A COLLECTIVE CASE STUDY OF NOVICE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PREPAREDNESS TO TEACH EARLY LITERACY SKILLS TO BEGINNING READERS

by

Crystal Wright Walker

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this collective case study was to explore novice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers in rural northwest North Carolina. Novice teachers' perceptions of how adequately prepared they felt to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers in prekindergarten through third grade was examined using Badura's theory of self-efficacy. The central question was "What are the perceptions of participants regarding their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers?" The three sub-questions were as follows: how do participants describe their preparedness as it relates to content knowledge; how do participants describe their preparedness as it relates to addressing students' challenges in acquiring literacy skills; and what experiences or opportunities do participants believe would help prepare beginning teachers to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers? The participants were 10 novice elementary school teachers responsible for teaching early literacy skills in prekindergarten through third grade. Data was collected via individual interviews, focus group interviews, and reflective journaling. Data was analyzed using coding to identify themes and patterns. The study produced four themes and nine subthemes. The themes were feelings of preparedness, effective literacy instruction, orthography, and differentiated instruction. The results indicated novice teachers felt unprepared to meet the literacy needs of beginning readers. However, teachers felt more prepared after gaining experience in the classroom, collaborating with veteran teachers, and when using scripted programs. Future research needs to include a larger sample size representative of more teacher preparation programs to better understanding teachers' current perceptions of preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers.

Keywords: teacher preparedness, early literacy skills, self-efficacy, beginning readers.

Copyright Page

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my three sons Ras, Hardin, and Charles Walker. Each day you all inspire me to be a better person.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Linda Holcomb for her patience, long-suffering, guidance, and encouragement throughout this process. I would also like to thank Dr. Justin Necessary for serving as the methodologist on my committee. I know that God had his hand in assembling the committee that I needed to complete this journey.

I must also acknowledge my late father who saw this milestone coming long before I even entertained the idea. The first time he suggested that I may pursue a doctorate degree someday, I thought he was crazy. I am sure if he were still here, he would be very pleased.

Finally, I have to give credit to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ from whom all good things come, and acknowledge that without him this would not be possible. The scripture that has inspired me throughout this process is Jeremiah 29:11, “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end” (King James Version, 1908/1990).

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List of Abbreviations

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE)

Clinical Practice Commission (CPC)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

Every School Succeeds Act (ESSA)

International Literacy Association (ILA)

International Reading Association (IRA)

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

National Center for Education Evaluation (NCEE)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD)

National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)

National Research Council (NRC)

Neurological Impressions Method (NIM)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Response to Intervention (RTI)

Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Teaching students to read is a critical part of elementary education. A good portion of instruction during the early elementary years is dedicated specifically to teaching students to read (Roe & Smith, 2012). However, reports by the US Department of Education (2019) and the Nation's Report Card for Reading by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2011, 2013, & 2019) have indicated a majority of students are not able to read proficiently. Even in the midst of numerous initiatives, both federal and state, reading scores continue to decline. Multiple factors contribute to students' inability to read proficiently including motivation, student self-efficacy, parental educational attainment, lack of early literacy experiences prior to beginning school, and low socio-economic standing (Gottfried et al., 2015; Jung, 2016; McKinnon, 2017). Teacher preparedness and teachers' perceptions of their preparedness can also affect student reading achievement (Varghese, Garwood et al., 2016). The goal of this study was to explore perceptions of novice teachers' preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers in rural North Carolina.

Chapter One of this study includes a historical and theoretical overview of effective literacy instruction and teacher preparedness to teach early literacy skills. A gap in the literature is identified, providing a framework for the current study. My motivation for conducting the research is identified as well as my relationship to the participants. The purpose of the study and the problem statement are addressed and clearly indicate the problem this study sought to address. The significance of the study is explained providing examples of how the results can be beneficial. The research questions are clearly stated and a list of definitions is provided to aide in clarity.

Background

Reading is an integral part of our everyday lives. Each day society is inundated with print, motivating children to learn to read for both personal and social reasons (Saracho, 2017). Being able to read helps students access all other content areas. Jordan et al. (2017) indicated the ability to read is a "prerequisite for student success" (p. 185) and necessary to become contributing members of society. The following is a brief historical account of the progression of reading philosophies, materials, and instruction throughout the years, in addition to the origins of teacher efficacy, and historical aspects of teacher preparation. The social and theoretical background for this study is also provided.

Historical

The history of reading instruction in the United States dates back to colonial times. During these times, students were instructed using the alphabet method which consisted of learning each letter of the alphabet and then using those letters to make syllables (Barry, 2008). Early instructional materials consisted of primers that were very Christian in nature; learning to read was seen as merely a means to accessing religious content (Barry, 2008; Patterson et al., 2012). In the early 1700s, Noah Webster printed the first instructional reading books in the United States. Webster's books, known as spellers, included spelling, grammar, and essays for reading (Barry, 2008), and still focused on Christian content. After the revolutionary war, students were asked to read essays that were very patriotic in nature, in addition to religious content (Adams, 1990).

In the 1820s, Horace Mann and other American educators, in part due to the influence of European reformers, became critical of the methods and materials used for reading instruction. In response to this criticism, educators created new instructional materials with information

organized based on difficulty. The new materials also provided instructions for teachers (Barry, 2008). During this time, reading instruction transitioned from the alphabet method of instruction to reading for meaning (Barry, 2008; Adams, 1990).

It was also during the mid-19th century that normal schools were established (National Research Council, 2010). Normal schools were designed to train teachers in the "norms" of education (Alston, 2016). These schools were typically one to two years and prepared women to teach elementary school; those wishing to teach secondary education received training at universities. By 1890 there were 92 normal schools in operation within the United States. By the turn of the century many universities included schools of education and began competing with normal schools for funding. Eventually existing normal schools were either incorporated into larger universities or transitioned into a state university (National Research Council [NCR], 2010).

The end of the 1800s also marked a change in reading instruction with an increased interest in using phonics, or letter sound correspondence, as opposed to letter naming (Barry, 2008). This approach started with students learning letter sound correspondence, sounding out and blending words, orally reading sentences and then stories. Some educators of this time believed content was more important than methodology when it came to teaching reading. Throughout the 1800s, educators responded by publishing readers that promoted reading, understanding, and engagement.

Moving into the 1900s, the content of new readers included more realistic stories of children participating in routine daily activities. These stories were intended to help children "reflect on aspects of their own behavior" (Patterson et al., 2012, p. 193) and marked a movement away from strictly religious content. Along with changes in content, authors

incorporated more rigorous vocabulary. Teaching reading began to emerge as a field of its own, with an increase in publications focused on reading research and pedagogy (Barry, 2008). By the 1920s, the meaning-first curriculum dominated the educational landscape (Adams, 1990).

Teacher education preparation programs were also changing, with colleges and universities adding requirements for program completion and licensure. During the 1920s, practice teaching become a program requirement and many states mandated teachers to major or minor in the subject they planned to teach (NRC, 2010).

In the 1940s, William S. Gray co-authored the popular Scott-Foresman reading series known as "Dick and Jane", which came complete with teacher guides, scripted lessons, supplementary materials, and word lists (Barry, 2008). While this series incorporated some aspects of phonics instruction, it was predominantly a word-based approach to reading instruction (Barry, 2008; Hiebert, 2015). With only 300 words accounting for approximately 50% of all written text, Gray believed repeating a core group of high-frequency words would enable students to read (Hiebert, 2015). This series, and its popularity, elicited a stinging response from Rudolf Flesch, a strong advocate for a phonics based approach and author of *Why Johnny Can't Read? And What You Can Do About It* (Flesch, 1955) and *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools* (Flesch, 1981). Flesch referred to the Dick and Jane series as "horrible, stupid, emasculated, pointless, tasteless little readers" (Flesch, 1955, pp. 6-7). Thus, the beginning of a war that continues today (Barry, 2008). In spite of the objections of Flesch and other phonics based advocates, the word based approach prevailed throughout the next decade (Barry, 2008; Hiebert, 2015).

The 1940s and 50s marked a time of increased criticism of public schools and their lack of rigor. Many held pessimistic views of teachers and their training with some advocating for teachers to be trained in master's degree programs (NRC, 2010).

In 1969, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) administered the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a congressionally mandated project to assess what students know and can do in select subjects, including reading" (US Department of Education, 2018). A representative sample of students across the nation were assessed; results were reported for groups of students with similar characteristics, by state, and by subject. This assessment practice continues today; information gained from the assessments is used to create The Nation's Report Card which shows how students across the nation are performing.

The 1970s and 1980s saw a significant increase in research regarding children's early language development and early childhood education with a specific focus on reading readiness (Saracho, 2017). During this time, Yetta and Ken Goodman postulated both approaches, word based and phonics based, were inadequate when used as the sole method of instruction (Goodman & Goodman, 1979; Goodman, 1986). Goodman and Goodman introduced the whole language approach to reading instruction. They contended word based and phonics based approaches limited learners to cues within words rather than using cues within the entire text, or within the whole language (Goodman & Goodman, 1979). This movement gained support within organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA) (Barry, 2008).

It was also during this time period, in 1976, a study by the RAND organization sparked interest in teacher efficacy. The study was intended to measure the effectiveness of various reading programs and interventions implemented as part of the School Preferred Reading

Program in Los Angeles Unified School District (Armour et al., 1976). In an effort to determine reliability and validity of student gains, researchers deemed it necessary to consider other factors which could contribute to reading gains. Two teacher efficacy questions were added to their survey. The results showed teacher efficacy had a strong positive effect on student achievement and was also a strong predictor of the teachers continued use of project materials and strategies even after the conclusion of the project (Tschannen et al., 1998).

The 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education brought about a new wave of criticism for public education and specifically teacher preparation. As a part of the recommendations for educational reform, the report indicated teacher quality and teacher preparation needed to be addressed to facilitate improvements in public education (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

As a response to the call for reform, and adhering to the ideas of Goodman and Goodman (1979; 1986), in 1988 California adopted an initiative which moved reading instruction away from a skills based approach toward a program focused on quality literature, embracing the whole language instructional approach. Following this initiative, California scored near the bottom of all 50 states in reading proficiency in 1992 and 1994 as reported by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This precipitated the call for a return to basics, specifically phonics (Levine, 1996). According to the Reading Task Force (1995), California returned to an intensive, systematic, phonics based approach to reading instruction.

In 1997, as an effort to settle the debate over the best method for beginning reading instruction, the US Congress requested the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), in conjunction with the Secretary of Education, appointed a panel to evaluate the effectiveness of various approaches to reading instruction (National Institute of

Child Health and Development [NICHD], 2000). The National Reading Panel was charged with evaluating research and evidence to determine the most effective methods of teaching children to read. The panel was asked to recommend ways of communicating their findings to schools for implementation and to develop a plan for future research. Based on their review, the panel reported effective reading instruction should incorporate instruction in phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (NICHD, 2000).

During this same timeframe, the National Research Council (NRC) convened a panel, the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children. The committee viewed their purpose as one that would end the reading wars by providing an integrated picture of reading development and the continuum of reading instruction (US Department of Education, 1998). The committee analyzed existing research, translated findings into information useful to all stakeholders, and conveyed their findings through publications, conferences, and other outreach activities. The committee concluded effective reading instruction should include explicit instruction in word recognition skills and comprehension skills, advocating for a balanced approach to literacy instruction.

The balanced approach to literacy is still prevalent in today's classrooms, allowing teachers, as professionals, to determine what works best for each child (Barry, 2008). Teachers are key to student success. "A critical element in preventing reading difficulties in young children is the teacher" (US Department of Education, 1998, p. 341). The report also indicated not all teachers are adequately prepared to meet the needs of beginning readers. The theme of inadequate teacher preparation continues in more recent research (Meeks & Kemp, 2017; Rutherford et al., 2017; Schumm et al., 2014) and remains a current topic of interest.

Social

The importance of the ability to read and comprehend text cannot be overstated. Reading is a necessary fundamental skill that contributes to success in many aspects of life (McKinnon, 2017). Roe and Smith (2012) stated, "few adults would question the importance of reading to effective functioning in our complex, technological world" (p. 2). The ability to read provides the foundation for academic success and prepares students to become productive members of society as adults (Sabatini et al., 2016). Without adequate literacy skills, an individual's ability to pursue a career in their field of interest, become self-sufficient, and actively engage in society are greatly limited. Recent reports indicate a majority of students are not able to read proficiently based on standardized reading assessments (US Department of Education, 2019). The Nation's Report Card for Reading by the National Center for Education Statistics (2011, 2013, & 2019) reported only one-third of our nation's 4th, 8th, and 12th grade students could read at or above proficiency.

Students that cannot read proficiently grow into adults that continue to struggle with literacy related issues. According to the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), test results from 2012 and 2014 indicated one in five US adults have low literacy levels (NCES, 2019). Adults with low literacy levels were unable to complete reading tasks that required comparing and contrasting, paraphrasing, and low-level inferencing. The same organization conducted a literacy prison study in 2013, the results indicated literacy levels of persons incarcerated in the US are significantly lower than those of household populations; assessed levels were 249 and 270 respectively (NCES, 2016).

Literacy levels affect the health literacy of many Americans (Rikard et al., 2016). The majority of healthcare information in the United States is provided in English; therefore, adults

with reading difficulties have lower levels of health literacy. Health literacy is defined as the ability to obtain, process, and understand information in order to make effective decisions regarding personal health. Lack of understanding contributes to poor health decisions leading to increased healthcare costs (Rikard et al., 2016).

Low literacy is also associated with higher levels of poverty. Workers in the US with the lowest literacy scores earn approximately $300 less per week and are significantly more likely to need public financial assistance (Gunn, 2020). When students learn to read and write they reduce their chances of living in poverty, increase their chances of finding sustainable employment, and ultimately change the course of their lives.

Theoretical

Teachers play a critical role in the success of students learning to read (NICHD, 2000; Schumm et al., 2014; US Department of Education, 1998). Teacher self-efficacy also plays a role in student success (Jordan et al., 2017; Sharp et al., 2016). Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as one's confidence in their abilities to achieve desired results. Bandura (1997) went on to say a persons' sense of efficacy greatly affects the choices and efforts they make toward achieving specific goals. Teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy are often willing to spend more time and effort ensuring their students are successful (Jordan et al., 2017; Sharp et al., 2016). Teacher content knowledge is also a critical component of effective teaching and student achievement (Meeks & Kemp, 2017; Schumm et al., 2014; Rutherford et al., 2017). This study explored novice teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. The study explored participants' feelings of adequacy regarding content knowledge gained through their college preparation programs and how effectively that knowledge has transferred into classroom application to meet the needs of beginning readers.

Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1977) and social cognitive theory (1986) are predominantly utilized by researchers when investigating teacher self-efficacy. Social cognitive theory contends many factors, personal and environmental, influence learning and behaviors (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's belief in their abilities to achieve desired outcomes. Self-efficacy levels are influenced by many factors and those levels in turn affect human behaviors (Bandura, 1977). Efficacy levels can impact choices made, effort expended, positive and negative thought patterns, and reactions to environmental demands (Bandura, 1977).

Linnea Ehri's (1979; 1995) phase theory of reading development will also be used to guide this study. Ehri (1979) originally developed the theory of word identification amalgamation, referring to the process of connecting letters to sounds, blending phonemes from graphemes, and matching words with meanings. This theory emphasized the importance of beginning readers to be able to identify words accurately, rapidly, and completely (Ehri, 1979). This early work later lead to the phase theory of reading development (Ehri, 1995).Over time phases were added to the theory before settling on five: 1) pre-alphabetic, 2) partial alphabetic, 3) full alphabetic, 4) consolidated alphabetic, and 5) automatic (Ehri & McCormick, 1998). The phase theory of reading development is based on the concept that children learn to read in phases and reading and spelling are connected (Ehri, 1979; 2014; Ehri & McCormick, 1998). An important aspect of this theory is latter phases are dependent upon knowledge gained from previous phases. This theory of reading development was used as a framework to guide this study as it served to establish the significance of foundational skills for beginning readers.

The problem of low levels of reading proficiency for elementary students has been addressed in numerous studies using various interventions to measure improvements in reading

levels (Sanchez & O'Connor, 2015; Snyder & Golightly, 2017; Young et al., 2015). This study sought to add to the research by exploring teacher preparedness as it relates to self-efficacy and effective literacy instruction for beginning readers in a rural setting. This study explored novice teachers' perceptions of preparedness and what implications their perceptions had on student success.

Problem Statement

Teacher preparation programs have long been scrutinized for not adequately preparing teachers to meet the diverse needs of students (NRC, 2010). Numerous studies have identified inadequate teacher preparation as a contributing factor to low levels of student reading proficiency (Lemons et al., 2016; Meeks & Kemp, 2017; Rutherford et al., 2017; Schumm et al., 2014). Researchers recommended improvements to teacher preparation programs as a means for improving teacher performance and student achievement. Efforts have been made to improve teacher quality through alternative licensure programs, additional licensure testing, and value-added assessments measuring teacher effectiveness (Jordan et al., 2019). However, reading scores across the country remain stagnant with three-fourths of students unable to read proficiently (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011, 2013, & 2019).

Effective literacy instruction is critical to improving student outcomes (NICHHD, 2000). Effective literacy teachers need to be knowledgeable of the developmental process of reading, provide instruction in the essential components of reading, and use assessment data to drive instructional decisions (Jordan et al., 2019). The National Reading Panel identified the five components of effective reading instruction as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension (NICHHD, 2000). While all phases of reading development are important, the early phases of developing phonemic awareness and word

decoding skills are especially crucial for later success (Ehri & Flugman, 2018; Spear-Swerling, 2015).

The problem is students are not acquiring early literacy skills necessary to become proficient readers and contributing to the problem is the possibility that teachers may not be adequately prepared to teach beginning readers. This collective case study will explore novice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. This study will be limited to novice teachers from a rural district in Northwest North Carolina. Novice teachers, teachers having less than three years of experience, will be used to minimize the effect of on-site training, professional development, and other learning opportunities.

Purpose Statement

This purpose of this collective case study was to describe novice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers in prekindergarten through third grade in three rural school districts in Northwest North Carolina. Preparedness was generally defined as teachers' perceptions of their ability to effectively perform teaching tasks (Freak & Miller, 2017). Early literacy skills was defined as foundational skills necessary for reading development, such as phonemic awareness and phonics (NICHHD, 2000). The theories guiding this study were Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy and Ehri's (1979; 2014) phase theory of reading development. Bandura (1977; 1997) defined self-efficacy as one's confidence in their abilities to achieve desired results. Self-efficacy impacts choices and efforts made while working toward desired goals (1977). Higher levels of teacher self-efficacy have been linked to improved student outcomes (Jordan et al., 2019). Ehri's (1979; 2014) phase theory of reading development will be used to support the concept that early literacy skills are necessary to enable students to develop the more complex task of reading comprehension (Ehri, 1979; Ehri, 1995;

Ehri & Flugman, 2018; Ehri & McCormick, 1998). These theories relate to this study in that teachers' self-efficacy and preparedness in effective reading instruction impact their experiences in the classroom as they teach early literacy skills to beginning readers.

Significance of the Study

This section addresses how this study is important empirically, theoretically, and practically. The section begins by discussing potential empirical significance by filling gaps in existing research. This section also discusses how teachers, administrators, professors, and universities may use the findings of this study to affect change in preservice teacher preparation programs and in-service professional development. Describing the perspectives of novice teachers, and analyzing their classroom experiences as they teach beginning readers will provide useful insight for school administrators, local school districts, colleges, and universities.

Research Questions

To explore novice elementary teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers, one central question and three sub-questions were used to guide the study. The questions are as follows:

CQ: What are the perceptions of participants regarding their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers?

SQ 1: How do participants describe their preparedness as it relates to content knowledge?

SQ 2: How do participants describe their preparedness as it relates to addressing students' challenges in acquiring early literacy skills?

SQ 3: What experiences or opportunities do participants believe would help prepare beginning teachers to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers?

Definitions

1. *Self-efficacy*- An individual's belief in their ability to perform behaviors necessary to achieve specific goals (Bandura, 1997).
2. *5 basic components of literacy instruction*- The 5 components are phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000; Walsh, Glaser, and Wilcox (2006).
3. *Phonics*- is letter and sound correspondence (National Reading Panel, 2000; Barry, 2008).
4. *Phonology*- basic building blocks of literacy including phonological awareness, print concepts, and knowledge of letter sound correspondence (Fedora, 2014).
5. *Vocabulary*- the knowledge and understanding of word meanings (Spear-Swerling, 2015).
6. *Comprehension*- the ability to understand what has been read or heard (Spear-Swerling, 2015).
7. *Fluency*- the automaticity of underlying skills that allow readers to read text accurately, quickly, and with proper expression (Fedora, 2014).
8. *Preparedness*- is teachers' perceptions of their ability to effectively perform teaching tasks (Freak & Miller, 2017).

Summary

The goal of this collective case study was to explore novice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. To achieve this goal, novice teachers were interviewed to discuss their feelings of self-efficacy in regard to their content knowledge in the area of early literacy and how prepared they feel to meet the specific needs of

beginning readers. Allowing participants to share their perceptions of preparedness, along with challenges and successes in the classroom helped me gain a better understanding of how to more adequately prepare teachers to meet the needs of beginning readers. Considering only one-third of our nation's students are able to read proficiently (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011, 2013, & 2019), it is important to understand teachers' self-efficacy in an effort to better prepare teachers to meet the diverse needs of today's students.

