2021

EXAMINING THE PERCEPTIONS OF EARLY ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM TEACHERS WITH SUPPLEMENTARY LITERACY CERTIFICATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

to the faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION SPECIALTIES

of

THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

New York

by

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Date Submitted 2/10/2021 Date Approved 5/19/2021

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ABSTRACT

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Teacher expertise can have a large influence on student experiences and achievement. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences, practices, and beliefs of early elementary classroom teachers who have supplementary literacy certification. Although characteristics of effective literacy teachers have been identified in previous research, the current literature is lacking information regarding teachers with this additional literacy certification. In this phenomenological study, data was collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews and analyzed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis procedure. The sixteen participants taught kindergarten, first, or second grade in Wisconsin (WI) and held a WI Reading Teacher license and/or WI Reading Specialist license. The theoretical frameworks guiding this study included interpretative phenomenology and social cognitive theory. Patterns in the lived experiences of the participants included: taking multiple paths to expertise, the use of knowledge to help others, valuing the individual, and going beyond the curriculum. At the core of this phenomenon is a combination of factors that allow these teachers to meet individual student needs. The findings of this study have potential to affect district hiring and professional development policies as well as individual teacher decision-making around the procurement and use of literacy expertise. The resulting actions of teachers and school districts may benefit student achievement in literacy.

DEDICATION

This dissertation and all the work that went into it is dedicated to my family. To my parents, Bob and Judy, and my brothers, Bill and Tony, for modeling a strong commitment to literacy and education for my whole life. To my in-laws, Don and Marybeth, and my sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law, Jen, Udeitha, Therese, Ken, Cathy, Sue, Todd, Cindy, Steven, Julie, and Rick, for the childcare, interest in my work, encouragement, and prayers. To my husband Dave, for always supporting my endeavors, maintaining an even-keeled outlook, and having fun with me along the way. To my children, Stephen, George, and Oscar, for showing me what is most important in life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Throughout the writing of this dissertation, I received assistance, support, and guidance from several people. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my committee, for their constructive feedback, belief in my work, extensive knowledge, approachable nature, and valuable advice throughout this process. Dr. Kyle DeMeo Cook was the perfect mentor for me and I will always be thankful to have been matched with her. Dr. Olivia Stewart's commitment to precision motivated me to complete my best work throughout this whole journey. I would like to thank these women, as well as several other faculty members at St. John's University, for supporting me while simultaneously pushing me, and for seamlessly achieving this balance during all the challenges of a worldwide pandemic. I am also grateful for my peers in the program and the countless ways in which they have enhanced my experience as a doctoral student. Additionally, I want to acknowledge the encouragement of my colleagues at Alverno College and the many ways in which they continuously inspire me to learn more. I want to thank Mindy Kramer for being such a strong and kind peer debriefer, sounding-board, colleague, and friend. Also, I would like to express my appreciation for the camaraderie and advice I received from Dr. Jonathon Metz. Finally, this dissertation would not have been possible without the participants who took the time to share their experiences with me and ultimately made me feel such pride and hope for the field of education. Sincere thanks to these individuals and to all of my former teachers and students who inspired this work.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Improving literacy achievement continues to be one of the most urgent issues in education today. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Report Card for 2017 reported that only 35 percent of students in Grade 4 and Grade 8 were at or above the proficient level (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Additionally, according to the 2019 report, national average reading scores for both Grade 4 and Grade 8 went down since 2017, and 31 individual states reported lower Grade 8 reading scores than in 2017. Although Wisconsin has shown slightly higher reading scores than the national average for the past decade, only 36% of Grade 4 students in the state scored at or above proficient in 2019, as did only 39% of Grade 8 students. The 2019 NAEP report also ranked Wisconsin as the state with the largest disparity in scores between Black and White students (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Improvement in literacy is needed on a national, statewide, and local level.

Educators, including classroom teachers and specialists, have been found to be a major factor in student success (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010; Matsumura, Garnier, & Spybrook, 2013; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004). Therefore, one way to address the challenge of improving literacy achievement is for specialized literacy professionals to collaborate with students and faculty to create access to high quality literacy learning experiences. By working with classroom teachers, it has been found that literacy professionals influence teachers' beliefs and classroom practices, which have resulted in higher reading achievement in students (Bean, Goatley, & Kern, 2015; Matsumura, Garnier, & Spybrook, 2013). Literacy specialists and coaches are also taking on more varied roles than ever before, reporting a combination of work with students and

teachers (Bean, et al., 2015). In 2015, members of a special interest group within the International Literacy Association published a national study on the ways in which specialized literacy professionals spend their time in schools (Bean, et al., 2015). The goal was to inform those who prepare and employ these professionals about the roles they fill and challenges they face. Their survey, which included over 2,500 respondents from all fifty states, gathered quantitative and qualitative data of those who self-identified as reading specialists or literacy coaches. Notably, they purposely left out information from those who completed the survey but worked as classroom teachers. The study found that literacy professionals working as reading specialists or coaches had varying qualifications, with 75% holding master's degrees, (55% of those degrees being listed as Reading Education) and 53% certified as reading specialists. This ILA study also found that they fulfill four different roles including instructional/literacy coach, reading teacher/interventionist, reading/literacy specialist, and supervisors , with all groups reporting the support of teachers as one of their primary roles. However, the lack of literacy growth across the United States suggests that this is not enough. Considering the positive influence that literacy professionals have been found to have, it is reasonable to wonder what influence they might have if and when they fill early elementary classroom teacher positions, thus having the most direct contact with students throughout the day.

Several states currently have a supplementary literacy license or endorsement that teachers can earn through graduate coursework (Opper, 2019). In Wisconsin, where this study took place, teachers who hold a teaching license and have two years of teaching experience can also earn a Reading Teacher license or a Reading Specialist license, both of which apply to kindergarten through Grade 12 (Wisconsin Department of Public

Instruction, n.d.). In order to earn these certifications, teachers must complete graduate level coursework and demonstrate knowledge on literacy content, language arts models, research in literacy and related fields, language and literacy acquisition, literature, and socio-cultural aspects of literacy (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2001). Many teachers earn this new certification and move into interventionist or coaching roles, which require these additional licenses (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, n.d.). However, others stay in the classroom setting after gaining a supplementary literacy license and the expertise that comes along with it. This phenomenon has potential to elevate the quality of literacy teaching happening in classroom settings, especially if it is encouraged by multiple stakeholders. Yet, there is a shortage of research on the lived experiences and instructional behaviors of classroom teachers who have supplementary literacy licensure.

Although substantial work has been done identifying characteristics of effective literacy teachers (Allington, 2002; Flynn, 2007; Kennedy, 2010), there has not been substantial research on the particular phenomenon of classroom teachers holding supplemental certification in literacy, resulting in a gap in the literature. Further understanding about how teachers with this certification use their literacy expertise may influence school policy decisions and student literacy achievement. This qualitative study aimed to help fill this gap in the literature by exploring and documenting unique attributes and practices of teachers who have supplementary literacy certification and remain in the classroom. By conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews, I identified and analyzed patterns within the experiences, practices, and beliefs of this group of teachers.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of early elementary teachers who have supplementary literacy certification in an effort to understand how they use their expertise throughout the school day. Employing more teachers with additional expertise in the area of literacy could be one way to improve literacy achievement or reduce achievement gaps between student groups in the United States. Research is needed in order to understand the nuances of how this literacy expertise is used in the classroom. If this phenomenon is better understood, there may be implications on the large scale policy level as well as for individual educators. With more knowledge about how participants utilize their expertise, school leaders could make more informed staffing decisions, create hiring policies, allocate funds, and use the practices of this group to inform high quality professional development for those who do not have the additional certification. Additionally, individual teachers could be compelled to obtain supplementary literacy certification, and school or district administration teams could be convinced to support teachers in doing so. Although attention has been given to the characteristics of effective professional development (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017), literacy licensure programs as professional development is an area that has not been well-represented in recent research. While the scope of this study is small and localized in one state, therefore limiting its potential generalizability to areas with significantly different demographics, the results could lead to more research on this topic that could inform educational decision-making on a much larger scale.

Research Questions

This phenomenological study qualitatively addressed the following overarching research question: *What are the experiences, practices, and beliefs of early elementary classroom teachers with supplementary literacy certification?*

Definition of Terms

Classroom teacher: This term refers to a teacher who is employed as a regular education teacher in charge of universal instruction of all core subject areas for a specific grade level and class of students.

Literacy professionals: This broad term includes reading/literacy teachers, specialists, interventionists, and coaches. These terms are used interchangeably and in different ways across the United States and beyond. A shift has occurred toward using the term *literacy* teacher/specialist/coach instead of *reading* teacher/specialist/coach, in order to recognize the important integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing (Bean, Goatley, & Kern, 2015). In this study, literacy professionals will be used to refer to reading/literacy teachers, specialists, coaches, and interventionists, but not general elementary classroom teachers.

Supplementary literacy certification: This term refers to a literacy license in the supplemental category that is obtained in addition to a teaching license. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction issues the following licenses in the area of literacy:

Wisconsin Reading Teacher license: This license is required for a teacher assigned to teach reading for more than one class per day or to teach reading in a Title 1 reading program (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, n.d.).

Wisconsin Reading Specialist license: This license is in the administrative category and is required for someone who directs reading programs or works with teachers,

administrators, and others as a resource teacher in reading (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, n.d.).

Universal Instruction: This term refers to the instruction available to and received by all students in the class. This can be differentiated and delivered in various groupings and includes all subject areas. This can also be known by the terms "Tier One instruction" (in relation to the framework for Response to Intervention) or "core instruction" and does not include intervention.

Positionality

I have held the WI Reading Teacher and Reading Specialist licenses since 2011. At the time, I was a kindergarten teacher and spent my first year with the supplemental licenses teaching kindergarten half time and doing literacy intervention half time. After that I became a full time reading specialist. After working as an adjunct instructor at a local small private college for five years, I took on the role of Graduate Reading Coordinator there. In that position, I have taught and worked closely with graduate students working toward WI Reading Teacher and Reading Specialist licenses. Due to my experience and expertise with the process of obtaining these supplementary literacy licenses, I cannot claim to be completely neutral about the topic of this study. Because I have a clear understanding of the content covered in the coursework and the ways in which I've seen my graduate students' learning influence their elementary students' learning, I feel that classroom teachers who have supplementary literacy licenses should have multiple effective practices in place for teaching literacy. I also believe they should be able to articulate what they do that is especially beneficial for their students and how their current practices, beliefs, and instruction are different from what they did and

experienced before gaining the additional expertise they have. Seven of the sixteen participants were my students for graduate literacy courses, and I also supported some of these students in a portfolio process throughout their graduate programs for licensure. Although I am bringing these personal experiences and beliefs to this research study, by disclosing these, I will be visible in the research in a way that allows the reader to discern my interpretations (Lichtman, 2012).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

While there are numerous accepted definitions of literacy that account for international perspectives, language differences, and social and cultural contexts (Keefe & Copeland, 2011), for this study, literacy will be defined as the ability to make meaning from text. This includes being able to read, write, and interact with understanding and purpose. Gee (2013) writes that reading and writing are deeply connected to speaking, listening, and interacting as well as the use of language to think about the world and participate in it. Meaning is key, therefore students may be considered literate even if they need accommodations to perform these processes but are able to do so with understanding and purpose.

The study was conducted with an interpretivist paradigm which allows for multiple interpretations of a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). It was implemented with a relativist ontology assuming that reality is constructed by experiences. Within this framework, the epistemological stance was that reality is interpreted. Thus interpretation was a thread that has been woven throughout this entire study. This was a phenomenological study which, by definition, looked at the lived experiences of those who have experienced a specific phenomenon (Terrell, 2015). In this case, the phenomenon is defined as being an early elementary classroom teacher while holding a supplementary WI Reading Teacher and/or Reading Specialist license. The aim of any phenomenological study is to determine the essence of the phenomenon. Phenomenology can be both a philosophy and a method (Lichtman, 2012), therefore the theoretical framework was directly connected to the methodology of the research study.

This study utilized a Hermeneutical phenomenological perspective which is an interpretive type of phenomenology and places emphasis on interpretation rather than description alone (van Manen, 2011). This means that this study operated with an assumption based on the work of Heidegger that "all description is always already interpretation" (van Manen, 2011, para.1). While analyzing and describing the lived experience of the participants, another underlying Hermeneutical assumption was also present: that "humans use language to experience the world and that we obtain understanding and knowledge through our language" (Lichtman, 2012, p.89). As a researcher, I used language to describe and interpret the language used by the participants. It is possible that I may have found different meanings in the language used by the participants than they might identify themselves.

This is in contrast to the transcendental or descriptive phenomenology philosophy which emphasizes the importance of the researcher removing oneself from the situation and only describing with no interpretation (Lichtman, 2012). The transcendental approach was not chosen because I included the practice of researcher reflexivity instead of attempting to ignore my bias. This study occurred with the assumption that the researcher is a "filter through which data are collected, organized, and interpreted" (Lichtman, 2012, p. 159). This reflexive process of self-examination is important for the credibility of the results of this study. By acknowledging how my own perspectives, biases, and experiences shape the research, I allowed their influence to be understood.

In addition, this study used a Social Cognitive Theory lens. Originally called the Social Learning Theory by Albert Bandura, this theory operates with the assumption that people learn by observing and interpreting the behaviors of others (Tracey & Morrow,

2017). Further, Bandura emphasized self-efficacy as an important factor in this theory. He asserted that with a higher level of self-efficacy, comes greater effort, persistence, and accomplishment, regardless of actual ability (Bandura, 2010). This study examined teacher self-efficacy and the possible role it might play in the lived experiences and beliefs of the participants.

Social Cognitive Theory also places value on the interaction of three aspects: personal, behavioral, and environmental (LaMorte, 2019). They combine in the classrooms where the participants work every day. This study explored how teacher expertise in literacy affects student behaviors and classroom norms. This theory assumes that personal, behavioral, and environmental factors have a reciprocal relationship, constantly informing one another. This theory helped to frame the context of this study because it was expected to find that the participants use their literacy knowledge (personal) in various ways to affect their instructional decision-making (behavioral) in the classroom setting (environment). The assumption of the interaction between these factors would be in contrast to other theories such as behaviorism, which focuses mainly on the environmental factor alone without acknowledging the other aspects at work (LaMorte, 2019). The sociocognitive perspective places high importance on making meaning specifically in the field of literacy as well. Ruddell and Unrau (2013) define reading as a meaning-construction process within the social context of the learning environment and taking into consideration the complex influence of the teacher as well as the student's prior beliefs and knowledge.

These two frameworks, Interpretative Phenomenology and Social Cognitive Theory, permeated all aspects of the research study. The research question was specific to

a phenomenological study and based on examining the personal, behavioral, and environmental factors as well as the self-efficacy of the participants. The literature review explored others' findings on these aspects of Social Cognitive Theory and the lived experiences of individuals in numerous studies, which is a main tenant of Interpretative Phenomenology. Interpretation has occurred throughout the data collection and data analysis phases, with the specific use of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis model. The Social Cognitive thread continued throughout these phases due to the emphasis placed on learning through observation and interpretation. Returning to the definition of literacy for this study, understanding and meaning making were emphasized and woven throughout the entire study. The overarching goal was to help teachers to guide students in using literacy to engage with the world around them.

