A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF TEACHER EFFICACY IN

GUIDED READING

by

Rhonda Jo Webb

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators who utilize differentiated instructional methods through the lens of Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* in rural, Title I elementary schools in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina. Vygotsky's social learning theory guided this study. Ten to 15 Title I elementary educators will participate in this study. The central question guiding this study was: What are the lived experiences of educators in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina who differentiate instruction using Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* in rural, Title I elementary schools? Guiding sub-questions are as follows: (a) What are the lived experiences of Title I teachers with integrating social interaction into small group literacy instruction? (b) What are the experiences of Title I instructors when facilitating guided literacy instruction through discovery and meaning making? (c) What are the lived experiences of Title I educators when implementing instructional scaffolding during guided reading? Data collection included: interviews, a questionnaire, and t focus group. Data analysis included epoché, phenomenological reduction, textual and structural descriptions, and imaginative variation. The themes that developed were: (a) time; (b) teacher self-efficacy; (c) structure; and (d) student performance. Seven sub themes emerged from the themes: (a) stress; (b) burnout (c) collaboration; (d) decreased stress; (e) language skills; (f) thinking independently; and (g) student self-efficacy.

*Keywords*: differentiated instruction, guided reading, literacy instruction, Science of Reading, small group instruction, teacher efficacy

**Copyright Page**

**Dedication**

"The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent" (Exodus 14:14, English Standard Version). There have been so many times I have wanted to quit this journey. There have been so many times I have asked myself why I ever started this process. But God— God just wanted me to be still so He could move. I would like to acknowledge my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for guiding my steps. I am grateful for His leadership and strength that got me through this. I am so honored and humbled that He would take a little girl from Small Town, North Carolina, and do something significant.

To the one who inspired me to teach so many years ago: Barbara Giesler. I dedicate this to you! All the memories you filled my formative years with are what ignited my aspiration to teach and make learning memorable for others. Thank you for making learning fun!

To my husband and best friend, Dedrian, and to my flesh and blood, Abbigail and Alexander. Dedrian, 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 says, "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (English Standard Version). You have been so incredibly patient through this journey. You will never truly comprehend my appreciation for all you've done over the past few years to lighten my load so that this journey could be completed. Abbi and Alex, this is for you. I completed this goal so you would know there is nothing you cannot accomplish. I pray that God puts His hand on your lives and guides you to do huge things, and I pray that you allow Him that opportunity. Thank you for your constant encouragement and understanding. I love you all!

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I would like to acknowledge my dissertation chair, Dr. Vonda Beavers. What an amazing person you are! Your constant prayers and encouragement are what have guided me through the last part of this journey. You prayed for me and celebrated with me and prayed for me even more. I appreciate you more than you know!

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Acknowledgments are also afforded to my principal, Dan Habla, who has been a guiding light since we met amid my work for this dissertation. Your continuous encouragement is what gave me the strength to continue. Good leaders inspire others and you, Sir, are definitely an impeccable leader!

I would like to acknowledge my academic coaches—the people I want to be when I grow up—Christina Gross and Melony Allen. Thank you for acting as mentors during this process. Your knowledge separately and especially collectively is pure gold! I truly value you both as mentors, colleagues, and most of all, friends.

Special acknowledgements to my family—natural, church, and work. Your prayers and encouragement along this journey have been integral along the way. You consistently remind me that I am thoroughly "blessed despite my mess"! To my Garrett and Integrity families, I am so very grateful that you have walked this journey with me and encouraged me every step of the way.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my participants. Without their time and commitment to serve in this study, my dream would have been impossible. Thank you.

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**List of Abbreviations**

Instructional Leadership Team (ILT)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Meaning, Structure/Syntax, and Visual (MSV)

National Association of Educational Procurement (NAEP)

National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ)

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)

*Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* (*NSFGR*)

Professional Development (PD)

Professional Learning Community (PLC)

Science of Reading (SoR)

Zone of proximal development (ZPD)

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

**Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators who utilize differentiated instructional methods through the lens of Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* (*NSFGR*) in rural, Title I elementary schools in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina. Chapter One provides a comprehensive contextual background and includes situation to self, the problem statement, the purpose statement, the significance of the study, and the research questions. The research questions guiding this study are backed by research and are the driving force of this study. The chapter concludes with a list of definitions of terms that are crucial to this study as well as a chapter summary.

**Background**

*NSFGR* by Jan Richardson (2016) is a framework for early and/or struggling readers. This "assess-guide-decide" small group literacy structure provides model lessons via recordings to demonstrate key components for successful, targeted small group instruction to accelerate reading growth for learners (Richardson, 2016). Not only does the framework provide the "why" for guided reading, it also provides prompts, teaching points, discussion starters, and word lists to guide educators in efficiently teaching guided reading for every reading stage. Additionally, this structure provides comprehension modules for teachers to assist students in mastering difficult comprehension skills such as retelling, inferring, and summarizing (Richardson, 2016).

Guided reading, using leveled text for differentiated literacy instruction, has become a commonplace practice in elementary classrooms (Donnelly, 2019). For guided reading, educators may allow readers to choose texts based on their interests; however, offering various

genres is also important (Olszewski, 2019). Figlio and Karbownik (2017) asserted that the more educational reform acts that are introduced, the further students in today's elementary schools fall behind in literacy achievement, especially in Title I schools. A classroom community within the low socioeconomic environment that promotes positive student-teacher relationships, a growth mindset, and personalized learning is beneficial in closing the achievement gap in reading (and in overall academic achievement; Figlio & Karbownik, 2017; McGill-Franzen et al., 2016). Classroom communities facilitate trust between teachers and students, allowing students to be less withdrawn and participate more in classroom discussions and activities. Classroom communities allow students to feel safe to be wrong, allowing teachers to know how to help their learners (Watson et al., 2019). Furthermore, students' underlying beliefs regarding their own intelligence are thought to have an effect on their academic motivation and achievement (Gouëdard, 2021). Therefore, introducing the concept of growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) has shown to be beneficial to students who are considered at-risk because a growth mindset offsets negative preconceived notions, restricted ambitions, and economic deficiencies (Gouëdard, 2021).

Currently, researchers assert that the literacy gap is 30%–40% larger among Title I students, despite continued efforts to close the gap (Figlio & Karbownik, 2017). In fact, the lowest-performing students in literacy appear to have made little to no improvement in approximately 30 years (Barshay, 2019). Reading achievement in Massachusetts, the state with the highest rank in reading proficiency, has fallen 6 percentage points since 2019, based on end-of-year assessments for Spring 2021 (Barshay et al., 2021). Furthermore, experts noted that reading scores in Title I schools had already been dwindling for a decade and the Spring 2021 end-of-year assessments all but erased 30 years of progress (Barshay et al., 2021). The

achievement gap has not diminished through the implementation of any of the Title I–funded programs (McGill-Franzen et al., 2016).

Bloom's (1968) research gave credibility to the concept of differentiated instruction through the approach to order reasoning skills, requiring greater abstraction and insight once skills have been superficially mastered (Prasad, 2021). Additionally, Bloom's taxonomy creates thinkers rather than students who regurgitate information on assessments (Prasad, 2021). Learners begin to question and construct their own meanings of content due to the use of Bloom's taxonomy (Clark, 2018; Prasad, 2021; Yuen et al., 2022). Therefore, Bloom's research opened the door for teachers to integrate constructivism through social learning (Clark, 2018; Yuen et al., 2022).

**Historical Context**

After the desegregation of schools came the revelation of inequitable funding for schools (Eng, 2015). To rectify the inequality, President Johnson introduced the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1964. This act poured millions of federal tax dollars into Title I schools to stimulate academic achievement. Unfortunately, little progress took place, which propelled the publication of *A Nation at Risk* under the Reagan administration (Good, 2010). The purpose of this reform was to address the lack of educational improvement through a focus on teacher accountability and government influence within the school system (Good, 2010). This change, too, did little to close the literacy achievement gap between students of poverty and their economically advantaged peers, so the Clinton administration introduced the Goals 2000 Act and the Bush administration introduced the No Child Left Behind Act, which were followed by the Obama administration's Race to the Top initiative (Williams, 2019). Unfortunately, however, the achievement gap has not lessened through the implementation of any of these governmental

efforts (McGill-Franzen et al., 2016).

Figlio and Karbownik (2017) asserted that learners who are economically disadvantaged will, unfortunately, most likely remain disadvantaged, as their test scores tend to remain much lower than scores of those from prominent households. McGill-Franzen et al. (2016) posited that part of the reason for this ever-growing difference is that "poor" (p. 586) children lose significant ground over the summer (commonly referred to as the summer slide) because of their lack of access to appropriate reading material (Albee et al., 2019). This, in turn, creates a cycle of economically advantaged learners maintaining their academic lead over their peers. İlter (2017) and Kainz (2019) asserted that there is a clear need for intentional, effective reading instruction to help close the gap for students of low socioeconomic status homes, as federal funds poured into Title I schools have not made a significant difference.

**Social Context**

Studies show that learners from low socioeconomic households tend to experience continued adverse events that prevent them from overcoming their financially disadvantaged childhoods, causing them to remain in poverty (Bubonya & Cobb-Clark, 2020; Goodacre & Summer, 2020). These learners tend to miss more days of school, experience more suspensions and/or expulsions, drop out of school at a greater rate, and have increased likelihood of risk-taking behaviors (including drugs and alcohol) than their more financially advantaged peers (Bubonya & Cobb-Clark, 2020). These factors lead to generational poverty, where children from low-income families grow up and repeat the behaviors of their own parents. This could include children dropping out of school to get jobs to help their family make ends meet, raising siblings and/or having multiple children themselves, or selling drugs (Bubonya & Cobb-Clark, 2020). The goal is to break the generational cycle, but the question is how?

**Theoretical Context**

There has been an ongoing debate regarding the achievement gap for decades (Donnelly, 2019; Figlio & Karbownik, 2017; Hoffman, 2017), with many researchers asserting that the literacy achievement gap is 30%–40% greater today than it was decades ago (Donnelly, 2019; Figlio & Karbownik, 2017; Hoffman, 2017; McGill-Franzen et al., 2016). Goodacre and Summer (2020) argued that many researchers postulate learners who come from economically disadvantaged households will, unfortunately, maintain the generational cycle, as their test scores tend to lag behind those from more financially advantaged households for a number of reasons. This, in turn, creates a cycle of economically disadvantaged learners falling behind their peers academically (İlter, 2017). İlter (2017) asserted that there is a clear need for intentional, effective reading instruction to help close the gap for Title I students.

A two-stage theory by Gough et al. (1983) asserted that learners begin to read by employing visual and/or contextual clues connected with written words (i.e., the humps in the middle of the word camel would help students read the word). Ehri (1995), however, argued that a middle stage had been disregarded, which led to the phase theory. Ehri's (1995) phase theory conceptualized literacy development into four phases: pre-alphabetic, early alphabetic, later (or full) alphabetic, and consolidated alphabetic. In Ehri's (1995) pre-alphabetic phase, students could recognize environmental print, such as logos. In such situations, parents may believe their child is reading; however, when a given environmental word is seen without the logo the learner is unable to recognize it (Ehri & McCormick, 1998). In this stage, learners are using pictures, context clues, and guessing to help them identify words (Ehri & McCormick, 1998).

Ehri (1995) argued that over time, learners begin their transition to the early alphabetic phase. In this phase, students rely on the initial letter of a word, the context of the text, and

picture clues to help them determine the unknown, or tricky, word (Ehri & McCormick, 1998). Considerations for instruction within this phase would include reinforcing letter-sound association as well as phonemic awareness and stressing the importance of students to attend to all the letters within the word (Ehri & McCormick, 1998). The full alphabetic stage shows a working knowledge of letter-sound association (Ehri, 1995). Students are able to decode, albeit slowly, as well as show a knowledge of phonemic awareness. The full alphabetic stage also shows student knowledge of orthographic mapping, used in decoding and encoding words (Ehri & McCormick, 1998). In the last stage, consolidated alphabetic, students no longer use individual letters to decode, but attend to chunks of words (Ehri, 1995). Instruction should focus on orthographic mapping in order to solidify continued chunking, but also encoding skills (Ehri & McCormick, 1998).

Another underpinning theory that has been used to study literacy teaching practices is schema theory (Shen, 2008). Schema theory is predicated upon learners obtaining, managing, and recalling information previously learned (Shen, 2008). Schema theory encompasses two systems of processing information: Bottom-up and top-down methodologies (Shen, 2008). The bottom-up method includes the engagement of basic readings skills, typically taught in lower elementary grades; top-down includes the employment of skills practiced in upper elementary to make text connections (Shen, 2008). Schema theory is constructed around the idea that previously learned concepts can assist with comprehension and making connections (Shen, 2008). The concern with this theory is that it solely focuses on comprehension skills. If a student has not mastered decoding skills, typical in Title I schools (Kragler et al., 2015), how should an upper-grades educator proceed with instruction?

Kragler et al. (2015) noted that students in Title I environments generally spend more

time decoding (sounding out) words than on comprehension skills. However, Bellibas (2016) and Eng (2015) posited that demanding students as a whole group use specific reading strategies and measuring teacher effectiveness is ineffective. Bellibas (2016) and Eng (2015) both asserted that occasions when students are able to construct their own learning, based on social interaction, discovery and meaning making, and instructional scaffolding, the likelihood of greater literacy achievement increases. Individualized instruction based on students' specific needs that provides them with opportunities to grapple with literacy-based strategies that have been scaffolded for them render more postive results (Bellibas, 2016; Eng, 2015).

This study will add additional understanding of Vygotsky's social learning theory (Vygotsky, 1980) and how it relates to closing the literacy gap in Title I schools. Vygotsky's (1980) social learning theory highlights the necessity of social interactions, meaning making, and scaffolding to provide opportunities for learners to adapt new concepts best (Clark, 2018; Eun, 2018; Hoffman, 2017). Differentiated instruction, which is the supposition of *NSFGR* (Richardson, 2016), focuses on current student levels and how to construct new reading behaviors, thus growing literacy achievement. There is a well-defined need for intentional and valuable reading instruction to help close the gap for Title One students (Ïter, 2017). This study will contribute to the body of literature currently available by sharing teachers' experiences regarding their integration of social interactions, meaning making, and scaffolding efforts through the use of Richardson's (2016) framework. This study could extend existing research by highlighting how educators implement social learning theory to inform their instructional practices and close the literacy achievement gap.

## Problem Statement

The problem this study aimed to address was the continuous literacy learning gap in Title I schools (Berkowitz, 2021; Ellis & Rowe, 2020; Kelly et al., 2021; Miller, 2022; Murdoch et al., 2022). To attempt to close this gap, most educational professionals turn to differentiated literacy instruction, specifically in guided reading. *Differentiated instruction* has become an increasingly used term within the education world. Although the term is generally used, somewhat loosely, throughout the academic realm, differentiated instruction has been known to have positive effects along with challenges, specifically in the area of literacy (Donnelly, 2019; Olszewski, 2019).

Researchers have continuously postulated that learners who come from low-income households will, unfortunately, most likely maintain that way of life, as their test scores will remain much lower than scores of those from higher-income households for numerous reasons (Donnelly, 2019; Figlio & Karbownik, 2017; Goodacre & Sumner, 2020; Hoffman, 2017). One reason for the widening achievement gap, McGill-Franzen et al. (2016) posited, is the summer slide. The term *summer slide* refers to students regressing academically during the summer months because they do not continue receiving literacy instruction (McGill-Franzen et al., 2016). Furthermore, most students from economically disadvantaged households do not read consistently at home during the summer due to few books in the home and/or a lack of public library visits; therefore, these learners do not continue practicing literacy skills they previously learned and their abilities regress (McGill-Franzen et al., 2016). Additionally, during the academic year, underprivileged learners often deal with violence and bullying at school, either from peers or from their teachers because of their lack of academic progress (Goodacre & Sumner, 2020). These learners often experience a deficiency of support at home or ineffective

support from their teachers to maintain academic progress (Goodacre & Sumner, 2020). In turn, the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged learners and their privileged peers remains (İlter, 2017).

Intentional, effective reading instruction is necessary to help close the gap for Title I students (İter, 2017). Arguably, Figlio and Karbownik (2017), as well as Kragler et al. (2015), noted that students in Title I environments generally spend more time decoding (sounding out) words than on comprehension skills; however, Bellibas (2016) posited that demanding students as a whole group use specific reading strategies and measuring teacher effectiveness is ineffective. A classroom community within the low socioeconomic environment that promotes positive student-teacher relationships, a growth mindset, and personalized learning is beneficial in closing the achievement gap in reading (and in overall academic achievement). The problem is that the experiences of the educators who have implemented Richardson's (2016) model to close the literacy achievement gap have, for too long, gone unheard.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators who utilize differentiated instructional methods using the framework presented in Jan Richardson's (2016) *NSFGR* in rural, Title I elementary schools in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina. Differentiated instruction, for the sake of this study, is defined as instructional practices that are based on what the individual student needs to become a successful reader. Differentiated instruction can be considered as a pedagogical approach in which educators' focus is to deliver the best course of learning based on students' needs (Pozas et al., 2023). Differentiated instruction is methodically designed and intentionally, systematically carried out (Pozas et al., 2023).

**Significance of the Study**

The participants in this study described their lived experiences with implementing Jan Richardson's (2016) *NSFGR*. A significant amount of research describes the achievement gap of students in Title I schools, specifically in literacy (Donnelly, 2019; Figlio & Karbownik, 2017; Goodacre & Sumner, 2020; Hoffman, 2017; Ïlter, 2017; Kragler et al., 2015; McGill-Fenzen et al., 2016; Olszewski, 2019). Additionally, over time, researchers have discussed how federal funds have been poured into Title I schools for specialized programs that have proven to be ineffective (Bruce et al., 2019; Figlio & Karbownik, 2017; Good, 2010; Heise, 2019; Kainz, 2019). The results of this study are significant in that they inform best practices for differentiated literacy instruction in the future. This section describes the theoretical, empirical, and practical significance of this transcendental phenomenological study.

Theoretically, this study brings further understanding of Vygotsky's (1980) social learning theory and how it relates to closing the literacy gap in Title I schools. Under this theory, social interactions, meaning making, and scaffolding allow students to learn new concepts most effectively (Clark, 2018; Eun, 2018; Hoffman, 2017). Differentiated instruction, which is the premise behind *NSFGR* (Richardson, 2016), addresses present student level and scaffolds new reading behaviors, thus increasing literacy achievement. This study contributes to the body of literature currently available by sharing teachers' experiences regarding their integration of social interactions, meaning making, and scaffolding efforts through the use of Richardson's (2016) framework.

There is little empirical research to provide in-depth accounts of teachers who utilize differentiation instruction strategies in small group literacy, implementing *NSFGR* (Richardson, 2016). Current research, however, does discuss differentiated instruction. To differentiate

instruction, teachers must observe learners, understand the differences of each student, then take that information and plan instruction (Onyishi & Sefotho, 2020). Because the needs of learners are so incredibly different, many teachers feel that differentiation is nearly impossible (Onyishi & Sefotho, 2020). Furthermore, there is a growing body of educational professionals who argue that differentiation, especially for literacy, does not work, deeming it ineffective due to its small effect size (Puzio et al., 2020). This research adds to the growing body of literature regarding sociocultural theory and Jan Richardson's (2016) *NSFGR*.

Practically, this study may assist educators in gaining better understanding of how to close the literacy achievement gap within Title I schools by using Jan Richardson's (2016) program. Teachers must comprehend how differentiated small group instruction operates in order to determine whether it should be utilized within the classroom to close the literacy achievement gap (Clark, 2018; Eun, 2018; Hoffman, 2017). The information gained from this study may drive professional development for teachers on how to successfully implement differentiated small group literacy instruction.

## Research Questions

This research focuses on the experiences of educators who have implemented Jan Richardson's (2016) model for small group literacy instruction. Data was collected from participants who have experienced the phenomenon of closing the literacy achievement gap through the use of Richardson's (2016) small group literacy instruction model. Data collection was guided by the following central question, a broad question that restates the purpose of the study, and three guiding sub questions that narrow the central question (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Central Research Question**

What are the lived experiences of educators in the Piedmont Triad region of North

Carolina who differentiate instruction using Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Steps Forward in*

*Guided Reading* in rural Title I elementary schools?

**Sub Question 1**

What are the lived experiences of Title I teachers with integrating social interaction into

small group literacy instruction?

**Sub Question 2**

What are the experiences of Title I instructors when facilitating guided literacy

instruction through discovery and meaning making?

**Sub Question 3**

What are the lived experiences of Title I educators when implementing instructional

scaffolding during guided reading?

**Definitions**

1. *Constructivism* – The study of a learner's own construction of knowledge (Clark, 2018, p.

   180).

2. *Differentiation* – An approach by which teaching is varied and adapted to match students'

   abilities using systematic procedures for academic progress–monitoring and data-based

   decision-making (Roy et al., 2013, p. 1187; van Geel et al., 2018, p. 52).

3. *Guided reading* – The process of grouping learners of similar reading ability together and

   matching text complexity to that ability, referred to as leveling (Donnelly, 2019).

4. *Phenomenology* – A form of research seeking to understand the lived experiences of

   participants who have experienced a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

5. *Qualitative research* – A type of research that centers on examining participants in their natural settings and making meaning of, or interpreting, the phenomenon, or experience (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

6. *Successful reader* – A reader who has reached a level of proficiency determined by state expectations (Roy et al., 2013, p. 1187; van Geel et al., 2018, p. 52).

7. *Self*-efficacy – "[B]eliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainment" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3).

8. *Transcendental phenomenology* – An unbiased, philosophical design of qualitative research methodology seeking to understand human experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

9. *Zone of proximal development* – The distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Eun, 2018, pp. 19-20; Vygotsky, 1980).

**Summary**

The first chapter provided an introduction to this transcendental phenomenological study. Background information was provided in order to establish the premise of the study. The problem is that the voices of the educators who have implemented Richardson's (2016) model to close the literacy achievement gap have for too long gone unheard. This transcendental phenomenological research describes the experiences of the participants. The researcher's motivation for administrating this study, philosophical assumptions, and perspective were discussed. Additionally, this chapter presents definitions of terms that drive this study, research questions, and the significance of the study.

# CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

## Overview

This chapter of the research study provides a theoretical framework as well as an overview of relevant literature regarding sociocultural theory and how it contributes to closing the achievement gap in literacy in Title I schools. Pittinsky (2017) defined the achievement gap as the consistent discrepancy in performance on educational assessments among a targeted group of learners. The overarching theoretical framework is Vygotsky's social learning theory, which centers around the construct that academic achievement takes place in the contexts of social interactions with peers and teachers, discovery and making meaning from learning experiences, and instructional scaffolding within students' zone of proximal development (ZPD; Chuang, 2021; Daniels & Tse, 2021; Kambara, 2020; Shin et al., 2020; Vygotsky, 1980). This theoretical framework is appropriate for this research because it focuses on small group reading, literacy instruction, and how social learning theory promotes literacy success (Vygotsky, 1980). The relevant theoretical literature discusses how learners construct their knowledge, how learning is mediated, and the idea that the classroom environment is equally as important as the instruction that takes place in it (Clark, 2018). Additionally, the related literature examines how small group literacy instruction (guided reading) applies social learning theory to close the literacy achievement gap.

## Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, this study was framed and guided by Vygotsky's (1980) social learning theory. Although constructivism and social learning theory are two separate theories, Vygotsky's social learning theory is often referred to as social constructivism (Akpan et al., 2020; Chuang, 2021). Educators who subscribe to this theory believe that learning experiences play a

fundamental role in academic achievements—that knowledge is built by learning through social constructs to elicit higher-order thinking and scaffolded learning tasks (Chuang, 2021; Clark, 2018; Hedges, 2021; Kambara, 2020). Jan Richardson (2016) applied this theory when creating her framework for literacy instruction. Richardson's (2016) addressed literacy instruction by suggesting the use of discussion starters for teachers and students. Additionally, Richardson's (2016) framework builds upon students' schema through discovery and making meaning by implementing prescribed lesson plans that meet students where they are developmentally and academically, affording them the success to grow in literacy skills and also meet state expectations. This framework formed the basis of the central question of this study, focusing on lived experiences of Title I teachers who implement Richardson's (2016) model in an effort to close the literacy gap.

The rudimentary principle of the social learning theory is that learning is facilitated, and knowledge constructed through social connections (Chuang, 2021). As everyday interactions occur, learners begin to construct new understanding and make meaning of these interactions. In each area of learning, language is the most utilized tool for mediation (Daniels & Tse, 2021; Vygotsky, 1980). Richardson (2016) implemented discussion starters into her framework because conversation is key to student learning; this idea led to the development of the first sub question: What are the experiences of educators integrating social interaction into literacy instruction?

Social constructivism presumes that learning is collective with meaning constructed through various outlooks and mediated through the use of tools (Chuang, 2021, Vygotsky, 1980). According to Eun (2020), "Mediation is a process by which individuals process external stimuli via means of creating additional artificial stimuli" (p. 4). When students engage with tools to

solve a task, a methodical connection transpires between what they do, what they say, and the understanding that ultimately takes place in the experience (Abtahi, 2018). To facilitate this connection, Richardson (2016) incorporated manipulation of letter tiles, chips, Elkonin boxes, etc. into her framework. Therefore, the second sub question focuses on the experiences of educators facilitating literacy through discovery and meaning making.

Kantar et al. (2020) described ZPD as the most essential tenet of sociocultural theory: learning with the scaffolding of an expert. This concept supposes that students learn best when their current level of understanding (independent level) is met and they construct new learning to assist in meeting their potential (proximal; Daniels & Tse, 2021; Eun, 2018; Kantar et al., 2020). The actual ZPD is the distance between these two zones (Abtahi, 2018). In this light, Vygotsky preferred to identify students' strengths, which are viewed positively, and scaffold those strengths rather than focusing on their weaknesses (Karimi & Nazari, 2021). The goal of working within a student's ZPD is to provide learning experiences that are not too easy, yet not too difficult, so that the learner is challenged at a level that is not frustrating (Lewis, 2018). As students begin to build independence in the skill being practiced, original scaffolds will be withdrawn, and new scaffolds constructed for more complex learning (Smagorinsky, 2018). Richardson (2016) designed her framework around the premise of scaffolding because it is essential to student learning. The progression of Richardson's (2016) framework led to the development of the third sub question: What are the lived experiences of Title I educators when implementing instructional scaffolding during guided reading?

Questions for the interviews in this study were designed to elicit participants' lived experiences using Richardson's (2016) framework to close the literacy achievement gap. Additionally, the research questions for the questionnaire and focus groups were designed to

describe participants' experiences utilizing Richardson's framework to integrate Vygotsky's (1980) tenets of social learning theory: social interaction, discovery and meaning making, and instructional scaffolding. The data collected will render a narrative, describing how social learning theory drives instruction.

## Related Literature

Neuman et al. (2018) asserted that students who reside in lower-income areas have less access to resources. In turn, this lack of access to resources sets up these learners for immediate failure upon entering elementary school due to their lack of a foundation of literacy and language skills (Neuman et al., 2018; Shavlik et al., 2020). According to Ndijuye (2020), the opportunity gap begins well before learners ever enter their primary education and follows them through adulthood. Studies (Fernald et al., 2013; Mol & Bus, 2011; Ndijuye, 2020) show extreme differences between learning patterns and baseline scores of students from lower socioeconomic communities and their peers from middle-class homes. Murdoch et al. (2022) found that learners from middle- and upper-class communities enter kindergarten more prepared and more proficient in school-related language skills, consistently becoming increasingly competent in reading, spelling, and comprehension. Their peers from lower-income communities, however, have been found to enter kindergarten less prepared, increasing the achievement gap (Murdoch et al., 2022; Neuman et al., 2018; Ralph et al., 2020). Ralph et al. (2020) asserted that learners from lower-income households have substantially smaller vocabularies than those from higher-income households and that the gap continues to widen. Furthermore, Shavlik et al. (2020) noted that students from low-income homes tend to have more absences due to poor quality health care, which impedes their learning.

Weak beginning reading skills negatively impact a student's ongoing reading abilities. Students who enter kindergarten with a meager knowledge of letters and sounds are considered at risk of widening the learning gap (Peng et al., 2019). Richardson (2016) defined meager knowledge of letters and sounds as knowing less than 40 upper and lowercase letters. Kjeldsen et al. (2019) posited that students in early grades who present at-risk behaviors, such as poor phonological and phonemic awareness, will maintain their at-risk status if they do not receive prescriptive instruction and catch up by first grade. Prescriptive instruction can only take place in the form of guided reading (Olszewski, 2019). Richardson's (2016) *NSFGR* takes students from their current instructional level and applies prescriptive steps in order to positively impact their ongoing reading abilities.

In 1999, a National Reading Panel was convened by Congress in conjunction with U.S. Department of Education to evaluate current research and evidence to determine the most effective methods in teaching literacy to learners (Brown et al., 2021; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2019). This panel included 14 members from diverse educational backgrounds (administrators, teachers, and scientists) who were currently researching literacy practices (NICHD, 2019). Congress called on the National Reading Panel to review more than 100,000 studies on how to teach learners to read and to determine, from their review, the most successful evidence-based approach. From there, the panel was expected to illustrate which procedures were classroom ready as well as how to get this information out to schools for immediate implementation (NICHD, 2019; Nelson et al., 2022). The panel determined that the soundest approach to literacy instruction was one that encompasses explicit phonemic awareness instruction, methodical phonics instruction, explicit fluency instruction, and comprehension strategies (Beerwinkle et al., 2021; NICHD, 2019; Nelson et al., 2022).

The related literature below describes how teachers apply the sociocultural theory to everyday practice through the implementation of guided reading to address each pillar of literacy described by the National Reading Panel. Students desire academic challenges, but they do not crave academic frustration; nor do they yearn for their learning experiences to be too easy (Lewis, 2018; Olszewski, 2019). Teachers are encouraged to focus their small group literacy instruction on what their students can *almost* do: what they can accomplish with moderate assistance but not yet independently (Lewis, 2018). In doing so, the educator has met the students' sweet spot: their ZPD (Lewis, 2018). During small-group literacy instruction with struggling readers, it is essential for teachers to comprehend that every second counts and each moment of instruction must be meaningful. Knowing this, running records, observations, anecdotal notes, and guided writing samples will allow the teacher to identify the appropriate ZPD for each small group, as well as the needed scaffolds, equipping the teacher with the ability to assist the learners to reach their fullest potential by meeting their individual needs (Lewis, 2018; Olszewski, 2019). The following literature reveals some key areas as to how guided reading and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory can be used together to close the literacy gap in Title I schools. Teachers employ mediated learning through word attack strategies for decoding and problem-solving for unknown words (Eun, 2020). Teachers target ZPD and scaffolding strategies to determine best comprehension strategies through retell or fluency, but also, for some, mediation can occur through the use of retell picture cards (Xi & Lantolf, 2020).

**Literacy Assessments**

Educators understand that assessments are necessary for driving personalized instruction (Veldhuis & van den Heuvel-Panhauizen, 2019). It is essential to understand the purpose of each type of assessment that is given. For example, if a teacher gives a running record: What is that

information utilized for; how will it inform the teacher's instruction; does it truly monitor the student's progress; does it determine if a student is at risk? If not, then the assessment may not be as purposeful as originally intended (National Council on Teacher Quality [NCTQ], 2020). Comprehensive assessments are used to collect and manage information necessary for decision-making (Veldhuis & van den Heuvel-Panhauizen, 2019). They impact reading successes and allow educators to be fully aware of student progress to drive instruction (NCTQ, 2020; Veldhuis & van den Heuvel-Panhauizen, 2019).

In literacy, it is essential for teachers to know how to assess students, how to score the assessments, how to interpret the data those assessments provide, and how to proceed with instruction, diagnostically and prescriptively, in order to best meet the needs of each learner (Goodwin et al., 2019; NCTQ, 2020; Veldhuis & van den Heuvel-Panhauizen, 2019). Outcome assessments, interim assessments, universal screeners, diagnostic assessments, and formative assessments are given to students to provide essential information to teachers (Goodwin et al., 2019; NCTQ, 2020; Veldhuis & van den Heuvel-Panhauizen, 2019). Each of these assessments build on each other to assist educators in providing next steps for learners (Veldhuis & van den Heuvel-Panhauizen, 2019). Although these assessments are intended to inform instructional routes, Nation (2019) asserted that each assessment should be viewed as only one piece of information. According to Nation (2019), the data derived from these assessments should be examined; however, instruction should be based upon the compilation of all results.

Outcome assessments are given at the end of the year to determine whether students have met grade level requirements. Interim, or benchmark, assessments are given three to four times per year to determine whether students are on track to meet the grade level requirements that will be assessed on the outcome assessment (NCTQ, 2020; Veldhuis & van den Heuvel-Panhauizen,

2019). Formative assessments are generally created by professional learning communities, testing committees, and/or school systems to determine whether a lesson or unit of study was effective. This type of assessment is given numerous times throughout the year and is utilized for daily planning and to assist teachers in monitoring core instruction (NCTQ, 2020; Veldhuis & van den Heuvel-Panhauizen, 2019). Universal screening assessments are quick, curriculum-based or computer adaptive tests that are given several times a year and used to measure the effectiveness of literacy programs and student growth. These screeners also provide purposeful information such as students' level of risk (NCTQ, 2020). Finally, diagnostic assessments drill down to determine the *why* behind a student's risk factor. The data from these assessments reveal which skills students are struggling with and how to address them (NCTQ, 2020).

Assessments are used to drive instruction (NCTQ, 2020; Veldhuis & van den Heuvel-Panhauizen, 2019). In order for assessment to be effective, educators must first know what skills are needed to become a good reader (Hong et al., 2020). Gough and Tunmer (1986) devised a simple plan that stated if reading comprehension was the goal, students must first master decoding skills and build language comprehension skills. Decoding skills are made up of phonological awareness and phonemic awareness (Goodwin et al., 2019; Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Oral language and vocabulary make up language comprehension skills (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hong et al., 2020). Language comprehension skills are necessary for understanding word meanings (Goodwin et al., 2019; Gough & Tunmer, 1986). In short, students must be able to decode words and understand their meanings before they can comprehend a passage (Goodwin et al., 2019; Gough & Tunmer, 1986).

Based on the assessments given, educators are able to map out how their students are performing and then determine the support they need by creating a student profile of reading

difficulties and skill gaps (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; NCTQ, 2020). There are four student

profiles, and each profile determines the individual support needed by each student. The first

profile notes that the learner indicates positive decoding language skills. This learner can learn

how to read and can comprehend without any given tiered support. The second profile describes

learners who indicate positive decoding skills but poor language comprehension skills. These

learners generally struggle to comprehend what they read even if the passage is read fluently.

Students in this category require explicit comprehension instruction. The third profile is of a

student who has poor decoding skills and positive language comprehension skills. Learners in

this profile show difficulty learning to read yet indicate strong comprehension. Students who fit

this profile require explicit phonics instruction. The final profile depicts the student who shows

poor decoding skills and poor language comprehension skills. This student struggles to decode

and make meaning of words. This learner needs explicit instruction in both decoding and

comprehension skills (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; NCTQ, 2020). Knowing how to implement and

utilize the information from given assessments will allow educators to align learners' instruction

to their actual needs, ensuring the best outcome for each student (NCTQ, 2020).

**Guided Reading**

Guided reading is literacy instruction that takes place in a group of five to seven students

who share the same instructional needs (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017). These instructional needs are

supported when the teacher uses systematic and strategic strategies that learners apply to decode

and comprehend texts at increasingly challenging difficulties. The teacher uses text with a small

group of students who have similar reading abilities to guide them to be independent and

intentional readers (Blything et al., 2020). Small-group literacy instruction levels range from

nonreaders, or Pre-A, to fluent (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017). Fluent readers are students who are

well past decoding words and are working on comprehension and fluency. As guided reading groups become more advanced, the lessons become slightly more complex to ensure that learners are not overwhelmed with the transition to the next reading level (Carr et al., 2022). Each level has sight words, word families, and reading behaviors that align with the students' reading stage and have been scaffolded from the previous level (C. Young, 2018).

During the process of guided reading, the teacher works with students to provide a collective lesson of targeted instruction based on the level of each group (Mikita et al., 2019). This time is not devoted to teaching reading skills in isolation, but rather teaching a group of reading behaviors and skills in a cohesive manner while students engage with text in order to scaffold learners and increase their reading abilities (A. Davis et al., 2019). Guided reading groups are fluid and should be ever-changing, as teachers should never want their learners to become stagnant but also because learners grow at different rates (A. Davis et al., 2019). While working within the group, the teacher may provide one-on-one, scaffolded prompts to individual students as needed based on observations the teacher makes while the monitoring individual students when reading (Mikita et al., 2019; Rodgers, 2017). Texts provided during guided reading play a critical role in the process, as they should be engaging and not frustrating, yet support the skills and behaviors the teacher is focusing on for the lesson in order to address students' ZPD (A. Davis et al., 2019).

Effectiveness of guided reading is determined and reinforced by teacher proficiency (Hattie et al., 2015; Nicholas et al., 2021). Expert teachers in guided reading have a "deep conceptual knowledge of … how people learn" (De Bruyckere et al., 2019, p. 140) and utilize that knowledge to meet the needs of each student (Nicholas et al., 2021). According to C. Young (2018), guided reading should be successful due to its roots in social constructivism. Students are

learning through interaction with their peers as well as their teacher, a tenet of sociocultural theory (Clark, 2018; Eun, 2018, Hoffman, 2017). As the teacher chooses text on a learner's instructional guided reading level, the educator is allowing the student to stay within his or her ZPD (C. Young, 2018). The teacher provides scaffolds so that the learner is successful with reading a challenging text. Over time, this exposure to what was once complex to the student allows the student to become independent and eventually need a more challenging text, thus increasing the learner's independent and instructional level (C. Young, 2018).

**Phonological Awareness**

Phonological awareness is the foundation for reading readiness. Phonological awareness is the auditory and oral management of sounds (Milankov et al., 2021) and sets the groundwork for decoding skills, also known as phonemic awareness (Bar-Kockva & Nevo, 2019). Phonemic awareness, especially in younger learners, advances and increases reading progression (Milankov et al., 2021). For students who enter kindergarten and do not already have phonological awareness mastered, there is a strong predictor for their future reading ability and their guided reading instruction must be targeted for their particular ZPD, in this area, using engaging tools for mediation (Milankov et al., 2021; Albritton et al., 2018). Richardson (2016) posited that when teachers use tactile tools with young children, students make better connections and quickly move through the prereading stage. Some of the tactile tools suggested for use are letter-sound picture cards, sandpaper, play dough, sand, and Wikki Stix. As students build the letters (upper and lowercase), they also construct connections to the letter sounds (Albritton et al., 2018; Richardson, 2016).

Reading development is heavily dependent on phonological awareness. Gillon et al. (2019) argued that phonological awareness and letter knowledge is strongly linked to reading

comprehension and that students' literacy success can predetermined by the time they are in first grade. Moats and Tolman (2019) supported this argument by asserting that the ability to perform complex phonemic awareness tasks is characteristic of proficient readers and spellers. Milankov et al. (2021) asserted that a deficit in phonological awareness is the most widely recognized cause of dyslexia. Considering this, one can argue that learners in Title I schools are at a huge deficit if they do not know their letters and letter sounds by the time they enter kindergarten (Albritton et al., 2018). Richardson (2016) posited, however, that closing that gap is possible through consistent phonological awareness practice. Focusing on phonological awareness is the only way to scaffold learners who are struggling with word families (rhyming words) and/or phoneme segmentation and blending (Gillon et al., 2019). Scaffolded learning opportunities for these learners include identifying initial sounds as well as blending, segmenting, and deleting initial and/or final sounds (Piasta & Hudson, 2022). Although the exact instructional progression for phonological awareness is unknown, its importance is undeniable. Phonological awareness tasks necessitate phonological processing in working memory. If this essential skill is neglected, the literacy achievement gap will continue to widen because students will not have received the proper scaffolding needed to be successful in subsequent lessons (Gillon et al., 2019).

**Phonemic Awareness**

In addition to mastering phonological awareness, to reach the ultimate goal of reading (comprehending written text), learners must develop phonemic awareness (Al Otaiba et al., 2019). Phonemic awareness is the ability to maneuver phonemes, also referred to as sounds (Al Otaiba et al., 2019; Randazzo et al., 2019). Phonemic awareness is commonly referred as decoding, or the ability to translate printed words into sounds (Park et al., 2020; Patael et al., 2018). For learners who exhibit severe challenges decoding text, accuracy, fluency, and

comprehension are negatively impacted and will continue to restrain learners from reaching their maximum potential. Once students reach third grade, decoding skills are expected to be mastered, and those with limited decoding skills will be left behind (Gandhi et al., 2018).

Moats and Tolman (2019) asserted that "whole class (Tier 1) instruction that includes phonemic awareness training for a few minutes per day, several days per week, is one of the best antidotes for future reading failure" (p. 102). Once students can identify the letters in their names and at least 40 upper and lowercase letter sounds, they are ready to have repetitive (predictive), decodable text and word attack strategies involving other phonemic awareness activities incorporated into lessons (Saiegh-Haddad, 2019). Decoding follows a fairly predictable developmental progression: Learners learn the sounds (phonemes) and then they are able to put the sounds together. Unfortunately, however, English is a complicated language with many rules and patterns. As students learn letter sounds, they can progress to learn that letters work together to create new sounds, such as digraphs, glued/welded sounds, long vowel patterns, and schwas, just to name a few examples (Kern & Hosp, 2018). As learners obtain foundational reading skills through phonemic awareness, they are able to read more (Moats & Tolman, 2019). As students read more, they accumulate more words in their sight banks, making reading much easier (Moats & Tolman, 2019). Following the natural progression of decoding, students continue toward the ultimate goal: comprehending written text (Park et al., 2020; Patael et al., 2018).

### Sight Words

In the past, sight words (also commonly referred to as high-frequency words, now referred to as heart words) were taught to students through the use of flash cards (Moats & Tolman, 2019). Students would be told that these particular words were often seen but could not be sounded out based on how they look; they pose a problem for early readers because they

cannot be decoded through "graphophonemic," letter-sound association (Kouri, 2020, p. 2).

When sight words are presented, students have typically not yet learned the letter patterns that

make up each high-frequency word, so they learn these words based on sight (or by heart) and

the frequency they see them in text (Miles et al., 2018). Students are now frontloaded with the

notion that high-frequency words will fall into one of three categories: regularly spelled (easily

decodable), irregularly spelled (words that follow a spelling pattern to be learned later, as

developmentally appropriate), or permanently irregularly spelled (such as thought or tough;

(Moats & Tolman, 2019). As high-frequency words are taught, students will be able to make

sense of the letter patterns they notice in each word (Miles et al., 2018; Moats & Tolman, 2019).

According to Richardson's (2016) *NSFGR*, high-frequency word lists are directly related to

particular reading behavior skills and levels and are, therefore, taught in a specific order so that

students receive proper scaffolding for the next level.

### *Word Families and Word Attack Strategies*

In addition to high-frequency words, students also learn ways to solve, or attack,

unknown words. Even as beginning readers, learners find patterns within words, noticing that

words that follow the consonant-vowel-consonant pattern always have short vowels and that the

letters in blends can always be heard. They begin to understand the concept of word families

(Negrete & Bear, 2019). The type of scaffolding teachers employ within students' guided

reading groups is based on domain contingency and instructional contingency (Rodgers, 2017).

Domain contingency correlates to what the teacher focuses on while scaffolding (i.e., meaning,

structure, and visual information). Instructional contingency correlates to how much information

is provided while scaffolding, starting with the least amount of support and then adding

additional layers until the student is successful (Mikita et al., 2019). As reading levels become

more complex, so do the patterns for attacking words: digraphs, inflected endings, glued/welded sounds, long vowel patterns, and prefixes and suffixes (Mikita et al., 2019). Learners use all of those patterns to chunk, or break apart, words in order to decode those segments. They focus on the meaning, structure, and/or visual information of what is available within each word (Mikita et al., 2019; Negrete & Bear, 2019).

As learners become increasingly familiar with patterns (which involves phonological awareness), text complexity continues to increase (Brown et al., 2021; Negrete & Bear, 2019). Soon, students realize they are no longer learning to read, but reading to learn. According to Richardson's (2016) *NSFGR*, word families and word attack strategies are directly related to developmentally appropriate reading behaviors and skills are, therefore, taught in a specific order to provide students with appropriate scaffolding for the next level. Mikita et al. (2019) advised that teachers analyze the errors students make and search for patterns of neglect of a specific skill and then work to address that skill. For example, if students are deleting final sounds or missing medial sounds, the teacher should return to practice various phonological skills (Brown et al., 2021). Additionally, Mikita et al. (2019) suggested choosing a reading passage or list of words that focus on a given spelling pattern, based on the level of student ability: How close is the student to solving the word, and what additional skills are needed to solve the word? As the reader becomes more successful, the amount of information provided to attack and solve the words should be decreased (Mikita et al., 2019; Rodgers, 2017).

**Contextual Vocabulary**

According to Maguire et al. (2018), approximately 42% of the nation's children come from homes where incomes are reported below the poverty threshold, and, on average, these learners have a significant deficit in their vocabularies than their counterparts of higher

socioeconomic status. Each year, this gap continues to increase. Maguire et al. (2018) asserted that

> when children have a deeper knowledge of words in context, they can integrate new semantic information into a deeper web of information to better predict what will come next. When encountering an unfamiliar word, this predictive information helps in meaning identification. (pp. 684-685)

Ralph et al. (2020) noted, however, that learners from lower-income homes have difficulty learning new words even when they know all the surrounding words in sentences, indicating that these learners are not essentially using sounds to solve words, but rather reading by sight and/or memorization. Furthermore, Ralph et al. (2020) supposed that the struggle of learners from lower-income backgrounds is rooted in the process of learning rather than the understanding of individual word meanings. Richardson's (2016) *NSFGR* explained that the teacher must pull vocabulary words from the text and allow students to construct their own meanings and make connections for future learning. Donnelly (2019) stated that vocabulary must be taught separately as well as systematically due to the documented vocabulary gap between learners of different socioeconomic statuses. To do so, Donnelly (2019) suggested students take a passage from the text being read and scan it for difficult words, then solve each word by deconstructing it using any of the word attack strategies taught and apply synonyms to make connections and construct meaning (Donnelly, 2019).

