Teacher efficacy in addressing gaps in foundational reading skills: A narrative case study of lived experiences at a midwestern Title I middle school

by

Kristin Michelle Ridgway

B.S., Southeast Missouri State University, 1997
M.S., Baker University, 2012

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Kansas requires universal screening for reading difficulties for all students through ninth grade, yet middle-level educators are not held to the same expectations for training and expertise in structured literacy as their elementary counterparts. This narrative case study explored how middle school reading teachers' lived experiences with reading influenced their efficacy to address gaps in foundational reading skills. Participants were teachers at a midwestern Title I middle school who voluntarily pursued and completed training in structured literacy and the science of reading. The single case study design was informed by narrative inquiry to draw out rich descriptions of lived experiences past and current. Data from two semi-structured interviews and observations were analyzed using in vivo and thematic coding. Findings revealed that firsthand experiences with older struggling readers exposed gaps in initial teacher preparation, motivating participants to seek additional knowledge, mentoring, and training. Participants described these experiences as catalysts for their commitment to knowledge and professional growth. Teachers reported confidence in their current roles to deliver explicit reading instruction. Supportive leadership, shared commitment to literacy, and classrooms where students were valued and celebrated for their effort suggested strong collective efficacy of the group. However, confidence in using data to guide instructional decisions and evaluate student outcomes remained limited and reflected a sense of uncertainty among participants in their current practice. Recommendations for leaders are to sustain and support the state-wide focus on structured literacy and to investigate middle level teacher preparation programs. Building leaders at the middle level should provide a clear picture of reality, establish common instructional expectations for literacy, and protect time for educators to engage in meaningful reflection on practice. Teacher efficacy is complex and shaped by multiple factors. Individual educator

commitment is essential, but educators need informed leaders and systemic support to sustain their effort and develop the refined skills necessary to address gaps in foundational reading skills.

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Donna Augustine-Shaw, Ed.D.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures xiv
List of Tables xv
Acknowledgements xvi
Dedication xvii
Chapter 1 - Introduction to the Research 1
Background 2
Research Problem 4
An Epidemic of Reading Deficiency 4
An Era of Reading Reform 5
Research Purpose and Questions 7
Theoretical Frameworks 8
Methodology 9
Research Design 11
Significance of the Study 12
Study Limitations 14
Delimitations 15
Researcher's Perspective 15
Definition of Terms 16
Summary 18
Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature 19
Section One: Why do the Reading Wars Matter? 21
A Brief History of Reading Instruction 22
Pre- and Early 1900s 22
1950s-1970s: The Modern Era of Standardized Assessment 23
1970-2000: Emergence of Whole Language Theory 24
Reading Instruction Today 27
The Three-Cue Model 27
Brain Science in the 21st Century 27
Structured Literacy and the Science of Reading 29

Influence of Professional Organizations 31
Summary Section One: Why the Reading Wars Matter Today 32
Section Two: Reading Instruction and Reform in Kansas 32
Kansas Education Systems Accreditation (KESA) 33
The Four Fundamentals 34
Kansas Standards for ELA 36
Reading Reform in Kansas 40
Elementary Teacher Preparation and Licensure 40
The Kansas Dyslexia Initiative 42
Structured Literacy as a Fundamental 43
Summary Section Two: Reading Instruction and Reform in Kansas 43
Section Three: Theoretical Frameworks 44
Theoretical Framework: Theories of Action 45
Model I Learning and Behaviors 46
Model II Learning and Behaviors 48
Learning Model II Behavior 51
Maximizing Valid Information 51
Maximizing Free and Informed Choice 52
Reinforcing Internal Commitment 52
Directly Observable Categories 53
Conceptual Framework: Teacher Efficacy 55
Summary Section Three: Theoretical Frameworks 57
Section Four: The Directly Observable Categories of Structured Literacy 58
Categories Outside the Scope of 6-8 Reading Standards 59
Categories Within the Scope of 6-8 Reading Standards 60
Summary Section Four: Directly Observable Categories of Structured Literacy 61
Summary of Literature Review 62
Chapter 3 - Methodology 64
Rationale for Qualitative Inquiry 65
Methodological Framework 66
Social Constructionism 66

Connecting the Theoretical Frameworks 67
Case Study Methodology 69
Single Case Study Methodology 70
Narrative Inquiry 71
Single Narrative Case Study Methodology 72
Research Methods 74
Case Study Site Selection 74
Challenges in Participant Selection 74
Gaining Access to the Case Study Site 76
Timeline for Data Collection 76
Arranging the Study 77
Credibility 78
Member Checking 78
Low Inference Notes 78
Observers Paradox 79
Data Collection 79
Individual Semi-Structured Interviews 79
Classroom Observations 81
Teacher Team Observations 82
Data Analysis 82
First Cycle Data Analysis 82
Second Cycle Data Analysis 83
Final Interpretation of Data 83
Rigor and Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research 84
Attending to Researcher Subjectivities 85
Alignment of the Research Theory and Methods 87
Data Triangulation 90
Ethical Considerations 90
Chapter Summary 91
Chapter 4 - Findings 93
Chapter Overview 93

Research Question One: Past Lived Experiences with Reading 95
Findings: Influence of Past Lived Experiences with Older Readers 96
Theme One: Early Reading Came Naturally 97
Theme Two: The Shocking Reality of Reading Deficits in Older Students 97
Theme Three: Limited Preparation to Teach Phonics or Language Structures 98
Theme Four: Seeking Mentorship and High-Quality Professional Learning 99
Discussion: Past Lived Experiences and Teacher Efficacy 101
Research Question Two: Current Lived Experiences Addressing Gaps in Foundational Skills 104
Finding: Teacher Efficacy to Deliver Reading Interventions 106
Theme One: Teacher Confidence in Knowledge and Skill 106
Theme Two: Observed Skill in Delivery of Interventions 107
Moment of Tension: Inconsistent Classroom Practices 108
Discussion: Teacher Efficacy in Delivering Reading Interventions 109
Finding: Classroom Cultures Designed for Student Success 110
Theme Three: Motivating Students with Gaps in Foundational Reading Skills 110
Theme Four: Safe and Supportive Classroom Structures 110
Theme Five: Classroom Management Skills 111
Moments of Tension: Challenges to Classroom Culture and Management 111
Discussion: Teacher Efficacy in Designing Classroom Cultures for Student Success 113
Finding: Building-wide Culture and Commitment to Literacy 114
Theme Six: Supportive Culture at the Building Level 114
Theme Seven: Supportive Culture at the Reading Team Level 116
Moments of Tension: Inconsistent Expectations 117
Discussion: Teacher Efficacy and a Building-wide Collaborative Culture 118
Finding: Limited Confidence in Data-Based Decision-Making and Results 119
Theme Eight: Limited Confidence in Decision-Making 119
Theme Nine: Limited Time for Reflection and Analysis 120
Moments of Tension: Educator Insecurities and Trust Across the Team 120
Discussion: Teacher Efficacy in Confidence to Make Data-Based Decisions 122
Synthesis of Findings: Past and Current Lived Experiences 123

Analyzing Model I Behaviors 123
Low confidence in data-based decision-making 124
Limited trust that others could or would support the work of addressing gaps in foundational reading skills. 124
Analyzing Model II Behaviors 125
Modell II Behaviors in Lived Experiences 126
Tensions in Current Lived Experiences 126
Summary of Data Presentation and Research Findings 127
Chapter 5 - Conclusions 129
Discussion of Findings 130
Implications for Practice 132
Implication #1: A Clear Picture of Reality 133
Implication #2: The Complexity of Teacher Efficacy 133
Implication #3: Clear and Common Expectations for Literacy Instruction 134
Implication #4: Time for Reflective Practice to Strengthen Decisional Capital 135
Boundaries of the Study 137
Conclusions, Recommendations, and Future Study 139
Conclusions and Recommendations 140
Sustained Commitment to the Knowledge Base of Structured Literacy 140
Recognize and Reinforce Internal Commitment 141
Investigate Middle Level ELA Teacher Preparation 142
Future Study 145
Final Words 146
Epilogue – The Future Narrative 148
Mrs. Lyndon's Future Narrative 148
Mrs. Shay's Future Narrative 149
Mrs. Bryant's Future Narrative 150
Ms. Nikki's Future Narrative 150
With Gratitude 151
References 152
Appendix A - Participant Recruitment Email 160

Appendix B - Informed Consent 161
Appendix C - Group Orientation Protocol 163
Appendix D - Interview Protocol 164
Appendix E - Classroom Observation Protocol 166
Appendix F - Team Observation Protocol 167
Appendix G - Debriefing Statement 168

List of Figures

Figure 2.1. *Kansas Education Systems Accreditation (KESA)* 35
Figure 2.2. *Model I Learning and Behaviors* 47
Figure 2.3. *Impact of Model I Behaviors on an Individual's Theory in Use* 48
Figure 2.4. *Model II Behavior and Conditions for Learning* 51
Figure 2.5. *Impact of Model II Behaviors on an Individual's Theory in Use* 55
Figure 4.1. *Evolution of Themes and Findings in Past Lived Experiences with Reading* 101
Figure 4.2. *Evolution of Finding in Teacher Confidence to Deliver Reading Interventions* ... 109
Figure 4.3. *Evolution of Themes in Classroom Cultures Designed for Student Success* 113
Figure 4.4. *Evolution of Themes and Findings for Building-wide Culture and Commitment to Literacy* 118
Figure 4.5. *Evolution of Themes and Findings for Confidence in Data-Based Decision-Making and Results* 122
Figure 5.1. *Organizational Structure of Research Conclusions* 130
Figure 5.2. *Summary of Research Questions and Findings* 132
Figure 5.3. *Implications for Addressing Gaps in Foundational Reading Skills* 137
Figure 5.4. *Evolution of Research Questions, Findings, Implications, Conclusions, and Recommendations* 145

List of Tables

Table 2.1. *Teaching Behaviors Beyond the Scope of 6-8th Grade ELA Standards in Kansas* ... 60

Table 2.2. *Teaching Behaviors Within the Scope of the 6th-8th Grade ELA Standards in Kansas* ... 61

Table 3.1. *Participant Experiences in Education* ... 75

Table 3.2. *Timeline for the Single Narrative Case Study* ... 76

Table 3.3. *Rigor in Theory and Method Alignment* ... 89

Table 4.1. *Analysis of Past Lived Experiences with Reading* ... 96

Table 4.2. *Analysis of Current Lived Experiences Addressing Gaps in Foundational Skills* .. 105

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Dedication

I dedicate this research to the teachers who foster the love of language at every level.

Chapter 1 - Introduction to the Research

"Children who are skilled readers and writers will be empowered by their literacy and will refuse to be defined by the low expectations of others" (The Reading League, 2022).

Over the past five years, I have dedicated my leadership focus to the mystery of poor reading performance at the middle and high school levels. Educators across all grade levels are learning about structured literacy, a model for reading instruction based on research of how the brain learns to read (Cowen, 2016; Moats and Tolman, 2019; Ray, 2020). As educators learn more, the contrasts to other models of reading popularized over the past decades cannot be ignored. When we know better, we do better, is a typical refrain from leaders asking teachers to change practices in reading instruction to align with structured literacy (Hanford, 2018). The assumption that teachers can simply "do better" implies an effortless unravelling of decades of learned teacher behaviors. These behaviors, for better or worse, have been reinforced over time. First, by how the current teaching force learned to read themselves. Next, by how they were taught to be teachers of reading, language, writing, and literature. And finally, by the years of practical teaching experiences they have accumulated over their unique and varied careers.

The purpose of Chapter One is to provide the background of the evolution of state-driven reforms in Kansas. The research problem is then established with a look at the contrasting reading data in this epidemic of deficiency and the demands of an era of reform. The research purpose and questions reveal the focus for study on the experiences of educators who are addressing gaps in foundational reading skills at the middle level, a space just beyond the scope of most state policy mandates (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024). Next, theoretical frameworks are introduced to guide leaders' understanding of the challenges middle level teachers face addressing foundational reading deficits and to inform the conditions needed for this magnitude

of change to instructional practice. Finally, the single case study methodology is briefly explained, including how narrative inquiry methods informed data collection and analysis of the lived experiences of middle level teachers.

Background

In 2019, the Kansas literacy task force determined that every instructional staff member working in a Kansas public school would participate in a six-hour course designed by the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) on recognizing the characteristics of dyslexia (KSDE, 2023a). This first step succeeded in raising awareness of reading difficulty as educators across the state were, perhaps for the first time, exposed to misconceptions and realities about students who demonstrate "difficulty with words," a rudimentary definition for dyslexia (International Dyslexia Association, 2019). The scientific studies advancing the understanding of reading difficulty as neurobiological in origin (International Dyslexia Association, 2019) created demand for reading reform among educators, but the unfortunate timing impacted the overall sustainability of the message. As the nation and the world were unexpectedly consumed by the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic, literacy leaders at the KSDE did not pause in their work; the Kansas *Dyslexia Handbook* was developed and expectations for annual training in structured literacy were maintained (KSDE, 2023a), despite little capacity for in-person training and inconsistent expectations for follow-through or compliance during this challenging time.

Fast-forward to 2023. As life returned to some version of normal, the previous literacy initiatives regained forward momentum with the KSDE's Blueprint for Literacy plan (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024). With renewed energy, the KSDE announced that by 2028, all licensed elementary classroom teachers would be required to show evidence of understanding of structured literacy and the science of reading. Teacher preparation programs across the state

would need to prepare preservice elementary teachers to demonstrate expertise in structured literacy and the science of reading. Ideally this would guarantee new elementary educators would enter the workforce prepared to meet the demands of all learners (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024).

With the Kansas Blueprint for Literacy requiring both new and currently practicing elementary educators to demonstrate proficiency in structured literacy, the state moved to support Kansas school districts and practicing teachers by utilizing COVID relief funds to subsidize training in the high-quality professional learning course, *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling* (LETRS) (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024). Finally, the Kansas Blueprint for Literacy specifically named practices considered unsupported by reading science and therefore prohibited for use in Kansas classrooms. The Blueprint requires state-wide commitment to developing training programs available to teachers of all grade levels (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024). However, only at the elementary grades are teachers required to demonstrate proficiency to maintain licensure (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024).

For teachers practicing in the middle grades, training requirements are currently limited to the initial six-hour training developed in 2019 to raise awareness of the characteristics of dyslexia (KSDE, 2023a). All components of the Kansas Blueprint for Literacy were codified per Kansas Senate Bill 438 in 2024 (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024). State-wide mandates and prohibited practices may seem unreasonable, but leaders across the nation justified the measures with reference to the downward trends in reading performance and subsequently called for drastic expectations for changed practices (Neuman et al., 2023).

Research Problem

An Epidemic of Reading Deficiency

Annual reading data released by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often referred to as "The Nation's Report Card," shows trends in reading performance steadily declining and more alarming than pre-pandemic reading levels of 4th and 8th grade students across the country (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025). NAEP sorts reading performance into four categories – Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic. According to 2024 NAEP results for 8th grade, only 30% of students are scoring in the proficient or advanced categories (combined), with 70% scoring basic or below basic (combined). The 33% scoring below basic suggests that one-third of our nation's 14-year-olds are lacking the skills needed to take basic meaning from the texts they read (NCES, 2025). The reading data from NAEP continues to trend downward, showing an increase in students scoring below basic from 27% in 2019 to 30% in 2022, and 33% in 2024 (NCES, 2025). Reading data from the Kansas Assessment Program (KAP) verify a similar state of reading performance in Kansas.

Over the past five years, KAP Reading proficiency for all students reflects a stagnant 25% of students scoring in Level 1 across the state. A Level 1 score is defined as a limited ability to understand and use the English language arts skills and knowledge needed to be academically prepared for postsecondary success (KSDE, 2025). In contrast, the graduation rate across the state of Kansas was 90% in 2024 (KSDE, 2025). Standardized reading data reflects deficits in reading performance, but graduation rates do not, causing concern that a high school diploma may not guarantee a student has certain fundamental skills, such as the ability to read and write proficiently. A look at how Kansans fare after graduation offers further insight into the disconnect and uncertainty in the data.