Chapter One has provided an overview of the research conducted and included background information that addressed the historical, social, and theoretical contexts. The chapter identified the problem statement and the purpose statement. The significance of the study has been addressed, research questions have been identified, and definitions provided.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter provides a summation of literature related to this study. A thorough review of existing research was conducted to identify studies related to teacher self-efficacy, teacher preparedness, and the instruction of reading and early literacy skills. The chapter begins with an explanation of the two theories used as a basis for the study. The review explores how researchers have utilized the theories in the past and more recently. The review then moves to related literature specific to teacher self-efficacy, relevant legislation, teacher preparation and clinical practices, teacher preparation and literacy education. The section on teacher preparation and literacy education includes a review of effective literacy instruction, preparation to teach struggling readers, in-service training, and teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach reading. The chapter concludes by identifying a gap in the existing literature, supporting a need to conduct further research.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories will be used as the framework for this study. The first theory is Albert Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy which provides the basis for exploring novice elementary teachers' confidence in their ability to teach early literacy skills. The second is Linnea Ehri's (1979, 1995) phase theory of reading development. Ehri's (1979, 1995) theory establishes the importance of early foundational skills to the subsequent development of more difficult reading tasks. With the goal of exploring novice teachers perceived level of preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers, both theories play a critical role in establishing the focus for this study. The following sections will explain each theory in greater detail and will also illustrate how the theories relate to this qualitative collective case study.

Theory of Self-Efficacy

Albert Bandura's theory of self-efficacy refers to one's belief in their ability to perform specific tasks successfully (Bandura, 1977). Bandura (1977) contended that the strength of people's convictions regarding their own effectiveness will likely affect how they cope in given situations influencing activity choices and levels of effort and persistency. Bandura's theory identified four major factors which influence self-efficacy: performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states (Bandura, 1977).

Performance accomplishments through mastery experiences increase self-efficacy. Bandura (1977, 1994) indicated that experiencing success builds self-efficacy while failures decrease it (Bandura, 1977, 1994). Successful clinical experiences can provide mastery experiences for preservice teachers. As a part of this study, novice teachers' experiences from their teacher preparation programs and from their first years in the classroom was explored to see how those experiences affected self-efficacy.

Vicarious experiences of social models can lead to greater levels of self-efficacy. Seeing others, similar to oneself, experience success resulting from sustained efforts can lead others to believe they can experience success as well (Bandura, 1994). Similarly, viewing social models fail can have a detrimental effect on one's sense of efficacy. The more similarities between the observer and the model, the greater the influence of the vicarious experience. For educators, internships, student-teaching, other field experiences, and mentor relationships provide social models that can help build self-efficacy.

Verbal, or social persuasion, in and of itself, has minimal effect on self-efficacy but when paired with another factor the impact is greater and longer-lasting (Bandura, 1977). For example, receiving verbal persuasion from others can cause a greater, more sustained effort, resulting in

success, a mastery experience leading to an increase in one's beliefs about their abilities (Bandura, 1994). This persuasion may come from sources inside and outside of the school setting. Outside of school, social persuasion may come from spouse, family, or friends (Korte & Simonsen, 2018). While at school, social persuasion may come from administrators, teachers, students, parents, and the community (Korte & Simonsen, 2018).

Physiological indexes, or somatic and emotional states, also contribute to feelings of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1994; Schunk, 2016). Some may interpret their response to stress, including an increased heart rate and sweating, as a negative indicator about their ability to perform successfully (Bandura, 1994). Conversely, others may interpret the same physiological reactions as "an energizing facilitator of performance" (Bandura, 1994, p. 3).

Perceived self-efficacy directly influences effort and persistence (Bandura, 1977). Using Bandura's theory as a guide, Schunk (2016) suggests students who feel more efficacious tend to "expend greater effort and persist longer than students who doubt their capabilities" (p. 143). This is also applicable to teachers and is known as instructional self-efficacy, which refers to a teacher's belief about their capabilities to help students learn (Schunk, 2016). It is important to note that instructional self-efficacy can vary from subject to subject based on experiences and knowledge (Schunk, 2016). A teacher's sense of self-efficacy has been known to influence activities, attitude, motivation, effort, and persistence (Bandura, 1977; Schunk, 2016; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998), which in turn can affect student engagement, motivation, and performance. Research indicates higher levels of teacher self-efficacy is a significant predictor of student achievement" (Schunk, 2016). Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) also indicates teacher efficacy is "significantly related to student achievement" (p. 215). This connection between teacher self-

efficacy and student achievement is the major factor for using Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy as a guiding framework for this study.

Phase Theory of Reading Development

During her early research, Linnea Ehri (1979) developed the theory of word identification amalgamation. Amalgamation is defined as connecting letters to sounds, blending phonemes from graphemes, and matching words with meanings. Ehri (1979) indicated the most important acquisition made during beginning reading is the ability to recognize printed words accurately, rapidly, and completely. Accurate and automatic recognition of words is critical for skilled reading comprehension (Ehri, 1979; Morris, 2008; Spear-Swerling, 2015). One of the most difficult tasks for beginning readers is learning how to assimilate printed language with existing knowledge (Ehri, 1979). This assimilation process is referred to as orthographic mapping, "the formation of letter-sound connections to bond the spellings, pronunciations, and meanings of specific words in memory" (Ehri, 2014, p.5). It is by this process that children are able to "read words by sight, to spell words from memory, and to acquire vocabulary words from print" (Ehri, 2014, p.5)

Stemming from her early research, Ehri (1995) later developed the phase theory of reading development. This theory is based on the concept that children learn to read in phases and reading and spelling are connected (Ehri, 1979; 2005). This theory of reading development is used as a framework to guide this study as it establishes the importance of foundational skills for beginning readers; therefore, supporting the need for teachers that are both knowledgeable and adequately prepared to teach these skills. Content knowledge and preparation both play a role in teachers' perceptions of their efficacy to teach literacy skills to beginning readers (Jordan et al., 2019). Ehri's (1979) original theory of reading development identified only three

phases but was later divided into four phases (Ehri 1995, 2005; Ehri & McCormick, 1998), and eventually evolved to consist of five phases (Ehri, 2014). The five phases are pre-alphabetic, partial alphabetic, full alphabetic, consolidated alphabetic, and automatic (Ehri, 2014). In the pre-alphabetic phase children have very little knowledge of the alphabet and instead rely on visual cues and guessing strategies to identify words (Ehri, 2014). During the partial alphabetic phase, children have some knowledge of the alphabet and begin to realize letter-sound correspondence. Children in this phase often use the first letter of a word as a cue and then use the surrounding context to identify the word (Ehri, 2014). In the full alphabetic phase, children have complete knowledge of the alphabet and most letter-sound correspondence. Children in this phase typically use decoding skills to sound out each individual letter when identifying new words. The full alphabetic phase often occurs near the end of kindergarten or the beginning of first grade (Ehri, 2014). Once a child reaches the consolidated alphabetic phase they are able to identify words by chunking syllables or morphemes rather than attending to each individual letter. This phase often happens near the end of second grade and continues into third (Ehri, 2014). The final phase, the automatic phase, is when students are able to read words quickly and with little effort, new words are decoded easily, and students have acquired multiple word identification strategies. During this phase students are able to focus on reading for meaning (Ehri, 2014). Central to her theory of reading development is the concept that latter phases of development are dependent upon knowledge gained from previous phases. Phonics and phonemic awareness knowledge that is gained in early stages is necessary to reach automaticity in the final stage, during which children are able to read with both fluency and accuracy leading to the ultimate goal of reading comprehension (Ehri, 2005; Ehri & McCormick, 1998; Morris, 2008; Spear-Swerling, 2015).

The focus of this study is on how adequately prepared teachers feel to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers and their preparedness to address the challenges faced by struggling readers. Given the impact that teacher self-efficacy can have on one's ability to provide effective literacy instruction, and the importance of early literacy skills to students' future academic success, Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy and Ehri's (1979, 2005, 2014) theory of reading development provide the necessary framework to conduct this study.

Related Literature

The following is an overview of the current literature related to teacher self-efficacy, teacher preparedness, and effective literacy instruction. This section begins by examining studies specific to teacher self-efficacy and related works. The literature is organized by the following themes: teacher self-efficacy, relevant legislation, teacher preparation and clinical practices, and teacher preparation and literacy education.

Teacher Self-Efficacy

Teacher self-efficacy is defined as one's belief in their ability to teach others (Schunk, 2016). The concept of teacher self-efficacy gained attention due to a 1976 study by the RAND organization (Armour et al., 1976). The study was designed to measure the effectiveness of reading programs and interventions being used in the Los Angeles Unified School District. In an effort to increase the validity and reliability of the study, researchers considered all factors which may affect student reading gains and decided to add two teacher efficacy questions to their questionnaire. The results of the study indicate teacher efficacy has a strong positive effect on student achievement (Armour et al, 1976; Tschannen et al., 1998). Teachers' confidence in their ability to "get through" to children in addition to their commitment and morale significantly contributed to student success (Armour et al., 1976).

Since that early study, additional studies have found many positive effects related to high levels of teacher self-efficacy including increased effort, persistence, resilience, and the ability to cope with stress (Hoy, 2000; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Teacher efficacy has also been linked to student motivation and student achievement (Jordan et al., 2019; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Teachers with a higher sense of self-efficacy are more likely to work with students in small groups as opposed to whole group, are less likely to criticize students for an incorrect answer, and are more likely to persevere when students are struggling (Tschannen et al., 2018).

Considering the significance of self-efficacy in the field of education, numerous studies have been conducted to evaluate the impact of teacher self-efficacy as it relates to a variety of content areas. Studies by Jeffrey et al. (2018) and Gonzalez and Maxwell (2018) sought to gauge the perceptions of teachers' self-efficacy to teach elementary mathematics. The study by Jeffrey et al. (2018) focused on elementary preservice teachers and the study by Gonzalez and Maxwell (2018) focused on in-service mathematics teachers. Both studies indicate positive classroom experiences are necessary to help build teachers' sense of efficacy. These positive classroom experiences are what Bandura's theory of self-efficacy refers to as mastery experiences (Bandura, 1977). In contrast, participants in the Gonzalez and Maxwell (2018) study indicated they felt adequately prepared to teach mathematics; while the participants in the study conducted by Jeffrey et al. (2018) indicated a desire for more clinical experiences and opportunities for self-evaluation. Participants expressing the need for more self-reflection makes this study unique to others reviewed on this topic. Researchers indicated self-efficacy evaluations would provide preservice teachers with opportunities for self-reflection, resulting in corrections and adjustments to teaching strategies, eventually leading to increased instances of mastery experiences and improving self-efficacy (Jeffrey et al., 2018). As suggested by Bandura's (1977) theory of self-

efficacy, successful clinical experiences can help establish higher levels of confidence regarding one's ability to teach.

Brinkmann (2019) investigated how teacher education programs can more adequately prepare preservice teachers to teach mathematics in an elementary classroom. Again, the findings suggest more field experiences would lead to increased levels of teacher self-efficacy. This concurs with research conducted in Turkey where researchers indicated a need for preservice teachers to have more field experiences that would allow them to take theoretical knowledge learned through course work and apply it in a real-world context (Aybek & Aslan, 2019). Brinkmann (2019) indicated it was especially beneficial for participants to assess and remediate students in small groups. This teaching and learning environment was conducive to increased student success, which creates a mastery experience for the teacher. As supported by Bandura's (1977) theory, mastery experiences increase self-efficacy. According to Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001), it is postulated that mastery experiences are the most potent means of increasing teacher self-efficacy beliefs.

A study by Gulistan, Hussain, and Mushtaq (2017) also examined teacher self-efficacy for teaching mathematics, but their study focused on secondary mathematics teachers. This study was unique in that it compared teacher self-efficacy levels of male and female teachers; the study found no statistical difference between efficacy levels based on gender. The study also compared student achievement for male and female students; there was no statistical difference between students' mathematics achievement based on gender. However, the study did find a strong correlation between mathematics teachers' self-efficacy and the achievement level of their students (Gulistan et al., 2017). "Teacher self-efficacy proved to an essential factor for effective math teaching" (Gulistan, 2017, p. 171). Based on the results of this study, researchers

recommended in-service training, every three years, should be used to build higher levels of teacher efficacy (Gulistan, 2017).

Catalano et al. (2019) conducted a study to compare science teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy to their degree of content knowledge. This mixed methods study used a science self-efficacy survey (STEBI-B) and the Science Beliefs Test which is an assessment of science content knowledge. The findings of this study were similar the aforementioned studies (Brinkmann, 2019; Jeffery et al., 2018), in that researchers recommended universities develop programs for preservice teachers which would provide more authentic learning experiences so future teachers can increase their levels of self-efficacy which will in turn lead to student success (Catalano et al., 2019). A similar study by Sultan et al. (2018) also focused on the self-efficacy of preservice elementary teachers and their ability to teach science. The study examined preservice teachers' science literacy and beliefs about their abilities to teach science, then investigated the relationship between the two (Sultan et al., 2018). This study found preservice teachers had an adequate knowledge of science content and moderate to high levels of teacher self-efficacy, with the exception of their confidence to teach physics. Based on the findings of this study, researchers recommended university program directors ensure that preservice teachers are equipped with the content knowledge and skills to teach the abstract concepts of physics. Sultan et al. (2018) go on to say the "teacher remains the most important element in providing high-quality and effective science education" (p. 38). Given that science and technology are both fields that are rapidly changing, it is necessary to have highly trained, intellectual individuals that are adequately equipped to meet the needs of students and to help prepare them for success in the twenty-first century (Aybek & Aslan, 2019). Improvements to preservice teacher education

programs are needed to more adequately prepare future teachers to face the challenges of today's classrooms (Brinkman, 2019; Catalano et al., 2018; Jeffrey et al., 2018; Sultan et al., 2018).

Teacher Preparation and Clinical Practices

Teacher quality is a significant factor contributing to students' academic achievement. Jimerson and Haddock (2015) stated "teachers represent the single most powerful force in facilitating student success" (p. 488). Considering the role teachers play in student success it is important teachers are adequately prepared to meet the needs of today's learners (Ehri & Flugman, 2018; Jordan et al., 2018; NRP, 2000). There are approximately 3.7 million teachers in the United States (NCES, 2019). Each year 200,000 students complete teacher preparation programs and are ready to enter the education profession as new teachers. The majority of teacher candidates, 70-80%, complete teacher training through a traditional program offered by postsecondary institutions while the remainder complete their training and enter the profession through an alternative route (NRC, 2010). Whichever path is taken to enter the profession, it is important new teachers are prepared to meet the needs of today's diverse learners (Clark et al., 2013)

Report of the Blue Ribbon Panel. Commissioned by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning produced a report which outlined existing issues in teacher education programs, expressed the need for changes, and proposed a new clinically based model for teacher preparation along with "comprehensive strategies to revolutionize teacher education" (NCATE, 2010, p. ii). The report calls for a movement away from teacher preparation which focuses on academic course work loosely connected to clinical practice and

toward programs committed to clinical practice that is closely connected to academic content and pedagogy.

The panel identified ten essential design elements for clinically based preparation programs.

1) Student learning is the focus of any clinically based teacher preparation program.
2) Clinical practice, content, and pedagogy is interwoven throughout the teacher preparation program.
3) The teacher candidate and preparation programs are judged based on data. The evaluation of candidates must be based on student data and preparation programs are judged on data about the program.
4) Teacher preparation programs prepare teachers that know their content and effective instructional strategies. Successful teachers must be prepared to use multiple types of assessments and use the data to make informed decisions about differentiated instruction.
5) Candidates learn to be part of a professional learning community working collaboratively to improve their practice. Teacher candidates need numerous opportunities to receive feedback from others.
6) Clinical educators and those leading teacher preparation programs are proven effective educators knowledgeable of instructional strategies, differentiated practices, and assessment methods. These positions need to be rigorously selected, specially certified, and made accountable for their candidates' preparation.
7) Specific sites are designated, designed, staffed, and funded for intensive, embedded clinical experiences.

8) Technology is used to foster collaboration, increase productivity, and improve efficiency.
9) Teacher education programs need continual research and development to support innovations and improvements. Each program should collect and contribute information to a national database of teacher preparation programs to provide evidence of growth and progress.
10) Partnerships among teacher preparation programs, school districts, and policy makers need to be strengthened. Working collaboratively to improve clinical practices can better meet the needs of each stakeholder and improve the overall effectiveness to preparation programs.

To transform teacher preparation programs and practices, it will be necessary to develop strong partnerships between state policy makers, district leaders, university leaders and professors. The partnerships will need to extend beyond preservice teacher preparation and clinical experiences and into the first years of teaching to provide needed support for novice teachers (NCATE, 2010).

Report by American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. In response to the NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel Report (2010), the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE, 2018) worked to develop a professionally aligned common lexicon and to identify the essential elements of clinical practices, as a means of uniting educators and affecting change in teacher preparation programs. The AACTE relied heavily on the work of John Goodlad, a leader in educational renewal since the 1970s (Goldberg, 1995). Goodlad advocates that better teachers will result in better schools and improved clinical practices are a critical part of preparing better teachers (Paufler & Beardsley, 2016).

The central proclamation of the report is that clinical practice is a critical component of high-quality teacher preparation (AACTE, 2018). High-quality teacher preparation programs need to provide structure for academic learning along with increased opportunities for application under the supervision of skilled university and school based educators. The proclamation is comprised on five basic tenets.

The first tenet is clinical practice should be the central framework for all teacher preparation programs. Course work should be designed and sequenced in a manner that supports developing knowledge and skills allowing for authentic practice in diverse settings. Course work should grow in complexity throughout the program. Secondly, clinical practice and research are inherently linked. Clinical practice and research in conjunction form the basis of successful teacher preparation programs. The third tenet contends clinical experiences should be designed with the end in mind; beginning with identified teaching standards and then clearly articulating what accomplished practice should look like and how it should be measured. Once the standards, practice, and means of measurement are identified then effective learning opportunities can be designed for teacher candidates. Tenet four indicates clinical partnerships among schools and teacher preparation programs are mutually beneficial. Improved preparation of teacher candidates results in success for PK-12 students. Finally, the proclamation contends learning to teach is a sustained and ongoing process which requires teacher candidates to participate in authentic learning opportunities in diverse settings; therefore, clinical practice is a fundamental necessity of high-quality teacher preparation programs (AACTE, 2018).

Legislation

Throughout the years there have been several pieces of federal legislation that have impacted K-12 education in the United States. This section provides a brief description of each

significant piece of legislation, summarizes the current state of education in the US, and establishes a need to further study teacher preparation.

In 1965, under the leadership of President Lyndon B. Johnson the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed. This legislation helped to clarify the federal role in education and established Title 1 to provide financial aid in educating socio-economically disadvantaged students. The legislation was changed and reauthorized multiple times over the years with changes typically resulting in expanding the role of federal government in education (Klein, 2010).

In 2001, President George Bush replaced ESEA with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), a law which governed K-12 education from 2002-2015 (Klein, 2010). With the goal of closing growing achievement gaps, the new legislation was designed to hold states more accountable for the academic progress of all students with a specific focus on improving achievement for English-language learners (ELL), students with disabilities, minorities, and disadvantaged students (Klein, 2010). NCLB required student progress to be tested in reading and mathematics in grades 3-8 and once in high school. The goal was to have all students achieve proficiency by 2013-2014; however, this did not happen. After the deadline passed, schools continued to work toward proficiency goals as measured by Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Schools not meeting AYP for two consecutive years faced sanctions (Klein, 2010). The act also included provisions for the Reading First program which used recommendations from the National Reading Panel to develop guidelines. States were directed to use "scientific evidence for designing or selecting research-based reading programs for both classroom and clinic" (Allington, 2006, p. 6).

NCLB was eventually replaced when President Barack Obama signed the Every School Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. ESSA is the current federal policy governing K-12 education in the United States. The major difference between NCLB and the new ESSA is the power given to states to make decisions regarding curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Brown, 2018).

In the midst of numerous education initiatives, special panels, committees, reports, and legislation, student achievement has remained relatively the same with the most recent reading scores declining from 2017-2019 (NCES, 2019). The mediocre performance of US students has contributed to continued criticism of teachers and teacher preparation programs across the country (Ehri & Flugman, 2018; Schumm et al., 2014; Walsh et al., 2006). Referring to teacher preparation programs Kronholz (2012) stated, "It's an accepted truth that the field is broken" (p.3).

Teacher Preparation Programs and Literacy Education

Studies conducted with the goal of exploring or evaluating teacher self-efficacy often have findings which indicate a need for improvements in the area of preservice teacher education programs (Brinkmann, 2019; Catalano et al., 2018; Jeffrey et al., 2018; Sultan et al., 2018). As the focus of this study is on teacher preparedness to teach early literacy skills, the following is a review of literature specifically about teacher preparation to teach reading.

A literature review by Schumm et al. (2014) examined 71 articles published by the Association of Literacy Education (ALER), formerly known as the College Reading Association (CRA), from 1961-2011. Researchers analyzed the articles to identify historical trends, subjects, concerns, and recommendations made for improving the field of reading education. The review revealed a common theme calling for improvements in the area of preservice teacher education programs and recommendations for further research relating to teacher preparation. In a

summary of their findings, Schumm et al. (2014) stated, “As a professional community, we must widen our lens to think about research in how we prepare teacher educators” (p. 241). It was also noted that recent criticism was focused specifically on the “quality of teacher education in literacy” (Schumm et al., 2014, p. 226).

Additional studies conducted after the review by Schumm et al. (2014) was completed also made similar recommendations for improvements to teacher education programs (Rutherford et al., 2017; Meeks & Kemp, 2017). The findings in a study by Rutherford et al. (2017) indicated beginning teachers do not possess the content knowledge necessary to teach early literacy skills effectively and recommended improved, research-based reading instruction in education preparation coursework. The study by Meeks and Kemp (2017) found preservice teachers were not adequately prepared to meet the needs of struggling readers and expressed a need for teachers to be better prepared, “it is important that preservice teachers are armed with exceptional knowledge and teaching ability in order to support beginning readers on their literacy journey” (p. 11). Spear-Swerling (2015) also suggested the “key to better reading by our children is enhanced teacher preparation” (p. xii). Teaching students to read requires specific content knowledge regarding oral language, the developmental process of learning to read, write, and spell, word acquisition and automaticity, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension strategies (Jordan et al., 2019). Knowing how to read does not equate to being able to teach others how to read.