Fogarty et al. (2020) posited that vocabulary shapes the knowledge base of learners. Vocabulary is built through adults reading to students, students reading independently, and teachers reading with students (Fogarty et al., 2020). Although Donnelly (2019) explained that vocabulary must be taught separately from the standard literacy block, Fogarty et al. (2020)

argued that "it is literally impossible for a teacher to directly teach students the quantity of words they need to know to be highly successful" (p. 70). Willingham (2017) stated that the majority of vocabulary is learned not as the result of explicit teaching, but rather incidentally through having conversations or reading passages. Therefore, the goal for a highly efficient reader is to obtain a vast vocabulary through discovery and meaning-making (Fogarty et al., 2020). Willingham (2017) noted that students are able to consistently acquire new vocabulary through the avenues of being read to, reading independently, and reading with the teacher, as text provides context that direct instruction does not necessarily provide.

**Reading Fluency**

Fluency is the ability to recognize words with ease, speed, accuracy, and expression (NICHD, 2019). Young and Rasinski (2017) defined fluency words read accurately, automaticity, and prosody. Word recognition accuracy is the ability to decode words quickly, without mistakes (C. Young & Rasinski, 2017). Roembke et al. (2021) described automaticity as reading quickly, effortlessly, with the least amount of cognitive effort. Prosody is reading with the expression that matches the meaning of the text (C. Young & Rasinski, 2017).

When learners can decode a text but are unable to read it fluently, they begin to lose meaning of the text. Each time a learner misreads a word, meaning is lost or eroded (Moats & Tolman, 2019). Additionally, many students are able to read a text accurately yet read it very slowly. In doing so, much of what is supposed to be made meaning of from the text is lost due to the amount of time it took the student to read the passage (Hall et al., 2020). Hudson et al. (2020) asserted that lack of fluency is the main hindrance for most students in the transition from learning to read to reading to learn. To address this, many teachers often provide learners with fluency passages with repetitive text or poetry (Hall et al., 2020; Hudson et al., 2020). Fluency

passages with repetitive text are generally selected based on what word family or skill the learner is having difficulty with, while poetry addresses the rhythm and syntax of the passage (Clemens et al., 2018). Once students overcome fluency problems, they are better equipped to make strides in their literacy achievement and are on their way to reading to learn (Clemens et al., 2018; Hudson et al., 2020).

**Reading Comprehension**

Reading comprehension is an integral skill for long-term academic achievement (Blything et al., 2020). Obviously, reading comprehension is impossible if the student has not mastered the foundational reading skills: phonological awareness and decoding strategies (Clemens et al., 2018). Reading comprehension is comprised of reading a text and building coherent, mental representations of the text (Hall et al., 2020). There are three levels of reading comprehension: surface level, where the reader retrieves word meanings and syntactic understanding; text level, in which the reader focuses on explicit information from the text; and situational, where the learner relies on schema and makes inferences to make sense of the information in the text (Hall et al., 2020). Scaffolding comprehension skills, however, is considered much more difficult than scaffolding decoding and word attack skills (Reynolds & Daniel, 2018). When types of comprehension are considered, however, one may reconsider that statement, as there are various levels of comprehension: retelling, identifying sequential events and key details, verbally answering comprehension questions, and responding to written comprehension questions (Blything et al., 2020; Cao & Kim, 2021; Spencer et al., 2020; Yamin, 2019).

Spencer et al. (2020) described storytelling as a social skill that presents itself naturally in most children. Parents ask their children about their day and expect details. Teachers ask students

questions about incidents that occur on the playground and details are required in sequential order. It seems only natural that story retelling would be considered the most common form of comprehension assessment (Cao & Kim, 2021).

The process of retelling, even at the lowest developmental level, scaffolds learners toward transference, taking what they have learned from reading to writing (Cao & Kim, 2021). Usually, pre-emergent retells involve picture cards that allow learners to place the events of the story in sequential order, or students may draw the order of events as they appeared in the story. When retelling a more complex fictional passage, learners are typically asked to draw, recall, or write the sequence of events. When retelling a nonfiction passage, students are typically asked to identify the main idea and supporting details (Cao & Kim, 2021). As the level of the text grows more difficult, students may begin to focus their retell on the story elements: characters, setting, problem, and solution (Dempsey & Skarakis-Doyle, 2019; Spencer et al., 2020). Generally, for this type of retell, a graphic organizer is used (Dempsey & Skarakis-Doyle, 2019). Learners who are not quite able to transfer their learning into written expression can typically draw and then label the elements (Dempsey & Skarakis-Doyle, 2019). As teachers are trying to frame sentence structure for students, for a written response, they may choose the structure of Somebody-Wanted-But-So-Then format (Dempsey & Skarakis-Doyle, 2019; Spencer et al., 2020). With this format, students write a sentence explaining the overarching events that happened in the story (Dempsey & Skarakis-Doyle, 2019; Spencer et al., 2020). This is generally the most complex form of retell that students participate in before answering in-depth comprehension questions (Dempsey & Skarakis-Doyle, 2019). The level of information and type of retell requested is directly proportional to the student's current literacy ability (Dempsey & Skarakis-Doyle, 2019).

Reading comprehension plays a direct and indirect role in every aspect of daily life (Karami, 2021). Some researchers even argue that reading comprehension is the most important component of literacy (Habok & Magyar, 2019; Hwang & Duke, 2021; Karami, 2021). Comprehension questions can be posed through teacher-led discussions, student-led discussions or written assignments (Blything et al., 2020). The purpose of comprehension questions is not only to ensure that students understand the text, but to also to encourage learners to think critically about the text (Reynolds & Daniel, 2018). Teachers may ask a variety of questions: explicit questions, with right-there answers that are found clearly in the text; implicit questions, inquiries that require students to make inferences about the text based on what they read and using their schema, or background knowledge; and/or a mixture of explicit and implicit questions (Blything et al., 2020). Sometimes, however, the implicit questions that teachers ask are too complex for students' cognition (Reynolds & Daniel, 2018). When this happens, it appears to the teacher that the learner does not fully understand the text that was read; however, the student does not comprehend the question itself (Reynolds & Daniel, 2018; Veldhuis & van den Heuvel-Panhauizen, 2019). When a student does not understand the comprehension question, it is essential for the teacher to consider contingent scaffolding and open the opportunity for student-led discussions of the text (Reynolds & Daniel, 2018; Veldhuis & van den Heuvel-Panhauizen, 2019). In this case, students have the opportunity to openly discuss their connections with the text, whether connections are text-to-self, text-to-text, or text-to-world. In facilitating these discussions, the teacher may observe a much richer, deeper type of comprehension (Reynolds & Daniel, 2018). Each comprehension technique is scaffolded for the needs of individual learners (Blything et al., 2020; Reynolds & Daniel, 2018).

The final step of the comprehension process is writing. Although this may seem somewhat peculiar, writing allows the learner to take everything they have learned throughout the reading continuum and encode their own thoughts for someone else to decode (Yamin, 2019). Writing is not something that comes naturally for learners, but rather, it is a process much like that of reading, which students must learn. In guided writing, however, students have the opportunity to transfer all the skills they have learned. As they hone this practice, students are exhibiting the internalization of all literacy concepts (Iniesta & Serrano, 2020; Reynolds & Daniel, 2018; Yamin, 2019).

Just like with reading, teachers must employ explicit and systematic intervention measures in order for students to be successful in writing (Blything et al., 2020). Each writing exercise must provide an intentional opportunity for student growth (Iniesta & Serrano, 2020). Proper scaffolding for pre-emergent learners includes modeling sentence structure for students, where the teacher chooses a single sentence from the text to write and students copy (Blything et al., 2020; Fountas & Pinnell, 2017). The teacher may provide a cloze sentence for students to copy and complete (Reynolds & Daniel, 2018). Modeling, repeated practice, and immediate feedback are essential for writing skills to improve (Iniesta & Serrano, 2020). As text complexity increases, so do the expectations for writing ability (Yamin, 2019). Each reading level of Richardson's (2016) *NSFGR* has a guided writing portion for each day's lesson in order to address students' ZPD that correlates with their developmental literacy stage.

**Anecdotal Notes**

Bates et al. (2019) asserted that good teaching requires the ability to make critical decisions in a rational way. Anecdotal notetaking is a strategy that teachers can utilize to document student learning and growth (Campbell, 2021; Peters & Graves, 2021). Reflection

through anecdotal notetaking is an ideal analytical approach to make such decisions (Veldhuis &
van den Heuvel-Panhauizen, 2019). Anecdotal notes are brief notes based on observations of
students' behaviors during instruction (Bates et al., 2019; Mills et al., 2020). Teachers can use
these notes to reflect on their instructional practices, to either make immediate changes or
modify future instruction (Patrick et al., 2020; Veldhuis & van den Heuvel-Panhauizen, 2019).
These observations are to be quick, yet integral, daily formative assessments so that students
receive the most individualized instruction possible (Bates et al., 2019; Mills et al., 2020).
Anecdotal notes encourage teachers to be more reflective in their practices, serving as the
underpinning for instructional development, and enable them to recognize learners' needs and
strengths (Mills et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2020).

Although anecdotal notes are subjective, this process facilitates a student-centered
approach to instruction, making learning "strategic and purposeful" (Mills et al., 2020, p. 78) for
students because teachers are better informed about students' reading behaviors and progress
(Campbell, 2021; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Patrick et al., 2020). During individual reading
observations with learners, teachers are also able to notate when students display misconceptions
or fail to make connections (Bates et al., 2019; Mills et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2020). Because
guided reading groups are meant to be fluid, anecdotal notes offer educators essential
information as to when students should be reassessed and placed into another group (Mills et al.,
2020).

**A Call for Change**

Learning to read appears simple for approximately 5% of all students; however, 20%–
30% of students find it incredibly challenging (Foorman et al., 2016; Seidenberg, 2017). One in
five students has a language-based learning disability (White et al., 2021). Additionally, 38% of

the nation's fourth graders are considered to have a "below basic" reading ability, meaning they are at or below the 40th performance percentile for their age group (White et al., 2021). Given that only approximately 15% of kindergarten students struggle with balanced literacy yet almost 40% of fourth graders do, many educators want to know why—and how it can be rectified (Blevins, 2017). In order for every student to receive an equitable opportunity to be successful in reading, literacy instruction should be taught in a manner aligned to cognitive science (Foorman et al., 2016; Seidenberg, 2017).

Cueing is a strategy known to be used in early elementary classrooms (Adams, 1998; Moats & Tolman, 2019; Schwartz, 2020b). In cueing, teachers prompt learners to use multiple sources to help them identify unfamiliar words (D. S. Davis et al., 2021; Moats & Tolman, 2019; Schwartz, 2020b). Cueing, often referred to as three-cueing or MSV (meaning, structure/syntax, and visual), takes place when teachers prompt students to rely on context clues, letters, sentence structure, and pictures to identify unknown words (Adams, 1998; Moats & Tolman, 2019; Schwartz, 2020b). MSV is an acronym that stands for meaning, structure/syntax, and visual, which describes what kind of cues students rely on to figure out a word they do not know (Adams, 1998; D. S. Davis et al., 2021; Schwartz, 2020b). The issue with cueing is that students are not actually attending to the phonics and structure of words; therefore, they are not actually learning to read the word but rather learning how to guess what could make sense (D. S. Davis et al., 2021; Schwartz, 2020b). Moats and Tolman (2019) asserted that cueing "encourages teachers to believe that phonics strategies area a last resort and that systematic phonics instruction is unnecessary because students can rely on meaning to figure out words" (p. 38). This strategy relies on pictures and guesses rather than decoding and blending sounds together (D. S. Davis et al., 2021; Moats & Tolman, 2019; Schwartz, 2020b).

According to T. T. Young (2022), students rely too much on picture support to help them read text. In a given study, students who were taught using leveled text were given a sentence written on a sentence strip without any illustrational support. Students who were taught using decodable text were given the same sentence on a sentence strip. Students taught with leveled text struggled with word recognition and prosody, while students who were instructed with decodable text read the sentence strip with ease (T. T. Young, 2022). Students who scored "below basic" on the National Association of Educational Procurement (NAEP) literacy assessment were found to have poor word recognition skills, poor oral reading fluency, and poor foundational skills (D. S. Davis et al., 2021; White et al., 2021).

To address the issues involved with cueing, Seidenberg and McClelland (1989) developed the four-part processing system. This method explains the means involved in decoding unknown words (Schwartz, 2020b). The four parts of this system are phonological processor, orthographic processor, meaning processor, and context processor (Schwartz, 2020b; Seidenberg, 2013; Seidenberg & McClelland, 1989). The phonological processor deals with remembering and producing phonemes (sounds) in language. The orthographic processor attaches or maps the phonemes to letters to represent speech sounds. Together, the phonological and orthographical processors decode words (Schwartz, 2020b; Seidenberg, 2013; Seidenberg & McClelland, 1989). The meaning processor works to make meaning and understanding of words through schema. Once meaning has been established, the context processor allows learners to fully comprehend the meaning of the word within the context it us being used (Schwartz, 2020b; Seidenberg, 2013; Seidenberg & McClelland, 1989). This process contrasts with MSV as a way to attack words, as meaning and context deemed important only after the word has been decoded (Schwartz, 2020b; Seidenberg, 2013; Seidenberg & McClelland, 1989). This process suggests

students look at the word and focus on all letters, sounding out each one, looking for chunks (parts) that are known, and blending all the sounds together (Moats & Tolman, 2019). The four-part processing system (Seidenberg, 2013; Seidenberg & McClelland, 1989) creates better decoders—in essence, better readers. Cueing creates better word guessers (Schwartz, 2020b).

Although schools have invested in many research-based guided reading programs, researchers now argue that leveled texts are inappropriate for building foundational skills (Blevins, 2017; Moats & Tolman, 2019; White et al., 2021; T. T. Young, 2022). Moats and Tolman (2019) argued that leveled texts do not allow for teaching phonics patterns or a logical scope and sequence for decoding instruction. Decodable texts rely mostly on phonological awareness, rather than predicative sentences and/or picture cues, which often mislead teachers into thinking that students are making progress, all the while preventing learners from building a foundational core (White et al., 2021). Decodable texts allow learners to focus on employing decoding skills and their knowledge of alphabetic code to attack and solve words, rather than guessing, memorizing, or using picture clues (Moats & Tolman, 2019).

**Science of Reading (SoR)**

The Science of Reading (SoR) is a phrase resulting from years of accumulated knowledge regarding literacy, reading development, and best practices for reading instruction obtained through utilization of the scientific method (Petscher et al., 2020). SoR is a

> systematic approach to phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency… it also supports teaching vocabulary and word-learning strategies, the development of comprehension, serious attention to motivation, engaging students in a wide range of texts to build broad and deep knowledge, and assessments that guide and evaluate instruction but do not distort it. (Dewitz & Graves, 2021, p. 131)

Although much of SoR approach aligns with Richardson's (2016) *NSFGR*, Duke et al. (2021) asserted that each literacy-based skill is not necessarily reading-level aligned and that students should be grouped in fluid, flexible skills groups. These groups should be focused solely on word attack strategies and, as students master each strategy or component, they change groups and move fluidly to the next, more complex skill (Shanahan, 2020).

### Why Science of Reading

The premise of science of reading is that focusing on phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency in an intentional way will close the literacy gap among learners (Dewitz & Graves, 2021). However, literacy instruction is very complex and requires educators to possess a deep content and pedagogical realization to be socially and culturally responsive in their practices (Hudson et al., 2021). Furthermore, research consistently finds that students, whether in lower or upper elementary grades, whether struggling readers or not, experience success from explicit literacy instruction focused on foundational literacy skills (Blachman et al., 1999; Hudson et al., 2021). Much like Richardson's (2016) guided reading model, SoR provides clear evidence for the explicit and systematic approach to literacy instruction, specifically on the foundational skill of decoding through phonological awareness and letter knowledge (Petscher et al., 2020). Not only is SoR beneficial for struggling readers, but this type of instruction has also proven to be advantageous for English language learners (Duke et al., 2021; Petscher et al., 2020).

### Science of Reading Components

Research is clear on what components are necessary to teach in early literacy instruction: phonemic awareness (including letter knowledge and concepts of print), alphabetic code (phonics and decoding), fluency and automaticity, vocabulary and oral language comprehension, text comprehension, written expression, and spelling and handwriting (Duke & Cartwright, 2021;

Duke et al., 2021; Goodwin & Jiménez, 2021; Petscher et al., 2020). Other critical components of science of reading include conducting screeners and continuous assessments to drive instruction as well as motivating children to read (Goodwin & Jiménez, 2021). Knowing this, what does an SoR classroom look like? According to several researchers, SoR should present systematic phonemic and phonological lessons in whole group instruction and less teachable, or incidental, moments (Petscher et al., 2020). Text should be rich and complex for all the students in the class, and teachers should supply a great deal of modeling and opportunities for practicing for transference and fluency. Students should be working together, partner reading for fluency and in discussion regarding the text, whether the language, text structure, or comprehension (Petscher et al., 2020).

According to science of reading, long gone are the days of small group reading where students are taught comprehension skills at their instructional reading level (Brown et al., 2021; Duke et al., 2021). SoR asserts that learners should be comprehending text through morphological awareness (Brown et al., 2021; Duke et al., 2021). Students should be able to dissect words, paying attention to roots, affixes, prefixes, suffixes, and words in compound words to help them make sense of what they are reading (Duke et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2022). That said, however, the majority of small group instruction—if focused on phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, fluency, and vocabulary, as *NSFGR* does—will remain the same (Duke et al., 2021).

Science of reading promotes phonemic awareness and suggests practice of skills through the use of decodable readers (Schwartz, 2020a). Many educators argue against that approach, however, because they feel that decodable readers are not engaging for learners (Schwartz, 2020a). Although that may be true, experts do agree that targeted practice is the only way to get

learning to stick (Blevins, 2017; Schwartz, 2020a). In this case, students are practicing skills they have just learned, they are not reading books that they are not ready for, and they do not have to rely on picture clues to make it through the text (Blevins, 2017; Schwartz, 2020a). Blevins (2017) posited that decodable texts should follow the progression of the phonics program that is being utilized in the classroom, allowing for spiral and immediate review. When students are not practicing with decodable texts, Blevins (2017) argued that they are devaluing and underusing what they have learned in phonics instruction. In doing so, learners continue to rely on picture clues and memorized words and patterns (Blevins, 2017; Schwartz, 2020a). Furthermore, implementing decodable texts in the classroom helps students transfer decoding abilities to writing, referred to as encoding (Schwartz, 2020a).

### *Rejecting Science of Reading*

There are many professionals who choose to reject science of reading (Seidenberg et al., 2020). These educators refuse to believe that the components outlined by SoR are major determining factors for reading proficiency (Seidenberg et al., 2020). Those who choose not to buy in to SoR deflect the attention away from the positive qualities of SoR, relying on excuses for poor literacy scores (Seidenberg, 2017; Seidenberg et al., 2020). Furthermore, Seidenberg et al. (2020) supposed that SoR has not made it to many classrooms because many educators are not sure how to implement it or rather how to implement it *correctly* (Seidenberg et al, 2020). When teachers are not strong in their own personal knowledge of literacy-based instruction and how students learn, changes in curricula will not occur because educators will continue doing what they are comfortable with (Schwartz, 2020a). Additionally, many educators wonder how long science of reading will be the recommended approach before the next idea takes precedence (Seidenberg et al., 2020).

**Teacher Efficacy**

Both small group reading instruction and SoR components promote student efficacy and are based on teacher efficacy; the literacy instruction decisions teachers make daily affect how students view themselves as readers (Dewitz & Graves, 2021). Ultimately, Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainment" (p. 3). Although there is an abundance of research regarding teacher efficacy, there is minimal inquiry regarding teacher efficacy specifically in literacy and even less in the Title I context (Depaepe & König, 2018; Outlaw & Grifenhagen, 2021; Raymond-West & Rangel, 2020).

Raymond-West and Rangel (2020) argued that teacher preparation courses for literacy have left novice teachers lacking the self-efficacy to teach students core reading strategies. Through the implementation of professional development and programs, however, many Title I K-2 teachers report changes in their literacy self-efficacy due to the support provided by their schools and/or districts (Outlaw & Grifenhagen, 2021). Teachers, especially beginning teachers, often become hindered by the daunting task of differentiated instruction. Today, more than ever before, it is crucial that literacy educators have a solid awareness of the diversity of learners in their classrooms and how to address their needs (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2021).

A teacher's self-efficacy often determines how much effort, motivation, and persistence they put into impacting student performance (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2021). Greater competence and efficacy lead to stronger willingness to try newer researched methods of literacy instruction. Teachers who have a low sense of efficacy believe they negatively affect student learning, are less willing to attempt new teaching methods, and have less perseverance when working with struggling readers (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2021; Shonfeld et al., 2021). Teachers who lack

experience and efficacy in explicit knowledge of literacy, literacy development, and best practices for literacy instruction will be unable to teach explicit literacy instruction (Hudson et al., 2021; Moats, 2020).

With so many literacy programs available and referred to as researched based, yet so many students still scoring not proficient on end-of-year reading assessments, many educators begin to question why their students are not considered proficient (Hudson et al., 2021). For teachers, knowing content is one aspect of literacy instruction, yet pedagogical knowledge is just as important (Hudson et al., 2021). Many teacher preparation programs have been critiqued for their lack of emphasis on foundational literacy skills: phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency (Ehri, 2020; Hindman et al., 2020). With so many state legislations adopting SoR, one would question the reason for such a lack of teacher preparedness.

Efficacious educators are adaptive and reflective in their practices (Vaughn et al., 2020). They are knowledgeable about what they must teach; however, if a strategy is not working, they are reflective and knowledgeable of other tools to utilize to help a student succeed (Hudson et al., 2021). Furthermore, teachers are able to recognize that students are functioning meaning makers, as previously discussed, and enjoy opportunities for tangential learning (Hudson et al., 2021). Therefore, teachers acquire the autonomy to do whatever is best in their classroom for students to experience literacy success (Vaughn et al, 2020). Professional learning communities (PLCs) enable educators to mutually question teaching practices in order to improve their craft (Zhang et al., 2020). Through deep conversation, questioning and reflection, teachers' perceptions and pedagogical practices begin to shift, increasing their self-efficacy (Zhang et al., 2020). Professional learning communities allow educators to come together to share instructional practices to determine *what* methods and strategies have worked for *which* skills, deepening and

strengthening their own comprehension of curricula and pedagogy (Yada et al., 2022). PLCs provide time for teachers to reflect on the *why* behind certain pedagogical approaches and *how* they teach. Unfortunately, however, many teachers believe that their autonomy for literacy instruction has been stripped from them due to the implementation of science of reading (Vaughn et al., 2021), which further motivates this research on the lived experiences of Title I teachers as they implement Jan Richardson's (2016) *NSFGR*.

**Summary**

Continued research shows that there remains a persistent, immense literacy achievement gap (Barshay, 2019; Berkowitz, 2021; Figlio & Karbownik, 2017; Kelly et al., 2021; Miller, 2022; Murdoch et al., 2022; Rowe, 2020). Based on the review literature, common characteristics of solid literacy instruction include: phonemic awareness (Bar-Kockva & Nevo, 2019 ; Gillon et al., 2019; Milankov et al., 2021), phonics (Al Otaiba et al., 2019; Gandhi et al., 2018; Kern & Hosp, 2018; Moats & Tolman, 2019; Park et al., 2020; Patael et al., 2018; Saiegh-Haddad, 2019), vocabulary (Donnelly, 2019; Fogarty et al., 2020; Maguire et al., 2018; Ralph et al., 2020), fluency (Clemens et al., 2018; Hall et al., 2020; Hudson et al., 2020 ; Roembke et al., 2021; Young & Rasinski, 2017), and reading comprehension (Blything et al., 2020; Habok & Magyar, 2019; Hwang & Duke, 2021; Karami, 2021; Reynolds & Daniel, 2018; Veldhuis et al., 2019). Despite the significant amount of research completed regarding this achievement gap, there remains a disconnect in research based on the experiences of elementary educators who implement social interaction, discovery and meaning making, and instructional scaffolding in small group, literacy instruction (Chuang, 2021; Daniels & Tse, 2021; Kambara, 2020; Shin, et al., 2020; Vygotsky, 1980). There is a need to conduct this research because the literacy achievement gap continues to widen (Barshay, 2019; Figlio & Karbownik, 2017). Sharing the

lived experiences of Title I elementary teachers who utilize Richardson's (2016) guided reading

model may be beneficial to the current body of research as the participants shed light on how

they use social learning theory to inform their instructional practices.

**CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

**Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators who utilize differentiated instructional methods through the lens of Jan Richardson's (2016) *NSFGR* in rural Title I elementary schools in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina. This study describes the experiences of teachers who implement *NSFGR* specifically in their small group literacy instruction within Title I elementary schools in order to improve the reading achievement of learners. Chapter Three provides a description of the research design, the process of selecting participants, and a description of the intended sites for the research. This chapter also provides a description of the research procedures, data collection methods, and analysis methods that will be utilized. Finally, this chapter discusses trustworthiness of the study and closes with information regarding ethical concerns that must be considered for the duration of this research.

**Research Design**

Qualitative research, centers on examining and making meaning of experiences (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Because the purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of educators who utilize differentiated instructional methods, a qualitative study is appropriate. Despite the abundance of qualitative and quantitative research that has been completed on closing the achievement gap (Donnelly, 2019; Figlio & Karbownik, 2017; Goodacre et al., 2020; Hoffman, 2017; McGill-Franzen et al., 2016), little or no prior research exists that gives a voice to those instructing students, implementing social learning theory or how social learning theory informs educators' teaching decisions. Moustakas (1994) described phenomenology as a form of research that seeks to understand the lived experiences of the participants who have experienced a

phenomenon. The term phenomenology comes from the Greek word *phaenesthai*, which means "to flare up, to show itself, to appear" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Phenomenology was chosen to describe the experiences of educators who utilize differentiated instructional methods through the lens of Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* in rural, Title I elementary schools in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina. The phenomenon in this study was differentiated instruction through Richardson's (2016) framework. This phenomenon was examined and interpreted in narrative form, which is the core of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology, as defined by Moustakas (1994), is an unbiased, philosophical design of qualitative research methodology that seeks to understand human experiences. For this research, transcendental phenomenology methodology was selected because I implemented the practice of epoché, or setting aside personal biases to view a phenomenon through a fresh lens; therefore permitting the true meaning of the phenomenon reveal itself (Dorfler & Stierand, 2020; Leigh-Osroosh, 2021; Moustakas, 1994).

In this study, the participants were teachers in rural, Title I elementary schools within the Piedmont Triad of North Carolina who had four or more years of teaching experience and had a shared lived experience of the phenomenon at the core of this research: Utilizing Jan Richardson's (2016) small group literacy instruction framework with fidelity. Although I have experience with Richardson's (2016) structure, I did not share my own experiences, but rather engaged in epoché, setting aside my own preconceived notions, divorcing my own experiences from the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This study's emphasis was solely on the phenomenon being investigated. My views, opinions, and experiences did not play any role in data collections or data analyses so that the lived experiences of the participants were able to be richly described.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this transcendental phenomenological study.

**Central Research Question**

What are the lived experiences of educators in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina who differentiate instruction using Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* in rural, Title I elementary schools?

**Sub Question 1**

What are the lived experiences of Title I teachers with integrating social interaction into small group literacy instruction?

**Sub Question 2**

What are the experiences of Title I instructors when facilitating guided literacy instruction through discovery and meaning making?

**Sub Question 3**

What are the lived experiences of Title I educators when implementing instructional scaffolding during guided reading?

**Setting and Participants**

Sampling is an essential factor of research. This study utilized three rural, Title I elementary schools in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina that consistently employ Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* in guided reading instruction. The three elementary schools chosen were representative of rural, Title I schools from differing areas within the same district to reach homogeneity in sampling for data collection and prevent negative generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Osbeck and Antczak (2021) referred to generalizability as the belief that the conclusions drawn from a given study are able to be

extended beyond the borders of the original investigation. To identify the participants, purposeful/homogeneous sampling was employed. Participants adhered to the particular criterion based on the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Site (or Setting)**

For this study, I employed three rural, Title I elementary schools: Central Elementary, Dawson Elementary, and Ellison Elementary. Each of these schools can be found within one school district in the Piedmont Triad of North Carolina and utilize Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Steps Forward in Guided Reading* framework for small group literacy instruction. Title I schools are schools that accept federal funding in order to afford additional academic support to assist low-achieving learners meet rigorous state academic standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). These schools have been identified as such due to their high percentages of students from low-income families (also commonly referred to as free and reduced lunch recipients) (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Central, Dawson and Ellison Elementary schools were be selected for this research because these schools maintain the former district-wide expectation to utilize Richardson's (2016) framework. The school leadership teams at Central Elementary, Dawson Elementary, and Ellison Elementary are each comprised of a principal and assistant principal. The instructional leadership team (ILT) at each school includes the principal, assistant principal, literacy coach, and multi-tiered support system (MTSS) lead teacher.

The rationale for this selection is that there are no known studies that have been examined that use Jan Richardson's (2016) *Next Steps Forward in Guided Reading* in rural, Title I schools. The purpose for selecting these particular schools is based on the number of participants needed in the study and the fact that I do not want the data to be generalized by the

location (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sites were chosen based on whether the instructional leadership team of the organization maintains the former district-wide expectation to utilize *NSFGR* as a site-based decision. Additionally, the sites were chosen based on how long *NSFGR* (Richardson, 2016) has been employed within the school. They were intentionally selected because Richardson's (2016) model has been a set expectation for, at least, three years and each location offers continuous professional development for newly hired teachers, whether first year or from outside the district. This criterion is important due to the fact that the participants will be well-versed in the practices of Richardson's (2016) routines and procedures for guided reading, making the implementation of such practices habitual and confident, rather than new and insecure (Leigh-Osroosh, 2021).

**Participants**

Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended that phenomenological studies consist of five to 25 participants. The requisite number of participants was based upon when saturation of data was reached (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Per Liberty University's guidelines, this study consisted of a sample of 10-15 participants, drawn from a pool of elementary educators located within a small, public school district in the Piedmont Triad area of North Carolina. The 13 participants selected are teachers in grades kindergarten through fifth grade who teach guided reading using Richardson's (2016) framework, with a minimum of four years of teaching experience.

<div align="center">

**Researcher Positionality**

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Based on my personal experiences as an elementary educator in only Title I schools, I have personally seen the need for scaffolded, differentiated instruction in small group, guided reading. I have always believed that this sacred block of time gives students the greatest instructions for their needs. As a classroom teacher, I have experienced the successes of below

grade level students as they struggled through reading levels to catch up to and, sometimes, surpass their classmates' reading abilities. As I reflect on my own guided reading experiences, I strongly believe that my students' success can be attributed to the implementation of Jan Richardson's (2016) model for small group literacy instruction. Currently, several colleagues are focused more on standards-based instruction because of upper grades assessment expectations; however, without addressing the needs of individual students, end of grade test scores will not improve, as students will continue to fall farther and farther behind.

As a lower elementary educator for much of my career, literacy success has driven my passion for teaching. I, personally, chose to integrate Jan Richardson's (2016) guided reading model after discovering it through continuous study and implementation of differentiation strategies in my personal classroom.  I had noticed in my own experiences, that all students were not experiencing success in whole group literacy instruction when grade level standards were being taught. As I began focusing on each of my student's needs, their literacy instruction became more like a treatment plan: I addressed them where they were and began building their understanding on a more solid foundation. Constructing on this understanding, students had the scaffolding needed to continue, at their own pace, to learn new sounds, chunks, words, and phrases:  Learning to read (decoding) and, later, reading to learn (comprehension).  It has been my experience that students are unable to independently earn without, first, being able to fluently decode.  The inability to decode decelerates the comprehension process.  Once students can read fluently, they are able to consistently focus on comprehension skills of more complex literature. Richardson's (2016) model couples decoding strategies and sight words with repetitive text for beginning readers and word study, guided writing, and comprehension skills for transitional and experienced readers.

**Interpretive Framework**

The interpretive framework for this study was social constructivism. Defined by Creswell and Poth (2018), in social constructivism, the researcher seeks understanding, while fostering subjective meanings of the participants' experiences. These meanings are constructed through the interactions with others. In this study, I made meanings of my participants' (Title I educators) experiences as they implement Richardson's (2016) literacy framework by positing open-ended questions. Such questions allowed the Title I educators to richly describe their experiences in order for me to better understand and describe their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) noted that phenomenological studies describe experiences of individuals. In transcendental phenomenology, researchers seek to depict the experiences of others (Leigh-Osroosh, 2021). Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that the constructivist worldview is manifested through phenomenological research.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

There are three philosophical assumptions made by researchers when completing a qualitative study: ontological assumption, epistemological assumption, and axiological assumption (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Suprapto, 2020). Ontology refers to the nature of reality and its characteristics (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Suprapto, 2020). Epistemology questions what counts as knowledge and how those claims are justified (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Suprapto, 2020). Axiology refers to roles of values in research and which biases are present (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Suprapto, 2020).

*Ontological Assumption*

Ontological assumptions in research are based on the nature of reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within my ontological assumptions, it is essential for me to acknowledge that I must

accept multiple realities. Each participant in my study brought individual experiences to the light

through their own reality. Knowing this, it is imperative to comprehend that multiple realities

through various perspectives as themes will develop my findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018;

Suprapto, 2020). These realities have been examined based on a consideration of the viewpoint

of science; the truth in restoring original understanding by employing the principles of

philosophy influencing the construction of reasoning that already exists (Creswell & Poth, 2018;

Perdana et al., 2019; Suprapto, 2020).

### *Epistemological Assumption*

The epistemological assumptions are based on the understanding of the nature of

knowledge: what counts as knowledge, how knowledge claims are justified, and the relationship

between the subject of research and the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My epistemological

assumption was my confidence that the knowledge is in the participants, rather than myself;

therefore, building a rapport with my participants in order to garner understanding from their

experiences was essential (Perdana et al., 2019; Suprapto, 2020). Spending time with my

participants, getting to know them, and gaining firsthand knowledge of their experiences and

individual views allowed me to eliminate my own biases (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Creswell &

Poth, 2018; Suprapto, 2020). The established process was, fundamentally, an approach carried

out to garner understanding (Perdana et al., 2019).

### *Axiological Assumption*

Axiological assumptions examine the role of social values and how those play into biases

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). My personal experiences and beliefs regarding closing the literacy

achievement gap using Richardson's (2016) model were strongly tied to my axiological

assumptions. Moving forward, it was necessary to position myself in this research by

acknowledging my beliefs but sharing the interpretations of the experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Perdana et al., 2019). Jan Richardson's (2016) model for guided reading instruction is based on sociocultural theory (social constructivism), containing values, especially integrity, so the model takes an approach acquired from the teaching and learning process (Perdana et al., 2019).

**Researcher's Role**

My role as the researcher in this transcendental phenomenological study, as defined by Creswell (2007), was to give a voice to my participants who work in Title I schools and employ Jan Richardson's (2016) guided reading model of scaffolded, differentiated instruction. Because this was a transcendental phenomenological study rather than a hermeneutic study, my role was to strictly describe the participants' experiences rather than my own. Therefore, it was necessary that I separated myself and my biases, suspending my own suppositions and putting my entire focus on the experiences of my participants rather than my own (Creswell & Miller, 2020; Neubauer et al., 2019). I critically examined this phenomenon as if it had nothing to do with my experiences (Zahavi, 2019).

For this investigation, I served as the human instrument, as defined by Creswell and Poth (2018). Data was collected through comprehensive interviews, asking open-ended questions written by me, rather than depending solely on questionnaires designed by other researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the primary instrument for data collection in this study, it was crucial for me to employ the epoché process, which permitted me to systematically set aside any preconceived notions or prejudgments regarding the phenomenon so that the research could be carried out based on minimal presumptions or predeterminations based on my prior experiences. The epoché process gave me an opportunity to concentrate on the exclusive experiences of the

participants by being completely approachable and receptive to the descriptions of the participants' experiences regarding the phenomenon, despite moderating my own biases concerning the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). During this study, I served as a first-grade teacher in a Title I school. In this capacity, I continued utilizing *NSFGR* with my own guided reading groups. Therefore, it was elemental to employ the epoché process (Dorfler & Stierand, 2020). In this particular research, I experienced my own successes and challenges with at-risk readers in Title I elementary schools and was therefore required to set aside these experiences and focus solely on those of my participants.

This research was conducted in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina, due to my familiarity with the area. I have worked in three Title I schools in this area that utilize *NSFGR* (Richardson, 2016); however, it was necessary for me to select other schools so there could be no influence or familiarity with the participants chosen for the study, which would challenge the epoché process. To separate biases, Moustakas (1994) suggested keeping a reflective journal throughout the study. This allowed me to maintain focus on the participants' story of their lived experiences rather than the thoughts and feelings of myself (Moustakas, 1994).

**Procedures**

After a successful proposal defense, I submitted my application for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (Appendix A). This is a prerequisite to site approval and participant solicitation. After receiving IRB approval, site/setting approval was sought for each location (Appendix B). This letter explained the research to be completed. After receiving approval from each site, I recruited participants. The recruitment letter sent to potential participants at each site can be found in Appendix C. Following, consent from the recruited participants to execute the research for this study was pursued (Appendix D). This documentation explains the research to

be completed and requests individual meetings with the researcher in order to discuss the

significance and necessity of the study. Once the teachers agreed to participate, I met with them

to explain the data collection process and allowed them to ask any questions regarding the

process. Participants were assured that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

As the researcher, I followed all ethical considerations and guidelines in order to protect the

confidentiality of the participants as well as maintain the integrity of the researcher and the

research completed (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). After each interview was

completed, participants were provided with a quick response (QR) code to complete the

questionnaire to gain further information. Participants were later invited to one of three focus

groups to provide any clarification to questions and/or provide any further information regarding

Richardson's (2016) framework.

**Permissions**

To protect the rights of the participants in this study, approval from the Institutional

Review Board (IRB) (Appendix A) was required to conduct the research (Hicks et al., 2021).

The purpose of the IRB is to evaluate the research design and data collection process to ensure

the respectful treatment of participants within the study. To obtain IRB approval, the researcher

submitted an application, providing a written synopsis of the research design and data collection

methods, including the questions being asked within each collection method. The application

also included the ethical considerations of the study and copies of written permission requests for

sites, recruitment letters, and informed consent so that the board is able to ensure the researcher

will following the protocol for conducting ethical research (Hicks et al., 2021).

Prior to gaining IRB approval, I began having preliminary conversations with

administrators at various sites to determine who would be open to collaborating with me on this

research. After gaining IRB approval, I sent official letters to those administrators, requesting permission to conduct my research at their site, gaining their formal consent to collect data for this study. The site/setting permission letter can be found in Appendix B, along with the letter of approval from the district office for the sites.

**Recruitment Plan**

Traditional recruitment approaches for qualitative studies typically include a combination of online and in-person strategies (Peoples, 2021). To recruit the 10-15 participants needed for my study (Creswell & Poth, 2018), I obtained a spreadsheet of the teachers from the Title I elementary sites who granted permission for my research. In the form of an email, I contacted each teacher with the body of the message describing the research I was seeking to complete and the purpose behind my study, requesting that if they fit the criteria detailed in the body of the email and would be willing to participate to contact me. Appendix C contains the recruitment letter that was emailed to potential participants. All chosen participants were given a Written/Informed Consent Form, which can be found in Appendix D.

<div align="center">

**Data Collection Plan**

</div>

In transcendental phenomenological studies, the central research question is intended to obtain meaning, structure, and substance of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The emphasis is on investigating how humans make meaning of an experience and, as Patton (2015) described, "transform the experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning" (p. 115). To gain the soundest understanding of the participants' lived experiences using Richardson's (2016) framework, I implemented various data collection methods that align with phenomenology: Interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups (Patton, 2015).

The data collection for this study included individual semi-structured interviews, a questionnaire, and three focus groups. The data collection concentrated on garnering essential information to answer the research questions that were guiding the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hicks et al., 2021). I employed these three different types of data collection methods to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the experienced phenomenon of the participants in the study (Hicks et al., 2021). Additionally, these three data collection methods were found to support the intention of triangulation due to the fact I was able to substantiate data from various sources and provide authenticity of the findings from the research. Triangulation is a method to increase trustworthiness and check the integrity of the data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mack et al., 2005). Member checking, a process allowing participants the opportunity to accept or correct interpretations of data (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2015), was also be used to increase trustworthiness. Other ways to increase trustworthiness in this study were providing a robust, comprehensive account of the data collection process along with the themes and sub-themes which increase transferability, while employing epoché to remove and eliminate biases, prejudices, and preconceived ideas increase confirmability.

**Individual Semi-Structured Interviews**

According to Merriam and Tisdale (2016), interviews are an expected method of data collection when completing qualitative research. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that interviews are the most customary form of data collection for phenomenology. They offer in-depth descriptions of participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). For this study, the semi-structured interviews were performed, via Zoom, with teachers who were recognized as suitable candidates through the sampling process. The interviews took place after contract hours, via Zoom, for the convenience of the participants. The researcher employed open-ended questions to gain deeper

understanding of the participants' experiences. Audio recording interviews allows the researcher

to focus on the conversation taking place (Madill & Sullivan, 2018). The interviews in this study

were recorded and transcribed through the Zoom application.

### *Individual Interview Questions*

1. How would you describe yourself to me, as if we had never met? CRQ

2. Why did you become an educator? CRQ

3. How would you describe your educational background and career through your current

   position? CRQ

4. What was your favorite teacher like? CRQ

5. Why was (s)he your favorite? CRQ

6. As an educator, what has been your most meaningful lesson, regarding student success?

   CRQ

7. What made this lesson so meaningful? CRQ

8. In your own words, what does integrating social interaction into learning experiences

   look like? SQ1

9. When planning guided reading, how have Jan Richardson's strategies allowed you to

   integrate social interaction into guided reading learning experiences? SQ1

10. What professional development experiences have you had that prepared you to integrate

    social interactions into guided reading? SQ1

11. When teaching small group literacy, what, if any, challenges have you experienced

    integrating social interaction? SQ1

12. What are your experiences when facilitating guided reading through discovery and

    meaning making using Jan Richardson's strategies? SQ2

13. When planning guided literacy instruction, how have Jan Richardson's strategies allowed for discovery and meaning making? SQ2

14. When planning guided reading instruction, how have Jan Richardson's strategies allowed for the implementation of instructional scaffolding? SQ3

15. What are your lived experiences implementing instructional scaffolding while facilitating small group reading instruction? SQ3

16. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with teaching guided reading that we haven't discussed? CRQ

17. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with students from lower-income families that we haven't discussed? CRQ

Questions 1, 2, and 3 were asked by the researcher to build a rapport with the participants (Patton, 2015). A phenomenological interview typically begins with questions intended to create an atmosphere of ease and relaxation (Moustakas, 1994). These questions were intended to be forthright and not meant to be threatening or judgmental (Patton, 2015). These questions allowed the participants to relax and become comfortable sharing with the researcher.

Gheith and Aljaberi (2018) noted that reflective thinking is a systematic way of thinking, meaning that educators think, analyze, and reflect on every aspect of their decisions, preventing them from planning tasks and learning opportunities based on routine. Furthermore, Schön's (1984) model asserted that teachers do not have to only reflect after a lesson but before and during the learning experience. For reflective thinking purposes, I proposed questions seven through 16. It was essential that participants recognized what has shaped their educational paradigm and how they continue to construct their philosophy of teaching and their instructional choices (Gheith & Aljaberi, 2018). These questions required vulnerability from the participant;

however, ideally, a positive rapport had been built between the participant and the researcher (Patton, 2015). Additionally, questions seven through 16 focused on describing the phenomenon. These questions allowed the participants to fully describe their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

The final two questions were designed for the participants to have another opportunity to offer insight that the researcher may have overlooked in the interview process. Patton (2015) described this as a one-shot question. This opportunity opened the door for invaluable information, as it provided the participants freedom to offer any insight that further forms their educational philosophy and could have been easily missed by the researcher not asking the right question (Patton, 2015). An essential characteristic of phenomenology research is for participants and the researcher to have a mutual experience. These final questions allowed the participants the chance to contribute any further material that may add to the overall crux of the research (Moustakas, 1994). Each interview was recorded and transcribed through the Zoom application.

### *Individual Semi-Structured Interview Data Analysis Plan*

Interviews are important in qualitative research in that they provide relatable stories and perspectives as well as actual experiences from participants directly (Patton, 2015). Interviews prevent researchers from embellishing to maintain the integrity of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The first step of data analysis is epoché, which commonly means removing prejudices or assumptions about the phenomenon being researched (Moustakas, 1994).  As the epoché process was applied, I progressed from a natural attitude, one filled with my own thoughts and ideas, to a transcendental position (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) asserted that abandoning one's biases, preconceived notions, and/or prejudices seems almost impossible and therefore highlighted Husserl's phenomenological reduction. Phenomenological reduction is a mindset that

clearly sets apart any inquiries regarding mind or reality and categorizes them as insignificant (Moustakas, 1994). I dispelled any preconceived notions regarding my own experiences using Richardson's (2016) literacy framework and kept an open mind toward the experiences of my participants, to gather the purest form of data possible (Creswell, 2007). Epoché, was applied through memoing and journaling, as described by Creswell and Poth (2018). A sample of journaling can be found in Appendix H.

The second step in data analysis is transcendental phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). Defined by Moustakas (1994), the term *transcendental* means "uncovering the ego for which everything has meaning" and the term *reduction* translates to "in that it leads us back to our own experience of the way things are" (p. 91). Transcendental phenomenological reduction can best be described as postulating a pre-reflective account in textural language of what is observed or experienced and a breakdown of what can be described as thematic or horizonal (Moustakas, 1994). The term *horizonal* can be illustrated through the comparison of a new horizon, rising after the old one ebbs; the prospect of discovery being infinite despite reaching an ending point (Moustakas, 1994).

To complete transcendental phenomenological reduction, individual interviews were transcribed simultaneously as they took place. By implementing horizonalization (Moustakas, 1994), each transcript was analyzed following the interview. Transcripts were read repeatedly and scrutinized to find the overall meaning, examining each for fresh and/or present key phrases and ideas (Moustakas, 1994). Meaningful phrases and/or sentences that related directly to the experiences of educators utilizing Richardson's (2016) framework were identified, along with nonrepetitive and nonoverlapping concepts. Ambiguous, irrelevant, and/or repetitive statements were disregarded (Moustakas, 1994). After identifying significant phrases and sentences, they

were categorized together and clustered into labeled themes (Moustakas, 1994). Codes were generated to explain and recognize essential themes (Moustakas, 1994). Identified themes from each individual interview were clustered together to create individual textural descriptions of separate interviews. Composite, or individual, textural descriptions of each interview were gathered into a collective textural description (Moustakas, 1994). The textural descriptions described the participants' experiences using Richardson's (2016) *The Next Steps Forward in Guided Reading*.