Historical Analysis

In order to understand the complexities of the lived experiences of teachers who have supplementary literacy certification, it is important to look back at the history of specialized literacy professionals in the United States. When the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was first implemented in 1965, the role of literacy professionals was usually that of Title 1 teachers doing pull-out intervention with struggling readers (Dole, 2004). Title 1 of ESEA was the first federal initiative established with a goal to improve literacy achievement for students who were economically disadvantaged. The intended nature of this part of the act was to be a source of funding rather than a specific program, but it became known as a pull-out intervention program for struggling readers. While there is still debate about whether additional school spending can narrow the achievement gap between rich and poor students (Hodge,

Taylor, & Frankenberg, 2016), the impact of Title 1 and its historical significance in education is far reaching. For instance, because funding was conditional on meeting desegregation targets under the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Title 1 played a part in ending racially separate schooling in the South (Cascio & Reber, 2013).

In 1994, ESEA was reauthorized as part of the Improving America's Schools Act that specified state accountability for ensuring Title 1 students are held to high standards (Hodge, Taylor, & Frankenberg, 2016). With ESEA's reauthorization in 2001, as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), came three areas of new emphasis (Dole, 2004): the need for all teachers to be qualified to teach reading, the use of scientifically based programs, and a focus on assessment, especially progress monitoring, used to inform instructional decisions. At that point there was a shift in the role of literacy professionals from working exclusively with students, to working with teachers in order to better achieve these three goals (Dole, 2004). This is also when it became more widely accepted that the lowest performing students need the highest quality teachers. This shift has meant that the role of literacy professionals varies from district to district but often includes remediation with struggling students, leading professional development for teachers, coaching teachers, making curriculum decisions, or a combination of multiple aspects (Collins, 2020; Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Frey, 2003). Most recently, ESEA was reauthorized again in 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act (Sharp, 2016) which gave states the opportunity to set their own college and career standards.

In addition to the historical significance of Title 1 on the roles of literacy professionals, the federal project Reading First has had an important influence on this topic since 2002. Deussen, Coskie, Robinson, and Autio (2007) reiterated the long history

of the coaching role dating back to the 1930's as well as its expansion under NCLB. The number of professionals in literacy coaching roles expanded rapidly under Reading First because of mandates making grant money conditional with the hiring of reading coaches (Deussen et al., 2007). With this influx of literacy coaches came the development of standards from the International Literacy Association (ILA, formerly International Reading Association) and the National Council of Teachers of English. These standards are typically used by institutions of higher education in combination with program requirements for supplementary literacy licensure endorsement. The ILA Standards for Reading Professionals, which were issued in 2006 and revised in 2010 and 2017, were originally designed to bring consistency to literacy positions and provide common language (Collins, 2020). The 2017 version of the ILA standards differentiates between roles and includes specific standards for three different roles: Reading/Literacy Specialists, Literacy Coaches, and Literacy Coordinators/Supervisors (International Literacy Association, 2018). However, even this differentiation does not completely match up to the titles used in districts or by state departments of instruction for licenses and literacy professionals across the country, which is further evidence of the complexity of these roles.

Also important to consider when looking at the history of literacy professionals is the role of Response to Intervention (RtI). In 1977 the procedure for diagnosing learning disabilities involved examining the discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability (Armendariz & Jung, 2016). This was criticized due to a number of characteristics: the implication that a label is needed prior to receiving support, the tendency to wait until a learning problem was severe before addressing it, and the lack of

consideration of other factors such as the opportunity to learn (Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008). The new emphasis on scientifically based practice under Reading First and NCLB paved the way for RtI, which was developed in 2004 as part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as a replacement for the discrepancy model (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Designed as a tiered method of support for students, this model relies on progress monitoring and the collaboration of numerous educators. Due to the high percentage of students with learning disabilities who struggle with literacy, the law specifically identified reading teachers as qualified participants in this process (Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008). When discussing the implications of RtI for reading teachers, Shanahan (2008) emphasized a number of ways in which they can enhance the classroom practices including the coordination of intervention and classroom instruction, adjusting to the student's specific level and needs, and increasing the amount and intensity of instruction students receive. This brings to light a central question for this study: What if the reading teacher *is* the classroom teacher? With this historical information, it is interesting to consider the implications of literacy specialists as classroom teachers.

Wisconsin Context

It is also important to consider the history of literacy professionals in a state context in order to build context for the specific location of the study, especially considering the state specific nature of certification. Wisconsin has certified literacy professionals since 1956 with the adoption of the Wisconsin Certification Regulations, under which a teacher could earn a Remedial Reading license (Schoeller, 1968). At that time this license was not required by the state for reading teacher jobs, but some

individual districts and administrators made it mandatory individually. Programs for the preparation of reading teachers grew, and in 1968 a proposal was made for improved requirements which introduced the reading teacher and reading specialist licenses (Schoeller, 1968). This was done in cooperation with the ILA as a response to a shortage of qualified reading teachers. Certification of reading teachers and reading specialists in Wisconsin became mandatory as of July 1972 (Wisconsin Administrative Register, 1972). Since that time, requirements have remained relatively unchanged and currently include the following (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1977; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2001):

- eligibility to hold a WI teacher license or completion of an approved program;
- two years of classroom teaching experience; and
- proficiency in literacy teaching in the areas of
    - developmental reading
    - assessment and instruction
    - learning disabilities
    - language development
    - content area literacy
    - children's literature.

In addition to these guidelines, the WI Reading Specialist license requires a Master's degree in the area of education. Finally, before applying for the license, teachers must also pass the standardized Wisconsin Foundations of Reading Test, unless they already hold a lifetime license in the respective area of either teaching or administration.

Considering that teachers who earn these licenses are gaining this literacy expertise in addition to their initial licensure programs and after at least two years of classroom experience, examination of how this additional competence is utilized in the classroom setting has potential to be valuable in the field of education.

Review of Related Research

While the topic of effective literacy teaching practices and effective professional development have received considerable attention in the field (Allington, 2002; Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017; Flynn, 2007; Kennedy, 2010), the specific topic of the practices and impact of early elementary classroom teachers who hold a supplementary literacy license is currently under-represented in the field of literacy education. However, the existing literature presented some themes to inform this study and provide support for future research in this direction.

Teacher Expertise Matters

First, there appears to be relative agreement in the field that teacher expertise matters to student learning experiences and achievement, with studies finding that the teacher is the most important factor in addition to other aspects such as class size, programs, funding, and family involvement (Dole, 2004; Flynt & Brozo, 2009; Opper, 2019; Stronge & Hindman, 2003). For example, in a four-year experimental study, Nye, Konstantopoulos, and Hedges (2004) found that the teacher has a larger effect on students than socio-economic status. Hatano and Oura (2003) applied research on expertise to the school setting by examining expert-novice differences and processes of gaining expertise. They identified the following as key points to consider that could be applied to the area of teacher expertise: domain knowledge, experience, socioemotional investment,

collaboration, and context. They argue that these characteristics of experts can be achieved by teachers without changing the basic structure of school learning. Similarly, Kennedy (2010) also argued that situational characteristics must also be considered when looking at the influence a teacher has on student experiences and achievement. These studies are relevant to this study for the examination of how literacy professionals use their expertise in the classroom setting. These studies suggest that teachers and their instructional decision-making have a substantial influence on student learning, therefore use of specialized expertise in the area of literacy should be further examined.

In addition, the relationship between initial certification and student learning outcomes has been explored. One longitudinal study done in New York public schools looked at six years of student test data and suggested that a teacher's performance during their first two years is a better indicator of their effectiveness than their certification status (Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2008). This seems to suggest that other factors matter more than certification. Conversely, Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor (2010) found that teacher credentials affect student achievement on end-of-course tests in the high school setting in North Carolina. After studying test scores from four cohorts of 10th graders, the authors found that having a regular license, as opposed to an emergency license or no license, and being certified in the particular subject area are both factors associated with higher student achievement. In their work examining how school climate, teacher qualifications, and instructional practices differ by school type, Lubienski, Lubienski, and Crane (2008) also found that teacher certification led to higher student achievement in the area of mathematics. This study used nationwide NAEP data and included 157,161 students from 6,288 schools at grade 4, and 119,364 students from 4,870 schools at grade

8. While these studies looked at initial licensure rather than the addition of literacy certification, the mixed findings on certification contribute to building a case for further examination of this phenomenon, including the study of teachers who have specialized literacy credentials.

Coaching and Specialized Literacy Expertise

A second theme is that teachers with supplementary certification in literacy have specialized literacy expertise that can be utilized to increase student learning (Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Frey, 2003; Stevens, 2010). As a result of research examining the varied roles and effects of literacy specialists, it is understood that the work of literacy specialists is often categorized into two roles: remedial student instruction and teacher professional development, as well as some combination of the two (Bean, Goatley, & Kern, 2015; Dole, 2004).

Additionally, it is clear that the expertise that literacy specialists possess allows them to make adjustments to their instruction in order to meet the unique needs of the learners they work with (Barksdale, 2018). In a qualitative study examining instruction during literacy interventions, Barksdale (2018) found that literacy specialists adapt their teaching according to their professional training, expertise, and experience teaching. Thus it is reasonable to conclude that teachers with a literacy specialist license could do the same in the early elementary classroom setting.

A third theme in the existing literature related to the study of supplementary literacy certification is that literacy coaching appears to have a positive influence on teacher practices and increased student achievement. When the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was first implemented in 1965, the role of literacy

professionals was usually that of Title 1 teachers doing pull-out intervention with struggling readers (Dole, 2004). With its reissue in 2000 came three areas of new emphasis: the need for all teachers to be qualified to teach reading, the use of scientifically based programs, and a focus on assessment, especially progress monitoring, used to inform instructional decisions. At that point there was a shift in the role of literacy professionals from working exclusively with students, to working with teachers in order to better achieve these three goals. This is also when the idea noted above, that the lowest performing students need the highest quality teachers, became more widely accepted (Dole, 2004).

In a three-year study of 20 Midwestern districts, Mangin (2009) explored decision-making factors regarding literacy coaches. She found that district-level administrators' interest in having a literacy coach depended on the following factors: the context of state and national reform, data on student outcomes, finances, and existing roles and programs. Additionally, Mangin reported that districts recognize teacher professional development as a key factor in student learning improvement *in combination* with the specialized roles of literacy coaches, paraprofessionals, and reading specialists. In other words, literacy specialists alone are not enough. Rather, classroom teachers need expert literacy knowledge as well.

This was supported by a meta-analysis from the International Literacy Association aiming to contextualize the roles of literacy professionals (Bean, Goatley, & Kern, 2015). The authors differentiated between reading/literacy specialists, literacy coaches, and literacy coordinators/supervisors, while also acknowledging the overlap in responsibilities and the lack of consistency with which the titles are used across the

United States. Regardless of titles used, the authors found that literacy professionals "assist in designing and sustaining efforts that result in higher reading achievement" (Bean, Goatley, & Kern, 2015, p. 3), often working collaboratively with other team members. Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter (2010), set out to determine whether literacy coaching was linked to significantly increased student achievement as measured by the DIBELS and Terra Nova assessments. Their four year quasi experimental longitudinal study of Kindergarten through second grade students in 17 schools found significant gains in student outcomes. Although they admit their results contrast with two similar studies that found little to no associated gains, the authors concluded literacy coaching to be "a lever for enacting change in teachers' practice and consequently in students' learning" (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010, p. 31). These studies do not address the potential effect of literacy coaches as classroom teachers.

Matsumura, Garnier, and Spybrook (2013) conducted a longitudinal study on a specific literacy coaching method: Content Focused Coaching, which follows a layered coaching approach at the district, school, and classroom level. Implementation of this approach includes intensive professional development for district literacy coaches, who then return to their schools and provide school-wide teacher professional development, as well as individual teacher geocaching in the classroom. Their three-year group-randomized trial, which included nearly 3000 fourth and fifth grade students and 167 teachers, found that this method increased students' ability in both basic and higher-level comprehension skills. Considering the findings of this study, which supports the use of literacy coaching at the district, school, and classroom levels, it is reasonable to wonder

what influence a literacy coach might have if they were in the classroom full time as the teacher.

Teacher Retention

The topic of teacher retention and attrition has received considerable attention as it has been examined as a possible factor in overall student achievement (Sass, Seal, & Martin, 2011). This is relevant to this study because teachers may choose to leave the classroom setting after earning additional certification, or they may choose to stay and utilize their new expertise in the classroom. Teachers may leave the classroom to take on other roles in education including administration, coaching, or intervention. Borman and Dowling's (2008) meta-analysis of 34 studies examining teacher career paths identified several complex factors of teacher retention and attrition including both personal and professional aspects. These included: characteristics of the school organization, salary, resources, experience, and family. Borman and Dowling (2008) reported that the characteristics of work conditions are more closely tied to teacher attrition than previously thought in the field. Although they report somewhat mixed results, relevant to this study is their finding that teachers with more training, experience, and skills are more likely to leave teaching. Thus the documentation of the experiences, practices, and beliefs of this group of highly qualified, well-prepared teachers who chose not only to stay in education, but in the early elementary classroom setting has potential to add to the body of knowledge.

In a survey of 329 Master of School Administration students, Hancock, Black, and Bird (2006) also identified a number of factors that motivated teachers to leave the classroom for administrative positions including "Challenge, Altruism,

Personal/Professional Benefit/Gain, and Leadership Influence" (p.91). The results of this study suggest that teachers feel they can make a greater difference and gain more from an administrative position over a classroom teaching job. Respondents in their study reported wanting to have a larger impact and a belief that this could be achieved outside of the classroom. This presents an interesting phenomenon related to Bandura's (2010) theory of self-efficacy. While the educators in Hancock, Black, and Bird's (2006) study believed they could impact more students by leaving the classroom, the participants in the present study have chosen to continue to be classroom teachers. It was important to understand the thought-process involved in that decision-making as it relates to self-efficacy and the desire to make an impact.

Crain (2013) did a multiple case study on National Board Certified teachers from Generation X who left the classroom. The purpose of Crain's study, to understand the reasons that these teachers left the classroom setting, has some parallels to this study. In the case of Crain's participants, the teachers *left* the classroom after gaining additional expertise through a rigorous process. The analysis concluded that the reasons these teachers left the classroom had to do with characteristics of both the teaching profession and characteristics of Generation X. They included: perception of the profession, lack of performance differentiation and fairness, lack of support, earnings, work/life balance, the need for challenge, and the desire to have an impact beyond the classroom setting. Crain's findings were compared with the qualitative information gathered from the teachers in this study who have gained additional expertise and decided to *stay* in the classroom.

In a review of qualitative and quantitative studies of teacher retention, Johnson, Berg, and Donaldson (2005) described how intrinsic and extrinsic factors, as well as the interaction of the two, affect teachers' decisions to stay in the profession of teaching. They found that retaining teachers long term may require districts to respond to teachers' need for growth inside and outside of the classroom setting. Additionally, they discovered that strong professional development was linked to teachers feeling happier and more effective, which may lead to better retention. This link between teacher expertise and self-efficacy corresponds to the Social Cognitive Theory framework for this study and may have important implications (Bandura, 2010). It is possible that the need for growth may be met by earning additional literacy certification, however the concept of licensure programs as professional development is under-represented in current literature.

A Gap in the Literature

Finally, there is a lack of literature on those who earn supplementary literacy certification and continue to be elementary classroom teachers. Leak and Farkas' (2011) study, which utilized the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten cohort (ECLS-K) national data, explored the effects of teacher certification, degree level, and coursework. Using data from over 16,000 students, this investigation on the link between student achievement and the educational background characteristics of kindergarten teachers utilized regression analysis of student level variables and teacher level variables. The authors found that teacher degrees have little association with student achievement outcomes. Additionally, they reported mixed findings on the impact of teacher coursework in reading and child development on student achievement. Their discussion of these results pointed out the need to investigate this further. Although this study

included teacher credentials and reading coursework as variables, it did not examine supplemental literacy certification specifically.

