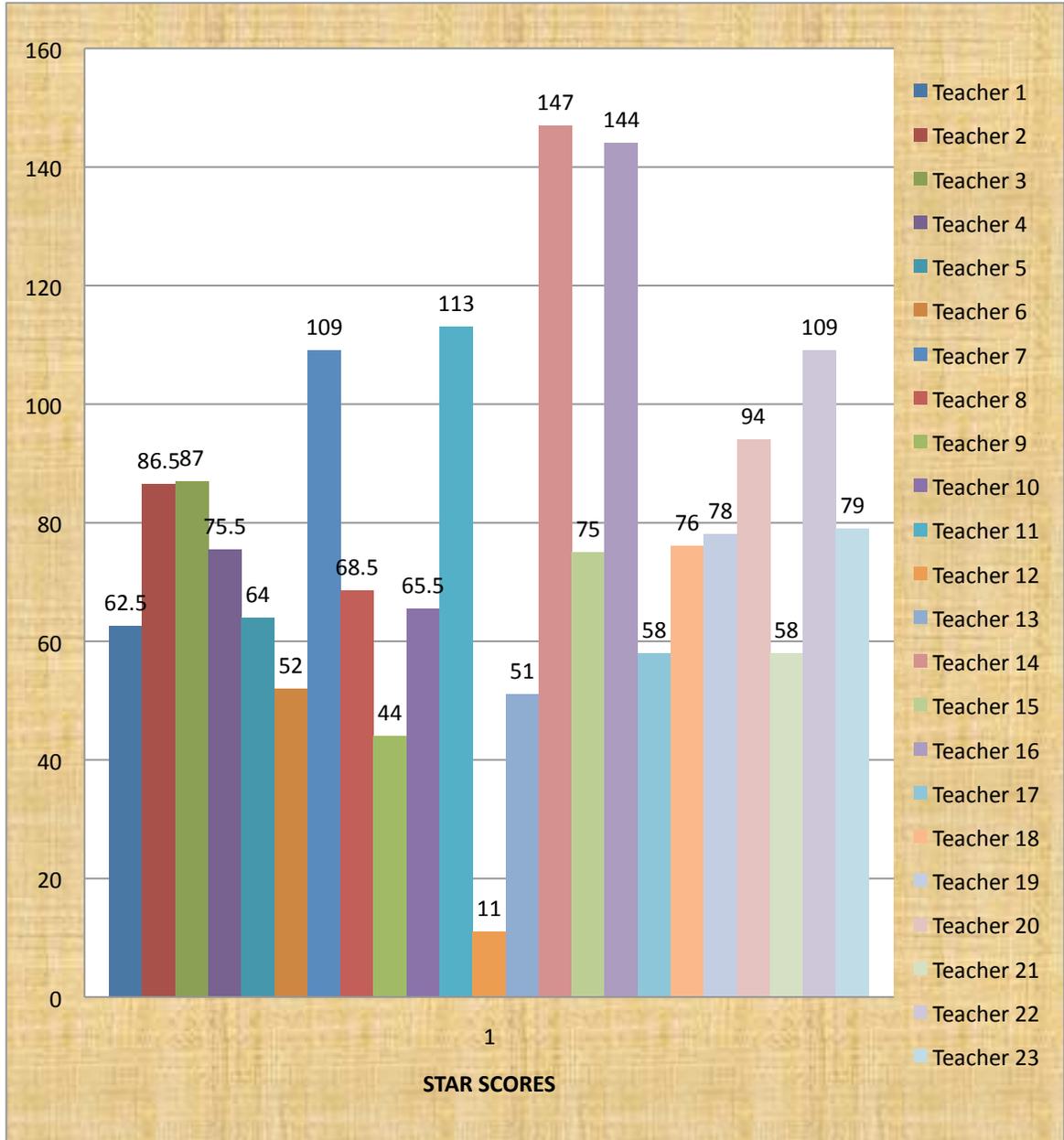
# Appendix B

## Consent for Participation in Interview Research

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Maria Rygalski, who is a graduate student of Rowan University. The research will be conducted during the spring of 2013. I understand this project will be directed under the supervision of Dr. Maria Sudeck intended to satisfy the academic requirements for the doctoral dissertation program.