The next integral step is the process of imaginative variation. This was described by Moustakas (1994) as "a structural description of the conditions that precipitate and experience and connect with it" (p. 35). This process entails searching for possible meanings using the imagination, altered frames of reference, and considering the phenomenon from different perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), individual structural descriptions are to be compiled by combining structural features and themes and then each individual structural description was clustered into a collective structural description of the experience. Through the process of imaginative variation, individual structural descriptions were formed through various perspectives to determine each possible interpretation (Moustakas, 1994). Then, I combined the individual, or composite, structural descriptions into a collective structural description of educators' experiences utilizing Richardson's (2016) literacy framework, as described by Moustakas (1994).

The final stage in analyzing the individual interviews was generating and describing the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Describing the essence and meaning of the phenomenon is the amalgamation of the textural and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), the connection of composite textural and composite structural

descriptions entails the incorporation of the textural and structural descriptions into a composite account of the essence of the experience of the phenomenon. Meaning, according to Moustakas (1994) is central to perception. Purpose guides attention toward something (Moustakas, 1994). Noema imparts "consciousness its direction towards a specific object" to bestow meaning (Moustakas, 1994, p. 68). Noemis, Moustakas (1994) claimed, is "the act of perceiving, must unify with noesis, or that which is experienced" (p. 69) to unearth the fundamental meaning of the phenomenon. In this research, I created a description of the essence of the phenomenon, the shared lived experiences of my participants in this study, through the combination of the composite textural descriptions and the composite structural descriptions of the phenomenon, as described by Moustakas (1994).

**Questionnaires**

Questionnaires are appealing to researchers due to the ease of gathering, processing, and analyzing data (Prendergast & O'Meara, 2022). For this research, I employed an open-ended style questionnaire for participant response. Much like interviews, questionnaires are relevant in qualitative research because they also provide perspectives and experiences from participants (Patton, 2015; Prendergast & O'Meara, 2022). Additionally, open-ended questionnaires allow participants to remove themselves from distractions and take time to think about their responses, to respond with much richer self-reflection, providing a deeper understanding of participant experiences (Prendergast & O'Meara, 2022). Questionnaires prevent the researcher from aggrandizing to maintain the integrity of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Open-ended questionnaires allow participants to provide extensive, reflective answers to questions, rather than giving a list of predetermined responses to choose from. This allows participants to respond freely, thus allowing the researcher to be able to garner honest answers. The responses acquired

from the questionnaires can be analyzed to determine underlying themes (Patton, 2015).

### Questionnaire Questions

1. As an educator, how has implementing *NSFGR* affected how you facilitate small group reading? CRQ

2. What are your feelings of self-efficacy, as an educator, related to teaching guided reading? CRQ

3. As an educator, what steps do you feel are integral for you to successfully implement social interaction into guided reading? SQ1

4. What steps do you feel, as an educator, you must take to effectively integrate discovery and meaning making into guided literacy groups? SQ2

5. What steps do you feel, as an educator, you must take to effectively incorporate appropriate literacy scaffolds into small group reading? SQ3

The questions designed for the questionnaire required participants to recognize what frames their instructional choices, in addition to how each participant can grow as an educator (Gheith & Aljaberi, 2018). Furthermore, these questions focused on the phenomenon, allowing participants to describe their experiences as best they could (Moustakas, 1994). Reflection on one's craft is one avenue for teacher efficacy but can also steer participants to fresh ideas and thought processes (Vaughn et al., 2020). Questions one and two address the idea of self-efficacy, although questions three, four, and five address what more the participants need in order for the literacy achievement gap to be positively affected by instructional practices, also addressing self-efficacy (Dewitz & Graves, 2021).

### Questionnaire Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis of questionnaires is very similar to that of interviews; however, the process

of coding questionnaires is much easier, as there is no audio to transcribe (Prendergast & O'Meara, 2022). To analyze the information gathered from the completed questionnaires I, again, referred to data analysis steps outlined by Moustakas (1994). The first step of data analysis for the questionnaires is epoché, where I acknowleged my own biases and neutralized them (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). To do this, I continued memoing and journaling to abandon any preconceived ideas or biases I may have (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Because the questionnaires do not involve transcription, transcendental phenomenological reduction was somewhat easier. Implementing horizonalization, I read through the participants' responses to the questionnaire, examining them for overall meaning, searching for supporting phrases to reinforce those from the interviews completed, but also seeking fresh key phrases (Moustakas, 1994). All irrelevant or vague statements were disregarded, and significant phrases were categorized and assigned codes to generate and identify themes (Moustakas, 1994). Recognized themes were then grouped together to construct individual textural descriptions. Individual textural descriptions were clustered to form composite textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994).

Following transcendental phenomenological reduction, I studied the data, seeking possible meanings using imagination and altered frames of reference, considering the phenomenon from various vantage points. This is referred to by Moustakas (1994) as imaginative variation. The individual structural descriptions were assembled by merging structural features and themes and then categorizing each separate structural description into a collective structural description of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Through imaginative variation, as defined by Moustakas (1994), individual structural descriptions were formed through differing perspectives. This assisted in determining each possible interpretation. These

descriptions were combined to construct a collective structural description of the educators'

perspectives while utilizing Richardson's (2016) model.

**Focus Groups**

Focus groups are utilized in qualitative studies to generate information on communal

views as well as the meanings that can be found within views (Mack et al., 2005). These

discussions are often used to investigate phenomena and experiences (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015).

In focus groups, the moderator (or researcher) sharpens a complexity of skills while facilitating

the group, such as: abating bias, developing rapport, active listening, and managing group

dynamics (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Focus groups are important in that, as thoughts are shared,

participants consider their views in relation to the other participants' and may begin to refine

their own way of thinking (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Each focus group was held, recorded, and

transcribed via Zoom so that I could fully focus on the participants, as pen-and-paper notetaking

often prevents deeper, richer, more honest statements (Davis, 2016). The employment of focus

groups in the study was appropriate due to the nature of the research not being highly personal or

socially sensitive (Mack et al., 2005). Focus groups allow for a great deal of information to be

contributed in a short amount of time, but also have the ability to facilitate rich conversations due

to the group dynamic stimulating the conversation (Mack et al., 2005). This study employed

three focus groups, with three to five participants in each group, totaling 13 total participants.

The focus groups were given the opportunity to provide additional information and/or clarify any

misconceptions. The focus groups also provided the opportunity for member checking for

member checking (Guest et al., 2017; Peoples, 2021).

*Focus Group Questions*

Focus group questions are based on the themes revealed through the initial data analysis

of the interviews (Patton, 2015). The contribution to research questions was noted as themes were identified from the interviews (Patton, 2015).

1. What are the biggest challenges when facilitating guided reading in a Title One school? CRQ

2. What are your experiences when implementing Jan Richardson's strategies while facilitating small group literacy instruction? CRQ

3. Time (regarding the length of your small group block and preparation time) is a theme that was revealed during the interview process. What more can you tell me about this? CRQ

4. Positive teacher self-efficacy is an additional theme that was revealed during the interview process. How can we go deeper in this area? CRQ

5. Student performance is the final theme revealed during our interview. Specifically in regards to language skills, independent thinking, and confidence. How can you elaborate here? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3

Question 1 is what Patton (2015) would consider a knowledge question, intended to help reestablish the rapport between the participants as well as the moderator/researcher. For this study, question one was intended to create an environment of relaxation (Moustakas, 1994). This question allowed for reflective thinking; for participants to determine if there were any further connections that they were able to make between their experiences and practices that have influenced their teaching (Gheith & Aliaberi, 2018). The remainder of the questions were meant to be introspective. Questions two through five required participants to self-reflect on self-efficacy in their guided reading practices (Gheith & Aliaberi, 2018). Additionally, questions three through five focused on the phenomenon, using Jan Richardson's (2016) *Next Step*

*Forward in Guided Reading* for differentiated instruction purposes. These questions allowed

participants to further describe their experiences as best they could, serving as a form of member

checking (Moustakas, 1994).

### *Focus Group Data Analysis Plan*

Verbal discussions, such as focus groups, are much more fruitful to qualitative research

than simple questionnaires (Davis, 2016). The first step of the data analysis process of the focus

group data, like interviews and questionnaires, is epoché (Moustakas, 1994). Epoché in this data

collection method continued to be accomplished through memoing and journaling, as described

by Creswell and Poth (2018). To complete transcendental phenomenological reduction, focus

group recordings were recorded and transcribed through the Zoom application. By implementing

horizonalization (Moustakas, 1994), I scrutinized each transcript, reading through them

repeatedly for new information. Transcripts were read and inspected to determine the overall

meaning, dissecting each for fresh key phrases and ideas in addition to those previously

identified, as well as key phrases and ideas that support previously identified ideas (Moustakas,

1994). Significant phrases and sentences that directly related to the experiences of educators

implementing Richardson's (2016) framework were identified along with nonrepetitive and

nonoverlapping concepts. Indistinct and irrelevant statements were disregarded (Moustakas,

1994). After identifying the significant aspects, they were categorized together and arranged into

labeled themes (Moustakas, 1994). Codes were generated to identify and describe fundamental

themes (Moustakas, 1994). The themes from each focus group were classified together to

establish individual textural descriptions of each focus group. Composite textural descriptions of

the total individual textural descriptions were utilized to develop a collective textural description

(Moustakas, 1994). This collective textural description described the participants' experiences while implementing Richardson's (2016) *The Next Steps Forward in Guided Reading*.

The next integral step in the data analysis process is imaginative variation. Again, this process involves seeking the possible implications using the imagination, different frames of reference, and contemplating the phenomenon from various perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) asserted that individual structural descriptions are to be composed by joining structural features and themes, then grouping each individual structural description into a collective structural description of the experience. By implementing imaginative variation, I created individual structural descriptions through different perspectives and then determined each conceivable interpretation (Moustakas, 1994). Individual structural descriptions were clustered into a collective structural description of educators' experiences utilizing Richardson's (2016) framework, as described by Moustakas (1994).

Finally, I generated and described the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) asserted that meaning is at the heart of perception. Purpose guides consideration toward something (Moustakas, 1994). For the focus groups, I generated a description of the essence of the phenomenon based on the shared lived experiences of the participants in this study through the combination of the composite textural descriptions and the composite structural descriptions of the phenomenon, as described by Moustakas (1994).

**Data Synthesis**

In this research, the participants were Title I educators with shared lived experiences of implementing Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Steps Forward in Guided Reading*. Because I am also an educator and share the lived experiences of the participants, I engaged in epoché. This afforded me the opportunity to moderate my own biases and concentrate on the exclusive

experiences of the educators in my study by being completely approachable and receptive to the

descriptions of their experiences while implementing Jan Richardson's (2016) framework in

small group literacy instruction (Moustakas, 1994; Leigh-Osroosh, 2021). An excerpt from my

journaling process can be found in Appendix H.

The second step of data analysis is phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). In

this process, I bracketed out any presuppositions to recognize the data collected in its purest form

(Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing, as described by Moustakas (1994) is where the researcher

dissects the collected data so that its essential structures are exposed, defined, and explored. The

biases or preconceived notions isolated during epoché are put aside during bracketing to be able

to view the data from a fresh lens (Moustakas, 1994). Bringing together the data collected from

each interview, and later questionnaires and focus groups, I identified key phrases within the

transcripts that spoke to the phenomenon directly being researched. After analyzing the data

from each collection method, individually, I combined the data from all methods of data

collection to determine any repetitive key phrases and then interpreted the meanings of those

phrases (Moustakas, 1994). After interpreting the meanings, I provided each participant an

opportunity to provide any clarification through member checking. I then scrutinized the

meanings for any important, recurring characteristics of the phenomenon (Madill & Sullivan,

2018; Moustakas, 1994). The final step of phenomenological reduction is providing a provisional

statement of the phenomenon regarding the fundamental recurrent elements that were previously

identified (Moustakas, 1994).

Data was assigned with equal values, meaning that all elements and viewpoints have

equal significance, referred to as horizonalization (Moustakas, 1994). I classified the data into

meaningful clusters, eliminating all repetitive or useless data (Moustakas, 1994). Invariant

themes were identified to perform imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). Utilizing the enriched account of the invariant themes, I shifted to the textural portrayal for individual themes, which are rich, dense descriptions, abstract portrayals of the experiences that offer exemplification but not essence (Moustakas, 1994). Composite textural descriptions are a combination of each textural description to provide a group or universal description of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

The imaginative variation involves the researcher to view experiences by varying perspectives like different meanings or different roles (Moustakas, 1994). Free fantasy variations are where structural characteristics or dynamics that suggest textural qualities are considered (Moustakas, 1994). During this phase, I created a list of structural qualities of the experiences described by the participants to develop the structural themes (Moustakas, 1994). Individual structural descriptions are defined by Moustakas (1994) as the integration of structural characteristics and themes into one individual structural description. A composite structural description was comprised from a combination of the individual structural descriptions based on the experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The composite textural and composite structural accounts were instinctively and reflectively integrated to determine a synthesis of the experiences, meanings, and essences of the phenomenon.

## Trustworthiness

Quality research is gauged by its trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness is imperative for ensuring that a study has completed what it was set out to determine (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).  There are four main tenants of trustworthiness: Credibility, dependability and confirmability, and transferability (Patton, 2015).

The trustworthiness of this transcendental phenomenological study can be determined through each of these tenets: Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

**Credibility**

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Credibility can be determined through a variety of strategies such as: prolonged engagement, persistent observations, triangulation, and member checking (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking were utilized. Prolonged engagement was accomplished by continuous attention during observations in individual interviews (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Participants were encouraged to further explain their interview responses, as clarification was needed (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Triangulation is conducted using various data sources and methods of data collection (Patton, 2015). In this study, triangulation was determined through corroborating data collected from individual participant interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups. Member checking is the most common form of validation as it includes reviewing information with participants through focus groups to acquire feedback regarding the accuracy of the data collection and how the data collection is represented (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Member checking in this study took place by returning the data to the participants after I had already analyzed it. The participants checked for accuracy of the themes and subthemes (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2015). In doing so, participants were able to engage with and add to the interpreted data to ensure its accuracy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Transferability**

Transferability denotes the possibility that the conclusions drawn through the research are applicable to another study (Creswell, 2007; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Transferability is established by exhibiting thorough, comprehensive description and theoretical example, that the elements of the study can be transferred and applied across a multitude of participants, groups, and settings (Creswell, 2007). Rich, dense description was provided in the explanation of this research, describing the experiences of Title I educators utilizing Jan Richardson's (2016) *NSFGR*. Providing a high level of description allows for the reader to determine whether the evidence is pertinent to other situations (Peoples, 2021). To strengthen conditions for transferability, robust and comprehensive details regarding setting, sample size, sampling technique, demographics, and interview and focus group procedures were shared, as suggested by Korstjens and Moser (2018) and Peoples (2021). A crucial understanding to be pointed out: I can only offer the conditions for transferability; I cannot guarantee transferability, as this determination can only be established by readers of the research (Creswell, 2007).

**Dependability**

Dependability is defined by saying that the study could be repeated by other researchers and the findings would be consistent (Creswell, 2007; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Creswell (2007) asserted that "[b]oth dependability and confirmability are established through an auditing of the research process" (p. 246). An inquiry audit, completed by the dissertation committee and qualitative director at Liberty University, were utilized to determine whether the findings are supported by the data and whether the findings would be consistent if the research was to be completed again (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is the degree of neutrality, or lack of bias, in the research findings (Creswell, 2007; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The first stage of confirmability is epoché to eliminate bias, prejudices, and preconceived notions. This allowed me to approach the phenomenon as if for the very first time (Moustakas, 1994). Patton (2015) asserted that the use of multiple data collection methods to acquire a complete understanding of a phenomenon is referred to as triangulation. Merging the collected data corroborated the study's reliability, as triangulation reduces the bias that can occur through the use of a single data collection method (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Allowing the participants the opportunity to view the themes and outcomes derived from each data source collected allowed for triangulation in this study (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, providing an audit trail, highlighting every step of data analysis completed and providing a rationale for every decision made also allowed for confirmability (Creswell, 2007).

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations included in this study were the confidentiality of the participants as well as the security of collected data to maintain the integrity of the researcher, as well as the research itself. Data collection methods were rigidly supervised to prevent personal bias and assumptions. Further description of ethical considerations are described, following.

I obtained a written/informed consent form (Appendix D) from all participants prior to start of the study, highlighting their autonomy within the research process (Hicks et al., 2021). Interviews were held individually to ensure the confidentiality of the participants as well as creating an open, honest environment (Creswell, 2007). The questionnaires had clear, open-ended questions, allowing the participants the opportunity to be completely honest about their

level of self-efficacy in small group literacy instruction to add to the richness of the description of participants' experiences. The focus groups had clear, concise discussion guidelines that included the importance of openness and trust within the group (Hicks et al., 2021). Additionally, the names of the participants, as well as the research sites have been provided pseudonyms, coded, and kept confidential in order to remove any possible identifiers (Creswell, 2007).

Finally, provisions were made to secure collected data: Interview, questionnaire, and focus group notes, as well as transcriptions and data analysis information. Data encryption has been applied to all digital files. Collected data was encrypted and is housed on a password protected computer, as well as a USB flash drive for backup. Data will be housed for three years until there is no longer a reasonable probability I will be required to guard against an accusation of misconduct (Peoples, 2021). Additional arrangements were made to store the USB flash drive in a safe deposit box, so that it will be in a protected location (Creswell, 2007; Peoples, 2021).

## Summary

A transcendental phenomenology methodology was chosen to address the research question of what the experiences of Title I teachers implementing Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* to close the literacy achievement gap are. This particular method allowed the researcher to focus on the totality of the experience, search for meanings and cruxes in order to fully comprehend the participants' shared experiences of the phenomenon and construct a more insightful understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposeful/homogenous sampling was utilized for 13 participants, when saturation was reached. Participant criteria included working as a teacher or academic coach in a Title I elementary school, having been employed for four or more years, and identified by an administrator or literacy coach as a teacher or literacy coach who consistently implements *NSFGR* with fidelity.

Data collection included semi-structured individual interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups. Interviews and focus groups took place via Zoom, with recording and transcription provided by the Zoom application. Participants were provided with a QR code to complete the questionnaire following the completion of their individual interview. For all data collection processes, epoché was implemented to eliminate bias, prejudices, and preconceived notions, allowing me to approach the phenomenon as if for the very first time (Moustakas, 1994). Data analysis involved epoché, phenomenological reduction, textual and structural descriptions, and imaginative variation.

**CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

**Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators who use differentiated instructional methods through the lens of Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* in rural, Title I elementary schools in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina. This chapter examines the findings of the data collected. Data collection and data analysis methods were discussed in Chapter Three. This chapter provides a list of the 13 participants along with their demographic information. A detailed narrative of the participants is presented in this chapter through rich, dense description. Themes that emerged from the data analysis process through transcendental phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994) are included. The central research question, along with the three sub questions, were answered from the data collected.

**Participants**

Participants in this study were recruited from a small, mostly rural district in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina composed of over 1,500 teachers, 121 of whom are National Board certified. After I received permission from the three sites (Central Elementary, Dawson Elementary, and Ellison Elementary), principals provided me with names and contact info for their teachers. I recruited participants via email, and those who were interested in participating emailed me in return. A copy of the recruitment letter sent to potential participants can be found in Appendix C.

Out of approximately 1,500 educators in the identified district, 26 educators responded to my email. After initial discussions, 13 participants were identified through homogeneous purposeful sampling. To qualify as a purposeful sample, participants must be chosen based on

the constraints of a test, survey, or research being carried out (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this research, the criteria for participation required that participants be fully licensed teachers or academic coaches in a rural-area Title I elementary school who have taught for at least four years and use Jan Richardson's (2016) NSFGR framework for small group. Homogeneous sampling is a type of purposeful sampling in which the participants share some type of characteristic such as age, gender, background, or occupation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, all participants were educators who use Richardson's (2016) framework to teach small group literacy instruction.

Of the 13 participants identified, five were males and eight were females. Eight participants described themselves as Caucasian. Three participants identified as African American. One participant characterized themselves as biracial and the last participant labeled themselves as multiracial. One participant was in her 20s, four participants were in their 30s, six participants were in their 40s, and two were in their 50s. Table 1 illustrates the demographics of the participants in the study. Table 2 exhibits the contributions of each participant by data collection method.

Table 1

*Teacher Participant Demographics*

| Teacher Participant | Age Range | Race | Years Experience | Highest Degree Earned | Current Grade Level |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Angela | 40-49 | African American | 23 | Bachelors | 4 |
| Chandler | 40-49 | Caucasian | 26 | Masters | 3 |
| Darryl | 30-39 | African American | 14 | Bachelors | 5 |
| Jim | 30-39 | Multiracial | 12 | Bachelors | 4 |
| Keeley | 20-29 | Caucasian | 5 | Bachelors | 2 |
| Meredith | 50-59 | Caucasian | 27 | Bachelors | 2 |
| Michael | 40-49 | Caucasian | 23 | Masters | 5 |
| Monica | 30-39 | Biracial | 14 | Masters | K |
| Pam | 40-49 | Caucasian | 6 | Bachelors | 2 |
| Phoebe | 40-49 | Caucasian | 21 | Bachelors | 2 |
| Rachel | 30-39 | Caucasian | 12 | Masters | K |
| Rebecca | 50-59 | Caucasian | 27 | Bachelors | 1 |
| Stanley | 40-49 | African American | 23 | Masters | 3 |

*Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality.

Table 2

*Teacher Participant Contributions by Data Collection Method*

| Teacher Participant | Interview Date | Questionnaire Date | Focus Group Session |
|---|---|---|---|
| Angela | May 20, 2023 | May 25, 2023 | May 26, 2023 |
| Chandler | May 5, 2023 | May 7, 2023 | May 9, 2023 |
| Darryl | May 18, 2023 | May 25, 2023 | May 26, 2023 |
| Jim | May 6, 2023 | May 7, 2023 | May 9, 2023 |
| Keeley | May 14, 2023 | May 15, 2023 | May 18, 2023 |
| Meredith | May 22, 2023 | May 24, 2023 | May 26, 2023 |
| Michael | May 20, 2023 | May 23, 2023 | May 26, 2023 |
| Monica | May 11, 2023 | May 13, 2023 | May 18, 2023 |
| Pam | May 23, 2023 | May 25, 2023 | May 26, 2023 |
| Phoebe | May 1, 2023 | May 2, 2023 | May 18, 2023 |
| Rachel | May 13, 2023 | May 15, 2023 | May 18, 2023 |
| Rebecca | May 13, 2023 | May 14, 2023 | May 18, 2023 |
| Stanley | May 3, 2023 | May 4, 2023 | May 9, 2023 |

*Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality.

**Angela**

Angela is a 45-year-old African American female who is a 23-year elementary veteran teacher. Angela has a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education with a concentration in English. She is well known throughout her school for her fantastic relationships with her students because she believes "Maslow before Bloom's." She also has a firm stance regarding the importance of hands-on learning and tries to incorporate it into her daily lessons. Angela has taught second, third, fourth, and fifth grades, with fourth grade being her favorite grade level to teach because fourth grade is "a really hard year." "Growing up, I never passed an end-of-grade test in reading until high school. I've seen some of the questions on [current] assessments and I just feel like kids in this grade level need to be reminded that they aren't a test score."

Angela did not plan to become a teacher. "I wanted to be an interior decorator. How ridiculous is that." When she got to college, though, something changed. She shared that her niece was in third grade at the time and was really struggling with school. "We'd sit down together on my weekends home to work, so my brother could have a break from it all, and she'd tell me she wished she had a teacher who cared like me. I started to think that *maybe* I'd make a good teacher." Once she graduated, she found that teaching ELA was her favorite subject. She was trained in 2014 in Jan Richardson's original guided reading framework and loved watching her students make growth through guided reading. When the updated framework came out, she loved it even more.