In 2024, then Kansas Commissioner of Education, Dr. Randy Watson, presented a report attempting to unpack the disconnect in graduation rates and reading performance in Kansas. Dr. Watson's report correlates 5-year averages of KAP Reading scores to graduation rates and post-secondary effectiveness of students from Kansas graduating classes of 2017, 2018, and 2019. The report shows that of all students scoring in Level 1 in Reading on the KAP, 81.4% of these students went on to graduate high school; however, only 28% of those students met the indicators for postsecondary success, completing or remaining enrolled in postsecondary programs two years after graduation (Watson, 2024). Dr. Watson's report offers another insight to reading trends across the state of Kansas, raising concern for the students who aren't on track for reading success and further fueling the urgency for reading reform in schools.

An Era of Reading Reform

In the last five to ten years, state legislation across the country has been enacted to require the implementation of evidence-based practices rooted in reading science and, in some states, prohibit the use of certain reading models that are no longer supported by scientific research on the reading brain (Dehaene, 2010; Neuman et al., 2023). Many advocacy groups have criticized the mandated nature of the various state legislation and question the value of pushing reading reform without addressing the larger context of inequitable practices and societal issues (Thomas, 2023). However, decades of controversy and underperformance raise doubts that school systems will commit the necessary effort or funding to make lasting change in the way children are taught to read without explicit changes in teacher licensing and school accreditation (Chall, 1991; Conway and Hogan, 2024; Ehri, 2020; Flesch, 1981; Moats, 2025; Neuman et al., 2023).

In *The Shanker Report*, a comprehensive and comparative analysis of all reading legislation taking place across the United States, Neuman et al. (2023) explored the nuances of legislation in the 44 states having enacted reading reforms at the time of their report. Neuman et al. (2023) raise concern that a common limitation across the reform initiatives is a failure to address the systemic infrastructures needed to sustain real change. Specifically, the various legislation across states lack overall commitments to "the practicality of classroom application, professional development, alignment of available tools and instructional materials, principals' communication about reading, and teachers' working conditions" (Neuman et al., 2023, p. 3). Neuman et al. (2023) also caution that "shifting how reading is taught is not for the faint-hearted" (p. 14) and demand organization- and system-level commitment to improvement and sustainability.

These warnings echo decades of debate surrounding the controversies of teaching reading. Despite the extensive legislation in 44 states, those analyzing the reforms are looking to the history and repeated failures of past efforts to guarantee all students can read (Neuman et al., 2023; Chall, 1991). Teaching reading is fundamentally hard (Moats, 2025). Without a commitment to the research, science, and explicit instruction of the unnatural act of learning to read (Moats & Tolman, 2019), we are in danger of making the same mistakes again (Chall, 1991; Semingson and Kearns, 2021).

Universal screening mandates require schools serving students in Kindergarten through grade nine to screen and respond when students demonstrate difficulties in reading (KSDE, 2023a). At the middle level it is uncertain to whom the responsibility of screening for and responding to gaps in foundational skills should fall. The KSDE's *Dyslexia Handbook* (2023a) cites guidance from the International Dyslexia Association that "All teachers need knowledge of

the structure of language and the ability to implement research-based instruction (KSDE, 2023a; International Dyslexia Association, 2025). However, school districts across Kansas vastly differ in total enrollment, from fewer than 100 students to well over 40,000 (KSDE, 2025). Resources available and implementation structures across these districts likely vary as drastically as the total enrollment, and so the problem is two-fold: first, the alarming number (33%) of students exiting 8th grade who are not reading at proficient levels (NCES, 2025), and second, the uncertainty of how systems will determine who is equipped at the middle level to effectively address the gaps in foundational reading skills theier students may have.

Research Purpose and Questions

This single narrative case study explored the lived experiences of the reading teachers at a purposely selected midwestern Title I middle school who were committed to addressing the gaps in foundational reading skills of their students. Since middle level ELA teacher training and expertise falls beyond the scope of current reading reforms in Kansas, the stories of these reading teachers at this middle school site provide a deep clarity and sophisticated understanding for other middle level teachers and the school, district, and state leaders who must consider the complex realities of addressing foundational reading gaps at the middle level.

The overarching research question is:

How do the past and current lived experiences of reading teachers in a midwestern Title I middle school shape their individual and collective efficacy to address gaps in foundational reading skills amid an epidemic of reading deficiency?

The research sub-questions for the study ask:

1. How do reading teachers in a midwestern Title I middle school describe their past experiences learning to read, learning to be teachers of reading, and other experiences impacting their beliefs about reading?
2. How do reading teachers in a midwestern Title I middle school describe their current lived experiences addressing gaps in foundational reading skills?

The case study participants' individual experiences with reading and learning to be teachers of the English language and their accumulated experiences in the classrooms of today were central to the case study narrative. Their individual experience as well as their shared experiences in education provided the layers of knowing necessary to understand the complexity of teacher efficacy and the current reality of addressing gaps in foundational reading skills for middle school students.

Theoretical Frameworks

Argyris and Schön's (1974) theory of action guided this study in outlining the differences in behavior and learning conditions humans need if they seek to improve their professional practices. The theory recognizes that individuals are often trapped in their learned behaviors, accumulated over time, unable to implement new practices even when they seek to improve. Often the old behaviors conflict with the new behaviors the individual seeks to implement (Argyris & Schön, 1974). The theory of action outlines conditions that can be intentionally fostered by leaders and the degree of support even a dedicated and growth-minded professional might need if they are to break patterns and move their practice from an espoused theory to a reality (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

A second conceptual framework that guided the narrative case study was self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) describes self-efficacy as a function of past experiences and an individual's

belief in their own capacity to produce desired outcomes, even in the face of great challenges. By exploring each participant's past experiences with reading and applying the lens of self-efficacy to those experiences, a more thorough understanding of the individual's efficacy can be explored relative to their current work to deliver reading interventions at the middle level. The individual reading teacher also influences the overall collective efficacy of the reading teacher team at the selected middle school case study site (Bandura, 1997; Donohoo, 2016; Lambert et al., 2016). Applying these frameworks allows for leaders to understand the varied experiences teachers bring to their current practice that in turn may be affecting their efficacy to address gaps in foundational reading skills. With a depth of understanding like this, leaders can determine the necessary school-wide structures that support teachers in their work to address gaps in foundational skills for their students (Neuman et al., 2023).

Methodology

A single case study informed by narrative inquiry was the chosen methodeology for the research. A case is a bounded system, and it is up to the researcher to create the boundary of what a case ought to be (K. Bhattacharya, 2017; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2008). Critical to the design of the study is the theoretical perspective and existing literature that justify it (K. Bhattacharya, 2017). This study is rooted in a social constructionism perspective in which knowledge is dependent on a relationship between the subject and the object of study. Crotty (2020) states that given a social constructionism perspective, the knowing of object by the subject is interdependent. Each reading teacher participant is a sub-unit of analysis for this study (Yin, 2008). Their individual knowing and lived experiences with reading contributed to the larger unit of analysis: a team of teachers committed to addressing gaps in the foundational reading skills of the students in their school (Yin, 2008). Each case study participant had a unique storied

experience of what came before in their personal and educational journey with reading and reading instruction, yet they represented a bound case, a group sharing a current experience of learning and implementing new practices at the same midwestern Title I middle school. Their relational connection in this moment of study and the continuity of their past, present, and future experiences were interdependent, supporting a case study methodology built upon social constructionism perspectives (Clandinin, 2023). Stake (1995) further confirms that case study methodology is well suited to a qualitative inquiry in which the researcher seeks to explore for her audience a deeper clarity of real experiences and a more sophisticated interpretation of those lived experiences.

Narrative inquiry methods were applied to the single case study. Clandinin (2023) purports that the narrative inquirer's ontological and epistemological assumptions honor the relational, continuous, and social nature of experience. Inspired by a Deweyan view of experience, Clandinin (2023) explains that the narrative inquirer has chosen to position herself on a continuum of the participants' experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state

> Experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences. Wherever one positions oneself in that continuum—the imagined now, some imagined past, or some imagined future—each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future. (p. 2)

This narrative case study further relied on the social influence of the group at the time of the study (Clandinin, 2023). Beyond this case study, teacher participants' unique future experiences grew from their individual knowing of this moment of collective effort toward the common goal of addressing gaps in foundational reading skills.

Finally, Yin (2008) indicates a single case study is appropriate in only a few scenarios, including a critical test of existing theory or a bound case that represents rare or unique circumstances. It was the rare and unique qualities at the selected site for this study that justify a single study rather a multiple case study. The selected midwestern Title I middle school site and the leaders of the school demonstrated strong evidence of the conditions necessary to implement second order change as identified in the theory of action framework. Further, the individual educators at the school site possessed unique and rare qualities worthy of study (Yin, 2008). The middle level reading teachers in this midwestern Title I school voluntarily engaged in the intensive LETRS training subsidized by KSDE, rather than as an imposed mandate as may be the case for their elementary counterparts. The unique stories of these well-trained, experienced, and committed educators provided the thick description needed for a glimpse of the reality of addressing gaps in foundational reading skills for students at the middle school level.

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative single case study design informed by narrative inquiry to examine the temporal and storied experiences of four teachers (Kim, 2016; K Bhattacharya, 2017). The single case study was bound by the conditions at the middle school site chosen for the study. The selected site was a purposefully selected Title I, midwestern middle school serving approximately 800 students across grades seven and eight. The sub-unit of study was each of the individual reading teachers at the middle school site who were directly involved with and committed to addressing gaps in foundational reading skills for students who demonstrated that need.

The individual stories of the teachers' lived experiences with reading and their efficacy to address foundational reading gaps were collected through two semi-structured interviews (Kim,

2016). Interview questions loosely guided participants to share their early school experiences of learning to read and other influential lived experiences contributing to their beliefs about reading instruction and efficacy in current reading practices in the classroom today. Data collected through the first round of individual interviews was triangulated by method and by collection, through classroom and reading team observations and a second semi-structured interview (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In vivo coding was used to analyze and draw out the participant's unique perceptions, emotions, and voices in communicating their lived experiences (Saldaña, 2021). Open and thematic coding served subsequent rounds of data analysis as evidence was analyzed through the lens self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), the theory of action (Argyris & Schön, 1974), and then interpreted for conclusions and recommendations (Saldaña, 2021; Bloomberg, 2023).

Data analysis and interpretations are presented in Chapter Four, and discussion of research implications, conclusions, and recommendations for future study are finalized in Chapter Five. Possible transferability for other middle level teachers and state, district, and school leaders is explored to more effectively develop and support the efficacy of educators addressing gaps in foundational reading skills for students at the middle level. An Epilogue is included to reassemble the narratives that were dissected for analysis and to provide a glimpse into the future narratives of each participant at the case study site.

Significance of the Study

The science of reading itself represents over four decades of extensive research about how children learn to read (The Reading League, 2022). The preponderance of evidence for how the reading brain is developed supports code-based reading instruction (International Dyslexia Association, 2019; The Reading League, 2022), providing a necessary clarity after the long-held

conflicts over reading confounded educators over time. If we do know better, then it is now time to do better.

In the current era of reading reform, the focus has shifted to changing the practices that were in place over the past several decades. With reform active in 44 states across the nation, there is a call to begin looking at the impact of those mandates and the lived experiences of teachers who are tasked with implementing them (Neuman et al., 2023). This narrative case study aimed to better understand the epidemic of reading deficiency and how the experiences of individual teachers from their earliest experiences with reading may be influencing their current individual efficacy. Policymakers, district and building leaders, and even teachers themselves may not grasp the magnitude of the changes reading reforms require (Moats, 2025; Neuman et al., 2023). Individual teacher efficacy, considered with an analysis based on past experiences with reading is unaccounted for in the current research, particularly at the middle level, and will contribute to a better understanding of the magnitude of change educators face when implementing structured literacy.

A further significance of the study was the influence of narrative inquiry to inform the case study methodology. Individual stories of personal inspiration, dedication, failure, frustration, and heartbreak may appeal to the empathy of those who have never experienced the reality of a middle school reading intervention classroom (Kim, 2016). It is this creation of a virtual reality, through the telling of the mundane and ordinary, that has the power to impact the greater social good (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2012). Policymakers looking to mandate change or better yet seeking to understand the impact of those mandates can learn from these reading teachers who came to their middle-level work freely and of their own commitment at the case study site. (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Lambert et al., 2016).

Potentially informative in this study is the intentional selection of an atypical case, a site in which favorable conditions for change are present, including shared leadership and a collaborative culture as well as a reading teacher team that engaged voluntarily in training to learn how to address the needs of their students. Teachers across the nation are learning about the science of reading and structured literacy, but an investigation of the lived reality of implementation as described by active practitioners needs to be studied. While a mandate or policy change may guarantee initial learning occurs, a study of the day-to-day experience of real teachers trying to implement the practice is needed.

Study Limitations

Any single case study is limited in that it can only provide insight to the unique set of circumstances present at the time and place of study (Stake, 1995). The situational meaning interpreted from this case may serve to inform other teachers and leaders who endeavor to implement new practices and address gaps in foundational reading skills at the middle level. The chosen case study site is unique, and so these precise conditions, experiences, and levels of expertise may be challenging to replicate in other settings.

The study is further limited by how close the researcher is to the topic of study. The teachers at the research site have voluntarily engaged in an intensive training and devoted hours beyond their expected teacher contract times in commitment to serving their students, even in the absence of state mandates at the middle level. Typically, I am a partner with teachers as they work to support their students. Managing their passion and mine involves drawing clear lines between the work of this study and our shared commitment to impacting student reading proficiency.

Delimitations

The boundaries for this single narrative case study were developed to guarantee a similar leadership and school culture for the reading teacher participants. The desired conditions at the potential case study site included stability of the school's administrative leadership team, evidence of distributed teacher leadership (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Lambert et al., 2016), evidence of the teachers' leadership capacity (Lambert et al., 2016), and the number of teachers and leaders trained in LETRS (Argyris & Schön, 1974). One middle school stood out with a significantly high number of teachers and administrators who have completed LETRS training, including eight teachers, one instructional coach, and three administrators. The reading teachers at this school site who trained in LETRS and were responsible for general reading intervention were invited to participate in the case study. These limiting qualities present at the chosen case study site were central to the study so that analysis of the teachers' experiences were rooted in researched training and favorable school conditions.

Researcher's Perspective

Throughout my years as a high school and then middle school ELA teacher, it never occurred to me that the students in my classroom who could not read well were potentially victims of poor reading instruction. The reading wars, outlined in the literature review, were completely unknown to me in my early days of teaching. I suspect they were unknown to my high school-level teaching colleagues as well. Furthermore, I was blind to my unearned privileged. It was only by chance that in 1981, when many in the field were drawn to the whole language movement, I learned to read from a traditional schoolteacher who prioritized phonics instruction. Decades later, standing in front of a classroom full of freshmen stumbling through

their oral recitations of *Romeo and Juliet,* I knew and understood on a core level that my teacher toolbox was missing something that some of my students desperately needed.

Six years ago, I began my current district-level role and took on the work of addressing needs for middle and high school level reading intervention. Because of my position and confidence in the knowledge I had accumulated over the subsequent years, I leveraged federal and state funding to provide LETRS training for middle level educators in the school district I serve. The Kansas Blueprint for Literacy does not mandate training or licensure changes beyond the elementary grades (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024); however, my lived experiences, my accumulated knowledge, and the faces of the students I could not help throughout my career drive my work to understand and impact this complex issue. My passion, however, is fueled by *my* lived experiences. This study sought an understanding of the storied experience of others, perhaps similar to mine, perhaps not, yet each with their own situational complexity and knowing of classroom experiences. My hope is for school systems to more effectively develop and support the educators responsible for addressing gaps in foundational reading skills for older, middle-level students.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are central to this study and defined as they relate to the purpose of this dissertation.

Middle Level: the middle level is generally defined as grades 5-9 but varies by school district. In the state of Kansas, curriculum standards are banded for the middle grades as 6-8 (KSDE, 2023b). The school site chosen for this case study includes grades 7 and 8.

Foundational Reading Skills: KSDE (2023b) standards for ELA define the foundational reading skills in this study, represented in the Reading Foundation (RF) strand for kindergarten through grade five, and include automatic, accurate, and fluent reading of words and phrases.

Science of Reading: a vast interdisciplinary body of scientifically based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing (The Reading League, 2022).

Structured Literacy: a model for reading instruction using explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction aligned to the science of reading (Cowen, 2016; International Dyslexia Association, 2019; The Reading League, 2022).