Multiple studies directly or indirectly point to the fact that collaboration of literacy experts, school leaders, and classroom teachers produce positive student outcomes (Mangin, 2009; Neumerski, 2013; Stevens, 2010). Thus leading to the question: What if the classroom teacher *is* the literacy expert? This study aimed to examine this question. Knowing more about this phenomenon has the potential to contribute to the body of knowledge that currently exists regarding: literacy licensure as professional development, the potential for addressing teacher retention, the use of literacy experts as early elementary classroom teachers, and their practices.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Specific Research Question

The central question for the study was: *What are the experiences, practices, and beliefs of early elementary classroom teachers with supplementary literacy certification?*

Research Design, Context, and Procedures

Understanding the context of this study must include the fact that it was situated within the COVID-19 global pandemic. All participants were impacted to varying degrees, which will be further discussed. Seven months prior to the data collection phase of this study, school buildings in the state of Wisconsin were closed. Several districts remained closed through the duration of this study, moving teaching to the online setting, while others reopened with several safety precautions and physical distancing procedures in place. These unique circumstances changed the professional practice of all participants, as discussed in every interview, though the longevity of these changes and the long term impacts remain still to be seen.

This study used phenomenological design (Lichtman, 2012) to examine the characteristics of early elementary classroom teachers who have supplementary literacy certification. After receiving IRB approval (Appendix A), participants were recruited via social media, email, and word of mouth in Wisconsin. Before giving consent, participants were given basic information about the goals of the study, the interview questions, and the confidentiality measures taken with the data, including the use of pseudonyms and the lack of disclosure of specific school names.

First, participants signed an informed consent form (see Appendix B) and filled out a form with basic information about characteristics of their district, number of years

with the literacy license, and grade level they are currently teaching (see Appendix C). Next, qualitative data was collected through one-on-one semi-structured teacher interviews. The interviews took place virtually through a password protected online video meeting, during which all teachers were asked the same questions using a semi-structured interview protocol which offered some flexibility. Lichtman (2012) outlined potential challenges to doing online synchronous interviews including sound and video quality, comfort level having a discussion in a virtual setting, security and confidentiality, and internet connectivity. A minor technology issue came up with one participant when her sound cut out a few times, but this appeared to be an issue she had been having regularly, thus she knew how to troubleshoot. For the rest of her interview and for all other participants it was very easy to see and hear one another. It seemed as though all participants had easy access to the necessary technology for the virtual interview. I believe the circumstances of the past several months of the COVID-19 pandemic have increased local educators' experience and comfort level with technology use, allowing our conversations to closely mimic the in-person interview experience.

The benefits to using the online platform were numerous. First, due to COVID-19, most schools were either severely limiting outside visitors or conducting school in a fully virtual format, thus closing their buildings completely. Additionally, doing online interviews gave me the ability to include participants from around the entire state, which would not have been feasible for in-person conversations. This also increased the convenience for participants and allowed for easy recording of the interviews through the virtual meeting platform. After obtaining permission to record these video meetings,

interview recordings were transcribed and stored in a password protected online account. Handwritten notes taken during the interviews were stored in a locked file cabinet.

Sampling & Participants

This study included sixteen participants chosen through purposive snowball sampling (see Appendix D Recruitment Flyer). The recruitment flyer was shared on social media pages for various Wisconsin professional literacy groups including the Reading League of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin State Reading Association. Additionally, it was shared on my personal social media pages in order to reach other Wisconsin educators. After initial scheduling of several interviews procured from the social media posts, I also reached out to several groups and individuals in order maximize variation in my participant sample. These included local chapters of the Wisconsin State Reading Association, teachers and administrators at various public and private school districts throughout Wisconsin, and faculty at institutions of higher education in Wisconsin that endorse teachers for the WI Reading Teacher certification.

The participants were current kindergarten, first grade, or second grade teachers who also hold a Wisconsin Reading Teacher or Reading Specialist license. They were from fourteen different school districts in the state of Wisconsin. The schools represented in this study were from a mix of public and private districts in urban, suburban, or rural settings. It was my goal to include a variety of perspectives, therefore I was intentional about attempting to balance the number of participants from similar settings. For example, after my initial social media posts, I had several teachers from mid-sized suburban districts from the area surrounding one large city. Therefore, I reached out to private school networks across Wisconsin. Additionally, I contacted six directors of

graduate literacy programs at institutions in Wisconsin that prepare teachers for the Reading Teacher license and asked them to share my call for participants. Because these individuals do the same job that I do at different colleges and universities, it seemed logical that they would personally know a number of potential qualifying participants from different areas in the state.

In order to emphasize the wide range of school district demographics represented in this study, Table 1 shows demographic information of the participants' districts (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2019). While Creswell and Creswell (2017) indicate that having three to ten participants is appropriate for a phenomenological study, including more participants allowed for better representation of the varying perspectives that exist due to the differences in experiences of teachers across Wisconsin. The purpose of sharing this information is to present context for the findings discussed in Chapter Four and the analysis presented in Chapter Five. In those phases of this study, the data gathered was considered along with the knowledge of these demographics in order to examine any meaningful patterns.

Table 1 District Demographics

District	Type	Enrollment	% Economically Disadvantaged	Race	% ELL	Overall Score
A	Public Urban	75, 431	82.9%	Amer. Indian 0.5% Asian 7.3% Black 51.5% Hispanic 27.2% Pac. Islander 0.1% White 10.5% 2 or More 2.9%	11.9%	58.4 Meets Few Expectations
B	Public Suburban	3, 527	43.3%	Amer. Indian 0.7% Asian 7.9% Black 4.6% Hispanic 25.1% Pac. Islander 0.4% White 56.1% 2 or More 5.4%	7.8%	66.8 Meets Expectations

C	Public Town	1,145	46.4%	Amer. Indian 0.5% Asian 0.6% Black 2.1% Hispanic 9.3% White 81.6% 2 or More 5.7%	12.1%	79.8 Exceeds Expectations
D	Public Suburban	1, 123	44.6%	Amer. Indian 1.1% Asian 3.1% Black 8.0% Hispanic 26.1% Pac. Islander 0.0% White 56.8% 2 or More 4.9%	5.2%	72.4 Meets Expectations
E	Private Urban	1, 529	70.4%	Amer. Indian 0.0% Asian 5.2% Black 81.2% Hispanic 11.0% Pac. Islander 0.0% White 0.5% 2 or More 2.1%	3.1%	72.8 Meets Expectations
F	Public Suburban	4, 599	14.5%	Amer. Indian 0.4% Asian 11.8% Black 2.4% Hispanic 8.8% Pac. Islander 0.1% White 72.1% 2 or More 4.5%	5.5	79.5 Exceeds Expectations
G	Public Suburban	4, 850	8.8%	Amer. Indian 0.3% Asian 1.3% Black 0.6% Hispanic 5.7% Pac. Islander 0.1% White 89.7% 2 or More 2.2%	0.4%	83.8 Significantly Exceeds Expectations
H	Private Urban	166	78.3%	Amer. Indian 0.0% Asian 6.6% Black 14.5% Hispanic 64.5% Pac. Islander 0.0% White 13.3%	23.5%	73.2 Exceeds Expectations
I	Public Suburban	2,698	25.4%	Amer. Indian 0.5% Asian 5.5% Black 2.3% Hispanic 13.5% Pac. Islander 0.2% White 73.9% 2 or More 4.0%	5.7%	80.2 Exceeds Expectations

J	Public Rural	564	35.3%	Amer. Indian 0.4% Asian 0.4% Black 0.7% Hispanic 12.2% Pac. Islander 0.0% White 83.7% 2 or More 2.7%	2.3%	80.6 Exceeds Expectations
K	Public Rural	672	58.8%	Amer. Indian 6.7% Asian 0.1% Black 0.3% Hispanic 4.2% Pac. Islander 0.1% White 78.0% 2 or More 10.6%	0.3%	65.3 Meets Expectations
L	Public Urban	20, 391	59.4%	Amer. Indian 3.8% Asian 7.4% Black 9.2% Hispanic 28.7% Pac. Islander 0.1% White 44.5% 2 or More 6.4%	22.3%	66.9 Meets Expectations
M	Public Urban	26,917	48.2%	Amer. Indian 0.3% Asian 8.8% Black 17.9% Hispanic 21.7% Pac. Islander 0.1% White 42.2% 2 or More 9.1%	19.9%	72.3 Meets Expectations

Instruments

In this study, two data collection instruments were used. A Google form was used to gather preliminary information from participants (see Appendix C). This included the following: name, licenses held, number of years teaching experience, number of years with supplemental license, school district and type (public, private, charter), grade currently teaching, number of years at current school, and number of years in current grade. The purpose of this initial form was to avoid spending interview time on basic information and to give me some background knowledge about the participant prior to the interview. A semi-structured interview protocol was also used for one-on-one in-depth interviews with participating teachers (see Appendix E). The interviews were semi-

structured in order to make sure the same topics were addressed in each interview, while still allowing for flexibility and the use of natural follow-up questions that may offer more in-depth information about the research questions (Terrell, 2015). The questions were centered around the following topics: motivation and path to licensure, use of literacy expertise with different groups (students, parents, colleagues), the importance of literacy licensure, and plans for the future.

Semi-structured interviews are considered the best way to collect data for interpretative phenomenological analysis due to the flexibility afforded to the interviewer to adapt to the participant's responses in order to gain the most interesting and important information (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). For example, in a structured interview, the researcher must adhere to the specific questions prescribed in a predetermined order, whereas in a semi-structured interview, the researcher is free to change the order of the questions and add follow-up probes to maximize the amount, depth, and detail of the information collected. This was true for the interviews that occurred during this study. For example, occasionally a participant began to answer a question that I planned to ask later on in the interview. By using the semi-structured format, I was able to continue the conversation on that topic at that natural point rather than waiting until the question came up in my planned protocol. Similarly, whenever a participant brought up something unique or especially interesting, I was able to ask follow-up questions to be sure to capture what they articulated.

Data Analysis

Following the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed and cleaned for clarity, taking out inconsequential phrases such as "you know" or repeated words when

this did not affect the meaning or tone of what was said. Then analysis was done to interpret the data using two main influences: the seven step approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Charlick, Pincombe, McKellar, & Fielder, 2016) and Saldaña's (2015) coding techniques including code mapping and code weaving.

The IPA analysis method included: Reading and re-reading the original data, initial noting of ideas, identification of emerging themes, looking for connections between themes, moving on to the next case, looking for patterns between cases, and finally deepening the analysis with more complex interpretation. See Figure 1. This data analysis approach is specific to the research design and theoretical framework utilized in this study as it allows for and emphasizes interpretation of the data.

Figure 1 The seven-steps of IPA data analysis (Source: Charlick, Pincombe, McKellar, & Fielder, 2016)

Smith and Shinebourne's (2012) detailed account of the procedures and purpose of each step of the IPA approach guided my analysis of the data collected. In their description of the analysis of the first interview transcription (steps one through four),

they stress the lack of rules for this kind of data analysis. For example, there are no prescribed ways of dividing the text into units, and no predetermined codes or themes. Instead, Smith and Shinebourne (2012) stress the interpretive relationship the investigator should have with the transcript, using their own interpretation to make meaning but constantly returning to what the participant actually said. Therefore, I did not create a list of codes in advance, but identified codes as topics came up in the first transcript. When a study has more than three interview participants, Smith and Shinebourne (2012) suggest using the codes that were developed from the first transcript on the next transcript, rather than starting fresh. The list of codes was used with the next transcripts and additional codes were added and adjusted along the way. After initial coding of all transcripts, I went back to each to look for the new codes that were added.

As described in steps three through six of the IPA process, I coded the transcriptions for patterns both within and across cases, which Saldaña (2015) describes as being both a natural and deliberate way to make sense of data. In addition to Smith and Shinebourne's (2012) description of using IPA, I implemented the advice given by Saldaña (2015), who suggests three specific types of coding techniques especially for interviews: Initial Coding, which is an open-ended method that involves breaking the data into sections to look for similarities and differences; In Vivo Coding, which uses actual words or phrases from the participants as codes; and Values Coding, which uses codes to represent a participant's perspective by reflecting their attitudes, values, and beliefs.

Saldaña (2015) also emphasizes the need to be flexible and open to revisiting and re-coding using multiple techniques. Keeping this in mind, as well as the overall spiraling

nature of the IPA model, I adjusted my codes and went back through each transcript multiple times. For example, when participants discussed how their understanding of literacy development affected their instructional decision-making for a student or group of students, at first I coded this under "Individual Student Needs." However, after more cases and further examination of what the participants specifically said, I decided to make "Literacy Progression" a separate code. Some teachers talked about learning the predictable continuum of literacy skills, others noted specific areas in the progression on which they increased their knowledge (phonics, for example), and others discussed students who were missing pieces from that developmental progression. After adding this code, I needed to revisit the transcriptions that had already been coded to include this new code. See Appendix F for the final code list and Appendix G for a sample of coding.

By adding and adjusting codes as needed with each additional transcript, I looked for convergence and divergence across cases. This coding process has similarities to that which is described by Lichtman (2012), who suggests moving from codes, to categories, to concepts. Additionally, the IPA approach is also similar to Tesch's eight steps for the coding process (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), which includes getting a sense of the whole transcription, examining one document, making a list of topics, abbreviating the topics as codes, turning these into categories, making a final list of these codes, bringing together the data from each category, and recoding the existing data. These methods have similarities to variations of code mapping (Saldaña, 2015), which is a way of organizing codes as well as auditing the analysis process. I used Saldaña's (2015) suggested four phases of code mapping including: listing all codes, categorizing those codes, re-categorizing the categories, and finally developing higher-level concepts. This method

was particularly helpful for identifying strong themes from the complex raw data that was collected. By using Saldaña's techniques along with the IPA approach which shares commonalities with other qualitative analysis processes, I ensured that this study was grounded in methodology that is accepted in the field. Systematic coding processes also allowed me to stay grounded in the theoretical framework of this study. Smagorinsky (2008) conceived the idea that codes should manifest theory and make a researcher's theoretical perspective explicit. For example, by choosing "confidence" as a code, I was able to reflect self-efficacy as a major principle of Social Cognitive Theory.

Finally, in step seven, the themes were brought together to relay the meaning of the participants' experiences. The nuances of the themes were interpreted and translated into a narrative account. This resulted in a detailed description of the participants' experiences according to my interpretation and supported by extracts from the transcripts (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). It also included practical implications for the results and the use of theory to situate further understanding of those implications. During this step, my analysis was also informed by Saldaña's (2015) concept of code weaving, which is the integration of codes and themes into narrative statements. Saldaña suggests that this interaction between codes can help identify major themes that provide a framework for a narrative description. Just as Creswell and Creswell (2017) and Smith and Shinebourne (2012) emphasize supporting interpretations with data from the transcripts, Saldaña urges qualitative researchers to return to the data to ensure support for the summary statements developed.

Throughout the data collection and analysis phase, reflexivity was an important component. This study operated under the assumption that "qualitative researchers

involve themselves in every aspect of their work." (Lichtman, 2012, p. 163). This assumption, along with the interpretative phenomenological and social cognitive theoretical frameworks, require that the researcher acknowledges the role of self throughout the study. Cohen and Crabtree (2006) suggest that reporting perspectives, values, and beliefs can help foster reflexivity. As a former reading specialist currently working with graduate students earning supplementary literacy certification, I came to this study with experience and knowledge on the topic. Consequently, I recognized possible bias in order to ensure trustworthiness of the results. In this case, I believe that the participants should have additional knowledge and skills as a result of their work to obtain supplemental literacy licensure and therefore I expected to find effective use of this expertise.