While the literature review by Schumm et al. (2014) only included articles through 2011, it is important to note similar recommendations and criticisms about teacher preparation were still being made based on findings from studies conducted in 2017 (Rutherford et al., 2017; Meeks & Kemp, 2017). The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education also made

similar suggestions in 2018. The fact that these criticisms still remain indicate wide-sweeping changes to teacher preparation programs and clinical practices have not occurred.

National Reading Panel

In 1997, Congress requested the Child Development and Behavior Branch of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) work cooperatively with the United States Department of Education to establish a National Reading Panel to evaluate existing research and evidence in an effort to determine the best methods of teaching children how to read (NRP, 2000). The panel was convened in 1999 and set to work. They began by considering which areas of reading should be selected for analysis. They settled on five major topics with five subgroups. The topics and subgroups are as follows:

1) Alphabetics
    - Phonemic awareness instruction
    - Phonics instruction
2) Fluency
3) Comprehension
    - Vocabulary instruction
    - Text comprehension instruction
    - Teacher preparation and Reading instruction
4) Teacher education and reading instruction
5) Computer technology and reading instruction (NRP, 2000, p. 1-2)

Following their meta-analysis, the NRP published a report entitled “Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction”. In the report, the panel identified five basic components

necessary for effective reading instruction, they are: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (NRP, 2000).

Phonemic awareness. One of the earliest stages of language development, phonemic awareness, is the concept that the spoken language can be broken into smaller units known as phonemes, the smallest units of spoken language (NRP, 2000). The English language is comprised of 41 phonemes which are combined to form syllables and words. Many children develop phonemic awareness through early literacy experiences which occur prior to beginning formal education. These experience are important to later success, a study by Oliver, Dale, & Polmin (2005) indicated early literacy experiences at age 4 can predict reading achievement levels at age 7, which can predict educational levels attained as an adult. Additionally, the NRP reported levels of phonemic awareness as measured at the beginning of kindergarten were one of the strongest indicators of how well children will learn to read (NRP, 2000). As suggested by Ehri's theory of word amalgamation and phase theory of reading development, phonemic awareness allows students to transition from the spoken language to the written language using knowledge of phonemes to make connections to graphemes which are the smallest units of written language (Ehri, 1979, 2005, & 2014). Making the connection between phonemes and graphemes enables students to decode and read words (Ehri, 1979). The analysis of research by the NRP indicated instruction in phonemic awareness resulted in positive effects for word reading and reading comprehension. The positive effects were seen in all types of students including normally developing readers, at risk readers, readers with disabilities, all elementary grade spans, and all socioeconomic groups (NRP, 2000).

Phonics. The term phonics refers to the relationship between written letters and their corresponding sound (NRP, 2000). This alphabetic principal is an essential part of the

developmental process of learning to read. The NRP found that explicit, systematic phonics instruction resulted in the greatest gains for beginning readers as opposed to other approaches. Systematic phonics instruction "typically involves explicitly teaching students a prespecified set of letter-sound relations and having students read text that provides practice using these relations to decode words" (NRP, 2000, p. 2-92). Mesmer and Griffith (2005) identified three common elements necessary for a phonics program to be considered explicit and systematic, 1) the curriculum follows a specific, sequential order of instruction; 2) instruction is clear, direct and precise; and 3) opportunities to practice using phonics to read words. Maddox and Feng (2013) conducted a study comparing whole language reading instruction and phonics based instruction. For the study, a first grade classroom was divided in half with half of the students receiving whole language instruction while the other half received phonic based instruction. At the end of the study students that received explicit phonics instructions showed greater gains in the area of reading fluency and spelling (Maddox & Feng, 2013). The NRP indicated phonics instruction has the greatest effect when it is started early, either kindergarten or first grade, but also produced positive outcomes for older, struggling readers (Armbruster et al., 2001: NRP, 2000). The benefits from early instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics are supported by Ehri's phase theory of reading development (Ehri 1995, 2005). The findings of the panel also align with Ehri's theory in that mastering early literacy skills are essential to moving on to more complex reading tasks (Ehri, 1995, 2005; NRP, 2000).

Fluency. The ability to read with speed, accuracy, and prosody is known as fluency (NRP, 2000). Reading fluently is a critical aspect of reading comprehension. Students who struggle with word recognition often suffer from cognitive overload and cannot gain meaning from the text (Stevens et al., 2017). Even though fluency is important for reading

comprehension, specific fluency instruction is often overlooked in the classroom (NRP, 2000; Stevens et al., 2016). It is commonly accepted that reading practice improves fluency; there are two approaches to how that practice should occur. One approach is practice with guidance and feedback; some commonly used procedures with this approach are "repeated reading, neurological impress, paired reading, shared reading, and assisted reading" (NRP, 2000, p. 3-1). Another approach is the encouragement of unsupervised independent reading; this approach includes sustained silent reading, drop everything and read, various incentive programs similar to Accelerated Reader, and at home reading (NRP, 2000). The panel found guided repeated reading resulted in increased word recognition, fluency, and reading comprehension. There was limited research on the outcomes of encouraging students to read independently; therefore, the panel suggested encouraging students to read may be beneficial but it has not been clearly demonstrated based on research (NRP, 2000).

Shengtian and Gadke (2017) conducted a study which evaluated the effectiveness of two reading fluency interventions: repeated readings and video self-monitoring. Results indicated repeated readings had medium to large effects on student reading fluency, while video self-monitoring had small to medium effects. A combination of both interventions did not result in higher effects (Shengtian & Gadke, 2017). Young et al. (2015) also conducted a study to evaluate the effectiveness of two fluency interventions. The researchers used Neurological Impressions Method (NIM) in combination with repeated readings to improve reading fluency for students in grades 3-5. The NIM is a method by which a teacher and student engage in choral reading where the teacher reads slightly faster than the student causing the student to "chase" the teacher. The teacher serves as a model for fluency and prosody. Repeated reading is a commonly used intervention to improve fluency. The results of this study indicated the pairing of NIM and

repeated readings resulted in significant gains in reading fluency and moderate gains in overall reading levels.

Vocabulary. Another important aspect of language development and reading comprehension is vocabulary (NRP, 2000; Roessingh, 2018). Vocabulary development is critical for students transitioning from early literacy skills learned in kindergarten through second grade to academic literacy skills needed for success in upper elementary grades throughout high school (Roessingh, 2018). It is estimated students need knowledge of between 8,000-9,000 word families to transition from "learning to read, to reading to learn" (Roessingh, 2018, p. 25). To build vocabulary, it was recommended teachers incorporate varied instructional strategies including direct and indirect vocabulary instruction and repeated exposure to new words. Instruction to maintain active student engagement and the use of technology for practice and reinforcement was also encouraged (NRP, 2000).

Reading comprehension. The ultimate goal of literacy instruction is reading comprehension, the complex task by which students are able to read and gain meaning from text. Meaning is derived from the intentional, problem-solving process which occurs during interaction with the text and can be influenced by the reader's prior knowledge and previous experiences (NRP, 2000). Hall and Barnes (2017) stated, reading with comprehension requires "building and continuously revising a mental model of text in memory" (p. 279). While this cognitive process happens naturally for some, many require explicit instruction. Teaching specific strategies to help students become aware of how well they are comprehending text and how to deal with problems in understanding during reading can help develop readers that are competent and self-regulated (NRP, 2000). Some reading comprehension strategies recommended are: cooperative learning, graphic organizers, story maps, summarization, and

answering or developing questions. Ritchey et al., (2017) conducted a study using intensive interventions for reading comprehension with at-risk fifth grade students. The interventions focused on informational text. The results of the study showed a positive correlation between students receiving the interventions and gains in reading comprehension. This study supports the idea that explicit instruction in comprehension strategies can improve reading comprehension for elementary students. The study by Ritchey et al., (2017) is one of numerous studies which support the benefits of explicit instruction of comprehension strategies (Gouldthorp et al., 2018; Ortlieb & McDowell, 2016).

While it has been demonstrated through research that specific instruction in the cognitive processes of reading comprehension results in positive outcomes for student achievement, the panel indicated implementation in the classroom has been problematic due to the lack of teacher preparedness (NRP, 2000). The panel reported teachers should have a firm understanding of instructional strategies as well as their students. Teachers need to provide constructive feedback to students during reading and select appropriate strategies to help students meet reading goals. "Many teachers find this type of teaching a challenge, most likely because they have not been trained to do such teaching" (NRP, 2000, p. 4-7). The panel suggested teacher preparation programs should place a greater emphasis on the teaching of reading comprehension strategies. The training should start early in preparation programs and should be extensive and intensive. Instructing teachers on how to teach reading comprehension strategies will improve student reading achievement.

Preparing Teachers to Teach Struggling Readers

Since this study sought to explore novice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning and struggling readers, the following is a review of current

literature related to teaching literacy skills to students having difficulties and students identified as having learning disabilities.

As a part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004, Response to Intervention (RTI) was identified as a method that could be used by general education teachers to help more students learn effectively (Behan, 2016; Spear-Swerling, 2015). In the Response to Intervention Model, Tier 1 instruction is designed to meet the needs of most learners, approximately 80% (Behan, 2016; Spear-Swerling, 2015); however, it is important teachers are adequately prepared to meet the needs of the approximately 20% of students that struggle to meet grade level expectations. Studies by Denton et al. (2013) and Sanchez and O'Connor (2015), utilized intensive reading interventions with students having reading difficulties. The study by Denton et al, (2013) resulted in significant gains in the areas of phonemic decoding, word reading fluency, and sentence- and paragraph- level reading comprehension. The Sanchez and O'Connor (2015) study saw significant gains in the areas of oral reading fluency and reading comprehension. Both studies resulted in positive gains for students, but noted that not all teachers are equipped to identify student needs, select the correct intervention, and then implement the intervention properly. A major concern for effectively using RTI is having enough trained teachers to implement the model with fidelity (Behan, 2016).

Phonemic awareness and word decoding are crucial to the early phases of reading development (Ehri, 1995; Spear-Swerling, 2015). A case study by Snyder and Golightly (2017) used the Orton-Gillingham (OG) phonics based reading program along with Edmark (EM) whole language reading program to provide interventions for a second grade, female student. After receiving intensive interventions for seven weeks the student showed gains in the areas of nonsense word decoding, word recognition, and reading comprehension. Researchers

implemented interventions focused on basic reading skills such as phonemic awareness, decoding skills, and sight word recognition; the same skills identified by Ehri (1995) and Spear-Swerling (2015) as being necessary foundational skills. It is significant none of the interventions targeted reading comprehension; however, the student showed significant gains in comprehension. These results support research indicating a strong base in foundational skills are necessary before moving to higher level reading skills such as vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension (Jordan et al., 2019; Morris, 2008; Saracho, 2017).

Systematic, explicit phonics instruction is the most effective approach in helping students acquire the foundational skills needed for the later development of reading automaticity and comprehension (Ehri, 1979, 1995). This type of instruction is especially successful with students having language acquisition delays (Troeva, 2015). Studies by Schlesinger and Gray (2017) and Troeva (2015) utilized systematic, explicit phonics instruction in conjunction with a multi-sensory approach for students with dyslexia. The multi-sensory approach provides visual aids, gestures, and hand-on manipulatives, such as letter tiles, in addition to oral instruction (Troeva, 2015). This type of instruction resulted in improved letter naming, letter sound production, decoding, and encoding for all students including students with dyslexia (Schlesinger & Gray, 2017) supporting the use of a structured and systematic approach to reading instruction. Both studies support the need for teachers that are trained in systematic, explicit instruction of early literacy skills.

Numerous studies have been conducted regarding teacher preparedness to teach reading skills to students with learning disabilities (Coyne & Koriakin, 2017; Lemons et al., 2016; Sayeski et al., 2015). Behan (2016) indicated 96% of students with disabilities spend at least a portion of their school day in the general education classroom. A report issued by the National

Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) (2014) stated the amount of time students with disabilities spend in the general education classroom is steadily increasing while their academic achievement lags far behind their peers. Sayeski et al. (2015) indicated approximately 85% of all students identified as have learning disabilities need additional support in the area of reading; therefore, it is vital for general education teachers to be prepared to meet the specific needs of this population. The studies reviewed agreed additional coursework in the area of literacy instruction and increased opportunities for authentic learning experiences over the course of teacher preparation programs would increase levels of preparedness. The findings also indicated effective in-service professional development would help teachers to be more equipped in meeting the specific literacy needs of students with disabilities (Coyne & Koriakin, 2017; Lemons et al., 2016; Sayeski et al., 2015).

Lemons et al. (2016) also discussed the importance of preparing general education teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the area of literacy instruction. With general education teachers being responsible for providing educational services to students with disabilities, it is important for them to be adequately prepared (Behan, 2016). Early identification and intervention for students having reading difficulties is critical for successful reading development (Morris, 2008; Spear-Swerling, 205). Lemons et al. (2016), suggested professional development for in-service teachers specifically aimed at implementing data-based reading interventions. Researchers also recommended professional development to provide follow-up training, and continued support for teachers during implementation.

Studies by Coyne and Koriakin (2017) and Anderson (2019) used a combination of instructional strategies to help struggling readers with word acquisition. Both studies focused on teachers providing reading instruction that was either code-based or meaning based (Anderson,

2019; Coyne & Koriakin, 2017). Instruction in code-based skills is inclusive of phonics, phonemic awareness, and word recognition. Instruction in meaning based skills is inclusive of oral language, vocabulary, and oral language comprehension. Researchers found explicit instruction in these two basic areas of reading resulted in improved student achievement (Anderson, 2019; Coyne & Koriakin, 2017).

Additional studies regarding teacher preparation to teach reading to students with disabilities, indicated teacher candidates are lacking knowledge of the skills, concepts, and processes associated with reading development, specifically in the areas of alphabetic principles, graphemes, phonemes, and phonemic awareness (Sayeski et al., 2015; Sayeski et al., 2017; Washburn et al., 2011). Assessments given to preservice teachers showed knowledge of basic language constructs but not phonetic principles (Washburn et al., 2011). Sayeski et al., (2017) indicated many teacher candidates are not able to accurately produce corresponding phonemes for given graphemes which is critical skill students need for decoding and encoding words. Given the importance of grapheme and phoneme mapping in reading development, it is critical that new teachers understand and are able to teach this concept to beginning readers. “Without overt instruction in the discrete and interconnected components of reading, teachers can experience difficulty” (Sayeski, 2015, p. 83). Suggestions made for supporting teacher candidates include multi-media instruction; intense, explicit, and accurate instruction in alphabetic principles; and improved course planning and program planning by universities (Sayeski et al., 2015; Sayeski et al., 2017; Washburn et al., 2011).

In-service Teacher Training

In-service teacher training is one method for improving teacher knowledge of effective literacy instruction (Ehri & Flugman, 2018). Increased knowledge can provide experiences that

will lead to greater levels of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). For students who do not acquire basic literacy skills initially, it is important for teachers to be properly trained in selecting and implementing interventions as needed (Spear-Swerling, 2015). Whether using the RTI model or just using good researched based interventions, teachers need to know what interventions to use to address specific areas of need for their students, how to implement the interventions effectively, and how to monitor progress and then determine if progress is adequate.

McMahan et al. (2019) examined the use of in-service teacher training to improve teacher preparedness to teach early literacy skills. Teachers participating in the study completed an assessment of content knowledge prior to beginning a two-year training program. At various times throughout the course of the training teachers were reassessed on their knowledge of language constructs. The reassessments of teacher knowledge over the course of the training program indicated an increase in content knowledge due to completing the training. Based on the improvements in teacher content knowledge, researchers recommended additional teacher training in the areas of phonological sensitivity, phonemic awareness, decoding, encoding, and morphology be provided. The findings of this study align with the phase theory of reading development by acknowledging the importance of the acquisition of early literacy skills (Ehri 1979; 1995).

Ehri and Flugman (2018) also conducted a study focused on providing additional in-service teacher training in the form of intensive professional development in connection with a year-long mentoring program. The professional development consisted of 135 hours of intensive instruction on teaching phonics using either Spaulding or Orton-Gillingham, both of which are research based phonics programs. The results of this study showed significant growth in the areas of reading and spelling for all sub-groups. The findings also showed that increased content

knowledge in conjunction with mentorship positively affects student gains in the areas of reading and spelling. Based on Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1997), the mentor relationship should provide vicarious experiences that will lead to increased levels of confidence about one's abilities to teach reading and spelling.

In addition to in-service training, an article by Glover (2017) outlined the importance of data-driven instructional coaches as a means of support for teachers. An instructional coach can analyze the data and help guide teachers in a systematic approach to identify needs, set goals, and implement plans, as well as evaluate progress toward goals. The coach can also provide vicarious experiences which can lead to increased levels of self-efficacy for the teachers. Goodnight et al. (2020) also supported the need for in-service coaching to improve teacher use of research-based reading strategies. The study found that instructional coaching produced positive effects on improving instructional practices.

Researchers have also investigated how clinical experiences during preservice teacher programs influence classroom practices for beginning teachers (Chochran-Smith, 2015; Young et al., 2017). Young et al. (2017) conducted a 3-year longitudinal collective case study to document efforts to train highly qualified literacy teachers. The study began by examining how teacher candidates incorporate aspects of their teacher preparation programs and Standards for Reading Professionals into their placement classrooms. Findings showed candidates demonstrated a moderate level of implementation of methods and strategies learned during their teacher education programs; however, some specific examples were cited where candidates' performance did not align with their preparation programs. The results indicate the environments in which candidates are placed for field experiences influence their teaching practices (Young et al., 2017). Researchers suggested a need for mentor teachers to maintain contact and inquire of

teaching practices throughout the first year of teaching. The use of mentor teachers during the first years in the profession is supported by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (2018) and the National Association for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (2010).

Teacher Perceptions about Preparedness to Teach Reading

An analysis of multiple research studies indicated a discrepancy between teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach reading and their content knowledge to do so effectively (Bogard et al., 2017; Meeks & Kemp, 2017; Rutherford et al, 2017). The study conducted by Bogard et al. (2017) compared student teachers' (ST) perceptions of their preparedness to teach reading with the perceptions of their clinic educators (CE) perceptions of their preparedness. Participants were surveyed regarding perceptions in four areas of reading instruction. Survey results indicated that in each of the four areas "STs rated their ability significantly higher than their C Es did" (Bogard et al., p. 54). In the study conducted by Meeks and Kemp (2017), teachers rated themselves as either prepared or very well prepared to teach early reading skills; however, only 6.9% of them were able to score 80% or higher on the knowledge and skills test. Three-fourths of teachers surveyed scored below 66%. Meeks and Kemp (2017) stated, "the research base related to preservice teachers' knowledge of language structure, as well as their perceptions of preparedness and ability for early reading instruction, is limited" (p.10). A similar study by Rutherford et al., (2017) found most participants rated themselves as definitely prepared to teach reading while their content knowledge assessments in phonics, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary indicated that they did not possess the knowledge necessary to do so. This study revealed a disparity between teacher perceptions of preparedness and actual content knowledge, which indicates a need for improved, research-

based reading instruction in education preparation coursework.

The disparity between teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach reading and their content knowledge demonstrates a need for further research. Conducting a qualitative collective case study would allow multiple participants to share their perspectives on their preparedness to teach early literacy skills. Gaining input from multiple perspectives can provide a deeper understanding of the issue at hand (Yin, 2018). A qualitative study can provide personal insight from participants that cannot be gained from a quantitative study (Creswell, 2015).

Conversely and more recently, another study revealed teacher candidates lacked confidence in their ability to teach reading (Myers et al., 2019). Teacher candidates expressed a desire for more real-world experiences during their coursework and more interaction with teacher educators. gSchunk (2012) stated a critical challenge for teacher preparation programs is to "develop methods for increasing teachers' self-efficacy" (p. 151). Internships with mentor teachers could provide expert modeling for preservice teachers and also provide opportunities for mastery experiences, which can foster self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

Summary

Chapter Two focused on the literature by examining the theoretical framework of Albert Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy and Linnea Ehri's (1979; 1995) phase theory of reading development. In an effort to improve reading proficiency levels across the nation, numerous studies have been conducted to analyze the effectiveness of specific reading interventions. There have also been numerous studies conducted investigating teacher preparedness; however, limited research has been conducted to determine if teachers are adequately prepared to teach reading. Reviewing the recent literature revealed a recurring theme, which is the need to make

improvements to preservice teacher preparation programs. Many of studies reviewed suggested increased opportunities for field experiences for preservice teachers over the course of their teacher education programs. Some of the literature recommended quality professional development for in-service teachers as a way to improve content knowledge and methodology. Most studies that have been conducted indicated teachers do not have an adequate knowledge base to teach reading effectively; however, those studies were quantitative which can indicate prepared or not prepared but provides no explanation or insight into the problem. The research also indicated teachers are even less prepared to help students that struggle with language acquisition and early literacy skills. Learning to read is not an easy process and for students who struggle it is important that teachers are prepared with the knowledge and skills necessary to help them (Jordan et al., 2019).

An overwhelming amount of research conducted regarding teacher preparation programs is conducted by universities and teacher educators and is focused on practices and outcomes specific to their program (Cochran-Smith, 2015). This proposed study would be unique in that it would explore perspectives of multiple novice teachers who have completed a variety of teacher preparation programs.

The studies reviewed used either quantitative or a mixed methods approach to evaluating teacher efficacy and effective reading instruction. Conducting a qualitative study could provide insight into the issue from multiple perspectives and allow participants the opportunity to share their experiences which can provide a deeper understanding of the problem and possible solutions.

