TEACHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES OF IMPLEMENTING READING INTERVENTIONS AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL IN SMALL RURAL DISTRICTS TO MEET THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE COLORADO READ ACT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

Misty Marie Cronsell

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who are mandated by the Colorado READ Act to implement reading interventions for all students on READ plans. The theory guiding this study was Bandura's theory of self-efficacy as it pertains to the self-efficacy beliefs the teachers have who are providing these reading interventions. The study involved 10 middle school teachers from across the state of Colorado who were responsible for the reading interventions at the middle school level. The use of individual interviews, focus interviews, document analysis, and a self-efficacy survey were used to gather data. An analysis of each set of data was conducted that involved coding and recognizing reoccurring themes. These themes were analyzed further for the essence. The main themes of the study were: time/resources, training/support, district expectations versus state mandates, and teacher self-efficacy.

Keywords: READ Act, self-efficacy, reading interventions, RtI, small rural

Copyright Page

Dedication

To my son and daughter who finished their high school years and started college while their mom tackled this degree. Thanks for listening to me, studying with me, and encouraging me to get this done. To my mom and dad who always had faith in my abilities, and to my husband who supported my desire to get this degree.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my Lord for the strength to see this through to the end. I am also grateful for my chair, Dr. Sabine Branch, for her support and feedback and for Dr. Rick Bragg for his willingness to be part of this process.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES)

Colorado Department of Education (CDE)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Learning Disabled (LD)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Reading to Ensure Academic Development (READ)

Response to Intervention (RtI)

Significant Reading Deficiency (SRD)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Reading is a critical skill in today's world, both in academia and beyond. Reading is necessary to access content in all academic areas, not just Language Arts (Vaughn et al., 2018). Reading expectations and the complexity of texts increase as students progress from elementary school to middle school and then to high school, yet only 33% of 4th graders and only 31% of eighth graders were reading at grade level in 2022 (Berendes et al., 2018; The Nation's Report Card, 2022). For over a hundred years, educators have recognized the need for reading interventions, even before the creation of standardized reading tests to ascertain reading abilities (Kelly, 1916). However, it is clear that the majority of students still are not demonstrating grade-level reading (The Nation's Report Card, 2022). Both federal and state legislative acts have mandated that this problem be addressed (Colorado Department of Education, 2012; Evidence for ESSA, 2022). In 2019, Colorado revised their READ Act, mandating that secondary schools provide reading interventions to students with READ plans. Mandating the READ plans places a burden on small rural school districts and teachers to provide these reading interventions. In this chapter, the background of the problem from the historical, social, and theoretical contexts and why this qualitative study is important is examined and explained. The problem and purpose statements are presented in this chapter, along with the significance of this study for education in rural school districts. The research questions are introduced that guided the study, along with definitions that relate to this research. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Background

The ability to read is crucial for academic success (Learning Ally, 2020). When a student does not read at grade level, the need for reading interventions often becomes necessary (Clarke

et al., 2017; Liebfreund & Amendum, 2017). However, rural school districts often do not have the funding or the qualified staff to provide these interventions at the secondary level (Brownell et al., 2018). This chapter contains a summary of the most relevant literature pertaining to the need and problem with providing reading interventions in a rural setting. How this need and problem evolved is explored in the historical context. The influence on the field of education and society as a whole is explored in the social context. Then, the theoretical concepts that pertain to teacher self-efficacy and reading interventions, and the principles underpinning this research are explored in the theoretical context.

Historical Context

The written word existed over a thousand years before Christ, necessitating the need to be able to read (Quay & Watling, 2008). For many centuries, the ability to read was predominantly isolated to the upper-class, government officials, and religious persons (Quay & Watling, 2008). Even in Colonial America, where the degree of literacy was higher than England and Europe at that time, literacy was still higher among the rich and upper-middle class. Bible reading was highly encouraged, which improved literacy rates (Quay & Watling, 2008). With compulsory schooling and a society moving from more rural to more urban industrial in the late 1800s, literacy gained more importance. Since 1867 and the creation of the Federal Department of Education, each year this entity was tasked to compile a report on the education of American children (Snyder, 1993). In 1870, approximately 20% of the population 14 and older could not read at all (Quay & Watling, 2008). The literacy rate in the United States improved 14 percent from 1876 to 1915 (Quay & Watling, 2008). However, for the poor and especially minorities in the United States at the turn of the century, literacy levels remained low (Kaestle, 1991). By 1940, less than half the U.S. population had completed 8th grade (Snyder, 1993). High school

education was limited to predominantly middle to upper class white students (Snyder, 1993). However, by 1991, around 70% of students completed high school (Snyder, 1993). In 1979, nearly one million people in the U.S. over the age of 14 were still considered illiterate, despite compulsory education requirements (Kaestle, 1991).

Researchers in the 1960s and 1970s focused on identifying students who had learning disabilities who were not intellectually disabled (Preston et al., 2015). In a study by Rutter and Yule (1975), the researchers found that IQ did not correlate with achievement in reading. A large occurrence of low reading achievement denoted an ability-achievement discrepancy. Another study in 1983 determined that over 90% of students who were not identified as learning disabled but rather low achieving met with criteria for learning disabled, showing the need for interventions and the need for alternative diagnosing of learning gaps (Preston et al., 2015). By the 1990s and early 2000s, researchers explored the effectiveness of intensive reading interventions, finding that these interventions significantly improved reading growth (Torgesan et al., 2001; Vellutino et al., 1996).

Federal and state mandates in the 21st century addressed the need for improved literacy (Brownell et al., 2018; O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Preston et al., 2015; Schimke, 2022). No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 required districts to employ highly qualified teachers, yet for rural populations, the remoteness, lack of social and cultural activities, insufficient salaries, and extra duties placed on intervention teachers made this difficult to attract these highly qualified teachers (Brownell et al., 2018). Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) also impacted rural schools in the same way as NCLB, due to increased federal expectations for the employment of highly qualified teachers, as these unfunded mandates made recruiting more difficult (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022). In addition, NCLB required schools to use scientifically based curricula and

increased time in reading, which lessened time spent in specials (music, art, gym) and recess time (Powell et al., 2009). An increased emphasis on test scores also resulted from NCLB. Rural teachers did not feel prepared to provide necessary interventions to struggling students, which increased the identification of students as learning disabled in order to increase funding to hire reading specialists (Powell et al., 2009). With the Reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, which required the use of universal screenings, students who struggled with reading were better identified (Preston et al., 2015). Less students were identified as learning disabled who were struggling readers and placed in RtI Tier 2 interventions (Preston et al., 2015). Despite these Federal mandates, in a survey of 59 rural high schools in 2010, only 37% had a reading program to help struggling readers, with the others citing their lack of a program on affordability, lack of reading teachers, and scheduling barriers (Bursuck et al., 2010). In 2012, the state of Colorado passed the Colorado Reading to Ensure Academic Development (READ) Act that addressed early childhood reading (Abram, 2019). This Act only addressed reading through the 5th grade. Recognizing that many students still did not achieve grade-level proficiency by the start of secondary school the READ Act revision in 2019 mandated secondary schools provide continued reading interventions for all students who were placed on READ plans during their elementary school years and not reading at grade level (Abram, 2019). No state funding is provided for implementation of this mandate at the secondary level which leaves rural districts struggling to provide evidence-based reading interventions (Schimke, 2022).

For over a hundred years, the United States has recognized the need for increasing literacy, yet 21% of adults are still considered illiterate in the U.S. in 2022 (Thinkimpact, 2022) despite compulsory education and increased federal and state educational mandates. The United States Department of Agriculture, in 2015, identified a 14% gap between post-secondary degree

holders between urban and rural adults, attributing this, in part, to higher poverty and higher unemployment rates which continue to hinder educational attainment. Despite an increase in RtI and other multi-tiered interventions, learning disabled identification, and higher teacher expectations, research over the years continues to show the need for reading interventions to address the gap in reading achievement and grade level expectations.

Social Context

The who, what, and how literacy is learned is shaped by the social context. Rural communities have often differed from urban communities. Societal expectations – often developed by traditions and religious beliefs– and educational pedagogies are shaped by the community (Franzak et al., 2019). Literacy practices are shaped by the views of the community (Lycke et al., 2015). Ingrained into American culture is the belief that rural education is of less quality and this belief is often held by rural students (Franzak et al., 2019). The need to focus on literacy in rural areas is a social concern, as rural areas contain the highest percentage of student poverty, which impacts a literacy-rich environment (Green, 2013). Knowing the practices and lived experiences of rural teachers can provide a rebuttal to the rural stereotype.

A major societal concern is the financial aspect of struggling readers and low literacy rates. The cost of providing reading interventions puts strain on school budgets, but especially rural districts that lack the commercial higher tax base of urban districts (Brownell et al., 2018). The estimated cost of providing remediation per student per year is between $1,800 to $3,400 (Bernanke, 2022). Approximately 8,000 students in the U.S. drop out of school each day, with one of the main reasons being a lack of reading ability (Learning Ally, 2020). An adult with low literacy earns an average of $28,000 less than other adults (Learning Ally, 2020). The cost to U.S. taxpayers over the lifetime of each dropout is $260,000 (Learning Ally, 2020). Across the

nation, the estimated cost of illiteracy is 2.2 trillion dollars each year (Thinkimpact, 2022). Even though the cost of providing reading interventions is high, the societal cost of not providing them appears to be even higher.

Another consideration is the impact on the individual student. From 1975 to 2000, the number of students identified as learning disabled more than doubled, in part from schools believing that students not achieving at grade level could benefit from special education services (Preston et al., 2015). With additional federal dollars being provided for students with disabilities, this increase allowed districts to afford more special education teachers to address intervention needs (Powell et al., 2009). However, students who are not proficient readers become frustrated with grade-level textbook material and often fear the negative peer perceptions and stigma of being labeled special needs or having to attend special reading classes (Bursuck et al., 2010; Salinger, 2020). With approximately 85% of curriculum involving reading after third grade, reading skills are essential for student success (Bernanke, 2022). Students who are struggling readers often demonstrate low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy. Low reading abilities correlate to an increase in school discipline issues, higher dropout rates, attendance issues, and an increase in juvenile crime (Bernanke, 2022). Some states even use the number of reading failures to predict the need for future prison sizes (Bernanke, 2022).

Because the Colorado Department of Education has no direct way to enforce the READ Act mandate, this lack of support leaves the responsibility and the enforcement of the mandate in the hands of each district (Schimke, 2022). In one small rural school district in Colorado, only 16% of the 7th grade students scored proficient in reading in 2019 (Public School Review, 2022). However, the middle school in this district only provides reading interventions once a week for 30 minutes (Waring, 2022). By providing rural schools with a look at what other districts are

doing to provide reading interventions, districts like this one are informed as to what other teachers and districts are doing that is or is not successful. Students only have one opportunity to be in secondary education and gain these critical reading skills. Looking at the results from this study could provide the Colorado Department of Education with a picture of how the secondary READ Act mandates are being carried out across rural Colorado. With 17% of students receiving their education in the 153 rural districts, reading interventions in these rural districts matters to not only the students being serviced by these districts, but also the lawmakers and policy enforcers, as well as those who determine funding for these mandates to be implemented (Colorado Department of Education, 2022d).

Theoretical Context

Bandura's (1994) theory of self-efficacy drives the theoretical context of this study. Self-efficacy affects a person's ability to cope, their effort level, and their ability to persevere when faced with challenges (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy development in teachers requires confidence in one's training and preparedness (Minicozzi & Dardzinski, 2020). The higher a teacher's belief in their self-efficacy, the more positive their behaviors, their personal well-being, and their commitment to teaching will be (Washburn & Mulcahy, 2020). The focus of this study is on the self-efficacy of rural middle school teachers when implementing reading interventions, including the challenges and successes that impact those self-efficacy beliefs. The research done for this study looks at self-efficacy of rural teachers who are responsible for teaching reading interventions. Because reading is a critical skill, teachers having a strong sense of self-efficacy can significantly impact instructional effectiveness (Perera et al., 2019). Research on teacher self-efficacy beliefs focuses on task-specific challenges, teacher level, years of teaching, and preparedness (Granziera & Perera, 2019; Lammert et al., 2022; Perera et al., 2019). Similarly,

research on the impact of teacher self-efficacy shows how this impacts student behaviors and outcomes (Herman et al., 2018; Laurmann & Berger, 2021; Prewett & Whitney, 2021; Zee et al., 2018). By understanding what contributes to a teacher's belief in their self-efficacy when faced with the challenge of meeting state mandates of reading interventions, many of the consequences of lower self-efficacy discussed by Bandura can be mitigated with proper support. Likewise, what contributes to higher self-efficacy beliefs can provide administration with ways to help their teachers improve.

In looking at rural education, Green (2013) identified rural education as place-conscious education. The theory of place-conscious education centers around an awareness of locality – the traditions, norms, and societal expectations of the community and its impact on the academic pedagogy (Green, 2013; Kelly & Pelech, 2019). The needs of the community provide the foundation of which to assess educational needs (Lycke et al., 2015). As educators ground their teaching in the local relationships and needs of the community, focus on academic interventions might take a backseat to other community needs, such as vocational training at the secondary level (Kelly & Pelech, 2019). Therefore, the recognition of how being an educator in a rural environment influences not only what is being taught, but also the self-efficacy of the teacher is necessary.

Problem Statement

The problem is that small rural school teachers are faced with increased expectations to provide evidence-based reading interventions due to Colorado's READ Act mandates. (Abrams, 2019; Colorado Department of Education, 2019). With a significant percentage of students not reading at grade level by the time they enter middle school, and a significant number of students leaving middle school still not proficient readers, interventions are necessary (National Center

for Education Statistics, 2020). When students are not reading proficiently, they often struggle to learn in all subject areas, not just in language arts classes (Baye et al., 2019; Bernanke, 2022; Frankel et al., 2021).

In the state of Colorado, students are identified by the third grade as struggling readers and placed on READ plans (Colorado Department of Education, 2019). These plans outline the needs of the student for structured support. Until 2019, Colorado did not mandate that these plans extended beyond elementary school. However, updated legislation extended the implementation of the READ Act through secondary schools, requiring all districts to provide evidence-based reading interventions through twelfth grade or until a student met and maintained grade-level reading and are exited from their READ plan. Teachers across the state already face a workload that is difficult to sustain (Brundin, 2022). With teacher job satisfaction dropping, lowered self-efficacy and eventual burnout is a major concern (Brundin, 2022; Wang, 2022). State mandates factor into this lowering of job satisfaction and increased job stress. For rural school districts, who traditionally struggle with adequate funding and over-stretched teachers, adjusting to meet these mandates adds to district and educator stress and can impact a teacher's efficacy (Bailey, 2021; Johnson et al., 2018). Many rural districts, and especially small rural districts, either cannot afford to hire specialists and often find that many of their teaching staff are inexperienced or have not received adequate training to adequately provide quality reading interventions (Johnson et al., 2018). In addition, many small rural teachers find themselves teaching multiple grade levels and subjects, which lowers their ability to plan, assess, and research best practices (McKittrick et al., 2019; Timar & Carter, 2017). A gap exists in the literature pertaining to small rural middle school teachers' lived experiences and perceptions of providing reading interventions to meet state mandates.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the beliefs of self-efficacy and practices of rural middle school reading teachers in Colorado who are faced with implementing reading interventions to align with mandates from the revised Colorado READ Act. At this stage in the research, reading interventions are defined as intentional implementations of supplemental reading curriculum to provide skill-building exercises and activities for students reading below grade level (Frankel et al., 2021). By examining the lived experiences of rural middle school teachers and understanding their feelings of self-efficacy and perceptions of program effectiveness, rural school districts and state policy makers can better understand the needs of rural teachers and students to successfully meet the state mandated READ plans.

Significance of the Study

The challenges and successes of small rural school teachers who are faced with implementing Colorado's READ Act mandates to provide reading interventions at the middle school level were addressed within this study. With only 17% of students in Colorado receiving their education in a rural school, rural schools often get overlooked (Colorado Department of Education, 2022d; Schimke, 2022). The first section addresses the theoretical, empirical, and practical significance of this study.

The focus of this study was on the theory of self-efficacy. High teacher self-efficacy is a cornerstone of quality education (Mahler et al., 2018). Conversely, when teachers experience low self-efficacy, higher levels of stress and lower job performance often result (Putwain & von der Embse, 2019). The aim of the research in this study was to explore the perceptions of small rural schoolteachers' beliefs in their self-efficacy when recent state mandates require curriculum

changes to address READ plans. By understanding what has influenced these beliefs, both the challenges and successes, a greater understanding will help stakeholders and policymakers address the needs of rural teachers who are tasked with providing these interventions.

By conducting a phenomenological qualitative study, the empirical significance of this study provides additional insights into the importance of individuals' perceptions when examining the success or failures of implementing reading interventions. The research done from this study built on the existing literature and furthers the research on rural education phenomenon. Several studies focus on the need for reading interventions, along with recommendations for various methods of providing these reading interventions (Baye et al., 2019; Chapman & Elbaum, 2021; Clarke et al., 2017; Daniel et al., 2021; Powell & Gadke, 2018). This study adds to this body of research on reading interventions but focused on the challenges and successes in a rural setting.

The practical significance of this study centered around struggling readers depending on quality teachers to provide the interventions needed to achieve reading proficiency (Paige et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2020). With a significant number of students leaving middle school not achieving reading proficiency, this is a critical need (NCES, 2020). Small rural school districts are often geographically remote, resulting in limited availability of professional development, available outside intervention resources, and limited interaction with teaching peers teaching the same interventions (Lavalley, 2018; Mattingly & Schaefer, 2021). After conducting this study and looking at the results from this study, other small rural districts have more information on other districts' struggles and successes in implementing reading interventions to address the state mandate.

Several small rural districts in Colorado participate in a student-centered accountability program called S-CAP (SCAP, 2022). This allows for teachers from other small rural districts to examine various aspects – school climate, leadership, curriculum, instruction, professional development - of another school district. Through this program, school leadership and teachers have gained valuable takeaways from districts around the state. This study could provide another way for rural schools in Colorado to gain these valuable take-aways that specifically focus on reading interventions.

Research Questions

The research questions were derived from the problem and purpose of the study. The central research question focuses on the overall lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers in addressing the need to provide reading interventions. The sub-questions focus on self-efficacy beliefs, challenges faced, and successes in providing reading interventions in a rural educational setting.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who are providing reading interventions to meet state standards?

Sub-Question One

How are these interventions affecting these small rural middle school teachers' perceived beliefs in their self-efficacy?

Sub-Question Two

How are the perceived challenges faced by small rural middle school teachers who provide these interventions affecting them as teachers and affecting their students?

Sub-Question Three

How are the perceived positives experienced by small rural middle school teachers who provide these interventions affecting them as teachers and affecting their students?

Definitions

1. *Literacy* – Literacy is a person's ability to decode and comprehend the written language at the basic, elementary level (Kaestle, 1991).
2. *Mandate* – a law enacted that requires mandatory implementation (Abram, 2019).
3. *READ Plan* – An individualized plan to implement reading interventions for a student (Abram, 2019).
4. *Reading interventions* – scientifically based reading instructions that address at least one of the five pillars of reading (Phillips et al., 2018)
5. *Small rural* – School districts that have a population of less than 1000 students enrolled K-12 (Colorado Department of Education, 2022d).

Summary

Since 2019, small rural middle school teachers are under a state mandate to provide individualized reading interventions to students who have READ plans (Colorado Department of Education, 2019). Rural districts face many challenges in hiring qualified staff and providing adequate training for current staff (Johnson et al., 2018). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who are responsible for implementing reading interventions. The historical context examined the history of literacy and literacy legislation. The theoretical context focused on Bandura's theory of self-efficacy and the theoretical significance explained how this study contributed to the

understanding of teacher self-efficacy beliefs. The social context of the problem of how low literacy impacted society was addressed, focusing on dropout rates, financial losses, and other negative individual and societal issues resulting from deficiencies in reading abilities. The chapter included the significance of the study potentially improving literacy proficiency through shared experiences and concluded with the research questions and definitions.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore rural middle-school teacher experiences with implementing reading interventions to meet the requirements of the Colorado READ Act. Within this chapter, a review of the current literature related to the topic of study is presented. First, the theory of Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory is discussed, followed by a synthesis of recent literature about current intervention expectations and both teacher implementation of reading interventions at the middle school level to achieve grade level reading and the role of the teacher in providing these interventions. Then, literature to illustrate how teacher attitudes of self-efficacy and program efficacy impact student reading level gains are presented. Finally, the need for the current study is addressed by identifying a gap in the literature regarding rural middle school teachers' experiences with reading interventions and their own self-efficacy in providing reading interventions in order to comply with state required READ plans.

Theoretical Framework

A teacher's belief in their abilities, their skills, and their overall attitudes plays a major part in their effectiveness. A teacher's attitudes, cognitive skills, and abilities define their self-efficacy. Several factors can play into the development of a person's beliefs in their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy was explored by Bandura within the social cognitive theory (Green, 2018), but developed into a category of its own. Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy provided the theoretical foundation for this study.

Prior to the social cognitive theory, many psychologists believed behaviors were apparent, in that behaviors could be manipulated with either rewards or punishments (Greene,

2018). According to Greene (2018), behaviorism could not explain cognitive flexibility and how the environment and experiences played a significant role in cognitive processing. In the social cognitive theory, three components come together to influence a person's behavior. Bandura (1986) referred to these as a "triadic reciprocality" (p. 23). The first component is a person's own characteristics, such as their thoughts, their motivations, and their feelings. The second is their past behaviors and the consequences of those behaviors. The third is their current environment and all the factors involved with that (Greene, 2018). All three of these components are key to a person's self-efficacy beliefs.

Bandura (1977) hypothesized that a person's belief in their own efficacy would affect their coping behavior, the amount of effort expended, and the length of sustainability when faced with obstacles and adverse experiences. Bandura challenged theoretical beliefs that favored peripheral mechanisms in regard to changes in behavior, rather theorizing that the strength of a person's belief in their own ability to achieve a desired outcome or their willingness to try to cope resulted in behavioral changes. However, a person with low self-efficacy tended to avoid situations beyond their believed coping skills. Bandura (1977) outlined sources of efficacy expectations: performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal. Each of these areas could impact an individual's belief in their efficacy. Bandura (1982) furthered his ideas on self-efficacy, stating that knowing what to do was not enough. Rather, perceptions of self-efficacy were a combination of cognitive, social, and behavioral skills. These perceptions were impacted by mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasions, and modifying self-beliefs (Bandura, 1994).

Self-efficacy deals with one's confidence in their ability to learn or complete a specific task (Bandura, 2012). Taylor (2013) believed Bandura's theory of self-efficacy to be one of

optimism: people can determine their outcomes and how they cope by the choices they make. Teachers are frequently met with challenges, often brought about by their environment and factors outside of their control. When faced with providing interventions to meet expected outcomes, a teacher's level of self-efficacy can impact those outcomes (Cho et al., 2021). When state mandates place teachers in roles that are outside their field of expertise, self-efficacy can be impacted. Bong and Clark (1999) held that self-efficacy involved cognitive appraisals. Their assertion indicates that self-efficacy is about how a person thinks of their ability to perform on a specific task rather than an overall self-concept of their abilities over a larger scope. If asked to do something outside of their content area or area of expertise, self-efficacy could be lowered. Bandura (2000) contended that the level of coping efficacy that a person had in a taxing situation impacted their stress, their anxiety, and their depression levels. Having a low sense of efficacy could result in task avoidance, low aspirations, and a lack of commitment to achieving goals (Bandura, 2000). Self-doubts led to lower performance. Bandura's self-efficacy theory was connected to the educational concept of having a growth mindset (Cho et al., 2021). In order for students to improve reading abilities, teachers played an integral role in helping develop this growth mindset towards improved reading (Cho et al., 2021). Therefore, self-efficacy and mindsets were not set, but rather malleable.