In addition to researcher reflexivity, validity strategies included member checking, peer debriefing, and the discussion of contradictory evidence. The purpose of these measures was to add credibility in a way that is appropriate for a qualitative study. Member checking helps to determine the accuracy of qualitative findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this study it occurred when I shared the themes that were identified after the interviews with five randomly selected participants via email. I gave a brief description of the themes that I identified and invited them to voluntarily comment on these findings. I did not receive any responses to my email to the five participants.

While reflexivity and member checking concern those who are already involved in the study, peer debriefing and discussion of contradictory evidence provide an external check of the research process (Creswell, 1998). In the study, peer debriefing took place after fourteen interviews were completed and central themes were identified. Discussing

the emerging themes with my peer debriefer and answering her questions added validity to the account and helped expand the audience that resonates with the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The peer debriefer for this study was a trusted colleague, an assistant professor of education, whom I have known for several years. She was chosen because of her extensive and relevant experience in early elementary classrooms both as a teacher and a teacher coach. Specifically, disclosure and discussion of contradictory evidence with the peer debriefer were expected to help differentiate actual themes about the participants from findings that may also apply to the general elementary education teacher population. The peer debriefer shared the insight that the themes appeared to be exclusive to the target population, but suggested further examination of the amount of time each participant has been teaching. She felt that this variable might bring about the same themes. Specifically, when discussing the use of research to support practice, she felt that this might be something that teachers might do with a certain number of years of experience. Upon further examination of the amount of participants' experience, as well as which teachers specifically mentioned the use of research, there did not appear to be a pattern that would suggest this.

Additionally, the trustworthiness of this study was enhanced by the conscious effort to include examples of disconfirming data that are unrepresentative of the whole (Smagorinsky, 2008). By highlighting outlying participant responses alongside overall trends in the sentiments shared by the others, overly simplistic conclusions can more easily be avoided. This practice of pointing out contrasting evidence can also aide in preventing a researcher's preconceived assumptions (Smagorinsky, 2008), which is especially important in a study that relies on researcher interpretation.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Summary of Participants

This study included sixteen participants from fourteen different school districts in Wisconsin. The table below shows basic information reported by each participant. Pseudonyms are used throughout and all quotations are taken directly from the interviews unless otherwise noted. All participants were female; seven of whom taught kindergarten, five of whom taught first grade, and four of whom taught second grade. The number of years of teaching experience ranged from five to twenty-nine, and the number of years with the literacy license ranged from one to twenty-seven. Two participants were from private school, while the rest taught in public schools. Of the districts they represented, three were large, seven were medium, and six were small. Five districts were in urban settings, eight were in suburban settings, and three were in rural settings.

Table 2 Participant Information

Name	Grade	District Size	District Type	Years Teaching	Years with License
Anna	K	Large	Public Urban	17	3
Allie	2	Medium	Public Suburban	10	7
Becca	1	Small	Public Rural	29	27
Brooke	1	Large	Public Urban	20	4
Claire	K	Small	Public Suburban	6	1
Christina	K	Small	Public Rural	19	1

Eva	1	Small	Private Urban	5	3
Kate	2	Medium	Public Suburban	14	8
Kim	K	Large	Public Urban	10	1
Kira	K	Medium	Public Suburban	10	2
Kenya	K	Small	Public Rural	8	2
Liz	2	Small	Private Urban	10	5
Mia	K	Medium	Public Suburban	5	1
Rose	1	Medium	Public Suburban	17	10
Samantha	2	Medium	Public Suburban	10	3
Sophia	1	Medium	Public Suburban	16	7

Participant Narratives

The participants in this study all reported several overarching ideas and rich details about their experiences. Their responses represented both a wide variety of perspectives as well as numerous overlapping components. Their responses are grouped below in order to report the ways in which they converge and diverge with clarity. First, in order to introduce some of the commonalities between individuals, findings about individuals are reported in groups including: those who received district support for

licensure programs and intend to stay in the classroom teacher role, those who showed evidence of acting as literacy leaders from within the classroom, those who returned to the classroom teacher role after previously acting as literacy professionals outside the classroom setting, and those who take on a dual role. Next, additional themes are reported that were identified based on the data collected across these groupings.

District Supported, Continue in the Classroom

Six of the participants, Anna, Claire, Christina, Eva, Samantha, and Sophia were motivated to earn the WI Reading Teacher license at least in part due to specific support from the school districts where they were employed. This support took the following forms:

- Courses taught on site at their school (Samantha)
- Courses paid for by the district partially or in full (Sophia, Eva, Christina, Anna, Claire)
- Certain courses required by district (Claire, Samantha)

For most participants, this district support served as one of several aspects that motivated them to earn the license, in addition to a desire to better meet student needs, a love for literacy, and a desire to increase their marketability. By contrast, one participant reported that district support was her main incentive to earn the license. Eva, who teaches first grade at a private urban district said:

> I had never thought that I would go back to school, it never even crossed my mind. It was one of those things where I was like, well, if they're paying for it, sure, I might as well jump at this opportunity.

Although this was her original motivation, after completing the Reading Teacher license, she continued the program to earn a Master's degree as well.

For the others within this group, district support was one of multiple reasons they made the decision to pursue supplementary literacy certification. Claire, who teaches kindergarten, works for a suburban public district that requires and pays for all of their early elementary classroom teachers to take two specific graduate level literacy intervention courses. Claire expressed that these two courses gave her a taste of deeper understanding of how children learn to read. Further, because the district-supported courses counted toward a Reading Teacher license, she felt like she not only desired to learn more, but that it also made sense to continue with the remaining courses required for licensure. She said, "I just want to make sure I was equipped with the best strategies, the best tools that I could use to help all students be successful and be confident in their abilities."

Similarly, Christina, Sophia, and Samantha, who teach kindergarten, first grade, and second grade respectively, all mentioned love of literacy and the desire to know more as motivation for earning the licensure in addition to district support. Although each of these participants teach different early elementary grades, they all articulated feeling that additional knowledge in literacy would be meaningful and useful. Christina works for one of the smallest public districts in this study which is in a rural setting that is geographically furthest from the rest of the districts. Uniquely, she emphasized feeling that earning the supplementary literacy license gave her more credibility with her students' parents. While the topic of gained confidence was touched on by all

participants, Christina was the only one to touch on how she felt she was perceived by parents.

Sophia teaches in a mid-sized suburban public district and spoke a lot about how teaching different grade levels can shift one's perspective. She reported earning the license while teaching fourth grade before moving down to first grade, which is the role she currently fulfills. Samantha teaches in a high performing suburban public district and talked about the way the courses she took influenced her classroom practices right away. Despite the differences in their circumstances and backgrounds, there was a lot of overlap in what Christina, Sophia, and Samantha reported. All three of these participants elaborated on the knowledge they gained during their preparation program, the importance of assessment, and specific examples of collaboration with colleagues.

Finally, these six participants all reported plans to continue to serve as classroom teachers with little to no desire to take on a different role. Sophia specified that she loves the ability to use her knowledge throughout the day and in different ways with her first graders. Eva articulated gratitude for the options the license gives her and the way in which it adds to her resume, but she feels it is much more important to apply what she knows to the classroom setting. Samantha, Christina, and Claire all spoke about the high value they place on their relationships with the students, and their concern that these relationships would not be as strong when taking on a different role. They felt that the type of bonds they experience with their students currently would not be replicated if they were only seeing students for brief portions of a school day. They also expressed appreciation for working with children rather than adults. Additionally, Claire reported being approached by administration about applying for a reading specialist role when the

position in her building became available. Along with her desire to stay in the kindergarten teacher role to continue working directly with students, she expressed not feeling ready for that kind of change. She felt that she hadn't had enough years of experience in the classroom and lacked variety in the age range she had taught.

The reasons behind Anna's plans to stay in the classroom differed from other participants in some ways. She teaches kindergarten at a large urban public district and, like others in this group, her district supported her process of earning the license. For her, this was in the form of a cohort model completely comprised of teachers within this district. In addition to the factors mentioned by others, she expressed a desire to stay in the classroom because she wants to stay in her district. However, in order to do so, she feels she must stay in the classroom because of a lack of opportunities to fill other roles within that district. She reported feeling confused and frustrated with her district, saying:

> Okay well (School District), you started this program, you paid for me to get this license. What do you want me to do with it? I always assumed they would create some positions that needed that licensure, but they haven't.

She was the only participant to specifically articulate feeling like being a classroom teacher wasn't using her knowledge to the highest potential, and yet she plans to stay in the classroom because she wants to stay in her district and feels like she is having a positive impact on her students.

Leading From Within the Classroom

While all participants reported some degree of literacy leadership, Kate, Kira, Kenya, and Rose stood out as taking on literacy leadership roles as a major component of how they utilize their expertise. Kate, who teaches second grade in a mid-sized suburban

public district, also teaches as an adjunct professor for a local university. Teachers in her district are mandated to take the two literacy intervention courses that she teaches on-site. Kate had a lot of insight about the complexities of teaching colleagues in compulsory coursework. While she reported strong beliefs in the philosophy behind the framework she teaches, she is also accepting of new, sometimes conflicting research that exists, as well as the reality of working with adult learners who, for a variety of reasons, may not want to be there. She said she encourages teachers to remember that it is always useful to add to your professional toolbox. Speaking about her own instruction and learning environment, Kate stressed the importance of teacher language and questioning techniques to "allow the children to think for themselves and also become independent". She credits this as a major outcome of the learning she did when she earned the literacy license and reported using this principle throughout her day and across various subject areas in her classroom.

Similarly, Kira, who teaches kindergarten at a different mid-sized suburban public district, has taught as an adjunct professor at a different private college in Wisconsin. Interestingly, the course she taught was on the same literacy intervention framework as Kate's courses. She talked about the ways in which the knowledge she gained from her Masters and literacy licensure program and her experience both in the kindergarten classroom and as a college instructor gave her a powerful combination of confidence and expertise. This has affected her practices of assessment, creation of student goals, collaboration with colleagues, and parent interaction.

While Kenya and Rose do not have formal positions as literacy leaders in their schools, they both shared multiple ways in which they informally provide literacy

leadership among their colleagues. Kenya recently moved to a small rural public district after several years teaching at a large urban public district. She described a moment early in her career when she was sitting with a group of students for guided reading and thought to herself, "I don't know what I'm doing." This compelled her to go to graduate school for a Master's degree and Reading Teacher license. Having taught kindergarten in varied settings, she talked about the large contrast in her current understanding and instructional practices compared to before she gained additional literacy expertise. Because of her background in literacy, she serves as an unofficial mentor to her colleagues, some of whom have taken the opportunity to come in to observe Kenya's literacy instruction, while others have come to her for specific literacy-related advice.

Rose, who has had the Reading Teacher license for the longest of all the participants, teaches first grade at a mid-sized suburban public school. She talked about the highly collaborative nature of the faculty at her school, which has given her the opportunity to share her expertise alongside colleagues with expertise in different areas. She said that her background in literacy makes her feel more comfortable sharing her opinions. She also described using her expertise while working at a university literacy intervention center, while helping colleagues, and while hosting student teachers. Throughout the interview, Rose mentioned multiple times that it is difficult to separate which practices and beliefs she has specifically from the licensure program as opposed to being from her years of experience, her personal background, or simply who she is as a teacher.

Kate, Kira, and Rose all said they would be open to moving out of the classroom and into formal literacy leadership roles, but only if the circumstances were ideal. All

three indicated valuing certain aspects of being a classroom teacher as well as a recognition of benefits to taking on a role outside of the classroom. Rose said, “When you give up ownership of your own classroom, I think there’s an opportunity for a greater impact. If you’re a coach, that’s really impactful, and changing the practice of a larger amount of people.” She also expressed feeling that once a teacher leaves the classroom, it is difficult to come back, which she is hesitant to do because she is happy in her current position. Unlike most of the other participants, Rose mentioned her personal life as influencing her career choices, stating, “I don’t want to be away from my kids if I’m not enjoying my job” and concluding that she is likely to stay “until something major happens in my life that causes me to look somewhere else.” Kenya, on the other hand, does not see herself wanting to move out of the classroom. She said, “I went into the Master's program knowing that I never really wanted to leave the classroom. And so my purpose was always to use what I was learning in order to strengthen my professional practice as well as what my students were learning.”

Kim was a unique participant who seemed to share many of the characteristics of individuals across groups previously discussed, without completely fitting in with any of them. As a kindergarten teacher in a large public, urban district, the main theme to her reported experiences, practices, and beliefs was flexibility. She decided to earn the literacy license so that she could learn more about meeting the literacy needs of her students and was especially encouraged to do so by a colleague. She felt that she didn’t learn enough in her undergraduate program and that the practicum experiences she had in her Master’s and literacy licensure program was considerably more useful than the coursework. Kim reported feeling excited to use her new knowledge of foundational

literacy skills to help students meet literacy goals and to help parents understand literacy development. She said she is open to staying in the classroom or taking on a different literacy role depending on how burnt out she feels, noting the extra stress of being a classroom teacher during the circumstances brought on by COVID-19.

Classroom Returners

Four of the participants, Allie, Liz, Mia, and Becca served as reading professionals outside the classroom setting at one point and then returned to the classroom teacher role. Allie and Mia, who teach at different mid-sized suburban public districts were both temporarily moved back into the classroom teacher role for the 2020-2021 school year due to COVID-19 district adaptations. They both had the unique experience of moving from the literacy professional role back into the classroom teacher role by necessity rather than by choice. They both fully expect this to be a temporary change, which means they have a slightly different perspective than other participants who believe they will stay in the classroom unless later on they make the conscious choice not to.

Both spoke about this unique time as being positive in certain ways. For example, Allie and Mia both talked about how taking on the classroom teacher role has changed their relationships with their colleagues. Mia, who is co-teaching kindergarten and first grade as well as providing math intervention, described a sharing of knowledge and expertise with more give and take than she experienced in her prior reading teacher role. Although she has the Reading Teacher license expertise, she is newer to the curriculum used for universal instruction in these grades, so she relies on her colleagues to share their experience. At the same time, she is able to share her literacy expertise with these

colleagues, specifically aspects of an intervention framework and use of current literacy research. She spoke about a sense of urgency serving as a catalyst for increased collaboration in light of the challenges of providing education during a worldwide pandemic. She shared:

> So I think, you know, I've always wanted to learn from my colleagues, but this year, especially, it's nice to collaborate and see how we can both help move these kids forward and learn all that they need to learn.

Allie, who had been a reading interventionist and English as a Second Language teacher, was temporarily moved into a second grade classroom teacher role this year. She emphasized the importance of assessment and use of research to inform her practice both inside and outside of the classroom setting. Like Mia, she shared insights about changes to her interaction with colleagues in this different role. Allie reported willingness to use her expertise to help her second grade team, but shared that it was difficult to navigate at times. She said, “Sharing expertise with colleagues shouldn't be so challenging. And yet it is quite challenging in the education profession, and you know, I'm not exactly sure why that is.” When asked if the sharing of expertise was easier for her in the interventionist role or the classroom teacher role, she was quick to say that it was much easier as a classroom teacher because she believed she gained respect for being “in the trenches”.

By contrast, Liz and Becca decided to return to the classroom teacher role on their own. For several years, Liz served as a reading specialist at a large urban charter school with a high percentage of English Language Learners in the student population. She reported entering this role with the intention of sharing her knowledge with teachers, who

then could effectively help students. However, over time, more and more responsibilities were added to her role: making curriculum decisions, providing student intervention, coaching teachers, and managing schoolwide literacy resources. She felt that she was no longer able to support teachers in a way that was effective due to the burden of her other responsibilities, saying, “It was too much and I wasn’t able to do it with fidelity. I wasn’t able to do it to the level that I thought teachers deserve.” Thus, Liz decided to take a break from formal literacy leadership and return to the classroom setting at a small urban private school where she teaches second grade. She articulated many different ways that she uses her literacy expertise in this role and feels that the learning she did to earn the literacy license changed everything she does as a classroom teacher.