None of the studies reviewed were conducted in North Carolina, indicating a study in this area of the country could be beneficial and add to the body of knowledge. This study focused on

novice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers in rural, northwest North Carolina, making it unique and necessary to fill an existing gap in the literature. The findings of this study could be used to positively influence elementary education preparatory programs in North Carolina. The findings of this study could also be beneficial to district and school level administrators, curriculum facilitators, and instructional coaches as they plan professional development opportunities for in-service teachers.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this collective case study was to explore novice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. This was a qualitative study using the collective case study design to explore novice teachers' beliefs about their preparedness and ability to teach early literacy skills. Novice teachers are defined as teachers having less than three years of experience. The study focused on early literacy skills taught to beginning readers in prekindergarten through third grade. In this chapter, the research design is explained and research questions are restated. The setting is defined and participants are described. Research procedures are addressed and the role of the researcher is identified. Methods for data collection, analysis, and interpretation are defined. Strategies used to establish trustworthiness and ethical considerations for the study are discussed.

Research Design

A qualitative, collective case study design was used for this study. Qualitative studies allow researchers to explore a variety of topics in many different circumstances, and allows latitude not found in other methods (Yin, 2018). This approach is appropriate for addressing research problems in which the variables are unknown and need to be explored (Creswell, 2015). There are five distinguishing features of qualitative research.

1) Studying the meaning of people's lives, in their real-world roles;
2) Representing the views and perspectives of the people in a study;
3) Explicitly attending to and accounting for real-world contextual conditions;
4) Contributing insights from existing or new concepts that may help to explain social behavior and thinking; and

5) Acknowledging the potential relevance of multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on a single source alone. (Yin, 2018, p. 8)

A qualitative approach is needed when the research problem needs to be explored to gain a deeper understanding (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study as it allowed for the exploration of individual teacher's perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills and will provide insight to the formation of those perceptions. This method also allowed for the presentation of the findings to include the individual voices of participants in conjunction with that of the researcher while providing a "complex description and interpretation" of the issue being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 8).

Within the scope of qualitative research, there are 12 frequently used variants, one of which is the case study design (Yin, 2018). A case study is "an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context" (Yin, 2018, p. 23). Case study research is commonly used when research questions focus on the "how" or "why" of an issue, when researchers have little or no control over behavioral events, and the focus of the study is contemporary, not historical in nature (Yin, 2018).

The case study design allows researchers to focus on individuals involved in a program, event, or activity (Creswell, 2015). This study focused on novice teachers that are responsible for providing instruction in early literacy skills to beginning readers in prekindergarten through third grade. A case study design was appropriate for this study as it provided an avenue for an in-depth exploration of teachers' perspectives of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills and to share experiences that have impacted their perceptions. A collective case-study was used as it allowed for the exploration of multiple perspectives on the issue, providing a more in-depth

understanding (Creswell, 2015). Yin (2018) indicated that having multiple cases in a case study will produce a stronger effect and is considered to be more compelling. Being able to identify recurring themes across multiple cases strengthens the generalizability of findings. This will be a bounded case study. A bounded case study separates out research based on time, place, or physical boundaries (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This case study was bound to three school districts, in two counties, in rural northwest North Carolina, and included participants that were novice teachers responsible for teaching early literacy skills to beginning readers.

Research Questions

To explore novice elementary teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers, one central question and three sub-questions were used to guide the study. The questions are as follows:

CQ: What are the perceptions of participants regarding their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers?

SQ 1: How do participants describe their preparedness to teach early literacy skills as it relates to content knowledge?

SQ 2: How do participants describe their preparedness to teach early literacy skills as it relates to addressing students' challenges in acquiring early literacy skills?

SQ 3: What experiences or opportunities do participants believe would help prepare beginning teachers to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers?

Setting and Participants

The purpose of this section is twofold. First, the purpose is to paint a site or setting picture for the reader of your dissertation in sufficient detail to visualize the setting without consuming too much time and space in the manuscript. Second, the purpose of this section is to

describe the profile of your participants by articulating the criteria for participation in your study.

Setting

The setting for this qualitative collective case study was three public school districts located in rural northwest North Carolina. Pseudonyms were used for each county, school district, elementary school, and all participants involved in the study. The Pacer County School District (PCSD) consists of thirteen elementary schools, four middle schools, and five high schools (PCSD Website, n.d.). Of the thirteen elementary schools, one was designated by the state as low-performing, nine met expected growth, and three schools exceeded expected growth (NC School Report Cards, 2019). The district serves approximately 9,300 students.

Table 1

Pacer County Schools Demographics

Ethnicity	Percentage of Student Population
White	88%
Hispanic	6%
African-American	4%

Table 2

Pacer County Schools NC EOG Testing Data Grades 3-5

Subject	Proficiency
Reading/ELA	59%
Math	61%

The district is served by a superintendent, assistant superintendent, chief academic officer, and public information officer. The district also employs a chief finance officer, chief technology

officer, and ten directors of various types of student services. Each school is served by a principal and assistant principal. Instructional support staff varies from school to school based on student population needs.

Falcon County Schools District (FCSD) consists of eleven elementary schools, four middle schools, and four high schools (FCSD Website, n.d.). Of the 11 elementary schools, one did not meet expected growth, five met expected growth, and five schools exceeded expected growth (NC School Report Cards, 2019). The district serves approximately 7,700 students.

Falcon County Schools District is served by a superintendent, assistant superintendent, and associate superintendent. The district also employs an education foundation liaison, director of finance, director of plant operations, chief technology officer and eight directors of various student services and programs. Each school is served by a principal and assistant principal. Instructional support staff varies from school to school based on student population needs.

Table 3

Falcon County Schools Demographics

Ethnicity	Percentage of Student Population
White	86%
Hispanic	11%
African-American	2%

Table 4

Falcon County Schools NC EOG Testing Data Grades 3-5

Subject	Proficiency
Reading/ELA	64%

Math	66%

Wallen City Schools District is served by a superintendent and chief academic officer. The district also employs an education foundation liaison, director of finance, director of plant operations, chief technology officer and eight directors of various student services and programs. Each school is served by a principal and assistant principal. Instructional support staff varies from school to school based on student population needs.

Table 5

Wallen City Schools Demographics

Ethnicity	Percentage of Student Population
White	86%
Hispanic	11%
African-American	2%

Table 6

Wallen City Schools NC EOG Testing Data Grades 3-5

Subject	Proficiency
Reading/ELA	64%
Math	66%

Due to the desire to explore teacher perceptions of preparedness in rural northwest North Carolina, the rural location of each school district makes them suitable for this study. While both counties are large rural counties, neither district had enough teachers meeting the study criteria to

obtain 15 participants, making it necessary to conduct the research in three school districts within the two counties. Including three districts in the study made it possible to identify 15 novice teachers responsible for teaching early literacy skills in prekindergarten through third grade. This study was conducted using participants from 8 elementary schools.

Participants

The sample for this study was a purposive sample. Purposive, or purposeful, sampling is when participants are selected in a deliberate manner with a specific goal or purpose in mind (Yin, 2016). The purpose of homogeneous purposeful sampling is to select sample cases with predetermined criterion of importance (Gall et al., 2007; Yin, 2016). This type of sampling allowed for an in-depth study of the issue at hand. The predetermined criterion for this study was that all participants were novice teachers responsible for teaching early literacy skills in prekindergarten through third grade. Goh et al. (2017) defined novice teachers as still being under probation and not formally confirmed as part of the teaching profession. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction considers teachers with less than three years of experience as beginning teachers. For this study, novice teachers were identified as teachers having less than three years of teaching experience.

There are no set rules determining sample size for qualitative research (Gall et al., 2007). This study used a sample of 10 novice teachers with a bachelor's degree in elementary education and no additional graduate coursework completed. District and school administrators assisted in identifying teachers that meet the study criteria. Participation in the study was solicited via school email correspondence. Participant information was collected through standardized open-ended questions during individual interviews. The study started with 12 participants but due to attrition, only 10 participants completed the study.

Researcher Positionality

With this study, I sought to understand the experiences of novice teachers as they taught early literacy skills to beginning readers. Having several years of experience teaching third grade, I see it as a year where students transition from learning to read, to reading to learn. Difficulties learning to read can detrimentally affect the overall education of a child (Morris, 2008). In recent years, more and more students have been coming to me without the foundational skills necessary to become successful readers. Without the prerequisite foundational skills, students are not able progress on to reading fluently and with comprehension. In my discussions with colleagues, I found many teachers, novice and veteran, feel inadequately prepared to help beginning readers and students who are struggling with learning how to read. Beginning teachers often feel at a loss for what kind of interventions students need to target specific skill deficits (Spear-Swerling, 2015). I also realized some teachers feel prepared but then lack the content knowledge necessary to do an effective job. It is the increasing number of students lacking foundational skills and the apparent inadequate preparation of teachers to meet the needs of beginning readers which motivated me to conduct this research. I conducted a collective case study with novice teachers working in rural elementary schools in northwest North Carolina.

Interpretive Framework

I used the paradigm of constructivism to guide me through this study. Constructivism allowed me to have an active flexible role in conducting the research (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), constructivism is focused on multiple realities constructed through lived experiences and interactions. This approach is more focused on the "views, values, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, and ideologies of individuals than in gathering facts" (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 441), making it an appropriate lens for exploring novice

teachers' feelings of preparedness. Methodologies commonly associated with constructivism are the use of interviews, observations, and analysis of text (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These methodologies allowed me to develop thick, rich, and deep descriptions of participants' experiences.

I conducted a collective case study to gain the perspectives of multiple participants, and explore how their preservice teacher training in conjunction with experiences in elementary classrooms have affected their perceptions of preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. The case study design is appropriate when a study seeks to explore "how" or "why" (Yin, 2016). A collective case study was selected for this research as it has benefits over a single case design. Studying multiple cases can provide more compelling evidence from the analysis. When analytical conclusions are derived independently from several cases, the findings are strengthened (Yin, 2016).

Philosophical Assumptions

By considering both ontological and epistemological assumptions, I was able to self-reflect on personal biases that may have influenced my interpretation of the data collected. Ontology is the study of being; "what kind of world we are investigating, with the nature of existence, with the structure of reality as such" (Crotty, 2003, p. 10). It is my belief that the world consists of humans whom construct their own reality based on unique, individual experiences; therefore, my reality and those of participants may not be the same. Acknowledging differences between participants and myself helped limit the influence of personal biases.

Epistemological assumptions are focused on providing a philosophical framework for determining what kinds of knowledge are possible (Crotty 2003). I find myself aligned with the constructivist paradigm which contends that reality is constructed differently by everyone (Gall

et al., 2007). An extension of the constructivist paradigm is the interpretivist philosophy which emphasizes the importance of exploring how various individuals in a social setting construct beliefs (Check & Schutt, 2012). As an educational researcher it was my goal to understand how novice teachers constructed their reality and to find consensus among the participants to aide in understanding teachers' perceptions of preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. Acknowledging my own biases on this topic allowed me to let the participants tell their own story, in their own way.

When considering my axiological assumptions, I was guided by my biblical worldview. Tackett (2006) defined a worldview as a framework by which we view reality and make sense of all that is in the world. My worldview is guided by my faith and belief in God and his teachings in the Holy Bible. I believe teaching is my calling in life, and I can use my education to positively influence the field of education, students, and future educators. Completing this study has been just one more piece of the puzzle in his greater plan for my life. Esqueda (2014) says, "There should be no distinction between Christian faith and academic endeavors" (p. 97); for me the two are intertwined. In keeping with my biblical worldview, all participants in this study were treated with the utmost respect, confidentiality was maintained, and their experiences and opinions were valued. Luke 6:31 says, "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise" (King James Version).

Researcher's Role

As the human instrument in this study, I was responsible for collecting and analyzing the data. My motivation for this study was based on struggles I witnessed in both beginning readers and novice teachers. As a third grade teacher, I noticed an increase in the number of students coming to me lacking the foundational skills necessary to become proficient readers. During my

years in education, I have worked with many teachers, both novice and veteran, who have expressed concerns over not knowing what to do to help students that have difficulty learning to read. In my studies through Liberty University, professional development courses, and conversations with colleagues, it seems to me that elementary teachers are not adequately prepared to meet the challenges associated with teaching early literacy skills to beginning readers and struggling readers. It also became evident to me in retrospect, that when I first started teaching, I did not have the content knowledge necessary to teach early literacy skills effectively. My undergraduate coursework in reading instruction did not provide instruction in phonemic awareness or phonics. My previous coursework did not provide strategies for student intervention and remediation. This spurned my interest in conducting a study exploring novice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. I decided to focus on novice teachers due to their recent completion of undergraduate education coursework. It was my belief that teachers completing their undergraduate coursework within a given timeframe would have similar levels of preparedness.

I live and work near the schools that participated in the study. I did not work at any of the participating elementary schools and did not work directly with any of the participants. I did not have any prior relationships with the participants. None of the participants attended the same preservice teacher education program as me.

I was aware going into the study that I felt as though beginning teachers, and many veteran teachers, are not adequately prepared to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers and are not prepared the meet the needs of struggling readers. I used multiple strategies to address preexisting biases. One strategy was member checking, this is when study participants review statements and reports for accuracy (Gall et al., 2007). If discrepancies arise, reports will

be rewritten and checked again. Another strategy was peer examination. This was done by asking colleagues to review and comment on the findings (Gall et al., 2007). I also conducted researcher reflections throughout the course of the study. These reflections were handwritten notes. Researcher reflections allowed me to consider roles, relationships, worldviews, theoretical orientation, and other positions related to the issue being studied (Gall et al., 2007).

Procedures

This study collected data from three sources: individual teacher interviews, focus group interview, and reflective journals. Data gathered from multiple sources allows for triangulation; triangulation is the use of evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection to create descriptions or identify themes in qualitative research (Creswell, 2015). Individual interviews were conducted in the classroom of the participating teachers in a one-on-one setting. Individual interviews were conducted first to establish familiarity between me and the participants. The focus group interview and discussion was conducted after individual interviews were completed. The focus group interview was held via Zoom due to Covid-19 concerns. The final data piece was reflective journals. Each participant responded to reflective journal prompts commenting on aspects of early literacy instruction that went well, areas for improvement, and feelings of self-efficacy. As participants reflected on their self-efficacy, they expounded on feelings of preparedness based on experiences provided during preservice teacher preparation programs and experiences in the classroom.

Prior to conducting the study, the standardized open-ended interview questions were piloted with a small group of three teachers responsible for teaching early literacy skills to beginning readers. Pilot study participants were not be novice teachers as the purpose of the pilot study was to test the clarity of the questions, and provide interview practice for the researcher. A

pilot study can help refine data collection methods and assist with developing relevant lines of questioning (Yin, 2018). Data collection methods and revisions to questions were not necessary based on feedback from the pilot study participants; however, practice asking the questions during the pilot study helped me feel more comfortable conducting interviews during the study. I noted important information gained from the process and used that information to help make data collection go more smoothly. Data collected from the pilot study was not included in final data analysis. Yin (2018) stated that the pilot study reports should be explicit about lessons learned regarding the research design and field procedures.

Permissions

The first step was to obtain necessary approvals for the research. Superintendents for Pacer County Schools, Falcon County Schools, and Wallen County Schools were contacted to seek approval to conduct research within their district. Once approval was granted by each superintendent (See Appendix A), school administrators were contacted. School administrators helped identify novice teachers responsible for teaching early literacy skills. Once letters of approval from the school districts were obtained, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (See Appendix B) was sought and obtained.

Recruitment Plan

School administrators were provided criterion for study participants and then provided potential candidates with study information and my contact information. Teachers interested in participating contacted me via email for more information regarding the study. The email to potential participants included a brief description of the study along with general information about what participants would be asked to do, including guiding questions for the reflective journals. The email clearly conveyed participation in the study is completely voluntary. Once

participants were identified, informed consent (See Appendix C) was obtained, and data collection commenced.

Data Collection Plan

The study used three methods of data collection. First, data was collected by conducting one-on-one interviews with each participant. Interviews were conducted at each school location in each participants' classroom. The ability to pose and ask good questions is an important part of case study research (Yin, 2018). Interviews were conducted using standardized open-ended questions (See Appendix D) and were approximately 40-60 minutes in duration. During the interviews, I took notes of participant responses and body language. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for accuracy. Transcriptions were shared with participants for the purpose of member checking. Member checking allows participants the opportunity to review and confirm information used in the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

One focus group interview was conducted via Zoom due to Covid-19 and was approximately 60 minutes in duration. Dialogue was guided by focus group interview questions (See Appendix E). I took notes of discussions and participant interactions during the focus group session. The dialogue was recorded and transcribed for accuracy. Member checking was used to confirm the accuracy of information collected.

The third method of data collection was reflective journaling. Participants were asked to reflect on aspects of literacy instruction, classroom practices, lessons, activities, feelings of preparedness and self-efficacy. Participants had the option to answer journal questions digitally or to provide a handwritten paper version of their answers.

It is important to maintain a chain of evidence to increase the construct validity of the study (Yin, 2018). The steps between data collection to research findings should be traceable,

ensuring that findings are based on evidence collected during the study (Yin, 2018). It is critical all documentation is maintained, secured, and available for review during analysis. A log was kept detailing data collected and methods used for securing evidence. All interview recordings were stored on a password protected device, accessible only to me, the researcher. Transcriptions were only be accessible by me and dissertation committee members. Handwritten notes were secured in a locked filing cabinet when not being actively used for research and analysis purposes. Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms for all locations and participants.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

Individual interviews using standardized open-ended questions were the primary source of data collection for this study. After informed consent was received from participants, ten individual interviews were conducted. Interviews last approximately 40-60 minutes in duration. Interviews took place in each participant's classroom. According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019), conducting individual interviews is a popular approach in educational research. In depth interviewing is a qualitative method used to find out about people's "experiences, thoughts, and feelings" (Check & Schutt, 2012, p. 201). During the interviews, I asked questions, and participants responded. Questions were scripted but participants elaborate as needed. Yin (2018) indicated that it is important to remain adaptive during the interview process; therefore, follow-up questions were asked as necessary. For this study, the interviews were recorded using the iPad app "Voice Recorder." Recordings were transcribed verbatim. In addition to recording the interviews, I took notes during the interviews. The notes and transcriptions were analyzed later. Each interview one hour or less to complete and took place in the classroom of the participating teacher.

Individual Interview Questions

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to me, including your name, what grade you teach, and how many years you have been teaching?
2. Why did you decide to become a teacher?
3. Why did you choose to teach elementary school?
4. What grade is your favorite to teach and why?
5. How would you describe the literacy needs of your general education students?
6. How would you describe the literacy needs of you special populations (EC, ESL)?
7. How do you define literacy instruction?
8. What do you think are the most important aspects of literacy instruction?
9. How often do you explicitly teach phonics as part of your literacy instruction?
10. How do you select text for your students?
11. Please describe how comfortable you feel teaching early literacy skills to beginning readers.
12. Please describe how comfortable you feel teaching early literacy skills to struggling readers.
13. How adequately prepared do you feel to teach early literacy skills?
14. How did your preservice teacher education program prepare you to teach early literacy skills?

Questions one through three were intended to open the dialogue between the researcher and the participant and establish a conversational tone (Yin, 2014). Question one established

necessary background information. Questions two and three addressed teacher motivation for teaching elementary school.

Question four asked the participants about their favorite grade to teach and why. This question was asked early in the interview process and served the purpose of establishing a relationship of trust between participants and researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Question five asked the participant to describe the literacy needs of students. This was important because teachers must be able to identify student needs to be able to meet them (Meeks & Kemp, 2017). Inability to describe the literacy needs of students, indicates a lack of preparedness. This question was asked to see if their feelings of self-efficacy aligned with their content knowledge. A study by Rutherford et al., (2017) found that while many teachers felt prepared to teach early literacy skills, their assessments on content knowledge indicated that they did not possess the skills and knowledge necessary to do so.

Question six was asked because it is important that general education teachers are able to identify and meet the needs of students identified as having a learning disability. A report issued by the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2014) stated the amount of time students with disabilities spend in the general education classroom is steadily increasing while their academic performance continues to lag behind their peers. Behan (2016) indicated 96% of students with disabilities spend a portion of their day in the general education classroom. This question allowed participants to describe student needs and provide insight into how prepared they felt to meet the needs of this group of learners.

Questions seven through nine were questions specific to effective literacy instruction. The National Reading Panel identified five major areas of effective reading instruction: phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (NICHHD, 2000). Knowledge or

lack of knowledge in this area could impact teacher perceptions of their ability to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. A study by Myers et al., (2019), revealed teacher candidates lack confidence in their ability to teach reading.

Question ten asked how participants selected text for their students. This question provided insight into teacher content knowledge and preparedness to meet the needs of beginning readers by selecting appropriate text for instruction. Swanson and Wexler (2017) indicated selecting high-quality texts complex enough to support learning but not beyond the student's level is critical; however, teachers receive very little guidance on how to do this.

Questions 11 and 12 specifically addressed teacher perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills, which directly related to the research questions of this study.

Question 13 asked participants if they felt prepared to meet the literacy needs of their students. This question allowed participants to discuss feelings of competency or inadequacy and to share personal experiences. A study by Lemons et al., (2016) discussed the importance of preparing teachers to meet the diverse needs of students. The study recommended teachers participate in additional training to improve reading outcomes for students. Additionally, Jordan et al. (2019) indicated teacher self-efficacy impacts student outcomes.

Question 14 addressed participant perceptions of preparedness based on their preservice teacher education programs. A literature review by Schumm et al., (2014) indicated teacher preparation programs across the country need improving. Schumm et al. (2014) stated, "As a professional community, we must widen our lens to think about research in how we prepare teacher educators" (p. 241). Answers to this question provided insight into possible improvements that could be made to teacher preparation programs.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

To begin the analysis of individual interviews, I listened to each interview and made notes. I used both memo writing and diagramming (Yin, 2018) to document observations and connections made during the analysis. The notes were compared to the memos made during the interview process. Interviews were then transcribed. Transcriptions were printed to allow for coding. This procedure assigns a code to each concept or potential interest (Yin, 2018). I used lean coding, which means that only a few codes were assigned. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) indicated that it is best not to overcode the data. An Excel spreadsheet was created to organize participant information and codes.