Directly Observable Categories: the clear language to be used that explicitly names the desired outcomes and behaviors an individual or group seeks to observe or measure in practice (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Espoused Theory: that to which one claims to believe or aspires to do in action, regardless of the actual behavior in practice (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Theory in Use: the actual behaviors of an individual when tested in practice, regardless of what the individual espoused in theory (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Theory of Action: a framework for understanding the learning that defines our behaviors and how to promote learning that closes the gap between an espoused theory and a theory in use (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Self-Efficacy: an individual's belief in their own capacity to produce desired outcomes, even in the face of great challenges (Bandura, 1997).

Teacher Efficacy: in this study, teacher efficacy is defined synonymously with self-efficacy, referencing the teachers' belief in their own capacity to produce desired outcomes in practice, even in the face of great challenges (Donohoo, 2016).

Collective Efficacy: the shared belief in a group in their capacity to produce desired outcomes, even in the face of great challenges (Bandura, 1997; Lambert et al., 2016).

Collective Agency: the shared commitment of a group to impact a common goal and ability to work together to achieve it (Lambert et al., 2016).

Leadership Capacity: references the capacity of a school for shared or distributed leadership across the school staff. Lambert et al. (2016) names four levels of leadership capacity and indicates the principal's job is to move a staff from one level of capacity to the next.

Shared Leadership: the shared commitment, shared responsibility, shared goal-setting, and shared protection of one another in the group, promoting a collaborative rather than competitive culture (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Distributed Leadership: a sharing of leadership responsibility in which teachers and leaders trust and respect one another's contributions and recognize that leadership does not rely on a single influential leader (Lambert et al., 2016).

Summary

The reading proficiency data across national, state, and local levels paints a clear picture that student reading performance continues to trend downward; this is not a new concern nor are federal and state actions to rectify it. Decades of prior efforts to impact reading were not in vain. School systems across the country have learned from mistakes and have adjusted to new contexts and needs in the service of students. In theory, school systems today have everything needed to impact the changes we seek so that nearly all students thrive as proficient readers (Chall, 1991). What lacks on the middle level is a sophisticated understanding of teachers' lived experiences so that leaders can better support teacher efficacy and transfer the learning and knowledge from theory into practice.

Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature

When we know better, we do better. This mantra in favor of continuous improvement is much easier said than done if we're talking about reading instruction. For decades, the opposing views on reading have impacted teacher preparation, professional learning, leadership, and even the curriculum standards that drive what teachers prioritize in the classroom and how universities prepare teachers to provide quality instruction in reading. As the pendulum swings back and forth across the range of conflicting researchers and methodologies, teachers are left confused and uncertain, lacking confidence and questioning their efficacy to deliver eading instruction and reading interventions.

Section one of the literature review paints the backdrop of the educational era most representative of current educators, their experiences in learning to read themselves and how they were taught to be teachers of reading or ELA. Decades of scientific reading research and shifting trends in reading instruction over time indicate a need for clarity of understanding that teaching reading is hard. Practitioners, professional organizations, experts, and researchers disagree as to how reading should be taught, both throughout history and even now in the current climate of intense reading reform.

Section two of the literature examines more closely the scope of current state reading reforms and current reading instruction to outline exactly what teachers in the state of Kansas are being asked to do. The review shifts to a focus on the state of Kansas's accreditation model, the state curriculum standards for foundational reading and ELA, and the skills middle level educators need if they are to teach all students, including those reading on grade level and those who are not. Principles of a multi-tiered system of supports is introduced to illuminate the extent to which current state mandates require teachers of middle level students to perform outside their

professional expertise. Literature in section two provides for a sophisticated understanding of the disconnect between middle-level teacher preparation and the training needed to address gaps in foundational reading skills for students at the middle school level.

Section three of the literature review investigates a theoretical framework for effectively translating theory into practice. Argyris and Schön's (1974) exploration of model I and model II behaviors and learning describes a framework for understanding how greatly teacher efficacy may be affected by reading reforms, mandates, and policies asking them to potentially undo decades of learned teaching behaviors in favor of new ones. The theory of action (Argyris & Schön, 1974) is tied to concepts of teacher efficacy, collective teacher efficacy, distributed and shared leadership models, and the supportive environment needed to set the stage for effective implementation of drastic changes in reading instruction. The literature is synthesized across Argyris and Schön (1974), Bandura (1997), Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), Lambert et al. (2016), and references Hattie's (2008) initial meta-analyses of teacher-level factors on student learning. The synthesis demonstrates the layers of influence leaders must consider for intentional movement of a school staff to high levels of capacity for implementing change. Section three suggests that addressing gaps in foundational reading skills for students at the middle school level is challenging because simply knowing better in theory is much different than the reality of doing better in action.

Section four of the literature review brings into focus the directly observable categories of structured literacy that serve as the espoused theories of instructional practice for those implementing structured literacy at the middle level. This includes the specific skills and instructional components rooted in structured literacy that middle level teachers need in order to address gaps in foundational reading skills for their students. The review narrows to illuminate

the typical deficits in foundational skills middle level students might have that are both within the scope of a middle school reading or ELA teacher's expertise, and those which are typically beyond it, based on the Kansas standards for English langauge arts. This final section of the literature review provides the current research- and evidence-based practice in reading instruction.

The exploration of literature frames by the decades of historical strife about teaching reading, implications of current reading reforms for middle level educators, and the impact of leadership capacity in any given school (Lambert et al., 2016). Argyris and Schön's (1974) theory of action provides a theoretical framework for understanding the depth of support necessary to develop teachers' efficacy when tasked with second-order change of the magnitude reading reforms require (Goodwin et al., 2015). The journey begins with an overview of the complicated historical plotline preceding the epidemic of reading deficits today and the subsequent era of reform that is now upon us.

Section One: Why do the Reading Wars Matter?

Various frameworks for implementing second order change indicate leaders must guarantee training and professional learning is based upon research and evidence (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Goodwin et al., 2015; Lambert et al., 2016). If establishing a foundation based in valid information is essential for transformative shifts in professional practice and teacher efficacy, then an historical examination of the reading wars is necessary. The investigation serves to illuminate the complexity, confusion, and uncertainty today's teachers face when seeking out research-based information on how to address gaps in foundational reading skills. The breakdown indicates that district leaders and policy makers must account for the challenge

of teaching reading because experts in the field have historically disagreed on how reading should be taught.

A Brief History of Reading Instruction

The history of reading instruction in America and the decades-old reading wars play a significant role in understanding the reading crisis today and how states, local school systems, and individual teachers are responding to the alarming underperformance of our nation's youth. The opposition over reading has left an entire generation of teachers confused and at odds as to how one should respond when students aren't learning to read. A close look at the conflicting views and inconsistency in reading instruction over the decades can help leaders understand the varying levels of efficacy across the current teaching force, especially if educators are now expected to teach reading in a way they weren't initially taught themselves.

Pre- and Early 1900s

According to Semingson and Kerns (2021) the term "science of reading" was first coined as early as the 1830s to describe the process of sounding out words. This aligns historically with a shift from oral measures of learning to written assessments (National Education Association, 2020); however, the term and the drive to determine the most efficient way to teach students to read became more prominent in the early 1900s.

Throughout the first half of the 20th Century, theorists such as John Dewey and literacy researcher Edward Huey would draw attention away from the value of phonics instruction in the early grades with Dewey specifically advocating for a whole to part approach to word reading (Flesch, 1981; Goodman, 1989; Semingson and Kerns, 2021). This theory, in fact, describes the crux of the opposing views in reading instruction—whether students learn best from top-down, whole-to-part reading or from bottom-up, part-to-whole word reading. Later research (Moats &

Tolman, 2019) supports that while spoken language is acquired through experience in the whole-to-part way Dewey and Huey promoted, acquisition of the unnatural skill of reading and writing is quite different.

It was in favor of the bottom-up, part-to-whole approach that Flesch (1955) wrote *Why Johnny can't read: and what you can do about it*, intended as a guidebook for parents explaining how to utilize phonics to "teach [their] child to read in 6 weeks" (front cover). Decades later, Flesch (1981) would revisit his work with *Why Johnny still can't read: a new look at the scandal of our schools*, likely in response to the psycho- and socio-linguistics movements that emerged in the 1960s and 70s (Semingson & Kerns, 2021). Flesch (1981) harshly attacks the methods of the look and say models popularized at the time, which suggested that guessing at words was better than precisely decoding for meaning (Capone, 2024; Flesch, 1981; Moats and Tolman, 2019). Conflicts over reading instruction in the United States were truly ignited throughout these decades.

1950s-1970s: The Modern Era of Standardized Assessment

The National Education Association (NEA) traces the modern era of standardized testing back to the computerization of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in 1958 (ITBS) and establishment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 (ESSA) (NEA, 2020). The advent of the modern reading wars can also be traced back to this time, with theorists, researchers, and practitioners emblazoned by the overuse of such measures to quantify and judge teaching and learning happening in schools across the nation (NEA, 2020). Concerns at the time echoed earlier sentiments from John Dewey that "our mechanical, industrialized civilization is concerned with averages, with percents…[and] subordinates education and social arrangements based on averaged gross inferiorities and superiorities" (Dewey, cited in NEA, 2020). Over the

subsequent years, new ideas would emerge to counter the standardization of education, including more experiential ways to instruct reading (Goodman, 1989), but national and state-driven policy to measure and judge reading success would remain.

Over the past 50 years, Americans have seen the establishment of the US Department of Education in 1980 and formation of the National Commission on Education (Wang, 2021). These moves came in the wake of reports such as the 1975 Adult Performance Study, which proposed 21% of adults in the United States were "unable to cope with modern life" and lacked basic reading skills such as reading a want-ad or a safety sign at work (Flesch, 1981, p. 2). Other historical examples of reform include the War on Poverty and the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act which led to programs like Head Start to address reading readiness and to combat socio-economic inequities (Wang, 2021). Ongoing studies and reports such as The National Commission of Education's report, *A Nation at Risk,* and international reports such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) convinced most Americans that the US Education system was and still is failing (Wang, 2021).

1970-2000: Emergence of Whole Language Theory

The turn in reading instruction was most notably built on the works of Kenneth Goodman (1967) and wife Yetta Goodman (1989). At face value, the whole reading approach is appealing, describe as a set of beliefs about teaching that puts students at the center of learning and promotes the teaching of phonics "within the context of diverse literature and dialogue, using socially and culturally meaningful reading experiences and cues" (Semingson & Kerns, 2021, p. 159). The experiential learning promoted by Dewey (Goodman, 1989) and then later the whole language advocates (Goodman, 1967; Goodman, 1989; NCTE, 2014) attributes the assigning of meaning to letters and words as a human construct, suggesting it is not important to read with

precision, but rather as a guessing game in which taking away the gist of the text's meaning and the author's intent is adequate (*Comparing Reading Research to Program Design: An Examination of Teachers College Units of Study*, 2020; Flesch, 1981; Semingson & Kerns, 2021). The work of teaching what was considered an imprecise code known as phonics was criticized and cast aside in favor of immersion in rich and engaging children's stories (NCTE, 2014). Kim Dale, a trained literacy facilitator, once told a group of training participants that the silver lining of the whole language movement was the plethora of rich, beautiful children's books written in the interest of immersing young children in a vibrant world of storytelling from very young ages (Personal Communication, 2023). Unfortunately, the trade-off for rich children's literature was a casting-aside of the code of the English language.

The whole language approach highly values artfully crafted writing and discourse, rich story-telling, and oral language (Moats & Tolman, 2019; NCTE, 2014). When the contrasting option, phonics, has a reputation for drill and kill instruction and desks in rows with worksheets and repetition, some teachers and schools may have been drawn away from code-based instruction in favor of the whole language approach (MTSU Center for Dyslexia, 2019). Whole language advocates agree that *some* phonics instruction is necessary (NCTE, 2019). Literacies and Language for All (LLA), a constituent group of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), purports students will "learn phonics and grammar… as they apply them within authentic experiences" (2014, para. 3). NCTE (2019) further posits that while all children need *some* explicit phonics instruction, an overemphasis on words, sounds, and spelling misleads children as to the purpose of reading (NCTE, 2019, section 2). The opposing reading theories are further centered, then, on when and how much phonics instruction is actually necessary (Ehri,

2020; Flesch, 1981; Goodwin and Jiménez, 2020; Semingson & Kerns, 2021) and whether phonics or meaning should be placed at the forefront as a child learns to read (NCTE, 2019).

In 1967, Dr. Jeanne Chall entered the scene as a reading professor at Harvard University Graduate School of Education. Much of the work of Jeanne Chall remains unpublished, but researchers Semingson and Kerns (2021) explore Chall's legacy and guidance in depth to uncover how she would respond to the reading wars happening in the 21st century. Chall (1991) explains, "some in the reading field act as if the solutions to our pressing problems lie mainly in changing the old, usually tested methods to untested methods, which results in polarization among teachers, parents, and reading specialists" (p. 49). Chall recognized the polarization in 1991, and it lingers today despite the evidence for code-based reading instruction.

Dr. Chall's concerns about reading instruction would be echoed just a few years later when in 1997 the US Congress called for the formation of the National Reading Panel (NRP) to investigate the state of reading instruction in America (Neuman et al., 2023). By this time and throughout the entire decade, whole language methods were prevalent in schools and the idea that kids didn't really need phonics was common. In response, the NRP's panel was staffed by leading scientists in reading research and ultimately led to the initial naming of the five critical areas of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). While this would be considered an important report providing the culmination of scientific reading research thus far, limitations facing the NRP would cause widespread doubt amongst whole language theorists. Without a strong commitment to ethnographic studies or consideration of early literacy factors in the home, criticism from the panel's minority opinion would leave the report open to interpretation and criticism among whole language theorists (Yatvin, 2000). In response to the NRP's report, the

three-cueing model would be rebranded as balanced literacy and would permeate classrooms in the 2000s, despite the NRP's evidence-based analysis of reading instruction (Hanford, 2018).

Reading Instruction Today

The Three-Cue Model

The three-cue model evolved as the go-to strategy for young readers who were taught to read through whole or balanced literacy (Hempenstall, 2006). This model relies on a guessing approach in which students are given three cues to determine the meaning of unknown words in the text. First, consider clues in pictures or what has been read so far to determine what might make sense (clues in context or syntax); if that doesn't work, then read on and go back later to figure out what might make sense (clues in meaning or semantics); finally, look to the first letter of the word to consider a word you know that starts with that letter (visual clues) (Capone, 2024; Moats and Tolman, 2019). In some cases, teaching guides based on the three-cue model indicate the teacher or parent should never ask a child to sound out words because that method was considered unreliable, in some cases impossible, and at best inefficient (Hempenstall, 2006). Children learning through the three-cue model were taught, from the earliest stages of learning to read, that sounding out words was not an effective approach to reading. Guessing at meaning was promoted as a better strategy (Flesch, 1981; Goodman, 1967).

Brain Science in the 21st Century

Modern advancement in brain scan imaging has allowed the neuroscientists of the 21st century fascinating insight into brain activity during reading and while learning to read (Dehaene, 2010; Ehri, 2020; Moats and Tolman, 2019). The reading experts naming phonics as essential for skilled reading now cite evidence rooted in neuroscience to support their claims. The Alphabetic Principle, the correspondence of the 44 English phonemes (sounds) to the 26

English graphemes (letters), can be analyzed and studied as children learn and consolidate the sound-symbol relationships to be retrieved automatically (Ehri, 2005). Research in neuroscience indicates the brain activity between the occipital and the temporal lobes builds and strengthens the neural pathways necessary for automatic skilled reading (Dehaene, 2010; Moats and Tolman, 2019). Without strong development of these pathways, the prefrontal cortex is overloaded simply decoding text or sounds of words rather than freed up to think deeply about the content of what is read, learn new ideas, make connections, and take meaning from the text (Moats & Tolman, 2019). Whole language theorists and proponents for phonics-prominent methods agree that the laborious focus on decoding words hinders a child from making meaning of the text, which is always the goal (Moats & Tolman, 2019; NCTE, 2019). Once again, the two camps agree on the end goal but disagree as to what it looks like to automatize the code and avoid cognitive overload while reading.