Similarly, Becca chose to come back to the classroom teacher role after serving as a literacy interventionist, student teacher supervisor, and literacy coach. In her nearly 30 years of experience in education, she gained expertise through her licensure program, additional literacy intervention and coaching training, experience, and the use of her knowledge and skills across varying circumstances and roles. She felt that her literacy expertise “affects everything” she does in the classroom. When describing her career path, Becca shared:

> I really wanted to be back in the classroom because that's really, if I had to say the reason why I got my Master's degree, it was to be better at teaching reading, so that I could benefit all the children in the classroom. So I've kind of come full circle.

She commented positively about how being a classroom teacher allows her to work with students of all different levels, which was not the case when she was an interventionist.

Although she credited much of her ability to her specialized literacy knowledge, Becca articulated the complexity of potentially mandating supplemental literacy licenses or required training, stressing factors such as passion, desire, and context as affecting the impact.

Dual Role

Brooke teaches first grade at a large urban public district. While she reported many experiences, practices, and beliefs that overlap with the other participants, her situation is unique among this group because she currently takes on a dual role as a first grade co-teacher and a literacy coach, with a portion of her time allotted for both. She was compelled to earn the supplementary literacy licensure when her principal approached her about an open coaching position which required the WI Reading Teacher license. This model of classroom-teacher-as-coach is used across her district, allowing coaches to come together for professional development and collaboration on a monthly basis, which was a particular highlight Brooke identified. When asked how she uses her expertise while teaching literacy, she said, "If I just summed it up in one word, it would be *intentionality*." This theme of intentionality came up over and over in Brooke's interview, whether she was talking about understanding the progression of literacy skills, matching students to appropriate goals, or the use of intentional language across the school day. She also emphasized the ways in which her dual roles inform one another. As a coach, she is able to share her expertise and continues to add to it by keeping up with current research. At the same time, she reported that being in the classroom and using the district-approved resources on a daily basis to provide universal instruction in first grade keeps her relevant.

Themes

While each individual participant had a unique reality as a classroom teacher with supplementary literacy licensure, commonalities were identified. The prominent themes present across cases are reported below and include: Use of knowledge for helping others, valuing the individual, going beyond the curriculum, and paths to expertise.

Theme One: Use of Knowledge for Helping Others

All participants discussed new knowledge they gained as a result of their preparation programs for supplementary literacy licensure. While most participants discussed gaining literacy content knowledge in their courses as well as in required field experiences, Kim was an outlier who articulated placing a much higher value on her practicum experiences than the graduate courses that were not connected to field work. Whether it was perceived as being gained through content courses or practicum, this new knowledge took many different forms including:

- Growth in understanding of specific components of literacy such as phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension
- Refined knowledge about child development and the progression of literacy skills
- Addition of and variation in instructional strategies
- The ability to recognize, assess, and address particular student difficulties in literacy
- Practical use of classic and contemporary research in the fields of education and literacy
- General insight into one's own practice

This list of gained knowledge reflects both highly specific skills and resources, as well as much more general concepts and principles. Most participants reported that working toward the literacy license added to their expertise in both ways, and that they utilize both kinds of knowledge in their current practice. Further, some of the participants also shared insights on the reciprocity between the specific and the general. For example, on a small scale, Kira talked about how her learning changed the way she taught guided reading groups. In a more universal sense, she reported being more aware of reflecting on the reasons behind her instructional decision-making. She said:

> I'm more purposeful in my activities… I'm not just going to do a guided reading group with four kids in it because we should have four kids at this level. But I'm pulling this group because this is what they need… I know more about why I'm doing things and not just pulling groups because I'm supposed to pull groups right now.

Participants also reported building their knowledge based through study of the elements of literacy and the progression of literacy skills. Samantha said, "One of the things that I learned the most about was the necessary components of literacy." Within this continuum of skills, the specific pieces most often mentioned by participants were phonemic awareness and phonics. Rose shared her perspective on what she learned about how to teach phonics:

> Having the reading license really gave me the things that I needed to do phonics systematically in my classroom and just have a good progression of when students are introduced to different concepts and how to roll out a yearlong curriculum in first grade.

Anna also illustrated her understanding of the progression of literacy skills and the value she places on phonemic awareness by saying, “So if I can get them really good at the phonemic awareness stuff, then decoding and phonics will be that much easier.”

Another way that participants reported building their knowledge base during their literacy licensure programs was through the use of research to inform practice. Nearly all participants talked about learning about specific researchers and literacy leaders. More importantly, they articulated how they used this research to improve their instruction as well as how they continue to seek out and use research to inform their decisions after completing their licensure programs. Samantha shared:

> It also helped me to know who was kind of leading the way in literacy instruction so that I can keep up myself. Now that I'm out of school, I'm going back to Allington, all the time. And Peter Johnston, and you know, a lot of the big name people that I learned about - Marie Clay, all those people that are super important in literacy instruction.

This perception was shared many times by several participants reporting their continued use of theory and research to inform practice in both small and large ways. For example, Allie mentioned how Richard Allington’s (2002) work has influenced her beliefs and practices surrounding volume of text. Claire talked about the ways in which Marie Clay’s (2005) principle of using the known to reach the unknown has impacted her instruction across subject areas in kindergarten. Similarly, Kira also referenced Marie Clay, saying, “I just go back to Clay a lot... like promoting independence for students…and being aware of how much support I’m giving.” Speaking about her experience learning about current research in her literacy licensure program, Anna said, “It was so refreshing and

invigorating to read current research again." Several participants also talked about how gaining knowledge about literacy research helped them keep up with current research after finishing school. Many discussed doing book studies, contributing to literacy groups on social media, and attending conferences.

In addition to the nature of the new knowledge gained, the common thread throughout this theme was the way in which this new knowledge was used: to meet student needs (which will be discussed in the following two themes), to share with colleagues, and to share with parents. In other words, they used their new knowledge to help different groups of people.

Colleagues. All participants discussed ways in which they share their literacy expertise with their colleagues, many of whom stressed the importance of valuing the different kinds of expertise that exist among their peers. Illustrating this belief, Rose said, "Everyone has their own kind of expertise… everyone on the team is really an expert." Several participants mentioned regular collaborative meetings and co-planning with grade level teams as well as other professionals within their districts, including English Language Learner teachers, Special Education teachers, coaches, and literacy specialists. Samantha talked about having the opportunity to lead a professional development session about phonological awareness with her peers. Mia discussed giving and receiving advice about curriculum as well as being asked to research a writing intervention for the grade level to consider. Liz talked about teaching multiple teachers how to do benchmark assessments with their students. Several participants gave examples of supporting teacher peers when they moved to a position teaching a new grade level.

Attitudes about collaboration were generally favorable among the participants, although a few shared examples of when it was more difficult to share their knowledge with colleagues. Kira spoke about the difficulties that sometimes arise when colleagues have different interpretations of what the district expects of them. She articulated a general sense of giving one another the benefit of the doubt, but also added that there's a "difference between sounding like a know-it-all, and trying to support". Anna expressed frustration with the divide between lower and upper grade teachers, sharing her perception that there is too much compartmentalization. She also talked about false starts for collaboration initiatives, giving an example of a literacy committee that was discontinued, which she felt limited her opportunity to share her knowledge. Discussing the variation in opinions that exists among teachers, Kate said, "Part of my program taught us how to have difficult conversations, but I have to say that sometimes it's still really hard to practice that." She conveyed the feeling that it is more important to add to her colleagues' toolboxes than to try to change their beliefs about what they are already comfortable with.

Sophia talked about the difficulty of sharing her expertise and collaborating with colleagues during the circumstances brought on by COVID-19, but also stressed feeling that it is now more important to do so than ever before. She said "When you can collaborate, it makes you feel more comfortable that you're doing the right thing." This perspective serves an example of a sentiment that was shared by many participants: that there is usually not just one "right" way when it comes to literacy learning, and that no matter how much expertise you have, there is always more to learn. Overall, all participants shared that they have had several formal and informal opportunities to share

their expertise with colleagues and appeared to value the ability to add to their colleagues' knowledge.

Parents/Families. The other way in which participants talked about sharing their expertise was with parents and families. It was clear that all individuals valued communication and cooperation with parents in order to best serve students. Many participants also expressed increased confidence in their ability to effectively communicate with parents about literacy due to their additional expertise. There were three main ways in which this was done: Explanation of reasons behind literacy activities at school, sharing insight and evidence about what their child knows, and giving advice on what can be done at home.

Many participants felt that due to their additional expertise in literacy, they were better able to explain to parents the reasoning behind their instructional decisions. Kenya described a specific example, sharing that parents have often questioned the use of phonetic spelling in her kindergarten classroom. She was able to convey the importance of this phase of spelling development and felt that her advanced coursework gave her the knowledge to handle these types of inquiries from parents.

Several participants talked about the need to share assessment data and evidence with parents. Teacher knowledge of the progression of literacy skills was also a component that was widely noted and connected to this aspect of assessment. Kira talked about how she needed to deeply understand the students, which she did through a variety of assessments and one-on-one conferencing techniques. Without doing this, she argued, she would have only been able to give parents a surface level answer about their child's

literacy skills rather than robust understanding about their particular literacy skills and specifically where she would like to help them grow.

When giving advice about how to support literacy at home, participants reported giving parents ideas and resources. They also talked about dismantling misconceptions. For example, Claire mentioned encouraging her students' parents to move away from drilling their kindergarten children and instead gave them ideas for fun activities. Sophia talked about how many parents are concerned about how fast their children can read, whereas she tried to educate them about the importance of comprehension over speed. Overall, the participants spoke positively about how their additional expertise has impacted their ability to share and partner with parents for the benefit of their students.

Theme Two: Valuing the Individual

The second theme identified was the complex way in which the participants valued their students as individuals. This came up across all interviews and in a few main ways:

- understanding the progression of literacy skills;
- identifying where individual students are on that continuum of knowledge and skills;
- being able to respond to assessment with targeted instruction;
- fostering student independence; and
- encouraging engagement and a love of school.

It appeared as though participants saw understanding of the literacy progression as a precursor to individualizing instruction. Many of them discussed the links between

understanding the literacy continuum, using targeted assessments, and implementing differentiated instruction. Kenya said:

> I definitely have an improved understanding of looking at the child as a whole in their reading development, rather than in small isolated areas… I have a clear understanding of where I want my students to be developmentally in literacy and I also know how to identify where they are and where I want to take them.

Sophia talked about the importance of recognizing and responding to individual strengths and weaknesses. Describing how her expertise changed the way she taught, she said, "Even though we as a class may be focusing on this, I can pull students into small groups and give them what they still aren't comfortable with."

Describing how she met individual needs within the framework of a workshop model required curriculum, Kira said:

> I feel like the heart of the work is the time when they go off to read. And that's when some teachers don't know what to do. But I feel well equipped to progress my students forward in their reading, other than just a mini lesson that maybe gets at like 50% of the kids, as opposed to trying to reach all kids and wherever they are in their learning journey.

Several participants mentioned the use of assessment and how this gave them the ability to meet individual needs. Giving an example of a particularly helpful course on assessment, Samantha said:

> I have that knowledge base and I feel like that helped change my teaching right away after that class, because it was like, yeah, I really should be doing a lot of different things for all different kids because everybody is such a different learner.

Rose emphasized how the assessment knowledge she has allows her to pinpoint particular areas of difficulty, such as visual processing, phonological awareness, etc. She said, "Knowing that a kid is struggling doesn't really help you unless you know exactly what area they're struggling in." Kira talked about the goals for assessment and how her view of assessment in general has changed over time. She shared her belief that assessment should be used to move kids forward to the next step in their unique learning path. Kim shared this sentiment, emphasizing a new understanding of individualized goal setting that came out of her graduate work.

Multiple participants also discussed how this expertise of a development of expected literacy skills gave them insight on the Response to Intervention process and when it was appropriate to make referrals for Special Education. Sophia talked about how gaining understanding about phonemic awareness allowed her to revisit those specific skills with the particular students who needed it.

Individualization also came up in several interviews as being a key aspect in student engagement. Participants talked about how important it is to know students well enough to be able to instill a passion for learning and a love of literacy. "I don't think I was as student centered as I thought I was." This is how Kate described her practice before earning the literacy license. However, after her advanced coursework and experience, she said, "I have learned how to really research the child as a reader." She went on to talk about how her learning changed the way she used language to promote student independence and motivation. Several participants also talked about matching books to readers and the role this plays in fostering a love of literacy.

Theme Three: Going Beyond the Curriculum

Another clear theme across the data collected was going beyond the prescribed curriculum. The teachers in this study all touched on this to some degree, many of whom directly talked about how and why they added to what their respective districts required of them. It appeared as though the participants were able to go beyond the curriculum due to a combination of the following components: new literacy knowledge and skills, increased confidence, and leverage of assessment to meet individual student needs.

Speaking about the knowledge she gained in her literacy licensure program, Samantha said:

> And it's also allowed me to not follow a program. Because I do have the expertise, I don't have to necessarily just march through the program, day by day. I can use some of the pieces that I know are best practice with my kids. And it's gotten them a lot farther than just marching through those lessons.

Similarly, Liz said:

> Teachers get really stuck on curriculum and coverage and they don't think about needing to use more than just [specific curriculum program]. You have to be flexible, to be able to move in and out of the curriculum to some degree.

She stressed the importance of doing what students need. Kenya echoed this, describing how she taught before going through her literacy licensure program, “I really relied heavily on the scripted curriculum that we had and I didn't know if we needed to go back and revisit something. I just kept plugging through.”

Nearly all participants brought up that they had experienced growth in confidence through their licensure programs and that this directly carried over to their professional practice and ability to go beyond the curriculum. For several teachers, this meant having

a large toolbox of knowledge and ideas, and the confidence to try new techniques. For others this meant relying less on what was mandated to cover, and more on their beliefs and experiences to guide their decisions. For others this meant feeling prepared to answer questions about literacy from students, faculty peers, parents, and administrators. Additionally, one participant mentioned no longer being intimidated when students entering her class were not where they needed to be in literacy. She used the example of starting this academic year with a group of second graders who had missed out on a large chunk of first grade, saying, "When the kids came to us a lot lower than what we're expecting in second grade, I was okay with that because I knew what to do."

Participants also talked about going beyond the curriculum in innovative ways. For example, Samantha reported feeling strongly that she should be the one providing literacy intervention to her struggling students rather than an interventionist, reading specialist, or at times, a Special Education teacher. She stood up for this belief, supported her viewpoint with research and student data, and was ultimately given administrative permission to provide intervention to a number of her students needing it. Similarly, Kim reported using an intervention that she had experienced as part of her licensure program field work in her classroom setting, saying, "I knew we weren't supposed to, but I started using some of the things that were in that curriculum." This illustrates participants' ability to manage various curriculum resources with their specialized literacy knowledge to meet the needs of their students.

Theme Four: Paths to Expertise

All participants expressed the benefits that resulted from having additional literacy expertise and agreed that earning the supplementary license would be beneficial

for all early elementary classroom teachers, as well as those who teach older students. A fourth theme identified was that there are different pathways to this valuable licensure as well as barriers to it. As previously discussed, the participants represented in the study had a variety of reasons for pursuing the Reading Teacher license and experienced various levels of support from their employing districts, with more than half of the participants reporting that they received financial support. Nearly all of the participants believed time and money are the biggest barriers to teachers adding to their expertise, and specifically to earning the Reading Teacher license. Illustrating the situation in Wisconsin, Rose said, "It's hard the way that the licensing laws have changed, having your Master's really isn't helpful financially… it's just not really that lucrative now."