The importance of a person's ability to be able to exert control over their decisions, environment, social life, and professional life affects their self-efficacy (Greene, 2018). How competent one feels, their perception of themselves, and their level of control over a situation, plays an integral part in their motivation. Holzberger and Prestele's (2021) study connected Bandura's belief that collective efficacy could be measured using individual beliefs of self-efficacy in determining school characteristics. Looking at the experiences of rural teachers who

are responsible for meeting the reading intervention needs of their middle-school students will help understand how self-efficacy translates to reading practices. Student self-efficacy towards reading can be impacted by the practices of the teacher (Lazarides et al., 2018). By understanding individual teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy when faced with the challenges of providing interventions to students at the middle school level in rural schools, overall collective efficacy can be explored. The study of teacher's lived experiences connects to Bandura's theory as it explores what teachers are doing to address the needs of students on READ plans and the results of those efforts, both on their own perceptions of self-efficacy and those of their students.

Related Literature

By the middle school level, students transition from learning to read to reading to learn (Shafer, 2016; Wu et al., 2021). Yet when students are not proficient readers, they can struggle to learn in all subject areas, making reading interventions necessary to help improve proficiency (Baye et al., 2019; Frankel et al., 2021; Stevens et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2021). This section begins with an explanation of reading interventions and structures, the history of intervention mandates, current state expectations, and what reading intervention practices are currently used. Next, examining teacher self-efficacy with a focus on how stress and burnout impacts teacher beliefs is explored. An examination of current studies regarding teacher perceptions and experiences and how these impact students follows. Finally, how rural education and Colorado State mandates factor into and impact teachers and students finalize this section.

Reading Interventions

Providing reading interventions can take on many different aspects. Numerous studies provide frameworks for these interventions (Baye et al., 2019; Frankel et al., 2021; Stevens et al.,

2018; Wijekuma et al., 2017). Determining which students need interventions often occurs during the first few years of school, and by the end of third grade struggling students are often placed on reading plans that determine what skills they still need to acquire in order to achieve reading proficiency (Colorado Department of Education, 2016; Liebfreund & Amendum, 2017). However, schools can determine at any grade level to place a student on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or provide interventions without having a formalized plan (King-Sears, 2022). These decisions often come after a student has gone through the response to intervention (RtI) process or has been flagged by a teacher or specialist and tested to determine specific needs (Arias-Gundin & Llamazres, 2021; Liebfreund & Amendum, 2017).

The RtI model contains three tiers with differing structures to provide interventions. The first tier is the general instruction given to all students, with measurements to determine student performance (Arias-Gundin & Llamazres, 2021). When students are flagged as needing more interventions, they move to the second tier. At this tier, more focused interventions are provided that are often done in small groups with more frequent monitoring. If a student still requires a more intensive intervention, they are placed on the third tier, where longer one-on-one and small-group interventions are used, along with weekly monitoring (Arias-Gundin & Llamazres, 2021).

Similar to RtI, the multitiered system of supports (MSSR) and the comprehensive integrated, three-tiered model (Ci3T) also are structured to provide leveled interventions (Lane et al., 2021; Lesh et al., 2021). The common thread in all multi-tiered intervention models is that students are tested, data is examined, and decisions are made as to whether a student continues to receive the same level of instruction or intervention or is moved to the next tier for more intensive and individualized interventions (Chapman & Elbaum, 2021; Lane et al., 2021; Lesh et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2020; Willis, 2019). This process often begins in elementary school,

with the majority (between 70-85%) of students at the bottom tier (Shapiro, 2022). The second tier is designed to be temporary with students receiving the necessary interventions to make up deficits in their learning. The top tier makes up between 1-5% of students and is focused on students who need prolonged interventions (Shapiro, 2022).

Background

Reading intervention practices date back to the late 1800s (Scammacca et al., 2016). One of the first documented studies regarding a student's inability to read focused on the belief in a physical impairment "congenital word blindness" being the cause (Scammacca et al., 2016). In the early 1900s, this theory slowly disintegrated. In 1915, the first standardized test for measuring reading comprehension, called the Kansas Silent Reading Tests, was developed (Kelly, 1916). The test focused on fluency and comprehension without demonstrating comprehension via a written response. This test helped screen participants in a 1916 study, which focused on reading interventions for low performing students in Grades 3-8 (Scammacca et al., 2016). Despite daily tutoring with drills and oral reading over a six-week period during the summer showed nominal growth, the study did shed light on the need for remediation, as did the advent of World War I, when it was discovered that thousands of servicemen could not understand the written instructions they needed (Scammacca et al., 2016; Smith, 2002).

The 1920s ushered in the kinesthetic approach, following the belief that students needed a different modality to learn (Scammacca et al., 2016). In 1921, Gray's approach with small group instruction and beginning of the year testing was similar to today's RtI framework, which recommended including developing individualized plans for each struggling reader (Scammacca et al., 2016). In 1927, Gates wrote a book on how to diagnose and remediate struggling readers

(Scammacca et al., 2016). The manual focused on the key components of reading: word recognition, comprehension, vocabulary, and eye tracking.

By the 1930s, more published works provided teachers with the tools to help struggling readers. Among these included an updated version of Gates's (1935) book *The Improvement of Reading*. This book provided one of the first manuals on how to conduct reading interventions. Consistent among the studies from the 1930s was that regardless of the method/intervention being used, reading growth occurred (Scammacca et al., 2016).

In the 1940s, recognition of the connection between emotional and behavioral disorders and reading deficiencies emerged (Scammacca et al., 2016). Researchers and practitioners placed an emphasis on home environments and student-teacher relationships in regard to reading, along with psychotherapy referrals. Despite the awareness of the need for reading interventions and some strides made to help struggling readers, the military again discovered at the onset of World War II that many of the soldiers still were not literate (Smith, 2002).

The efficacy of various methods characterized many of the studies during the 1950s (Scammacca et al., 2016). One method included medicating with an anti-psychotic drug to produce calmness and lessen behavioral and emotional disruptions. One consistency with most studies showed reading growth for struggling readers, when given the appropriate interventions. However, in a 1963 article in *The New Yorker*, Tomkins discussed how most students with reading disabilities did not have access to the individual reading interventions necessary for this growth. In 1965, the passing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provided funding for low-income children to receive reading interventions (Scammacca et al., 2016). Despite this funding, many districts struggled to find qualified specialists to provide these interventions.

The 1960s moved away from the psychoanalytic theory to be more reflective of behaviorist theories (Scammacca et al., 2016). Reading interventions took on more positive reinforcement aspects. In addition, the emphasis changed to focusing on reading comprehension over the previous focus on decoding and oral reading fluency (Scammacca et al., 2016). This continued into the 1970s, with a focus on dealing with reading anxiety, stress, and phobias. However, the 1970s also saw the rise of whole language instruction (Snow, 2006). This rise in whole language instruction moved reading instruction away from being teacher-led, flat-line reading growth, and created wider gaps between socio-economic groups (Snow, 2006). The fallout from the whole language movement resulted in reinforcing the value of teachers being trained in the science of reading instruction (Snow, 2006).

The 1980s and 1990s showed an increase in cognitive psychology, shifting reading interventions towards developing cognitive strategies (Scammacca et al., 2016). This shift moved reading from a more passive to a more active activity. Improvements in efficacy studies also occurred. Concepts like reciprocal teaching, collaborative groupings, building fluency, and one-on-one reading gained more focus in studies as well as a focus on all five pillars of reading (Scammacca et al., 2016; Snow, 2006).

Two major legislative acts in the early 2000s impacted reading interventions. First, the Education Science Reforms Act of 2002 provided educational research funding (Scammacca et al., 2016). Second, the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 provided a framework and funding for schools to identify students with learning disabilities. Over the last two decades, studies on reading interventions have significantly increased (Arias-Gundin & Garcia Llamazares, 2021; Savitz et al., 2022; Scammacca et al., 2016). By 2020, over 14,000 peer-reviewed journal articles with the focus on reading had been published,

providing a significant base of knowledge as well as conflicting viewpoints on what constitutes the best reading practices (Petscher et al., 2020).

Current Expectations and Mandates

The Colorado READ Act was enacted in 2012 to address literacy education for students in early elementary school (Colorado Department of Education, 2019). This legislation required all elementary schools to test students upon entering kindergarten, and then each year through third grade to ascertain which students showed notable reading deficiencies (Abram, 2019). Identified students were placed on a READ plan that specified individualized reading interventions needed (Abram, 2019). Until 2019, only elementary schools were mandated to provide these reading interventions, but in 2019, an update to the READ Act required secondary schools to continue to provide these individualized reading interventions for students on READ plans (Colorado Department of Education, 2019). Students are expected to receive high-quality, evidence-based interventions, yet the burden is placed on the districts to implement these, as no funding or state support for professional development is provided to address the mandate (Abram, 2019; Colorado Department of Education, 2019; Schimke, 2022).

Contributing Factors to Needing Reading Interventions at the Middle School Level

Although elementary schools in Colorado have been mandated to provide high-quality, evidence-based reading interventions to students identified during the first three years of elementary school until these students achieve grade-level reading, a significant number of students continue to need reading interventions in middle school with less than 43% of students in grades 6-8 achieving literacy proficiency on the Colorado Measures of Academic Success standardized test (Colorado Department of Education, 2022c). A number of factors contribute to students entering middle school without necessarily reading skills (Barth & Thomas, 2021; Chan

et al., 2023; Northrop & Kelly, 2018; Sleeman et al., 2022). One of these factors is the effect of poverty that contributes to students needing reading interventions (Barth & Thomas, 2021). Emotional, behavioral, and learning disabilities – such as ADHD, dyslexia, and autism – also are contributing factors (Barth & Thomas, 2021; Chan et al., 2023). How students are taught at the elementary and secondary levels can also contribute, in that teachers can fail to provide enough opportunities for students to acquire these skills, differences in curriculum when students are placed in tracked classes, and differing motivating strategies (Barth & Thomas, 2021; Northrop & Kelly, 2018). Likewise, some students have a simple view of reading (SVR) which is a cognitive inability to decode and comprehend language, which hinders intervention success (Sleeman et al., 2022). In addition, student attendance also impacts student learning, which plays a factor in students acquiring the necessary reading skills prior to attending middle school (Bartanen, 2020). Many factors can contribute to why a student needs reading interventions beyond their elementary school years.

Intervention Practices

Reading interventions practices can take on many forms. Various types and forms of reading interventions are the focus of several research studies (Baye et al., 2019; Clark et al., 2017; Frankel et al., 2021; Stevens et al., 2018). When implementing a commercial reading intervention program, a district or school can utilize evidence-based research to help them navigate the numerous programs. Evidence for ESSA (2022) provides information regarding the quality of reading interventions programs. According to Evidence for ESSA (2022), fourteen out of the sixteen reading programs earned a strong rating with two earning a promising rating. Another twenty-two more designed for third grade and up earned a strong rating. Evidence for ESSA uses the results from scholarly research studies as criteria for these ratings. Numerous

studies used testing data to determine the effectiveness of the programs and methods being researched (Evidence for ESSA, 2022). However, according to What Works Clearinghouse, only two of the five most used reading programs met their standards for best practices (Petscher et al., 2020).

Intervention programs range from predominantly computer-based, such as Achieve 3000 and Reading Plus (Baye et al., 2019) that are provided as a RtI Tier 1 to Tier 3 intervention to multiple students at one time, to small group and one-on-one work with a reading interventionist (Baye et al., 2019). In some schools, separate reading intervention classes at the Tier 2 and Tier 3 levels use various intervention strategies to provide reading support tailored to individual needs (Frankel et al., 2021). Some practices involve pull-out tutoring or after-school tutoring to provide reading interventions (Vess et al., 2018). Not all practices find equal success. As stated by Baye et al. (2019), an examination of over sixty research studies on reading interventions revealed that tutoring, cooperative learning, whole-school approaches, writing-focused approaches, and strategy-focused approaches all had significant positive effects on students' reading achievements. Conversely, some of the technology-based programs and students having a separate reading intervention class beyond the sixth grade were found to be less effective (Baye et al., 2019; Frankel et al., 2021). Likewise, programs that focused on isolated skills rather than multi-component were also less effective (Petscher et al., 2020). Several of these reading intervention programs involved content area teachers taking on intervention roles (Cantrell, 2017, Liebfreund & Amendum, 2017; Wu et al., 2021). According to Wu et al., (2021), when students received reading strategy instruction in their regular classes, this improved their metacognitive awareness of reading strategies and their autonomous reading motivation.

Despite numerous successful studies that showed student improvements in reading using a variety of intervention practices and programs, a reoccurring theme in the literature stresses that a few key components are necessary for the success of any program (Baye et al., 2019; Clarke et al., 2017; Daniel et al., 2021; Lesh et al., 3032; Powell & Gadke, 2018). One of those components involves focusing on multiple pillars of reading (Paige et al., 2021; Petscher et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2018). In elementary school, phonemic awareness and phonics lay the foundation for fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Phillips et al., 2018), but by the time students enter middle school, the primary focus shifts to continuing to develop primarily fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Powell & Gadke, 2018). However, many students still need instruction in all five pillars, which according to Paige et al. (2021), are frequently not addressed. Reading involves multiple components to develop reading skills, and even if one component is lacking, overall comprehension is impaired (Szili et al., 2022). Most secondary commercial programs do not cover all five pillars (Evidence for ESSA, 2022; Baye et al., 2019). Because phonemic awareness and phonics are components of early reading development in elementary school, this is not something that middle school teachers are either trained to teach or focus on when teaching reading (Thomas et al., 2020). Because of the higher level of academic vocabulary and more complex reading comprehension needed as students move into secondary school content-area classrooms, successful reading interventions that lower a student's reading frustrations must build comprehension and language skills by teaching students the essential strategies needed to understand text (Ilter, 2018).

Another key component to successful intervention is the teacher and their knowledge, support, and experience, as well as their ability to adapt and make judgments (Paige et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2020). For successful reading comprehension interventions, teachers must be able

to model, provide explicit teaching, give students relevant guided practice, then provide pertinent, timely feedback (Serrano-Mendizabal et al., 2023). Content teachers do not always see themselves as reading teachers, assuming that if students can read the words, they can comprehend what they read (Stevens et al., 2018). Even when multitiered systems are in place to address struggling readers, teachers are critical in ensuring that the practices and programs are being done with fidelity (Daniel et al., 2021; King-Sear, 2022).

Curriculum Decisions

One of the key components to successful reading interventions is the curriculum (Bippert, 2019; Suity et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2020). Curriculum is comprised of the courses taught, the scope and sequence of those courses, the textbooks and resources used, the list of topics, and the teacher directions or guides (Siuty et al., 2018). Data-driven curriculum utilizes norm-referenced assessments to determine what specifically is taught and is often individualized towards a student's needs (Filderman et al., 2019). Curriculum decisions when looking at possible reading interventions can also be made based on research studies being conducted (Clarke et al., 2017). Many times, curriculum decisions made by teachers are based on a teacher experience and understandings without deep contemplation (Siuty et al., 2018). Regardless of the curriculum provided, teachers often adapt curriculum to address both student needs and pressures from administration (Burkhauser, 2017; Chapman & Elbaum, 2021).

Many commercial reading curricula exist that allow for differentiation and individualization, with over twenty receiving a strong rating from Evidence for ESSA (2022). Most of these are technology-based curricula that includes both print material for small-group and individualized instruction and computer-based learning (Evidence for ESSA, 2022).

In the last decade, technology-based reading intervention curriculum has gained popularity (Bippert, 2019). When evidence-based curriculum, such as System 44, HELPS-SG; Reading Plus, READ 180, and Achieve3000 is used, reading skills have improved (Shannon & Grant, 2015; Siuty et al., 2018; Spichtig et al., 2019; Thomas & Dyches, 2019; Vess et al., 2018). However, the cost of this curriculum is off-putting for many rural school districts, and many do not have the technology infrastructure to support a web-based program (Tyler-Wood et al., 2-18; Wargo et al., 2020).

Teacher-Directed

Even though many digital reading intervention programs exist, teachers are an integral component in improving student reading performance (Cantrell, 2017; Liebfreund & Amendum, 2017). Yet despite a wide range of intervention programs, teachers continue to grapple with how to best provide reading interventions to support literacy (Frankel et al., 2021; Lesh et al., 2021; Vess et al., 2018). Many of the teacher-directed reading interventions lack various intervention components (Vess et al., 2018), resulting in gaps in student reading development (Clarke et al., 2017). Within a whole-class setting, especially at the Tier 1 level, teachers are addressing primarily vocabulary and comprehension with accommodations and modifications for students on IEPs (King-Sears, 2022). For whole class reading instruction in the content area, consistent read-alouds, book talks, goal settings, literature circles, and reading response activities all produced positive results in both of these areas (Brandt et al,, 2021) which indicates that not all interventions need to be conducted by those highly trained as reading interventionists.

For students who need more specialized reading instruction, small-group and one-on-one instruction becomes necessary (Daniel et al., 2021; King-Sears, 2022). Within the classroom setting, this might utilize a special education co-teacher or reading specialist (King-Sears, 2022),

or this might be done in a separate intervention class (Frankel et al., 2021). Another aspect of teacher-directed reading interventions involved the amount of time needed to implement individualized instruction. Some interventions required teachers to work one-on-one with students, as with oral fluency practice (Powell & Gadke, 2018) and decoding multi-syllable words (King-Sears, 2022). While teachers are providing this within the general education class, activities and learning must be planned for all the other students in the classroom. In addition, students on higher tiers require additional progress monitoring, which results in more time away from whole-class and small-group focus and instruction (Lesh et al., 2021).

For some intervention programs, students are placed in a separate intervention class (Frankel et al., 2017; Vess et al, 2018). Generally, these classes contain a smaller number of pupils and are taught by either a general education teacher with training in intervention strategies or are taught by special education teachers or reading specialists (Thomas et al., 2020). Regardless of whether the interventions are done in the general education class, as a separate class, as a pull-out, or after school, the teacher conducting the interventions significantly impacts the success or failure of those interventions (Paige et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2020).

Computer-based Interventions

As access to technology increases, more schools can utilize computer-based reading intervention programs. When faced with the complex interventions needs of students, the use of computer-based programs can help teachers meet these needs (Fogarty et al., 2016; Hurwitz et al., 2022; Messer & Nash, 2017; Szili et al., 2022). Use of computer-based programs is especially valuable when teachers have not received the adequate training to provide reading interventions (Pindiprolu & Forbush, 2021). Despite earlier reading intervention programs – those used in the early 2000s to mid-2010s – showing limited gains in reading improvement

(Messer & Nash, 2017), with the improvement in technology and research, computer-assisted programs have begun to show much greater efficacy (Messer & Nash, 2017, Spichtig et al., 2022). Programs that focus on more than reading comprehension have shown to be more effective (Hurwitz et al., 2022; Szili et al., 2022). Programs like PowerUp, TuinLECweb, and Reading Plus provide initial online placement assessments, scaffold instruction, provide chunking to prevent student information overload, and individualize for student needs, as well as provide teacher-directed follow-up instructional suggestions and material (Hurwitz et al., 2022; Serrano-Mendizabal et al., 2023; Spichtig et al., 2022). These programs address two key components to successful reading comprehension instruction: strategy instruction and feedback. Students are provided modeling, explicit teaching, guided practice, then get immediate feedback upon answering comprehension or vocabulary questions (Serrano-Mendizabal et al., 2023).

Not all studies demonstrate that computer-based programs are effective, however, because not all computer-based programs focus on the same skills. The Comprehension Circuit Training (CCT) study, conducted by Fogarty et al. (2016) showed only slightly better student performance and growth than students in teacher-conducted interventions. Computer-based programs can be limiting in addressing student needs, especially when those needs are extensive and used exclusively as the sole intervention, rather than as a complement to students receiving high-quality, tailored reading interventions from teachers or interventionists (Fogarty et al., 2016; Serrano-Mendizabal et al., 2023). Despite programs being limited, they do allow more students at once to receive individualized reading interventions, freeing up teachers to focus on one-on-one or small group interventions (Szili et al., 2022).

Student Placement in Intervention Classes

The curriculum chosen for reading interventions is a significant factor, but so is student placement in these interventions (Brooks & Rodela, 2018; Ginsberg, 2020; Learned et al., 2022). Placements in reading intervention classes at the secondary level come from failing test scores on state or local tests, teacher recommendations, behavioral issues, and from inadequate progress towards reading goals in elementary school (Brooks & Rodela, 2018; Learned et al., 2022; Suity et al., 2018). However, not all struggling readers who need these intensive structured interventions get placed in these classes, either due to a complicated RTI process, a lack of resources, or administration not acting on teacher recommendations in a timely manner (Thomas et al, 2020). In addition, different school districts set different parameters for their cut-line on standardized tests and other measures to determine which students receive interventions (Baker et al., 2018).

Some students being placed in these intervention classes feel resentful or embarrassed, and some do poorly because they do not see the value in the classes (Brooks et al., 2022; Ginsberg, 2020; Learned et al., 2022). These classes also can cause a loss of elective choices for students, which can also lead to this resentment. Likewise, separate intervention classes might lead to tracking, as students in these classes then tend to be in content area classes together due to scheduling (Learned et al., 2022). With these factors in mind, creating student engagement is necessary to make reading interventions successful (Learned et al., 2022; Martinez-Lincoln et al., 2021).

Student Engagement

To engage students in their learning, they need agency and to know that what they are being asked to do has relevance to their own lives (Cantrell, 2017; Frankel et al., 2021; Martinez-

Lincoln et al., 2020). How reading interventions are delivered also impacts how students engage. (Martinez-Lincoln et al., 2020). Computer programs provide self-paced, visually appealing, and tailored interventions, which helps hold a student's attention (Martinez-Lincoln et al., 2020). These programs need to be engaging, because students who perceive a program as boring will disengage (Bippert, 2019). Likewise, student engagement with technology can be hindered by internet issues, faulty technology, or lack of monitoring for off-task behaviors (Bippert, 2019). Use of technology-based programs can reduce the anxiety that some students experience in whole-class settings (Martinez-Lincoln et al., 2020). However, whole-class instruction has the potential to motivate students when done consistently, such as book talks and read-alouds (Brandt et al., 2020). Students are also motivated when given the opportunity to collaborate with their peers and hold discussions about reading without these being teacher-driven (Brandt et al., 2020).

Student choice in what they read also helps to improve reading engagement, especially with struggling readers (Gilson et al., 2018). Having access to both non-fiction and fiction that are culturally relevant also increases student engagement (Thomas & Dyches, 2019). Although middle school language arts classes primarily are narrative heavy for whole class reading, providing independent time for students to read from a variety of texts, including magazine and blogs helps to increase reading motivation (Gilson et al., 2018).

Another contributing factor to student engagement, especially at the middle school level, is their physical development during these years (Thomas et al., 2020). Children at the middle school age are experiencing both brain and physical development at a rapid rate, along with an increase in hormones (Thomas et al., 2020). These increases and fluctuations in hormones can impact cognitive processes and retention (Kohne & Diekhof, 2022).

Attitudes about reading in general and one's belief if their own ability to read factors into a student's engagement (Gilson et al., 2018; Ortlieb & Schatz, 2020). Where a student lives also plays a factor in determining the social context, student motivation, and behaviors connected to reading (Cantrell & Rintamaa, 2020). When parents convey the importance of reading to achieve success, students are more likely to be motivated to value reading (Gibson et al., 2018). However, students who do not read as much or at all are not necessarily rejecting reading but valuing other activities more than reading (Gibson et al., 2018).