According to the research of Dehaene (2010), the four processors involved in automatic word retrieval are phonological (sounds), orthographic (symbols), semantic (meaning), and syntactical (context). The first three of the four processors (sound-symbol-meaning) work together, with or without context, each as important as the other in decoding and associating meaning of words. Moats and Tolman (2019) explains "learning to recognize words depends heavily on accurate matching of recognized written symbols with spoken language and the eventual connection of those sound patterns with meaning" (p. 27). However, the contrasting three-cueing model of whole language theory does not address the role of phonological processing nor the connection to orthographic mapping as distinct from other visual clues like pictures and shapes of whole words (Moats and Tolman, 2019). The three-cueing model overemphasizes context as a priority in determining meaning rather than explicitly teaching

sound-symbol correspondence (Capone, 2024; Hanford, 2018; Hempenstall, 2006; Moats & Tolman, 2019). The four-part processor, however, includes context as an important component of making meaning from text, but places it on the fringe of the model, connected only to the meaning processor. The context processor works directly with the meaning (semantic) processor to differentiate potential nuances of precise word meaning that can only be finalized in context, after the word has been decoded (Moats & Tolman, 2019). Fascinatingly, all of this happens in the four-part processor in a span of time so fast that it appears words are being read and understood as if by sight (Moats & Tolman, 2019). The concept of reading words by sight is another point of contention among those debating the reading science. Prior to the brain science of the 21st century, reading researchers were unable to verify whether a child who seems to read words as if by sight has memorized the way the word looks as a *whole* or if the brain truly decodes the word so quickly, letter by letter, that the functions of the four-part processor only give the impression of reading by sight. Extensive and ongoing brain research supports the latter theory (Dehaene, 2010).

Structured Literacy and the Science of Reading

Conflicting theories have caused slow and chaotic progress in literacy movements from the release of the NRP report in 2000 and through 2020; however, structured literacy has emerged as the model for reading instruction with code-based, systematic instruction aligned to the science of reading (Conway & Hogan, 2024.; Moats and Tolman, 2019; Ray, 2020; Shanahan, 2020; The Reading League, 2022). Structured literacy relies on the preponderance of data and reading science insisting that 90-95% of young children can learn the code of English and develop the fluency and automaticity needed for skilled reading (Cowen, 2016; International Dyslexia Association, 2019; The Reading League, 2022). Such high levels of reading success

only happen with a commitment to explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction and a universal system to screen, intervene, and monitor early and quickly when students fall behind in foundational reading skills (*Comparing Reading Research to Program Design: An Examination of Teachers College Units of Study*, 2020; Conway & Hogan, 2024.; Ray, 2020; The Reading League, 2022). Many states, including Kansas, require multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) to guarantee universal screening and intervention are in place at all levels and for all students (KSDE, 2026). Even with these systems in place, the conflicting theories for initial instruction and response when students can't read are still at odds.

How different are these two models? Structured literacy encompasses many of the same tenets as a whole language approach, such as an emphasis on skills learned in the context of meaningful, connected texts (Moats & Tolman, 2019). In contrast, however, structured literacy prescribes the scope and sequence of foundational skills, purporting to guarantee proficiency reading rather than leaving it to chance (Conway & Hogan, 2024; Moats & Tolman, 2019; Ray, 2020; Shanahan, 2020). A major criticism of structured literacy is that while its proponents aim to guarantee reading skill as a fundamental human right (The Reading League, 2022), the model does not directly address culturally or linguistically responsive methods and ignores larger systemic issues in social and racial equity (Thomas, 2023). While the minority opinion of the NRP suggests this was initially true, leading experts in structured literacy continue to evolve practices alongside unfolding research (Moats & Tolman, 2019). For example, current structured literacy models have added oral language, writing, and background knowledge as key tenets (Moats & Tolman, 2019; Neuman et al., 2023). The reality in today's classrooms, however, indicates that lingering models of literacy instruction continue to confound the experts in the room despite evolving research in support of structured literacy.

Influence of Professional Organizations

Many English teachers of today consider the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) the authority for supporting their practice and providing guidance on matters of the ELA classroom. The NCTE consults on the development of state standards and policy and has promoted meaning-first methods of reading instruction evident through the organization's vast research database (NCTE, 2019; *The Praxis Study Companion: Middle School ELA*, 2023). NCTE (2019) has formally published nearly 300 resolutions and position statements since 1970, including mission and vision statements adopted in 1990, and the 2019 position statement coined, *The Act of Reading*.

Position statements and resolutions from NCTE over the last five decades demonstrate the organization's vision to "apply the power of language and literacy to actively pursue justice and equity for all students" and "to achieve full participation in society" through a study of language and literacy (NCTE, 2017, *Vision* section). While the NCTE cites research across five decades consistently rooted in quality instruction and experiential learning, the council does not acknowledge the breadth of scientific evidence for code-based methods and the simple view of reading, which demands word recognition as equally critical in reading development as language comprehension (Moats & Tolman, 2019). While the council recognizes a need for phonics and explicit, responsive methods, statements in the 2019 position on the act of reading maintain "an effective literacy learning environment immerses children in a language bath" (NCTE, 2019, section 2) and that "an overemphasis on words, letters, and sounds misleads developing readers as to the purpose of literacy" (NCTE, 2019, section 2). While the NCTE has addressed that learning to read is complex and values language knowledge and code-based instruction to an

extent, the position statements offer little clarity on the role of foundational skills or a focus on phonics and word recognition, leaving much to the interpretation of the individual educator.

Summary Section One: Why the Reading Wars Matter Today

Despite Dr. Chall's (1991) guidance that policy makers and education leaders must consider the evidence and research for code-based reading instruction, the first two decades of the 21st century would prove to be a confusing time for those making sense of the national reading crisis. With teachers, schools, professional organizations, publishing companies, and universities polarized as Dr. Chall (1991) warned, it was as recently as the year 2020 that a non-profit organization released a cumulative study of one of the most popular three-cueing model programs, *Units of Study*, concluding that the three-cueing approach is not based in science nor adequate for all students to learn to read (*Comparing Reading Research to Program Design: An Examination of Teachers College Units of Study*, 2020).

Experts in the field are now taking bold steps to directly address the need for reading instruction based on reading science, reflecting a call to end the confusion over reading instruction that has resulted from the decades-long reading wars. The KSDE is among those entities taking strides, and great risks, to send a clear message for the expectations of practice in Kansas classrooms.

Section Two: Reading Instruction and Reform in Kansas

Research indicates that about 50% of young children can learn to read without explicit instruction when they are exposed to rich language, written and spoken, early and often, so that the brain is able to learn the patterns, the code, and over time make sense of the written word (Moats & Tolman, 2019). However, educators cannot control whether students have these experiences outside of the school setting. Without intentional systems in place that educators can

control, we risk leaving reading success to chance. This is especially dangerous if educators, on an implicit level, do not believe all students have the capacity to read fluently (Hanford, 2018) nor know how to support students as the texts they read grow more challenging. Current reforms from the Kansas Board of Regents (KBOR) and the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) aim to guarantee all Kansas school systems and licensed elementary educators have the capacity to teach all children to learn to read (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024). Existing structures of school improvement and accreditation pair with these new reforms for an overarching commitment to the quality education all children receive in Kansas schools.

Kansas Education Systems Accreditation (KESA)

The second iteration of KESA (KESA 2.0) has been built upon four fundamentals of school improvement, each of which is implemented through six structures that reinforce and sustain each of the fundamentals within the system. Several common threads emerge when analyzing the fundamentals, the structures, and the various actions needed to successfully implement these fundamentals. The most poignant of the commonalities, however, is the research- and data-supported assertion that 95% of all children have the capacity to learn at high levels (Buffman et al., 2018; Cowen, 2016) and thus the capacity to learn to read fluently. When reading data from NAEP, state assessments, and local growth measures indicate consistently that only 30% of students are performing at high levels in reading, and 30% of students are performing below basic reading levels, it is apparent that efforts to improve school literacy programs are critically important (KSDE, 2025; NCES, 2025).

A close look at each of the four fundamentals and three of the key structures shows the common purpose of each of these components: all students in the state of Kansas can perform at high levels, and we know how to make it happen. With this accreditation system in place and

proper accountability for it, there should be no excuse if a system continues to ignore the research on reading and learning for all students.

The Four Fundamentals

Quality instruction is the first of the four fundamentals. KESA guidance defines quality instruction as a culture of high expectations and a guarantee that all students have access to grade-level content and standards taught using high-quality materials (KSDE, 2026).

Balanced assessment, a second fundamental, includes assessing students for risk and using data to respond to their needs through a system of support. Utilizing tiered systems of support is another key structure in Kansas to intervene quickly and effectively when data indicates a student is falling behind (KSDE, 2026). As stated in the previous section, structured literacy relies on a responsive system such as this to guarantee all students learn the code of English.

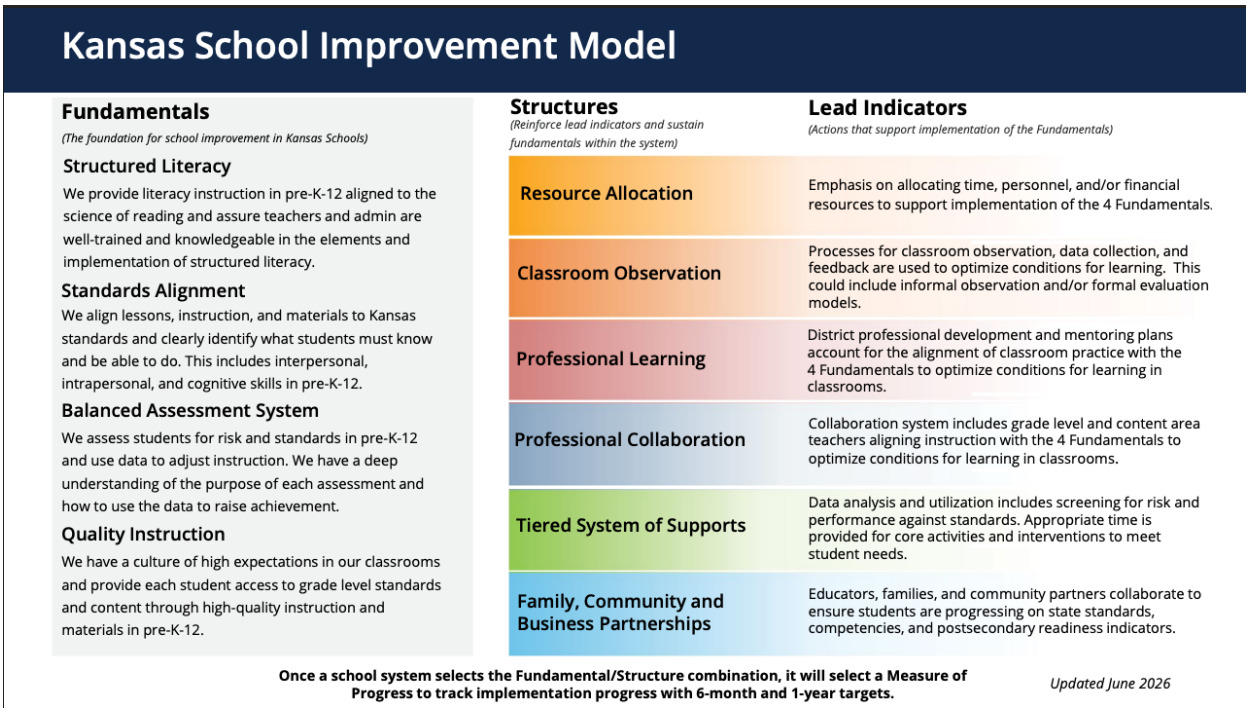
Standards alignment is a third fundamental dictating that teachers should align lessons, instruction, and materials to Kansas standards and clearly identify what students must know and be able to do. Two of the state structures, professional learning and professional collaboration, further emphasize that teachers and teacher teams have district-provided training and ample collaboration to maximize the development of standards-aligned classroom practices and utilization of high-quality materials (KSDE, 2026).

Structured literacy, the last of the four fundamentals, serves as the model for literacy instruction aligned to the science of reading. KESA expectations of the fundamental indicate teachers and administrators should be well-trained and knowledgeable in the elements and implementation of structured literacy. The key structures of professional learning and a tiered system of supports are again critical to the successful implementation of the fundamentals

outlined in KESA 2.0 (KSDE, 2026). Figure 2.1 shows the KESA 2.0 accreditation model communicated through the four fundamentals and six structures of school improvement.

Figure 2.1.

Kansas Education Systems Accreditation (KESA)



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Education and literacy research over time support the development of the KESA model. The commonalities in the outlined fundamentals and the system structures needed to implement them rest on one thing: the efficacy of the classroom teacher. Classroom teachers must have high expectations for their students, must believe each child can achieve, and must be committed to the continuous improvement process (Hattie, 2008). Hattie's (2008) meta-analyses of effect sizes indicate that a combined value of the individual impact of a teacher with the collective effort of the system and teacher belief about student learning would have a dramatic effect on overall student performance (Hattie, 2008). Each of these individual factors are well over the .4 hinge point that defines the typical actions of a school that have typical results equal to one year of

learning. Anything beyond the .4 hinge point is expected to have more influence on student learning. Effect sizes based on Hattie's (2008) analysis are regularly reevaluated and reported at VisibleLearningMetaX.com. At the time of the research study, teacher credibility was reported with an effect size of 1.09, collective teacher efficacy at a 1.01 effect size, and finally teacher belief about student learning topped them all with a 1.29 effect size (*VisibleLearningMetaX,* 2024). KESA 2.0 aims to guarantee continuous improvement of our systems and the teachers in them through structures and fundamental practices aligned to education research (KSDE, 2026).

Kansas Standards for ELA

A close look at the existing ELA state standards for grades K-12 and the level of intervention needed to support older students illuminates the challenges middle level leaders and teachers face to provide quality instruction and intervention if their students demonstrate gaps in foundational reading skills. The purpose of this section is to define and compare the nuances of the KSDE curriculum standards for elementary and middle level ELA. A close look at the early primary grades and the reading foundational strand that addresses reading skill development shows the explicit scope and sequence for learning to read based on the science of reading and structured literacy (KSDE, 2023b). An analysis of the second through fifth grade standards shows how advanced reading skills are developed in preparation for the middle grades, where students are expected to read for learning and the focus on foundational reading instruction falls away (KSDE, 2023b).

KSDE adopted the Common Core state standards as the basis for core instruction in Kansas in 2012 and has seen two revisions in 2017 and 2023. The current curricular strands (2023b) are defined as follows:

- Reading for Literature (RL)

- Reading for Information (RI)
- Writing (W)
- Speaking and Listening (SL)
- Reading Foundational Strand (RF – K-5 only)

Embedded within each of the four K-12 strands are additional skills that were initially articulated in a separate strand, the language strand of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The revision of the state standards in 2017 integrated the language standards within the context of the other strands to encourage language taught within the context of reading, writing, and speaking, rather than as an isolated skill (KSDE, 2017). The integration of the language arts is aligned with whole language theory (Semingson & Kerns, 2021) but also supports the structured literacy approach of all word and language study being practiced through the reading of connected texts (Moats & Tolman, 2019; US Department of Education, 2022; Ray, 2020). While the change reflects research-based practice, the language standards no longer stand out as a prominent thread at the forefront of reading instruction.

However, in elementary grades kindergarten through five, the reading foundation (RF) strand stands alone and outlines clear standards for explicit instruction in reading (KSDE, 2023b). The RF strand includes print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency, although not all standards are included at each of the K-5 grade levels (KSDE, 2023b). In a comparison of the time and intensity devoted to the reading foundation strand across grades K-5, the following should be noted:

- Print concepts and phonological awareness standards are defined for kindergarten and first grade and described as “not applicable” to grades two through five.

- Phonics and word reading standards explicitly describe a scope-and-sequence of skills from kindergarten through grade three.
- Phonics and word reading standards culminate in grades four and five (RF 4.3 and RF 5.3) indicating students should "know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills, combined knowledge of all letter-sound correspondences, syllabication patterns and morphology (e.g., roots and affixes) to read unfamiliar multisyllabic words accurately" (KSDE, 2023b, p. 33; p. 41).
- Fluency is explicitly defined as a foundational skill in kindergarten through grade five. Fluency standard RF.5.4, including parts a, b, and c, indicates students should, by grade five, demonstrate sufficient and accurate reading, reading with a purpose, reading orally with accuracy, prosody, and appropriate rate, and to affirm or self-correct to increase accuracy in fluent reading (KSDE, 2023b).