While all participants placed a high value on the knowledge they gained in their literacy licensure preparation programs, more than half specifically emphasized feeling that their undergraduate preparation was inadequate. Allie said, "I don't feel like I was truly prepared to help students learn to read." Thinking back to her first year teaching, she said, "That was a disaster." Based on her undergraduate experience, Samantha said, "When you get your bachelor's degree you aren't even taught how to teach reading." Rose has had several undergraduate student teachers throughout her career and has noticed holes in their understanding of what she considers to be relatively basic literacy knowledge such as short vowels. Therefore, she believes "there should be an additional emphasis on reading in undergrad, or a very strong push to have additional education in that area." Multiple participants specified having a lack of knowledge in phonics before undertaking additional coursework for licensure, some of whom acknowledged that this may be a reflection of the continuously swinging pendulum in mainstream beliefs about

literacy instruction. Liz talked about her coworkers feeling ill prepared and having gaps in their knowledge about literacy following initial licensure programs. With several years of experience in inner city schools and with English Language Learners, she reflected on the lack of preparation she felt she received specifically for meeting the needs of the population she works with now.

Several participants reported feeling like the Reading Teacher license would be beneficial for all early elementary classroom teachers while also acknowledging the complexities that exist beyond the issues of time and money. Kenya shared her perception that well-roundedness is sometimes prioritized in undergraduate programs, therefore there isn't time to spend on everything that needs to be learned about literacy. Kenya also articulated an appreciation for the years of teaching experience she had before her Masters and literacy licensure program, feeling that she would not have gained as much in her advanced coursework if she had not been able to put her new learning in context. She said, "There were a lot of things that I wouldn't have been able to reflect on and grow from without the teaching experience beforehand." Similarly, Kira also touched on the importance of experience and context when she discussed the need to avoid overloading new teachers when they may not be ready for the types of things learned in Masters and literacy licensure programs. Becca shared this stance, emphasizing that although she felt much better equipped due to her literacy expertise, she would not advocate requiring supplementary literacy licensure for early elementary teachers, saying:

> I think that you also have to have that passion for it, and the desire to keep learning. Because not all educators want that. And I think that if you make it a mandate, you'll get kickback and not the openness to wanting to learn.

Allie talked about how trends in education change over time, making the argument that new trends and research will always continue to evolve throughout all teachers' careers regardless of how effective their undergraduate programs were. For example, she noted student data analysis as something that is the standard in education today, but was not a focus in her undergraduate program over a decade ago. She appeared to accept this, not as a fault of the program, but rather as a fact of the education field in general. She admitted uncertainty about the solution to this issue, but suggested focused professional development within school districts as a more viable option than relying on the unrealistic possibility that all teachers will go back to school for a Masters or literacy licensure program.

As they looked back, many participants lamented the years they taught without what they felt was the necessary expertise to meet the needs of their students, but they also acknowledged that earning the literacy license is not easy or straightforward. Brooke summarized the views of most participants saying,

> I haven't met a person who really is opposed to learning... usually it's, "I don't have the time" or "It's too expensive". You know, so if you can break down some of those barriers and make it more accessible, I think more people would take you up on it.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Overview

This study investigated the experiences, practices, and beliefs of early elementary classroom teachers who have supplementary literacy licensure. Chapter One introduced the research study and provided a rationale for further study of this topic. Chapter Two articulated a review of literature related to the issue and a theoretical framework for the study utilizing interpretive phenomenology and social cognitive theory. Chapter Three presented a detailed design of the study including a description of the methodological components. Chapter Four summarized the data gathered from the interviews. Chapter Five provides a discussion of the research analysis.

Interpretation of Results

Several patterns were identified in the interview responses of the participants including:

- use of knowledge for helping others;
- valuing the individual;
- going beyond the curriculum; and
- paths to expertise.

The interpretation of these themes were woven together resulting in the following analysis of major conclusions of this study.

Strengths of the Phenomenon

Evaluation of the data suggests several benefits to early elementary classroom teachers having supplemental literacy licensure and the additional literacy expertise that comes with it. Overall, participants reported feeling more prepared to do their jobs

effectively. This predominant perception encompassed a wide variety of skills and practices, the impact of which is extensive. They had better understanding of literacy development and were more knowledgeable about assessing literacy skills. They were also more equipped to implement instruction that engaged students and met their collective and individual literacy needs. The principles behind their practices, such as using research and data to guide instructional decision-making or helping students build on the known to reach the unknown, also impacted their teaching in other subject areas. Additionally, these teachers were more prepared to involve parents and interact with colleagues regarding literacy in numerous and varied ways. These characteristics suggest that the expertise of the individual teachers does not remain contained within the classroom setting, rather it seems to spread to the wider school community. This extension of knowledge appears to occur across all of the school districts included in this study regardless of demographic attributes such as racial make-up, percentage of students who are economically disadvantaged, and location, size, or type of the school district. This aspect of literacy knowledge proliferation could be examined in further research studies.

Challenges of the Phenomenon

While several positive aspects of this phenomenon of staying in the classroom while holding additional literacy certification were identified, this study revealed challenges as well. All teachers discussed the time and money spent on programs to earn licensure. When resources are utilized for one initiative, logically they cannot also be used for other purposes at the same time. Whether individual teachers or districts are paying for literacy licensure programs, those are funds that are not spent elsewhere.

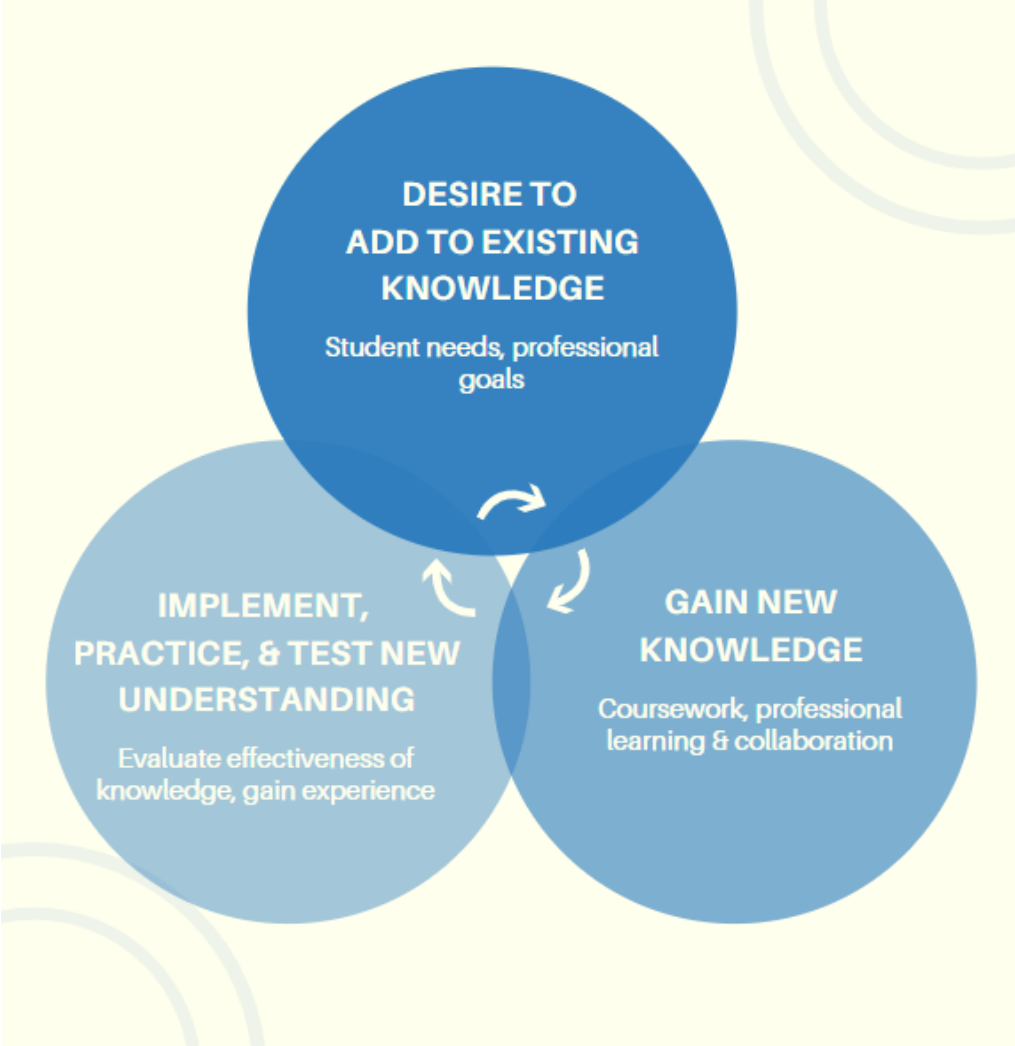
Similarly, because all of the teachers in this study had to spend a significant amount of time on coursework and practicum experiences in order to earn supplementary certification, they were not able to devote that time to other personal or professional endeavors at that point. It is very difficult to even begin to measure or quantify the impact of adding to a teacher's literacy expertise as opposed to purchasing flexible seating furniture or paying for hand-on science supplies. It is impossible to compare the impact of a teacher's extended time and focus on a literacy licensure program versus a culturally responsive teaching program. These are the decisions that educational leaders must weigh because time and money cannot be ignored as factors in professional development.

In addition to the costs of earning licensure, an interesting challenge that came to light was the issue of school administrators being able to move teachers into different positions because of their credentials. When a teacher is certified to teach subjects or grade levels they do not desire to teach, they open themselves up to potentially being moved into those positions against their will. In my own experience, this fear is much more common regarding the grade range of regular education licenses issued than in the literacy specialty. For example, in Wisconsin a teacher who only wants to teach kindergarten or first grade may be compelled to earn the Early Childhood license which applies to teaching students from birth to third grade, rather than the Elementary and Middle School license which applies to kindergarten through ninth grade. Legally they could not fill a position over third grade. For teachers who very much want to stay in the classroom setting, holding a supplemental literacy license makes them vulnerable to administrative staffing decisions. In a sense, this appears to be the other side of the coin regarding teacher marketability.

Cycle of Continuous Learning

Of the major themes identified in this study, an overarching conclusion is that a continuous cycle of learning is at the core of the participants' experiences, practices, and beliefs. This is represented in the graphic in Figure 2.

Figure 2 The Cycle of Continuous Learning



This cycle begins with a desire to know more. Over and over, participants voiced the pervasive nature of literacy knowledge and listed the ways students and teachers can use their literacy knowledge in other academic areas throughout the school day, as well as beyond the school setting. These teachers sought new knowledge in order to fill gaps

in their students' understanding, to learn how to supplement required curricula, and to gain better understanding of literacy development and instruction. They recognized the ways in which their knowledge and skills affected their students' school experiences and wanted to increase their expertise to improve upon what they were already doing. This was true even for those who were partially motivated to do licensure programs due to district support.

This leads to the next phase in the model which involves gaining new knowledge. For the participants in this study, the main avenue through which this occurred was graduate level coursework. By completing their courses and other certification requirements, they each added to their existing literacy knowledge base. Because they each went into their programs with different circumstances, contexts, experiences, and levels of expertise, this common task of earning supplementary literacy certification through graduate coursework looked different for each person. Some teachers identified specific areas of particular growth and learning in relation to content such as phonics or guided reading. Others noted that their practicum experiences throughout the licensure program gave them opportunities for experiences and growth in implementing interventions. The wide variety of program formats and requirements provided diversity in learning experiences in addition to the numerous demographic differences across the participants. The common thread across all cases was additional knowledge being gained and valued. While this could be related to the willingness to be interviewed for this study, there were no participants who expressed feeling that they did not learn anything new and useful while seeking the literacy license. All participants placed high value on the

knowledge they gained during their licensure programs and articulated numerous ways that this new learning impacts their practice.

After gaining new knowledge, these teachers then went on to implement, practice, and test their new understanding in their job setting. This included trial and error of new instructional techniques, new focus on specific literacy content, collaboration with colleagues, and observation of students with a new perspective. Central to this phase is reflective practice. Teachers reported thinking about their practice in a new way, with new awareness of the continuum of literacy skills, a new focus on students as individuals, and confidence with the use of assessments to determine instructional decisions. Because of their different backgrounds and contexts, this naturally was a larger shift in practice for some than it was for others. Several participants talked about the importance of experience and how having the opportunity to utilize literacy knowledge and skills over time allowed them to hone their craft.

During this phase of implementation of new knowledge, teachers reported the identification of new areas in which they desired more knowledge. By putting their new knowledge into practice and reflectively observing the outcomes, they were able to evaluate what was working and what needed to be adjusted. Thus new opportunities for learning are revealed and the cycle repeats. All participants mentioned multiple ways that they continue to add to their knowledge. For some, this was formal and in the form of additional courses or training. For many other participants, this was less formal and included learning through individual professional reading, membership in professional groups, book studies with colleagues, and literacy conferences. Again, this may be a

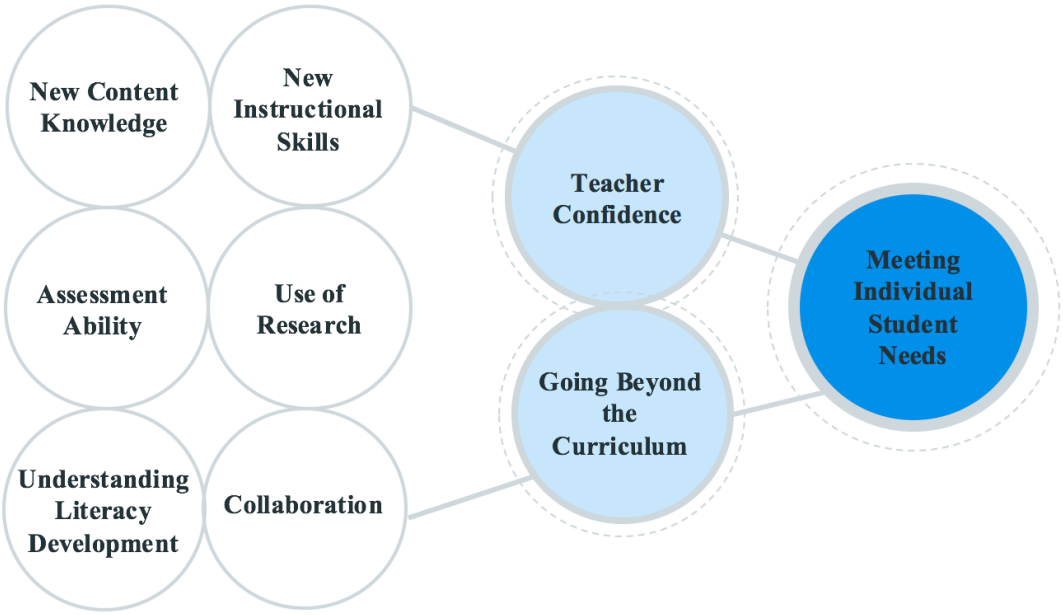
characteristic of the type of person who agrees to be interviewed for a study like this, but there were no participants who gave any indication that they were done learning.

This notion of teachers going through a cycle of learning is not new. Models of continuous improvement and professional learning in education exist and are already used to inform professional development in schools (DuFour & DuFour, 2013; Hirsh & Crow, 2016). However, the fact that early elementary classroom teachers with supplemental literacy certification fall into this pattern is worth noting. It is possible that the new literacy learning done by the teachers in this study gave them better understanding of the outcomes they were looking for in their students, which allowed them to more clearly see when these learning outcomes are not being achieved. It appears to be a case of the more one knows, the better they understand how much they still do not know.