Once codes were identified, the code list was be used to examine the data further to see if new codes emerged. Codes were then analyzed to look for recurring themes. Themes are similar codes that can be grouped together to form a major idea from the data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Once each individual case was analyzed, I began a cross case analysis looking for recurring themes and patterns across the cases. This technique identifies key variables and uses those variables to aggregate the data across cases (Yin, 2018). Themes and patterns that emerged were used to establish generalizations and explore teachers' perceptions regarding their preparedness to teach early literacy skills.

Focus Group Interview

Focus groups are used in qualitative research to collect data through interviews with small groups of people, usually four to six participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Focus groups are beneficial in that the interactions between participants can yield valuable information (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). For this study, there was one focus group interview session. The interview took place via Zoom to accommodate teachers from three school districts while

maintaining participant health and safety during the Covid 19 pandemic. The interview questions were open-ended in nature to allow for conversation among participants. As the conversation among participants unfolded, it was necessary to ask follow-up questions. The focus group interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The interview was recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Focus Group Questions

1) Please state your name, the grade level you teach, and how many years you have been teaching.
2) How would you describe effective literacy instruction?
3) How confident are you in your ability to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers?
4) How confident are you in your ability to teach early literacy skills to struggling readers?
5) How would you describe your level of preparedness to meet the early literacy needs of your students?
6) Can you describe the literacy requirements of your teacher preparation program?
7) During your teacher preparation program, what did your reading/literacy methodology courses entail?
8) Can you describe how your education courses prepared you to meet the needs of beginning readers?
9) Can you describe how your education courses prepared you to meet the needs of struggling readers?
10) Is there anything else that you would like me to know?

Question one opened the dialogue and established a conversational tone between participants and the researcher (Yin, 2014). Question one also established necessary background information.

Question two initiated dialogue between participants as to what they consider to be effective literacy instruction. The National Reading Panel identified five major areas of effective reading instruction: phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (NICHHD, 2000). Knowledge about these five components are necessary for successful general education instruction in reading (Spear-Swerling, 2015). Knowledge, or lack of knowledge, about effective literacy instruction could impact teacher perceptions of their ability to teach early literacy skills (Jordan et al., 2019).

Questions three asked participants about their ability to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. Jordan et al. (2019) stated it is important to consider self-efficacy for teaching reading given the significant role it plays in teaching students to read. Higher levels of self-efficacy have been linked to increased student achievement (Tschannen-Moran, 1998).

Question four asked participants about their ability to teach early literacy skills to struggling readers. This was important because the ability to provide effective classroom instruction, and intervention when necessary, is critical to children's reading development (Spear-Swerling, 2015). The National Center for Learning Disabilities (2014) stated the amount of time that students with disabilities spend in the general education classroom is steadily increasing.

Question five allowed participants to discuss their feelings of preparedness, or lack of preparedness, for teaching early literacy skills. This question was important in that it may provide insight into teachers' lack of self-efficacy for teaching reading. Jordan et al. (2019) stated, "self-efficacy in teaching reading during teacher education is an important construct to consider" (p. 191).

Questions six and seven asked participants to describe courses and experiences during their teacher preparation programs. These questions helped me understand what was required of them during their preparation programs. The questions related directly to the central question and sub-questions of this study by allowing participants the opportunity to discuss how experiences during their teacher preparation programs influenced their perceptions of preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. These questions also prompted further discussion as to what additional experiences or opportunities would have been beneficial during their teacher training. Jordan et al. (2019) indicated that teacher preparation programs significantly impact teachers' beliefs about their abilities.

Questions eight and nine allowed the participants to expound upon how the courses and experiences from teacher preparation programs equipped them to meet the needs of beginning readers in their classrooms. Participants described in their own words both challenges and successes they have encountered as they have applied the pedagogy learned from their training into their own classrooms. Asking these questions during the focus group interview prompted interaction among the participants and helped me to collect a shared understanding of how their teacher preparation programs truly prepared them to meet the needs of students (Creswell, 2015)

Question ten provided a final opportunity for participants to offer any additional information they deemed appropriate. An important aspect of case study research is to be a good listener (Yin, 2018). Allowing participants to share feelings and experiences freely without specific direction from me provided valuable insight into teacher perceptions of preparedness.

Focus Group Interview Data Analysis Plan

Focus group interview data analysis began with listening to the interview and making notes using memo writing and diagramming. Each focus group interview session was transcribed

and printed to allow for coding. Codes were assigned to key concepts that emerged from the analysis. Once codes were identified, they were added to the Excel spreadsheet in a separate designated section. The code list was used to further analyze the data looking for recurring themes and patterns.

Reflective Journals

The third method of data collection was reflective journaling by the participants. While reflective journaling can be used by researchers to acknowledge personal biases and tendencies (Yin, 2018); for this study, reflective journaling was used as a data collection method. Participants used journaling to reflect on successes and challenges encountered during literacy instruction during the 2020-2021 school year. Using reflective journals for data collection allowed participants to reflect on classroom practices, lessons, activities, feelings of preparedness and self-efficacy. When participants were given information regarding the study, guiding questions for reflection were also provided. Participants were asked to reflect on early literacy instruction, documenting aspects of lessons and activities that went well and areas for improvement. Teachers were asked to reflect on their feelings of preparedness to teach early literacy skills based on experiences provided through their preservice teacher preparation programs. This allowed participants to share positive aspects of their preservice teacher training and areas in need of improvement. Participants were allowed the liberty to add any other information they felt was pertinent to the study. Some journals were handwritten while others were digital. Journals were collected and analyzed to look for recurring themes and patterns that aligned with themes and patterns identified from individual and focus group interviews.

Reflective Journals Data Analysis Plan

Reflective journals were collected and reviewed. During the analysis of the journals, I used memo writing and diagramming to make notes. I incorporated the use of highlighters to color code recurring themes and patterns. A code list was created and added to the spreadsheet in a designated area.

Data Synthesis

Case study data can be analyzed in a number of different ways. Gathering data from multiple sources will allow for data triangulation (Yin, 2018). This study utilized a "ground up" theory as described by Yin (2018). This approach calls for an initial review of the data that may suggest a useful concept that can be used to start down an analytical path (Yin, 2018). The first step in the data analysis process was to organize the data. Data organization is a critical component of qualitative research due to the large amount of data collected over the course of the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Data was separated by type: individual interviews, focus group interview, and reflective journals.

Once data from the three different collection methods was analyzed independently, the data from all sources was compared. I identified recurring themes and patterns that emerged across the data. These themes and patterns were used to create a narrative discussion of the phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Trustworthiness

To ensure the findings and interpretations of the study were accurate, multiple strategies were used to establish trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is the qualitative equivalent to validity in a quantitative study (Creswell, 2015). The following sections on credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability will provide more detail about the strategies used.

Credibility

Credibility refers to how accurately the researcher describes the reality of what happens in the field. Triangulation was used to achieve credibility for this study. Triangulation uses evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection to create descriptions or identify themes in qualitative research (Creswell, 2015). This study used data gathered from individual interviews, focus group interview, and reflective journals to identify themes, patterns, and perspectives that accurately portrayed the experiences and feelings of the participants. Member checking was used to establish credibility. Member checking is the process of allowing one or more participants of the study to check the researcher's account of events or discussions (Creswell, 2015).

Transferability

Transferability refers to how well the findings of the study can be applied in other settings or circumstances (Creswell, 2013). To establish transferability for this study, I provided thick, rich descriptions of the participants, their experiences, and the setting. Providing detailed descriptions of methods and procedures will allow for replication in other settings.

Dependability

Dependability and confirmability are the qualitative counterpart to reliability in a quantitative study. Dependability makes it possible for the study to be replicated by providing an in-depth description of methods and procedures (Creswell, 2015). Dependability was achieved by keeping a detailed log of methods and procedures throughout the study and providing rich detailed descriptions of the context and setting of the study. Methods and procedures were systematically followed to ensure consistency in data collection and analysis from site to site.

Researcher memos were used to note ideas, thoughts, and possible code categories (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) during data collection and analysis.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the research findings are shaped by the participants and not by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure confirmability, I set aside any preconceived ideas about the study and approached the process of data collection and analysis in an unbiased manner. An audit trail was used to document all materials and procedures used throughout the study (Gall et al., 2007).

Ethical Considerations

Data collection for case study research poses a variety of ethical concerns (Gall et al., 2007). Precautionary measures were taken to avoid unethical behavior during the course of this study. First, Institutional Review Board approval from Liberty University was obtained prior to beginning data collection. Permission was gained from site gatekeepers, the superintendent and school administrators, to conduct the study. Participants were provided with an informed consent form prior to taking part in the study. The nature and intent of the study was clearly communicated to the participants and it was made clear that participation was voluntary. Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms for all participants, schools, and school districts. Paper copies of all research data was secured in a locked filing cabinet. Electronic data was stored on a password protected computer and on a flash drive that was secured. Data will be stored for one year after a successful dissertation defense, at which time electronic data will be deleted and paper copies will be shredded. Participants were treated fairly, and with dignity and respect for the duration of this study.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore novice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. This was a qualitative study using a collective case study design to explore, interpret and share perceptions of novice teachers as they teach early literacy skills to students in prekindergarten through third grade in rural northwest North Carolina. Data was collected using individual interviews, focus group interview, and reflective journals. Data was analyzed using the "ground up" theory and cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2018). The role of the researcher has been identified along with strategies used to establish trustworthiness. Ethical considerations have been discussed. The results of the data analysis will be presented in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this collective case study was to explore novice teachers' perceptions of preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers in rural northwest North Carolina. Chapter Four provides descriptions of participants, data collected, emerging themes and subthemes. The chapter also includes answers to the central research question and three sub-questions and concludes with a summary.

Participants

The participants for the study included 10 novice elementary teachers from rural northwest North Carolina. School administrators at elementary schools within each district were provided with study criteria and information, which was passed along to potential participants. Teachers meeting the criteria and willing to participate completed a Google Form providing contact information to the researcher. Twelve teachers indicated a willingness to participate but only 10 completed the study. Finding willing participants was more difficult than expected. This was attributed to the stressful year that educators endured as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the timing of data collection coming at the end of the school year which is a busy time for teachers. Due to the difficulty of finding participants, revisions to the original Institutional Review Board application were made to extend the study from two school districts to three. Once approval was received for the third school district to be included in the study, a satisfactory number of participants was secured. All study participants were female and Caucasian, which is common for elementary teachers in rural northwest North Carolina.

Four college preparation programs were represented among the 10 participants. To maintain anonymity and to comply with IRB, each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

Pseudonyms used are as follows: Amy, Beth, Connie, Donna, Emily, Frannie, Gracie, Hope, Ivey, and Julissa.

Amy

Amy is a first-year teacher. She always wanted to be a teacher but she married and started a family before completing her education. When her children were school-aged, she was ready to return to school and earned a degree in Social Work. She worked in that field for over 15 years. A couple of years ago, Amy decided to pursue her original desire to teach school and returned to college to seek licensure in Elementary Education. She student-taught in third grade and was hired by her host school as a second grade teacher for this year. She completed her teacher education program at a large private university in Virginia.

Beth

Beth just completed her first year of teaching kindergarten. Similar to Amy, education was not Beth's major in college. She originally obtained a degree in fashion design but was unable to find a job in that field. Her interest in education began when she taught sewing classes to children during summer camps. This led her to apply for a part-time job as a substitute teacher, which subsequently resulted in a full-time position as a special education teacher assistant. She said, "It just felt right. It was like, this is what I was meant to do" (Beth, individual interview, July, 2, 2021). She returned to college to earn a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education. She completed her teacher education program through a small private university in North Carolina with a satellite campus at a nearby community college.

Connie

Connie has taught first grade for two years. Connie served as an intern at a local elementary school during high school and that is when she fell in love with education and

working with young children. While certified to teach kindergarten through sixth grade, she prefers working in lower elementary grades. She says the younger students just have this light about them and still have a strong motivation to listen and learn. Connie attended the same small, private university as Beth and completed her coursework at the satellite location.

Donna

Donna just completed her second year of teaching first grade. Donna originally went to college to major in History but eventually changed her major to Nutrition; however, once she got to the anatomy and physiology classes she decided nutrition was not the right major for her. With the help of her advisor, she made the decision to major in Family Consumer Science Education. She completed her degree and then spent some time at home with her three small children. When her children were old enough to begin pre-school, she was employed at the pre-school. As they transitioned to elementary school, Donna did too. She began working at the school as a part-time tutor and then decided she would return to school and add elementary grades to her teaching license. After a little over a year as a tutor, she was offered a first grade teaching position. She says the longer she is in education the more she loves it, "I enjoy the art of it" (Donna, individual interview, June 8, 2021). Donna completed her elementary education coursework through an online program offered through a state supported university.

Emily

Emily has taught third grade for three years. She said teaching is what she wanted to do for her entire life but delayed beginning a career in education to start a family. When Emily's children got older for was employed by a company that had an annual "bring your child to work day". That was the day she realized she had to go back to school and get her degree in education.

She said, “It was just laid on my heart” (Emily, individual interview, June 3, 2021). Emily attended a small private university to complete her teacher education program.

Frannie

Frannie just completed her third year of teaching second grade. She said that she has always wanted to be a teacher and was inspired by her grandmother who was a teacher. She was also influenced by her own positive experiences in school. She said, “I always knew I wanted to teach something because I had such a positive experience in school with all of my teachers” (Frannie, individual interview, May 27, 2021). Frannie attended a mid-sized state supported university near her hometown.

Gracie

Gracie is an exceptional children’s pre-kindergarten teacher. She just completed her first year of teaching. Gracie was also inspired to become a teacher by her grandmother who was a teacher and principal. She indicated that she went into education to positively impact the lives of children and had a special desire to work with young children, especially students with special needs. “It’s just what I’ve always wanted to do” (individual interview, May 26, 2021). Gracie attended the same mid-sized state university as Frannie.

Hope

Hope teaches a self-contained exceptional children’s class for students in kindergarten through third grade. She has been teaching for two years. Hope also indicated that she always wanted to teach. In college, she majored in elementary education. She took some time after college to begin a family. Once her own children started school, she started working as a

substitute teacher and eventually moved into a full-time teaching position. She attended the same mid-sized state university as Gracie and Frannie.

Ivey

Ivey just completed her first year of teaching. She taught fourth grade and will be transitioning to third grade next year. She is looking forward to the move and said she feels most comfortable teaching second through fourth grades. Ivey indicated that she had always wanted to be a teacher and can remember playing teacher at a very early age. “There was never really anything else I wanted to do” (individual interview, July 14, 2021). She completed her preservice teacher preparation program online through a small private university.

Julissa

Julissa is an exceptional children’s resource teacher serving students in kindergarten through sixth grade. She just completed her second year of teaching. Similar to other participants, Julissa was inspired to go into education by her family. Her mother was a teacher, and her grandmother was a teacher and principal. “I always wanted to teach and exceptional children have always held a special place for me” (Julissa, individual interview, July 21, 2021). Julissa completed her teaching degree online thought a mid-sized state supported university.

Table 7

Teacher Participants

Teacher Participant	Years Taught	Grade Level
Amy	1	3
Beth	1	K
Carrie	2	1
Donna	2	1
Emily	3	3
Frannie	3	2
Gracie	1	PK/EC
Hope	2	K-3/EC

Ivey	1	3
Julissa	2	K-6/EC

Of the 10 participants in this study, four teachers had one year of teaching experience, four teachers had two years of experience, and two of them had three years of experience. Gracie was the only pre-kindergarten exceptional children's teacher while Hope taught exceptional children in kindergarten through third grade and Julissa taught exceptional children in kindergarten through sixth grade. Beth was the only kindergarten teacher. Carrie and Donna both taught first grade. Frannie was the only second grade teacher. Amy, Emily, and Ivey all taught third grade. All beginning teachers in North Carolina have an assigned mentor; therefore, all participants in this study had a mentor which they could go to for assistance.

Results

The case study design allows researchers to focus on individuals involved in a program, event, or activity (Creswell, 2015). This study focused on novice elementary teachers responsible for providing instruction in early literacy skills to beginning readers. The case study design allowed for an in-depth exploration of teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills and to share experiences that have influenced their perceptions. To help understand teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers, individual interviews and a focus group interview were conducted and reflective journals were completed by the participants. The following section outlines how the themes were developed and how they align with the research questions.

Theme Development

This collective case study explored novice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. Data was collected from individual interviews, a focus group interview, and reflective journals. After completing data collection, I listened to

individual and focus group interviews and read the reflective journals multiple times. Memo writing and diagramming were used to document observations and connections (Yin, 2018). The memos and diagramming were compared to notes made at the time interviews were conducted. Individual and focus group interviews were transcribed and printed. The transcriptions were read multiple times and then lean coding was used to assign a code to each concept or potential interest. Lean coding was used as to not overcode the data (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2019). Reflective journals were read multiple times, and I used memo writing and diagramming to make notes. Lean coding was used to assign codes to areas of interest in the journals. During the analysis, I journaled my thoughts as a means to remain unbiased and allow the data to speak for itself.

Case Study Database

Once all data were collected, a case study database was created using information gathered from the three data sources. Individual and focus group interviews were transcribed and coded, information was then organized by theme in an Excel spreadsheet. Reflective journals were read and coded. Information specific to teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills was merged with the interview data and included in the spreadsheet.

Coding and Categorizing

The first step in data analysis was to listen to the interviews while reviewing memos taken during the interview process. Each interview was listened to twice before transcribing. The transcriptions were read and reviewed to identify words and phrases related to teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. Key words and phrases were color coded to assist with organization. A frequency table was created and used

to organize the information. Reflective journals were read and coded using the same process and the information was added to the frequency table.

Theme Development

The notes and coding for the interviews and journals were reviewed and compared to the information in the frequency table. The information in the table was then reviewed; key words and phrases were organized and grouped together in a new table. The new groupings helped identify the recurring themes related to teacher perceptions of preparedness to teach early literacy skills. The following table indicates the recurring codes, the number of occurrences and the assigned theme.

Table 8

Codes and Themes

Code	Occurrences	Theme
well prepared	9	
not prepared	6	feelings of preparedness
more confidence after experience	10	
more confidence with scripted program	13	
not ready at first	9	
phonics	23	
phonemic awareness	11	
fluency	3	effective instruction
vocabulary	10	
comprehension	14	

decoding	7	
mapping sounds	4	orthography
writing	3	
leveled groups	19	
differentiation	8	differentiated instruction
interventions	12	
scaffolding	3	
Lexile levels	3	
Instructional levels	2	

Feelings of Preparedness

A recurring theme through all interviews and reflective journals was feelings of preparedness, both positive and negative, and teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to meet the needs of beginning readers. While teachers stated they felt "well prepared" more often than "not prepared", many participants went on to explain how they felt more prepared after having additional experiences in the classroom beyond completing their teacher preparation programs. In her journal Gracie stated, "I feel that I will be more prepared to serve my students next year, due to all that I have learned this year" (reflective journal, May, 26, 2021). Donna said learning from co-workers and gaining classroom experience has helped her feel "a lot better than I did" (individual interview, June 8, 2021). Julissa had similar feelings and said she relied heavily on two colleagues to guide her the first couple of years in the classroom and now feels

more comfortable teaching early literacy skills (individual interview, July 21, 2021). Another participant indicated after two years in the classroom she now feels okay about her abilities to teacher early literacy skills.

> I feel that experience is such a big component. I feel like when you see it and they tell you this is what a phoneme is, this is what a grapheme is, this is why it's important- you don't really see how it needs to be done until you're in front and watching someone map out those sounds with a kid. I think experience is really what I needed because I didn't feel as prepared when I started as I do now (Carrie, individual interview, July 2, 2021).

During the focus group interview, many participants echoed feelings shared during their individual interviews in that they felt more prepared after gaining experience in the classroom. "I am a lot more confident now than my first year teaching" (Hope, focus group interview, July 23, 2021). Julissa offered, "Now that I know what resources I have, I've had some training, and actually used it with my students, I feel like I have a good idea of what I'm doing" (focus group interview, July 23, 2021).

The participants seemed reluctant to say their teacher preparation programs did not prepare them but descriptions of their experiences suggested they did not feel prepared. When asked if she felt prepared to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers, Julissa responded, "Yes, I do feel prepared". When asked how comfortable she was teaching early literacy skills to beginning readers Julissa also said, "I am feeling more comfortable, at first I was feeling kind of lost. I felt like I was not ready for this, but I think having trainings have helped" (Julissa, individual interview, July 21, 2021). As for teaching struggling readers Julissa indicated she did not feel very prepared but after having a year of experience she feels better now. Amy stated, "I think it (her teacher preparatory program) prepared me well" and she also said, "I feel like I'm

missing the science of reading and the specifics of this is how you teach reading" (individual interview, July 14, 2021). Ivey also stated she felt well-prepared and had the necessary knowledge but was anxious about implementation. "I can sit here and talk about it all day but putting it into practice and differentiating for each student is a different story" (individual interview, July 14, 2021). Participants expressed concern about not knowing what to do for students struggling with acquiring reading skills. Frannie said, "I feel like I have a good idea of how to teach reading in general but not really what to do for students who just don't get it from regular instruction. We talk about interventions, but I don't really know what to do or how to do it" (focus group interview, July 23, 2021).

Colleagues

Many participants suggested assistance from colleagues while they were gaining experience in the classroom contributed to increased feelings of preparedness. Amelia said she went into her first year of teaching planning to rely on colleagues as a support system (individual interview, July 14, 2021). Donna said she relied on a neighboring teacher to help her look for activities that would help her in meeting the needs of her lowest students (reflective journal, June 8, 2021). Frannie said she constantly reached out to co-workers. "Mrs. McDonald (pseudonym) next door was a great help. She's been teaching several years and had some great strategies" (reflective journal, May 27, 2021).