To summarize, the scope and sequence of foundational reading skills indicates that the earliest reading skills (phonemic awareness) would typically be mastered by the end of 1st grade, that explicit phonics and word recognition instruction should continue through 3rd grade, and that 4th and 5th grade students should have ample time to practice, reinforce, and master fluent reading of multisyllabic words and complex text (KSDE, 2023b). However, even within this prescribed scope and sequence, Moats and Tolman (2019) and Ehri (2005) caution that students move fluently in and out of the stages of reading development. While the sequence is considered important, it does not mean all students will master reading skills along the precisely same continuum nor on the same timeline (Moats & Tolman, 2019). In a multi-tiered model of support, even 4th and 5th grade teachers will need to know and understand how to instruct and intervene on the foundational skills a student may still need (KSDE, 2026).

Beyond grade five, the reading foundations strand is no longer a part of the ELA standards, and any references to phonics, syllables, or fluency are excluded completely (KSDE, 2023b). Morphology is the only vestige of foundational skills that carries over to the middle level (6th-8th grade) or high school (9^{th}-12^{th} grade) ELA standards (KSDE, 2023b). Morphology is the study of meaningful word parts and word patterns to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words (Bhattacharya, 2020; KSDE, 2023b). At the middle level and higher, it is expected that fluency is less a skill to be taught and instead a coordination of several skills (Shanahan, 2023b). However, several factors beyond 5th grade significantly complicate the reality for students who are at risk of reading failure or simply need more time to learn to read as fluently and accurately as their peers (Cervetti et al., 2020; Moats and Tolman, 2019). Although the balanced assessment required by KESA 2.0 (KSDE, 2026) guarantees school systems will screen for and intervene on missing universal skills through grade nine, the direct instruction older students need is typically not in the repertoire of their middle-level teachers' skills (Cervetti et al., 2020).

Classroom structures and the expertise of classroom teachers change drastically as students transition to middle school. First, most middle schools devote about half the time to the ELA block compared to the elementary level (45 minutes versus 90 minutes per day, for example). This means students are in a new setting with less time for reading practice. Furthermore, the complexity of texts and tasks the curricular standards demand of students beyond grade five continues to increase. Sample phrasing from the grades 6-12 ELA standards include that middle and high school students must present complex information to peers, engage in collaborative discussions, use precise language, and choose among differing sentence structures and stylistic components for desired effects in speaking and writing (KSDE, 2023b).

Overall, the standards suggest that students are no longer learning to read but should command the English language as a tool for learning and an art for effective communication.

Thus, middle level educators are trapped in a cycle. Data suggests nearly 70% of middle level students are not yet proficient, fluent, and automatic readers (NCES, 2025), and the grade level standards and texts they should be reading and learning from may be too hard to read independently. The teachers serving them may not know what to do and run the risk of lowering expectations by selecting simpler texts and easier tasks for students (Conway & Hogan, 2024).

To summarize, the reality for middle level teachers and students is this as follows:

1. the texts get harder (KSDE, 2023b);
2. grade-level ELA standards are demanding (KSDE, 2023b);
3. screening and tiered systems of supports mandate intervention (KSDE, 2026);
4. teachers lack knowledge of foundational reading skills and expertise to intervene on them (Cervetti et al., 2020);
5. state standards don't include any explicit instruction of reading, syllabication, spelling, or fluency beyond grade five (KSDE, 2023b); and
6. reading diagnostics may indicate the student's earliest missing skills could fall anywhere from the 1st grade through 5th grade prescribed sequence (International Dyslexia Association, 2019; L. Moats & Tolman, 2019).

In summary, when students transition to the new setting of middle school, the elementary educators trained in reading instruction are no longer in the same school, and it is uncertain who at the middle level will have the skills.

Reading Reform in Kansas

Elementary Teacher Preparation and Licensure

In 2024, Kansas Senate passed legislation to require all elementary level teachers to obtain a seal of literacy on their Kansas teaching license by the year 2028 (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024). By that time, the Kansas Seal of Literacy will be awarded to new elementary teaching candidates as part of the licensure process as an additional teacher license examination will be required that serves as evidence the educator is prepared to teach reading using evidence-based practices. In the meantime, current elementary educators have until July 1, 2028, to earn the Seal of Literacy by demonstrating their knowledge of reading science and structured literacy. This can be done in several ways, including taking the designated Praxis examination or by completing training in structured literacy such as LETRS (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024).

The end goal is for all elementary classroom teachers to have the training and expertise to execute the reading foundations strand as described in the KSDE ELA standards. However, there is no indication of any requirement for professional educators practicing in the levels just beyond the scope of these state-wide initiatives to earn a Seal or demonstrate any degree of knowledge on foundational reading skills (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024). Students at the middle level have skill deficits often falling into the range of the reading foundations strand, which spans kindergarten through fifth grade and includes elements of phonological awareness, syllabication, word reading, and fluency not stated in the sixth-eighth grade curricular standards (KSDE, 2023b).

Furthermore, university preparation programs are designed around the curriculum standards (*The Praxis Study Companion: Middle School ELA*, 2023). As the 6-12 standards for English language arts do not address fluency, syllabication, or word-level reading, teacher preparation programs have no obligation to provide training in foundational literacy instruction for pre-service teachers pursuing secondary-level English or education degrees. Unless

universities are proactively including foundational reading skills and language structures as required coursework in these programs, new middle and high school English language arts teachers will continue to matriculate but enter the profession unprepared for the possibility they may need to address gaps in foundational reading skills.

The Kansas Dyslexia Initiative

Alongside changes to elementary licensure and general expectations for school accreditation, Kansas legislation also mandates universal screening for characteristics of dyslexia (KSDE, 2023a). Systems are required to monitor student reading progress and screen for reading deficits into high school. Dyslexia is neurobiological in origin and is often diagnosed formally through a medical practitioner (KSDE, 2023a). However, for the purpose of a systemic response in a tiered system of supports, initiatives to recognize dyslexia are intended to capture any difficulty with word reading and intervene accordingly (KSDE, 2023a; The Reading League, 2022). Simply stated, school systems across the state must address the needs of all readers, regardless of age, regardless of diagnosis *(*KSDE, 2023a*)*.

School systems are following well-intentioned state guidance, but how does this translate to a system of support for older students who demonstrate difficulties reading words fluently? The initial steps of the Kansas literacy taskforce in 2019 mandated six hours of training in the characteristics of dyslexia for middle and high school ELA teachers (KSDE, 2023a). While this training served its purpose in raising awareness and outlining steps for universal screening, it is uncertain how school districts will guarantee middle level teachers can successfully respond to support students who do not yet demonstrate sufficient and accurate reading, read with a purpose, read orally with accuracy, prosody, and appropriate rate, and affirm or self-correct to

increase accuracy in fluent reading (KSDE, 2023b) as the Kansas reading foundation standards dictate for grades four and five.

Structured Literacy as a Fundamental

The inclusion of structured literacy as a fundamental in the KESA 2.0 (KSDE, 2026) model indicates that the scientific evidence for the four-part processor and thus, the debunking of the three-cueing model, has taken hold as the research- and evidence-based practice for teaching reading in Kansas. Kansas Senate Bill 438 specifically prohibits, on or after July 1, 2025, school districts from using textbooks or instructional materials that utilize any of the following:

- The three-cueing system model of reading as the primary basis for teaching word recognition,
- Visual memory as the primary basis for teaching word recognition, or
- The three-cueing system model of reading based on meaning, structure, and syntax and visual cues (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024).

Critics of mandates like Kansas Senate Bill 438 call for policymakers to trust teachers and advise against policies that outlaw one specific approach over another (Thomas, 2023), but the literature presented thus far raises concern that teacher expertise has been limited by the confusion and conlficting information of the past decades.

Summary Section Two: Reading Instruction and Reform in Kansas

With more than 30% of our nation's 8th graders performing below basic levels in reading (NCES, 2025), how will middle school systems guarantee older students get the support they need to develop into proficient readers? Increasing the efficacy of the teachers charged with closing reading deficits is essential. Curriculum standards, teacher preparation, tiered systems,

and state mandates for licensure and reading instruction do not account for the potential need for foundational reading expertise in the older grades nor how systems should go about securing it.

Section Three: Theoretical Frameworks

Middle level schools live just beyond the reach of reading reform in Kansas, but the students they serve may need highly trained teachers who can provide reading instruction and intervene when students demonstrate deficits in foundational skills. Policy makers, science of reading professional learning organizations, even state and district leaders like me often address the remorse teachers feel when faced with the potential damage done over decades of teaching with strategies like the three-cueing model. Don't look back in despair, we say, instead look ahead and embrace your renewed commitment going forward: When we know better, we do better.

Is it that simple? Can teachers simply learn new methods of reading instruction and reading intervention and then do better, quickly reversing decades of poor reading performance? Two theoretical frameworks, Argyris and Schön's (1974) theory of action and Bandura's (1997) model for self-efficacy frame the extensive and intentional conditions needed to change instructional practices in reading and the ELAs and influence the efficacy of individual educators to deliver them. The theory of action provides a complex framework for intentionally changing habits and behaviors that have been reinforced over time, citing conditions and commitments for both the leaders and the teachers seeking changed practice (Argyris & Schön, 1974). The constructs of self-efficacy provide insight into how past and current experiences influence an individual's belief in their capacity for success in a given situation (Bandura, 1997). A heightened awareness of both frameworks informs the conditions leaders could maximize

(Argyris & Schön, 1974) to potentially the influence the practice of teachers charged with addressing gaps in foundational reading skills.

Theoretical Framework: Theories of Action

School systems and teacher teams are expected to effectively screen for and respond to gaps in foundational reading skills, per state mandates (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024). The content of the reading foundation strand is new learning for any middle level ELA teacher, but the newness of the learning isn't limited to them alone. Other teachers involved in this new learning include teachers of students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs), teachers of English Language Learners (ELLs), and teachers in the upper elementary grades. School administrators must also learn new skillsets and content if they are to recognize what they should expect to see in a reading classroom. If school leaders do not have a sophisticated understanding of the magnitude of change being asked of their teachers, they will not be prepared to effectively manage nor respond to teacher frustrations and insecurities as they transition the learning into practice (Neuman et al., 2023).

First, per the KESA 2.0 model, all educators must learn the content, principles, and routines of structured literacy (KSDE, 2026). However, the content, principles, and instruction must be transferred from theory into the teaching behaviors put in action daily in the middle level classroom (Neuman et al., 2023; The Reading League, 2022). It is one thing to learn a new strategy; it is another to learn a whole new paradigm for practice and then to learn new strategies within it that may be incongruent with what was previously deemed effective. Argyris and Schön (1974) consider this layering of behaviors to be "double-loop learning" which is further explained through the concept of model I and II behaviors.

Model I and II behaviors define the gap between an espoused theory and that which we do in real practice, a theory of action (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Argyris and Schön (1974) present key elements to understanding the theories of action that drive human behaviors. Those elements include theories of action, espoused theories, theories-in-use, and the impact of our actions on the behavioral world we perceive. The researchers purport an individual's theory-in-use, which governs actual behavior, is rarely congruous or consistent with the individual's espoused theories, or that to which one claims to believe or aspires to do in action. Closing the gap between the espoused theory and the theory in use is paramount to enacting change yet can only be accomplished when individuals learn new behaviors so that their theories-in-use align with the theories they espouse (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Model I Learning and Behaviors

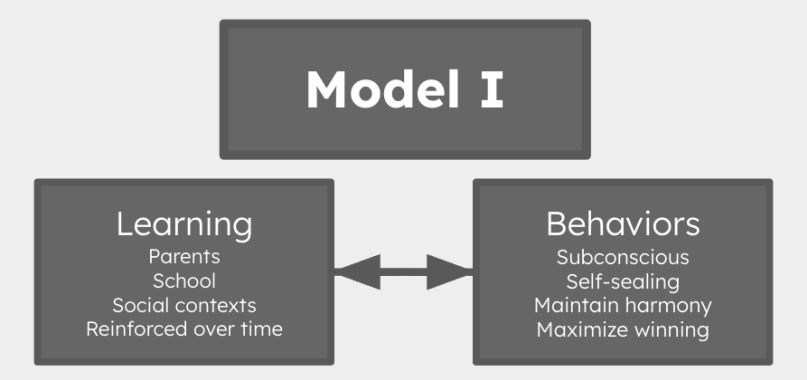
Argyris and Schön (1974) outline two types of learning that influence one's theories in use, referencing their actual behavior when tested in action. Model I learning and behavior describe how most humans operate based on learned behaviors from childhood, asserting that parents, teachers, and society in general, all reinforce the norms that drive our polite behaviors. These more common behaviors derive from a tendency toward win/lose relationships, managing or minimizing discomfort of self and others, remaining unemotional or in control in the face of conflict, and minimizing losing and maximizing winning for all involved, but prioritizing self in the overall winning (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Model I behaviors trap us as actors in the world, leading to self-sealing behaviors, ineffective or ingenuine feedback, resistance to facing the reality of a situation, and a tendency to surround ourselves with others who will reinforce our model I behaviors (Argyris & Schön, 1974). All of this is done to keep our behavioral worlds in balance and harmony; furthermore,

most humans are blind to the disconnect between that which they espouse to believe and the reality of their actions. A further limitation of model I learning is the tendency to speak to attributes and inferred categories, with little or no evidence of directly observable behavior (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Human nature is to maintain the perceived harmony and remain blind to the reality of our actions by evaluating them only in abstract generalities. Figure 2.2 provides a visual representation of model I learning and behavior.

Figure 2.2.

Model I Learning and Behaviors

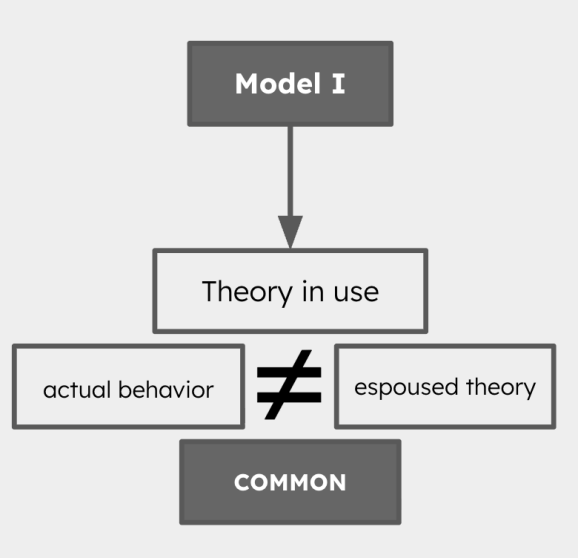


Teachers in classrooms today have been influenced by decades of sociocultural factors and inconsistent commitments to reading instruction, as outlined in the literature review thus far. Specific skills in teaching and learning to read may be quite uncomfortable for teachers who were taught to read and teach using whole language theory or three-cueing models, which may trap them in self-sealing model I behaviors (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Middle level teachers are not typically trained in the practices prescribed for literacy instruction, and therefore may be uncomfortable with practices such as clapping or tapping out syllables (Moats & Tolman, 2019), modeling the decoding of a multisyllabic word (US Department of Education, 2022) or taking time to emphasize how the spelling of a word with a Greek base differs from that of a word with Anglo-Saxon etymology (Moats & Tolman, 2019). If an educator claims they have committed to

using a research-proven method or resource but then in reality finds themselves avoiding the discomfort of asking students to do specific tasks within the program, then that teacher has reinforced and sealed behaviors that are disconnected from what the educator espoused as good practice (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Figure 2.3 presents a visual representation of the impact of model I behaviors on an individual's theory in use.

Figure 2.3.

Impact of Model I Behaviors on an Individual's Theory in Use



Model II Learning and Behaviors

The contrasting model II learning requires specific commitments from the individuals seeking to align their actions to their espoused theories. First, those most likely to attain model II learning and behaviors are those who can listen to feedback when they make errors and are willing to persevere – practicing, trying, and adjusting to new approaches and feedback – to achieve their desired outcomes. Individuals find more success if they can "feel vulnerable without feeling weak" (Argyris & Schön, 1974, p. xxiii).

In addition to these basic traits, one's attitude toward change and willingness to test the theory publicly or privately matters as well. Those open to change and willing to test their

espoused theories publicly are more likely to move beyond model I behavior and learning (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Most humans are subconsciously committed to the equilibrium of their learned behaviors and subsequently avoid the risk of upsetting them by testing new behaviors publicly (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Therefore, even an educator committed to changing practice through professional growth is going to need help recognizing whether model I behaviors are preventing them from improving their practice.