Impact of Reading Interventions

Benefits from students receiving structured reading interventions varies from study to study (Baker et al., 2018; Bogaert et al., 2023; Daniel et al., 2021; de Boer et al., 2018). Often, these benefits reflect a number of factors regarding the quality, the length, and the type of interventions provided. One benefit is a heightened awareness and greater focus on students' reading struggles and the need for differentiation (Bogaert et al., 2023). Although much of RtI interventions focus on Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, Tier 1 interventions also provide a positive impact, as more students receive these interventions, as they are done in the general education classes rather than in pull-outs or separate classes (Bogaert et al., 2023; Brooks et al., 2022). Even students receiving additional interventions outside of the general education class benefit from the reinforcement in their general education classes from these Tier 1 interventions (Bogaert et al., 2023). Both reading motivation and use of reading strategies increases with interventions, as students are encouraged to read (Bogaert et al., 2023; McBreen & Savage, 2020). Reading interventions have also resulted in student learning improvement in other areas (McBreen & Savage, 2020). Looking at 25 middle schools that provided struggling readers at the 7th grade level reading interventions for eight weeks, pre and post assessments did not show a

significant improvement (Baker et al., 2018). However, a key take away was that in order to increase engagement and motivation, reading interventions needed to be both intense and sustained, with committed resources to provide these interventions (Baker et al., 2018). In order to achieve a lasting long-term impact, the quality of the intervention is significant (Baker et al., 2018).

Long-Term Results of Interventions

Most reading intervention studies involve testing immediately after the intervention (Daniel et al, 2021; de Boer et al., 2018). Sustainability of these interventions are critical for student success (Daniel et al., 2021). Several studies show successful retention of skills for elementary reading interventions, but limited studies exist to show long-term results for secondary reading interventions (Daniel et al, 2021). A meta-analysis of several studies show that gains from certain reading interventions decrease by forty percent within a year (Suggate, 2016). However, in some studies, long-term results varied based on the type of reading intervention. In one study using multi-component interventions, testing from immediate post intervention to 20 weeks later showed students scored the same, yet in another study with vocabulary interventions, students maintained their growth from post-intervention testing to testing four weeks later (Daniel et al., 2021; O'Connor et al., 2019). Computer-based reading intervention long-term results varied as well. A study involving the use of READ 180 for one year did not show improved scores over a two-year period, yet other programs did show significantly higher test scores on standardized tests than those in the control group (Haines et al., 2018; Messer & Nash, 2017).

The quality and length of the interventions used do determine the long-term results of those interventions (Baker et al., 2018; Daniel et al., 2021; Forster et al., 2018). The more

tailored interventions are to student needs, the better the long-term reading growth and increased oral and silent reading fluency, as well as comprehension (Baker et al., 2018; Forester et al., 2018). This focus on tailored interventions includes frequent progress monitoring and re-evaluation of needs. In addition, the emphasis on developing meta-cognitive strategies shows better long-term results (de Boer et al., 2018).

Teacher Perceptions and Experiences

Teacher perceptions and experiences play a major role in classroom climate, curriculum decision making, curriculum implementation, program efficacy, and ultimately, student outcomes (Cankaya, 2018). Perception, more than reality, impacts people's rationales and their decision-making, making perception a significant factor in a teacher's overall effectiveness (Felin et al., 2016; Poulou et al., 2019). Teachers who perceive that they have limited to no decision-making in what they teach or how they conduct their classrooms, along with excessive course loads are more likely to suffer burnout which, in turn, lowers student engagement and achievement (Akin, 2019; Ansley et al., 2021; Cankaya, 2018). Clearly, the longer a teacher has taught, the more experiences they will have that impacts their perceptions and practices. The more experienced a teacher is, the more they rely on their own professional judgment and the less they utilize data to determine both what is taught and its effectiveness (Lesh et al., 2021). In addition, teachers with more experience tend to believe they are more effective teachers in regard to classroom management and instruction (Cankaya, 2018). Regardless of experiences, teachers generally report that they do not feel adequately prepared to provide interventions, especially to students who have significant needs (Liebfruend & Amendum, 2017; Poch et al., 2020). They perceive the need for more professional development, but recognize that learning comes more from practice and experience than from this professional development (Smith & Williams,

2021). Professional development works when they have time to put into practice what they have learned between professional development sessions, in addition to receiving support from peers and administers (Goddard & Kim, 2018; Smith & Williams, 2021).

With Struggling Readers

Not all struggling readers who need intensive structured reading interventions receive these in a separate intervention class, or with a co-teacher who has reading intervention training (Thomas et al., 2020). This lack of separate intervention classes or co-teaching classes results in general education teachers needing to provide these interventions. Content teachers, not just teachers tasked with providing reading interventions, perceptions of struggling readers impact the instruction these students receive. Teachers perceive that they are not adequately prepared to provide reading interventions, especially if they are content area teachers (Smith & Williams, 2021; Thomas et al., 2020). Many content teachers' perceptions of what struggling readers need are inaccurate or limited, and they are not sure of how to use data from formative assessments to direct instruction (Smith & Williams, 2021). Perceptions of struggling readers as lacking in effort instead of ability can also impact whether they receive support or are flagged for the RTI process (Smith & Williams, 2021).

Some teachers have shown concern over reading instruction varying from tier to tier using a three-tiered RtI model (Liebfreund & Amendum, 2017). As students move from tier to tier, instruction is fragmented and not as effective. In addition, teachers experience distractions from providing one-on-one instruction, as they still need to manage other students in the classroom, as well as deal with higher noise levels or they have to try to find time to schedule these interventions (Liebfreund & Amendum, 2017). These distractions and need to find alternative activities for the rest of the class can create a negative perception of providing one-

on-one instruction. Teachers have a more positive perception of the use of technology as a supplement to provide reading interventions, however (Bippert, 2019). The negatives to the use of technology are perceived to be the need for training on the specific programs, firewall and internet issues, and the lack of technology resources (Bippert, 2019).

Many teachers lack buy-in to their school or district's chosen interventions or progress monitoring, especially when they do not play a part in the decision-making process on what curriculum or program is used (Thomas et al., 2020). In addition, a lack of support from colleagues, a lack of adequate professional development, and a lack of intervention time or conflicts with scheduling interventions also impacts teacher perceptions of working with struggling readers (Merga et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2020). These perceptions can impact a teacher's self-efficacy in implementing effective reading interventions.

Teacher Self-Efficacy

A teacher's belief in their self-efficacy is shaped by a number of factors and can have a number of consequences (Hajovsky et al., 2019; Holzberger & Prestele, 2020; Lane et al., 2021). Teacher self-efficacy (TSE) lies at the heart of quality education. Frequently, state mandates require schools to face new challenges and expectations and revamp what and how teaching and learning occurs (Colorado Department of Education, 2019). These challenges, expectations, and alterations directly impact teachers who already face a number of stressors that can affect their self-efficacy (Putwain & von der Embse, 2019). Understanding these factors and consequences from previous studies helps to provide a foundation for understanding teachers' perceptions of their self-efficacy in implementing new state mandates for reading interventions at the middle-school level.

Contributing Factors to Teacher Self-Efficacy

Teacher self-efficacy can be impacted by a number of factors, including stress. Bandura (2000) researched the connection between stress and self-efficacy. According to Bandura, the higher a teacher's stress, the lower their self-efficacy. Several recent studies support Bandura's claim, focusing on how stress impacts TSE (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Harmsen et al., 2018; Lane et al., 2021; Putwain & von der Embse, 2019; Zhu et al., 2018). The higher a teacher's stress, the lower their self-efficacy (Kim & Buric, 2019). Teacher stress is caused by a myriad of reasons. Raising test scores, especially in areas of high-stakes subjects, leads to job-related stress in teachers (Gonzalesz et al., 2017). Curriculum changes due to test accountability increase stress as well (Putwain & von der Embse, 2019). Even teachers using multi-tiered interventions show an increase in stress, leading to a decrease in TSE (Lane et al., 2021). High job demands can lead to higher stress. Inadequate pay and low work satisfaction are also causes of teacher stress (Song et al., 2020). Time pressures, poor working conditions, discipline problems, and encouraging unmotivated kids all contribute to a teacher's job-related stress (Harmsen et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2018). Increased stress could lead to teacher burnout, which could predict a teacher's future self-efficacy (Kim & Buric, 2020).

A teacher's teaching experience could also play a factor in TSE (Kim & Buric, 2020; Ortan et al., 2021; Poulou et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2018). Although some studies included teacher experience for statistical purposes only (Gonzalez et al., 2017, Lane et al., 2021), Zhu et al. (2018) did factor in experience as a contributing aspect, finding that teachers with more experience had higher self-concepts than novice teachers, which therefore had greater impact on efficacy. Conversely, exhaustion, which impacts burnout and self-efficacy, is greater in experienced teachers (Kim & Buric, 2020). The greater a teacher's experience, the higher the

levels of TSE (Poulou et al., 2019) up until late in a teacher's career, where TSE beliefs actually have been shown to decline (Dicke et al., 2014; Ortan et al., 2021). Some findings do show, however, that having a doctorate degree does improve TSE (Cankaya, 2018). Although TSE and teaching experience do show some correlation, factors impacting TSE are much more complex.

The school environment also contributes to teacher perceptions of self-efficacy. School environment includes parental support, discipline structures, school leadership, collaboration among peers, resource availability, and class sizes (Gonzalez et al., 2017, King-Sears, 2022; Lane et al., 2021; Narayanan et al., 2021; Zee et al., 2018). According to Lane et al. (2021), frequent leadership turnover could lead to increased stress and lower TSE. Likewise, the level of support and quality of feedback from administrators could impact their TSE (Narayanan et al., 2021). When a teacher feels validated in specific ways by their evaluator, self-efficacy increases, yet vague praise does not improve self-efficacy (Narayanan et al., 2021). Another aspect of high TSE is having good peer relations and colleague support (Harmsen et al., 2018; Holzeberger & Prestele, 2021; King-Sears, 2022). A teacher's trust in their colleagues, school leadership, and even their students impacts their efficacy (Choong et al., 2019).

High-stake testing and administrative pressure also impact TSE. When facing pressures from higher-stake testing mandates and concerns about gaps in student knowledge, TSE lowers (Ansley et al., 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2017). Time constraints to cover material and increased pressure from administrators lead to stress, which lowers TSE (Gonzalez et al., 2017). In addition, carrying a heavy workload and being required to teach multiple subjects or grade-levels can also result in heightened stress levels, which lowers TSE (Ansley et al., 2021).

Similarly, the classroom environment and teacher-student relationships also can contribute to TSE (Hajovsky et al., 2019; Lane et al., 2021). When teachers do not feel they are

being effective in the classroom, this can impact TSE (Lane et al., 2021; Narayanan et al., 2021). Another factor that impacts TSE is dealing with challenging student behaviors (Ansley et al., 2021). Yet developing relationships with students also has a big influence on creating a higher TSE (Hajovsky et al., 2019; Narayanan et al., 2021). According to Narayanan et al. (2021), teachers in their qualitative study expressed higher TSE when they felt they had positive relationships with their students, but when faced with student apathy and distancing, they expressed lower TSE. Along with teacher-student relationships, relationships with parents also impacted teacher stress and efficacy (Miller et al., 2017). If teachers do not feel parental support or are faced with difficult parents, self-doubt and lower self-efficacy can occur.

When looking at current research, the majority of studies on self-efficacy are quantitative in nature, but qualitative studies present more of an idea of why teachers feel the way they do about their self-efficacy (Liebfreund & Amendum, 2017; Martinez-Sierra et al., 2021). Quantitative studies, such as Gonzalez et al. (2017), Lane et al. (2021), and Woodcock et al. (2019) involved looking at surveys that ascertained teacher responses regarding perceptions of self-efficacy. However, looking deeper at TSE, individual experiences provided non-scripted responses not able to be achieved from filling out a survey. Although high-stake testing was explored by Gonzalez et al. (2017) in a quantitative study, understanding the dynamics of state mandates on teacher perceptions of self-efficacy in regard to providing specific reading interventions that target specific areas of need prior to high-stake testing needs to be studied.

Impact of Teacher Self-Efficacy

The level of TSE a teacher experiences impacts a teacher's well-being, stress, and potential burnout (Kim & Buric, 2020, Lane et al., 2021; Song et al., 2020). Stress lowers a teacher's self-efficacy beliefs leading to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a lack of

personal accomplishment (Ansley et al., 2021; Lane et al., 2021). When teachers have high TSE, their satisfaction with their job increases, they suffer less from stress, they experience better emotional health, and are less likely to suffer burnout (Song et al., 2020). However, TSE is not a consistent predictor of future burnout and does not correlate TSE with teacher disengagement (Kim & Buric, 2020).

Students are also impacted by teachers' self-efficacy beliefs. Student achievement, motivation, and student self-efficacy are directly related to teacher self-efficacy (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Mahler et al., 2018; Poulou et al., 2019; Woodcock et al., 2019; Zee and Koomen, 2016). When teachers demonstrated high TSE, students' motivation and performance improves (Gonzalez et al, 2017; Mahler et al., 2018; Woodcock et al., 2019). Along with student achievement, teacher attitudes towards students also can be impacted by their self-efficacy. According to Woodcock et al. (2019), results from their study showed that teachers with high TSE reported they experienced less frustration, had more sympathy, and had higher expectations towards future success towards students classified as "low-effort." Similarly, student engagement is impacted by TSE (Poulou et al., 2020). However, according to Zee et al. (2018), their research found that the link between TSE and various student-outcomes was not as strong as predicted by earlier studies. A teacher's self-efficacy towards students on an individual basis could be associated with a student's reading comprehension. However, Zee et al. also surmises that out-of-school influences play a greater influence on reading comprehension than school influences.

Classroom management could also be impacted by TSE (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Holzeberger & Prestele, 2021; Kim & Buric, 2020; Miller et al., 2017; Poulou et al, 2020). When teachers demonstrate a higher level of TSE, improvements in classroom management and the willingness to allow for student autonomy occur (Holzeberger & Prestele, 2021; Miller et al.,

2017). High TSE also factors into positive parent and colleague relationships, which can affect classroom management as well (Miller et al., 2017). However, according to Poulou et al. (2020), whose quantitative data was compared to observations conducted in classrooms to correlate data with actual observed behaviors, even teachers who expressed high levels of self-efficacy in classroom management were observed to not demonstrate the strategies they claimed to use.

State mandated reading interventions could play a factor in TSE. Each of the factors and impacts presented in previous studies could be found in the current study in relation to the 2019 READ Act mandate (Colorado Department of Education, 2019). However, this study will involve looking at TSE through a qualitative lens, exploring how rural middle-school teachers perceive their self-efficacy when faced with the challenges of meeting this state mandate and the impacts of their beliefs and practices.

Rural Education

Rural school districts share many similar characteristics, but also can greatly vary. One similarity is in defining what constitutes a rural district. Larger rural districts contain 6,500 students or fewer in K-12, whereas student populations of under 1,000 constitute a small rural district (Rude & Miller, 2018). According to Johnson et al. (2018), almost 20% of primary and secondary students in the United States attended rural schools. Colorado has178 local school districts with 147 of these being defined as rural (Rude & Miller, 2018). As stated by the Colorado Department of Education (2022d), in the 2021-2022 school year, Colorado had 107 small rural districts, of which 89 had fewer than 500 students. Another similarity found in most rural school districts is the ability to find and retain quality teachers (Johnson et al, 2018; McKittrick et al., 2019; Rude & Miller, 2018). Some rural districts located by urban areas can attract teachers willing to commute, whereas some districts' geographical features make this

unfeasible (Rude & Miller, 2018). Many rural school districts face large ELL populations, whereas others have few to none (Todd, 2021). Some research showed rural school districts to provide strong community support for their teachers and schools (McKittrick et al., 2019; Rude & Miller, 2018), yet others reported a lack of community support due to outside teachers coming with different norms, culture, and values than those of the community (Statti & Torres, 2020).

The funding across the country for rural school districts varies as well (Rude & Miller, 2018; Statti & Torres, 2020; Timar & Carter, 2017). All rural school districts are provided special concessions from Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA), under which the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) was established (Rude & Miller, 2018). The REAP program provides assurances that rural school districts will receive equal treatment from the federal government and be awarded certain percentages of federal grants, along with not being held to some of the requirements (Rude & Miller, 2018). Along with financial concerns, rural districts also face other challenges.

Challenges to Rural Education

Rural school districts encounter a number of challenges in meeting the diverse needs of their students. Several obstacles can influence student academic growth in rural schools. These obstacles include family and community poverty, district financial and human resources, and changing demographics that comprise an increase in ELL and IEP students (Johnson et al., 2018; Rude & Miller, 2018; Sutton et al., 2014; Timar & Carter, 2017). In addition, the lack of district personnel, such as a dedicated curriculum director, could mean teachers struggle to find high-quality instructional materials, find a lack of professional development opportunities, and have a lack of intervention support (Timar & Carter, 2017). Districts also could find themselves struggling to keep up with the digital resources, especially in areas of high poverty (Statti &

Torres, 2020). However, in more affluent rural areas, good technology infrastructure does exist (Timar & Carter, 2017). Another challenge to rural education, especially with reading, is cultural perceptions. Rural parents are more likely to put less emphasis on higher education and the importance of being proficient in reading, resulting in a lack of student engagement in reading (Cantrell & Rintamma, 2020). In addition, relevance to their own lives also impacts reading motivation, creating an additional challenge for rural teachers to find relevant reading materials and promote reading as being relevant to students' lives.

Positives of Rural Education

Despite the challenges, positive aspects to rural education do exist. These positives include smaller class sizes, community togetherness, more shared responsibility for student growth among educators, a higher level of collaboration, easier focus on individual student needs, strong parent/teacher relationships, and a safer environment (McKittrick et al., 2019; Rude & Miller, 2018). Many teachers in rural schools are raised in either the same community or one of similar dynamics and show a greater investment in their communities and a strong commitment to their schools (Aiken, et al. 2020). In California, over half of rural teachers have taught in the same school for more than six years, demonstrating a positive retention rate (Timar & Carter, 2017).

Special Education and Interventions

Rural schools face challenges providing both their special needs and general populations in providing reading interventions. For rural schools, high poverty levels, an increase in English Language Learners (ELL) population, financial limitations, providing adequate special education services, and changing demographics all present obstacles (Aiken et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; Statti & Torres, 2020). For many rural districts, the lack of salary incentives, large

caseloads, coverage of more than one grade or subject, and the lack of support hinder the hiring of qualified special education and intervention teachers (Aiken et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2020). For students in rural intervention programs, the lack of funding limits program availability, highly qualified teachers, and adequate resources (Statti & Torres, 2020). Despite IDEA providing funding and making special educational services mandatory in all schools, this funding is often not enough (Turnage, 2020). Because of the increase in ELL students who do not qualify for IDEA funding if their language learning is deemed a barrier, providing interventions for these students draws on already strained resources (Turnage, 2020). Likewise, students with social/emotional disabilities also do not qualify for funding, even if they also need academic interventions (Turnage, 2020). Regardless of funding, however, rural students tend to hold lower aspirations towards college, promoting a lack of importance on reading proficiency (Cantrell & Rintamma, 2020). With the lack of resources and special education and intervention teachers, along with struggle in promoting the importance of reading proficiency, rural districts face many challenges.

Teacher Expertise

Rural districts face the challenge of finding and retaining highly qualified and experienced educators (Johnson et al., 2018; Rude & Miller, 2018; Sutton et al., 2014). As stated by Johnson et al. (2018), rural districts often have difficulty hiring qualified experienced teachers, which could be attributed to the lack of financial means to compete with larger urban school districts. According to Rude and Miller (2018), the pay gap in the state of Colorado in 2018 was approximately $46,000 between a teacher's salary in urban versus rural districts. Along with lower salaries, rural teachers also face a decline in the prestige and recognition as professionals, as well as often being asked to teach multiple grades and multiple subjects

(McKittrick et al., 2019; Timar & Carter, 2017). With smaller student numbers, hiring qualified educators to do specific interventions is often not financially viable, resulting in many teachers taking on intervention roles they did not have the qualifications or training to fill (Johnson et al., 2018: Timar & Carter, 2017).

Summary

For over three decades, school districts have been under federal mandates to provide support for students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). However, students not identified with disabilities often did not receive the interventions necessary to achieve grade-level reading. Recently, Colorado passed legislation requiring students not reading at grade level, regardless of disability status, to receive targeted reading interventions, thereby requiring teachers to provide these interventions (Colorado Department of Education, 2016). Researchers have recently explored the perceptions and experiences of teachers who have provided these interventions at the secondary level (Barrett-Tatum & Ashworth, 2020; Clark et al., 2021; Daniel et al., 2021; Vess et al., 2018). Using Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory to understand this topic, the reviewed literature discussed a brief history of interventions, current expectations, teacher self-efficacy and factors impacting self-efficacy, teacher perceptions and experiences, rural education implications to meeting student needs and teacher expertise, and state mandates.

A gap exists in the literature pertaining to rural middle school teachers' lived experiences and perceptions of providing reading interventions to meet state mandates. By examining the lived experiences of rural middle school teachers and understanding their feelings of self-efficacy and perceptions of program effectiveness, rural school districts and state policy makers can better understand the needs of rural teachers and students to successfully meet the state mandated READ plans.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of rural middle school teachers in Colorado who are faced with implementing reading interventions to align with mandates from the revised Colorado READ Act. The study focused on both the teachers' beliefs in their self-efficacy and the perceived challenges. This chapter presents the research design, procedures, data analysis, and trustworthiness for the current study.

Research Design

The use of a phenomenological qualitative study was appropriate for this study as the study centered around the lived experiences of participants who all shared a similar phenomenon. The current study focuses on the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who are tasked with the responsibility of providing state mandated reading interventions to students who are on READ plans. Although quantitative measurable data, in the form of state and local testing, can show whether students are making reading growth, the focus of a qualitative transcendental phenomenological study focuses on how teachers perceive their self- efficacy in providing these interventions. Since phenomenological studies focus on the lived experiences, this type of study is most suited for exploring the lived experiences of these teachers. Because all districts across the state are required, as of 2019, to provide evidence-based reading interventions to secondary students who were placed on READ plans in elementary school, this is a recent phenomenon (Colorado Department of Education, 2019) and therefore is not one explored in recent scholarly studies.

In 2020, the researcher for this study was tasked with researching, developing, and implementing a reading intervention plan for students in their rural district. With the background

and experience in providing these interventions, the investment in the topic fulfills what Moustakas (1994) stated was necessary when deciding on a topic for a phenomenological study. The phenomenological research design involves looking at human behavior, both in what humans say and do (Umanailo, 2019). Moustakas (1994) defined transcendental phenomenology as "a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness" (p. 49). For a transcendental phenomenology study, the focus is on the lived experiences of a group of people who have experienced the same phenomenon. Through the study, the researcher desired to gain a deeper understanding of these experiences.

Four characteristics comprise transcendental phenomenology: description, reduction, essence, and intentionality (Umanailo, 2019). The first aspect of a phenomenological study is to describe the phenomenon. The researcher does not explain the phenomenon, but rather explores it as it happens (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) believed that the researcher needed to have a personal interest and should be "intimately connected with the phenomenon" (p. 59).

Reduction focuses on keeping out the biases, assumptions, and prejudices so as to not taint the description of what is being observed (Umanailo, 2019). Intentionality involves the correlation between noesis and noema (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) explained this as the combining of the real content and the ideal content that forms memory, thoughts, perceptions, judgments, and feelings. Reduction was done through the Epoche, bracketing, and memoing, and intentionality was done through data collection and analysis. From these, the essence was derived. The essence is the core meanings and essential themes that the researcher draws from analyzing the collected data (Umanailo, 2019).