Scripted and Specialized Reading Programs

Several participants indicated using a scripted phonics program boosted their feelings of preparedness. Six of them specifically mentioned using the phonics program *Letterland* and expressed how the layout and explicit instructions helped them feel better about their lessons and what they were doing in the classroom to meet the needs of beginning readers. Beth said, "I think

because we have *Letterland t*hat helps my confidence. Coming in, I was already familiar with that. I'm sure I would feel a lot less confident if we didn't have that program" (individual interview, July 2, 2021). Four participants mentioned the use of other specialized reading programs such as: *Journeys*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt *Into Reading, FUNdations, Rooted in Reading,* and Scott Foresman *Reading Street*. Ivey said she liked the way teacher resources with her basal textbook had leveled texts, vocabulary, sight words, and phonics skills already planned out to go along with each reading story (reflective journal, July 14, 2021).

Preparing Future Teachers

Based on their time spent in the classroom gaining hands-on experience teaching beginning readers, participants shared suggestions for ways to better prepare future teachers for the challenges they will face. Participants indicated changes in the structure of college courses, opportunities for additional field experience, and additional in-service training as ways to better prepare teachers. Beth recommended college courses designed specifically for kindergarten through second grade. "I think if you know you want to teach those lower grades, then maybe some more classes focused on what those students need" (Beth, individual interview, July 2, 2021). Donna commented, "I would have liked for my classes to go more in-depth on how to teach reading. I think some programs now are doing a better job of that with this new focus on the science of reading, but my classes didn't have much of that" (focus group interview, July 23, 2021). Amy said, "I feel like I needed more hands-on experience because I didn't get that from my internship or student teaching. More time in the classroom would have been helpful" (individual interview, June, 14, 2021). During the focus group interview, Beth and Hope echoed the same sentiment, suggesting more time in classrooms working directly with students would have helped them feel more confident in their abilities to teach early literacy skills (focus group

interview, July 23, 2021). Carrie said, “It’s just a matter of having that time and sitting down to work with kids. That’s how you figure out what works and what doesn’t” (Carrie, individual interview, July 2, 2021). Participants also expressed the benefits of being trained to use programs and resources schools already have in place. Donna said it took her most of the year just to figure out what resources were available and how to use them effectively. She indicated training on the resources would have been helpful rather than having to figure it out on her own (Donna, reflective journal, June 8, 2021). Hope and Julissa received in-service training for the Letterland phonics program, both said that really knowing how to implement the program with fidelity greatly increased their feelings of preparedness (Hope, reflective journal, July 16, 2021; Julissa, reflective journal, July 21, 2021). Frannie and Ivey both received training on the basal reading text used in their district and both indicated the training helped them feel better prepared to teach reading to their students (Frannie, reflective journal, May 27, 2021; Ivey, reflective journal, July 14, 2021).

Effective Literacy Instruction

Across all data sources, a recurring theme was the key components of effective literacy instruction. According to the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000), effective reading instruction should incorporate instruction in phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. All participants referred to at least one or more of these components; however, only two participants named all five of the key components. When discussing how to meet the needs of struggling readers, Ivey said, “I always look to the science of reading with phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension and everything that is involved in layering instruction” (individual interview, July 14, 2021). Amy and Donna included phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension in their discussion of how they meet

the needs of their general education students; and went on to discuss the importance of vocabulary development when defining literacy instruction (focus group interview, July 23, 2021).

All participants included some aspect of phonics instruction in their answers and seven out of ten mentioned phonics and phonemic awareness. When discussing the needs of beginning readers, Julissa suggested students need specific instruction in the area of phonics and phonemic awareness to acquire the decoding skills necessary to become fluent readers. She went on to say that once students enter third and fourth grades, where they should be reading for knowledge, students are still struggling with comprehension due to their lack of fluency and decoding skills (Julissa, individual interview, July 21, 2021). Carrie stated, "Literacy instruction has a big phonics component of sounds and letter recognition" (individual interview, July 2, 2021). She also said students need these foundational skills before moving on to the more difficult task of comprehension. When asked how often they explicitly taught phonics skills, nine out of ten participants responded "daily" with times varying from 20-40 minutes; the one exception to this answer was the exceptional children's pre-kindergarten teacher who indicated phonics instruction was incorporated into play throughout the day.

Fluency did not occur in the data as often as the other four components of literacy instruction but it was mentioned once by three participants. During her individual interview, Julissa referred to the importance of acquiring foundational skills such as phonics and phonemic awareness to enable students to read fluently which in turn assists with reading comprehension (Julissa, individual interview, July 21, 2021). Ivey and Hope included fluency in their definition of literacy instruction (focus group interview, July 23, 2021).

Participants knowledge, and lack of knowledge, about the five components of effective literacy instruction provides insight to their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. While this information can indicate whether a teacher is adequately prepared or not, it does not necessarily equate to their perceptions of preparedness. When discussing various aspects of literacy instruction participants spoke with a great deal of confidence about what they were doing in their classrooms. When asked directly if they felt prepared to teach early literacy skills, the majority of them said they did, even though they later described feelings of inadequacy.

Challenges of Phonics Instruction

While all participants acknowledged phonics instruction as a part of literacy instruction at some point during the data collection process, it was specifically identified as an area in which beginning teachers did not feel completely prepared to teach. In their reflective journals Donna and Ivey both indicated phonics instruction was the area they found to be the most challenging aspect of literacy instruction during the past school year. Donna said phonics instruction was a struggle for her due to lack of resources and "lack of knowledge implementing what resources I did have" (reflective journal, June 8, 2021). Ivey said it was difficult for her because she learned to read using "whole word reading. I don't think I truly understood all that goes into phonics and reading" (reflective journal, July 14, 2021). In their personal interviews, Carrie and Hope indicated they struggled with teaching phonics just because they felt like they did not have enough instruction on how to properly teach phonics and phonemic awareness to beginning readers (Carrie, individual interview, July 2, 2021; Hope, individual interview, July 16, 2021).

Vocabulary Development is Key

Vocabulary development is one of the five key components of effective reading instruction as identified by the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) and was also identified as important by all study participants. While vocabulary development was not mentioned in each participants' definition of effective reading instruction, it was mentioned as important to reading acquisition while participants were answering other questions during data collection. Vocabulary instruction was not identified by participants as an area they felt unprepared to teach. When discussing the importance of vocabulary acquisition in her individual interview, Ivey stated, "If they don't have the vocabulary and they don't have that knowledge of words, then they are not going to be able to comprehend" (July 14, 2021). Frannie (individual interview, May, 27, 2021) and Donna (individual interview, June 8, 2021) both cited the importance of students' knowledge of vocabulary to their overall ability to comprehend texts. They both said they felt prepared to teach this aspect of literacy. Donna indicated she uses a variety of strategies when teaching vocabulary to her students. She also noted that she spends a good amount of instructional time exposing students to words, scaffolding instruction, and building background knowledge while teaching a weekly reading story (Donna, individual interview, June 8, 2021). Amy pointed out the importance of integrating vocabulary instruction across the curriculum. "I think it's just so important that literacy instruction is a part of everything you do". She discussed how she pre-teaches science and social studies vocabulary and that she likes to have students write definitions in their own words to help build understanding (Amy, individual interview, July 14, 2021). Participants also discussed the significance of vocabulary development as an important part of literacy instruction during the focus group interview. Emily and Donna (focus group interview, July 23, 2021) both indicated teaching new words were an important part of their weekly

routines. “It is so important to build that knowledge base, to learn new words and how to use them. You also need to provide them with strategies for figuring out the meaning of words they don’t know.” In her reflective journal, Ivey stated that there are many important aspects to effective reading instruction but “I think vocabulary is one of the bigger ones. If they don’t have that vocabulary knowledge, then the comprehension is not going to be there” (July 14, 2021). Emily identified vocabulary as being the most important aspect of effective literacy instruction (individual interview, June 3, 2021).

Orthography

Orthographic mapping is defined by Ehri (1970) as the process by which beginning readers are able to assimilate printed language with existing knowledge. It is during this process that students begin to make letter-sound connections which help “bond the spellings, pronunciations, and meanings of specific words in memory” (Ehri, 2014, p.5) making it possible for children to “read words by sight, to spell words from memory, and to acquire vocabulary words from print” (Ehri, 2014, p.5). While this process was not mentioned by the specific term of orthographic mapping, the study participants did mentioned aspects of the process during data collection.

When asked about the most important aspect of literacy instruction, Gracie stated she felt all aspects are important but went on to specifically mention the importance of helping students make connections between letters, sounds, and words. “I want to ensure that they are actually learning that letters make up words and they can recognize those letters and see the connection between them” (Gracie, individual interview, May 26, 2021).

Ehri and Flugman (2018) indicated developing phonemic awareness and word decoding skills are especially crucial for later success in reading comprehension. Five out of ten study

participants mentioned decoding as a critical piece of literacy instruction. Julissa noted her students that she considered behind as compared to typically developing peers often struggled with decoding. She said she noticed her third and fourth graders who have difficulty comprehending text have a much lower reading rate due to their inability to decode (Julissa, individual interview, July 21, 2021). Carrie specifically mentioned the importance of students being able to recognize and map out sounds, "To me literacy instruction has a big phonics component of sounds, letter recognition and mapping out sounds, then moving onto comprehension" (Carrie, individual interview, July 2, 2021). Carrie made a similar comment during the focus group interview to which Donna responded, "Yes, I agree, it is so important that they have those phonics skills so that when they start reading harder texts they can decode words they don't know". Frannie, a second grade teacher, discussed working on decoding skills each day during reading groups. When discussing the most important aspect of literacy instruction she commented, "Literacy is, in my opinion, a really big umbrella, it goes from knowing your letter sounds and being able to put them together and make words all the way up to college level reading" (Frannie, individual interview, May 27, 2021). Similarly, Ivey stated she provided many opportunities for students to work on decoding skills, not only during reading instruction but in other content areas. She said when teaching science and social studies lessons she would "pick words I knew my students might not know and break them apart beforehand" (Ivey, reflective journal, July 14, 2021).

Fluency

Students who struggle with the orthographic mapping process have difficulty reading fluently, which in turn affects reading comprehension. Frannie mentioned the importance of students having decoding skills to read fluently (Frannie, individual interview, May 27, 2021).

She said she was glad that many of her second graders already came to her with decoding skills and she just needed to help them increase their fluency. She said she usually uses repeated readings as a way to improve fluency. Donna stated students' comprehension on oral reading assessments was "much less than it would have been if the student could have read the story more fluently" (reflective journal, June 8, 2021). During the focus group interview, Amy and Emily discussed the difficulty of addressing low levels of reading fluency and the lack of decoding skills in third grade when reading instruction is more focused on reading comprehension (focus group interview, July 23, 2021). "I feel like once they get to me I really need to focus on comprehension. It's hard to find the time to go back and fill in the gaps they have" (Emily, focus group interview, July 23, 2021).

Word Parts

While the participants did not specifically use the term orthographic mapping when answering questions during data collection, they did discuss instructional strategies used to help students with the orthographic mapping process as outlined by Ehri (1970). Participants spoke of different ways they help students make connections between letters and corresponding sounds. Gracie who teaches pre-kindergarten, said she uses repetition to help students recognize letters with corresponding sounds. She usually teaches one letter and sound per week, and uses multiple ways to show students the letter. She said sometimes they write the letter in sand or with shaving cream. She also takes very simple words and breaks them apart letter by letter to help students see that letters make words and words have meaning (Gracie, personal communication, May 26, 2021). Beth (personal communication, July 2, 2021) and Julissa (personal communication, July 21, 2021) both said Letterland does an excellent job of explicitly teaching students letters, word parts, and corresponding sounds.

Differentiated Instruction

Participants often referred to differentiated instruction as an important part of effective literacy instruction; however, they expressed concern over knowing how to effectively differentiate to meet the varying needs of students. The theme of differentiation was more predominant in the reflective journals as participants reflected on the challenges of the 2020-2021 school year and how they addressed those challenges. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2019-2020 school year ended with students in North Carolina participating in school via remote instruction and was followed by a difficult 2020-2021 as teachers navigated remote instruction for some students, a revolving door of quarantined students, and the struggles of social distancing in the classroom. Julissa said the most challenging aspect of the year was, "learning how to effectively differentiate lessons for small group instruction while abiding by COVID restrictions" (Julissa, personal communication, July 21, 2021). Another participant said the most challenging part of the year was "reaching all students at their instructional level" (Frannie, individual interview, May 27, 2021). Frannie also stated she used small groups, while following COVID safety guidelines, to provide interventions and enrichment for her students as needed. Donna expressed a "lack of resources and knowledge of implementation" made it difficult for her to differentiate for her students (Donna, personal communication, June 8, 2021).

Participants felt the need for differentiated instruction was even more important during the 2020-2021 school year due to learning gaps exacerbated by Covid-19. Frannie said if she tried teaching a whole group lesson, "It was very difficult to keep all students engaged. For some students the material we were working on was way above their understanding, but for others it was too low and boring" (reflective journal, May 27, 2021). Gracie identified differentiating instruction to meet her students' needs as the most challenging part of the school year (reflective

journal, May 26, 2021). She added, “I knew I needed to do something different but it was hard just figuring out where to start”. Beth offered that students needed more individualized instruction which made teaching whole group difficult (individual interview, July 2, 2021).

Intervention

One of the greatest challenges identified by the participants was the large disparity among their students’ ability levels. To address the issue teachers said they often placed students into ability leveled groups for instruction. “During small group instruction, I put many intervention and enrichment programs in place for those who needed it. I have definitely learned the sooner you can begin targeted interventions, the better” (Frannie, reflective journal, May 27, 2021). Beth (personal communication, July 2, 2021) said she felt that working with small groups of students with similar abilities gave her the opportunity to provide more individualized instruction which is especially beneficial for students who need interventions. During the focus group interview, Carrie and Amy both indicated they felt they were better able to meet the needs of struggling readers and implement interventions while working with small groups. Carrie said, “I usually group my students based on their Fountas Pinnell letter and then that’s what I use to select instructional materials that will be appropriate” (Carrie, focus group interview, July 23, 2021).

While teachers felt small group work for interventions was the most effective way to meet the individual needs of their students, they expressed low levels of self-efficacy when discussing their preparedness to meet those needs. When discussing small groups and using reading interventions to help struggling readers, Carrie stated, “I’m just not sure that I’m putting the right thing in front of them” (individual interview, July 2, 20201). Beth expressed being unsure of how to identify what are truly research-based interventions and how to implement

them effectively. She noted that what she has been doing for her struggling readers has yielded inconsistent results (Beth, reflective journal, July 2, 2021). Several participants expressed frustration over the wide range of reading levels in their classroom which resulted in stress and anxiety over how to meet student needs. Frannie said, “I did not feel very comfortable, and I did not quite understand how to figure out what they needed because there were so many learning gaps” (individual interview, May 27, 2021). Because she felt unprepared, Frannie made improving reading instruction for her lower level readers a goal on her professional development plan for the year. To help her improve in this area, she sought help from a colleague who assisted in determining resources and strategies to use. She noted feeling better about how to help her struggling readers by the end of the year but added, “I still have a lot to learn.”

The reflective journals indicated school-based trainings in specific programs and reading curriculum resources improved their feelings of self-efficacy. After being trained on how to use the targeted interventions which are a part of the Letterland program, Hope and Julissa both indicated the training was beneficial in helping them determine what to do for their students who needed additional support (Hope, reflective journal, July 16, 2021; Julissa, reflective journal, July 21, 2021). Frannie and Ivey both received training on implementing a comprehensive reading curriculum based around the use of a basal text. “I used the level texts with my small groups each week” (Ivey, reflective journal, July 14, 2021). “The Houghton-Mifflin-Harcourt reading program provided lots of stories that were engaging and relevant to their lives. The students enjoyed the wide range of topics as well.” She also added that she used the decodable texts and leveled readers with her small groups.

Enrichment

Participants identified the use of smaller instructional groups to provide enrichment for students performing above grade level. Frannie said that while some of her students were getting interventions in small groups, her higher students were getting enrichment. For those students she said, “I pulled short novels with supplemental material to read and study during group time” (Frannie, reflective journal, May 27, 2021). Amy said she provided enrichment for higher level students by selecting higher leveled texts related to topics that were being taught in science and social studies (Amy, reflective journal, July 14, 2021). Ivey stated that for students reading above grade level, she used group time as a time for them to select high interest books (Ivey, personal communication, July 14, 2021). Other participants indicated they incorporated writing in response to higher leveled texts as a way to challenge more advanced readers (Ivey and Gracie, focus group interview, July 23, 2021).

While the majority of data collected referred specifically to teaching beginning readers and struggling readers foundational skills, there was some discussion surrounding what to do for students who “already get it.” During the focus group interview, participants expressed concerns over how to best provide enrichment opportunities for students already reading on grade-level and above. “It doesn’t seem fair to always have them working independently just because they can, but I feel like my teacher assistant and I need to spend our time with students who can’t read yet and need those basic skills” (Donna, focus group interview, July 23, 2021). “You can’t always just give them reading with a higher Lexile level because sometimes the content is not age appropriate” (Emily, focus group interview, July 23, 2021). The focus group discussion

indicated participants felt more prepared to teach “to the middle” and not adequately prepared to teacher struggling and more advanced readers.

Research Question Responses

This section addresses the central research question and each sub-question in reference to beginning teachers’ perceptions of preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. The responses are synthesized from data gathered via individual interviews, a focus group interview, and reflective journals. Four themes were identified: feelings of preparedness, effective literacy instruction, orthography, and differentiated instruction. Further analysis provided nine subthemes that assisted in understanding novice elementary teachers’ perceptions of preparedness. The central question is addressed first followed by three sub-questions.

Central Research Question

The central research question asked, What are the perceptions of participants regarding their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers? Individual interviews, a focus group interview, and reflective journal entries were coded to identify themes to aid in answering the central research question.

In regard to their overall perceptions of preparedness, the majority of beginning teachers in this study, eight of ten, expressed a lack of self-efficacy when it comes to teaching early literacy skills to beginning readers. Even the two teachers who said they felt prepared went on to describe experiences which highlighted doubt about how well they are meeting the needs of their students. All participants expressed they felt inadequate when they first started teaching. As participants discussed their perceptions of preparedness, it became apparent that classroom experience increased positive perceptions of preparedness. In addition to just gaining experience,

participants indicated being able to collaborate with colleagues and using specially designed reading programs, such as a basal text or a scripted phonics program, boosted their self-efficacy.

In their individual interviews, several participants stated they felt more comfortable teaching early literacy skills now than they did when they first started teaching. Frannie stated, "I'm not as comfortable as I would like to be, but I'm getting there" (personal communication, May 27, 2021). Beth, Carrie, Donna, and Julissa made similar comments during their interviews. Dialogue during the focus group interview, which came after the individual interviews, reinforced participants feelings of increased levels of self-efficacy after spending time in the classroom gaining experience.

Sub-Question One

How do participants describe their preparedness as it relates to content knowledge?

While interview questions did not directly ask participants about their content knowledge, insight on this topic can be gained based on how participants defined literacy instruction and what they identified as the most important aspect of literacy instruction. Additional insight can be gained from participant answers regarding phonics instruction in their classrooms.

Some participants struggled when attempting to define literacy instruction. The National Reading Panel indicated effective reading instruction should incorporate instruction in phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (NICHD, 2000). Participants' inability to adequately define effective literacy instruction suggests a lack of necessary content knowledge to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers; therefore, indicating they are unprepared. Only four of the ten participants were able to describe literacy instruction, discuss the most important aspects, and elaborate on phonics instruction in the classroom while exhibiting knowledge of the tenets of effective literacy instruction as reported by the National

Reading Panel. Discussion of effective literacy instruction during the focus group interview further highlighted deficits in content knowledge.

Sub-Question Two

How do participants describe their preparedness as it relates to addressing students' challenges in acquiring early literacy skills?

Participants described varying degrees of preparedness in addressing the challenges of teaching beginning readers as they acquire early literacy skills. The responses regarding challenges to acquiring literacy skills were influenced by the recent Covid-19 pandemic as many of the responses related to student challenges compounded by the pandemic. Participants stated that extended periods of remote learning resulted in the loss of quality of instructional time and decreased student engagement. Answers also reflected challenges encountered due to Covid restrictions upon returning to the classroom which affected the ability of teachers to effectively meet the literacy needs of their students. Participants felt as though the pandemic contributed to learning loss and to larger disparities in student ability levels, making it more difficult to meet all the needs of their students. Overall the beginning teachers in this study did not feel prepared to meet the needs of struggling readers. Many participants mentioned trying to implement intervention groups but felt lost about exactly what to do in those groups to help students acquire the skills needed. In their reflective journals Julissa, Donna, and Gracie all noted that addressing student challenges more effectively next year was a goal for them (reflective journals, July 21, 2021; June 8, 22021; May 26, 2021).

Sub-Question Three

What experiences or opportunities do participants believe would help prepare beginning teachers to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers?

Additional coursework specific to literacy practices and teaching foundational reading skills during teacher preparation programs would be beneficial. Several participants stated they had one college course on teaching language arts in general and it did not go in-depth on how to specifically teach reading. All participants indicated their college coursework did not address how to help struggling readers. Participants also suggested opportunities for more classroom observations and practice implementing procedures with the guidance of a mentor teacher throughout preparation programs would increase teacher perceptions of preparedness. After entering the teaching field, participants cited professional development, especially focused on literacy programs they are expected to use, as a way of improving teacher preparedness and self-efficacy.