I understand that the project is designed to gather information about methods and practices also known as reading pedagogy in the classroom. I will be one of no more than 4 people being interviewed for this research.

My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. I may decline to participate or withdraw from the study. The research information does not affect my professional role as an employee of the Washington Township Board of Education.

I understand that most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview. The interviews will be audio taped and kept in a secure location.

I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.

I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Studies Involving Human Subjects: Behavioral Sciences Committee at Rowan University.

I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

_____ _____
Participants signature                             Date

_____ _____
Maria Rygalski                                      Date

The signature below indicates that I understand all interviews will be audio taped. I understand that the audio tapes will be used for the intended research project only. I agree to have the interviews audio taped by the researcher.

_____ _____
Participants signature                             Date

If I have any further questions I understand I may contact you, the Principal Investigator (PI) at
mebeeman@comcast.net, 267-210-0753 or Rowan University's faculty sponsor Dr. Maria Sudeck sudeck@rowan.edu, 856-256-4500 x3805.

**Appendix C**

**Interview Protocol**

| Date of Interview: | Interviewee # |
|---|---|
| Time started: | Grade Level: |
| Time completed: | |
| Location: | |

**Statement read by the interviewer/researcher**:
The first four questions concern your perceptions and interpretations of reading pedagogy. For these purpose of this interview *perception* refers to your insight and understanding of reading pedagogy. *Reading pedagogy* will be defined as the methods and strategies used to teach reading.

5. How do you describe successful reading pedagogy?

6. How do student learn to read?

7. What is the student's role perceived to be, in the reading process?

8. What is the teacher's role perceived to be, in the reading process?

**Statement read by the interviewer/researcher**:
The next set of questions concern your knowledge base of reading pedagogy. For these purpose of this interview *reading pedagogy* will be defined as the methods and strategies used to teach reading.

6. How many years of teaching experience do you have?

7. What degree (s) do you have? What certification(s) do you have?

8. What professional development do you have in the area of reading?

9. How do you describe reading acquisition?

10. How were you taught to read?

**Statement read by the interviewer/researcher**:
The last set of questions will reflect your own practice which you implement to teach

reading.

4. What strategies do you use to help students learn to read?

5. In your experience, what is the most successful strategy to help student learn to read?

6. What materials do you find most helpful to effectively teach reading?
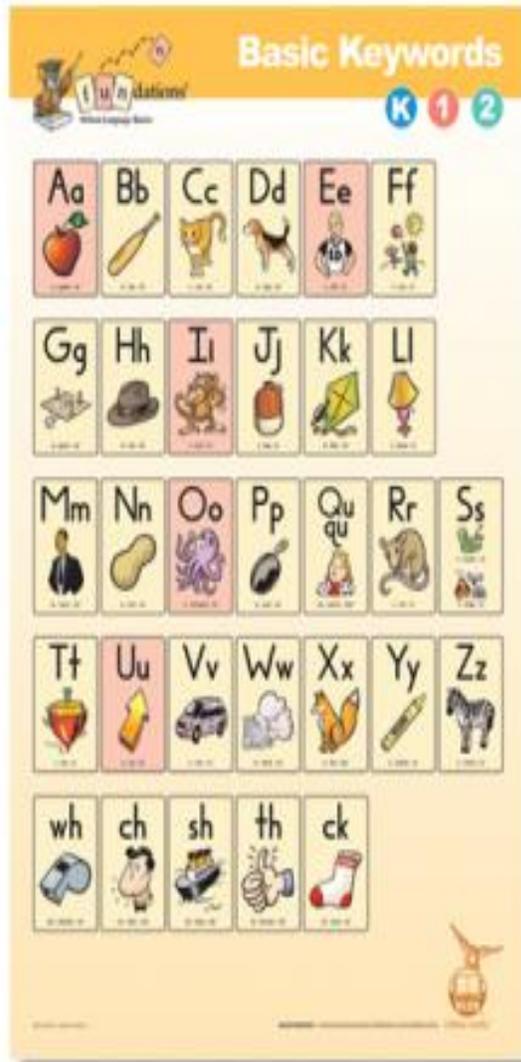
**Appendix D**