School leaders are instrumental in establishing the conditions and space needed for model II learning and behavior. Argyris and Schön's (1974) theory of action outlines leadership styles most likely to allow for teacher growth, notably shared leadership and distributed leadership. Shared leadership includes shared commitment, shared responsibility, shared goal-setting, and shared protection of one another in the group, promoting a collaborative, not competitive, culture (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Distributed leadership implies a sharing of responsibility in which teachers and leaders trust and respect one another's contributions and recognizes that leadership does not rely on a single influential leader (Lambert et al., 2016). Each of these leadership styles aims for a culture where explicit feedback, perseverance, vulnerability, and trust will flourish, all named conditions for model II learning (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Bush, 2020; Goodwin et al., 2015; Lambert et al., 2016).

Lambert et al. (2016) outlines four archetypes of leadership capacity within a school, asserting school leaders must be committed to moving their staff from one level to the next. The first two archetypes can be associated with model I behaviors as described by Argyris and Schön (1974). Low leadership capacity schools (archetype 1) look to the principal to have all the answers, to settle disputes because staff distrust one another, and in general have low student performance and low agency to do anything about it (Lambert et al., 2016). In a fragmented

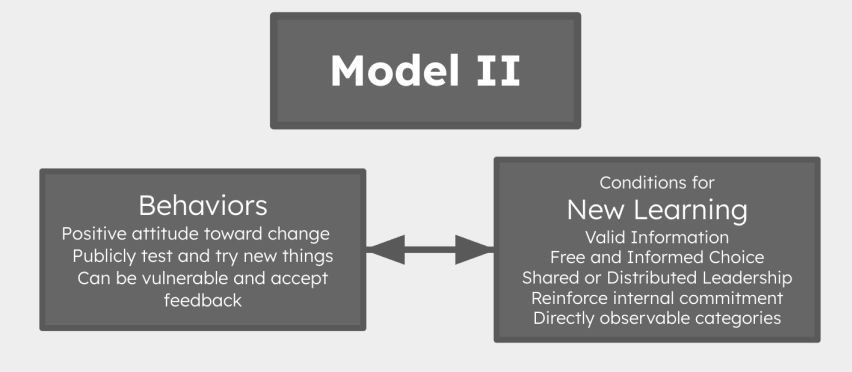
leadership capacity school (archetype 2), teachers may be trying new things in isolation but are left alone to do as they please. This inevitably leads to a range of high achieving classrooms, but with no clear goals or explanations for when things go right or wrong (Lambert et al., 2016). Similar to model I behaviors (Argyris & Schön, 1974), a low impact or fragmented impact school is one in which people prioritize a socialization mindset. Voices remain silent in the interest of avoiding conflict and maintaining peace. In this scenario, a few strong personalities have the power to influence the whole staff, and few want to disrupt the equilibrium. Most schools rarely make it beyond these levels of low or fragmented capacity (Lambert et al., 2016), just as most humans are stuck in the self-sealing model I behaviors of the theory of action.

A limited leadership capacity school (archetype 3) is essentially one in transition, heading toward the ultimate high leadership capacity school (archetype 4). When a leader has successfully established the conditions for a high leadership capacity, a shared vision emerges where collective agency gets results (Lambert et al., 2016). Coherence, collaboration, reflection, and trust permeate the school community and student achievement is steadily improving. Turnover doesn't matter because the organization continues to move. A collaborative professional learning model genuinely exists because space is made for the ongoing cycle of reflection, inquiry, and discussion needed to promote ownership and intellectual stimulation for staff (Lambert et al., 2016). Establishing and sustaining high levels of teacher leadership capacity doesn't happen by chance. The conditions for model II learning provide leaders a framework for moving a staff toward these levels of high leadership capacity. Figure 2.4 represents the model II behaviors and learning outlined by Argyris and Schön (1974) and characterized by high levels of leadership capacity (Lambert et al., 2016). Similarly, Argyris and Schön (1974) suggest that

shared or distributed leadership is developed when leaders commit to certain conditions that allow staff to flourish. According to Argyris and Schön, (1974), leaders should maximize valid information, promote free and informed choice, reinforce internal commitment to the choices made, and speak in directly observable categories. Based on the assertions of Lambert et al. (2016), actions associated with model II learning culminate in the heightened collective efficacy of the group to accomplish their goals, making their espoused theories a reality in action. The recommended actions to promote model II learning are represented in Figure 2.4 and explored in depth in the following sections.

Figure 2.4.

Model II Behavior and Conditions for Learning



Learning Model II Behavior

Maximizing Valid Information

As defined in Lambert et al. (2016), capacity building "enables a group of people to engage in and solve their own problems" (p. 21). Leaders do this by creating a sense of collective agency, discomfort, and thereby demand for change (Goodwin et al., 2015) while at the same prioritizing time for knowledge-building and research so that team members have the knowledge and skills to act with confidence in solving their shared problem (Argyris & Schön, 1974). The framework suggests that when leaders must maximize valid information, they create demand that

motivates teachers to willingly engage in shared or distributed leadership models to address common problems of practice.

The current reading performance of students on national, state, district, and building levels is an example of such valid information that is difficult to ignore. The data shared in Chapter One shows a stark disconnect in reports of classroom performance and measures of standardized reading performance and post-secondary success. Reflective educators willing to engage in model II learning will not be satisfied with this disconnect and seek to analyze their own role in reading instruction and student performance.

Maximizing Free and Informed Choice

Teachers who have been trained in the tenets of structured literacy through LETRS have an extensive background in the science of reading. This includes the decades of reading science still relevant today alongside new studies of brain activity supporting what happens in the brain when humans learn to read (Dehaene, 2010). LETRS investigates the challenge of learning to read and why the three-cueing system, popularized over the last several decades, is not sufficient for the teaching of reading. When valid information like this is maximized, the resulting dissonance compels teachers to willingly engage in learning new behaviors and drives them to embrace change, confident they are informed by research (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Reinforcing Internal Commitment

Ethical fitness is an internal commitment to beliefs so that an individual effortlessly knows how to act when faced with professional dilemmas (Kidder, 2009). Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) also recognize professional capital as a combination of one's work-related skills, or human capital, their social capital within the organization, and their decisional capital, or the ability to make decisions quickly in high-pressure and challenging scenarios. Decisional capital

and ethical fitness both reflect a person's internalization of their personal and professional commitments, so that they act in accordance with their beliefs (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Kidder, 2009). Kidder's (2009) idea of ethical fitness implies a workout, a strengthening of decisional capital, that can only be homed through practice. Conversely, Argyris and Schön (1974) indicate that individuals are rarely tested in their espoused beliefs and so only by intentionally putting themselves in difficult positions can grow their "fitness" to act upon their internalized commitments. Thus, a lack of authentic practice means limited chances to build ethical and decision-making fitness levels.

Luckily, middle level classroom teachers have more opportunity than most to practice their commitments in action, sometimes repeating the same lesson four or five times in one day and seeing the same set of students every day over the course of a school year. However, without an intentional commitment to model II learning, these opportunities to change behavior could easily go awry and instead contribute to the self-sealing model I behaviors we seek to overcome (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Instead, when teachers practice their theories in use, they must be ready to lean into the discomfort, the vulnerability, and the relative moments of weakness that come alongside the learning (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Necessary to foster this culture of learning is the extensive system of support needed where genuine feedback and are valued, encouraged, and normalized. According to Argyris and Schön (1974), leaders can foster the strengths-based, collaborative culture described here by making use of directly observable categories, defined in the next section.

Directly Observable Categories

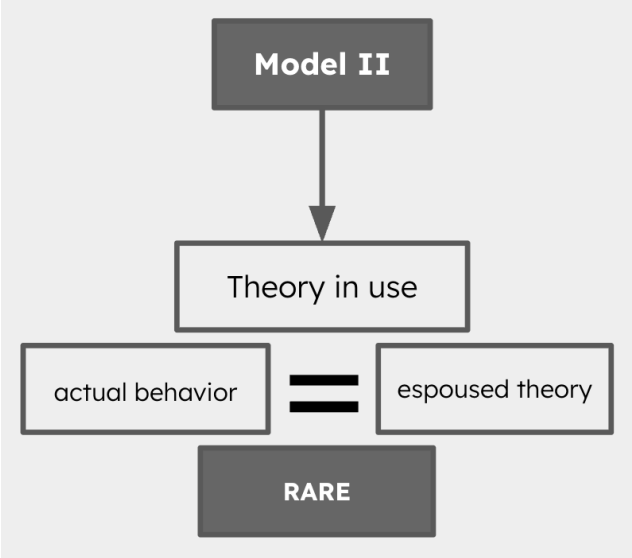
Directly observable categories are defined by the clear language used to explicitly name the *desired* outcomes and behaviors the group seeks (espoused theories), as well as the directly

observed behaviors (theories in use*)* that may or may not be congruent or consistent with the espoused theory (Argyris & Schön, 1974). When leaders model the use of directly observable categories and expect the same of teachers, feedback becomes genuine and measurable, rather than cliché and vague. Naming observed behaviors minimizes perceptions of weakness and instead promotes an emphasis on specific qualities the group has espoused to implement (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

For example, in the context of a daily classroom learning goal, a teacher team speaking in directly observable categories might assert, "we agree our daily exit ticket should directly connect to the learning target stated at the beginning of the class and inform whether or not the student met the target." Conversely, a general attribute with inferred categories left to individual interpretation might instead read "we will use standards-driven practices." When vague attributes are used, the team may not have common understanding of the attribute and each walk away with their own interpretation of expected outcomes. Commitment to directly observable categories allows for the genuine feedback required for model II learning to occur (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Figure 2.5 provides a visual representation of how model II behaviors and learning impact an individual's theory in use.

Figure 2.5.

Impact of Model II Behaviors on an Individual's Theory in Use



In this study, the tenets of structured literacy and the instructional practices participants have learned in LETRS training provide the directly observable categories teachers are striving to embed in their practices. These directly observable categories will be explored in depth in section four of the literature review. While some practices are aligned with middle level ELA standards and instruction and fall within the scope of formal teacher training, others fall well-beyond the typical training for the middle level ELA teacher. Regardless, the past and present lived experiences of each participant must be considered to know the magnitude of change the implementation reflects relative to the teacher's espoused beliefs about reading and their teacher efficacy.

Conceptual Framework: Teacher Efficacy

Bandura's (1997) constructs of self-efficacy define the conceptual framework of the study used alongside the theory of action to better understand how past and current lived experiences have shaped individual teacher efficacy. Self-efficacy, a driving force in the learning process, is a function of past experiences and names an individual's belief in their own

capacity to produce desired outcomes, even in the face of great challenges (Bandura, 1997). Constructs of self-efficacy include mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and affective states (Bandura, 1997; Donohoo, 2016). The vocabulary of efficacy is critical to understand how teachers' past and current lived experiences are associated with each construct.

Mastery experiences are a culmination of past experiences in which the individual or team met success and perceived the success as a result of factors within their control (Donohoo, 2016). Vicarious experiences represent a culmination of past experiences in which an individual or team observed others facing similar challenges who found success through factors within their control (Donohoo, 2016). Teachers rarely have opportunity to observe one another, so their vicarious experiences are often limited. Social persuasion references a trustworthy and credible innovator who encourages the individual or team with new but reliable knowledge or learning that elevates their belief in possible success (Donohoo, 2016). The administrators and teacher leaders thriving in a high leadership capacity space serve a role in developing a positive social persuasion across the group. Finally, affective states refer to whether an individual approaches a problem with anxiety or excitement, relative to their perception of their own competence or capability (Donohoo, 2016). The teachers in this study each had their own level of affective state that fluctuated as their experiences changed throughout the study.

Assertions of Lambert et al. (2016), Argyris and Schön (1974), and Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), guide leaders in how to intentionally foster self-efficacy for individual teachers. According to these researchers, leaders must allow space for inquiry, observations, high-quality professional learning, and collaboration to create space for social persuasion and vicarious experiences (Lambert et al., 2016; Bandura, 1997). They can also provide coaching and feedback to educators, positively impacting their mastery experiences. While affective states are more

challenging to influence directly, a school climate where vulnerability is valued rather than perceived as weakness can contribute to more positive affective states among staff (Argyris & Schön, 1974). The theorists purport that the more leaders develop the self-efficacy of individual teachers, the greater the capacity for collective efficacy and agency across the school.

Summary Section Three: Theoretical Frameworks

In the wake of reading reforms, extensive professional learning, and heightened urgency to move the needle on reading performance, the lived experiences of middle level reading teachers can illuminate potential challenges to changing instructional practice and aligning espoused beliefs to reality in the classroom. Kansas initiatives have ignited the passion of many middle level teachers, regardless of licensure mandates or lack thereof. Many middle level educators have embraced structured literacy as an espoused theory of action and want to align their classroom practice to be congruent and consistent with the knowledge and tenets they have learned. However, even when they know better, have expressed desire to do better, and genuinely attempt to act upon the desired changes, what is the reality that plays out in these classrooms? Much like Neuman et al. (2023) say of current reading reforms, overcoming model I behaviors in favor of model II is not for the faint of heart. Educators must be primed for the changes and leaders must understand the depth of the challenges educators will face. An understanding of the content of structured literacy relative to middle level classrooms will serve to clarify the specific instructional skillsets and directly observable categories Argyris and Schön (1974) demand for model II learning to occur. Section four of the literature review provides this overview.

Section Four: The Directly Observable Categories of Structured Literacy

To guarantee educators and leaders have a clear understanding of valid knowledge and the directly observable behaviors being asked of them, it is crucial to state explicitly the strategies and areas for intervention needed to address the skill deficits of their students. Only with clearly stated, observable behaviors can teachers and those supporting them reflect and measure the success of applying the espoused theory in the classroom as a theory of action (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

The prior analysis of K-12 ELA curriculum illustrates the specific skill areas of the reading foundation strand that are not emphasized for instruction in grade 6-8 ELA standards. These areas of need for targeted intervention at the middle level include fluency, word-level decoding skills, word syllabication, and in the most extreme cases phonemic awareness (Moats & Tolman, 2019). This is confirmed by a recent study from the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) indicating the most critical approaches to addressing gaps in foundational skills in grades 4-9 is to provide direct instruction on word decoding and opportunities to practice reading with prosody to improve reading fluency (US Department of Education, 2022). In addition to knowledge deficits relative to foundational reading skills, middle level teachers may also struggle with a deep knowledge of syntax and other language structures. The prior analysis of the era of the reading wars implies that the bulk of today's teaching force may not have learned nor been trained explicitly to embed language instruction, despite those skills being explicitly stated in the 6-12th grade ELA standards (KSDE, 2023b).

What, then, are we really asking middle level teachers to do differently than they were before? For those who learned to read through a whole-language approach, we may be asking them to do quite a bit that they are not familiar with and even things they are not comfortable

with – for themselves or for their students. In some cases, these teaching behaviors are reserved for elementary teachers and span well beyond the training any middle-level educator would receive. In others, the middle level ELA standards clearly state an expectation to instruct students in the structures of English; however, those structures may not have been taught explicitly, implicitly, nor to automaticity for that individual who is now responsible for the reading instruction of others. The specific categories of ELA and reading intervention instruction needed in the middle level classroom follows, categorized by applicability to the existing ELA standards.

Categories Outside the Scope of 6-8 Reading Standards

Directly observable teaching practices that extend beyond the scope of 6th-8th grade ELA state standards include directly teaching an overt/covert routine for decoding multisyllable words using gradual release of responsibility (US Department of Education, 2022) as well as a daily syllable review routine for practice decoding multisyllabic words (Toste et al., 2017). An overt routine for decoding multisyllable words would include connecting the phonology (sound/pronunciation), orthography (spelling), and syllabication of the word to decode it fluently during reading (Moats & Tolman, 2019). Teachers can also engage students in phrase-cued text fluency routines, which means marking up text passages for oral language development and improving prosody when reading aloud (Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2019; Rasinski et al., 2005; Shanahan, 2023). Finally, middle level teachers must use diagnostic and progress monitoring data to group students based on skill deficits and respond and adjust efficiently to gaps in their foundational reading skills in the context of the classroom (Buffman et al., 2018; *Literacies and Languages for All*, 2014; Moats and Tolman, 2019). These observable teaching behaviors can be viewed in Table 2.1, showing the alignment of these activities to the existing state standards.

Table 2.1.