Table 9

Alignment of Research Questions and Themes

Research Question	Themes	Supporting Quotes
RQ 1: What are the perceptions of participants regarding their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers?	feelings of preparedness	"I feel that I will be more prepared to serve my students next year, due to all that I have learned this year" (reflective journal, May, 26, 2021).
		I think experience is really what I needed because I didn't feel as prepared when I started as I do now. (Carrie, individual interview, July 2, 2021).
	effective literacy instruction	"I always look to the science of reading with phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension and everything that is involved in layering instruction" (individual interview, July 14, 2021).
		"Literacy is, in my opinion, a really big umbrella, it goes from knowing your letter sounds and being able to put them together and make words all the way up

		to college level reading" (Frannie, individual interview, May 27, 2021).
	Orthography	"I want to ensure that they are actually learning that letters make up words and they can recognize those letters and see the connection between them" (Gracie, individual interview, May 26, 2021).
	differentiated instruction	"To me literacy instruction has a big phonics component of sounds, letter recognition and mapping out sounds, then moving onto comprehension" (Carrie, individual interview, July 2, 2021). Julissa said the most challenging aspect of the year was, "learning how to effectively differentiate lessons for small group instruction while abiding by COVID restrictions" (Julissa, personal communication, July 21, 2021). Gracie identified differentiating instruction to meet her students' needs as the most challenging part of the school year (reflective journal, May 26, 2021). She added, "I knew I needed to do something different but it was hard just figuring out where to start".
SQ 1: How do participants describe their preparedness as it relates to content knowledge?	feelings of preparedness	"I am feeling more comfortable, at first I was feeling kind of lost. I felt like I was not ready for this" (Julissa, individual interview, July 21, 2021).
	effective literacy instruction	"I feel like I'm missing the science of reading and the specifics of this is how you teach reading" (Amy, individual interview, July 14, 2021).
	orthography	"I feel that experience is such a big component. I feel like when you see it and they tell you this is what a phoneme is, this is what a grapheme is, this is why it's important- you don't really see how it needs to be done until you're in front and watching someone map out those sounds

		with a kid (Carrie, individual interview, July 2, 2021).
	differentiated instruction	"I knew I needed to do something different but it was hard just figuring out where to start" (Gracie, reflective journal, May 26, 2021).
SQ 2: How do participants describe their preparedness as it relates to addressing students' challenges in acquiring early literacy skills?	feelings of preparedness	"I feel like I have a good idea of how to teach reading in general but not really what to do for students who just don't get it from regular instruction. We talk about interventions, but I don't really know what to do or how to do it" (Frannie, focus group interview, July 23, 2021).
	effective literacy instruction	When discussing small groups and using reading interventions to help struggling readers, Carrie stated, "I'm just not sure that I'm putting the right thing in front of them" (individual interview, July 2, 20201).
	orthography	"I want to ensure that they are actually learning that letters make up words and they can recognize those letters and see the connection between them" (Gracie, individual interview, May 26, 2021)
	differentiated instruction	Frannie indicated the most challenging part of the year was "reaching all students at their instructional level" (individual interview, May 27, 2021).
SQ 3: What experiences or opportunities do participants believe would help prepare beginning teachers to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers?	feelings of preparedness	"I feel like I needed more hands-on experience because I didn't get that from my internship or student teaching. More time in the classroom would have been helpful" (Amy, individual interview, June, 14, 2021).
	effective literacy instruction	"I would have liked for my classes to go more in-depth on how to teach reading. I think some programs now are doing a better job of that with this new focus on the science of reading, but my classes didn't have much of that" (Donna, focus group interview, July 23, 2021).

orthography	Ivey said it was difficult for her because she learned to read using "whole word reading. I don't think I truly understood all that goes into phonics and reading" (reflective journal, July 14, 2021).
differentiated instruction	"Now that I know what resources I have, I've had some training, and actually used it with my students, I feel like I have a good idea of what I'm doing" (Julissa, focus group interview, July 23, 2021).

Summary

Chapter four provided a description of each study participant and outlined the results of data analysis. Data were collected through individual interviews, a focus group interview, and reflective journals. After analyzing the data, recurring themes were identified and aligned to the research question, "What are the perceptions of participants regarding their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers?" The participants described their perceptions of preparedness to teach early literacy skills and the following four themes emerged: feelings of preparedness, effective instruction, orthography, and differentiated instruction. Two of the ten participants indicated a positive perception of preparedness but went on to describe situations in which they felt unprepared. All of the participants said they felt more prepared after spending time in the classroom and learning through experience and collaboration with other teachers. Only two of the participants said they felt as though they had the necessary content knowledge to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers and many indicated scripted phonics programs, specific reading curriculum resources, such as a Basal text, along with classroom experiences and advice from veteran teachers helped them fill the gap between what was learned in their college preparatory programs and what is necessary for success in the classroom. Only two of the ten participants said they felt prepared to meet the needs of struggling readers.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this collective case study was to understand beginning teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. Chapter five provides a discussion of the research findings and implications for policy and practice. The chapter describes theoretical and empirical implications as well as limitations and delimitations of the study. Chapter five concludes with recommendations for future research and a summary of the entire study.

Discussion

This study examined the experiences of 10 novice elementary teachers responsible for teaching early literacy skills to beginning readers. Data were collected through individual interviews, a focus group interview, and reflective journals. Participant perspectives were analyzed to assist in understanding their sense of self-efficacy regarding early literacy instruction for beginning readers and experiences that impacted their perceptions. From the data analysis, four common themes emerged: (a) preparedness, (b) effective instruction, (c) orthography, and (d) differentiation. These themes served as the basis for understanding teachers' perceptions of preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers.

Interpretation of Findings

Once data were collected, organized, and analyzed four themes emerged: feelings of preparedness, elements of effective literacy instruction, orthography, and differentiated instruction. The following are my interpretations of the research. Interpretations were derived based on empirical knowledge and the guiding theoretical framework of the study. In addition to interpretations, the following sections provide implications for policy and practice as well as

empirical and theoretical implications.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Using a collective case study design to explore novice elementary teachers' perceptions of preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers, four themes emerged from the data analysis. The themes were overall teacher preparedness, elements of effective literacy instruction, orthography, and differentiated instruction. These themes helped to answer the research question and sub-questions. The ten participants' experiences shared through individual interviews, a focus group interview, and reflective journals were used to better understand their perceptions of preparedness to meet the needs of beginning readers and struggling readers. Shared experiences also provided insight into what additional opportunities could be used to improve teacher self-efficacy in regard to teaching early literacy skills. The findings reveal many teachers feel unprepared to meet the literacy needs of their students.

Three subthemes were identified within the theme of teacher preparedness. One subtheme identified was assistance from colleagues as a means to improve feelings of preparedness. This aligns with Banduras' theory of self-efficacy which suggests vicarious experiences of social models can improve feelings of self-efficacy. According to Bandura's theory, verbal persuasion also improves self-efficacy (Bandura 1977, 1994). For the participants in this study, working alongside colleagues with a proven record of success in the classroom and a willingness to share methodology, in addition to encouragement, resulted in greater feelings of preparedness. The second subtheme was the use of scripted and specialized reading programs to increase feelings of preparedness. Using a scripted phonics program with a detailed scope and sequence helped participants feel more confident in their ability to teach students the foundational skills needed for mastering more complex reading skills later. The importance of students mastering

foundational skills in order to progress through stages of reading development aligns with Ehri's phase theory of reading development (1979, 1995). The third subtheme related directly to teacher preparation and preparing future teachers to teach early literacy skills. Participants indicated additional field experiences during teacher preparation programs and more opportunities for in-service training as ways to better prepare teachers; this concurs with previous findings by Brinkmann (2-19), Aybek and Aslan (2019), and Jeffery et al. (2018).

The theme of effective literacy instruction included the subthemes of challenges to phonics instruction and the importance of vocabulary development. Phonics and vocabulary development are two of the five key components of effective literacy instruction as identified by the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) and they were the two components mentioned most frequently by the participants of this study. Participants acknowledged the importance of phonics instruction in building foundational skills that students need but also acknowledge their feelings of inadequacy to teach these skills effectively. Participants identified vocabulary development as an important aspect of effective literacy instruction, and also as an area in which they felt confident in their abilities.

The theme of orthography included the subthemes of fluency and word parts. The beginning teachers in this study did not specifically mention orthography or orthographic mapping, but consistently discussed problems caused by lack of fluency which stems back to the inability of readers to decode words. Ehri (1970) defined orthographic mapping as the process by which beginning readers assimilate printed language with existing knowledge. During this process, students make letter-sound connections which help them commit spellings, pronunciations, and word meanings to memory (Ehri, 2014). To help student improve reading

fluency, participants implemented a variety of strategies to aide students in making connections between letters, sounds, word parts, and word meanings.

The theme of differentiated instruction included the subthemes of intervention and enrichment. Participants identified providing differentiated instruction as an important part of what they needed to do to help students be successful. The National Center for the Advancement of Teacher Education (2010) stated successful teachers should be able to use data to make informed decisions about differentiation. To differentiate for their students, participants often used leveled groups with some groups receiving reading interventions while others received enrichment. Providing specific reading interventions to help struggling readers has been documented in numerous research studies (Sanchez & O'Connor, 2015; Snyder & Golightly, 2017; Young, Mohr, & Rasinski, 2015) and was used by all participants in this study.

Feelings of Unpreparedness. The study revealed an overall feeling of unpreparedness on the part of beginning teachers to meet the literacy needs of their students. Participants throughout the individual interviews, the focus group interview, and in their reflective journals expressed feeling unprepared to teach early literacy skills. All participants expressed low levels of self-efficacy in regard to some area of early literacy instruction. Two participants who indicated they felt well-prepared by their teacher preparation program went on to describe experiences in which they struggled with knowing what to do to help their students. Considering the impact teachers have on student success it is important for teachers to be adequately prepared to meet the diverse needs of students (Ehri & Flugman, 2018; Jordan et al., 2018; NRP, 2000). Nearly as important as being prepared with the necessary content knowledge, is the feeling of preparedness. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy refers to one's belief in their ability to successfully execute tasks. Bandura (1977) contended that the strength of one's convictions

regarding their own effectiveness would affect how they cope in given situations, influence activity choices, as well as effort, and persistency.

Participants admitted to feeling lost, uncomfortable, and not ready. Due to these low levels of self-efficacy, teachers said they relied heavily on colleagues. Working closely with colleagues provides valuable opportunities for increasing self-efficacy. Bandura (1977, 1994) outlined four factors which influence self-efficacy, one being vicarious experiences of social models. Seeing others similar to oneself, experience success resulting from sustained efforts can lead others to believe they can be successful as well. Another factor is verbal, or social persuasion, in this instance having other teachers provide verbal encouragement serves as motivation for novice teachers which can result in success; therefore, increasing self-efficacy. Several of the participants indicated after a year or two of teaching, they felt much more comfortable and prepared to meet the literacy needs of their students. This aligns with Bandura's theory in that mastery experiences build self-efficacy; successes in the classroom increase teachers' belief in their abilities (Bandura, 1977).

Noting that teachers originally did not feel prepared to provide literacy instruction to beginning readers but felt more prepared after an extended period of time working closely with other teachers, aligns with empirical literature. A report by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE, 2018) proclaimed that clinical practice is a critical component of a high-quality teacher preparation program and course work should be designed in a manner that provides increased opportunities for application under the supervision of university and school-based educators. Providing increased opportunities for the application of teaching early literacy skills during pre-service teacher preparation programs can help improve the self-efficacy of novice teachers as they enter the workforce.

Lack of Content Knowledge. A contributing factor to teachers' feelings of unpreparedness is the lack of content knowledge. Content knowledge and preparation both play a role in teachers' perceptions of their efficacy to teach literacy skills to beginning readers (Jordan et al., 2019). Jordan et al. also stated, effective literacy teachers need to be knowledgeable of the developmental process of reading, provide appropriate instruction in the essential components of reading, and use assessment data to drive their decisions. The participants in this study indicated they did not feel prepared to do those things upon entering the classroom. It was only after working closely with other teachers, having additional experience in the classroom, and additional trainings that they were finally able to feel prepared to meet students' needs. These findings are in keeping with a report by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) which suggested a movement in teacher preparation programs that would more closely align clinical practice to academic content and pedagogy (NCATE, 2010).

Julissa (personal communication, July 21, 2021) said she did not feel ready in the beginning but working with Amanda W. (pseudonym) and having training for the phonics program she was using helped her gain the knowledge she needed. Donna (personal communication, June 8, 2021) also indicated using a scripted phonics program help her gain an understanding of phonics and phonemic awareness and how to teach the concepts effectively.

A Need for Change. Based on the data collected from novice elementary teachers responsible for teaching early literacy skills to beginning readers, their feelings of unpreparedness and lack of content knowledge can be interpreted as a need to make changes to teacher preparation programs. Empirical literature supports the same. Meeks and Kemp (2017) and Petrilli et al. (2019), recommended more extensive clinical experience for preservice teachers to better prepare them to meet the literacy needs of an increasingly diverse student

population. Paufler and Bartley (2016) also indicated improved clinical practices are a critical part of preparing better teachers. Rutherford et al. (2017) indicated beginning teachers lack adequate content knowledge to effectively teach early literacy skills and recommended teacher preparation programs provide improved, research-based reading instruction for preservice teachers.

The majority of the participants in this study had only 1 course focused on reading instruction during their preservice teacher training. Frannie (personal communication, May 27, 2021) said, “We only had 1 course in early literacy type skills before student teaching and it was not fresh on my mind when I started teaching. So, I feel that they should have put a bigger focus on that because it’s so important”. However, Julissa (personal communication, July 21, 2021) said she may have had up to three “literacy type courses” but went on to say that at first, she was “not very prepared at all”. Meeks and Kemp (2017), Rutherford et al. (2017) and Spear-Swerling (2015) all suggested teachers should be better prepared by teacher preparation programs to meet the needs of beginning readers.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Teaching students to read is a very important part of elementary education. Students’ ability to read sets them up for future academic success; however, reports by the US Department of Education (2019) and the Nation’s Report Card for Reading by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2011, 2013, & 2019) have indicated a majority of students are not able to read proficiently. Adequately preparing teachers to meet the literacy needs of students is critical to student success. Tschannen-Moran (1998) indicated higher levels of self-efficacy have been linked to increased student achievement. Varghese et al. (2016) also suggested teacher preparedness and teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness are factors that can affect student

reading achievement. The purpose of this study was to explore novice elementary teachers' perceptions of preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. The following sections discuss implications for policy and practice based on the findings of this study.

Implications for Policy

The results of this research study have implications that could benefit colleges and universities responsible for preparing future teachers. The data collected from individual interviews, the focus group interview, and reflective journals indicated participants are aware of the importance of foundational literacy skills for students to develop into proficient readers; however, they also indicated their preservice teacher preparation programs did not fully equip them with the knowledge necessary to teach the foundational skills that students need. This lack of knowledge has resulted in low levels of self-efficacy to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. Research by Lemmon et al. (2016) and Walsh et al. (2006) indicated a need for improvements in the area of preservice teacher preparation programs and this study supports the same.

The results of this study could be used by colleges and universities to consider restructuring course requirements for preservice elementary teachers. It may be helpful to further breakdown elementary education into two groups: pre-kindergarten through second grade and third grade through fifth grade. Teachers on the pre-kindergarten through second grade track would have more courses focused on early literacy instruction. Colleges and universities could also include more clinical experiences throughout preservice preparation programs to aide in building self-efficacy. Providing more field experiences and field experiences closely aligned with academic coursework is supported by previous research (NCATE, 2010; Paufler & Bartley, 2016; Petrilli, 2019).

Implications for Practice

For district and school level administrators, the results of this study offer insight into additional training that could help novice teachers feel more prepared to teach early literacy skills. Several participants indicated training in an explicit, systematic phonics program improved their feelings of self-efficacy. Providing relevant, effective professional development for in-service teachers could help teachers feel better equipped to meet the needs of beginning readers, which could lead to improved reading proficiency scores.

This study also indicates it may be beneficial for schools to partner novice teachers with veteran teachers that are strong in the area of early literacy instruction. While most school have some form of a mentoring program for beginning teachers, administration may want to be more intentional with how they partner teachers to provide the support needed for success. Based on Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1997), the mentor relationship should provide vicarious experiences and verbal persuasion that will lead to increased levels of confidence about one's abilities to teach early literacy skills. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (2018) and the National Association for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (2010) both advocate for the use of mentor teachers during the first years in the profession.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

This collective case study explored novice teachers' perceptions of preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. Ten participants shared experiences from teacher preparation programs and their classrooms to aide in understanding teachers' perceptions of their preparedness. In the following sections, the theoretical and empirical implications related to this research study are discussed.

Theoretical Implications

In this study, Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy and Ehri's (1979; 2015) phase theory of reading development were used to explore novice teachers' perceptions of their ability to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. This study has theoretical implications in that it expounds upon and supports Bandura's theory of self-efficacy. Bandura's theory identified four major factors which influence self-efficacy: performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states. Participants in this study suggested three of the four factors increased their feelings of self-efficacy to teach early literacy skills; physiological states were not a factor mentioned by participants. This research further validates Bandura's theory of self-efficacy.

Performance accomplishments through mastery experiences can increase self-efficacy. (Bandura 1977, 1994). Participants indicated successful experiences in the classroom over time helped them feel more prepared to meet the early literacy needs of their students. Frannie (personal communication, May 27, 2021) stated she has become "much more comfortable" after teaching for three years. Carrie (personal communication, July 12, 2021) said now she feels "okay" teaching early literacy skills to beginning and struggling readers. She went on to elaborate by saying, "experience is such a big component". The idea that more time and experience in the classroom equated to higher levels of self-efficacy was common among participants.

Vicarious experiences of social models can lead to greater levels of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1994). Seeing others, similar to oneself, experience success resulting from sustained efforts can lead others to believe they can experience success as well (Bandura, 1994).

For the participants in this study, teacher colleagues served as the social model leading to increased levels of self-efficacy. All participants indicated working with and collaborating with more experienced teachers helped them feel more prepared. Beth, a first-year teacher, said at the beginning of the year she did not feel comfortable at all so she reached out to Ms. McDonald (pseudonym) next door. “She was a great help. She’s been teaching for several years and had some great strategies to share. So, I definitely learned from her. I feel that now I am much more comfortable teaching struggling readers” (Beth, personal communication, July 2, 2021). Donna (personal communication, June 8, 2021) relayed a similar experience. “I’ve not been around long enough to test and know what’s best, so I relied heavily on Stacy Marion (pseudonym). I noticed in her lessons she was going really slow, so I figured that was going to be key. Now, I feel good about what I’m doing”

Verbal, or social persuasion is another factor that can positively impact self-efficacy; however, verbal persuasion on its own has minimal effect but when paired with another factor the impact is greater and longer-lasting (Bandura, 1977). For the participants in this study, the verbal persuasion came from the colleagues the novice teachers were working with day in and day out. The vicarious experiences of the social models paired with verbal support and encouragement helped increase the novice teacher perceptions of self-efficacy to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers.

In addition to Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy, Linnea Ehri’s (1979, 1995, 2014) phase theory of reading development was used as a part of the theoretical framework for this study. The phase theory of reading development is based on the concept that children learn to read in phases and reading and spelling are connected (Ehri, 1979; 2014; Ehri & McCormick, 1998). An important aspect of this theory is latter phases are dependent upon knowledge gained from

previous phases. It was used to guide this study as it establishes the importance of the acquisition of foundational skills for beginning readers. Data collected from participants indicated an awareness of reading development and the significance of foundational skills; however, their knowledge of the developmental stages and the interconnectedness of reading, spelling, and writing was not evident.

Empirical Implications

As stated previously, numerous studies have been conducted investigating teacher preparedness but there is limited research specific to teacher preparedness to teach early literacy skills. Quantitative research has been conducted to evaluate teacher preparation programs but is typically conducted by universities or other teacher educators and is focused on practices and outcomes specific to their programs (Cochran-Smith, 2015). Additional quantitative studies have been conducted to evaluate teacher efficacy and effective reading instruction (Jordan et al., 2019); however, there is a limited amount of research on the perceptions of teachers and their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. Therefore, this study provided valuable information from perspective of novice elementary teachers regarding their perceptions of preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. Participants were able to share their feelings of self-efficacy and describe experiences that affected their feelings. They were able to elaborate on experiences which boosted self-efficacy. Participants provided insight into challenges faced by novice teachers as they try to meet the diverse literacy needs of students in their classrooms. Participants were also able to make recommendations about what experiences could have helped them to feel more prepared prior to starting their career in education.

Previous research identified in-service teacher training as one approach for improving literacy instruction (Glover, 2017; Gulistan, 2017; McMahan et al., 2019). The McMahn et al.

study focused specifically on training to improve literacy instruction. The study revealed a deficit of knowledge in the areas of encoding and morphology and that training focused on systematic literacy instruction of reading, spelling, and writing resulted in increased content knowledge. This current study had similar findings in that participants said they felt more confident and comfortable teaching early literacy skills to beginning readers after receiving training for an explicit, systematic phonics program. Participants indicated training for programs they were required to use and the use of a scripted program increased self-efficacy.

Furthermore, Meeks and Kemp (2017) and Petrilli et al. (2019) suggested teacher preparation programs should provide more opportunities for clinical experiences during their teacher preparation programs. Providing opportunities for teachers to have more mastery experiences prior to beginning their careers will help build self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Participants in this study agreed that having more opportunities to teach early literacy skills via internships or student teaching would have helped them to feel more prepared for their first year of teaching.

Limitations and Delimitations

The following delimitations were placed on this study:

1. Participants had to be novice teachers, meaning they had less than 4 years of teaching experience.
2. Participants had to be responsible for teacher early literacy skills in pre-kindergarten through third grade.
3. Participants had to teach in rural northwest North Carolina.

These delimitations resulted in some limitations to the study. The first being that all participants were Caucasian females which is representative of elementary teachers in rural northwest North

Carolina. This limitation decreases the generalizability of the study as other areas of the state and the country would have different demographics for their beginning teachers. Conducting the study with teachers from northwest North Carolina limited the number of teacher preparation programs that were represented by the participants; there were only four colleges and universities represented.