**Observation Form**

Teacher Number _____Date_____ Time_____Grade_____

Lesson/Subject_____

| Description | Reflection/notes |
|---|---|
|  |  |

# Appendix E

## Keywords Chart

**Appendix F**

**Reflection Journal**

Personal Journal for Dissertation

Maria Rygalski

April 2013 – May 2013

My research journey

This journal fulfilled a need to reflect upon my experiences as a researcher, specifically during my observations. Since I work closely with the participants it was important for me to keep a journal to recognize and curb my biases. It was also important for me to reflect my research, and practice as it relates to my leadership within the school district.

April 1, 2013

I am in the process of waiting for the IRB approval to begin my research. The IRB process is quite lengthy. I took several exams on conducting research. I received approval from the superintendent of my school district. This was confirmed at the Board of Education meeting. I also received a letter from the superintendent to confirm the Board's approval. Since I am collecting data from two schools within the district I also needed 2 additional letters from the principals of the schools. Our district is without a contract and I am very concerned that the teachers chosen for the study will not participate since it will require staying after school to meet with me for interviews and opening up their classrooms for me to come observe. My hope is to ensure the teachers that the reasoning behind my research is to illuminate the good things that teachers are doing with students. The moral is very bad. This may be a moral buster and a good

leadership for me. I find that teachers in general are willing to do anything for students. These teachers that I work with are not the exception. I know they will be willing to take part in a research study that will pinpoint excellent teaching practices for the purposes of sharing to assist other teachers in using effective reading strategies.

April 4, 2013

I made my first contact today to set up the interviews. I believe meeting with the teachers to interview each one first will put them at ease, for the observations. I have worked within the school district for twelve years. The teachers know me. I have worked in two of the classrooms. However I think now that I am looking specifically at their instruction they may feel uncomfortable. I know how I feel when I am having a formal observation, it can make you second guess yourself and your instructional practices. I am also looking at these particular teachers reading instruction. In my role they would expect me to have an expectation that they would use the required materials and program that the district has adopted. The truth is I believe "good" teacher don't completely follow the mandated programs and curriculum. I want the teachers to feel at ease and really carry on with their routines and procedures. The typical instructional practices they implement when they close their door and it is just them and the students. Not a show per say or what they would do if a supervisor or an administrator came to observe. I tried to keep my research general when I spoke about it. I told S that it was a school assignment. I do not want her to feel she needs to do something different or say anything specific for this. I really want it as authentic as it can be. I am scheduled to interview her next week after school. In light of the contract issues she is willing to meet me after "contract" hours. I think that says a lot about her. She is willing to help a colleague out, even though the

union is telling us to leave school immediately each day. I am looking forward to talking with her.

April 8, 2013

I contacted D today via email to set up our interview time. I told her I would be in her building on Tuesday so she agreed to meet with me for an interview. I didn't want to tell her that I was also interviewing another teacher in her building. D was very short with her email responses. I hope this is not reflected in her interviews. My principal stopped me today. She said she saw that my "project" was board approved. She wanted to ensure that this would not interfere with my regular responsibilities. I eased her worried and told her that it would not. I am concerned that the teachers in the other school will not be able to work around my prep/lunch so that can observe. I think I will inquire about video tapping lessons just in case. I do not want anything to hold me up.

Today I asked both teachers in my building if I could interview them and observe them. They were very agreeable. It makes things a lot easier for these two teachers because they are in the building in which I work. I told both teachers I would let them know when but that it would be later next week. My goal is to get S and D done on Tuesday, and then proceed.