Contributing Factors for Meeting Individual Student Needs

Another outstanding conclusion resulting from this study is the ability of the participating teachers to go beyond the prescribed curriculum in order to meet individual student needs. The results suggest a combination of factors that allows this to take place, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Contributing Factors for Meeting Individual Student Needs



Starting on the left side of Figure 3, the white circles represent the participant characteristics that were reported in the Results section, many of which are active in the Continuous Learning Cycle in Figure 2: new content knowledge, new instructional skills, assessment ability, use of research, understanding of literacy development, and collaboration. Combined, these essential components allow for two characteristics that are at the center of the experience of this phenomenon: teacher confidence and the ability to go beyond the prescribed curriculum. All of the teachers in this study expressed renewed confidence in their skills and understanding. This is significant considering the theoretical framework for this research. Bandura's (2010) assertation that a higher level of self-efficacy is connected to greater effort, persistence, and accomplishment, regardless of actual ability appears to apply to this group of teachers. Additionally, feeling more equipped to do their jobs was connected to the participants' ability to rely more heavily on their expertise than on following a curriculum. This is not to say that

these teachers ignored their schools' mandated resources. Rather, they were able to supplement these materials when they recognized a need to do so. Anna illustrated this pattern within the participants, saying:

> This (licensure program) gave me the knowledge to then be confident in my choices... that if the canned curriculum was garbage, I wasn't going to do it if it didn't actually back up what all the research was saying and what I was seeing was successful with my students.

Teachers' articulation of this aspect of their practice provides evidence of two factors: being able to diagnose a need to supplement curriculum materials and experiences, and the ability to plan and implement learning experience to accomplish this goal. Thus, the combination of teacher confidence and going beyond the curriculum leads to the top circle in Figure 3: meeting individual student needs. Ultimately, this is the culmination of all the preceding components. A synthesis of the perceived experiences, practices, and beliefs of the participants reveals that literacy expertise allows teachers to meet individual student needs. Sophia said:

> Now I really understand how beneficial it is to look at each child individually as a reader… just understanding that each child is different and their needs are different... And the idea of treating them as an individual, and setting those goals for them specifically - just for them.

Liz shared this sentiment, simply and clearly saying, "I'm doing what my students need."

Connection to the Existing Literature

The findings of this study were generally consistent with the existing related literature from the themes identified in Chapter Two. Each of the themes originally

identified in the literature review are revisited below in order to situate the results of this study within this context.

Teacher Expertise Matters

The results of the interviews conducted supported this theme in multiple ways. First, Hatano and Oura's (2003) work outlined the ways in which key factors of expertise can be applied to teachers: domain knowledge, experience, socioemotional investment, collaboration, and context. Each of these areas were specifically raised by several participants during the interviews, indicating that they have achieved the status of an expert and should be considered as such within the education field. This is worth noting because the role the participants are filling, that of a classroom teacher, does not necessarily outwardly indicate expertise on its own the way administrative roles do, for example. It is what these teachers bring to the role that makes them experts.

Further, the literature review provided evidence that teacher expertise is a major factor in student experiences in schools, with studies reporting that the teacher is the most important factor in addition to other aspects such as class size, programs, funding, and family involvement (Dole, 2004; Flynt & Brozo, 2009; Opper, 2019; Stronge & Hindman, 2003). The results of this study correspond to this literature when looking at the wide range of demographics of the districts included as well as the strong patterns that existed in responses. Even though the teachers in this study came from very different schools, there was a substantial amount of overlap in their responses, indicating that teacher expertise transcends demographics. For example, Liz, Rose, and Kira all talked about the use of assessment data in instructional decision-making, the importance of oral language as a foundational skill, the use of literacy across subject areas and how

understanding learning development changed their practices. To compare just one demographic factor, 78% of the students in Liz's district are economically disadvantaged, while Rose's and Kira's are 43% and 9% respectively. This corresponds to the work of Nye, Konstantopoulos, and Hedges (2004), who found that the teacher is a more important factor than socioeconomic status. Several other demographic differences can be seen in Table 1. Likewise, seven of the participants who are from very different districts, all emphasized ways in which their knowledge of a specific intervention model impacts their daily practice. When considering the variety in student demographics, teacher backgrounds, and licensure programs, it is notable to see the commonalities in what these teachers perceive as important factors in their expertise. That these factors persist regardless of differences in context seems to support the notion that the teacher has a large impact on student experiences.

Coaching and Specialized Literacy Expertise

To revisit another theme in the existing literature, research indicated the variety of roles taken on by literacy professionals (Bean, et al., 2015; Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Frey, 2003; Stevens, 2010). This was affirmed by the participants who had fulfilled several of these roles themselves. One role examined in the literature, the literacy coach, was found to be connected to positive outcomes for students in collaboration with teachers (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010; Mangin, 2009). The findings of this study can add to this body of knowledge because participants reported collaboration with literacy coaches, filling the dual role of coach and classroom teacher, and utilizing literacy leadership/coaching training in the classroom setting. While all of these areas could be further explored, the latter is of special interest because this expertise sets these teachers

apart from other literacy professionals and other classroom teachers. As classroom teachers, participants reported using their literacy leadership/coaching training with students, colleagues, and parents.

Teacher Retention

Existing literature reported that teachers with more training, experience, and skills are more likely to leave teaching than those with less (Borman & Dowling, 2008) and that there is a need for districts to respond to teachers' desire for growth inside and outside of the classroom setting (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005). From the amount of teachers who reported receiving support from their district to complete supplementary literacy licenses, it appears that districts are responding to this need. However, without gathering data from those who made these decisions at the administrative level, their motivation cannot be certain. It is possible that these administrators were knowledgeable about the need for professional growth and were providing support at least partially in order to meet that need. None of the teachers in this study specified the desire to leave the teaching profession. Transversely, they all mentioned being motivated to some degree to earn the supplementary literacy license due to the desire to increase their knowledge and skills. This supports the concept of professional growth being linked to teachers staying in the profession.

Additionally, Crain (2013) and Hancock, Black, and Bird (2006) identified the following as reasons teachers leave the classroom: perception of the profession, lack of performance differentiation and fairness, lack of support, earnings, work/life balance, desire for challenge, and desire to have an impact beyond the classroom. Compared to these findings, seven participants expressed the strong desire to stay in the classroom

setting, whereas six others preferred to stay in the classroom unless certain beneficial circumstances arose. Only three participants expressed a definite desire to leave the classroom; notably these were three of the teachers who had previously filled a literacy professional role outside of the classroom and then returned to the classroom teacher role. Thus the majority of this particular group appeared to be satisfied with their current role as classroom teachers. Nonetheless, a few of the reasons for leaving the classroom identified by Crain (2013) and Hancock, Black, and Bird (2006) came up across multiple interviews including earnings, work/life balance, and the desire to have an impact beyond the classroom. Work/life balance was brought up by a few participants in different ways and their perceptions seemed to depend on individual contexts. Interestingly, this was brought up by one participant as a reason for leaving the reading specialist role and returning to the classroom. She felt she had better work/life balance as a classroom teacher than she did as a specialist. A few teachers mentioned this balance as a possible factor in a future decision to leave the classroom.

Regarding the desire for challenge and impact, a small number of teachers mentioned being "only a teacher" and the fact that coaching has potential for an impact on a larger number of people. However, this was balanced by the same participants reflecting on the advantages of staying in the classroom, which they mainly perceived as working with students rather than adults, autonomy, student relationships, variety, and the use of their knowledge throughout the school day. Several teachers talked about the everyday challenges of being a classroom teacher, suggesting that the desire for more challenge or different challenges is not currently causing these teachers to want to leave the classroom. They talked about the challenge of teaching students of all different levels,

teaching all different subjects, implementing interventions within the classroom, matching appropriate books to readers in varying circumstances, etc. Teachers mostly talked about challenges in a positive light, usually indicating that their unique skill set prepared them to meet these challenges.

Connection to Theoretical Framework

Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory provides a lens to view the results of this study. First, as described above, it is clear that enhanced self-efficacy has positively affected the experiences of the teachers in this study. They unanimously expressed stronger belief in what they were able to do professionally as a result of their literacy licensure programs. At the heart of Bandura's (2010) work on self-efficacy is the principle that individuals need to believe they can achieve desired results of their actions in order to put forth the necessary effort to meet these goals, especially when facing difficulty. It was clear that elevated self-efficacy was at work in the teachers in this study when they talked about how their learning affected their practice as well as how they handled challenges. For example, Samantha spoke passionately about fighting to implement intensive literacy interventions herself rather than having an interventionist or literacy specialist pull her students out of her classroom. She said, "That's been a big thing for me, that getting my literacy license has allowed me to do, because I can say I am an expert. And I can do it myself." She believed in her ability so much that she changed the structure of how literacy interventions were implemented in her school. When asked about how her practice changed before and after her Masters and literacy licensure program, succinctly stated, Kira said, "I feel better equipped as a teacher." This

reflects similar statements made by several other participants, indicating the relationship between expertise and self-efficacy. Finally, Becca's articulation of her journey through various roles in education and back to the classroom illustrates how this confidence in one's ability has potential to positively affect others:

> I'm almost glad that it's taken me this long because I really appreciate what I can bring to the table now. I really feel like because it's so ingrained in me now, it's very natural for me to not only instruct my students and be able to give them that detailed support as needed. But I also feel like I am able to share that with my team.

Another aspect of Social Cognitive Theory that was confirmed within this study is the interaction of the personal, environmental, and behavioral factors (LaMorte, 2019). It was expected to find that the participants used their literacy knowledge (personal) in various ways to affect their instructional decision-making (behavioral) in the classroom setting (environment), and this was the case. The participants all talked about ways in which their expertise informed their planning and teaching in literacy, in other subject areas, and when interacting with students, colleagues, and parents. While these were certainly varied and robust interactions between the personal and behavioral factors, in some ways it was most striking to examine the role of the environment in the experiences of these teachers while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. As reported earlier, some teachers were working with students virtually, some were working in person, and others were doing a hybrid model combining both formats. Teachers faced challenges in each of these scenarios. For example, those who were online were concerned about student engagement and attendance, while those who were in person talked about needing

to limit their time and proximity with students, something they would not have considered during more typical times. As an example, Samantha works with students in person, but reflected on the particular difficulties of wearing masks when teaching reading, saying:

> There's all these rules and parameters around six feet and 15 minutes… you can only spend 15 minutes in a close contact situation with a child, the entire day. Yet you still want them to learn how to read and I can't see their mouths when they're reading. Sometimes kids will show their thinking through their lips or their tongue movement and I can't see any of that… it's hard to teach reading when they can't see what I'm doing with my mouth, I can't see what they're doing with their mouth.

Eva, who was teaching virtually, described the importance of maintaining routines in the virtual setting and establishing consistency with the digital tools being used. She valued these aspects of the learning environment and wanted students to know what to expect and be independent with resources, just like she would if she had the students in her physical classroom.

Teachers had different ways of defining the environment, some of which were related to the learning format, whereas others seemed more based on philosophy. For some, this meant the physical classroom, including the movement of people in it, as well as the materials and resources present. Others had a broader outlook, expressing aspects of the environment that contributed to or took away from the sense of being a community of learners. In either case, and across the spectrum between schools of thought, all teachers in this study confirmed the reciprocal relationship between personal, behavioral,

and environmental aspects of their classroom experiences. Samantha's statement when asked about how her expertise affects decisions made about the learning environment illustrates this interaction quite well:

> I advocate to teach the interventions in my classroom. So when RTI first came out, I just remember sitting with my team at the time and saying, this doesn't really make sense that we're taking these kids out of our classroom, to people who don't know them and are not experts in the area of literacy.

Clearly she could see important connections between the personal (her expertise), the environment (her classroom and the relationships within it), and the behavioral (advocating to teach the interventions herself).

Interpretative Phenomenology and Reflexivity

Another aspect of the Social Cognitive Theory is the assumption that people learn by observing and interpreting the behaviors of others (Tracey & Morrow, 2017), which leads into the other theoretical perspective of this study: interpretative phenomenology. As stated in previous chapters, the use of this as opposed to purely descriptive phenomenology puts interpretation at the forefront rather than attempting to suppress it. Throughout the data collection and analysis phases of this study, I observed and interpreted the behaviors and responses of the participants as the study progressed. Saldaña's (2015) recommendations described in Chapter Three were a guide for me as I interpreted the results, especially while identifying and reflecting on specific codes and practicing code weaving. The practice of memoing, taking brief reflective notes between the interviews, facilitated my identification of themes and reflexivity. Saldaña's (2015) emphasis on the need to constantly return to the interview transcripts was instrumental in

this study. In a sense, this allowed me to "observe" the participants over and over again by returning to their words repeatedly throughout the interpretation.

Overall, I felt inspired by the interviews I did with the participants and their clear commitment to student learning, especially given the difficult current circumstances. Of the central themes and conclusions, many were not surprising to me because of the existing literature and my experience with this topic. I found myself feeling proud of these teachers, especially when they repeatedly told me about using their expertise to enhance the curriculum, their continued use of research to inform practice, and the ways in which their knowledge impacts students, colleagues, and parents. It is my personal view that too often teachers are not allowed to use their professional judgement, whereas these teachers articulated being empowered to do so, even when they had to advocate for it.

One result that I did not expect and that required reflection on my part as I conducted interviews and interpreted the data was the number of participants who spoke about undergraduate teacher preparation falling short of sufficiently training teachers to teach literacy. Although I have not personally taught any of the participants in the undergraduate literacy courses that I currently teach, I had to examine my reaction to hearing this strong criticism. To some extent, my role as a teacher of graduate literacy courses has prepared me for this because I often experience students expressing how much they have learned in their graduate courses. However, I did not realize that this feeling was pervasive enough to be elaborated on by so many participants. In order to avoid swaying the participants in any way when this topic came up, I reflected on the concept of bracketing, setting aside one's views in order to avoid influence (Creswell,

1998). I found myself gravitating toward the advice of Lichtman (2012), who suggests completely setting aside one's views is not actually possible and that the same purpose can be achieved through journaling/memoing and reflexive self-disclosure. This is in keeping with the philosophical underpinnings of this study as well.

Implications for Practice

Given the reported positive characteristics of this group of supplementally certified teachers, their experiences, practices, and beliefs could inform the practices of others in the education field. The study showed how these teachers felt more equipped to do their jobs, which is a phenomenon that has several positive implications and potential to benefit multiple groups of stakeholders.

Promoting Literacy Licensure

One way in which these positive characteristics could be spread to more schools could be to support more teachers to earn supplemental literacy licensure. Because the impact was not limited to any particular program, location, or school type, the process teachers could go through to do so could look similar to the paths taken by the participants in this study. This has potential to be impactful on both small and large scales, affecting the experiences of individual students as well as entire schools, all the way to the district level. This is a logical way to ensure that more well-prepared, high quality teachers are serving as classroom teachers.

The results of this study support multiple paths to accomplishing this including: providing district support for licensure programs, giving hiring preference to those with this qualification, and incentivizing the license with salary increases. District leaders who are serious about having highly qualified early elementary teachers should create policies

that support literacy licensure programs as meaningful professional development and reward teachers for adding to their expertise. The results of this study showed that time and money are the main barriers to this license. While districts may not be able to completely eradicate these burdens, they could make resource decisions to mitigate these factors in order to make this commitment to their teachers, students, and families.

Alternatives to Licensure

Alternatively, there are ways in which teachers could develop their literacy expertise without specifically earning the supplementary literacy license. Although the benefits to completing an entire literacy certification program seem clear, it is not realistic that every early elementary teacher will do this. Lessons can be gleaned from the data gathered from participants that could support expertise without licensure. For example, many teachers in this study mentioned specific courses and topics that had large and direct impacts on their practice. These included literacy development, systematic phonics, and intensive intervention, to name a few. It could be more manageable to support teachers to take one or two graduate literacy courses that are most impactful, rather than a whole graduate program.