Once the phenomenon and the questions were formulated, the researcher located and selected the participants. Moustakas (1994) stressed that the participants must not only have

experienced the phenomenon, but also show an intense interest and is willing to undergo a lengthy interview and other means of data collecting (such as focus groups and observations), as well as willing to be recorded and have the data collected be part of a publication or dissertation. In addition to selecting participants, Moustakas explained the importance of having ethical principles that include informed consent, confidentiality, and having "procedures for insuring full disclose of the nature, purpose, and requirements of the research project" (p. 110). Validating the data provides another assurance of ethical practice.

After the preparation is done, with willing participants ready to participate, the next step is to collect the data (Groenewald, 2004). The most typical form of data in a phenomenological study comes from a long interview with each participant (Moustakas, 1994). These interviews can involve creating a trusting atmosphere through a social conversation that helps the participant to feel comfortable (Moustakas, 1994). Prior to beginning the interviews, the researcher needs to engage in the "Epoché process…so that, to a significant degree, past association, understandings, 'facts,' biases, are set aside and do not color or direct the interview" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 116). Other forms of data are also collected prior to organizing and analyzing the data. These forms can include focus group interviews, observations, documents, and audiovisual materials (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Once the data are collected, the researcher then focuses on organizing the data through horizontalizing, then clustering, then "developing textural descriptions of the experiences" into the essences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, p. 118).

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who are providing reading interventions to meet state standards?

Sub-Question One

How are these interventions affecting these small rural middle school teachers' perceived beliefs in their self-efficacy?

Sub-Question Two

How are the perceived challenges faced by small rural middle school teachers who provide these interventions affecting them as teachers and affecting their students?

Sub-Question Three

How are the perceived positives experienced by small rural middle school teachers who provide these interventions affecting them as teachers and affecting their students?

Setting and Participants

This section describes both the participants and the settings for this study.

Setting

The study focused on rural middle schools in the state of Colorado. The Colorado Department of Education (2022b) defines rural schools as districts with less than 6,500 students enrolled in P-12. Colorado is comprised of 178 districts, of which 146 are considered rural. Of the 146 rural districts, 107 are designated as small rural with less than 1000 students enrolled. For this study, only small rural districts of Colorado were represented, as these are the districts

facing the most challenges meeting state mandates. Most of these districts are comprised of either all grades in one school or split into two schools with either middle school (6-8) attached to the elementary or high school. All rural districts in Colorado follow a similar organizational structure: superintendent, administrator(s), teachers. Some districts have charter schools, but since these are held to the same state mandates, teachers in charter schools were also included in the participant pool.

Because of the smaller population of students in these schools that are required to receive reading interventions per the Colorado READ Act, access to highly trained reading interventionists is often not feasible. Therefore, reading interventions are often conducted by either general education or special education teachers that also have other job requirements along with providing reading interventions. This study involved teachers from small rural school districts at least twenty miles from any urban city, so as to provide a true picture of rural Colorado representation. With schools within twenty miles of an urban area, the greater pool of human resources might alter the rural dynamics. All participants and school districts were given pseudonyms to preserve their confidentiality.

Participants

The participants in this study were comprised of both general and special education teachers who are responsible for providing structured reading interventions to students who are on a READ plan. All participants are certified secondary teachers, holding Colorado teaching licenses. Demographic information was obtained, primarily for contributing to understanding if years of teaching, gender, or ethnicity play a factor in the participant's lived experience. Every participant was currently teaching at a middle school in a small rural district in Colorado, and no more than two participants from any one school district was included. Superintendents of these

school districts were asked to provide organizational documentation and/or written information about current intervention practices for triangulation but were not a part of the interviews or focus groups.

Researcher Positionality

The motivation for conducting this study came from being placed in the role of reading specialist, despite not having any specific training, when first hired by the rural Colorado school district where I currently teach. For years, social studies content took a back seat to reading instruction for students who did not demonstrate grade-level reading on standardized tests. Initially, three grade levels of students took a reading intervention class where they received reading instruction and then took a reading assessment test each month to monitor growth. The teacher would provide some social studies content, as this class took the place of social studies. The school then tried to place social studies teachers in language arts classes in order to provide struggling readers with extra help, but since social studies teachers had no training, this model failed as well. Next, language arts teachers co-taught a social studies/reading intervention class where the emphasis was again on reading over social studies. In 2019, after the Colorado Department of Education mandated secondary schools provide individualized reading interventions, I begin to research how we provided these interventions. My colleague and I received phonetic and phonemic training that elementary school teachers receive, but this did not cover vocabulary development, reading fluency, or reading comprehension. Because I recognized that this training was inadequate, I presented recommendations to the school board and superintendent, who approved most of my recommendations. It is this experience that contributed to my interpretive framework.

Interpretive Framework

The interpretive framework for this study followed the post-positivism framework. The post-positivism belief system takes "a scientific approach to research" (Creswell & Poth, p. 23). With reading growth, there is no strict cause and effect, but possibly a number of factors that contribute to student reading growth. A number of qualitative data collections would be necessary to look at these factors and analyze what correlations these factors play in improving reading proficiency. Therefore, I believed that conducting a qualitative study that looks at reading growth through student motivation, through reading self-confidence, and reading importance, as well as recognizes and represents reading growth through quantitative measures, would align with the post-positivism framework. According to Howell (2013), "Post-positivist epistemology abandons the ideal of complete separation between the investigated and investigator, however objectivity and distance are still pursued." This study allowed me to explore the phenomenon beyond my own experiences and allowed for objectivity while still rooting it in a shared phenomenon.

Philosophical Assumptions

The three philosophical assumptions are addressed, as these provide an understanding of researcher positionality.

Ontological Assumptions

The ontological assumption looks at the nature of reality and the concept of multiple realities. Just as people are diverse, so are the realities that different researchers embrace. As a researcher, it is important to not only accept that others' realities are different, but to gather evidence to show these diverse realities. That includes using multiple forms of evidence and by presenting the themes discovered during research in "the actual words of different individuals

and presenting different perspectives" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20). For my research, my ontological position was to gather evidence from different teachers. I conducted interviews and focus groups and administered a survey that helped explore these individuals' realities when it came to reading interventions and attitudes about reading.

Epistemological Assumptions

The epistemological assumption places the researcher in as close of a proximity to the participants as possible. Epistemology focuses on how we know that which we know (Engle, 2014). To do this, I spent quality time with interviewing and focus groups. The data collected was the subjective experiences of those being interviewed. In order to understand the lived experiences of my participants, I needed to spend time getting to know them.

Axiological Assumptions

The axiological assumption acknowledges the researcher's own values and biases. This includes identifying their demographical information, personal experiences, professional beliefs, and any other information that might be relevant to the context and setting of the study being conducted. For myself, having taught in five different schools for over 27 years, I bring years of expertise. I also believe in the idea espoused by J.K. Rowling, who said, "If you don't like to read, you haven't found the right book" (Severs, 2016). I have spent years developing a strong curriculum that promotes choice and have personally purchased over four thousand books for my classroom library. I value students' having high quality literature available. However, I recognize that this is what I value, as the reading teacher I work with does not have a single novel available in his classroom for students to self-select. He does not read young adult literature and cannot recommend books to students, whereas I have read over a thousand of the books on my shelves.

Therefore, my biases and values needed to be shared, as it was relevant to the context and setting of my research.

Researcher's Role

My role in this research is as the human instrument. All of the participants in this study were teachers, like me. Therefore, I had no authority over them. Only one of the participants work with me in my district, but I only had a professional relationship with this participant, and I was conscious of my own biases and assumptions, ensuring that these did not impact their responses. My role as the researcher was to gather data through listening and questioning during interviews and focus groups. The use of personal knowledge regarding reading interventions was used to help prompt open-ended responses as needed, but not to sway or influence responses. During focus groups, my role was to help the discussion remain focused and to prompt discussions that address the research question and sub-questions. Because of my own personal connection to this phenomenon, my role as researcher was to bracket my own biases and assumptions during the data analysis, so as to not skew the categories, themes, or essence derived from the data collected.

Procedures

This section outlines the permissions, information regarding securing Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, soliciting participants, and the data and analysis plans by data source, as well as an explanation of how the study achieved triangulation.

Permissions

Initially, the proposal was submitted for IRB approval. Upon approval, emails were sent out to several superintendents across the state of Colorado in small rural districts at least twenty miles from any major urban area. These emails asked superintendents for permission to contact

the teacher(s) responsible for the reading interventions at the middle school level, as well as a request for any organizational documentation or information they could provide regarding their reading intervention program. Because of the need to protect the participants, superintendents who provide this permission were not informed if their teacher(s) agreed to participate. Although none of the interviews or focus groups were conducted at any sites, except for the one at the researcher's school, requesting this permission from the superintendents provided the contact information for the teachers who have experienced this phenomenon, as well as provided them with information regarding the study and promoted possible interest in the findings from the study.

Recruitment Plan

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), in a phenomenological study, it is essential that all those participating in the study have experienced the same phenomenon. Colorado has 107 small rural school districts from which to solicit participants. Emails were sent to the superintendents of each rural district, requesting the names and emails of middle school teachers who were responsible for implementing reading instruction for students on READ plans. Emails were then sent to numerous prospective participants outlining the study. No consideration was given for age, gender, or years of experience, regardless of their impact on experiences as the primary concern was to have the selection be based on the demographics of the school district. Therefore, the sampling strategy employed was a combined or mixed sampling. Ideally, participants would have been from different regions of the state, representing various differences in socio-economic demographics. Using a map of Colorado, potential participants' location would have been mapped if more than fifteen willing potential participants would have responded. From the map, geographical considerations were used, along with district size and the

socio-economics of the area to help create a diverse representation of schools. This was valuable, as some districts in the state serve impoverished counties, whereas some rural districts were located in more affluent counties. As this is a qualitative phenomenological study, the number of participants was a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 15, per Liberty University's guidelines. Once IRB approval was gained, participants were contacted via email, with clear informed consent being obtained.

Data Collection Plan

No data was collected from participants until approval was gained from the Instructional Review Board (IRB) at Liberty University and the consent of the school superintendents to solicit teacher (participant) consent was sent. The superintendents in each rural school district was sent an email request for permission to contact the teacher(s) responsible for reading interventions in the middle school. Each email included a request for any documentation regarding the reading intervention program or links to what their district's plan is for meeting the state mandates regarding the READ Act. Emails were then sent to potential participants throughout rural districts around the state. Written and informed consent from the superintendent and the teachers participating was on file prior to starting any data collecting. Willing teacher participants were informed of the nature of the study, along with the time commitment prior to gaining their consent.

This study involved the use of semi-structured individual interviews, followed by focus groups, then a look at the organizational documentation. As necessary to provide additional triangulation, the use of a self-efficacy survey (Schwarzer et al., 1999) was used. Interviews were used to understand the phenomenon from the participants' viewpoints in order to gain insights into their beliefs and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Merriam and Tisdell

(2015), “interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (p. 108). The use of semi-structured interviews allows for the research question to be addressed “while also leaving space for the study participants to offer new meanings to the topic of study” (Galletta & Cross, 2013, p. 2).

The second source of data came from focus groups. One of the benefits of conducting these focus groups is to “produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (Morgan, 1997, p. 2). Another benefit of the focus group was to note any differences in participants’ responses to each other than those given in the individual interviews.

In order to achieve triangulation, the use of organizational documents was used. The use of documents helped to align what the participants are doing to implement reading interventions with what the districts’ expectations are for these interventions. The use of documentation can provide “a lot about a broad range of phenomena” and therefore makes it valid for qualitative research (Grant, 2018, p. 2). As this study focused on the phenomena of rural school district teachers providing reading interventions to meet Colorado State reading mandates, using organizational documents provided a straightforward report on the expectations of each district.

The use of the self-efficacy survey (Schwarzer et al., 1999) helped to collaborate interview data, along with providing additional information regarding teacher self-efficacy. Although predominantly used in quantitative studies, Glackin and Hohenstein (2018) found that self-efficacy surveys, along with interviews, provide a much more in-depth data regarding self-efficacy. The survey data was charted on a scale to look at the percentage of how each question was answered by the participants. Due to the small number of participants in this study, the

survey was used to offer additional data as to overall feelings of self-efficacy for triangulation purposes. The percentages of how teachers answered each question were included in the results.

Individual Interview Data Collection Approach

These interviews were conducted primarily via Zoom, as most of the participants were in districts too far away to conduct in-person interviews reasonably and economically or conduct observations. Only one was in person and was digitally recorded, both on a recording device and through video. Pilot testing was done prior to the interviews, using a nearby rural (but not small rural) school district teacher in order to fine-tune the questions. Once the interview questions were set, participant interviews were conducted. As with a semi-structured interview, some responses lead to follow up questions not included above, but still related to the research questions, allowing for participants to express and expand on their perspectives of the phenomenon. According to Bogdan & Biklen (2003), it is important for the interviewer to not control the content too tightly, as it limits the interviewee telling their story in their own words.

Each of the four data collection methods had an analysis plan. Interviews and focus group interviews received nearly the same phenomenological reduction, as described by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell and Poth (2018). Documentation and the survey data were examined for triangulation purposes.

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please tell me your name, what school district you teach in, what you teach, and how many years you have been teaching. (CRQ)
2. How did you come about becoming your school's reading interventionist? (CRQ)
3. What is your training and/or background in reading interventions? (CRQ)
4. What other classes do you teach besides providing reading interventions? (CRQ)

5. What type of on-going or recent training has your district provided you with since becoming the reading interventionist? (CRQ)
6. How does the school provide time for reading interventions within the school day? (CRQ)
7. How familiar are you with the Colorado READ Act regarding secondary school responsibility to provide reading interventions to students with READ plans? (CRQ)
8. How many students do you have on READ plans? (CRQ)
9. What programs or curriculum does your school use for reading interventions? (CRQ)
10. What internal school/district supports are in place for you in regard to student READ plans? (SQ3)
11. How do you feel about the effectiveness of your reading interventions that you provide the students? (SQ1)
12. What is your comfort level in teaching these reading interventions? (SQ1)
13. Thinking about your own self-efficacy, how effective do you feel you are in providing these interventions? (SQ1)
14. How successful do you feel your school's reading intervention program has been? (SQ2, SQ3)
15. What are some things you feel your school district could do to improve reading interventions and/or meeting the READ plans of your students? (SQ2)
16. Have you seen a positive improvement in reading interventions within the last three years since the state mandate? (SQ3)
17. Is there anything you can think of that I might not have asked regarding this topic?

Initially, a brief, “How are you?” question and ice-breaker was asked prior to the first actual interview question being asked. This ice-breaker was done to help establish a level of comfort and build a connection (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2017). The first set of questions (1-6) and questions 8 and 9 were asked in order to provide background information that helped to provide context for additional questions. Question 1 provided the setting, which was important to establish as this study involved rural school districts only. Questions 3,5, and 10 were asked to gather information on training in order to help establish the possible “why” a participant feels the way they do regarding the phenomenon (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2017). These questions addressed the research question. Questions 11-15 focused on the lived experiences of the participant and aligned with the purpose and goal of the study (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). Specifically, question 13 addressed the sub-question one, focusing on self-efficacy. Question 15 addressed sub-question two, focusing on challenges. Question 16 addressed the sub-question three, focusing on potential positives. The last question (17) encouraged the participants to add additional information that the interviewer might have not asked or covered (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2017).

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Once the interviews were collected, the recordings were transcribed using an online transcription service (Otter.ai) and then manually checked for accuracy of transcription. Next, each interview transcript was sent to the participant for them to check for accuracy. Once accuracy had been ascertained, the interviews were coded. Prior to focus groups being conducted, the interviews were read line-by-line with initial coding done. These included In Vivo coding, summarizing, condensing, and reducing. This is the first impression coding phrases that later was refined (Saldana, 2015). Horizonalization (Moustakas, 1994) was used to analyze

the data. Once the decoding then encoding of all the interviews was finished, looking for possible gaps and emerging themes (that have been noted through analytic Memoing) helped to refine and guide changes to initially planned focus group interview questions. The coding from the initial read-throughs were then looked at again through a reflective lens. A list of non-overlapping statements was generated and then categorized into themes. Using imaginative variation was used to take into account multiple perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). Using the themes from the focus groups, documents, and the survey, the integration of all the data was used for the final stage of analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

Focus Groups Data Collection Approach

Focus groups were used in this study to follow up on additional questions that came up during the individual interviews that were best discussed and drawn out by conversations with others who have similar experiences. An email request was sent out to all the participants, asking them to select a time they could participate in a focus group via a Zoom call. This email also included a request that they did not ask other participants to identify what school or district they teach in but were welcome to share this information if they choose to do so. Since these focus groups involved other people who could share what was discussed in the group, it was important to ensure that a level of confidentiality exists (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2017). The two focus groups ideally would have contained at least four participants. By doing two separate focus groups, more voices would heard, as well as allowing for more themes to potentially arise. The focus groups were to last a maximum of one hour, as to respect the time of the participants. The questions for the focus group involved information about each individual, how their district provides reading interventions, and then delved into their feelings regarding these interventions.

Questions were posed by the researcher, with the researcher only interjecting if necessary to keep the group focused.

Focus Group Questions

1. Please tell us your first name, what you teach besides the reading interventions, and how many years you've been teaching.
2. What specifically does your district do to provide reading interventions for students on READ plans or those that would qualify for reading plans? (CRQ)
3. How do you personally feel about your school's reading interventions? (SQ1, SQ2, SC3)
4. What are some personal positives regarding your reading intervention program? (SQ3)
5. What are some personal challenges in providing the reading interventions? (SQ2)

Morgan (1997) believed that focus groups allowed for insights and data from interactions of the group that might not be as easily discovered in one-on-one interviews. Because the participants all share similar experiences, these interactions were likely to yield the best information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The first question provided background on the participants and helped to establish a connection among the participants. Question 2 allowed the participants to exchange information about what their district does, which opened up conversation regarding the various types of interventions. Questions 3-5 applied to the research question regarding the self-efficacy of teachers. These addressed the research sub-question one. Question 5 directly addressed sub-question two regarding challenges.

Challenges to conducting these focus groups might come from participants being timid about sharing their experiences, or worried about confidentiality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This was mitigated by encouraging the participants to be open but professional, and explaining that the

information given would remain confidential, referencing the application for the IRB, and ensuring the recording would be stored in a password protected file.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

The focus group interviews were recorded, then transcribed in the same manner as the individual interviews. However, accuracy was only checked by the researcher, as multiple participants were involved. The focus group transcripts were uploaded and then coded in the same manner as the individual interviews. However, codes used for the interviews that had already been refined were primarily used, with the addition of new codes made that did not fit any previous codes. Using the codes from the individual interviews and the focus groups, the second stage of coding occurred. This involved looking for patterns: similarities, predictable differences, frequency, sequence correspondence, and causation (Saldana, 2015). Throughout the process, the research questions and sub-questions guided the relevance of each chunking of patterns or categories and sub-categories that emerged. These patterns were reduced to five to seven themes that were consistent with all the data collected before moving into the final stage of analysis.

Document Analysis Data Collection Approach

These documents were the strategic plans outlined by the district that explain how and what the district's plans were to meet the state mandates. The use of documentation was used to help explore the phenomena and provide validation for the data obtained during the interviews and focus groups (Grant, 2018). Collection of these was done through email to the superintendents, as well as a request from the participants for any documentation they had regarding their reading interventions. The third source of data was organizational documents. These were strategic plans outlined by the district that explain what they are doing to meet the state mandates. These

supported the interviews, as each teacher was willing to talk about their district's expectations for implementation of reading intervention practices. This also included a copy of the state mandates found in the Colorado READ Act (Colorado Department of Education, 2019) as well as other state data regarding reading interventions and testing data.

Document Analysis Data Analysis Plan

The use of documentation was analyzed for triangulation purposes. The documents were analyzed for themes derived from both the interviews and the focus groups. Margin notes and initial coding were done, but as noted when connected to previous coding and categories rather than line-by-line, as the documents were used to support the interviews and integrate the data. The documents were analyzed to support and further understand the emerging themes, as these documents supported the participants' lived experiences, but were not influenced by these participants' perceptions.

Surveys/Questionnaires Data Collection Approach

The survey was administered after the interview, so as not to skew the participants' responses during the interview process. Each participant received the Teacher Self- Efficacy Assessment (Schwarzer et al., 1999) after their interview and focus group participation. A link to this assessment was emailed to each participant, with directions asking them to focus on their self-efficacy in relation to their providing reading interventions only and not any other classes. The assessment is comprised of ten questions that require the participants to respond on a 1-4 scale. Scores were tabulated, with the higher the score, the higher the feelings of self-efficacy. A chart shows the percentage of responses for each question, with the 1-4 scale tabulation done for each question. The survey results were used to provide additional data on teachers' beliefs in their self-efficacy to corroborate with the data from the interviews and focus groups.

Survey/Questionnaire Questions

These survey questions are directly from the Teacher Self-Efficacy Assessment by Schwarzer et al. (1999):

1. I am convinced that I am able to successfully teach all relevant subject content to even the most difficult students.
2. I know that I can maintain a positive relationship with parents even when tensions arise.
3. When I try really hard, I am able to reach even the most difficult students.
4. I am convinced that, as time goes by, I will continue to become more and more capable of helping to address my students' needs.
5. Even if I get disrupted while teaching, I am confident that I can maintain my composure and continue to teach well.
6. I am confident in my ability to be responsive to my students' needs even if I am having a bad day.
7. If I try hard enough, I know that I can exert a positive influence on both the personal and academic development of my students.
8. I am convinced that I can develop creative ways to cope with system constraints (such as budget cuts and other administrative problems) and continue to teach well.
9. I know that I can motivate my students to participate in innovative projects.
10. I know that I can carry out innovative projects even when I am opposed by skeptical colleagues.

6. The scale used is a 1-4 scale, comprised of: (1) not at all true, (2) barely true, (3) moderately true, (4) exactly true.

Survey/Questionnaire Data Analysis Plan

The survey was used as additional data was needed to support an emerging theme regarding the research sub-question, "What are these rural middle school teachers' perceived beliefs in their self-efficacy in providing these interventions?" The Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer et al., 1999) used resulted in numerical data, as it is scored on a 4-point Likert scale, with statements written from the "I" perspective, intended for teachers to assess their own feelings of self-efficacy in regard to providing reading interventions. The resulting data from this survey was used to support themes that emerged from earlier analysis and was used in the final stage of phenomenological reduction. .

Data Synthesis

Prior to the beginning analysis of the data, a clear understanding and use of the Epoché process was established to inhibit researcher biases and judgments (Moustakas, 1994). Using the reflective process of continued looking as each new perspective is added, the reduction process lead to "what is texturally meaningful and essential in its phenomenal and experiential components" (Moustakas, 1994). Once the interviews and focus group transcripts wereverified for accuracy, the use of horizonalization for data analysis was used (Moustakas, 1994). For the first stage, coding included assigning a word or statement that pertained to the research question and sub-questions for each line or sentence. According to Moustakas (1994), "when we horizonalize, each phenomenon has equal value as we seek to disclose its nature and essence" (p. 95). In addition, the use of imaginative variation looked at the data from the interview from various perspectives. In using this process, the descriptions of what the participants experience combines with how they experience it (Moustakas, 1994).

After the initial coding, the codes was then examined for redundancy and overlapping. The initial conceptual labels that remained was then clustered or chunked into categories and subcategories, where processing coding occurred. Some In Vivo coding was included in these categories in order to help keep the data "rooted in the participant's own language" (Saldana, 2015, p. 6). The documents were analyzed to provide additional data to support these categories. Any personal thoughts and ideas were bracketed. Likewise, the use of the self-efficacy survey was used to support the data collected regarding self-efficacy.