Teaching Behaviors Beyond the Scope of 6-8th Grade ELA Standards in Kansas

Directly Observable Categories	**Expected Taught**	**Expected Automatic/Proficient**
Word study routine connecting phonology, orthography, and syllabication to meaning.	*ongoing*	4th grade
Explicitly teach the six syllable types	3rd grade	4th grade
Weekly phrase-cued text fluency routine	1st-5th	5th grade
Daily multi-syllable routine	2nd, 3rd grade	5th grade
Collect and analyze diagnostic reading data	*ongoing*	N/A
Targeted grouping by skill deficits	*ongoing*	N/A

Categories Within the Scope of 6-8 Reading Standards

Several teaching behaviors are within the scope of teacher preparation for middle level ELA teachers with directly observable practices grounded in structured literacy. First, teachers should engage students in advanced word study, prioritizing morphology and etymology to determine meanings of unfamiliar words (Beers, 2003; Bhattacharya, 2020; KSDE, 2023b; Moats and Tolman, 2019; Scammacca et al., 2015). Syntax, or the order of words to create grammatically correct sentences, is often taught in isolation but is best taught in the context of writing (Hochman & Wexler, 2017; *Literacies and Languages for All*, 2014). Droves of strategies aligned to pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading of a text help students make sense of complex structures that make the text challenging (Beers, 2003). These practices alone are not enough, however, as classroom routines are essential to keep things moving at a lively

pace, maximizing instructional time and minimizing time lost in transitions (Moats & Tolman, 2019; US Department of Education, 2022). Essentially, teachers learning to address gaps in foundational skills need to not only know and apply new teaching content and behaviors, but also polish their craft so lessons are delivered with finesse, with confidence, and with credibility. Table 2.2 relays the teaching behaviors of structured literacy within the scope of 6th-8th grade ELA standards in Kansas.

Table 2.2.

Teaching Behaviors Within the Scope of the 6th-8th Grade ELA Standards in Kansas

Directly Observable Categories	**Expected Taught**	**Expected Automatic/Proficient**
Advanced word study of Latin and Greek roots and affixes	3rd – 8th grade	4th -8th grade
Explicitly teach syntax to aid in word and text meaning and writing	K-9th grade	11th-12th grade
Explicitly teach writing of increasingly more complex sentences	3rd – 9th grade	8th-9th grade
Targeted grouping by skill deficits	*ongoing*	N/A

Summary Section Four: Directly Observable Categories of Structured Literacy

Middle level educators, and especially ELA teachers of today, are potentially at a disadvantage in their instructional skillset after decades of reading wars wreaked havoc on the profession. As things stand in reading reform and teacher preparation in the state of Kansas, middle level teachers and leaders committed to the implementation of structured literacy must

plan for and fill the gaps in training on their own, which leaves the quality of reading instruction and intervention at the middle level to chance.

Summary of Literature Review

Moats (2025) posits that teaching reading is, in fact, as complex as rocket science, and explains how modern neuroscience research has evidenced that the human brain must be explicitly taught the code of reading. This evidence stands in opposition to assertions of whole language theory that there is not one correct way to learn to read and that meaning-making overshadows any other skill needed for reading (NCTE, 2019). The missteps of the whole language movement, specifically the three-cueing model, have led to wide gaps in reading instruction and no longer is it only students struggling to master the structures of the English language. So, too, are the teachers tasked with helping them. Leaders and policy makers must have clarity and a sophisticated understanding of these gaps and potential challenges in teacher efficacy if they are to support the second-order changes needed for successful implementation (Neuman et al., 2023).

As outlined in Chapter One, the reading skills of high school graduates have been of concern for decades and continue to decline. Chapter Two has established that the era of reading wars has shaped the experiences of many educators in the teaching force today leaving them with potentially inconsistent and disparate approaches to teaching reading. The literature has further established that current reforms demand systemic response when children aren't learning to read. Reforms also demand that elementary teachers learn and demonstrate expertise in the science of reading and structured literacy yet does not require the same of middle level educators. Two models, the theory of action framework and the conceptual model of self-efficacy (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Bandura, 1997), establish the level of leadership and support teachers may need to

learn new behaviors and reshape or replace outdated practices learned over years of lived experience. Finally, the literature has clearly defined the best practices outlined by structured literacy and based in the science of reading to guarantee students consolidate decoding skills to levels of automaticity necessary for skilled reading.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This single narrative case study explored the lived experiences of the reading teachers at a purposely selected midwestern Title I middle school who were committed to addressing the gaps in foundational reading skills of their students. Since middle level ELA teacher training and expertise falls beyond the scope of current reading reforms in Kansas, the stories of these reading teachers at this middle school site provide a deep clarity and sophisticated understanding for other middle level teachers and the school, district, and state leaders who must consider the complex realities of addressing foundational reading gaps at the middle level.

The overarching research question is:

How do the past and current lived experiences of reading teachers in a midwestern Title I middle school shape their individual and collective efficacy to address gaps in foundational reading skills amid an epidemic of reading deficiency?

The research sub-questions for the study ask:

1. How do reading teachers in a midwestern Title I middle school describe their past experiences learning to read, learning to be teachers of reading, and other experiences impacting their beliefs about reading?
2. How do reading teachers in a midwestern Title I middle school describe their current lived experiences addressing gaps in foundational reading skills?

The case study participants' individual experiences with reading and learning to be teachers of the English language and their accumulated experiences in the classrooms of today were central to the case study narrative. Their individual experience as well as their shared experiences in education provided the layers of knowing necessary to understand the complexity

of teacher efficacy and the current reality of addressing gaps in foundational reading skills for middle school students.

Rationale for Qualitative Inquiry

Words over numbers, complexity over simplicity, ambiguity over certainty. A popular analogy for qualitative research draws a comparison to the "high hard ground" where the positivist walks and the contrasting "swampy lowlands" (Kim, 2016, p. 14) where the qualitative researcher chooses to muddle through the complex and important issues of the human condition. This second approach, trudging through qualitative muck, is appropriately matched for a study of public schools where layers of complexity often mask the reality of what works in the classroom (Wang, 2021).

My topic is one usually presented through a quantitative lens. Student reading achievement has long been a measure for accreditation of public schools (NEA, 2020); furthermore, the quality of various reading programs has been a source of great pedagogical debate over the past several decades. Chapter One established the uncertainty and disconnection in reading performance, graduation rates, and two-year reports of post-secondary success (KSDE, 2025; NCES, 2025; Watson, 2024). With such discrepancies, one must question if the quantitative data we so closely analyze in public education reflects an accurate picture of reality, or if there is a more nuanced story to be understood.

Quantitative data as broad as NAEP scores reflect a high-level view of education but fall short in communicating the reality in an individual classroom. Quantitative studies, judged by sample sizes and generalizability (Bloomberg, 2023) align with the tenets of objectivism, or a positivist way of knowing in which reality exists whether humans are there to perceive it or not (Crotty, 2020). An educational study rooted in positivism would seek a specific answer,

controlling for outliers in a quest for certainty (Crotty, 2020). This qualitative case study instead asked what? and how? and why? to describe, understand, and explain a uniquely favorable case through a rich analysis of the lived experiences of the participants (Kim, 2016).

Throughout the early 2000s, educational policy in the United States continued to be heavily influenced by scientific research limited to hard, systematic, measurable, and objective data (Wang, 2021). Freeman, et. al (2007), call for a validation of qualitative methods, pointing to discussions of "educational research in general as historically and presently broken and in need of repair" (p. 25). As more researchers recognize that quantitative measures go only so far and often fail to serve a field where "complex human concerns cannot be understood by testable observation, general principles, and standardized knowledge" (Kim, 2016, p. 4), the call for qualitative inquiry grows louder and more urgent than ever before. This qualitative study investigated the individual and collective stories of the human experience rich with description of day-to-day classroom reality that could not be captured in a state or national assessment score.

Methodological Framework

Social Constructionism

According to Crotty (2020), constructionism posits there is "no meaning without a mind and meaning is only constructed, not discovered" (2020, pp. 8–9) so that "subject and object emerge as partners in the generation of meaning" (p. 9). As such, constructionism is situated on the delicate balance between subject and object, the implication that all knowledge and meaningful reality is "contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world" (Crotty, 2020, p. 42). This qualitative narrative case study relied on such a delicate balance. Not only did each case study participant bring her own prior lived experiences with reading and teaching, but the interwoven stories of

current reality relied on one another as the teachers engaged in their collective commitment to address the reading gaps of their students. Their actions, interactions, and reactions to each other, their students, and all actors in the school contributed to their experiences during the time and place of study. Through this social context, the participants co-constructed a unique meaning and knowing of the reality shared during the case study research period.

Through a social constructionism perspective, the world is already interpreted when humans are born into it, and so the social constructionist asserts humans must challenge "the sense we make of things" (Crotty, 2020, p. 58). The tendency is to interpret our own sense-making as truth for all, whereas the truth we perceive is in reality an indication of the hold our culture has on us, a concept tightly connected to Argyris and Schön's (1974) model I behaviors that trap us as actors in the world. To challenge social constructs critically is to welcome the critique of history and the way things are in pursuit of a deeper understanding of society (Crotty, 2020). This study was built upon a way of knowing through the social interaction of the participants. Their unique lived experiences prior to the study and their shared knowing of how to address gaps in students' foundational reading skills in the classroom today created an ongoing process of learning. Throughout the study, it was anticipated the teachers would discover new understanding, adjust practice, and build an awareness of when and how their prior experiences were either helping or hindering them to better serve their students.

Connecting the Theoretical Frameworks

Argyris and Schön's (1974) theory of action, in contrast to espoused theory, recognizes that individuals often fail to move past espoused theories to implement a theory-in-use and ultimately a theory of action in professional practice. This theoretical framework is aligned with a social constructionism perspective in that we must challenge the sense we make of things,

recognizing that the truth we perceive is an indication of the hold our culture has on us (Crotty, 2020). On the one hand, humans are "motivated by a sense of competence and a need to be effective" (Argyris & Schön, 1974, p. xxx). The particular conditions at the case study site guaranteed the educator participants were thus motivated. The motivation and energy of the team was consistent with Argyris and Schön's assertion that, "one source of human energy is psychological success with challenging opportunities" (Argyris & Schön, 1974, pp. xxx–xxxi).

On the other hand, even among motivated individuals and teams, humans are typically blind to the reality of their effectiveness, unable to recognize the incongruence between that to which they espouse in theory, the sense made of things, and the reality of their actions in use (Argyris & Schön, 1974). This narrative case study was designed to tell the story of a bound set of individuals, a well-trained and motivated team of reading teachers who were primed for success and armed with yearning to improve their effectiveness (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Lambert et al., 2016). In the context of their commitment and the unusually favorable conditions at the case study site, their stories and observed actions could affirm if the practices they espoused to implement in theory have permeated the hold of their past experiences and have been realized in their classrooms in action.

The tenets of self-efficacy also contributed to the design of this narrative case study as a conceptual framework. The study explored each participant's lived experiences prior to the time and place of study, and a variety of perceptions and knowing of the object of study emerged (Clandinin, 2023). The constructs of self-efficacy, mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion and affective states of the individual teacher contributed to an understanding of the relative efficacy of the group (Bandura, 1997). Applying this framework revealed for the intended audience the varied experiences teachers brought to the time and place of study that

shaped their experiences implementing significant changes in instructional practice (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Bandura, 1997).

Case Study Methodology

A case study is a bound system, and so the researcher makes intentional choices to create the boundaries and delimit the study (Bhattacharya, 2017; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2008). Further critical to the design of the study is alignment of the literature justifying it and the theory framing the analysis (K. Bhattacharya, 2017). Crotty (2020) states that given a social constructionism perspective, the knowing of object by the subject is interdependent. Each case study participant was a part of the subject and brought their own subjective view and lived experience to describe their knowing of the object, implementing new instructional practices to address gaps in foundational reading skills (Stake, 1995). In this study, the reading teacher team, who have collectively committed to address gaps in foundational reading skills, served as the unit of study, with each case study participant a sub-unit of study (Yin, 2008).

The individual teacher participant shared unique storied experience of what had come before in her personal and educational journey with reading and reading instruction (Clandinin 2023). The reading teacher team represented a bound case, a group sharing a current experience of learning and implementing new practices in the same school, under the same leadership conditions, and same shared commitment (Lambert et al., 2016). The unique conditions of the bound case deemed them particularly worthy of study (Yin, 2008). Their relational connection in this moment of study and the continuity of their past and current experiences were interdependent, supporting a case study methodology built upon social constructionism perspectives (Clandinin, 2023). Stake (1995) further confirms that case study methodology is well suited to an inquiry in which the researcher seeks to gain the insight of of real experiences

and a more sophisticated interpretation of those lived experiences than a large study across several sites could provide.

Single Case Study Methodology

Yin (2008) indicates a single case study is appropriate in only a few scenarios, including a critical test of existing theory or a bound case that represents rare or unique circumstances. While a multiple case study could have produced volumes of raw data, this single narrative case study instead explored the experiences of one group of educators bound by their common commitment in a common setting under common conditions (Lambert et al., 2016). It was the unique qualities of the selected site that justified a single case study.

As a whole unit of study, the teacher team was chosen for the case study because the school site evidenced conditions necessary to implement the model II, double-loop learning necessary for change (Argyris & Schön, 1974)). The individual reading teachers at the school site exhibited unique characteristics worthy of study (Yin, 2008). Because mandates for reading instruction do not currently affect middle level educators (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024), the middle level teachers in the midwestern school of study sought out and completed LETRS training voluntarily, a indication of their commitment to improving effectiveness (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Lambert et al., 2016). These carefully chosen actors provided the thick description needed for a single narrative case study (Stake, 1995). Stake (1995) explains that "thick description is not complexities objectively described; it is the particular perceptions of the actors" (p. 42). The storied experiences of these well-trained and committed educators foddered the developing clarity and sophisticated understanding of the teacher efficacy needed to address foundational reading gaps at the middle level.

Narrative Inquiry

This single case study was informed by narrative inquiry to examine the temporal and storied experiences of four teacher participants. Clandinin (2023) presents a Deweyan view of experience explaining that the narrative inquirer's assumptions honor the relational, continuous, and social nature of experience. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain

> experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences. Wherever one positions oneself in that continuum—the imagined now, some imagined past, or some imagined future—each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future" (p. 2)

Aligned with Clandinin's (2023) explanation, I chose to position myself on a continuum of the case study participants' experiences. Together, we each grew from the moment of shared experience of addressing gaps in foundational reading skills for middle level students. The narrative case study further relied on the social influence of the group on the moment of study (Clandinin, 2023). Each of the case study participants' individual storied lives impacted one another just as each of their unique future experiences will grow from their individual knowing of this moment of collective effort toward the common goal of skillfully addressing gaps in foundational skills.

Key tenets of literary- and arts-based research include the creation of a virtual reality, the presence of ambiguity, the use of contextualized and vernacular language, and the promotion of empathy (Kim, 2016). Engaging in research through narrative technique is to bring life, creativity, and verisimilitude to the lived experiences of the case study participants (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2012; Kim, 2016). The collected stories of the individual reading teachers bound within

the case developed an overarching narrative that captured numerous viewpoints and insights, re-storied through participants' current journey *together* (Bloomberg, 2023; Kim, 2016). Each participant's lived experience was valued but interpreted as a co-construction of knowledge through their storytelling and my interpretations and observations at the case study site.

This study embraces and honors the blurring of research roles to deliver the stories needed for sophisticated understanding. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) assert four turns toward narrative methods, when the researcher, realizing traditional methods are not suitable for the study at hand, must turn away from the norm. One turn is to embrace the relationship of researcher and the researched, recognizing that in a relationship, "both parties will learn and change in the encounter" (p. 9). My role as researcher blurred as I switched between my daily work supporting teachers as a district administrator to that of an investigator exploring the complexities of their storied experience. I suspect we all left the moment of study having learned and changed for it (Pinnegar &Daynes, 2007).

Single Narrative Case Study Methodology

At this juncture, the methodologies demanded a study investigating a uniquely positive case bound by the specific qualities defined by theories of action, leadership capacity, and teacher efficacy (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Bandura, 1997; Lambert et al., 2016); however, the study was also informed by narrative inquiry to examine the temporal and storied experiences that contributed to the collective knowing at the time and place of the study. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) indicate that "a turn toward acceptance of multiple ways of knowing the world is a turn toward establishing findings through authenticity, resonance, or trustworthiness" (p. 28). The authenticity of this study was built on the reading teachers' voluntary and collective commitment to their students' success. The lived reality as understood by participants and

researcher told through these educators' day-to-day experiences will resonate with those experiencing the same challenges. Despite their passion and commitment, the teachers' personal insecurities, frustrations, and uncertainties developed a verisimilitude, a lived experience potentially recognizable to other middle level teachers learning the concepts necessary to address gaps in foundational reading skills for other students in other schools.