April 10, 2013

Two interviews were accomplished. I met with S right after school. She was happy to meet with me and interested in my research. The interview process is not easy. Some questions led to a discussion that was not related to the research questions. It was hard for me to bring the conversation back. S obviously has a lot of experience and

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knows her craft of teaching. She seemed to think about students who had problems

learning to read when she answered the questions because she most often included an

example. She confirmed my suspicion or hypothesis. She does not use the teachers'

manuals much. In fact she stated that she only used the manuals to see what skills needed

to be taught. The implementation of strategies comes from her years of teaching. S

communicated that reading was made up of skills and once a student can master the skills

the actual event of reading emerges. However she felt that is was a process and every

child may be at a different place within the process. As I was finishing up with S, D came

into the room and asked how long we would be. She saw that the interview was being

tapped and left the room. I finished with S and went down the hall to D's classroom. D

was in a hurry. She told me from the start that she had to go vote (union vote). I thought

for a split second and wondered if I should cancel and come back. My instinct was to get

the interview in while I could. If I needed more I could ask to come back. I felt very

rushed through the interview. Each questioned was answered but it was very short and

abrupt. I though the tape recorder may have inhibited the flow of the answers. D also

confirmed that she did not use the manuals. She also only used it to get the skills that

needed to be taught. It occurred to me that neither teacher had mentioned the curriculum.

If they did it was used as interchangeable manuals and curriculum, as if each were the

same. D would not commit to a strategy that solely worked in her repertoire. She stated

that all the strategies work. It is the teachers' responsibility to find out which to use with

which child. I didn't know if D really thought that. As an educator for thirty plus years I

wanted to hear her recipe for teaching children to read. I was eager to learn just what mix

of strategies she used. I left very disappointed. It was not what I had expected nor was it

what I wanted to hear. I went over and over in my head her theory on learning to read as I drove home. Although it was not what I expected I had to remind myself that it must mean something because her student consistently do well. Knowing I would see her in action through the observations eased my disappointment with the interview results.

April 15, 2013

Back at my own school, I felt more relief and comfort interviewing the last two teachers. Both teachers had me come to their classrooms after our contracted school time. I've worked in K's classroom so I knew everything she was referring to. It was a bias, but a bias I am pointing out. K referred to successful strategies as multisensory. I knew right away what she meant. I was familiar with her singing to learn sight words and letter sounds. I knew she used anchor charts and body movement to help students remember rules, letters or math facts. It appears that her philosophy on teaching reading is evident in all areas of teaching. K also said she did not use the manuals to teach but refers to the scope and sequence of the skills. So this is the third teacher that does not rely on the publishing materials. It was nice to know that each teacher has the capacity to rely on their own ideas to teach. This tells me a lot about the administration. The leadership in the district allow the teachers to use what they want to help students learn. I know not all schools are as accepting of teacher's judgments on what skills, material and strategies to implement. I am interested in interviewing teacher 4 to pull together the findings about reading pedagogy.

April 18, 2013

I interviewed A today. I am seeing common themes from all the participants.

Teacher A brought up a theme that did not come out in any other interview. She talked

about teachable moments. Her view of reading acquisition or the reading process is that

she is the bridge from what the students know to the unknown. And although she knows

where they need to be she makes an effort to allow their natural curiosity to come out and

guide the instruction. This immediately made me think of the literature. The new concept

is hybrid methods of teaching. This approach uses both natural methods and systematic

methods of teaching. As A was describing how she allows for these teachable moments I

immediately thought this was the naturalistic approaches that are in the literature. I am

associating the whole language to the naturalistic approaches, and the phonics with the

systematic approaches of teaching. This is a topic that could be further researched.

April 19, 2013

I had an opportunity to observe K today. There was time in my schedule so I went

in unexpected. To me this was better than a planned observation. I could capture what she

was really doing. The first thing that I noticed is that her routines were in place. The

student knew the expectations of the classroom. It was evident that K had gone through

these skills before. The students were familiar with the process and the lesson flowed

very nicely. K modeled for the students. She utilized a think aloud procedure for almost

all modeling. I am not sure if she was aware of this. She told the students her thoughts

and thinking process for working through the sentence on the board. The sentence was

out of order and she explained the concepts of print to get the sentence back in order

helping the students notice the capital letter, the spacing, the punctuation. K worked through the CVC words using a tapping procedure to blend the sounds. This is a technique that all 4 teachers referenced for a strategy. Another adult come into the room to work with the student while K worked with a small group of students on the rug. K used leveled readers for instruction. She also used wipe boards for word work, using a word in the book as a springboard for the conversation and follow lesson. The students knew the routine. They read the books in a whisper voice while the teacher monitored and gave feedback. The students' took the books home to read to someone at home. Included in the bag was the phonics game that reinforced vowels. The three instructional techniques were the think aloud, small group instruction, guided reading and phonics. All of these strategies helped the students develop their reading skills.