Using the categories, the next step was to reduce these categories into major themes. These themes were an intuitive integration of the themes "into a unified statement of the essences of the experiences of the phenomenon as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). This final stage of analysis involved creating a composite description of the understanding gained from the participants' experiences through the integration of all the gathered data to draw meaning of the phenomenon as lived experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

Sandelowski (1993) claimed that trustworthiness in qualitative research "becomes a matter of persuasion whereby the scientist is viewed as having made those practices visible and, therefore, auditable" (p. 2). Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to auditing as "the critical review of the research design, processes, and conclusions by an expert" (p. 882). In order to ensure the trustworthiness of this qualitative study, credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability, recommended by Lincoln and Guba, was examined.

Credibility

In order to establish credibility, this study needed to demonstrate that the views of the participants and the gathered information from the experiences are accurate (Nowell et al., 2017). The use of triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking was used to establish credibility.

Triangulation

The use of triangulation of the multiple sources (interviews, focus groups, and organizational documents) was used to confirm congruence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used triangulation using the data sources, as well as various qualitative methods to explore the lived experiences told by the participants. Triangulation occurred from using a wide range of participants, along with organizational documents obtained from participants, as well as focus group interactions. The use of the self-efficacy study also provided triangulation, allowing for a more quantitative look at self-efficacy to support the qualitative data.

Member Checking

The interviews were member checked to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts. Recordings and transcripts were checked for accuracy with an outside reviewer, and additional follow-up clarification was obtained from the participants as needed, via email. Through lengthy interviews and focus groups, prolonged engagement helped establish credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Peer Debriefing

In addition, the use of peer debriefing (Marshall & Rossman, 2015) was used by sharing my analyzes with colleagues. No data was shared with colleagues, but general thoughts and impressions was shared to help provide perspective and detect possible biases. These colleagues

were teachers who have research experience and an understanding of the research questions, which helped to provide perspectives that helped me formulate themes and arrive at the essence.

Transferability

Transferability involves demonstrating that the findings of the present study can be applied in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to achieve this, detailed information regarding the copious data collected are provided (Amankwaa, 2016). Along with the written transcripts of the interviews and focus groups, facial expressions and body language was be recorded, as interviews and focus groups were conducted via Zoom. Details regarding demographics, programs, and school environments were included. Amankwaa (2106) stated that in order to ensure transferability, the researcher "in essence is telling a story with enough detail that the reader obtains a vivid picture of the events of the research" (p. 122). The use of several participants, detailed interviews, along with focus groups helped to provide this picture.

Dependability

Dependability relies on findings that are consistent and able to be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to achieve dependability, this study had all the procedures effectively described. Each step of this research process underwent scrutiny by another researcher. According to Cope (2014), by having another researcher concur "with the decision trails at each stage of the research process," dependability is able to be achieved (p. 89). This auditing process is necessary to assure dependability of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability

Confirmability is a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Tobin & Begley (2004) build on this definition, stating that confirmability "is concerned

with establishing that data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer's imagination, but are clearly derived from the data" (p. 392). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend that to establish confirmability, the researcher should create an audit trail, use triangulation, complete a confirmability audit, and utilize reflexivity. The audit trail involved keeping all raw data, all reduction and analysis products (notes, categories, themes, definitions, and documentations), all process notes, and all materials. The use of triangulation, as discussed above, was used for confirmability. Positional reflexivity was used to express how my own experiences and personal characteristics play into my interactions and understanding of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to do this, I used memoing and bracketed my perspectives. To audit this, I asked a colleague who was aware of my biases to review my research.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to contacting participants, permission was obtained from the IRB board at Liberty University. Emails were sent out to district superintendents, (1) requesting permission to speak with potential participants; (2) requesting specific demographical information regarding the district; (3) requesting any organizational documentation pertaining to their district's READ interventions at the middle school level or that they provide this information if no documentation exists. For districts that did not have superintendent responses, emails were sent out to potential participants outlining the study and requesting participation. I obtained participant informed consent, informed participants that this study was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time, expressed confidentiality through use of pseudonyms and site anonymity, and how both physical and electronic data was to be stored.

The participants were informed that a low-level of risk was involved, as Colorado only has 107 small rural school districts, so it was possible that someone might identify a program or participant based on some unintentional mention of a peculiarity to that district's program. However, given the intent of the study was to bring about an awareness of the experiences, this should not be a significant risk. Another risk explained might be in participating in focus groups, as experiences shared with other participants cannot be guaranteed to not be shared by those other participants. To mitigate this risk, at the start of each focus group participants were asked to maintain confidentiality and not share outside of the focus group. All recordings were stored on a password protected flash drive and on a password protected server. This data will be destroyed after three years.

Summary

This study used a transcendental phenomenological qualitative study design, as it focuses on the lived experiences of rural middle school teachers who are tasked with providing reading interventions to meet state mandates. The participants were pulled from several rural districts in various parts of the states to provide a wide sampling. The data collected was in the form of individual interviews, focus groups, organizational data, and a self-efficacy survey. Prior to collecting and analyzing the data, the researcher underwent the Epoche to minimize any personal biases and assumptions. Interviews were conducted primarily via Zoom and the transcripts recorded. The participants were asked to check the transcripts for any discrepancies or to clear up any possible ambiguities or confusion. Then the data was examined line-by-line. Categories were created, and emerging themes will be pulled. From these themes, the essence of the lived experiences was articulated. Peer debriefing occurred for credibility, along with triangulation of data.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

In this chapter, the participants are described, along with how their shared lived experiences providing reading interventions in the middle school grades highlight overall themes from the research questions. The data collected from ten participants includes interviews, focus groups, emailed documentation of programs and reading data, state testing information, and a self-efficacy survey. These ten participants are all licensed teachers or in the process of being licensed through alternative licensure in the state of Colorado who work in small rural school districts and provide reading interventions to middle school aged students. The purpose of this phenomenological study will be to understand the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who are mandated by the Colorado READ Act to implement reading interventions for all students on READ plans. Chapter four presents participant descriptors, a discussion of the data results, and emergent themes related to the research question and sub-questions.

Participants

The study consisted of ten teachers. Over 75 superintendents received emails requesting permission to solicit participation from district staff. Only two superintendents offered names of possible teachers in their district and two superintendents responded in the negative, stating their districts did not have anyone at the middle school level providing reading interventions. Invitations to participate were sent to over 150 middle school language arts and special education teachers in 80 of Colorado's rural districts. Only ten participants responded that they provided reading interventions to middle school students and were willing to participate in this study. All participants gave consent to be interviewed and have their data used for this study. The participants participated in individual interviews and eight of the ten completed a self-efficacy

survey. Focus group interviews were also completed, along with participants emailing documentation and information pertaining to their individual school's reading programs and program efficacy. State testing data was also used. A brief description of the participants is listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Teacher Participants

Teacher Participant	Years Taught	Classes w/ Reading Int.	Additional Classes	Grade Level
Participant 1	7	English Language Arts	None mentioned	7^{th}-8^{th}
Participant 2	5	English Language Arts	None mentioned	7^{th}
Participant 3	1	Specific Reading Intervention classes	None mentioned	7^{th} – 8^{th}
Participant 4	4	Special Education Support	Math Interventions	6^{th}
Participant 5	29	English Language Arts	None mentioned	7^{th} – 8^{th}
Participant 6	5	Specific Reading Intervention classes	Social Studies/Electives	6^{th}-8^{th}
Participant 7	24	English Language Arts	None mentioned	8^{th}
Participant 8	12	Special Education Support	Math Interventions	7^{th} – 8^{th}
Participant 9	10	English Language Arts	Social Studies, Keyboarding, Leadership	6^{th}
Participant 10	32	English Language Arts	Electives	7^{th}

The following information in Table 2 describes participants' district information. This information helps to present a picture of socio-economics from the percentage of students on free and reduced lunch in 2022-2023, and district demographics in terms of percentage of students with significant reading deficiencies (SRD) and overall percentage of middle school students proficient in ELA on the 2023 state standardized test.

Table 2

District Demographics

District	Percent of Free/Reduced Lunch	Precent of SRD	Percent of Middle School Students Proficient in ELA
District 1	49.9%	43%	No Data Available
District 2	36.8%	20%	32.7%
District 3	18.9%	6%	73%
District 4	50%	28%	28.6%
District 5	28.1%	30%	42%
District 6	64.1%	23%	47.8%
District 7	30.1%	18%	62.5%

(Colorado Department of Education 2023, May 5; 2023, November 6; 2024).

Results

After conducting individual interviews, holding two focus groups, collecting emailed documentation and information regarding reading programs and data, and collecting survey results, the information was examined for broad themes. Using coding to organize and classify reoccurring keywords and concepts, the information was then arranged by the varying codes. Once this organizing of codes was complete, the themes of the study were determined. The major themes identified from the data were Professional Development/Training, Time/Resource Limitations, and District Expectations versus State Mandate Understanding. Sub-themes identified included Budget Constraints, Lack of Support Staff, Communication, and School Support.

Table 3

Themes

Significant Statements	Subthemes
Theme 1: Time/ Resource Limitations	
No separate reading intervention classes Reading interventions embedded in whole class instruction Pull-outs Number of students needing interventions Lack of time to teach interventions Reading time embedded in school day, but done by all teachers so no differentiation Need for resources District budget constraints resulting in lack of skilled professionals	
Theme 2: Training/Support	
No set interventionist specialist Training done on own or with different district Lack of available professional development opportunities Mostly focuses on elementary school reading, not secondary Interventionist (Special Education teacher) spread too thin – has to cover too many students	
Theme 3: District Expectations vs. State Mandate Expectations	
Teach them how to read and good luck Not familiar with the secondary part of the READ Act Lack of follow-up from elementary to secondary Students with READ plans receive support in general ed class along with all students	
Theme 4: Successes and Strengths	
Working with others to support students Developing own curriculum Noticing growth over time Seeing skills transfer to other classes Separate classes for reading intervention needs Support of other teachers	Use of Technology

Theme 5: Weaknesses/Struggles	
COVID causing reading deficits Lack of consistency	External Issues
Theme 6: Teacher Self-Efficacy	
Too much responsibilities for the time given Strong sense of self-efficacy due to experience	

Time/ Resource Limitations

Several of the participants, when asked what they felt their district could do to improve reading interventions mentioned the need for resources. Only a few teachers indicated their school utilized a reading intervention program. Most found resources on their own. Participant 7 mentioned using Cris Tovani's books, stating she pulled strategies from them to assist her in providing reading support. She indicated that this was not what her district provided or required, but what she found on her own to use. Participant 3 provided that she just started using Language Live, but this was her decision as the district did not "officially use any specific program." Another participant expressed that even though her district had purchased 20 licenses of IXL (an online program that targets both language arts and math), they did not have enough to accommodate all the students needing interventions and the program was not one she utilized. Participant 5, when asked if her district had any curriculum to follow, indicated that her district did not have any programs or curriculum in secondary to support reading interventions. She mentioned the lack of tools to assist students as being a concern. Similarly, participant 2 also indicated that she was "just kind of on my own." Only a few participants stated that their district had something in place, but that it was limited to only select students and not used for all students needing reading interventions. Participant 4 stated her district used "Really Great Reading" as part of the special education department's curriculum, but not for students needing

reading interventions who were not on IEPs. Overall, with limited exceptions, the lack of resources was a common theme amongst the participants.

Another theme that repeatedly came up was the lack of time to provide needed interventions. For some participants, all reading interventions had to be done within their general education class. Others had limited time, either from pull-outs or separate whole-school "intervention/enrichment" times daily. Only a couple participants had full-length classes specifically to provide reading interventions to students. Although some districts provided reading time daily, this was not intentional intervention time. Participant 10 stated that all the students in her middle school were required to have a 20-25 minute reading class which was taught by all staff, regardless of their content specialty. When asked how students were placed in these classes, she indicated that it was random placement. Therefore, this reading time was not allocated for reading interventions. These interventions needed to be provided within the ELA class. Participant 10 also indicated that only a small percentage of students, mainly on IEPs, received additional one on one support for reading.

In Participant 9's school, students only received 20 minutes three times a week of interventions. Not all students needing reading interventions were placed in these sessions, however. She indicated that "it can't be three days a week for 20 minutes [as it] is not going to show any improvement." Participant 5 indicated that she only had about five minutes a day to focus on the kids that needed reading interventions. She felt that moving from elementary to middle school was "a hard shift for our students and teachers. When elementary school has all these interventionists, and all this extra support they provide kids, and when they get to middle school it's just classroom teachers." She brought up that she felt that getting the help at the secondary level was "hard for any small district to handle."

Similarly, Participant 2 indicated that she might only get students that needed Tier two interventions for a class for just a quarter or semester during scheduled intervention/enrichment time. Students who need more intensive help normally would get pulled out by a reading interventionist, but currently that interventionist was unavailable, so students had to get help in their general classes. Participant 4, who taught special education rather than general education courses, pulled students from classes to provide reading interventions. However, she pulled only the students with IEPs that previously were on READ plans (the district determined that IEPs trumped READ plans). She indicated that she only worked with students for the required number of contact minutes on their IEPs. This led to her expressing that one of her struggles was the lack of time she had to spend with her students, "The reading intervention we use moves through the lessons really quick and I only have 30 minutes with my students a day. I wish I would get at least maybe 45 to 50 minutes. Just that little extra time would really help and just let students be a little bit more relaxed instead of how fast we have to move through each lesson."

Likewise, Participant 8, another special education teacher, stated students would be pulled for targeted interventions. They also could have to miss electives and be in a specific intervention class. However, if a student also needed math interventions, they would only receive math or reading. Similarly, in a focus group, one of the participants also indicated that her district only allowed students to be in either a math or reading intervention class, so test scores determined which they would receive. Therefore, all other interventions needed to be done in the general education class. Only Participant 6 indicated that students on READ plans had both a regular language arts class and a targeted reading intervention class that provided adequate time for students to receive the help they needed.

Training/Support

Seven of the ten teachers stated their school either used paraprofessional help to support reading interventions for students not on IEPs, or for two of the participants, their reading interventionist was being utilized as a long-term substitute in another department. Participant 4 expressed concern over the lack of support. “We have staffing problems, and we just lost one of our paras.” Participant 5 stated, “we don’t have the staff in place to meet the needs of our struggling [readers].” Another participant, during a focus group, indicated that she felt that providing a reading interventionist was not a priority for her district. Only Participant 3 was specifically hired by her district to provide reading interventions and was the only participant in the study whose district currently had a reading interventionist working directly with students needing reading interventions, regardless of whether they were on IEPs or not.

Since nine of the ten participants did not have a reading interventionist at their school to provide interventions to students on READ plans, they were asked what training they received to support them in providing reading interventions. Participant 1 stated that she received no formal training to do interventions, nor was she an English teacher by training. She taught sociology and social studies before moving into teaching English two years ago. Participant 6 taught social studies and only became the reading interventionist because he did not have a full class-load. Participant 3, the outlier to this, was a teacher specifically hired to provide interventions after being a "squeaky wheel.” Participant 3 stated, “Two of my boys are dyslexic. As they were coming through the grades, there was zero help.” To help her own sons, she took Orton-Gillingham training and became a certified structure literacy dyslexia interventionist. Only two other participants, one while working for an urban district and one who took a half-day session on her own, received dyslexia training. Participant 5 referred to receiving Six-Trait

training, which is actually a writing program, not a reading program. She indicated that her district provided no reading intervention training. Any training she might receive would be at her own initiative and not through her district. Participant 8 stated that her time working for Denver Public Schools, one of the largest urban districts in Colorado, provided her with opportunities for professional development around reading. However, she stated that since working for her current district, "I've gone to conferences over the years, but it's all things I've had to seek out on my own." Even when training is offered, one participant indicated that only a handful of students fit the profile of the student who would need that skill or program.

The lack of training offered by school districts was mentioned by most participants. Participant 9, who has taught for 10 years, stated she has had no reading intervention training at all except a "master's degree in elementary education." Participant 8 indicated that her district would pay for the trainings that she would seek out on her own, but that her district did not offer any professional development around reading interventions. In contrast, Participant 4 received DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) training recently and stated that they would be starting DIBELS in the next few weeks. She indicated that they received monthly trainings. Participant 4 taught at a 5-6 intermediate school (as a 6th grade teacher) that worked closely with the elementary school for trainings rather than the 7-12 grade school in her district, so she often attended elementary school trainings. The local BOCES (Board of Cooperative Educational Services) provided some training for teachers, but these were not always built into professional development days provided for the district but offered during the summer. Participant 6 indicated that he spent a week completing training in Orton-Gillingham, but other than that, he did not receive any additional professional development. He did receive support from one of the elementary reading specialists when he first started teaching the reading

intervention class but felt the training he received was on how to assess the students and analyze the assessments, not on how to actually do interventions. Other participants, when asked what ongoing or recent training was provided by their districts, responded that no training at all was provided. Participant 2 indicated that her training came from another state and that she sought out dyslexia training on her own, but that she has been frustrated and has advocated for her district to provide the language arts teachers with additional training.

The lack of professional development and training lent itself to questioning why this lack of training existed. For some participants, administration was supportive to the best of their ability, whereas some participants faced apathetic administrators. Despite acknowledging that resources, due to budget constraints, were limited, participant 10 indicated that she had the support of her principal and fellow staff. “If we see a need and take it to our principal, right away, he’s on it.” Participant 7 shared that she had an amazing principal, but stated that when it came to district support, it was “not there.” She said it was, “just kind of, like, teach them how to read and good luck.” Conversely, Participant 2 stated, “We have just been fighting and fighting and fighting to get support.” Participant 5, during the focus group, stated that her school also did not adequately support reading interventions. “In our district,” she responded, “sports are far more important than reading interventions.”

District Expectations vs. State Mandate Expectations

Another reoccurring theme that emerged during both the individual interviews and the focus groups was the lack of knowledge and the lack of concern regarding the Colorado READ Act as it pertained to secondary schools. When Participant 7 was asked about whether the state mandate had resulted in reading growth over the past 3 years, she stated, “I don’t really care about that. I hate to say that, but I don’t like it. I’m not teaching for the state. I just want kids to

know how to read and that's more important than what the state says anytime. So, I don't think the state mandate really has done a lot or made a lot of difference in what we're doing." Participant 9 explained that the elementary school would pass on their READ plans to the middle school, but no instructions or expectations on what they were supposed to do with these READ plans were provided. "Honestly, I don't know what we're supposed to be doing, besides providing these interventions in my classroom as a normal teacher would be." Despite this lack of knowing, she indicated that "30 to 40% of [her] 6th grade class would be identified this year on READ Act plans, but [she] had not seen the actual papers in probably a couple of years." Most participants expressed a lack of familiarity with the READ Act update from 2019. Participant 2 stated, "I did a lot of independent research on understanding what it was. When I asked for the district to support me and understand…what READ plans mean, they said, 'This is what you do to track the data. Just track the data.' So, I don't understand a lot of it. I have just been monitoring test scores and giving check ins and things like that."

Most other teachers interviewed knew little or nothing about the updated READ Act that included providing reading interventions to students beyond their elementary school years. Despite not being that familiar with the READ Act, Participant 2 stated that within the district, teachers "met at least once a month to go over how students are progressing on READ plans." She did express frustration that students placed on IEPs no longer stayed on READ plans. She stated, "That doesn't mean that they don't need the interventions. It's just crazy. Most of the kids who are on the IEPs were on it for reading interventions. So, they're still getting the reading interventions."

Only a few felt they had a good understanding of the mandate. Participant 3 indicated that she was writing the READ plans, so she felt familiar with the state mandate and her role in

meeting that mandate. Although, she did state that only about fifty percent of the students she taught in her reading intervention classes currently had READ plans. Participant 6 stated that he knew about the mandate and knew which students were on READ plans, but had not personally seen the plans himself.

A number of participants indicated that how the district determined which students belonged in a reading intervention class or received additional support was not based on whether they had a READ plan, but on other factors. Participant 5 stated that her district determined the students pulled out of electives to be in a reading intervention class "based on their NWEA and their CMAS scores." However, she did state that this was contingent on having parent permission which "has been tricky" for them to get. For her school, this is the first year they have provided a separate class and not all students who need these interventions receives them in this class, so she continues to provide them in her regular ELA classroom. She felt that "a third should be on a READ plan" but their plans did not transfer from the elementary school to the middle school. A number of other participants indicated similar experiences with READ plans not going from elementary to middle school.

Successes and Strengths

A few participants shared their successes and positive experiences around providing reading interventions. Participant 10 remarked on the transferring of reading skills, "I feel pretty good about it just because I see them use those strategies in other classes." She also shared that what they were doing was successful. "We take such ownership over them, and they're my kids." She felt that her students' growth and state assessment scores were meeting state expectations. Participant 2 stated that last year students made huge growths because the school had a reading

interventionist who had specific reading training. Students were able to be exited off of Tier 3 and moved into regular intervention classes to receive Tier 2 support.

Working successfully with other teachers was a strength mentioned by some participants. Participant 8 expressed strong support for the communication her district had regarding students who needed reading interventions. “The general education teachers have input into which students go into the Tier 2 and Tier 3 groups.” She compared it to her time working for Denver Public Schools, where the “reading interventionists decide who they wanted to see and weren’t necessarily accountable.” She expressed that being in a small rural district allows for more communication. Likewise, Participant 6 had the support of the elementary school reading specialists who came over and helped train and work with him when he first started providing reading interventions.

Some districts also providing additional resources, including providing more time with students, which helped play a role in student success. Participant 5 shared that last year her school provided programs for 30 minutes each day that targeted student needs. She taught a reading intervention class and indicated that she saw about 70% of students making growth on the NWEA and/or CMAS. Participant 4 also shared a similar experience, “We’ve seen a lot with NWEA, with a student’s growth jumping. They’re getting a lot higher in their reading than they were at previous years where it’d be like a roller coaster of up and down. Now it’s like a steady growth it seems.” She stated that her district has been utilizing the same intervention curriculum at the elementary school for about 5 years, but that they have added DIBELS, which helps with consistency from elementary to intermediate. She also shared a success story during a focus group about a student who made significant gains and her parent’s response of, “You’ve made such as difference.” For her, “watching the kids find success” has been a major positive.

Likewise, Participant 4 also indicated that she really enjoyed "seeing all the progress students are making" as her positive.

Use of Technology

Some participants mentioned using READ 180, IXL, and Reading Plus as reading intervention tools. Participant 6 indicated that with the use of Reading Plus, his students made good progress reaching their grade level reading targets. However, Participant 5 found that using a specific online reading program to not be successful. She indicated that they used the same program as participant 6. However, because their district did not use it appropriately, it was not successful. Participant 4 stated that her reading program was, "…on the computer, which is really cool. We have the pamphlets and everything. And then materials to project onto the board. But [students] have workbooks, and we have a guide book that has prompts embedded." Those who had or just started using on-line programs felt that, if used with fidelity, these programs were successful in helping students growth in reading.

Weaknesses/Struggles

Although participants shared successes and strengths, they also shared a number of struggles and weaknesses in their program. Participant 7 felt that "for what time I have and the responsibilities that I have on my shoulders" that if she did much more than what she currently was doing, she would be "six feet under." The number of students a teacher needed to provide interventions was also reported to be a struggle for participants. Participant 3 felt that the "system is hampering." She stated, "I don't think it is fair to sprinkle water on twenty kids where nobody really is getting a drink." Participant 5 also shared a similar sentiment. She felt that there should be no more than 12 students max in reading intervention class. Participant 2 stated, "I've been using a lot of my intervention class to support what I've been doing in my core classes, just

to make sure the kids are understanding what is going on in class." However, with 20 students in her intervention class, she felt like she was "floundering." She also indicated that without being able to utilize any specific reading programs online, student growth and improvement was not happening.

Participant 8 indicated that at the middle school level, students with dyslexia were not getting their needs met. "They are just being taught more to use text to speech or speech to text." With the increase on her caseload, she no longer pulled dyslexic students to work with, as she did not want them to miss out on their electives. Participant 3 also expressed that she would be more effective with smaller numbers of students, especially when working with her dyslexic population.