**Chandler**

Chandler is a Caucasian 48-year-old, 26-year elementary veteran teacher who has a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education and a master's degree in Reading. He became a teacher because he noticed there were very few men in the profession when he was

growing up. Chandler teaches third grade and, like Angela, he relies on positive relationships with his students to get to the core of their learning. "I've noticed," he reported, "that my students will work harder for me if they know I care."

Chandler has been using Richardson's (2016) framework since their school was trained on it in 2017. He was "skeptical at first, but then [he] began seeing some major progress." He implements the framework daily and says he loves the components because they "meet the kids where they are and allows them to work to get where they need to be." Chandler reported that Vygotsky was his hero in college because zone of proximal development "just made sense, ya know?"

**Darryl**

Darryl, a 36-year-old African American, 14-year veteran teacher who teaches fifth grade, wasn't sure what else to do with this life. "But when I got here," he reflected, "I loved teaching, so I stayed." He taught kindergarten for six years and was moved to second grade and enjoyed his "new-found freedom because the kids were so independent," and when there was large turnover of staff due to a principal change, he was "moved to fifth grade and *that* was a whole *new* ballgame." He has been teaching fifth grade ever since.

Darryl has taught Richardson's (2016) framework in kindergarten, second, and fifth grades and finds the lessons for each level are "*very* different." He reported that the lesson plan format in kindergarten was based strongly on phonics and phonological awareness, "but that all went away when you hit the lesson plans for Level A; the phonological piece disappears. Just because kids know their letters and letter sounds, it *doesn't* mean they know all the phonological things they need to know to master reading." Despite witnessing his students grow "leaps and

bounds" in small group guided reading, he remains skeptical of the framework, "but it does provide some *amazing* scaffolds for my students."

**Jim**

A 33-year-old multiracial elementary teacher with 12 years of experience, Jim reported that he could no longer see himself doing anything else with his life. Originally planning to major in business, Jim was introduced to the classroom as a freshman in college.

I was a [student athlete] and my coach challenged the team to commit to some type of community service project. My mom was a teacher, so I asked if I could volunteer in her class, but coach said no. Instead, he said I could go to another teacher's classroom, and I ended up in an upper grades room with a teacher I didn't know. I was miserable, at first. Over time, though, I developed a lot of positive relationships with the kids – *and* the teacher – in that room and I found myself thinking more about teaching than business.

Jim officially changed his major at the end of his freshman year. He had continued volunteering in the classroom long after his challenged hours were completed and loved it.

When asked about Richardson's (2016) framework and his implementation in his fourth-grade classroom, Jim reported that he uses it with fidelity, but it is "not exactly my favorite thing in the world. I don't hate it, by far, I'm just not sold that it's the best thing out there." Because the framework is still an expectation in his school, he has continued using it, but admits, "There's not really anything else out there for students who have mastered phonics and phonological awareness."

**Keeley**

Keeley, a Caucasian twenty-eight-year-old female, has been an elementary educator for five years. She has a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education with a concentration

of Science/Technology/Engineering/Mathematics (STEM) because she believes that children learn better when given opportunities to construct their own learning with social interactions. Whenever possible, Keeley incorporates some kind of hands-on learning in all subjects: math manipulatives, Lego Build and Write, letter tiles and magnets, and science experiments.

As a child, Keeley grew up knowing she wanted to be a teacher due to observing her own mother's love for the profession. Keeley loves working with children, building positive relationships with her students, and witnessing students' "light bulb moments." Reflecting on her student teaching experiences, she noted that learners in the rural Title I school often lacked the background knowledge to make connections. She was intent on teaching in a way that her students would consistently see academic gains. When Keeley joined the staff at her current school, she was almost immediately trained in Richardson's (2016) framework for guided reading. She was eager to implement the framework in her own classroom.

Although the student-teacher ratio is smaller in Title I schools, Keeley noted that class size still affects small group instruction. Because of non-negotiables within the district, classroom teachers are required to have a set number of minutes in each subject area for direct, whole group instruction. This mandate only leaves an hour for small group instruction with each lesson lasting between 20-30 minutes. With students grouped based on their instructional levels, Keeley has five groups but only has time to teach two groups each day. Being able to meet the literacy needs of her students has been challenging because of time, but she has gotten creative with her small group reading block. Keeley uses her instructional assistant (IA) to teach two groups every day. She teaches the lowest group every day and alternates the next two groups by day while her IA alternates between the two highest groups and the two middle groups every day. "The schedule is difficult at first," she explains, "but we've made it work. I provide lesson

plans for her and for me, so it's definitely more work, but at least then I know I've done my due diligence for my kids."

**Meredith**

Meredith is a Caucasian 50-year-old, 27-year elementary teacher who has taught only first and second grades throughout her career. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education from a small private college in her hometown. Inspired by her favorite elementary teacher, Meredith minored in Psychology because she strongly believed that relationships matter in all areas of life. She starts each morning with Morning Meeting to address social-emotional aspects within her classroom.

Meredith comes from a line of educators. Her mother was a teacher as was her grandmother. "As a child, I looked up to my mom…I spent numerous nights watching her plan, grade papers, and make materials for school. I knew I wanted to be just like her." Her love for her students is what has kept her in the profession, though the demands of the job have often made her want to quit. "Not having time to reach every student the way I need to is unfair to them. Class sizes and individual needs are just too much. There's not enough time to do everything I need to do to give them what they need – what they deserve. It's frustrating but I love these kids so I stay."

Meredith has been using Jan Richardson's (2016) framework since her principal introduced it to the staff in Fall 2017. "Originally, I was afraid that it was just 'one more thing,' but after our academic coach trained us on it, I ended up liking it." For as long as she can remember, Meredith has grouped her students based on their abilities, finding this an effective, easier way to meet the students' needs. She found it was easier to meet more of the students' needs that way. When her school transitioned to *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading*

(2016), the shift was somewhat painless because she had been doing a form of guided reading for years.

**Michael**

A 45-year-old Caucasian elementary teacher who has been teaching 23 years, Michael admitted that he did not always want to be a teacher. He chuckled and said, "I – like most kids – wanted to be a professional baseball player…but I blew out my shoulder my senior year of high school, pitching a game for a pick-up league." He added that he lost his scholarship for college, and considered taking a break from school, but his mother encouraged him to continue because "going back later would be hard." He went to college with an undeclared major and, through talking with his then-girlfriend, "I decided to be a teacher. I loved my nieces and nephew so I thought teaching elementary kids would be easy. I was *clearly* wrong," he said with a snicker. Although teaching has been a difficult, "especially during Covid," he does not regret the decision. He obtained his master's degree in leadership and supervision and has considered applying for a principal job, but "I'm just not there yet. I still love the classroom."

"Next Step has done amazing things for my guided reading groups," Michael asserted. "I've seen a lot of things, over the years, come and go…just like this stuff with science of reading. If it was so great, why did I start my career with it and then things changed to guided reading?". He reported that in his fifth-grade class, he could definitely use some additional phonics instruction to attack words, but "if the standards aren't going to reflect this shift to science of reading, I still need to focus on comprehension skills and strategies in whole group and small group. Jan Richardson does that."

**Monica**

Monica is a biracial 26-year-old not originally from the area of the sample. She also has not taught from the area for her entire career of 14 years. "I moved here on a whim," she reported, laughing. Prior to moving to the Piedmont, Monica had been teaching a type of guided reading, "but it was nothing like I do now... If I'm being honest, I had no idea what I was doing, which explains why my students weren't growing like I wanted them to." When Monica took a kindergarten position at one of the sample sites in 2017, the academic coach suggested a Richardson (2016) framework training. They then completed a coaching cycle and Monica reported "My kindergarten kids made some pretty spectacular growth." She admitted she had not been implementing any kind of real structure, but this framework was much appreciated. "I knew what to do, how to do it, and just did the *thang*. My kids were learning way more than they ever had and every single one of them left me on grade level." Monica recently graduated with her Master of Education in Reading to, hopefully, get a reading specialist or interventionist position in the future.

**Pam**

Pam is a 43-year-old Caucasian female who has had second grade in the six years she has taught. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education after her children were out of elementary school. Pam reads any books she can get her hands on, if she thinks it will help her to improve her craft.

Pam went to work straight out of high school, then met her now-husband. Not long after they were married, Pam found herself pregnant, so she became a stay-at-home mother. She served as "room mom" at her children's elementary school and was an active Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) mom. When her last child transitioned to middle school, she felt a calling

back to elementary school, so she got her degree and went to work in her own classroom, feeling she was doing what she was always meant to do.

Pam has been implementing Jan Richardson's (2016) framework since her first year, and the principal introduced it to the staff in Fall 2017. "I appreciated that [the staff] were all learning it together." The framework provided Pam with exactly what she needed to do for each of her student's abilities, which made her feel like the hard part was "off my plate. The plans were done for me. What I didn't count on was how much I would appreciate the framework for my students. They were making so much growth." Pam had learned about social learning theory in college, and she reported that she loves "how my students feel confident with what we're doing. When we sit down to Day One of a new book, they know there are new skills and strategies to be learned, but they know they have what they need to help them learn."

**Phoebe**

Phoebe is a Caucasian 43-year-old, 21-year veteran teacher, who currently teaches second grade. "I've seen so many mandates come and go. I cut my teeth on the things science of reading is suggesting, but it was abandoned, and now it's back. It's no wonder the kids can't learn; the people making all the decisions have no idea what they're doing." Phoebe has a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education and had always wanted to be a teacher. She used to play school all afternoon. "I used to make all the kids in the neighborhood come sit in the chairs I'd drag out from our living room," she reported. She would do read-alouds and give spelling tests. "I even had a small chalkboard I'd drag out there and make some of the kids come up and solve math problems. They hated me but I was happy as a lark," she laughed. Phoebe read about Richardson's (2016) framework when it first came out.

I'm a self-proclaimed nerd. I read all the teacher-y things. I bought the book as soon as I

saw it and when my principal presented the staff with it a few years back, I was excited

about putting it into practice. That lesson plan, though…oof. It was something to find all

the components on our own, but I absolutely love the books [the principal] bought us. We

got the experience writing the lesson plans, using the format for the matching text, but

then these books are a lifesaver. Don't get me wrong, I have to still read through

everything in order to be prepared, but I don't have to write out the lesson. I can modify a

lesson if I need to, based on what my students need.

When asked about meaning making in guided reading, she loved the vocabulary

activities. She mentioned that learners are able to manipulate pieces to spell words or use

pictures and words to match words to connect ideas and thoughts. "It's a pretty great

framework."

**Rachel**

Rachel is a 33-year-old Caucasian female who has taught only kindergarten for 12 years.

She earned her Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education from a prominent university in her

hometown. Like other participants, Rachel starts each morning with Morning Meeting to address

social-emotional needs of the students in her classroom.

Rachel comes from a line of educators. Her mother and father were teachers, as were her

grandmothers on both sides of her family. "Teachers were everywhere I looked. I grew up in

classrooms or surrounded by things *for* classrooms." Rachel stated that she "absolutely love[s]

kindergarten" and cannot imagine herself ever quitting. She agrees that there is not enough time

in the day to cover everything the district requires, "but I just don't worry about it. I know I'm

giving my kids everything I can with the time I have, and if the district doesn't like it or lawmakers don't like it, they can come do it and show me how to fit it all in."

Rachel has been implementing Jan Richardson's (2016) framework since it was introduced as a district mandate in Fall, 2017. "I love it. I didn't like the lesson plans at first because they took forever to write, but once we got the hang of them, we split them up, as a team; we all took books and wrote plans for them and then made copies for each other… Why work harder when we can work smarter? I work with an amazing team, so I trust their plans…but I also read over them for my own clarity and see if I, personally, need to modify anything for my kids."

**Rebecca**

Rebecca is a 50-year-old Caucasian female who has been a teacher for 27 years. Rebecca has a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education with a concentration in Mathematics. She works double-duty, somewhat, as a "[beginning teacher] coach," because the district recently removed all coaches at the district level. Her administrator strongly believes that beginning teachers need all the support they can get, so support within the building became a priority. "I wear a lot of hats that way. I help with behavior, curriculum, and new teacher support in general. It's time-consuming but I've loved the position."

Rebecca was inspired to be a teacher by her first-grade teacher:

[The teacher] was kind of a rebel. Reading groups back in those days meant a reading basal that each reading group went through. Some went quicker than others, so you always knew if you were in the "low" group. Not [the teacher]. She *refused* to teach reading that way. I mean, we were all still ability grouped, but it was *different*. She didn't

use the basals, but she found books that were appropriate. She seemed to be well before

her time, because…well, look where we are now.

That approach, Rebecca's initial experience with guided reading-type small group, affects her

still today. She claimed that the students in that class never knew who the low, middle, or high

groups were; they read and got the instruction they needed. Rebecca asserted that *NSFGR*

(Richardson, 2016) is structured that way, which caused her to buy in quickly.

Once she began truly implementing *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading*

(Richardson, 2016), she loved how moving through the levels was consistently fluid and how

learners passed through them at the pace of each student's ability. "Groups were fluid, so

students were constantly moving in and out of various levels," Rebecca claimed, but "that's

because students learn at different rates."

**Stanley**

Stanley is a 46-year-old African American who has been teaching 23 years. Stanley has a

Master of Arts degree in Education and was teaching third grade at the time of the study. Stanley

always wanted to be a teacher but does not recall any particular incident or person who inspired

it. Stanley strives to create and maintain positive relationships with his students, but also serves

as a male role model within the school, meeting with several boys who have lost their father

through death, abandonment, or prison, regardless of their grade level.

Stanley has been using Richardson's (2016) framework since arriving in the district in

2017. He mentioned that he immediately bought in to it because Vygotsky inspired much of his

reflective college assignments. He utilizes the framework daily and says he appreciates the

components because they "keep me on track and include everything my kids need to help them

become better readers." Stanley noted that he loves how the skills and strategies include

spiraling, so once a skill has been taught and the students master it, it does not just disappear, but is revisited again later so the skill "and the strategies used for it will be kept fresh for students" (Stanley, personal communication, May 3, 2023).

## Results

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators who utilize differentiated instructional methods through the lens of Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* (*NSFGR*) in rural, Title I elementary schools in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina. The shared experiences of 13 rural Title I elementary educators were highlighted using a phenomenological qualitative research design. Data collection from participants included individual semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and three focus groups. Interviews and focus groups were completed via Zoom, utilizing the in-application software to record and transcribe each portion. Questions for individual interviews and focus groups were semi-structured to promote explanation and variation regarding the topic. At the close of each interview, participants were given a QR code to complete the Google Forms questionnaire (Appendix F). Participants responded to each data collection method freely, describing their experiences and related thoughts and/or feelings.

I scrutinized the transcripts and questionnaires, searching for common words and themes as I created codes. I eliminated data that was not relevant to this study. In agreement with Moustakas' (1994) methodology for qualitative analysis, I bracketed personal biases and experiences from the data gathered. Using Google Sheets, I listed, grouped, reduced, and eliminated data. Then I clustered the data, categorizing and confirming evolving themes, continuing to follow Moustakas' (1994) methodology for qualitative analysis. The coding procedure involved repeated readings and careful scrutinization, color coding, and memos.

Commonalities appeared through words, phrases, and notions. A textural description of participants' lived experience using Richardson's (2016) framework for small group literacy emerged through the consolidation and classification of the emerged key concepts. In connecting the findings to the central research question and three sub questions, four themes transpired by synthesizing and triangulating the data through phenomenological reduction, as described by Moustakas (1994). The themes that developed were: (a) time; (b) teacher self-efficacy; (c) structure; and (d) student performance. Seven sub themes emerged from the themes: (a) stress; (b) burnout (c) collaboration; (d) decreased stress; (e) language skills; (f) thinking independently; and (g) student self-efficacy. Table 3 represents these identified themes, sub themes, and related codes from phenomenological reduction.

Table 3

*Identified Themes and Related Codes from Phenomenological Reduction*

| THEMES | SUB THEMES | RELATED CODES |
|---|---|---|
| Theme 1: Time | Stress | Short teaching block (phonics, whole group, shared reading, close reading, shared writing, independent writing, phonological awareness) |
| | Burnout | Preparation<br>Exhaustion |
| Theme 2: Teacher Self-Efficacy | Collaboration | *NSFGR* Book (Richardson, 2016)<br>Training<br>Model lessons<br>Lesson plan template<br>Consistency |
| Theme 3: Structure | Decreased Stress | Lesson plan template<br>Guided reading library with pre-made lesson plans<br>Suggested timeframe for each component<br>Kagan Structures |
| Theme 4: Student Performance | Language Skills | Peer coaching<br>Turn and Talk<br>ESL prompts<br>Making connections<br>Schema<br>Immediate feedback<br>Prompting |
| | Thinking Independently | Turn and Talk<br>Making connections<br>Schema |
| | Student Self-Efficacy | Peer coaching<br>Making connections<br>Immediate feedback<br>Prompting |

**Time**

Teachers have a lot of instruction to get through during a regular school day, especially during the literacy block. Pam (interview, May 23, 2023) listed the district's expectations for her literacy block: "Fundations (our phonics program), whole group instruction (for grade level standards practice), Heggerty (phonemic awareness), and small group instruction." One problem is that "all the components of each [whole group] lesson don't fit within those time constraints. Using Jan Richardson for guided reading allows me to provide support," Michael elaborated (focus groups, May 26, 2023).

*Stress*

Angela (interview, May 20, 2023) mentioned that before she started with Richardson's (2016) framework, students in her class "typically needed the entire literacy block to make it through our Fundations lesson, so every day I had to make the decision of which part of the lesson I was going to cut…and pray that the principal didn't ask questions. I *have* to teach reading." Pam (focus group, May 26, 2023) noted that she had to do the same: "But when we got to the test for the unit we're working on, the kids couldn't do it…because they hadn't mastered those skills…because something had to be cut.", focus group, May 26, 2023). Pam (focus group, May 26, 2023) also expressed that the district pacing does not seem to have student need as the focus. "[The students] fail the Fundations assessment. We're supposed to reteach for three days and reassess. But they can't pass it if they didn't master the unit prior. After we reassess, we're expected to move on – because the pacing guide says to," Pam (focus group, May 26, 2023) added. How can children learn to read if educators are required to speed through phonics faster than they learn it?

Now that she uses Richardson's (2016) framework in guided reading, Meredith

(interview, May 22, 2023) noted she continues with her phonics lessons within the 20-minute block of time she has been afforded, and when the time is up, she moves on to her whole group lesson. "I make a note of struggles I see in each whole group lesson, and when we sit down for guided reading, I address the struggles with those kids" (Meredith, interview, May 22, 2023). Rachel (interview, May 13, 2023) has noticed "the struggles my kids experience with our phonics lesson align with the phonics covered in my Jan Richardson lessons. Developmentally, my kids are right where they should be." Phoebe (focus group, May 18, 2023) mentioned that, although Fundations is "*technically* scaffolding students, it's fast-paced. Not all the kids learn at that rate. They don't learn at the same rate *period*. For my lower kids, I look at it as front-loading skills." Finally, participants felt, the *students* were the focus. Each student was able to get what they needed in each lesson.

### Burnout

Not only is there not enough time to teach the mandated material, teacher preparation time has slowly but surely been reduced. "We used to get 40 minutes of planning, four days a week, and duty-free lunch. We haven't had duty-free lunch in years," Darryl (interview, May 18, 2023) stressed. Phoebe (focus group, May 18, 2023) supported that statement and followed up with the fact that teachers now meet with the instructional leadership team (ILT) twice a week and other planning days are taken for individualized education plan (IEP) meetings or to discuss committee meeting minutes. "I'm stressed as a veteran teacher because we can't actually find time to plan. I can't even imagine how a brand-new teacher feels," Meredith (interview, May 22, 2023) reported. Stanley (interview, May 3, 2023) mentioned that his planning got moved to the weekends:

Typically, I enjoyed my Saturday and then on Sunday, I'd get back to the grind. But I'll

be honest: guided reading was the first thing to go. I just didn't have it in me. Reading the

books, coming up with vocabulary on my own for each group, and skills with strategies?

Nope.

Rachel (focus group, May 18, 2023) admitted that the same was true for her. "I just found I had

*nothing* else to give…and my kids weren't making a lot of growth" (Rachel, focus group, May

18, 2023).

When the district introduced *NSFGR* (Richardson, 2016), high frequency words and

skills with strategies were categorized by reading level. Comprehension prompts and word work

were included for each developmental level as well. "I could get on board with something that

made my life *easier*," Chandler (interview, May 5, 2023) chuckled. Rachel (focus group, May

18, 2023), Michael (focus group, May 26, 2023), and Pam (focus group, May 26, 2023) each

mentioned that the template was time-consuming, at first. "We had a staff development meeting

one afternoon and our goal was to write at least three lessons. I mean, if I have to stay after for a

meeting, it's nice to be able to be productive," Michael (focus group, May 26, 2023) asserted.

Over time, the lessons became less tedious, "and we could reuse them for other groups when *they*

got to that level so that was nice. My hard work didn't just go out the window," Rachel (focus

group, May 18, 2023) mentioned. "Guided reading was back on the table…I was able to plan an

entire week's worth of small group lessons in about an hour after I got used to the template,"

Pam (focus group, May 26, 2023) said.

Richardson's (2016) framework made the guided reading process much easier. "I had

been doing guided reading all wrong. I mean *really* wrong. Think of back-in-the-day, 'reading

groups with basals' wrong. I just thought my kids needed more time. No, they needed *strategic*,

intentional planning," Monica (interview, May 11, 2023) reflected. When she went through her

coaching cycle with her academic coach, Monica realized how she could truly scaffold her students' learning through the framework. Going step-by-step, planning each area (which high frequency and/or vocabulary words to introduce and review; which decoding skills to focus on; which comprehension skill to highlight) made her realize that "failure to plan is a plan to fail. *I was failing my students*," Monica (focus group, May 18, 2023) added. Once she had the hang of the planning process, Monica (focus group, May 18, 2023) said her students "really started gaining ground. It was all a matter of teaching them in an intentional, sequential order, providing them with the tools for the next step."

**Teacher Self-Efficacy**

Teachers teach more effectively when they feel knowledgeable with the curriculum they are working with. Monica (interview, May 11, 2023) mentioned, "before *Next Steps*, I had no idea how to effectively teach guided reading. I was a mess." In their focus group sessions, Chandler (May 9, 2023), Keeley (May 18, 2023), Meredith (May 26, 2023), Monica (May 18, 2023), and Rebecca (May 18, 2023) stated that when they received their *NSFGR* books (Richardson, 2016) and were told to familiarize themselves with the framework, they were incredibly overwhelmed; however, each school was soon provided with in-house training by their site's academic coach and the guided reading structure became much less daunting. "I will forever be grateful to [the academic coach] for coming into my classroom and doing model lessons for each of my groups and then completing a coaching cycle with me" Chandler (focus group, May 9, 2023) noted. In completing the coaching cycle with his academic coach, Chandler (focus group, May 9, 2023) became much more comfortable with the framework and began to love his guided reading block.