Format of professional development is another area to consider. Perhaps it is the characteristics of the graduate courses that effectively promote expertise rather than actually being enrolled in a program. It could be possible to mimic the graduate course experience in the district professional development setting. To do so, districts could include aspects of effective graduate courses such as: extended study of a specific topic, performance-based accountability, a community of learners, focused outcomes, and

applicability to the job setting. Districts that are providing isolated, “sit and get” type of professional development could benefit the most from this.

Implications for Research

Due to the lack of research on this particular phenomenon of teachers staying in the classroom while holding a supplemental literacy license, the findings of this study add to the body of knowledge that exists. There are limitations and several opportunities for further research in this area.

Limitations

The limitations of this study included the small sample size of teachers and the limited geographical area of the participating schools. While every attempt was made to include a variety of schools (public and private; urban and suburban) and teachers (differing demographics, amounts of experience, and educational backgrounds), it is important to remember that there are several individual factors within the phenomenon being explored. While the goal of this study was to identify themes within the experiences of the participants, the assumption that one teacher speaks for all in their school, district, or cohort was strictly rejected. This is especially true when considering that one city near some of the participating districts is one of the most economically and racially segregated cities in the United States (Frey, 2018). Therefore, one participant’s lived experience may be completely different from another’s within the same district, or even just blocks away. Regarding the geographical area of the participating schools, more schools were either from urban or suburban areas with significantly fewer rural areas represented.

Additionally, this study was limited to those willing to be interviewed about their experiences, practices, and beliefs. While participants were urged to understand that there were no desirable or undesirable answers, it is possible that participants still may have felt pressured to be perceived a certain way. It is likely that this was mitigated by the open-ended nature of the interview questions. It is possible that some of the results may not hold true for the entire population with these qualifications.

Recommendations for Future Research

The limitations of this study provide ample opportunity for further research to better understand this phenomenon. First, this topic could be further explored qualitatively with different foci and perspectives. One option could be to conduct a study very similar to this one in a different location. This would allow for comparison between results in different regions of the United States. Additionally, many participants reported receiving financial support for their licensure programs from their districts. Therefore, a study involving interviews with administrators from districts who provide this type of support for teachers would contribute additional information with a new frame of reference. The research could examine the administrators' reasons for supporting their teachers in this way as well as the perceived outcomes of this use of district resources. To take into account other perspectives, similar phenomenological studies could be done involving collecting data on the perceptions of students who have teachers with this supplementary literacy licensure or their parents. This could provide information to affirm the impact of literacy expertise on the various stakeholder groups.

Moreover, this topic should be examined quantitatively in a variety of ways. Indeed, measuring student outcomes of teachers who have supplemental literacy

certification is necessary and seems to be an important next step. Examining the relationship between having a teacher with additional literacy expertise and the literacy knowledge, skills, and test scores of their students, as compared to students who do not have a teacher with those credentials could provide important rationale for the suggested practical implications discussed earlier. While this study shows a pattern of positive attributes of these teachers, linking the licensure to increased student achievement would be even more meaningful.

In the case of a quantitative study, it would be important to use a large nationally representative data set such as the ECLS-K. A hypothetical study could use regression analysis on groups of students assigned to a teacher *with* an additional literacy license and students assigned to a teacher *without* an additional literacy license. A multiple regression analysis could be used to control for factors such as household income, prior achievement in kindergarten, disability status, and school setting in order to determine how much of the difference in growth may be attributed to each variable. This would be important to consider, as results may or may not show that these teachers are particularly more or less effective with certain subgroups of students, the implications of which would directly impact administrator decision making. This type of data analysis also has potential to confirm or challenge some aspects of the self-reported results of this study. For example, one theme identified was this group of teachers' ability to recognize and meet individual student needs. Therefore, it would be interesting to see if this is also reflected in the results of the ECLS-K item responses on student groupings and time spent with individuals.

Similarly, specific aspects of literacy growth could also be measured, as well as areas outside of the literacy realm. Teachers in this study reported numerous ways their literacy expertise impacted other aspects of their practice. Again, analysis of existing data such as ECLS-K could be examined to determine whether relationships exist between having a teacher with an additional literacy license and other outcomes or behaviors that are not specific to literacy. With extensive longitudinal data like this, relationships between factors could be measured and examined for sustainability. For example, if having a teacher with an additional literacy license is found to increase literacy achievement in first grade, is there still a lasting impact in eighth grade?

Finally, research is needed on different models for using literacy professionals. For example, a longitudinal study could provide insight into the effectiveness of literacy experts as classroom teachers, as compared to literacy experts as coaches or interventionists. What might happen to district literacy scores if they discontinued the use of literacy professionals outside the classroom and instead made sure each kindergarten, first, and second grade class was taught by a literacy expert? With exciting models existing such as the dual role Brooke described, this type of comparative study is not far-fetched.

Conclusion

If a single interview quotation could represent the essence of the experiences, practices, and beliefs shared by early elementary classroom teachers who have supplementary literacy licensure, it would be Becca's articulation as follows:

> I love the fact that I'm working with kids of all different levels. And I love the challenge of trying to meet the needs of all those levels at the same time. It's very

> hard but I love that challenge of trying to really focus on comprehension and fluency with those super high kids and then also having kids that still don't know their alphabet in December of first grade. And trying to juggle all those balls at the same time and meet all those needs. I love it. It's a really good challenge for me.

Classroom teachers with robust literacy expertise and the passion expressed here have tremendous potential for meeting individual student needs and spreading their knowledge and skills throughout the communities in which they serve. Students need and deserve expert teachers. This phenomenon is worthy of further exploration to examine the capacity of the impacts discussed in this study as well as possibilities for future development in the education field.

APPENDIX A

IRB Approval Memo

IRB #: IRB-FY2021-111
Approval Date: 10-19-2020

IRB-FY2021-111 - Initial: Initial Submission - Expedited - St. John's

irbstjohns@stjohns.edu <irbstjohns@stjohns.edu>
Mon 10/19/2020 10:16 AM
To: cookk@stjohns.edu <cookk@stjohns.edu>; Theresa A. Marsicek <theresa.marsicek18@my.stjohns.edu>

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

Federal Wide Assurance: FWA00009066

Oct 19, 2020 11:16 AM EDT

PI: Theresa Marsicek
CO-PI: Kyle Cook
Education Specialties

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - **IRB-FY2021-111** *Examining Supplementary Literacy Certification of Early Elementary Teachers*

Dear Theresa Marsicek:

The St John's University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for *Examining Supplementary Literacy Certification of Early Elementary Teachers*. The approval is effective from 2020-10-15 through --

Decision: Approved

PLEASE NOTE: If you have collected any data prior to this approval date, the data must be discarded.

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,

Raymond DiGiuseppe, PhD, ABPP
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Professor of Psychology

Marie Nitopi, Ed.D.
IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study to learn more about the lived experiences of early elementary classroom teachers with supplemental literacy certification. This study will be conducted by Theresa Boehm Marsicek, School of Education, St. John's University as part of her doctoral dissertation. Her faculty sponsor is Kyle DeMeo Cook, PhD, School of Education.

If you agree to be in this study, you will take part in one interview concerning your experiences, practices, and beliefs as an early elementary classroom teacher with supplemental literacy certification. Your interview will be approximately 30 minutes to one hour and will be recorded and transcribed. You may request to review the recording and transcription and request that all or any portion of each be destroyed.

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this research beyond those of everyday life. Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research may help the investigator understand ways in which literacy expertise is used in the classroom setting, therefore contributing to the body of knowledge that can affect staffing, hiring, and professional development decision-making in schools.

Confidentiality will be strictly maintained with the use of codes, pseudonyms, and ambiguous descriptors (Ex: "a suburban public school near a medium sized midwestern city"). Only the investigator will have access to the raw data collected (interview recordings). Your name/identity and your school's name will not become known or linked with any information you provide. All data will be stored securely on password protected computers or in locked file cabinets.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time. You have the right to skip or not answer any interview questions.

If there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact Theresa Boehm Marsicek at, theresa.marsicek18@mystjohns.edu, or the faculty sponsor, Kyle DeMeo Cook at cookk@stjohns.edu. For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University's Institutional Review Board, St. John's University, Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Chair at diguser@stjohns.edu or Dr. Marie Nitopi, Coordinator at nitopim@stjohns.edu.

You may request a signed copy of this consent document to keep, which will be scanned and emailed to you.

Agreement to Participate

_____ _____

Subject's Signature Date

APPENDIX C

Google Form for Basic Participant Information

Basic Information

* Required

1. Name *

2. Licenses held *

3. Number of years teaching experience *

4. Number of years with supplemental license *

5. School district *

6. School type *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Public
- ◯ Private
- ◯ Charter

7. Grade currently teaching *

8. Number of years at current school *

9. Number of years in current grade *

APPENDIX D

Recruitment Flyer

APPENDIX E

Interview Protocol

Beginning script: Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. The purpose of this interview is to learn about the lived experiences of early elementary classroom teachers who have supplementary literacy certification. There are no desirable or undesirable answers, so I would like you to feel comfortable saying what you really think. I will be recording our conversation so that I don't miss any of the details that you share. Do I have your permission to record the interview?

Everything you say will remain confidential and you may choose to stop the interview at any time. You may also skip any questions.

Can you confirm that you received and signed a copy of the consent form? Do I have your permission to begin the interview?

Questions & Probes:

- Describe your teaching background…
  - What/where have you taught and for how long?
  - What grade do you teach?
- Describe the process you took to earn the literacy license...
  - What made you decide to earn the literacy license?
  - How long have you had the literacy license?
  - How did you earn the literacy license?
- Describe how you utilize your literacy expertise...
  - While teaching literacy?
  - While teaching non-literacy subjects?
  - While making decisions about the learning environment?
  - While interacting with colleagues?
  - While interacting with parents/families?
  - While teaching during the COVID 19 pandemic?
  - Other ways?
- What was something specific you did differently after going through your program/obtaining the license?
- In terms of classroom environment, practices, and/or beliefs, can you compare yourself to colleagues without the literacy license?
- What have you noticed about student outcomes since going through your program/obtaining the license?

    - What other benefits beyond student outcomes do you think have been gained?
- Has earning the certification changed how you feel about being a teacher? How?
- What are your thoughts on the need for early elementary classroom teachers to have supplemental literacy certification?
- In what ways do you continue to add to your expertise? What do you want to be doing in 3 years?
- Do you have anything else that you want to add that we have not talked about yet?

Ending script: Thank you for your time and thoughtful answers. If there is anything else you would like to add, please feel free to contact me.

APPENDIX F

Code List

- Assessment
- Across the Curriculum
- Barriers to Licensure
- Engagement/Student Gains/Love of School
- Future Plans
    - Hope to Leave Classroom
    - Hope to Stay in Classroom
- Going Beyond the Curriculum
    - Confidence
    - Data/Evidence
    - Individual Needs
- New Knowledge
    - Comprehension/Background Knowledge
    - Development/Progression
    - Fluency
    - Phonics/Phonemic Awareness
    - Vocabulary
- Reasons for Pursuing Licensure
    - Love of Reading
    - School/District Support
    - Wanted to Know More
    - Wanted to Leave Classroom
- Share Knowledge
    - With Colleagues
    - With Parents
- Student Independence
- Undergraduate Preparation Inadequate
- Use of Research
- When Challenged

APPENDIX G

Coding Sample– This shows an example of how I completed my coding. Below are all of the interview passages that were labeled with the code *confidence*.

Name	*Confidence* Code Samples
Anna	• This gave me the knowledge to then be confident in my choices that if the canned curriculum was garbage, I wasn't going to do it if it didn't actually back up to what all the research was saying and what I was seeing was successful with my students. • I just know a little more precisely what to focus on. • Again, I have the years experience also, but now this, yeah this confidence to say "no, that's not gonna work for my students".
Allie	• I am more willing to offer help to my colleagues. • I think having my expertise is very helpful. Like in conferences, for example, I felt much more prepared. Just because I really understand informal observation records and running records, and because I've spent a lot of time studying literacy.
Becca	• It's so ingrained in me. Now, it's very natural for me to not only instruct my students and be able to give them that detailed support as needed. But I also feel like I am able to share that with my team. • I was putting myself in a position so that not only I could succeed, but my students could succeed. And I think that all of that prep helped me a ton this fall.
Brooke	• If I just summed it up in one word, it would be more intentionality. • I'm using my expertise to establish what I would consider to be the proper learning environment for the learner. • When I'm speaking to other teachers about the phonics, I can tell them firsthand what works and things that I've been trying. • My expertise typically comes in giving them a more developmental view as far as what's appropriate for a child at that age, and sometimes I'll go and I'll do some assessment to be able to reference during those conversations.
Claire	• And then after I did it the first time, then I would say I became more confident and then I carried it over into sight words that we've been using, or even carried over into math at that point because we're having to read lot of numbers.
Christina	• I feel more knowledgeable and I feel like I have more ideas.

	• So sometimes there's little holes in the curriculum so I know how to add those extra pieces and it just gives you that much more knowledge of what you should be doing and adding when the curriculum is lacking sometimes.
Eva	• I definitely think I became a lot smoother in my presentation and before in my early years of education before I had taken this class, I tried the same thing with everybody and it just wasn't effective, so I know more now.
Kate	• While I have a lot of information about literacy and literacy research, it's still taught me how to work with other people that maybe don't always agree on the same things that I do. • I feel like I have some skills, like about researching the child as a reader, that might come through when I'm talking to the parent. • I don't think I was as student centered as I thought I was until I took the course. And then I felt much more student centered really transferring that responsibility to them. • I know what I should be trying to teach that kid developmentally.
Kim	• I would be really excited to take on an interventionist position, especially with my classroom knowledge.
Kira	• I'm more able to try new things knowing that I don't have to do whatever my district says just because they're saying that, but also rely on my own beliefs and what I value. • I feel better equipped as a teacher just having more background to go off of. • And some teachers don't know what to do with that. But I feel well equipped to like, how can I progress my students forward in their reading, other than just a mini lesson that maybe gets at like, 50% of the kids, as opposed to, you know, trying to reach all kids and wherever they are in their learning journey? • And like feeling confident now to be able to try that in the room is really helpful.
Kenya	• And so I found that I was prepared for those questions. • So I now know what to look for, to see what students are understanding and what we need to go back and what needs to happen in a strategy group, what needs to be delivered whole group, things like that.
Liz	• I'm doing what my students need.

	• I think I can speak more on my feet, by far.
Mia	• I think I just have more refined skills and strategies that I knew I could keep and I can return to every day. • I know I have more skills and strategies that I learned.
Rose	• When you have a gut feeling about something, that you know, you're able to voice it because you have a little bit more background. • These are things that I think definitely helped me feel more comfortable, that I'm able to communicate to that parent that I'm doing absolutely everything that I can.
Samantha	• I feel like when the kids came to us a lot lower than what we're expecting in second grade I was okay with that because I knew what to do, where some of my colleagues don't know all the ins and outs. • I will stand up if it is impacting my kids and it is not a best choice for kids. • So then I did have the confidence to say "I'll be pulling from a lot of different pieces and depending on what he needs at the time". • …talking with parents and families, just having that confidence to be able to say I know. • And so I think that's been a big thing for me that getting my literacy license has allowed me to do, because I can say I am an expert. And I can do it myself. • Because I do have the expertise, I don't have to necessarily just march through the program, day by day, I can use some of the pieces that I know are best practice with my kids.
Sophia	• I feel more comfortable. The last year or two that, oh yeah, I can do this. My literacy instruction, I think just really helped me know different things that were important. • It's easier for me to recognize when kids need that and give that to them. Even though we as a class may be focusing on this, I can pull students into small groups and give them what they still aren't comfortable with.

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