Another weakness mentioned was the lack of READ plans and communication coming up from the elementary to middle school. Although Participant 4 felt that the growth with her 6th graders was good and that the reading interventions stayed consistent from elementary to intermediate (5th and 6th), after 6th, this consistency is where her district fell short. She stated, "We don't talk as much." Participant 6 indicated that until recently, no READ plans were being passed on and that he had not personally received any READ plans for his students despite knowing they were on these plans. A few other participants had no idea if the students they worked with on reading interventions all had READ plans or not.

External Issues

Several teachers mentioned factors outside of the academic setting that impacted reading interventions. Because students are placed on READ plans by no later than third grade if they show a significant reading deficiency, many students who need reading interventions by the time they enter middle school were not on READ plans. Some teachers felt that this was due to

COVID happening about the time many middle schoolers were in 2nd -4th grade. Participant 10 stated, “We are steadily trying to still dig out of COVID, like the deficit in learning, and just the base level of where students are when they come to us. Last year… most of [the 8th graders] were reading at third/fourth grade level.” Participant 5 stated that parents had to approve their child being taken out of an elective to be placed into the reading intervention class. She stated that it was tricky, “because parents see that they’d rather be in a different…elective rather than reading.” When asked if she’d seen a positive improvement from reading interventions within the last three years since the state mandate, Participant 5 stated she had not. She said, “Parents don’t want to. ‘My kids are fine. If you’re a teacher, he’d know how to read.’” The challenge, for her district, was getting parents to buy into the idea that their children needed reading interventions more than they needed another elective. Likewise, students themselves could see being placed in reading interventions as a negative. Participant 5 indicated, “My biggest concern is the kids that have to take a reading intervention class see it as a punishment. I think we’ve always had that struggle, but convincing children of the importance of reading and that reading interventions will hopefully get them into position for high school. But [they] would much rather be anywhere but the reading class.”

Another external issue mentioned was the language barrier. “I have kids who are only Spanish speakers, which is really hard when I don’t speak Spanish,” stated Participant 4. “A big percentage of our students are Hispanic. And so mainly a lot of our students are ESL learners. So, it’s trying to provide instruction for both and trying to decide if they are on a READ plan because of their language.”

Teacher Self-Efficacy

Teachers indicated varying levels of self-efficacy. Participant 10 indicated a high level of

comfort regarding teaching reading interventions. “I would say fairly high, I would think with 32 years. I think most of the time I am able to give them some assistance in whatever they’re doing so they can comprehend what they’re reading so they can retain it.” Participant 8 responded to how she felt about some of the positives of being involved in teaching reading interventions with, “Oh, I love it. It’s my jam. I think I really enjoy it.” When asked about her self-efficacy, Participant 4 responded, “Originally, it was about like a six. Now it’s about like an eight because I got retrained. I feel really comfortable teaching the interventions and then I’m doing it properly now to the students.” Others felt they had room to grow. Participant 5 rated herself at a B+, but she explained that that she had been teaching for 29 years. However, when asked how effective her school’s reading intervention program was, she explained, “It’s not.” Participant 7 indicated, “I think I’m pretty effective…I don’t think that I’m doing the best that I probably could do.” Regarding her self-efficacy, Participant 9 replied that she was, “thrown into [teaching reading interventions] from being a high school teacher to being a middle school teacher.” She stated, “We don’t do reading interventions at high school. My self-efficacy when I first started this was incredibly low.” She also indicated that, “Sometimes it can feel pretty upsetting if I can’t get a kid to where I hope that they could be just based off of what I can do in the classroom.” Participant 6 felt similar, stating that in his first year, he did not feel effective and prior to getting an on-line program for reading interventions, he felt that he was “not comfortable with it at all,” and stated that without the on-line program, he did not feel he could handle doing reading interventions at all. He felt that his district should hire a reading specialist instead of using whatever teacher was available that did not have a full schedule.

Effectiveness also depended on the number of students being taught. In small groups, Participant 3 felt she was effective, but the larger groups of students she taught made her feel less

effective. Similarly, Participant 2 indicated that she struggled with the planning and implementation, in large part because of the number of students in each of her classes as well as having to teach core classes. “I can’t plan an entire day of core classes and 20 different lessons in one class two days a week for two different classes. Like that’s impossible. I’m not five people.” Her response to being asked about her self-efficacy was, “Maybe only half effective because I just, I’m being asked to do more than is humanly possible. It’s awful and it breaks my heart because I’m trying and I feel like I’m not doing enough… but I can only do so much. I’m being asked to do the job of like five people, because it’s just the different skill sets that I have in that class of 20 kids. You can’t address them all.”

The survey data came from “Teacher Self-Efficacy Assessment” by Schwarzer et al. (1999) and showed teacher self-efficacy to be higher than expressed in the interviews. Eight of the ten participants completed the survey. In the directions of the survey, participants were asked to answer the questions in terms of their self-efficacy regarding providing reading interventions. However, the questions themselves did not directly pertain to reading interventions. With the exception of two questions regarding finding creative ways to cope within system constraints and when faced with skeptical colleagues, all eight participants felt sure of their own self-efficacy to provide reading interventions, even when disruptions occurred, when they were having a bad day, or working with the most difficult students. Appendix E shows the direct results of the survey.

Outlier Data and Findings

Outlier Finding #1

Participant 3 was an outlier. She was hired specifically to address READ plans and provide reading interventions for dyslexic students. She teaches in the most affluent district of all

the participants and trained specifically as a reading interventionist. She indicated that she was hired because of her repeated concerns being voiced to the district regarding their lack of qualified educators in meeting the needs of dyslexic and reading-challenged students. She stated the was a "squeaking wheel" prior to being hired. "Two of my boys are dyslexic and as they were coming up through the grades, there was zero help." To help her own sons, she took Orton Gillingham training, and became a certified structure literacy and dyslexia interventionist. She also provides professional development for the staff in her district on morphology and other areas of reading acquisition.

Outlier Finding # 2

Participant 6's school district provided specific classes for reading interventions using an evidence-based online reading program. Class sizes were limited to around 7 per class, and overall, students made significant gains in reading. According to Participant 6, the elementary school actively communicated with the middle school as to "what to expect for these kids coming in" and the elementary school "will give us on every single student, all the reading data they have collected thus far."

Research Question Responses

This study answered the research question and sub-questions. Participant interviews, focus groups, documentation provided, and the self-efficacy survey provided answers to these questions. The questions for this study in both the individual interviews and the focus groups were intended to investigate the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who provided reading interventions for students to meet state mandates set forth in the Colorado READ Act. The requested documentation and the self-efficacy survey provided additional support and data. Although studies and literature presented explore reading interventions for

middle school students, most focused on specific programs or methodologies. Additionally, literature presented in this study discussed challenges faced by rural and small rural districts, but none focused specifically on how being a small rural district impacted providing reading interventions. Likewise, with the Colorado READ Act mandate for secondary schools being relatively recent, the impact on small rural districts has not been explored. The central research question and sub-questions presented in this study were designed to provide some insight into the lived experiences of these small rural middle school teachers. The central research question investigated common shared experiences around providing the state mandated reading interventions to middle school students who qualified for READ plans. The three sub-questions supported the central research question, focusing on self-efficacy, challenges, and successes these teachers experienced and how these impacted both them and their students. The themes found in the interviews and focus groups apply directly to these questions.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who are providing reading interventions to meet state standards? The participants' perspectives varied for a number of reasons, but common themes involved the lack of resources – both human and physical, the lack of time with students, the number of students needing interventions, support by district, knowledge of state standards, outside influences, lack of training, feelings of self-efficacy, and their struggles and successes. Experiences amongst the participants had many differences, in large part due to how their school district provided resources, time, and support for reading interventions, and in part due to the participants' backgrounds. Participant 2 shared, "I'm being asked to do more than is humanly possible. It's awful and it breaks my heart because I'm trying, and I feel like I'm not doing enough… but I can only do so much. I'm being asked to do the job

of like five people, because it's just the different skill sets that I have in that class of 20 kids. You can't address them all." Whereas Participant 6 shared that with the help of the program provided by the district, that they are doing "very well." The other participants fell between these two in effectiveness of the reading interventions provided to their students. Each of the themes from the interviews, focus groups, and the survey aligned with the central research question.

The first theme of resources received a variety of responses. Resources included humans as a resource, curriculum, and time given to provide interventions. The amount of time teachers had to provide reading interventions ranged from as little as a few minutes a day within the language arts class to a full class period a day for targeted reading interventions separate from any other course. Participant 6 indicated that his school would, "block out a class per grade level" and that class sizes were kept around seven. Despite having no separate times for students during the day for interventions, Participant 1 expressed, "We have small enough class sizes so I can sit down with those kids that need extra support and work with them individually."

When asked about what programs or curriculum being used for reading interventions, Participant 7 stated, "Most of the stuff that we do, it's just stuff that I have learned. We don't actually have a real program that we do." When asked the same question, Participant 1 responded, "That's a good question. I don't know the answer to that." Others, like Participants 4 and 6, used a technology-based program and a few had some limited reference materials to draw from to help them.

Another resource often mentioned by participants was in terms of having support from an actual interventionist. Although two of the participants were special education teachers, they were not reading specialists. Only participant 3 was hired by her district to provide specific reading interventions to students. With the exception of Participant 6, the other participants all

taught language arts. A few districts employed paraprofessionals to provide limited reading interventions, but the majority of interventions were conducted by general education teachers. The special education teachers predominantly worked with students who had both IEPs and READ plans or IEPs that negated their district having them on READ plans.

Another prevalent theme that focused on addressing the lived experiences centered around training and district support. Most participants stated that their districts did not provide them adequate training to provide reading interventions, nor offer any professional development around reading interventions. Participant 3 indicated that, as a specialist, she provided her district training, and Participant 4 stated that she had trainings at least once a month. However, Participant 1 stated that she was not provided with any training, nor has she had any formal training in the past. Similarly, Participant 9 also indicated that she had received no training besides getting a master's degree in elementary education. Participant 5 also stated that her district did not provide any training, but that she has sought out training on her own. Participant 6 attended Orton-Gillingham training over the summer, paid for by the district, and had some limited help from the elementary school reading interventionist when he first started, but both programs were elementary-school related and did address the needs of middle school students.

Since the research question focused on state mandates, understanding what the participants knew about the state mandate also made up part of their lived experience. Knowledge of the updated 2019 Colorado READ Act pertaining to middle school mandates met with varying responses. Participant 9, when asked about her familiarity, responded, "Honestly, nothing. I don't know what we're supposed to be doing, besides providing these interventions in my classroom as a normal teacher would be."

Sub-Question One

How are these interventions affecting these small rural middle school teachers' perceived beliefs in their self-efficacy? Self-efficacy varied based on a number of factors. This included the number of students a teacher had when providing reading interventions, years of experience, availability of curriculum/programs to assist, training, and amount of time participants had with students. Participant 2 expressed that having moved recently from high school to middle school, when she first started providing reading interventions, her self-efficacy was "incredibly low: and that she was "floundering." When asked, "How do you feel that you can accomplish what you're hoping to accomplish?" she responded, "I think it's hard because once they're in middle school, it's not like we teach them how to read anymore. In some ways it's more breaking things apart and examining things, which is really challenging for a lot of students. The last two years, I've seen the lowest readers in my class, and I have to read everything out loud, so sometimes it can feel pretty upsetting if I can't get a kid to where I hope they could be just based off of what I can do in the classroom." The responses to this question varied greatly among participants. A few participants expressed a lower level of self-efficacy due to a lack of resources, time with students, a lack of training and too many students at one time to adequately meet the needs of each student. Others who expressed higher self-efficacy did so based on the resources or their own background training. Participant 6 attributed his higher self-efficacy to the program used by his school, whereas Participant 3 attributed hers to her background as a licensed reading interventionist. The self-efficacy survey also helped to address this question. Overall, participants had a good sense of self-efficacy in their ability to provide reading interventions. With only two exceptions, teachers felt confident in their abilities.

Sub-Question Two

How are the perceived challenges faced by small rural middle school teachers who provide these interventions affecting them as teachers and affecting their students?

Not having enough resources, training, support staff, and parental support are all challenges expressed by participants that affected them and their students. “I would like to have some more training,” Participant 1 expressed. “There are a whole bunch that are still very low as they leave eighth grade, some that are still pretty low. In that red zone. That’s certainly very concerning.” Participant 6 shared that one of the challenges he faced was the lack of training as well. He indicated that without the use of the technology program Reading Plus, he would not be able to provide reading interventions. Prior to his district using this program, he taught a specific social study reading class that was co-taught with a language arts teacher to help students with reading. Neither he nor his colleague had any reading training and just “winged” it. When asked what his district could do better to improve reading interventions, his response was to hire a “reading specialist with an actual reading program” because only a few students were making progress in some areas.

For Participant 9, the perceived challenges included the lack of resources, including smaller class sizes. “I wish I had more tools. I am not able to give students the one-on-one full-on support they need, especially not in a full classroom. I would just really want more training and time.” Participant 2 also indicated that class size presented a challenge as well as lack of resources. “I am not an interventionist. I’m a language arts teacher. How am I supposed to be doing intervention for 20 kids and I’m not the interventionist and you’re not giving me anything.” She also provided that the time she has with students in an intervention class is often

used to help support them in their core classes rather than provide them specific reading interventions.

Another perceived challenge is the lack of continuity between elementary school and middle school. Participant 2 stated that her middle school did not receive READ plans for students coming from their elementary school, but that many students did have them at the end of 5th grade. “I’ve been asking this question. What happens to the READ plans once they leave elementary school if they’re not at grade level?” Participant 1 commented that she was not aware of who was on READ plans. “I’m finding out that a lot of kids once they leave elementary school, they’re exited.” Participant 5 knew students should be on READ plans, but said she was unaware of what platform they used to hold student READ plans. She said she just worked with whomever needed interventions, regardless.

During the focus groups, participants were asked what some of their personal challenges were that they found in providing reading interventions. Each participant shared a different challenge. Participant 7 expressed, “I wish I had more time to work with all our struggling readers. I have too many kids. The other frustration that I have is a lot of those kids don’t like to read. They haven’t found what they love. They struggle obviously and that hurts my heart that they don’t love it.” Participant 6 shared that his challenge was that he was “not a reading specialist.” Participant 8 stated that her biggest challenge was, “just carving out that time and prioritizing it.” She also expressed that the program they have only targets one or two students, which makes it, “really hard to balance with the rest of the needs in the building.” Participant 5 felt that one of her challenges was in keeping students from seeing being in reading interventions as a punishment. “Trying to find a way to make it an important part of their day and not the worst part of their day.” She also expressed the need for more staff to help meet the needs of

those struggling. Overall, the challenges faced by the participants appeared throughout the interviews and focus groups in terms of resources, time with students, need for more support staff, better training and professional development, and communication regarding READ plans in general.

Sub-Question Three

How are the perceived positives experienced by small rural middle school teachers who provide these interventions affecting them as teachers and affecting their students? The third sub-research question pertained to what teachers felt were successes and strengths of their program. Responses varied. Some participants had little positive to report. However, a few shared positive thoughts regarding the strengths. Participant 1 felt that because of the small numbers in her classes, she was able to provide more individualized support for struggling readers. She felt like she was making progress. "Year after year, they're definitely progressing. I have really seen a lot of growth…my seventh graders last year and where they are this year, it's encouraging." Participant 3 said, "I really love my reading intervention group…a lot of students are starting to grow on the NWEA and they're developing reading." Participant 8 called reading interventions, "my jam" and she said that because she only sees her group two days a week, students do not feel like they are missing out on their electives so it "keeps things fresh for the students." Participant 7 felt that the strategies she was teaching her students being used by them in other classes was one of the positives, "They're using that in other classes and so that makes me really happy." Participant 6 shared that he really liked using Reading Plus, stating, "It helps me really gather data because I'm not a reading specialist. So, it really helps me interpret the data [and] figure out where the kids are at. Then I can conference with them. The unknown is minimalized the best we can. And the kids kind of start realizing, 'Hey, I'm at this level' and it

gives them a clear path to where they need to be and what is expected of them." Positives from various participants included the program they used, students transferring skills, and seeing students grow.

Summary

The data collected on the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers providing reading interventions to meet Colorado state mandates focuses on a number of themes. The most prevalent themes included resources needed: staffing, time, and training. With few exceptions, participants expressed that their district did not provide qualified staff at the middle school level to adequately provide reading interventions. Only a few participants mentioned resources provided to them by their schools or districts to assist them in providing quality interventions to students. Additionally, with the exception of one participant, all expressed that they either had too many students to provide individual support, or they did not have enough time during the week to do so. Only one participant, who was hired because of her background as a reading interventionist, felt they were provided adequate training and professional development. Most participants had limited or no knowledge of the state mandate regarding providing reading interventions to students still on READ plans. Likewise, many expressed that their district exited students off READ plans prior to middle school, or they were unaware of which students still had READ plans. Both successes and challenges were expressed by participants, as well as their reflections on their own self-efficacy in providing reading interventions. For some participants, being an experienced teacher made them feel more effective, whereas others felt effective due to prior training before being employed by their current district. Overall, the interviews, focus groups, collected documentation, and the survey assisted in answering the central research question and the three sub-questions.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

This phenomenological qualitative study aims to understand the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who are mandated by the Colorado READ Act to implement reading interventions for all students on READ plans. This chapter includes a summary of the thematic findings that answer the central research question and the three sub-questions. In addition, this chapter includes a discussion of the practical, theoretical, and empirical implications of this study. Next, the limitations and delimitations are discussed. Furthermore, the recommendations for future research are provided.

Discussion

The findings of this study include the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who provide reading interventions for students in grades 6-8 who are or should be on READ plans. Discussed within this section are the themes and sub-themes as perceived through the lens of the theoretical framework. The interpretation of the findings is discussed, along with the implications for practice. Both the theoretical and empirical implications are described, along with a discussion on the limitations and delimitations of the study. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

Participants for this study included ten small rural middle school (6^{th}-8^{th}) teachers in Colorado. All participants were tasked by their districts with providing reading interventions to students either on READ plans or ones that had or should have had READ plans. Data was collected through individual interviews, focus group interviews, emailed documentation, and a self-efficacy survey. Due to the distances between schools, all interviews except one were

conducted via Zoom. One in-person interview was conducted due to the proximity to the researcher. The individual interview questions were asked to gather participants' perceptions of providing reading interventions in a small rural school setting. Next, the focus group interviews were conducted. These focus group interviews allowed participants the opportunity to both delve deeper into topics brought up in individual interviews, as well as interact and build upon responses made by other participants. Requests for program and general reading data were made. Lastly, participants were asked to complete a brief self-efficacy survey via Google Forms.

After collecting all the data, I examined the interviews for key words using the coding recommendations from *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* by J. Saldana. Several themes and sub-themes emerged from these keywords. The major themes included resource and time limitations, training and support, district expectations versus state mandate expectations, successes and strengths, weaknesses and struggles, and teacher self-efficacy. Sub-themes included use of technology and external issues. These themes and sub-themes provide a look at the collective lived experiences of providing reading interventions to middle school age students in small rural districts.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The themes found from the collected data provide answers to the central research questions and the three sub-questions. The information provided from the data explores the phenomenon of teaching small rural middle school reading interventions to students as mandated by Colorado's READ Act of 2019. The central research question was: What are the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who are providing reading interventions to meet state standards? This question guided both the individual and focus group interview questions. Sub-question one was: How are these interventions affecting these small rural middle

school teachers' perceived beliefs in their self-efficacy? Sub-question two was: How are the perceived challenges faced by small rural middle school teachers who provide these interventions affecting them as teachers and affecting their students? Sub-question three was: How are the perceived positives experienced by small rural middle school teachers who provide these interventions affecting them as teachers and affecting their students? This summary will discuss the major themes and sub-themes found in the collected data for this study. Altogether, the participants discussed the lack of resources, the lack of time to provide reading interventions, the lack of training and support, their district's expectations, their knowledge of the state mandate, and the successes and strengths of their reading interventions. Additionally, participants expressed their understanding of the state mandates versus what their district expected, as well as their feelings of self-efficacy when providing reading interventions.

Resources and Time

The mention of resources in the form of curriculum, staffing, and time with students repeatedly came up during the interviews. Although the Colorado READ Act requires elementary schools of use state approved curriculum, the 2019 mandate does not require secondary schools to do the same (Colorado Department of Education, 2022a). Therefore, it is up to the school districts to determine how to provide reading interventions. Of the ten participants, only one consistently used an ESSA-qualified program purchased by their district. One other participant used an elementary-focused program in her 6th grade class. The rest pulled from their own experiences and made their own curriculum decisions. Participant 10 explained that she pulled from Cris Tovani's books, stating, "So in my classroom, all my students, I make them use strategies from those books. We do a lot of annotation…we do the thinking strategies with the kids, we keep reading logs, we do dialectal journals. So, we do a lot of those types of

interventions with all students across the board." These are all reading strategies used in most general language arts classes and not specific to reading intervention classes. Participant 2 indicated that she was "kind of on my own" when it came to curriculum. Participant 5 believed that her district had 20 licenses for IXL, an on-line program that provided specific skills in both math and language arts for students K-12, but due to the limited number of licenses, this was not used for reading interventions by her, as she did not feel it was sufficient, so she did her own curriculum. Similarly, Participant 7 stated, "Most of the stuff that we do, it's just stuff that I have learned. We don't actually have like a real program that we do." The lack of curriculum or programs provided by the district means that participants were left to figure out and develop their own curriculum based on their knowledge of what would work for reading interventions. A few participants did mention that students with IEPs that received Tier 3 interventions did use district approved curriculum, such as Really Great Reading, but as Participant 4 stated, "This was not provided to non-IEP students who needed reading interventions." Even Participant 3, the only licensed reading specialist, stated that her school did not have any specific program. "I'm pulling from many programs." She did look into starting one soon, but this was on her own initiative. The lack of reading intervention curriculum provided to teachers tasked to conduct these interventions to students with READ plans, as well as those needing the interventions was a frustration voiced by a number of participants.

The need for more time with students also was mentioned repeatedly. For half the participants, interventions had to be provided during their general language arts classes. Due to student numbers and the need to teach the course curriculum, this often became difficult. Participant 9 expressed her concern, stating, "I am not able to give them the one-on-one full support they need, especially not in a full classroom." Even in a targeted reading intervention

class, student numbers can be large. Participant 2 had 20 in her intervention class and Participant 3 felt that having 10 students in her targeted intervention groups was "too big." She indicated that she thought "three or four" was optimal in order to do one-on-ones and really small groups. Participant 6 shared that his reading intervention classes hovered around 7 students each, which allowed him to have more time with students one-on-one. With the exception of Participant 6, all participants indicated that they either did not have enough time with students or they had too many students in their sections to adequately provide one-on-one support. Even with smaller numbers, a couple of participants mentioned that not all students who needed reading interventions were placed in intervention pull-outs or classes. Participant 8 expressed concern over students who needed both math and reading interventions not getting any reading support, stating that whichever a student's lowest NWEA was determined which intervention they received. Overall, not one participant felt their district had the adequate resources, either in curriculum, staffing, or time. Most felt the lack of all three.

Training/Support

Any teacher or paraprofessional can provide these interventions.