*Collaboration*

After receiving training, watching model lessons, and using the provided framework template, Rachel (focus group, May 18, 2023) said that she and her colleagues began providing each other with copies of lesson plans for various levels. "It was great," Rachel (focus group, May 18, 2023) asserted. "I felt like this *thing* that had caused me so much stress, was actually, *finally*, making my life easier." Rebecca (focus group, May 18, 2023) added:

> I take the lesson plans my colleagues provide and I tweak them, based on how I can have my students Turn and Talk or have book talks together, based on the skill we're working on. It's fun to see how much they get into the conversations. They'll debate occasionally and say things like, "the text says…" I know from just their interactions with one another that they've truly learned something from what they read.

Jim (interview, May 6, 2023) noted that the upper-level lesson plans are different. Each level varies some; however, he and his team came together to brainstorm ideas for the reading response prompts. Instead of having students just write answers to the prompts, Jim (interview, May 6, 2023) mentioned, "[The team] decided to let the kids work together before writing. They do an oral rehearsal kind of thing. They read with the prompt in mind, but before they write, they have to speak their answer to their partner. Their partner asks them follow-up questions if they need more detail."

## Structure

Structure is always helpful in the classroom for students and teachers. Structure allows for students to fall into a routine, so they begin to know what to expect. Rebecca (interview, May 13, 2023) mentioned, "routines help kids stay on track, but I've found it opens the door to greater academic success; there are less interruptions because the kids know what to do." Stanley (focus group, May 9, 2023) disclosed, "my students know to come over to my table and get their book.

If I'm attending to something else, briefly, and it's Day One, they preview the book. If it's Day Two, they reread." Jim (focus group, May 9, 2023) pointed out, "I know what to do, too. There is no time wasted when everyone involved dives right in," Jim (focus group, May 9, 2023) continued, "Instructional time is maximized for students."

### *Decreased Stress*

The structure of Richardson's (2016) framework has decreased stress, in terms of guided reading, for several participants. Additionally, several schools within the district purchased guided reading libraries, Literacy Footprints, that partnered with Richardson to create ready-to-use lesson plans. The structure these plans provided included specific timeframes for each component that allows the teacher and students to stay on task in order to complete the entirety of the day's lesson. "This has been a game changer," Meredith (interview, May 22, 2023) said. "I can teach my entire lesson and make it to all the groups I have scheduled because I know how long the actual components are supposed to be." she continued (Meredith, interview, May 22, 2023). Guided reading happens more consistently now because it is less stressful to prepare for. Rebecca (interview, May 13, 2021) noted,

> I'm even *less* stressed about guided reading now because I can grab the books, read the lesson plans and books to know what I'm teaching, and know how I need to prepare to teach the lessons. When my stress level is down, my energy is up, which makes the kids more excited about guided reading.

What Angela appreciates about the Literacy Footprints library is that the guided reading books are sequential. She (Angela, focus group, May 26, 2023) stressed,

> I know that my kids are being properly scaffolded for what's coming next because I start them with the book at the very beginning of that level and we work through each book.

Every book is numbered, so I just grab the next number. There are fiction and nonfiction

texts, so they are exposed to both types of literature. There are series texts and there

hasn't been a book the kids haven't liked yet. They're able to stay engaged because,

although the text is on their instructional level, they've been prepared for it.

**Student Performance**

All participants mentioned noticing a vast shift in their students' reading performance

since transitioning to Richardson's (2016) framework. "Never in my career have I seen such

growth! The first year was inconsistent because I was still learning, but since then? Whoa,"

Meredith (focus group, May 26, 2023) shared. Teachers all agreed that *NSFGR* (Richardson,

2016) clearly affects students' language skills, their ability to think independently, and their

confidence. Phoebe (interview, May 1, 2023) mentioned that "many of my students come to me

lacking language skills. They have a difficult time expressing their thoughts and their learning."

After using Richardson's (2016) framework, "they are able to confidently use the vocabulary

they've learned through the year to vocalize their learning and their thoughts regarding our

lessons," Michael (focus group, May 26, 2023) added. Angela (focus group, May 26, 2023)

mentioned that through the modeling, prompting, and support that the framework allows,

"students began realizing that it's okay if they *don't* think like everyone else. They're grasping

the concept of facts versus opinions. They've started having great conversations and backing up

their claims with text evidence."

*Language Skills*

Language skills were identified as a sub theme to student performance. Students who

come from less privileged homes tend to have a lower-level vocabulary. Michael (interview,

May 20, 2023) noted that this is most likely due to the students' lack of exposure to books. Phoebe (interview, May 1, 2023) pointed out that:

> SES students come to the group with a lack of vocabulary and background knowledge. Often their communication skills… are also lacking. These lessons allow for students to work, hands on, with vocabulary for each lesson prior to reading the text. They also allow for kids to have discussions about the text and/or work with a peer. Eventually, you notice the difference.

Darryl's favorite way to work on language skills is having the students Turn and Talk. This collaborative way of work allows students to work on conversational skills and implement academic language. "It's interesting to hear the kids say, 'I think you mean…' or ask, 'Do you mean…?' These interactions have definitely had an impact on their learning" Daryl (interview, May 26, 2023) noted.

"My kids work together through Peer Coaching a lot in guided reading" Jim (focus group, May 9, 2023) added. "For example, after we read, I give my kids written questions. They get a partner and take turns answering questions. If the answers are wrong, their coach asks guiding questions to help guide their thinking rather than just saying, 'Nope. It's actually…' They're articulating what they've comprehended, but also improving language skills" Jim (focus group, May 9, 2023) continued. Since implementing word talk and book talk from Richardson's (2016) framework, Phoebe (interview, May 1, 2023) said that her students' "vocabulary and conversational skills have grown tremendously, just from talking to each other. It's amazing."

### Thinking Independently

When students struggle with comprehension of what is happening around them, they generally glance at their peers and mimic what they are doing. When students are not struggling,

however, they look around to see who disagrees with them. They are eager to share their thinking and their reasoning to justify their thoughts. Rebecca (questionnaire, May 14, 2023) noted that Richardson's (2016) framework "provides a great deal of prompting and support" for students, through scaffolds for thinking. Angela (focus group, May 26, 2023) said, "There is a lot of modeling that goes into lower levels. When we're working on simple things, like asking and answering questions, I model, model, and model some more. Then the kids try it." As levels progress, there is less modeling because students have learned what they need. Rachel (focus group, May 18, 2023) mentioned, "They've been given the tools to think. We don't teach them *what* to think, but *how* to think. There's a huge difference. They're able to do that because of the modeling and then practice."

Stanley (questionnaire, May 4, 2023) noted that "eventually, you can start seeing the wheels turning. More often, I'm able to remove the scaffolds in place because I find them thinking on their own." Keeley (interview, May 14, 2023) said, "It's interesting that after I model…let's say…visualizing…my kids don't say the same things as me anymore. We've built the tools, together, to make this movie in our minds. Not everyone sees a movie through the same lens, so it's neat to see my kids making interpretations and vocalizing them so confidently, so unashamed."

Angela (focus group, May 26, 2023) mentioned that she sees a lot of independent thinking when students are given the opportunity to Turn and Talk. She (Angela, focus group, May 26, 2023) stated, "when we go around the table to share, I don't get 'We had the same answer' anymore. My kids are expected to share their partner's response to whatever we were talking about. They are making their own connections and voicing them now! There's this excited buzz at my table!" Meredith (focus group, May 26, 2023) shared similar experiences:

"I've noticed during book talks or with word work, [the students] are connecting words with patterns and examples in the book with their schema. If they have a friend in the group that *hasn't* had a given experience, they describe it and make that friend feel like they *have*" (Meredith, focus group, May 26, 2023).

### *Student Self-Efficacy*

As students' skills improve, they become more confident. When they are more confident, they begin to take chances. Rachel (questionnaire, May 15, 2023) noted that, throughout the course of the year, the support she provides to her students becomes less prevalent as they become more confident in their word attack strategies. Chandler (interview, May 5, 2023) asserted that "kids act like – just because you taught them how to solve a word - they don't need you anymore. But the truth is, they *do* begin to rely less and less on me. In group, they start racing each other to see who can solve the word first, without any support from me. It's a fun process to witness."

What makes these learners more confident? "They experience all these learning opportunities during guided reading. They're able to coach each other. They're able to make connections. They also receive a *lot* of prompting in lower levels so over time they've had enough practice that they know they're right," Meredith (focus group, May 26, 2023) said. Learners also "receive a *lot* of immediate feedback using Jan Richardson. Who wants their students to practice something incorrectly and then have to reteach it? That's frustrating for the teacher *and* the students," Phoebe (interview, May 1, 2023) said. Immediate feedback is extremely important in guided reading.

**Outlier Data and Findings**

An outlier can be defined as an anomaly in the data (Sullivan et al., 2021). If not

recognized, outliers can prevent a study from being replicated if not acknowledged (Sullivan et

al., 2021). In this study, one outlier finding was mentioned by Darryl, Jim, and Keeley. They

noted information learned in their required professional development regarding science of

reading that shed light on learning progressions in their classroom. This outlier represented gaps

in phonics and phonological awareness in early readers. This area was found to be significant

and could possibly be the focus of future research studies, especially regarding science of

reading.

### *Phonics and Phonological Awareness Instruction*

Darryl, Jim, and Keeley brought up their Science of Reading professional development

(PD). Jim (interview, May 7, 2023) noted that the PD opportunity he attended made him second-

guess whether Richardson's (2016) framework, or guided reading in general, was the best

approach. "Several of my students are lacking phonics skills and phonemic awareness. I don't

have time to address it at any other point in the day," Darryl (interview, May 18) stressed.

Keeley (interview, May 14, 2023) noted that she "question[s] whether guided reading is the best

thing… But then again, by the time my students get to me for second grade, I feel like they

should already know those skills. I know *nothing* about teaching PA skills or beginning

phonics." Jim (interview, May 6, 2023) made the statement that implementing guided reading,

rather than guided phonics, makes him "wonder whether I assess my students correctly. How can

they be at a third or fourth grade reading level and have such gaping holes in phonics and

phonemic awareness? Am I instructing them at the incorrect level in guided reading? I can't

make it make sense."

**Research Question Responses**

This section provides a detailed discussion of the central research question and the three sub questions, incorporating descriptive responses to each question attained during data collection. Narratives of themes related to each research question are also included, containing in vivo participant quotes.

**Central Research Question**

What are the lived experiences of educators in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina who differentiate instruction using Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* in rural, Title I elementary schools? Four themes developed from the in-depth analysis of the interview, questionnaire, and focus group responses. These themes were: (a) time; (b) teacher self-efficacy; (c) structure; and (d) student performance. All participants, while varied, described positive experiences when implementing *NSFGR* (Richardson, 2016). Having the autonomy from their principals to teach small group literacy in a way that best fits the needs for their students was a major factor in being able to continue implementing Richardson's (2016) framework. Additionally, most of the participants shared the perspective that Richardson's (2016) instructional design has been helpful to address the learning gap within their classrooms, regardless of the short amount of time they have in their whole group literacy block.

Angela (focus group, May 26, 2023) stated that when she and her grade level "had a crucial conversation with our principal about the continued need for guided reading rather than abandoning guided reading for science of reading, he was very supportive." She continued by noting, "comprehension standards still have to be taught and Jan Richardson has the components that align for phonics and phonemic awareness for lower-level students, so why would we abandon it?" (Angela, focus group, May 26, 2023). Because Richardson's framework has been

successful in addressing the learning gap, Phoebe (interview, May 1, 2023) mentioned,

> District mandates shouldn't be *mandates*, but rather suggestions. We're the ones in the
> trenches. These commands are what make us so stressed out. Guided reading, though, is
> an *essential* piece for helping kids because they're reading texts that are at their
> instructional level, they're practicing phonemic awareness if that's a component that's
> needed, and there's word work with high frequency words and phonics. How could that
> be a bad thing?

This supports Vygotsky's (1980) social learning theoretical framework that asserted learners make growth when they are able to experience instruction at the right level, through the appropriate avenues. Additionally, Michael (questionnaire, May 23, 2023) noted, "I am, personally, more confident teaching guided reading now because I know what is developmentally appropriate for each learning level." With this framework, teacher self-efficacy has increased and guided reading is taking place on a daily basis rather than sporadically, leading to greater literacy success for learners. Bandura's (1997) theory regarding self-efficacy noted that when educators feel secure in their teaching practices, students will experience positive learning outcomes. Each of the participants in this study described just that.

**Sub Question One**

What are the lived experiences of Title I teachers with integrating social interaction into small group literacy instruction? A major theme that emerged from the data was student performance. Participants highlighted cooperative learning structures like peer coaching and Turn and Talk as preferred social interaction procedures implemented in guided reading. The sub themes that emerged from the data analysis in this area were: (a) language skills; (b) thinking

independently; and (c) student self-efficacy. Through the implementation of social interaction opportunities in small group instruction, participants noted positive experiences.

Monica (interview, May 11, 2023) provided an elaborate description of her experiences with integrating social interactions:

There are a *lot* of interactions that take place within just one Jan Richardson lesson. I mostly rely on the emergent lesson plan, so we start with high frequency review. We typically do some kind of quick game, so there's social interaction number one. Then we do a book synopsis or book walk. They kids discuss what they notice and make predictions after the synopsis; that's interaction number two. While each student is reading, I am conferring with one. As the student is reading, I am offering immediate feedback based on how he or she read. That's interaction number three. Then we have our group discussion based on a prompt I provide the kids with. These discussion starters are interaction number four. When we do our new sight word for the day, the kids play another super quick game so that's interaction number five. The word study piece is done with a buddy so that's interaction number six. In one thirty-minute lesson, students have the opportunity for *six* purposeful social interactions.

Chuang (2021) asserted that integrating social interactions is not having one learner provide all the answers for the other, but rather learning that takes place through facilitation. Vygotsky (1980) noted that, of all the tools students can use to make meaning of their experiences, social interaction is the *most* utilized. Integrating social interaction into small group literacy instruction has allowed students to build confidence, not only in their vocabulary skills, but also in oral language and, especially, in reading/decoding skills and comprehension skills. Rebecca (focus group, May 18, 2023) reflected, "being able to Turn and Talk has allowed

students to think out loud and work through struggles collaboratively." Regarding the integration of social interaction using *NSFGR* (Richardson, 2016), Meredith (focus group, May 26, 2023) added that students were able to "make connections about what they are reading. They are also able to practice academic vocabulary, fluency, and expression with one another… Every day, I see greater and greater success. It makes me happy to see them excelling."

**Sub Question Two**

What are the experiences of Title I instructors when facilitating guided literacy instruction through discovery and meaning making? When analyzing the data collected from the interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups, the answer to this sub question was found within the theme of student performance. Participants all reported positive experiences when implementing discovery and meaning making opportunities through activities like "Mix It – Fix It," Elkonin boxes, letter tiles, and Magna-Tiles. These types of learning activities allow for learners to make connections.

Vygotsky (1980) postulated that learning is also constructed with the use of tools. Just like with social interactions, the use of hands-on tools is just as important. Jan Richardson's (2016) framework provides hands-on learning opportunities with high-frequency words and vocabulary words, as well as phonological awareness. Stanley (questionnaire, May 4, 2023) noted that students are able to perform tasks such as "Mix It – Fix It" (Richardson, 2016) where students take letter tiles or magnets for a given word (whether high frequency or vocabulary), mix them up, and spell the words correctly. Keeley (questionnaire, May 15, 2023) noted, "students are provided the opportunity to connect with the text prior to, during, and after reading. Making these connections allows them to make sense of the text."

Students are also given other opportunities to make meaning of the text through the use of Elkonin boxes and chips. Elkonin boxes are typically used for sounds. "Students push a chip for every sound they hear," Rachel (focus group, May 18, 2023) explained. "[Students] can [also] use Elkonin boxes for decoding: We write a [consonant-vowel-consonant] word in the boxes, with each letter, or sound if it's a digraph, in a box, and the students can tap the word out and then blend it all together. This helps with phoneme segmentation and blending," Monica (focus group, May 18, 2023) added. "Sometimes instead of dry erase Elkonin boxes, we use Magna-Tiles. We'll write each sound on a tile and each student will take turns tapping the tile and then snapping them together when blending the word. They love it," Rebecca (focus group, May 18, 2023) disclosed.

Pam (focus group, May 26, 2023) mentioned that she uses sentence frames in order to guide students' writing based on the reading they did that day:

> I have sentence frames that I made from laminated sentence strips. It's almost like an elevated version of Elkonin boxes, but instead of using them for sounds, we use them for whole words. I give each student a set, and on Day Two of a lesson, we do a dictation sentence. I read the sentence we're practicing, and students take out a frame for each word in the sentence from their baggie. I read [it] again and students echo the sentence. Then they independently repeat the sentence, touching each frame. Once they have internalized the sentence, they write it. Each sentence we do has words that are based on the phonics skill we are working on in order to transfer their decoding to encoding.

All participants noted that, no matter the students' developmental level, there are many ways to use manipulatives in order to increase student engagement and learning.

**Sub Question Three**

What are the lived experiences of Title I educators when implementing instructional scaffolding during guided reading? Based on the analysis of the data collected, Richardson's (2016) framework provides successful instructional scaffolding opportunities through leveled texts that focus on developmental reading stages. The instructional level of texts for students provides one layer of support; however, for participants who are at schools that have purchased the Literacy Footprints library, another layer of support is that each book is numbered and allows for skills to build one upon the next as groups move chronologically through sets. This also allows for students to connect their learning to schema based on previous books.

Zone of proximal development is another essential tenet of Vygotsky's (1980) social learning theory (SLT). Daniels and Tse (2021) postulated that this element of SLT (Vygotsky, 1980) is the most essential component of the theory. Students learn best when their current instructional level is met and new learning is constructed to meet their potential (Kantar et al., 2020). Rather than focusing on students' weaknesses, their strengths are identified, and skills are built based on their strengths (Karimi & Nazari, 2021). According to Smagorinsky (2018), as skills need less scaffolding and become more independent, old scaffolds are removed and learning continues, much like the construction of a skyscraper.

Richardson (2016) designed the *NSFGR* framework around the tenet of scaffolding because it is essential to student learning. All of the participants agreed that Richardson's (2016) framework provides appropriate scaffolds their students need in order to be successful in reading. Michael (interview, May 20, 2023) described the process of "leveling" his students:

I start with a running record based on the previous year's end-of-year [EOY] assessment. Their level may go up or down because of Summer Slide, but it shouldn't change

dramatically. Then I go through the high frequency word list and identify the words my

students don't know. I compare their accuracy from their final running record and their

score from their high frequency word list. If I need additional information, like if I

noticed specific holes in their phonics or phonological awareness ability, I pull out the

"old school" PAST and PA assessments. I take all that information and compare it to the

reading levels Jan Richardson has defined. They *always* align. *Always*.

Chandler (focus group, May 9, 2023) commented, "finding a student's individual instructional

level and then using texts [for that level], vocabulary, and aligned comprehension strategies,

coupled with teacher modeling, has been highly successful over the last few years." Rebecca

(focus group, May 18, 2023) added:

All the components just work together to create this solid foundation for kids. The word

work and all the hands-on pieces that come into play with that; the meaningful

conversations about words or text; the writing. It's this pretty cool process. I get to watch

these little humans go from feeling like they know *nothing* about reading to being

confident conversationalists about texts they have read! All because they took what they

knew and started building new knowledge bit by bit.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of educators who utilize

differentiated instructional methods through the lens of Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step*

*Forward in Guided Reading* in rural, Title I elementary schools in the Piedmont Triad region of

North Carolina. Data was collected from 13 participants through individual semi-structured

interviews, questionnaires, and three focus groups. The results of this study were identified

within this chapter, in addition to the data analysis findings. Through phenomenological

reduction, as described by Moustakas (1994), four themes emerged. These themes were identified as: (a) time; (b) teacher self-efficacy; (c) structure; and (d) student performance. Seven sub themes emerged from the themes: (a) stress; (b) burnout (c) collaboration; (d) decreased stress; (e) language skills; (f) thinking independently; and (g) student self-efficacy. The central research question and the three sub questions were answered through the analysis of the data collected. Lived experiences of the participants revealed that they are able to address individual students' needs appropriately through the implementation of Richardson' (2016) framework, despite having a shorter than needed literacy block. Participants also noted that since implementing *NSFGR*, their self-efficacy has dramatically increased. Additionally, the implementation of social interaction has added structure to their small group instruction time. Less time is wasted, students' language skills and ability to think independently have increased, and students' confidence in literacy has improved.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Overview

Addressing individual student needs is being accomplished through differentiated, small group instruction. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators who utilize differentiated instructional methods through the lens of Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* in rural, Title I elementary schools in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina. This chapter provides the overview, discussion, interpretation of the findings, and synopsis of the thematic findings. Constructed from the outcomes of the study, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, and limitations and delimitations are then considered. Finally, recommendations for future research are addressed.

### Discussion

Through Vygotsky's (1980) social learning theory, this chapter examines the findings of this study as connected to the themes identified, along with the implications considering the significant literature. Because this research sought to understand the lived experiences of the rural, Title I participants who implement Richardson's (2016) differentiated literacy framework, a phenomenological design was implemented. Because an unbiased design was implemented, this study is described as a transcendental design (Moustakas, 1994).

### Interpretation of Findings

This transcendental phenomenological study was able to uncover the essence of the experiences of 13 rural Title I teachers using Jan Richardson's (2016) guided reading framework to differentiate small group literacy in the Piedmont of North Carolina. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and three focus group discussions. Data were

analyzed by coding, with four themes and three subthemes emerging. These themes are interpreted and supported below. Following are the suggestions for policy and/or practice as well as the theoretical and empirical implications.

### *Summary of Thematic Findings*

The participants in this study were liberal with their time and unrestricted with their responses, whether in our individual interviews, on their questionnaires, or in the focus groups. This afforded me the opportunity to collect rich, dense data regarding the phenomenon being studied. Participants were very open in the descriptions of their experiences and enthusiastic about sharing their experiences, should these experiences help other educators make decisions regarding differentiated instructions within their own classrooms, using Richardson's (2016) model. Four themes emerged through data analysis. These themes were: (a) time; (b) self-efficacy; (c) structure; and (d) student performance. Time produced two sub themes: stress and burnout; teacher self-efficacy generated collaboration; structure constructed decreased stress; and student performance yielded language skills, thinking independently, and confidence. The interpretations of themes include two main interpretations: (a) teachers are persistent; and (b) persistence brings results. Below are the explanations for these interpretations.

**Teachers are persistent.** The first interpretation of this study's findings is that teachers are persistent. Figlio and Karbownik (2017) asserted that the literacy learning gap continues to widen among Title I students despite continued efforts to decrease it. Although non-negotiables from districts continue to demand more from educators, micromanaging the number of minutes spent on various components of literacy instruction, teachers persist. Stressed and burnt out, many educators have begun to question why their students are not making the progress that is considered to be proficient (Hundson et al., 2021). Regardless, efficacious educators are adaptive

and reflective. They are persistent in finding practices that are successful. They are knowledgeable regarding what needs to be taught (Hudson et al., 2020; Vaughn et al., 2020). Despite being tired and frustrated with ever-changing policies, educators come together, collaborating to determine how they can improve their craft (Zhang et al, 2020).

Hudson et al. (2020) asserted that teachers are capable of recognizing that students are meaning makers and tangential learners. The participants from this study have consistently relied on Vygotsky's (1980) social learning theory to implement what their learners need for appropriate literacy instruction. The reliance on Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* has afforded the participants in this study the chance to implement social interaction, meaning making, and scaffolding on a daily basis with their learners. Teachers whose students had previously not made notable growth have begun witnessing incredible results. Why? Because they were persistent.