Another limitation to the study is that it was conducted at the conclusion of the 2020-2021 school year, in the midst of a global pandemic. The pandemic resulted in teachers having to face instructional challenges not faced during a normal school year, for example: social distancing guidelines, remote instruction, student absences due to illness or quarantine, and learning gaps resulting from lose of instruction due to schools shutting down in March, 2020. These challenges could have negatively impacted teachers' perceptions of their preparedness and their overall attitude toward education.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this research study provided insight to novice teachers' perceptions of preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers, more research is needed to fully understand teachers' perceptions of preparedness and factors affecting their perceptions. Future studies should include a larger sample size of teachers from a larger area. A study conducted statewide could result in a sample that is more diverse in gender and ethnicity, as well as, more representative of colleges and universities with teacher preparation programs. A statewide study would provide a more accurate picture of teachers' perceptions of preparedness across the state and could potentially assist in identifying teacher preparation programs that are successful in preparing teachers to teach early literacy skills. If successful teacher preparation programs can be

identified through future research, their programs could serve as a model for other colleges and universities.

Additionally, a future mixed methods study exploring teachers' perceptions of preparedness compared to their actual content knowledge, based on an assessment, could help determine how and if there is a correlation between the two. Identifying and acknowledging a deficit in content knowledge upon exiting teacher preparation programs could lead to real change in teacher preparation programs in the future.

Another possibility for future research could be a longitudinal study to compare students' reading proficiency and growth over time with beginning teachers' increase in self-efficacy during the first three years of teaching. Previous research has suggested increased teacher self-efficacy results in increased student achievement (Jordan et al., 2019; Tschannen-Moran et al.,1998). Additional research could support or refute this concept.

Conclusion

The purpose of this collective case study was to explore novice elementary teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers in rural northwest North Carolina. This study used a purposeful sampling method. The participants were 10 teachers having less than 3 years of teaching experience and responsible for teaching early literacy skills to beginning readers in grades pre-kindergarten through third grade. Data were collected via individual interviews, a focus group interview, and reflective journals. This study utilized a "ground up" theory for data analysis. Four themes emerged from the data: overall preparedness, effective literacy instruction, orthography, and differentiated instruction.

There were 3 major interpretations that came from the findings of this study. Overall beginning teachers do not feel prepared to meet the literacy needs of beginning readers.

Secondly, most teachers do not have the necessary content knowledge to meet the literacy needs of their students. Finally, changes to teacher preparation programs could improve teachers' perceptions of preparedness and their content knowledge which could result in improved reading achievement for students in North Carolina.

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APPENDIX A

[External] Re: research study

[redacted]

Thu 4/15/2021 5:22 PM

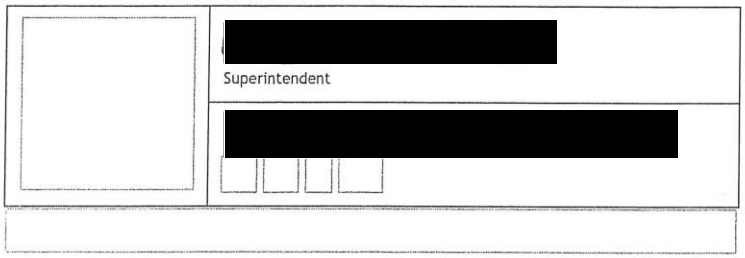
To: Walker, Crystal <cwalker100@liberty.edu>

[redacted]

[EXTERNAL EMAIL: Do not click any links or open attachments unless you know the sender and trust the content.]

Ms. Walker, please contact [redacted] Director of Testing and Accountability. He will help you.

Good luck with your research.



On Apr 15, 2021, at 4:01 PM, Walker, Crystal <[redacted]> wrote:

[redacted]

Good afternoon! My name is Crystal Walker, a doctoral candidate at Liberty University. I contacted you back in September to inquire about conducting research in your district and you graciously approved. I have since completed my proposal and received conditional IRB approval pending a recent time stamped email confirmation of approval from you. I have included a copy of my request for permission to conduct research in your district and my conditional IRB approval letter. Once I have final IRB approval, I will be ready to start identifying potential participants. Please let me know who you would like for me to use as a point of contact as I move forward with my research.

Thank you so much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Crystal Wright Walker
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

[External] Re: proposed research study

[redacted]

Tue 9/1/2020 9:06 PM

To: Walker, Crystal <[redacted]

[redacted]

[EXTERNAL EMAIL: Do not click any links or open attachments unless you know the sender and trust the content.]

Ms. Walker, [redacted] would be happy to participate in your research study. Let us know how we can help.

[redacted]

On Sep 1, 2020, at 4:59 PM, Walker, Crystal <cwalker100@liberty.edu> wrote:

[redacted]

My name is Crystal Walker. I am a doctoral student at Liberty University and am working to complete my dissertation. I am a lifelong resident of the [redacted] and am currently employed as a 3rd grade teacher at [redacted]. I will soon be transitioning to a position with [redacted] as an instructional specialist.

I am writing to ask if you would consider allowing me to conduct a portion of my research study in your district. The title of the study is: "A Collective Case Study of Novice Elementary Teachers' Perceptions of Preparedness to Teach Early Literacy Skills to Beginning Readers". I need 15 participants that are Beginning Teachers and provide reading/literacy instruction in grades K-2. I originally proposed the study to be conducted in [redacted] however, they only have 8 teachers that meet my requirements which leaves me 7 participants short. My new proposal would be to use participants from two districts, [redacted] To collect data, I would need to conduct one individual interview with each participant, focus group interviews, and reflective journals.

I hope you will consider my request, and I would be happy to answer any follow-up questions you may have. Thank you for your time and consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,
Crystal W. Walker, Ed.S.

4/19/2021 [redacted]

[redacted] Crystal Walker <[redacted]

research proposal?

10 messages

Crystal Walker <[redacted] Tue, Jun 2, 2020 at 10:24 AM

[redacted]

Good morning! I am currently working on my Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction at Liberty University. I would love the opportunity to discuss the possibility of conducting a research study in your district. Your district is preferable, [redacted] does not have a large enough sample for what I would like to study. The study would not involve children. I know this is a busy time of year for you, but I hope you will consider hearing my proposal, I promise I will be brief! I would be glad to call you at your convenience if you could let me know of a good time, or you can contact me at [redacted]

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Crystal W. Walker, Ed.S.
3rd Grade Teacher
[redacted]

"The kids in our classroom are infinitely more significant than the subject matter we teach." Meladee McCarty

[redacted] Wed, Jun 3, 2020 at 11:36 AM

To: Crystal Walker [redacted]

Mrs. Walker,

I hope all is well and I look forward to discussing your proposed study. Could you share with me in a couple of paragraphs what your proposal is, and we can then set up a time to talk? I think it would help me wrap my mind around any questions that I may have.

Again, no need for anything more than a paragraph or two. I am not asking you to share a proposal, just a brief summary at most.

Thanks

[Quoted text hidden]

[Quoted text hidden]

[redacted] Non-Discrimination Statement.

[redacted]

--

[redacted]

Crystal Walker [redacted] Thu, Jun 4, 2020 at 8:40 AM

[redacted]

Thank you for being willing to hear about my proposed study. The official title is "A Collective Case Study of Novice Teachers' Perceptions of Their Preparedness to Teach Early Literacy Skills to Beginning Readers". All the research indicates that if students cannot read by the time they reach third grade they will continue to struggle the remainder of their academic careers and many continue to struggle even as adults. Having taught third grade for several years, I see how critical those early foundational literacy skills are for students. However, teaching students to read is a very complicated process and even more so for students that have difficulties.

Through my qualitative study, I hope to learn about beginning teachers' experiences in the K-2 classroom and how prepared they feel to meet the needs of beginning readers. My proposal is written for 15 participants. The methods would include one individual interview with each participant, focus group interviews (each participant would take part in one focus group), and one 30 minute classroom observation. I am hopeful that the study will highlight areas of improvement for elementary education preparation programs as well as areas that would be beneficial in professional development for in-service teachers.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Crystal W. Walker, Ed.S.
[redacted]

"The kids in our classroom are infinitely more significant than the subject matter we teach." Meladee McCarty

[Quoted text hidden]

[redacted] Tue, Jun 23, 2020 at 3:31 PM

To: Crystal Walker [redacted]

Mrs. Walker,

I am willing to approve your proposed research study. Do I read this correctly that you will need to work with a group of 15 of our newer teachers in grades K-2? If so, I have copied our Assistant Superintendent for HR and Personnel, Dr. [redacted] on this email. He can work with you to identify 15 BT's that you could invite to participate.

Thanks
[Quoted text hidden]

Crystal Walker [redacted] Wed, Jun 24, 2020 at 1:56 PM

[redacted]

Thank you so much for approving my research study. You are correct, I will need 15 BTs that teach literacy K-2. I am currently finalizing my proposal.

Thanks,
Crystal W. Walker, Ed.S.
[redacted]

[redacted]

"The kids in our classroom are infinitely more significant than the subject matter we teach." Meladee McCarty

[Quoted text hidden]

[redacted] Fri, Jun 26, 2020 at 8:02 AM

To: Crystal Walker [redacted]

Ms. Walker,

I'll begin to look at our BT's and see how many we have in years 1-3 that teach K-2.

Thanks,

[redacted]

Personnel and Human Resources

[redacted]

[redacted]

[Quoted text hidden]

Crystal Walker [redacted] Tue, Jul 7, 2020 at 11:07 AM

[redacted]

Thank you! I am currently finalizing my proposal, so it will be a bit before I am ready to move forward. I will be in contact when I have more information and a timeline.

Thanks again!
Crystal W. Walker, Ed.S.
[redacted]

"The kids in our classroom are infinitely more significant than the subject matter we teach." Meladee McCarty

[Quoted text hidden]

[redacted] Tue, Jul 7, 2020 at 10:54 AM

To: Crystal Walker [redacted]

Hi Crystal,

Due to planning for reopening of schools, I have not been able to research the number of beginning teachers we have in grades K-2. We have on average a high number of BT's each year, so it should not be a problem.

Thanks,

[redacted]
Assistant Superintendent
Personnel and Human Resources

[redacted]

[Quoted text hidden]

[redacted] Mon, Jul 27, 2020 at 6:02 PM
To: Crystal Walker [redacted]

Good evening Ms. Walker,

I wanted to follow-up with you regarding your proposal and to let you know of our current data regarding K-2 teachers so that you can research and inquire about any next steps before moving forward as it could have an impact. After looking at numbers[redacted]only has 8 teachers that will qualify as a BT for the 2020-21 school year that teaches in grades K-2. If this is not an issue, I will reach out to them and let them know that you will be contacting them regarding your project in the future. Let me know your thoughts.

[redacted]

4/19/2021 [redacted]

[redacted]

[Quoted text hidden]

Crystal Walker [redacted] Tue, Jul 28, 2020 at 8:43 AM

[redacted]

Thank you for letting me know, as this will impact my proposed study. I am finalizing the proposal but have not yet submitted for IRB approval. I will contact my dissertation chair and see what my best options are moving forward. It may be that I use the 8 BTs you have in [redacted] and also include another rural district. I will be in contact when I know more.

Thanks again for your help.

Crystal W. Walker, Ed.S.

[redacted]

"The kids in our classroom are infinitely more significant than the subject matter we teach." Meladee McCarty

[Quoted text hidden]

6/21/2021 [redacted]

Gmail [redacted]

reading research

4 messages

Crystal Walker <[redacted]> Tue, May 18, 2021 at 4:13 PM

Good afternoon, [redacted] I hope you are doing well. I am finally in the data collection phase of my dissertation. I originally wrote my proposal and planned to collect data from two districts; however, I am a few participants short. I was hoping that you would allow me to also conduct my study in the [redacted] I know the timing is not great but as you know, it's a process and some things are out of our control. Below is a little more information about my study and what it would entail for the participants.

I will need participation from beginning teachers currently teaching in grades K-3 and responsible for literacy instruction. The official title of my study is "A Collective Case Study of Novice Elementary Teachers' Perceptions of Preparedness to Teach Early Literacy Skills to Beginning Readers". Participation will entail one face to face interview, one focus group interview (via Zoom), and a reflective journal.

Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you. I also hope you have a great ending to what has been a very difficult year for everyone in education.

Thanks,
Crystal W. Walker, Ed.S.
[redacted]

"The kids in our classroom are infinitely more significant than the subject matter we teach." -Meladee McCarty

[redacted]

[redacted]

To: Crystal Walker <[redacted]> Tue, May 18, 2021 at 5:57 PM

Good for you!! We're ready to finish this school year. Won't lie. Haha. I hope you've had a good year!

Yes, of course, you may conduct research in [redacted] What is the next step? Shall I let [redacted] know and you work through her or inform principals that you'll be contacting them.. maybe both.

Thanks!

[Quoted text hidden]

[Quoted text hidden]

6/21/2021 [redacted] reading research

FERPA: The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act prohibits the sharing with a third party of any personally identifiable information about a student or his/her family without the written consent of the parent or the student (if eighteen years or older). Therefore any personally identifiable information contained in this email needs to be handled confidentially and not shared with others without written consent.

[redacted]Non-Discrimination Statement.[redacted]

Crystal Walker [redacted] Wed, May 19, 2021 at 7:31 AM

[redacted]

Thank you so much for agreeing to this. I could go through [redacted] you prefer, or since it will only be K-3 teachers it may be easier to inform [redacted] and then I can just contact her. I am happy to do it either way.

Thanks again!

Crystal W. Walker, Ed.S.
[redacted]

"The kids in our classroom are infinitely more significant than the subject matter we teach." -Meladee McCarty

[redacted]
[Quoted text hidden]

[redacted] Wed, May 19, 2021 at 7:57 AM
To: Crystal Walker [redacted]

Hi,
I think it might be easier to just go through Mrs.[redacted]
[Quoted text hidden]

APPENDIX B

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 14, 2021

Crystal Walker
Linda Holcomb

Re: Modification - IRB-FY20-21-697 A Collective Case Study of Novice Elementary Teachers' Perceptions of Preparedness to Teach Early Literacy Skills to Beginning Readers

Dear Crystal Walker, Linda Holcomb:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-FY20-21-697 A Collective Case Study of Novice Elementary Teachers' Perceptions of Preparedness to Teach Early Literacy Skills to Beginning Readers.

Decision: Exempt - Limited IRB

Your request to "expand the grades taught from K-2 to include PK-3," "provide compensation in the form of a $20 gift card to Chick-Fil-A or Starbucks," and "change the reflective journal prompts to be an end of year reflection as opposed to an ongoing reflection over the course of instruction" has been approved. Thank you for submitting your revised study documents for our review and documentation. Your revised, stamped consent form and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study in Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for complying with the IRB's requirements for making changes to your approved study. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.

We wish you well as you continue with your research.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 21, 2021

Crystal Walker
Linda Holcomb

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-697 A Collective Case Study of Novice Elementary Teachers' Perceptions of Preparedness to Teach Early Literacy Skills to Beginning Readers

Dear Crystal Walker, Linda Holcomb:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 9, 2021

Crystal Walker
Linda Holcomb

Re: IRB Conditional Approval - IRB-FY20-21-697 A Collective Case Study of Novice Elementary Teachers' Perceptions of Preparedness to Teach Early Literacy Skills to Beginning Readers

Dear Crystal Walker, Linda Holcomb:

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been **conditionally** approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Conditional approval means that your complete approval is pending our receipt of certain items, which are listed below:

Documented approval from each research site you are enrolling in your study. Acceptable forms of documentation include a letter on official letterhead or a time-and-date stamped email from a person with the authority to grant permission.

Please keep in mind that you are not permitted to begin recruiting participants or collecting data until you have submitted the above item(s) and have been granted complete approval by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well as you continue working toward complete approval.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX C

Consent

Title of the Project: A Collective Case Study of Novice Elementary Teachers' Perceptions of Preparedness to Teach Early Literacy Skills to Beginning Readers

Principal Investigator: Crystal Wright Walker, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be a novice teacher, with less than three years of teaching experience, in the northwest region of North Carolina. Participants must be responsible for teaching early literacy skills to students in kindergarten through second grade. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore novice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers in kindergarten through second grade in rural northwest North Carolina. Describing the perspectives of novice teachers, and analyzing their classroom experiences as they teach beginning readers will provide useful insight for school administrators, local school districts, colleges, and universities.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a one on one interview with the researcher. The individual interview will last approximately one hour. An audio recording of the interview will be made.

2. For member-checking purposes, a transcription of the individual interview will be provided for review within two weeks of the date the interview is conducted.

3. Participate in a focus group interview conducted via Zoom. The focus group interview will last approximately one hour. An audio and visual recording will be made of the Zoom meeting.

4. For member-checking purposes, a transcription of the focus group interview will be provided for review within two weeks of the date the interview is conducted.

5. Maintain a journal reflecting on literacy instructional practices over the course of four weeks. Each journal entry should take approximately 30 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include aiding in the understanding of teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers in a way that may contribute to improving teacher preparation programs and professional development opportunities. Improved teacher preparation could result in improved student achievement.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Confidentiality will be maintained by using pseudonyms for all participants, schools, and school districts.

- Paper copies of all research data will be secured in a locked filing cabinet. Electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer and on a flash drive that will be secured. Data will be stored for three years after a successful dissertation defense, at which time electronic data will be deleted and paper copies will be shredded Audio and visual recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer for access during data collection and analysis.

- Recordings will also be stored on a flash drive that will be secured. Only the researcher will have access to the recordings. At the conclusion of the study, recordings will be deleted from the computer and the flash drive will be maintained in a secure location for three years. After three years, the flash drive will be destroyed.

- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Crystal Wright Walker. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [redacted] or [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Linda Holcomb, at [redacted].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____ _____

Printed Subject Name Signature & Date

APPENDIX D

June ____, 2021

Dear _____,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to explore beginning teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be teachers with less than three years of teaching experience who are responsible for teaching early literacy skills to students in pre-kindergarten through third grade. Participants must not have completed any graduate studies in the field of education. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in one individual in-person interview lasting approximately one hour, participate in one focus group interview via Zoom lasting approximately one hour, and complete a reflective journal. Individual and focus group interview transcriptions will be provided to participants for review within two weeks of the date the interview is conducted. It is expected that the reflective journal will take approximately thirty minutes. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

In order to participate, please complete the attached Google Form and submit it. A consent document is included in the first section of the Google Form. The consent document contains additional information about my research. After you have read the consent form, please click "I agree". Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the study. Upon meeting for the in-person interview, a hard copy of the consent form will be provided, signed, and maintained with study materials. The second section of the Google Form is for you to provide contact information in order to set up times to conduct interviews.

Participants will be given a $20 gift card to Chick-Fil-A or Starbucks, whichever is preferred, to compensate them for their time.

For more information, please contact me at [redacted].

Sincerely,

Crystal Wright Walker
Doctoral Candidate
[redacted]

APPENDIX E

June ____. 2021

Dear _____,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to explore beginning teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers. One week ago, an email was sent to you inviting you to participate in a research study. This follow-up email is being sent to remind you to complete the following Google Form if you would like to participate and have not already done so. The deadline for participation is _____.

If you choose to participate in the study, you will be asked to participate in one individual in-person interview lasting approximately one hour, participate in one focus group interview via Zoom lasting approximately one hour, and complete an end of year reflective journal. Individual and focus group interview transcriptions will be provided to participants for review within two weeks of the date the interview is conducted. It is expected that the reflective journal will take approximately thirty minutes. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

In order to participate, please complete the attached Google Form and submit it. A consent document is included in the first section of the Google Form. The consent document contains additional information about my research. After you have read the consent form, please click "I agree". Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the study. Upon meeting for the in-person interview, a hard copy of the consent form will be provided, signed, and maintained with study materials. The second section of the Google Form is for you to provide contact information in order to set up times to conduct interviews.

Participants will be given a $20 gift card to Chick-Fil-A or Starbucks, whichever is preferred, to compensate them for their time.

For more information, please contact me at [redacted].

Sincerely,

Crystal Wright Walker
Doctoral Candidate
[redacted]

APPENDIX F

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to me, including your name, what grade you teach, and how many years you have been teaching?
2. Why did you decide to become a teacher?
3. Why did you choose to teach elementary school?
4. What grade is your favorite to teach and why?
5. How would you describe the literacy needs of your general education students?
6. How would you describe the literacy needs of you special populations (EC, ESL)?
7. How do you define literacy instruction?
8. What do you think are the most important aspects of literacy instruction?
9. How often do you explicitly teach phonics as part of your literacy instruction?
10. How do you select text for your students?
11. Please describe how comfortable you feel teaching early literacy skills to beginning readers.
12. Please describe how comfortable you feel teaching early literacy skills to struggling readers.
13. How adequately prepared do you feel to teach early literacy skills?
14. How did your preservice teacher education program prepare you to teach early literacy skills?

APPENDIX G

Standardized Open-ended Focus Group Interview Questions

1) Please state your name, the grade level you teach, and how many years you have been teaching.
2) What do you feel is effective literacy instruction?
3) How confident do you feel in your ability to teach early literacy skills to beginning readers?
4) How confident do you feel in your ability to teach early literacy skills to struggling readers?
5) Do you feel that your preservice education program adequately prepared you to teach early literacy skills?
6) Can you describe the literacy requirements of your teacher preparation program?
7) During your teacher preparation program, what did your reading/literacy methodology courses entail?
8) Can you describe how your education courses prepared you to meet the needs of beginning readers?
9) Can you describe how your education courses prepared you to meet the needs of struggling readers?
10) Is there anything else that you would like me to know?

APPENDIX H

Reflective Journal Prompts

1. What aspects of literacy instruction were challenging this year?
2. What made it challenging?
3. How did you approach these challenges?
4. What did you learn that could help with planning future instruction?
5. What aspects of literacy instruction went well this year?
6. Do you have any additional reflective thoughts regarding particular lessons, issues, concerns, or successes?