Paraprofessionals do not need a college degree or specific training to work in school districts. Not having qualified reading interventionists creates a lack of human resources that can directly impact students who need reading interventions. Participant 5 called the teacher providing reading intervention pull-outs a "glorified para" who did not have a degree. Instead, she provided much of the reading interventions for students in her general education class. The lack of support required participants to draw on their own understandings of what constituted reading interventions and the limited prior training to provide these interventions. Only one participant was a trained and qualified reading specialist. Participant 3 indicated, "I'm a certified structure

literacy, dyslexia interventionist." Only one participant received district training in DIBELS However, DIBELS is not a structured literacy program, but rather a tool to help measure where students are at in their literacy. Another participant received Orton-Gillingham training but felt that this was not relevant to middle school students' needs, as it primarily focused on phonemics. Two participants received training prior to working for their current districts – both in urban schools. With the exception of two participants, the rest expressed the lack of training to be a concern. Three participants shared that they had a lack of background in reading. Participant 6 taught social studies and only became the reading interventionist because he was the only teacher who had open slots in his schedule to conduct reading interventions classes. Participant 1 was a sociology and social studies teacher who just recently switched to teaching English. Participant 9 taught high school English and indicated that knowing how to provide reading interventions was not needed as a high school teacher. This lack of training and background in reading interventions was repeatedly expressed by participants.

Along with this lack of training was the lack of any professional development offered around reading interventions. Only two participants – Participant 3 who provided her district with trainings as she was the specialist and Participant 4, whose district met monthly to go over data – stated that their district had professional development around reading strategies and interventions. All the rest stated their districts did nothing. Professional development either had to be sought out by the participants or were done prior to coming to the district. Overall, the lack of support to adequately provide needed training and professional development, as well as the lack of qualified interventionists lent itself to frustration.

District Versus State Expectations

Although the Colorado State Legislation updated the READ Act in 2019 to include secondary schools in their mandate, the lack of enforcement, funding, and communication with districts shows in the lack of knowledge about the updated READ Act expressed by the majority of participants. Not one participant indicated that their district was in full compliance with the mandate. Even though Participant 6 explained that his district ensured READ plans made it up to the middle school, he had never read one of his student's plans to know if he was providing the interventions needed for each student. Some students who demonstrated a lack of spelling, for example, would remain on their READ plan, regardless of not demonstrating a significant reading deficit because spelling was one component on the assessment from elementary school that had to be at grade level to allow a student to exit off their plan. Therefore, a student might receive comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary intervention support, but not spelling, despite not necessarily needing these interventions. With only a couple of exceptions, participants did not meet or work with their students on just reading interventions on a daily basis. A few only worked with students a couple days a week for either a full period or partial period, or else they only met with them for part of the school year. Others only had time during their general class to provide reading interventions to their students.

Most participants were not aware of the state mandate, as it fell to their districts to communicate this and then work towards compliance. The participants' district expectations varied from none to simple data tracking, to clear expectations for all students on READ plans to receive structured interventions. Participant 5 stated that she was not aware of the state's mandate, indicating that she did not think her district knew about it either. "My district is not,

well I'm afraid to tell you, that we're not in compliance." Participant 2, who recently started teaching in Colorado, stated:

> I learned about [the mandate] last year when I moved here because New Mexico didn't have that. I did a lot of independent research on understanding what it was. When I asked for the district to support me and understand what this is, what does a READ plan mean? Why is a kid on a READ plan? They said, 'This is what you do to track the data. Just track the data.' So, I don't understand a lot of it. I have just been monitoring test scores and giving check-ins and things like that.

Most participants expressed a lack of concern and knowledge over whether or not they were meeting state mandates. Only the reading specialist, Participant 3, was familiar with the state mandates, her students' READ plans, and felt that she was meeting the mandates. In fact, when the question was asked about whether the participants saw an improvement in students' reading since the mandate, none expressed that they felt the mandate had anything to do with whether or not their students improved or not. When asked about positive improvements since the mandate, Participant 7 replied:

> I don't really care about that. I mean, I hate to say that, but I don't. I'm not teaching for the state. And I'm not teaching like, 'Oh my gosh, they're making me do that.' I just want kids to know how to read and that's more important than what the state says anytime. So I don't think the state mandate really has done a lot or made a lot of difference for what we're doing.

Others expressed similar sentiments. The state mandate was not a driving factor in why they provided reading interventions, nor what types of reading interventions were used. Likewise,

most felt that whether a student was on a formal READ plan or not did not determine who received interventions, either by themselves or by the district.

Successes and Strengths

Despite a number of expressed frustrations, participants did share some of their successes and strengths of their reading interventions. These included witnessing students using reading strategies learned during interventions to help them in other subject areas, students being exited off their READ plans or moving from Tier 3 to Tier 2 support, and overall student growth in reading as shown on the state achievement test as well as on the NWEA. Participant 4 praised her student growth, stating, "We've seen a lot with NWEA, with student's growth jumping." Another felt getting positive parent feedback to be a success. Another aspect shared about their lived experiences included having positive communication within the district about students, support from colleagues, and districts providing needed resources for a successful program. Most of the success and strength of the reading interventions rested on the teachers' abilities to provide these interventions, either drawing from their own knowledge and skills, or from the programs they used. Participant 10 shared that she felt comfortable teaching reading interventions due to her 32 years as a teacher. When asked how successful did she feel her school reading intervention program has been, she responded, "I'm highly confident in our reading programs. When we look at our state assessment scores and growth, we're meeting state expectations in growth and performance. So, I feel great about that." She did clarify that this was not true for students with learning disabilities, however. Another success noted was with Participant 6, who attributed student success in reading interventions to their chosen technology program.

Some participants whose districts used technology to help provide reading interventions praised the use of these programs. Participant 4 shared that their program, another technology-

based one was also successful in assisting students in gaining reading skills. Participant 6 explained that his district adopted Reading Plus a couple of years ago and last year, students made an average of 4.2 year gain. However, Participant 5 stated that their district also used the Reading Plus program, but since it was not done with fidelity, it was not successful. Despite the mention of using READ 180, and IXL, only two participants felt that the use of technology was successfully implemented in providing and improving reading interventions and success.

Weaknesses and Struggles

Although most participants expressed successes and a few described strengths within their programs or from their own experiences, many also expressed a number of weaknesses and struggles. Many of the weaknesses and struggles mentioned fell into the themes of resources, time, support, and training. However, others were mentioned as well. One of the struggles was the number of responsibilities placed on teachers to not only provide reading interventions, but also teach their core subjects as well. Participant 7 expressed that to do it all, she would be "six feet under." Not being able to address the diverse needs of students also came up repeatedly. Participant 8 felt students with dyslexia were not being provided adequate interventions. Too many students with too diverse needs also plagued a number of participants. Because READ plans often did not make it from the elementary school to the middle school, teachers did not know what specific needs students had already been identified with, so meeting these needs became problematic, especially when given larger numbers of students needing interventions.

A few external issues that teachers felt impacted reading interventions included the impact from COVID, as well as the lack of parental support. With all current middle school students experiencing COVID while in elementary school, a couple of participants mentioned how this resulted in many students not having strong reading skills. Participant 10 stated that

most of her 8th grade students "were reading at third/fourth grade level." Participant 1 echoed this concern, "In the last three years since kids have kind of come out of COVID…we have hardly any growth." Participant 6 also indicated that number of students since COVID needing reading interventions has increased. Another external impact is parental support. Not all parents support their students being placed in a reading intervention class over getting a different elective. Both participant 5 and 6 mentioned this as a struggle. Participant 5 attributed the lack of improvement to parents not wanting their kids being pulled out for interventions. Both participants expressed that students also felt a stigma for being in a reading intervention class. Participant 4 felt that her district, having a larger ESL population, also faced trying to figure out if it was a language acquisition issue or a reading issue when deciding which students to place on READ plans or provide with reading interventions. These outside influences presented frustrations and road-blocks for participants providing needed interventions to students.

Self-Efficacy

During the interviews, the expressed self-efficacy of providing reading interventions to students widely varied from "I'm floundering," (Participant 2) to "It's my jam" (Participant 8). However, not one felt that, given the lack of resources, time, support, number of students, and training, that they were as effective as they would like to be. All the participants expressed passion about what they did for their students and how much they loved to see their students improve in reading. However, each participant expressed at least one reason beyond their control as to why they or their school were not as effective as they believed they could be. However, when looking at the results of the survey that focused only on themselves as providers of reading interventions, participants' self-efficacy was expressed much higher. The survey only focused on their abilities, not external factors out of their control, such as district curriculum decisions, class

sizes, time with students, parental and student attitudes, or teacher workloads. Participants, themselves, felt strongly in their own abilities, but their lived experiences did not necessarily align with their feelings.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this phenomenological study revealed a number of implications for policy and practice. The results revealed the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who were mandated by the Colorado READ Act to provide reading interventions to students on READ plans. The state, district superintendents, school administrators, and teachers can use these implications to advocate and improve the effectiveness and overall experience of the teachers who are tasked to provide these reading interventions.

Implications for Policy

Despite Colorado's READ Act requiring secondary schools to provide reading interventions for students on READ plans, without funding and enforcement, this mandate held little impact on actual practices for most of the small rural school districts represented by the participants in this study. Without additional funding from the state to assist districts in meeting the mandate, expecting small rural middle schools to hire, train, and provide smaller class sizes for reading interventions places an additional burden on already budget-strapped districts. Recently, the Colorado Department of Education made it mandatory that all secondary teachers providing reading interventions have to take a state-provided training on reading or provide evidence of knowledge or coursework in reading (Colorado Department of Education, 2023, October 31). However, no compensation is provided. This expectation rests on the districts to determine if they will compensate their teachers, or if they will just require it as an additional expectation on already overwhelmed teachers. Even with providing the training, if the state is not

overseeing and monitoring whether or not districts are in compliance, nor is there any consequences that impact district funding or accreditation, there are no guarantees that districts will comply with the state mandate. In fact, when asking a few participants if they were aware of the training, not one had completed it as of October 2023, and only one had heard of it, but did not know if it applied to special education teachers. Since one of the exceptions to this required course is if a teacher who provides reading interventions to students on READ plans has taken a state-approved reading course during their undergraduate or graduate studies, the state could require this as part of teacher education rather than placing all the burden to teach reading and provide interventions solely on the shoulders of a few teachers at the secondary level.

Implications for Practice

The information gathered from the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who provide reading interventions to students with READ plans provides a few implications for practice. The participants in the study provided districts and schools a number of issues that could be addressed. By understanding how teachers perceive their abilities to provide reading interventions, in terms of their higher self-efficacy, but how this efficacy is impacted by factors outside of their control, addressing these factors can improve student reading growth. These include providing more time during the day for reading interventions, making intervention groups smaller in number so teachers have more one-on-one time with individual students, providing more resources and programs to assist teachers in differentiating and targeting specific reading needs, and providing more training and professional development opportunities for those providing the reading interventions. In addition, providing parents with a better understanding of the importance of their children receiving needed interventions can be supported and stressed by the district and administrators. Overall, understanding and addressing the concerns expressed

through the lived experiences of these small rural middle school teachers who are tasked with providing reading interventions to meet the state mandate could help to reduce the frustration experienced, as well as lower the risk of teacher burnout.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The theory driving this phenomenological study is Bandura's (1994) theory of self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy affects a person's effort level, their ability to cope, and their ability to persevere when faced with challenges. Teachers are a key component in students making reading growth and instructional effectiveness is connected to a teacher's level of self-efficacy (Co et al., 2021; Perera et al., 2019). Previous research shows a direct connection between how a teacher's self-efficacy impacts student outcomes and behaviors (Herman et al., 2018; Laurmann & Berger, 2021; Prewett & Whitney, 2021; Zee et al., 2018). When each participant was asked about their own perceived self-efficacy, their responses were as follows: Participant 1 felt that "if I asked my students that question, I would say that they think it's pretty effective. I really have seen a lot of growth," but then explained that this was only her second year, and she still had a number of students going from seventh grade to eighth grade who were still very low. Participant 2 explained, "With everything that I'm trying to do and everything I'm trying to help them with? Maybe only half effective because I'm being asked to do more than is humanly possible." Participant 3, a reading specialist, rated herself as "highly effective" but then also expressed concern over how effective she was with larger groups. Participant 4 rated herself at a six initially, but then stated, "Now it's about like an eight because I got retrained. I feel really comfortable teaching the interventions, and I'm doing it properly now to the students." Participant 5 gave herself a B+ but felt that was only if she had the right material and "everything's in place." Participant 6 attributed his own self-efficacy without using

the Reading Plus program as “not very good” and stated he could not handle reading interventions without the use of the program. Participant 7 shared, “I’m pretty effective. I don’t think I’m doing the best that I probably could do, but… for what time I have and the responsibilities that I have on my shoulders. If I did much more, I think I would be six feet under.” Participant 8 responded with “Um” and did not directly answer the question but explained that she was not seeing what she was doing as translating to how students were performing on the NWEA. “I don’t know that it necessarily translates on NWEA because they are so far below grade level and, at this point, I am teaching them to use assistive tech and accommodations to access grade level content. I think often at the secondary level their needs are not being met.” Later in the focus interviews, she did call providing reading interventions her “jam” and said she felt pretty comfortable providing these. Participant 9, who explained, “I’ve been thrown into this from being a high school teacher to being a middle school teacher, and we don’t do reading interventions at high school” so she rated her self-efficacy as “incredibly low” when she initially started, but over the past two years of teaching sixth grade, it has improved. She stated, “Sometimes it can feel pretty upsetting if I can’t get a kid to where I hope that they could be just based off of what I can do in the classroom.” Participant 10 expressed that after 32 years, “I feel pretty good with my reading intervention strategies,” but also added that they needed resources.

The participants in this study all expressed various challenges they faced when trying to provide reading interventions. These challenges included a lack of curriculum, a lack of time with students, a lack of training and professional development, a lack of knowing specific student needs, and too many students at one time to adequately meet needs. Both participants 5 and 10 have over 25 years of teaching experience, but only Participant 10 felt her years of

experience directly related to having high self-efficacy in providing reading interventions. Participant 5, despite having 29 years of teaching experience, expressed that she would "give myself a B+," but qualified this with "if I have the right material, [and] if everything's in place." She attributed her self-efficacy to her experience as an educator but did not feel that her school's reading interventions were a success. Years of experience contributed to both participants levels of self-efficacy, but both also expressed that this was not enough to make their programs successful. Task-specific challenges, years of teaching experience, and level of preparedness all play a role in how effective a teacher feels they are (Granziera & Perera, 2019; Lammert et al., 2022, Perera et al., 2019). This feeling of effectiveness varied based on the challenges each participant felt they faced, their training and experience providing reading interventions, and how prepared they felt with the curriculum they utilized. For Participant 6, self-efficacy was based primarily on his use of a strong reading intervention program. When asked about his personal self-efficacy, he felt he would not be able to provide reading interventions without the use of the program.

Other participants also expressed that the curriculum they used made a difference in how effective they felt their reading interventions to be. Participant 3 was able to draw on her training to provide effective reading interventions. To develop self-efficacy, a teacher needs to have confidence in their training and preparedness (Mincozzi & Dardzinski, 2020). However, as a first-year interventionist, she felt she had room to grow, "There's more for me to learn," explaining, "We have a literacy district coordinator and she's mentoring me and guiding me." When asked how effective she felt she was, she responded, "Because it's my first year, I think my small groups – I'm affective…we're going to make some progress. The large groups are harder. I just think mostly because of group size." Even with adequate training and mentorship,

challenges outside of a teacher's control can impact self-efficacy. Even knowing what to do is not enough to build self-efficacy, but self-efficacy is often impacted by a teacher's environment and challenges outside of their control (Bandura, 1994; Cho et al., 2021). Lower self-efficacy lends itself to avoiding situations beyond a teacher's believed coping skills (Bandura, 1977). Similarly, Greene (2018) contended that self-efficacy was directly related to a person's ability to exert control over their environment, professional life, and their decisions.

Every one of the participants explained how they did not have control over a number of variables that impacted their ability to effectively conduct reading interventions. With all but one participant having other responsibilities beyond providing reading interventions, to include conducting math interventions like Participant 8, or teaching core social studies classes like Participant 6, each one had other teaching responsibilities that required their time and focus. Participant 2 expressed her frustration, saying, "I can't do what I know how to do because I have too many kids in my room with too many different needs. And I can't plan an entire day of core classes and 20 different lessons in one class two days a week for two different classes. Like that's impossible. I'm no five people." Participant 2 shared that along with her language arts classes where she provides the reading interventions, she also teaches a keyboarding elective and a leadership elective. Participant 6 taught four geography classes, as well as a separate history elective and two reading intervention classes. Being stretched to provide reading interventions, along with their core duties, impacted their self-efficacy. Participant 7 summed up her feelings about everything she was asked to do by her district, stating, "For what time I have the responsibilities that I have on my shoulder, if I did much more, I think I would be six feet under." Another contributing factor to lower self-efficacy is the lack of parental support, resource availability, and class sizes (Gonzalez et al., 2017; King-Sears, 2022; Lane et al., 2021;

Narayanan et al., 2021; Zee et al., 2018). As Participant 9 pointed out, parents often preferred their children to take other electives over being in a reading intervention class. She expressed frustration at the lack of parental support as well. Participant 2 stated a lack of resources, saying, "I'm just guessing at what they want me to be doing in these intervention classes." Participant 3 expressed her concern over the number of students being placed in her intervention sections, as she could not adequately meet their individual needs due to the numbers of students needing support. Overall, the self-efficacy of the participants varied based on numerous factors that included the curriculum, or lack of curriculum, the training they received or did not receive, the number of years as an educator in their current position, the amount of time they had with their students on a daily or weekly basis, whether they provided reading interventions within their core class or whether they had specific time allocated for providing interventions, and how many students they provided interventions to at the same time.

When looking at the self-efficacy survey and comparing the results to the responses during the individual interviews, the self-efficacy survey showed a much higher level of self-efficacy than what was conveyed in the interviews. This can be explained by Bong and Clark (1999), who contended that self-efficacy is more about how a person thinks of their ability to perform rather than their own overall self-concepts of their abilities on a larger scope. Tasked with providing interventions outside their area of expertise could result in lower self-efficacy towards the specific task of providing interventions, even if the participants feel effective in their content areas and as a teacher overall. Similarly, a quantitative survey does not provide as much of an idea as to why participants feel the way they do, which qualitative data allows for (Liebfreund & Amendum, 2017; Martine-Sierra et al., 2017). Even with reporting a higher level

of self-efficacy on the survey, both the individual interviews and the focus group interviews presented a different view of effectiveness, based on the responses to the questions asked.

The empirical implications of this phenomenological qualitative study about the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who provided reading interventions to students on READ plans to meet the state mandate cover a number of areas. Despite not having resources and formal training, most participants expressed a desire to do the best they could to provide reading interventions to their students. Baye et al. (2019) reviewed over sixty research studies on reading interventions, finding that a number of different approaches were effective in improving students' reading. However, Baye et al. also contended that not all programs and methods met with success. Frequently, only a few of the pillars of reading are provided at the middle school level (Paige et al., 2021). According to Szili et al. (2022), if one component of the reading is missing, overall comprehension can be impaired. Therefore, if teachers do not have the necessary curriculum and training to understand all five pillars of reading – phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension – and know what the needs are of each of their students, reading interventions will be less effective (Powell & Gadke, 2018). Only a few of the participants utilized structured reading intervention curriculum. Most explained that they had to figure out what they needed to do.

Curriculum plays a big role in the success of reading interventions (Bippert, 2019; Suity et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2020). However, as Suity et al. (2018) pointed out, these decisions often are made by teachers based on their experience and what they understand reading interventions to be without deep contemplation. Gaps often occur when reading interventions are teacher-directed, as components of reading are often missed (Clarke et al., 2017; Vess et al., 2018). With the participants who did use structured curriculum, their responses indicated that

they felt that the use of these structured curricula to be a direct contributing factor to student growth. Participant 7 stated that her district "started to look at our curriculum and align things…and since we started doing that…our CMAS scores improved." Participant 8 explained that in previous years when their reading interventionist was not being used to fill in for another teacher on leave, she used a program, which Participant 8 assured was "research based and one of the approved ones." She also said that other special education teachers in her district used Lexia, and that her district saw growth on the CMAS over the past few years. Participant 6 also expressed praise for the program used by his school. He indicated that Reading Plus allowed for differentiation and targeted skill building. Student growth improved since the implementation of this program. Conversely, when participants did not have a curriculum or a program to use, they expressed that they were trying to do the best they could based on their own understandings. Participant 1 did not know what curriculum her school used for reading interventions. She said, "I do a lot of one on ones… with those kids that need extra support and work with them individually." She later stated that this was working with them on sentence structure and parts of speech, saying, "We start pretty basic."

Paige et al. (2021) held that a key to successful interventions rested on the teacher and their knowledge, support, and experience, as well as their ability to adapt and make judgments. Having experienced educators, such as Participant 10 with 32 years of experience, makes a difference on how effective reading interventions are. She shared, "In my classroom, all my students, I make them use strategies. We do a lot of annotation and …thinking strategies with the kids. We keep reading logs, we do dialectal journals." She also expressed that she felt her students made growth this past year. However, teacher experience is not enough to make a reading intervention program successful. Even though Participant 5 has 29 years of experience,

she felt the lack of resources, training, and time with students impacted her ability to provide the needed reading interventions. Despite experience, teachers often are not adequately prepared to provide reading interventions, especially students who are significantly deficient in reading (Liebfruend & Amendum, 2017; Poch et al., 2020). None of the participants in this study had similar strategies, programs, or curriculum with other participants. This lack of consistency indicates that each district and even each teacher often does what they think best. However, with the lack of training expressed by most participants, doing what they think best can be hampered by lack of knowledge about what is actually best practices.

Another concern beyond the lack of resources is the number of students in classes needing support. Even participant 3, the reading specialist, felt that she was not as successful as she could be because of class sizes. Participant 3, who wrote the READ plans for her district and knew what specific skills students needed, felt that she was not as effective because of the class sizes. She stated, “It’s just the system is hampering. I don’t think it’s fair to…sprinkle water on 20 kids, where nobody’s really getting a drink.” With larger classes and not having a program to support the diverse needs of students, she felt frustration. Half of the participants provided reading interventions in their core classes rather than having a separate class or pull-out for students to receive these interventions. Participants who had to conduct these interventions in their core classes expressed concern over the lack of time they had to pull small groups or provide one-on-one support. Students who need more support can require a teacher to spend less time with whole-class and small -group focus and instruction (Lesh et al., 2021).

In previous studies, content area teachers perceived that they were not adequately prepared to provide reading interventions (Smith & Williams, 2021; Thomas et al., 2020). Even with data, many teachers felt that they did not know how to use it to direct instruction (Smith &

Williams, 2021). Participant 4 expressed a similar experience. She indicated that even though they had NWEA and used DIBELS, she had to come up with her own curriculum. Her class sizes made it difficult to work with students. Participant 9 shared a similar experience, "I track our students' reading data pretty heavily through MAPS testing, and they feel confident in my classroom teaching ability. However, I am not able to give some students the one-on-one full support that they need. Especially not in a full classroom." She also indicated that her district did not have any programs or curriculum for her to follow. Class sizes, lack of time with students in separate reading intervention classes, and the lack of curriculum all impacted how effective teachers felt their reading interventions to be. Existing literature examined teacher efficacy in providing reading interventions in light of similar challenges faced by the participants in this study and found similar results (Liebfruend & Amendum, 2017; Poch et al., 2020; Smith & Williams, 2021; Thomas et al., 2020). However, despite the numerous challenges, each one of the participants also expressed positives and strengths. Many felt their students were making growth and felt they were making a difference, which lent itself to a higher perception of self-efficacy expressed by the participants.