Bellibas (2016) asserted that measuring teacher effectiveness based off student progress in whole group instruction is ineffective. Demanding specific amounts of time on whole group teaching components would, therefore, render ineffective suppositions regarding teacher effectiveness. In order to make the best instructional decisions for their students, teachers require the autonomy to do so (Vaughn et al, 2020). Due to recent SoR implementations in several states, many teachers believe their autonomy has been stripped from them (Vaughn et al, 2020). The teachers in this study, however, have continued making decisions based on the needs of their students, regardless of continuous, and oftentimes useless, district and state non-negotiables. They are able to do this because they have principals who allow them autonomy within their own classrooms. Therefore, they persist in social interactions with their students, using tools to connect learning and instructional scaffolding.

**Persistence Brings Results.** Educators who subscribe to Vygotsky's (1980) social learning theory believe that learning experiences play a vital role in academic achievements (Chuang, 2021; Clark, 2018; Hedges, 2021; Kambara, 2020). Vygotsky (1980) postulated that knowledge is constructed through social interactions to draw out higher-order thinking and scaffolded learning experiences. Furthermore, Abtahi (2018) noted that a systematic connection transpires when students engage with tools in order to solve a task, based on Vygotsky's (1980) social learning theory.

De Bruyckere et al. (2019) argued that teachers who are experts in guided reading "have a deep conceptual knowledge…of how people learn" (p. 140). Nicholas et al. (2021) went further to add that teachers utilize that knowledge to meet the needs of each student. Because guided reading is grounded in social learning theory (Clark, 2018; Eun, 2018, Hoffman, 2017), there are plenty of opportunities for learning to take place.

The participants in this study have consistently implemented Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading*. In doing so, they have identified texts based on students' instructional levels; provided opportunities for social interaction between peers using vocabulary talks and book talks; and implemented the use of literacy tools such as Elkonin boxes for phonological awareness and letter tiles for high-frequency words and phonics skills. These teachers have successfully applied scaffolds for students to eventually become independent with each text level. The participants in this study have been able to focus on a set of literacy skills rather than teaching individual skills in isolation. In doing so, these participants have experienced great success in their practices. Their students have made excellent growth based on these practices.

**Implications for Policy or Practice**

      The findings of this research study described the experiences of rural Title I teachers who use Richardson's (2016) framework to teach small group literacy instruction to address the learning gap. The results that emerged could possibly have policy and practice implications that may benefit potential stakeholders. These implications resulted from the themes and interpretations of the study. The participants in the study were rural, Title I elementary teacher who teach guided reading, implementing Jan Richardson's (2016) framework with fidelity. Policymakers, instructional leadership teams, and teachers may use these results. The following implications apply to policy and practice.

*Implications for Policy*

      Students and teachers alike are impacted by the decisions made by shareholders, which are then used to develop policies in legislature. Relevant stakeholders for this study are considered to be local school representatives like the district superintendent and school board, district central office employees, and state legislators: individuals who can influence change from the top (state and/or district) to the bottom (classroom). Because the findings in this study can be utilized by educational leaders at the state level to make policy decisions, teachers are the most significant stakeholders. In this study, participants are from one district within one state. In the same state, however, other districts have begun abandoning guided reading for science of reading components: whole and small group phonics- and phonological awareness-based instruction.

      At the time of data collection, participants reported that the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) had begun requiring all districts to complete Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS). LETRS is a two-year, Canvas-based training that

provides in-depth training for the components of science of reading. Participants stated that SoR had, at the time of data collection, already been passed into law for North Carolina. Because every district within the state has begun LETRS training during different years since the passing of SoR, many teachers, according to the participants, are finding themselves in limbo. Many districts within the state have not started training, some are mid-training, and others have already completed LETRS training. This means that some districts are still teaching guided reading; some are doing a combination of phonics, like Fundations, and phonological awareness, like Heggerty, and guided reading using a framework like Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading*; and other have abandoned guided reading completely and are teaching whole group phonics (Fundations), whole group phonemic awareness (Heggerty), and guided phonics instruction for small groups. Within the state, there is inconsistency concerning the expectations of literacy instruction regarding the best practices of science of reading; however, there are consistent expectations regarding reading comprehension through reading literacy (RL) standards and reading information (RI) standards in whole group instruction.

In addition to the cost of LETRS training for teachers, each district is also responsible for covering the cost of post-training materials for the required instruction components. "[Our district] doesn't have that kind of money. We started the year out at a three-million-dollar deficit. We were originally told that the district was going to purchase the required decodables and then we were told they would be a site-based purchased. Now, we aren't even sure what's happening," Pam (personal communication, May 26, 2023) reported during her focus group session. "I feel like we're throwing the baby out with the bath water," Meredith (personal communication, May 26, 2023) said during the same focus group: "teaching is cyclical. Twenty-five years ago, we taught what science of reading suggests. Then, we moved to guided reading.

Now, we're back to science of reading. Maybe we should trust teachers to do their jobs. Just a thought."

This study may assist legislators, district, and school leaders in creating a feasible plan for meeting the demands of the new science of reading law. Should these stakeholders communicate with veteran teachers – the most critical stakeholders – a positive outcome could take place. Meredith's (personal communication, May 26, 2023) statement during the focus group regarding cyclical mandates is an important factor. District leaders should take this under advisement and consider a compromise: Whole group phonics would use Fundations, phonological awareness through Heggerty, and reading comprehension based on the state standard course of study, while small group instruction would focus on targeted skills in these same areas, using Richardson's (2016) framework to differentiate. This would provide on-grade level instruction in each area during whole group instruction, yet also provide targeted, differentiated instruction based on student need in small group instruction. It is imperative to break the cycle of low socioeconomic status learners from remaining disadvantaged (Figlio & Karbownik, 2017). This compromise could, potentially, provide the intentional, effective literacy instruction needed to break that cycle.

In essence, teachers are practitioners. They administer assessments to diagnose a problem. Then, they determine the next steps to rectify the issue. Just like doctors, if one treatment proves unfit, another one is established, and so on, until improvement is shown. Educators are able to do this because they are in the trenches every day. They know their students and they are knowledgeable regarding the needs of their learners. Therefore, to prevent further recurrent patterns in literacy education reform, lawmakers should consider the voices of those who are doing the work in the classroom, as they are the experts.

*Implications for Practice*

The implications for practice from this study may inform stakeholders with a vested interest in literacy practices of public schools. These stakeholders may include but are not limited to school administration (district superintendent, school board, principals, and assistant principals) and teachers. School leaders can employ this study to plan professional development for teachers within the district and/or schools. Raymond-West and Rangel (2020) assert that new teachers lack the self-efficacy to address the literacy needs of their students. By providing professional development, initially licensed teachers' self-efficacy would increase in terms of differentiating instruction for literacy instruction.

The experiences of the participants from this study consistently described literacy success of students when their individual needs were met through differentiated instruction. For the sake of this study, all the participants were selected for involvement in this research based on their employment at schools where annual training using Richardson's (2016) framework takes place; however, not every school completes such training. Moats (2020) states that educators lacking experience and efficacy will not be successful in teaching literacy. Providing annual professional development may allow teachers to experience the importance of differentiation through the integration of social learning theory (Vygotsky, 1980).

Teachers may use the results from this study to understand the importance of differentiated instruction to address the learning gap of students. Based on the findings of this study, all teachers, statewide, may implement Richardson's (2016) *NSFGR* to address students' individual literacy needs. Teachers may, also, possibly realize how Richardson's (2016) framework addresses the phonics and phonological portions stated in the science of reading movement.

**Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

This portion considers the theoretical and empirical implications. Vygotsky's (1980) social learning theory effectively served as the framework to describe the lived experiences of rural, Title I elementary teachers differentiating literacy instruction by implementing Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading.* Additionally, the outcomes of this study add to the literature on differentiated literacy instruction and have recommendations for future research regarding self-efficacy and professional development.

*Theoretical Implications*

Vygotsky's (1980) social learning theory productively served as the framework to reveal the themes of rural, Title I elementary teachers who differentiate literacy instruction by using Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading*. According to social learning theory (Vygotsky, 1980), learning best takes place through social interactions, making meaning using tools, and appropriate scaffolding. Three sub themes emerged from the theme of student performance: language skills, thinking independently, and student self-efficacy. Based on the identified tenets of SLT (Vygotsky, 1980), teachers described their experiences using social interaction, meaning making, and instruction within students' zone of proximal development. Students showed increased growth when implementing these factors, as described by Vygotsky (1980).

*Empirical Implications*

Empirically, this study's findings help to advance the research that discusses differentiated instruction (Onyishi et al., 2020; Puzio et al., 2020). Specifically, this study adds to the research on differentiated instruction by addressing literacy instruction and the influences that shape educators' experiences when teaching students in rural, Title I schools. This study is

unique due to its qualitative design and the fact that the majority of research regarding differentiated instruction is quantitative. Of the current research regarding differentiated instruction, there are no such designs that attempt to comprehend educators' experiences.

This research reveals that educators must assess learners, determine their needs, and plan intentional, targeted, individualized instruction (D. S. Davis et al., 2021; Onyishi et al., 2020; van Geel, 2018). Because the needs of learners are so incredibly diverse, many teachers feel that differentiation is nearly impossible (Grecu, 2023; Onyishi et al., 2020; Puzio et al., 2020). Additionally, many educators believe that the cueing system that typically coincides with guided reading is antiquated, teaching students to guess, rather than attack the words and solve them, phonetically (Puzio et al., 2020).

The findings from this study reveal that 10 of the 13 participants believe—despite the shift to science of reading—that a guided reading method, incorporating Richardson's (2016) framework, is a more appropriate method to address the needs of underperforming students. The participants who continue to use Richardson's (2016) framework argue that the structure of the lessons provides the differentiated instruction (Adams, 1998; D. S. Davis et al., 2021; Moats & Tolman, 2019; Schwartz, 2020b).

**Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations in research are any possible weaknesses beyond the researcher's control within a study that may affect the findings of the research (Peoples, 2021). A limitation in this study exists in the predetermined ideas and/or opinions regarding the individual interview, questionnaire, and/or focus group questions asked. Participants were not responsible for employing the epoché process as I was. Additionally, three of the participants were hesitant to share their experiences. These participants were concerned about their identity being

compromised. In response to their concerns, I reminded them that their participation was completely voluntary, and they could stop at any point. Furthermore, I reminded these participants that there would be no identifiers within the research. The more we discussed the process, the participants became less concerned and began offering more elaboration with each question they were asked. Another limitation to this study is that each of the three schools where data collection took place are located in the same district and included the same grade span (elementary teachers). To address this limitation, a future phenomenological study could include teachers from across the country, varying in location as well as grade span.

A delimitation in research is a boundary created by the researcher in terms of the focus of the study (Peoples, 2021). Delimitations in this study included participants' requirement to have a minimum of four years of teaching experience as a teacher. The number of years of experience was chosen because the state of North Carolina recognizes teachers with four years of experience as highly qualified teachers and are no longer recognized as a beginning licensed teacher. Another delimitation in this study required that participants were teachers or academic coaches in a rural, Title I elementary school. The rationale for this was to ensure that the participants could offer relevant experience to the study. Finally, the participants were also required to teach guided reading using Jan Richardson's (2016) guided reading with fidelity. This was relevant to guarantee the participant could provide relevant experience to the study.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this study should be considered preliminary, as this exists as an early study regarding this topic. Additional research is recommended in order to validate these results and fully comprehend these lived experiences. This study explored educators' experiences during the transition to SoR. The findings may be altered based on other parts of the country where

guided phonics is taking place rather than guided reading. This study was limited to educators in a rural Title I elementary setting, who had at least four years of experience, and taught guided reading using Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* with fidelity. One recommendation for future research includes conducting an additional phenomenological research study of like educators in other regions of the United States to increase the generalization. Additionally, this study could be replicated and expanded to include other groups. Future researchers may find it beneficial to explore the experiences of middle school educators who implement Richardson's (2016) framework as an intervention for students who are below grade level, to gain insight on their experiences in an environment of older students. Similarly, another recommendation for future research is to extend such a study to urban elementary schools in order to investigate the implementation of *NSFGR* in another elementary Title I setting. Future research could also include a phenomenological research study regarding the further-widened literacy learning gap post-Covid. Additionally, future research could possibly expand to learners, describing their experiences with learning through Jan Richardson's (2016) framework to gain a different perspective regarding the implementation of the framework. Finally, researchers may want to complete a quantitative study to determine whether students who receive guided reading instruction experience greater or less success in literacy learning compared to learners who receive solely guided phonics instruction.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators who utilize differentiated instructional methods through the lens of Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* (*NSFGR*) in rural, Title I elementary schools in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina. This study gave a voice to

educators who work in rural, Title I schools, to describe their experiences implementing guided reading using Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading*. The identified problem in this study is the ever-widening literacy learning gap in rural, Title I schools. This study is personal to me due to my 20-year experience as an educator in this type of environment. The study was guided by the following research questions: What are the lived experiences of educators in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina who differentiate instruction using Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Steps Forward in Guided Reading* in rural Title I elementary schools? What are the lived experiences of Title I teachers with integrating social interaction into small group literacy instruction? What are the experiences of Title I instructors when facilitating guided literacy instruction through discovery and meaning making? What are the lived experiences of Title I educators when implementing instructional scaffolding during guided reading?

The theory that guided this study was Vygotsky's (1980) social learning theory. This theory highlighted how the participants implemented social interaction, discovery and meaning making, and instructional scaffolding to differentiate instruction in guided reading groups. The primary findings in this study identified four themes: (a) time; (b) teacher self-efficacy; (c) structure; and (d) student performance. Within time, the sub themes of stress and burnout emerged. From teacher self-efficacy, the sub theme of collaboration surfaced. Decreased stress emerged from the theme of structure while three sub themes manifested from student performance: language skills, thinking independently, and student self-efficacy. To prevent ongoing vicious, cyclical education patterns when examining literacy laws in the future, researchers should allow classroom educators a voice, as they will be utilizing current practices and will have implemented previous applications.

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# Appendix A

# IRB Application/Approval

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 24, 2023

███████████████

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-1044 A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Teacher Efficacy in Guided Reading

Dear ████████████████

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 46:104(d):

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 ████████████
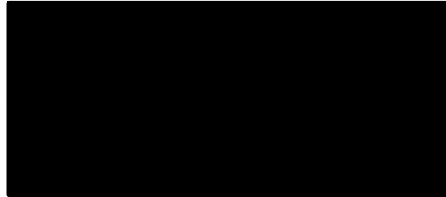
Sincerely,
████████████████

*Administrative Chair*
**Research Ethics Office**

## Appendix B

### Setting Permission/Approval

## Permission Request for Site/Setting

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Tuesday, April 25, 2023

█████████████████████

Dear ███████████,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctorate in Education degree. The title of my research project is *A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Teacher Efficacy in Guided Reading* and the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of educators who utilize differentiated instructional methods through the lens of Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* in rural, Title I elementary schools in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at ████████████ and contact members of your staff to invite them to participate in my research study.

Participants will be asked to schedule an interview, complete a questionnaire, and participate in a focus group. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval and respond by email to ████████████████████ A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Rhonda J. Webb
Liberty University Doctoral Candidate

# Permission Request for Site/Setting

Monday, February 6, 2023

███████████████
███████████████
███████████████

Dear ████████████

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctorate in Education degree. The title of my research project is *A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Teacher Efficacy in Guided Reading* and the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of educators who utilize differentiated instructional methods through the lens of Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* in rural, Title I elementary schools in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at ████████████ and contact members of your staff to invite them to participate in my research study.

Participants will be asked to schedule an interview, complete a questionnaire, and participate in a focus group. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval and respond by email to ████████████. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Rhonda J. Webb
Liberty University Doctoral Candidate

**Permission Request for Site/Setting**

Tuesday, April 25, 2023

████████████
████████████
████████████

Dear ███████,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctorate in Education degree. The title of my research project is *A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Teacher Efficacy in Guided Reading* and the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of educators who utilize differentiated instructional methods through the lens of Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* in rural, Title I elementary schools in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at ███████████████ and contact members of your staff to invite them to participate in my research study.

Participants will be asked to schedule an interview, complete a questionnaire, and participate in a focus group. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval and respond by email to ████████████. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Rhonda J. Webb
Liberty University Doctoral Candidate

███████                    ████████████████████████████
                              █████████████████████████
                                   █████████████████

███████                                          ███████████
Chief Academic Officer                           Executive Director for Accountability

4/16/2023

Dear Rhonda Webb

Our team has reviewed your application to conduct the research study, "A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Teacher Efficacy in Guided Reading."

███████████████████████████████  grants you permission to conduct your study in ████ .

Preliminary permission is based upon the following conditions:

● Your study maintains the full support of the participants.
● Active consent is received from each participant in the study.
● A copy of the approved IRB is received, and a final letter of approval is issued by this office before research activity commences.
● Research is conducted in accordance with your application as approved by ████ and the approved IRB.
● The purpose, participants, and data collection procedures remain as described in the application.
● Confidentiality is upheld so that no participant in the study is identifiable.
● Requests for participation by solicited participants remain completely voluntary.
● A final copy of your work shall be submitted to the ███████████████████████ .

Sincerely,

███████████

**Appendix C**

**Recruitment Letter**

Wednesday, May 3, 2023

███████████████████
███████████████████
███████████████████
███████████████████
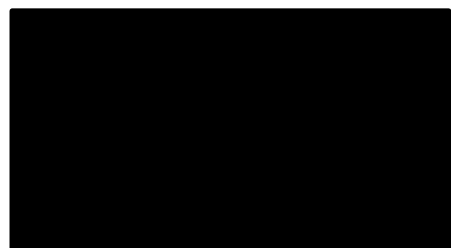
Dear Colleague:

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of educators who utilize differentiated instructional methods through the lens of Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* in rural, Title I elementary schools in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be a teacher or academic coach with more than four years of experience and use Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Steps Forward in Guided Reading* with fidelity. Participants, if willing, will be asked to meet with me one-on-one for a semi-structured interview (60 minutes), complete a five-question questionnaire (30 minutes), meet for a focus group (60 minutes). Participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected.

To participate, please contact me at ████████████████. For more information or to schedule an interview, please contact me at ████████████████.

If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of your interview.

Participants will receive a $50 Amazon Gift Card and will be entered to win a $250 Visa Gift Card.

Sincerely,

Rhonda J. Webb
Liberty University Doctoral Candidate
████████████

**Appendix D**

# Consent

**Title of the Project:** A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Teacher Efficacy in Guided Reading
**Principal Investigator:** Rhonda J. Webb, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a teacher or academic coach with more than four years of experience and use Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Steps Forward in Guided Reading* consistently. 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.

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

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of educators who utilize differentiated instructional methods through the lens of Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* in rural, Title I elementary schools in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina. The participants in this study will describe their lived experiences with implementing Jan Richardson's (2016) *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading* in order to address the literacy achievement gap.

### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:
1. Participate in an in-person/virtual/phone, audio-recorded interview that will take no more than 1 hour.
2. Participate in a five-question questionnaire that will take no more than 30 minutes.
3. Participate in an in-person/virtual/phone, audio-recorded focus group that will take no more than 1 hour.

### 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 understanding the lived experiences of Title I educators who implement Jan Richardson's (2016) The Next Steps Forward in Guided Reading in order to close the literacy achievement gap; understanding the lived experiences of Title I teachers with integrating social interactions into small group literacy instruction; understanding the lived

experiences of Title I instructors when facilitating guided literacy instruction through discovery and meaning making; and understanding the lived experiences of Title I educators when implementing instructional scaffolding during guided reading.

### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

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

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

### 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.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- 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.
- Data will be stored on an encrypted, password-protected computer as well as an encrypted USB flash drive for backup, in a locked file cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer for three years and then deleted. Only the researcher and members of the dissertation committee will have access to these recordings.

### How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. At the conclusion of the focus group participants will receive a $50 Amazon gift card and entered to win a $250 Visa gift card at the completion of the study.

### 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 or ███████████████████████. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

**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 Rhonda Jo Webb. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ and/or ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, ▮▮▮▮▮▮ ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮.

**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 IRB. Our physical address is ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ ▮▮▮▮▮ our phone number is ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ and our email address is ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮.

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

**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 me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

**Appendix E**

# Individual Interview Questions

1. How would you describe yourself to me, as if we had never met? CRQ

2. Why did you become an educator? CRQ

3. How would you describe your educational background and career through your current position? CRQ

4. What was your favorite teacher like? CRQ

5. Why was (s)he your favorite? CRQ

6. As an educator, what has been your most meaningful lesson, regarding student success? CRQ

7. What made this lesson so meaningful? CRQ

8. In your own words, what does integrating social interaction into learning experiences look like? SQ1

9. When planning guided reading, how have Jan Richardson's strategies allowed you to integrate social interaction into guided reading learning experiences? SQ1

10. What professional development experiences have you had that prepared you to integrate social interactions into guided reading? SQ1

11. When teaching small group literacy, what, if any, challenges have you experienced integrating social interaction? SQ1

12. What are your experiences when facilitating guided reading through discovery and meaning making, using Jan Richardson's strategies? SQ2

13. When planning guided literacy instruction, how have Jan Richardson's strategies allowed for discovery and meaning making? SQ2

14. When planning guided reading instruction, how have Jan Richardson's strategies allowed for the implementation of instructional scaffolding? SQ3

15. What are your lived experiences implementing instructional scaffolding while facilitating small group reading instruction? SQ3

16. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with teaching guided reading that we haven't discussed? CRQ

17. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with lower SES students that we haven't discussed? CRQ

**Appendix F**

**Google Form Questionnaire Questions**

1. As an educator, how has implementing *NSFGR* affected how you facilitate small group reading? CRQ

2. What are your feelings of self-efficacy, as an educator, related to teaching guided reading? CRQ

3. As an educator, what steps do you feel are integral for you to successfully implement social interaction into guided reading? SQ1

4. What steps do you feel, as an educator, you must take to effectively integrate discovery and meaning making into guided literacy groups? SQ2

5. What steps do you feel, as an educator, you must take to effectively incorporate appropriate literacy scaffolds into small group reading? SQ3

**Appendix G**

# Focus Group Questions

1. What are the biggest challenges when facilitating guided reading in a Title One school?
   CRQ

2. What are your experiences when implementing Jan Richardson's strategies while
   facilitating small group literacy instruction? CRQ

3. Time (regarding the length of your small group block and preparation time) is a theme
   that was revealed during the interview process. What more can you tell me about this?

4. Positive teacher self-efficacy is an additional theme that was revealed during the
   interview process. How can we go deeper in this area?

5. Student performance is the final theme revealed during our interview. Specifically in
   regards to language skills, independent thinking, and confidence. How can you elaborate
   here?

**Appendix H**

**Researcher's Journal Excerpt (Epoché)**

May 5, 2023

Interview with "Chandler." Like the others, I explained (with my camera on) that once we were ready, I would turn my camera off; I didn't want my facial expressions to affect their responses. I also explained I would mute occasionally so I could keep my train of thought, but I would—for the most part—be unmuted so he would know I was still there.

I often want to ask what would happen if a school didn't bend and bow to these "laws" put in place.
① I know that—like me—these teachers probably don't know the answer to that; and
② Probably don't want to find out the answer to it.

But seriously—can teachers get

in trouble for helping kids learn ... if schools are seeing progress using the framework?

Ultimately, though, guided phonics or guided reading — either way it's based on ZPD... should it matter? States aren't changing comprehension standards, so don't kids have to practice that, too?

Our education system is
BROKEN.