April 22, 2013

Due to conflicts in scheduling, I am having someone video tape lessons at B school. In the mean time I will try to get over there to observe in person but if I don't I have the video tapes to view. I am observing A today. I wondered if my data would look different if I had observed at the beginning of the school year. I am sure that the time of year is a variable I had not considered.

April 24, 2013

My last interview was this afternoon. I met with K in her classroom after school. She answered all my questions and it was very hard for me to not interject. This is where my bias surfaces. There are practices that I know K implements because I work in her classroom. However I could not add that to my raw data. It was interesting to hear her

view on what practices she implements. She left out a vast majority of strategies that I have observed in her teaching. For example, she did not mention think aloud process. She consistently uses this strategy with her students. This made me think deeper about the interview process. I wondered if teachers are aware of their craft. It appears to be a lonely process and other than conversations in the halls or faculty room, do teachers have an opportunity to think and reflect on their craft. It appeared to be the first time anyone had asked K about her teaching. I just assume teachers question their practice about what works and what does not work. Interviewing K confirmed for me that good teaching does not come with experience. K is a novice teacher however she has an expertise and teaching craft like no other.

April 26, 2013

I have observed a few sessions thus far. It is already evident that phonics is at the core of all four teachers practice. In S's class I observed a lesson on sorting blends. In D's class I observed a lesson that touched on the vowel patterns. In K's class I observed a mini lesson on long vowels with a follow up practice and in A's class I observed a lesson on tapping out words to isolate and blend. The research tells us that literacy instruction should be a hybrid approach, using both systematic approaches and naturalistic approaches. I observed more systematic lessons. The naturalistic lessons are important but appear to be lacking in the classes I observed. is that to say that successful teachers mainly use systematic methods of instruction. The limitation of this study is the time. If I had more time to observe, I may have come across naturalistic methods. It seems like using systematic methods ensure that all students learn. Naturalistic methods may not reach all learners. The research states that some students need a more systematic

approach. Implementing the systematic approaches would ensure that even your struggling learners have access to best practice. Although the research call for the use of both methods, I cannot say for certain if this is the case in this particular study.

May 5, 2013

The observations are coming to an end. I have collected five lesson plans from each teacher. I have 20 lesson plans to review. Upon first impressions I noticed the block of time for literacy varies for each teacher. One first grade teacher has a literacy block, as well as phonics (Fundations) block of time in her schedule. The other first grade teacher does not have the phonics block of time. The two kindergarten teachers appear to only have literacy blocks of time three days a week. The inconsistency of the amount of time dedicated to language arts literacy instruction is a concern for me. It would require observing the teachers in more depth to see if the amount of time actually varies when implemented.

May 8, 2013

This is my last entry. I will be finishing up my observations next week. I have all my interviews transcribed, and all the lesson plans ready for the coding procedures. I plan to highlight all literacy words, phrases or sentences. I will provide each with a code for the first round of coding. These first round codes will be entered into an excel spreadsheet. These codes will be further reduced to a second round of codes. On the third and final stage of coding, I will look at the codes, or themes, as they relate to perceptions of reading pedagogy, knowledge base of reading pedagogy and practice of reading pedagogy. I will look for commonalities of all three areas as it relates to reading methods.

As I reflect on the process itself, keeping it simple really is the best way to complete research. I could have used just the lesson plans or just the interviews. Each in itself has plenty of data. I know using all three data collection strategies will provide my finding with triangulation and data saturation, ensuring that my data has validity.