Overall, when asked what their district could do to improve reading interventions, several mentioned the need to hire reading interventionists. King-Sears (2022) expressed that the utilization of a special education co-teacher or reading specialist is often necessary to provide students with the interventions they need. However, not one participant either co-taught or had a co-teacher in their core classroom providing these interventions. The two special education teachers and the one reading interventionist who participated all assisted students with reading interventions outside of the general education classroom. Even Participant 6 had resources to provide these interventions within a designated reading intervention block, he still felt that his

district should hire a reading interventionist rather than have general education teachers take on that role. Participant 9 summed it up by stating:

> I think it's really a hard shift for our students and teachers when elementary school has all these reading interventionists, and all this extra support that they provide kids. Then when they get to middle school, it's just classroom teachers, and then we have, like, our ESS teacher. But that's really it. They lose all of this support. So ideally, I would like for the middle school, secondary level to get more support and specialists to help, which is hard for any small district to handle.

Having a lack of support in the classroom as well as not having a reading specialist impacts students who often only have a core teacher providing limited interventions to assist them in meeting their READ plans and making growth.

Only two participants read and understood students' READ plans. Some knew students had READ plans, but had not read them, and most did not know which students had READ plans or knew that students' plans did not transfer from elementary school to middle school. Without knowing a student's READ plan, knowing what specific interventions each student needed would require testing and collecting data over time. This would lessen the probability that interventions would be tailed to student needs. When students receive tailored interventions to address their reading needs, long-term growth, fluency, and comprehension increase (Baker et al., 2018; Forester et al., 2018). Participant 4, who teaches sixth grade, expressed her concern that she did not know if, once students left intermediate school and moved into the 7-12 middle/high school, they would continue to receive reading interventions or if their READ plans would move up with them. She felt her district was "falling short," because "even though I'm right across the street from the high school, we don't talk as much with the high school."

Participant 6, who teaches at a middle school, stated that his students' READ plans did make it up from the elementary school, but he did not have easy access to them. Similarly, the majority of participants did not know what their students' READ plans stated, and some did not even know which of their students had READ plans or which had been exited off at the end of elementary school.

A final implication for this phenomenological study on the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who provide reading interventions as mandated by the state is how being in a small rural district can impact these experiences. When teachers perceive they have limited to no control over curriculum or how they have to conduct their classrooms, as well as carrying too much on their shoulders in terms of expectations and course loads, they are more likely to suffer burnout, which impacts student engagement and achievement (Akin, 2019; Ansley et al., 2021; Cankaya, 2018). With higher teacher stress, efficacy is lowered (Kim & Buric, 2019). Small rural districts often cannot afford to adopt expensive programs, hire additional support personnel, or provide adequate training and professional development. Even though participants recognized this, they still felt the effects of not having what they needed to be as effective as they wanted to be. This challenge was recognized by the participants. Participant 9 stated, "I would like for the middle school, secondary school to get more support and specialists to help which is hard for any small district to handle." Likewise, Participant 10 also expressed her understanding of small rural district predicaments:

> We need resources. We, like all small schools, we have no cash flow to provide teachers what we need. We have one teacher doing math and language interventions. It would be nice to be able to have two qualified teachers doing that. It would be nice to be able, to

> just, you know, that luxury of cash flow where you can bring in different programs and we just don't have it.

Rural schools face challenges and obstacles that include poverty, limited district and human resources, and a changing demographic with increases in ELL and IEP students (Johnson et al., 2018; Rude & Miller, 2018; Sutton et al., 2014; Timar & Carter, 2017). Many rural districts do not have a curriculum director making decisions or assisting in continuity between grade levels and schools, nor do they often have access to the same professional development opportunities of larger urban school districts (Timar & Carter, 2017). In addition, some districts cannot afford the technology or have the infostructure to utilize on-line reading intervention programs. Therefore, with the limitations faced by small rural school districts, these lived experiences of small rural school teachers providing reading interventions shows that the state mandate does not address, nor significantly impact the needs of these teachers. The participants in this study all demonstrated a strong desire to do the best they could for their students, regardless of the challenges they faced. However, their perceptions of their efficacy, regardless of their own beliefs in their overall ability, were lowered by factors outside of their control.

Limitations and Delimitations

This nature of this study as a qualitative phenomenological study is one of the delimitations. This design was most appropriate to explore the perceptions and themes arising from information gathered from participants. Additionally, because phenomenological studies set out to describe and understand the lived experiences of a select group of people (Creswell & Poth, 2018), this type of study was most appropriate. Participants could share their experiences, allowing for a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Another delimiting factor was in how participants were selected. The participants had to be teachers who taught in a small rural school district in Colorado. They had to be responsible for providing reading interventions to students who were or should be on READ plans. Another delimitating factor was that participants had to teach in the middle grades of 6th-8th, regardless of school structure. Providing the shared lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who were tasked with providing reading interventions to students on READ plans to meet the state mandates provided insight and gave voice to these teachers to share their perceptions.

When conducting this study, several limitations occurred. First, after receiving IRB approval, teachers were on summer break, which made it difficult to gather willing participants. Initially, seventy-five superintendents received emails requesting permission to speak with teachers in their districts that fit the criteria for this study. Only two superintendents responded initially. After a second request was made by the researcher's superintendent, two more provided names of teachers. At the start of the school year in August, over 150 emails were sent to teachers in 80 rural districts. Many replied back that they were too busy with the start of the school year to participate. Only ten teachers demonstrated willingness to participate. Because of the limited number of participants, no consideration could be made for teacher gender, years of teaching experience, socio-economics of districts, or size of districts in relation to others. Because this study involved participants from all over the state of Colorado, all but one participant was interviewed using Zoom, with Otter.ai providing backup transcription in case of recording failure, which did occur during one interview. One interview was conducted in person with Otter.ai recording the conversation, as the participant's technology failed to work. In addition, there was no way to ensure participants coming to focus groups despite agreeing to

attend. One participant had a sick child and other forgot to attend. Finally, this study is limited by the honesty of the participants in sharing their experiences.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who provided reading interventions to students on READ plans to meet the state mandate. Therefore, I sought to collect data on the perceptions of self-efficacy, and the strengths and challenges of providing these interventions. The data collected from this study provides recommendations for further studies.

This study was conducted in the early months of the school year. Participants often drew on the previous year's experiences to answer questions. However, by the time they received the self-efficacy study, the end of the first semester was near. The self-efficacy survey showed a higher level of reported self-efficacy than when participants answered interview questions. Therefore, a future study might shed light on whether the time of year impacts a teacher's perception of self-efficacy. Another factor that could not be addressed in this study due to the limited number of participants, was how socio-economics factors into how a teacher perceives their efficacy when it comes to providing reading interventions. One variable that was not explored in this study was how some districts were on a four day a week schedule and some were on a five day a week schedule. A possible study could be conducted to look at if the number of days a teacher works with students on reading interventions impact the success of these interventions. Finally, this study only focused on teachers responsible for 6^{th} -8^{th} grade, with no consideration to how their district structured grade levels. Looking at the dynamics of if grade grouping played a role in resources available, communication, and curriculum decisions is another possible direction to pursue for future studies. Some participants in the current study

taught in a K-6, or 5-6, whereas others taught in a 6-8 school or a 7-8 school. A few taught in a 7-12 school and one taught in a K-12 school.

Although many quantitative studies already focus on reading interventions within larger urban districts (Baye et al., 2019), the use of a quantitative approach that focuses solely on small rural districts could provide missing information that is unique to small rural districts. During this study, participants expressed their beliefs about the effectiveness of their reading interventions translating to student growth. One area of further study could be in comparing state and local testing to actual programs and curriculum being used by districts to gather information about what has the best growth potential.

A sub-theme that emerged from the research was how COVID caused reading deficits that teachers felt impacted students' ability to catch up to grade level. Since one of the most significant impacts of COVID has been on education (Ford & Moore, 2022), a recommendation for future research would be to identify small rural communities most impacted by the lack of educational opportunities for students and how this impacted their need for reading interventions. A transcendental phenomenological qualitative study would allow a researcher an in-depth look at teachers' lived experiences providing interventions before COVID and after COVID differed, providing insight into the challenges faced with this loss of reading instruction in the elementary years and how that impacts students needing additional support in secondary schools.

Conclusion

The Colorado READ Act update in 2019 required districts across the state of Colorado to provide reading interventions to students on READ plans. Since READ plans are written during the early elementary school years, students are only to be exited off these plans once they achieve grade-level proficiency in reading. Since many students do not enter middle school

reading at grade-level, it falls to middle schools to provide the necessary interventions. For small rural school districts who already face over-worked staff, budget constraints, and several other limitations due to location and size, having another mandate can feel daunting. As a small rural 7th grade language arts teacher tasked with providing reading interventions to students, I have witnessed firsthand how having a lack of training and curriculum can affect my feelings of self-efficacy. Having taught in small rural schools for over fifteen years, I understand the challenges and struggles faced by these districts. As evidenced by the literature, rural districts face many challenges due to location, funding, staffing, and lack of training opportunities. This study focused on the experiences of small middle school teachers tasked with providing reading interventions to meet the state mandate. Following data collection, themes and sub-themes emerged as participants revealed the realities of providing reading interventions to middle school students on READ plans or those that should be on READ plans.

I identified the major themes as Resources and Time, Training and Support, Successes and Strengths, Weaknesses and Struggles, and Self-Efficacy. The theme of Successes and Strengths include the sub-theme of Uses of Technology, and the theme of Weaknesses and Struggles included the sub-theme of Outside Factors. As the participants shared their experiences with providing reading interventions, it became apparent that the state mandate did not drive decisions around curriculum, who received interventions, how these interventions were conducted, or how READ plans were handled at the middle school level.

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Appendices

Appendix A

IRB BOARD APPROVAL

Date: 6-20-2023

IRB #: IRB-FY22-23-1453
Title: TEACHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES OF IMPLEMENTING READING INTERVENTIONS AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL IN SMALL RURAL DISTRICTS TO MEET THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE COLORADO READ ACT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL QUALITATIVE STUDY
Creation Date: 4-23-2023
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Misty Cronsell
Review Board: Research Ethics Office
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type Initial	**Review Type** Limited	**Decision** Exempt - Limited IRB

Key Study Contacts

Member Sabine Branch	**Role** Co-Principal Investigator	**Contact** [redacted]
Member Misty Cronsell	**Role** Principal Investigator	**Contact** [redacted]
Member Misty Cronsell	**Role** Primary Contact	**Contact** [redacted]

Appendix B

REQUEST FOR SUPERINTENDENT CONSENT TO EMAIL POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

Date
School District

Dear Superintendent,

As a graduate student at Liberty University working on my PhD in Curriculum and Instruction, I am conducting research for my dissertation. The title of my research is "Teachers' Lived Experiences of Implementing Reading Interventions at the Middle School Level in Rural Districts to Meet the Requirements of the Colorado READ Act," and my purpose is to explore teacher self-efficacy, challenges, and successes of providing these reading interventions in a small rural school environment.

I am requesting your permission to speak with a teacher who is responsible for reading interventions at the middle school level in your district. Participants will be asked to do a personal interview, be part of a focus group discussion, provide any documentation on specific interventions used that they might have, and possibly complete a self-efficacy survey. No student data will be requested or collected.

All data collected will be used to understand the experiences of these teachers, their self-efficacy beliefs, and the successes and challenges to providing these reading interventions in order to provide insight for educational leaders and help them address the needs of the teachers in these positions.

The participants will be provided with informed consent information prior to participating, will be informed that participation is completely voluntary, and that they can discontinue their participation at any time.

Thank you for considering this request. If you are willing to allow one of your teachers to participate, I would appreciate getting the name and email of that individual so I can reach out to them. If you would like a copy of my final dissertation emailed to you upon completion and acceptance, please let me know as well.

Sincerely,
Misty Cronsell
Doctoral Student

Appendix C

Participant Recruitment Email

Dear fellow educator,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University and a small rural reading/LA teacher here in Colorado, I am conducting research as part of my doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to study teachers' lived experience with providing reading interventions to meet the Colorado Department of Education's mandates for secondary students on READ plans (or those who are behind in reading and require reading interventions) in small rural public and charter schools in Colorado, and I am writing to invite you to participate in the study.

To participate, you must be a current middle school educator (6^{th},7^{th}, and/or 8^{th}) who is responsible for providing reading interventions to students in middle school with READ plans. (I do know that some districts exit students off their READ plans at the end of elementary school, but if you are still providing reading interventions to students who WOULD qualify as not making grade-level reading, you can also participate.)

If providing reading interventions is not your responsibility, I would appreciate this email being passed on to the person in your school responsible for these interventions. Participants will be asked to complete an interview via ZOOM, participate in a ZOOM focus group consisting of at least 5 participants, provide any documentation pertaining to the curriculum used, and potentially be asked to complete a brief self-efficacy survey. No requests for individual student information will be made.

The interview will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes to complete, and the focus group will be approximately an hour. Transcripts of both will be emailed to you for your review. If any corrections need to be made, you will be requested to email me within 10 days of receipt of the transcript. I will be emailing you a request for documents pertaining to your curriculum and information regarding your interventions, as well as possible request for filling out a brief self-efficacy survey. In addition, names and other identifying information will be requested, but the information will remain confidential.

If you would be willing to participate in this study, please contact me at [redacted] to schedule an interview. A consent document will be provided if you agree to participate. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of your interview.

If you have any questions, please contact me at [redacted] or [redacted]

Sincerely,
Misty Cronsell
Doctoral Student, Liberty University

Appendix D

Consent

Title of the Project: TEACHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES OF IMPLEMENTING READING INTERVENTIONS AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL IN SMALL RURAL DISTRICTS TO MEET THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE COLORADO READ ACT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL QUALITATIVE STUDY

Principal Investigator: Misty Cronsell, Doctoral Student, 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 middle school teacher in a small rural school district in Colorado and provide reading interventions to students with READ plans or require reading interventions as mandated by the state. 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 the study is to look at what teachers think about their role as reading interventionist, the challenges and successes of providing reading interventions to students in the rural school setting. The purpose of the study will also be to look at how these challenges and successes affect teacher self-efficacy and affect students from a teachers' perspective.

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 a recorded one-on-one interview using Zoom that will take no more than one hour.
2. Review interview transcripts to check for accuracy that should take no more than 30 minutes.
3. Participate in a focus group of approximately 4 to 6 other participants via a recorded Zoom that will take no more than one hour.
4. Provide any organizational documents that explain or outline the reading interventions used. (No individual student data will be requested.)
5. Complete a brief Self-Efficacy survey via email that should take no more than 10 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

Benefits to society include getting a general idea of how rural teachers in Colorado feel about their experiences with reading interventions and the Colorado READ plans. Another benefit is to provide the CDE another viewpoint of how the READ Act legislation impacts teachers and students outside of the urban areas.

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.

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[s] will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Participant responses to the survey will be anonymous.
- Interviews via Zoom will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversations.
- 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.
- The data will be stored on a password protected drive on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted. [Describe how and where data will be stored and how the data will be disposed of. If any hardcopy documents are provided, these will be stored in a locked file cabinet for three years and then shredded.
- The recordings of the interviews and focus groups will be stored on a password protected drive on a password-locked computer. Participants will receive a digital copy via email of the interview transcript to confirm the accuracy of the transcripts. Once the accuracy has been confirmed and the study has concluded, the recordings will be erased/deleted. The research and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

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

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

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

The researcher conducting this study is Misty Cronsell. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her[redacted] and/or [redacted] You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Sabine Branch at [redacted]

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

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher[s], **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

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/video record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix E

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of small rural middle school teachers who are providing reading interventions to meet state standards?

Sub-Question One

How are these interventions affecting these small rural middle school teachers' perceived beliefs in their self-efficacy?

Sub-Question Two

How are the perceived challenges faced by small rural middle school teachers who provide these interventions affecting them as teachers and affecting their students?

Sub-Question Three

How are the perceived positives experienced by small rural middle school teachers who provide these interventions affecting them as teachers and affecting their students?

Appendix F

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please tell me your name, what school district you teach in, what you teach, and how many years you have been teaching. (CRQ)
2. How did you come about becoming your school's reading interventionist? (CRQ)
3. What is your training and/or background in reading interventions? (CRQ)
4. What other classes do you teach besides providing reading interventions? (CRQ)
5. What type of on-going or recent training has your district provided you with since becoming the reading interventionist? (CRQ)
6. How does the school provide time for reading interventions within the school day? (CRQ)
7. How familiar are you with the Colorado READ Act regarding secondary school responsibility to provide reading interventions to students with READ plans? (CRQ)
8. How many students do you have on READ plans? (CRQ)
9. What programs or curriculum does your school use for reading interventions? (CRQ)
10. What internal school/district supports are in place for you in regard to student READ plans? (SQ3)
11. How do you feel about the effectiveness of your reading interventions that you provide the students? (SQ1)
12. What is your comfort level in teaching these reading interventions? (SQ1)
13. Thinking about your own self-efficacy, how effective do you feel you are in providing these interventions? (SQ1)

14. How successful do you feel your school's reading intervention program has been? (SQ2, SQ3)
15. What are some things you feel your school district could do to improve reading interventions and/or meeting the READ plans of your students? (SQ2)
16. Have you seen a positive improvement in reading interventions within the last three years since the state mandate? (SQ3)
17. Is there anything you can think of that I might not have asked regarding this topic?

Appendix G

Focus Group Questions

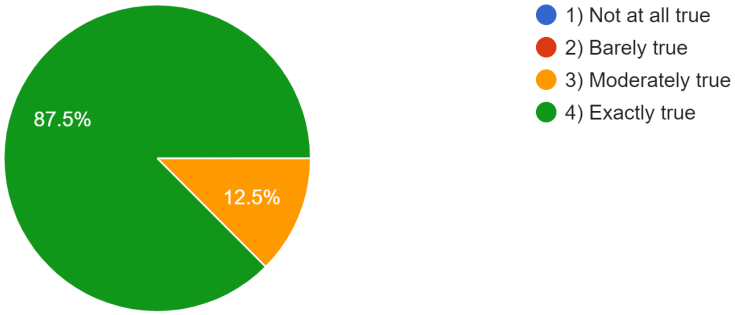
1. Please tell us your first name, what you teach besides the reading interventions, and how many years you've been teaching.
2. What specifically does your district do to provide reading interventions for students on READ plans or those that would qualify for reading plans? (CRQ)
3. How do you personally feel about your school's reading interventions? (SQ1, SQ2, SC3)
4. What are some personal positives regarding your reading intervention program? (SQ3)
5. What are some personal challenges in providing the reading interventions? (SQ2)

Appendix H

Self- Efficacy Survey Results

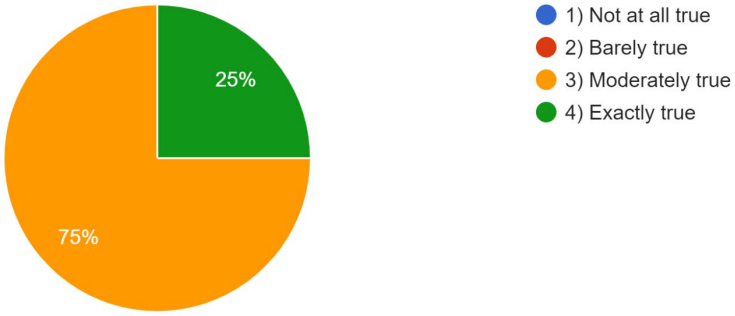
I know that I can maintain a positive relationship with parents even when tensions arise.

8 responses



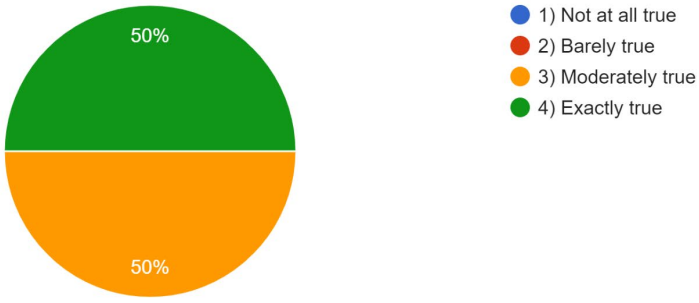
When I try really hard, I am able to reach even the most difficult students.

8 responses



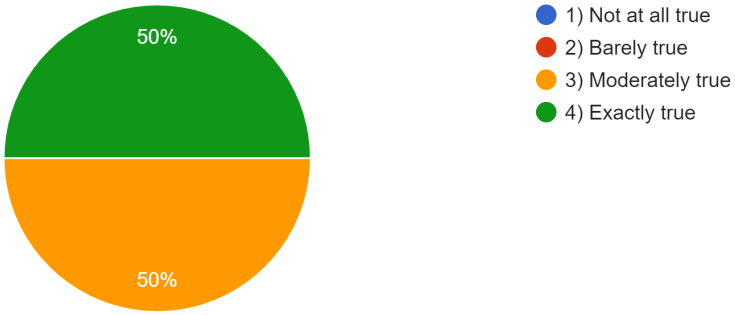
Even if I get disrupted while teaching, I am confident that I can maintain my composure and continue to teach well.

8 responses



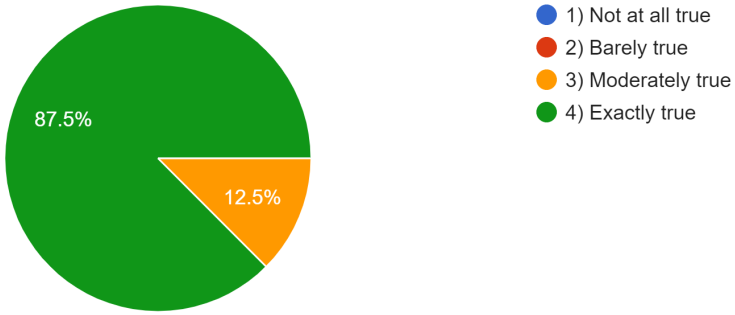
I am confident in my ability to be responsive to my students' needs even if I am having a bad day.

8 responses



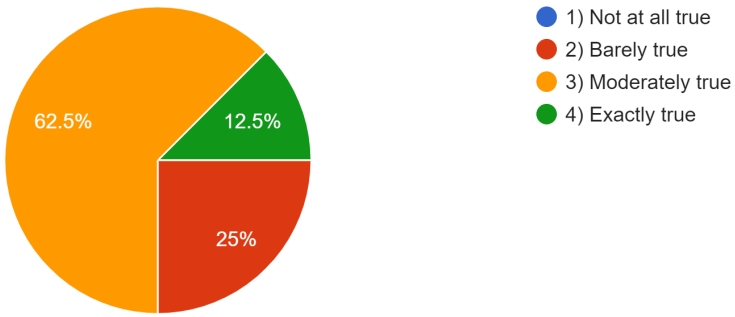
I am convinced that, as time goes by, I will continue to become more and more capable of helping to address my students' needs.

8 responses



I am convinced that I can develop creative ways to cope with system constraints (such as budget cuts and other administrative problems) and continue to teach well.

8 responses

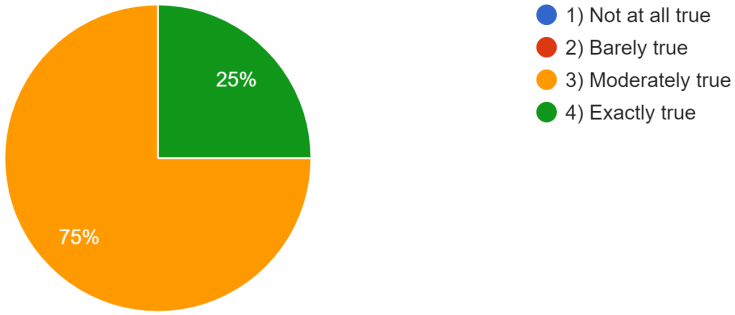


I know that I can motivate my students to participate in innovative projects.

8 responses

I am convinced that I am able to successfully teach all relevant subject content to even the most difficult students.

8 responses



I know that I can carry out innovative projects even when I am opposed by skeptical colleagues.

8 responses