Clandinin and Rosiek (2012) further justify narrative methods, asserting "without such foundations rooted in the storied experiences of ordinary people, it is believed that efforts at social change are condemned to either be ineffective or hollow exercises of externally imposed authority" (p. 50). While well-intentioned, the current reading reform and policy mandates across 44 states could meet this fate – hollow, imposed, ineffective. This study reflected the situational knowing of a shared moment of collective effort, but it is a knowing built upon a co-constructed web of individual experiences. The research design, the literature, and the careful selection of site increased the applicability of this study to other educators and leaders who are committed, either individually or collectively, to understanding the complexity of teacher efficacy in addressing reading deficits at the middle level.

To summarize, this single narrative case study explored the lived experiences of the reading teachers at an uncommonly favorable midwestern Title I middle school trained to implement teaching methods aligned to structured literacy. The single case study was informed by narrative inquiry (Kim, 2016) to capture participants' individual stories, unique emotions, and lived experiences of past experiences with reading and the influence of lived experiences on their efficacy to address gaps in foundational reading skills (Bhattacharya, 2017; Kim, 2016; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2008). The commitment to reality, to the mundane but accurate exploration of lived

experiences, is intended to foster transferability of the study to other middle level educators facing the same problems amid an epidemic of reading deficiency in an era of reform.

Research Methods

Case Study Site Selection

The study was bound by the unusually favorable conditions at the middle school site and the collective commitment of the reading teacher team at the school. The site was a midwestern Title I middle school in the state of Kansas. While the Kansas Blueprint for Literacy does not mandate training in the science of reading and structured literacy for middle level educators, nine of the teachers in this school voluntarily chose to complete LETRS training (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024). The administrators at the school site have also completed LETRS for Administrators training and have established a teacher-led literacy team that met quarterly and planned professional learning on school-wide literacy strategies.

These conditions at the selected site indicated both high leadership capacity where leadership was distributed as well as the presence of teacher leaders who were dedicated to professional effectiveness (Lambert et al., 2016). The knowledge acquired in LETRS training was a necessary delimitation to assure common shared knowledge and goals for the reading teacher team. School and staff details were confirmed through district training and hiring records, analysis of school schedule structures, and verification of teacher assignments through school leaders.

Challenges in Participant Selection

While there were nine LETRS-trained educators at the selected research site, they each served in a variety of roles. Some had more specialized backgrounds such as teaching English language learners (ELL) or students needing specialized instruction (SPED) per an

individualized education plan (IEP), and some had initial training in English language arts (ELA). The school site did not have any certified reading specialists.

The focus of the study was intended for those trained and certified for middle level ELA but acting as general reading intervention teachers; however, voluntary participation in LETRS training was also critical to the study. The final determination for case study participants was to shift the ELA delimitation to a preferred quality, so all general reading intervention teachers trained in LETRS were invited to participate in the case study. This broadened the number of possible participants and still allowed for the focus on voluntary participation in LETRS. The Kansas Blueprint for Literacy does not indicate specific changes or mandates in training or licensure for any middle-level staff, even specialists such as special educators or teachers of English Language Learners (ELL) practicing at the middle level (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024). Ultimately, four middle-level teachers, all LETRS-trained and teaching general education reading intervention courses at the time of the study, were selected as participants. Three of the participants were certified ELA teachers and the fourth was originally certified for the elementary level but served as ELL instructor in addition to teaching general reading intervention during the period of the study. Table 3.1 provides an overview of the four case study participants, their years of experience in education, and key unique details from their narratives.

Table 3.1.

Participant Experiences in Education

Participant	Years in Education	Key Background Experiences
Mrs. Lyndon	>30	>20 years elementary classroom teacher, ESOL endorsement
Mrs. Shay	15-20	2 years middle level school counselor, ESOL endorsement
Mrs. Bryant	15-20	Began career in an unaccredited school district
Ms. Nikki	<5	Alternate path to licensure

Gaining Access to the Case Study Site

The midwestern school district of the case study site required approval from the district's central office to gain access to the site for human research. The written request outlined the intended participants in the study, the planned methods that would be used to collect data from the participants, and the overall purpose and intentions of the study. After submitting to the district office, further information was requested including a general timeline of the study, intended research methods to be used in data collection, documentation of university Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, and confirmation of dissertation committee approval. All requested documentation was provided to the assessment director at the midwestern school district central office as it became available.

Timeline for Data Collection

Each case study participant engaged in two semi-structured interviews over the three-month window of study to allow for a compilation of rich individual descriptions of lived experience. Further data was collected through observation of each participant's reading classroom and observations of the reading teacher team meetings. The timeline for the single narrative case study is outlined in Table 3.2 with further detail included in Appendix A. Specific considerations throughout each phase of data collection are detailed in the following subsections.

Table 3.2.

Timeline for the Single Narrative Case Study

Date	Collection Phase	Researcher Credibility
	Pre-Study	
November 2025	IRB Approval Site Access Approval	
	Participant Recruitment	
December 2025	Initial Recruitment Letter via K-State Email Orientation and Informed Consent	Disclosed Researcher Positionality

	Scheduled all interviews and observations planned for first cycle coding Informal classroom visits (2 maximum)	Established Member Checking Addressed Observers Paradox
	First Cycle Data Collection	
January 2026	Conducted all first-cycle interviews and observations	Analytic Memo-ing Reflexive Journaling
	First Cycle Data Analysis	
January – February 2026	Engaged in first cycle in vivo and thematic coding of interview transcripts and notes, classroom and team observation notes	Analytic Memo-ing Reflexive Journaling
	Second Cycle Data Collection and Analysis	
February 2026	Conducted second interviews, classroom, and teacher team observations Transcribed all data using transcription software, analytic memo-ing, and open coding immediately after collection	Analytic Memo-ing Reflexive Journaling Member-checking
March 2026	Completed data collection and initial data analysis	
	Final Data Analysis	
March – April 2026	Second Cycle Coding Emerging themes and theories analyzed and interpreted for findings	Reflexive Journaling Member-checking

Arranging the Study

Case study participants at the selected school site received information sent via email providing a brief overview of the study, an invitation to participate in the study, and an initial orientation to understand more about the study before committing (Appendix A). The orientation session was approximately 30 minutes. Informed consent documents were presented and explained (Appendix B) before consent signatures were secured. During the orientation, I disclosed my subjectivity statement and research purpose. The goal during the orientation was to promote the participants' understanding of the purpose of the study and provide transparency of the potential subjectivity I brought to the interviews and observations as researcher. I focused on fostering rapport with participants and defined the boundaries between the research study activities and any district initiatives. To maintain focus on participants' knowning of the subject,

I clarified the purpose of my study was to capture a lived reality as they knew it. Research processes to mitigate researcher's subjectivity and to enhance accuracy of data collection were explained, including member checking, preliminary classroom visits, low-inference note taking, and reflexive practices. Agenda protocol used during the orientation is outlined in Appendix C.

Credibility

Intentional methods were used to maximize accuracy in the initial the data collection, such as membership checking, low-inference note-taking and addressing the observer's paradox during observations.

Member Checking

Member checks were used to provide case study participants with preliminary interpretations of the data collected. Peshkin (1993) recounts that many research participants find interpretations of their interviews to be jarring and unnatural, often reworking or clarifying their intended meaning. In this way, member checking was used throughout the second and final data cycles to validate initial findings and improve the overall outcome and trustworthiness of the study. Specifically, the researcher provided a draft write up of research sections particular to the participant that included their words, ideas, etc., to review for accuracy in researcher interpretation. Further, participants were consulted for input on pseudonyms and representations of their personas for authenticity. Featured sections of the research write up were shared, and most adjustments or corrections for researcher interpretation were addressed during the second cycle of data collection.

Low Inference Notes

Low inference note-taking was employed to focus only on what was directly observed during classroom and team observations (Baecher, 2019). For example, noting *the students*

aren't paying attention makes assumptions and does not state what, directly, was observed that led to the assumption. Low inference notes instead might capture *student #1 looks at his hands, shrugs shoulders twice during small group discussion*. This approach limits the tendency to make assumptions, drawing a line between that which was directly observed and the reflective questioning that may follow. After observations, notes were immediately reviewed for judgmental or overly inferential wording. Content that was irrelevant to the study or potentially inaccurate or unsupported in the analysis was removed. Any remaining questions to accuracy in the data collected was shared with participants for accuracy during the membership checks.

Observers Paradox

Kim (2016) also references the observer's paradox, the notion that a researcher may struggle to capture authentic observation since simply being in the research space influences the way the participants act or behave. Prior to the active data collection period, I visited the participants' classrooms a maximum of two times to meet students and explain I would be visiting in the next weeks. The intention was that my presence became less noticeable the more often I was a normal part of the classroom landscape, allowing for more accuracy in the initial collection and analysis of observation data.

Data Collection

Individual Semi-Structured Interviews

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each of the four teachers to understand their personal experiences with learning to read, learning to be a teacher of reading and/or ELA, other significant experiences contributing to their beliefs about reading instruction, and their current teaching experiences addressing gaps in foundational reading skills. The semi-structured interview method allowed for a unique unfolding of each participant's

individual lived experiences (Kim, 2016). The educators' experiences ranged over fifty years collectively and illuminated a variety of perspectives and ways of knowing their current reality. Each storied experience of the past contributed to the current dynamic of the case study group and understanding their collective efficacy (Clandinin, 2023).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person at the school site. To guarantee accuracy, interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed using Otter.ai and later Microsoft Dictation. Duration of the interview sessions were 45-60 minutes. Appendix D outlines the semi-structured interview protocol used, supporting both a loose structure for conversation and trust-building with the interview participant and the open-endedness necessary to allow the knowing and lived experience of the individual to come to the surface (Kim, 2016). Appendix D outlines specific interview questions used across all cycles of interview data collection. Questions during the first cycle interview focused on the participant's knowing of past lived experiences, including prior experiences with reading and their more recent past experiences in the classroom. Second cycle interview questions focused more closely on experiences with structured literacy, the LETRS training the teacher participants have completed, current experiences implementing practices in the classroom, and the teachers' knowing of team collaboration and school-wide efforts to meet the needs of readers.

Interview questions were developed with intentional alignment to the constructs of self-efficacy and the theory of action framework guiding the case study. Further detail in Appendix D includes follow up questions used to prompt participants for deeper reflection and explanation of specific lived experiences, as needed. The follow up questions were frequently referenced and used as needed during the interview cycles. The second cycle interview questions also served to guide participants to reflect more critically on observed behaviors from the classroom and/or the

reading team meetings. The second-cycle questions evolved and were specific to the data collected in the first cycle of data collection and coding. Examples are included below:

- Can you clarify the experience you mentioned…?
- I'd like to better understand why…?
- During the group observation, I heard you say….. can you tell me more about that?
- During the class observation, I (saw, heard, observed)…. can you tell me more about that?

Participants received the general interview questions in advance which allowed for more depth, accuracy, and efficient use of time during the face-to-face interviews. Participants were prompted prior to the interview to bring any classroom materials, evidence, student work, etc., that they felt would support our discussion or add clarity to their storied experience. The second round of follow up interviews prompted elaboration on topics from the initial interview, the classroom observations, and the participants' continued daily experiences delivering reading instruction to address gaps in foundational reading skills.

Classroom Observations

The researcher observed the reading intervention classrooms of each case study participant twice, once during the first six-weeks of the study after completing the semi-structured interview and then again before the second interview. Teacher participants' instructional delivery of prescribed reading routines and interventions were the focus of classroom observations. Notations of both directly observable behaviors aligned to espoused theories and researcher interpretations of behaviors in action facilitated the triangulation process

during second cycle data analysis. Appendix E outlines researcher protocol for classroom observation notetaking.

Teacher Team Observations

Two reading teacher team meetings were observed in which the group reviewed and analyzed student data, determined responses to student performance, and problem-solved next steps for their collective action as a team. The team observations served to bridge the individual teacher experiences to the group story and dynamic. Low-inference observation notes were analyzed for connections to teacher narratives and constructs of self- and collective efficacy. Appendix F captures the observation protocol used during team meeting observations to capture low inference notes and researcher interpretations.

Data Analysis

First Cycle Data Analysis

First cycle coding began after the first interview through immediate analytic memo-ing and continued throughout every interview and observation. Interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed so that in vivo coding could be used to lift actual words and phrases from the participants and recognize patterns emerging directly from the participants' voices and feelings (Saldaña, 2021). Stake (1995) suggests that with careful and immediate analytic memo-ing, it isn't necessary to get the exact words of the interviewee, but rather their overall meaning. By taking only brief notes during the interviews and then memo-ing after, pre-coding led smoothly to in-vivo coding and thematic analysis of the emerging trends from the interviews. Themes from the first round of interviews contributed to findings for how teachers' past lived experiences with reading developed their current efficacy to address gaps in reading skills.

Classroom observations were conducted during the teachers' 45-minute reading intervention periods. Low-inference techniques for notes taken during the classroom and team observations required a careful separation of that which was directly observed and any judgements or inferences drawn from what was observed (Baecher, 2019). Observation notes were coded thematically, with possible connections and assosiations tracked to the codes and themes drawn from teacher interviews.

Second Cycle Data Analysis

First cycle analysis produced themes across the past and current lived experiences of the four teacher participants in the study which were interpreted for association to teacher efficacy. Emergent themes across the experiences and constructs were consolidated and reassembled through a sort of code-weaving which connected and wove together the initial themes from past reading experiences with teacher efficacy in current experiences addressing gaps in foundational reading skills of students. As described by Saldaña (2021), a combination of various strategies such as charts, diagrams, journaling, and graphics supported the laborious evaluation and re-evaluation of the themes and findings during the data analysis. These strategies allowed for movement between the past and the present and the storied experiences and researcher observations to understand possible hierarchies, chronologies, influences and affects to recognize significant threads of meaning among the teacher participants' to interpret further. (Saldaña, 2021).

Final Interpretation of Data

Most qualitative research aims to end in an expression of theory, a generalizable statement that meets pre-determined criteria to be accepted as something profound and insightful for improving social life (Saldaña, 2021). Analysis of the narrative case study data refined

thematic findings based on the theoretical frameworks and research questions. Where the storied experiences and observations suggested associations to constructs of teacher or collective efficacy, an investigation across the narratives aimed to uncover the why and the how of the experiences. Where the storied experiences and observations suggested alignment to either model I or model II behaviors might be at play, deeper analysis was devoted to investigate contributing conditions, moments of tension, or unexpected or unusual factors in the narratives.

At the conclusion of the data analysis, six overall conclusions were determined based on nine themes reflecting how past and current experiences influence teacher efficacy and the collective efficacy of the teacher participants in their current work to address gaps in foundational reading skills. Intentional use of rich text formatting throughout Chapter Four outlines the hierarchy of the analysis, interpretation, and development of the themes and findings for the single narrative case study. The broad purpose was to relay the temporal and situational knowing of the individual, bound together by their shared experience and commitment to gain a deeper clarity and sophisticated understanding of the complex issues of addressing the gaps in reading skills for older students and in developing teacher efficacy to do so.

Rigor and Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

To guarantee rigor in a qualitative study, the researcher must endeavor to align every element of their work. Crotty (2020) communicates the alignment of methods, methodology, epistemology, and theoretical frameworks as crucial factors to address rigor and trustworthiness. According to Peshkin (1993), to guarantee a significant contribution, qualitative researchers must focus on a rich description of processes, relationships, situations, and people. Further, the qualitative researcher seeks explanation, elaboration, and insights that change behavior and refine knowledge (Peshkin, 1993). A rigorous study may be characterized by the way it clarifies

and allows for a deep understanding of highly complex situations (Peshkin, 1993). Triangulation also characterizes rigorous research, requiring the researcher to intentionally corroborate findings to enhance the validity of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). And finally, a study is strengthened by a carefully designed system of rigorous coding used to connect data for analysis and arrive at assumptions, theories, and possible generalization (Peshkin,1993). Done well, the research culminates in an evaluation that questions policies and practices that are established as the way we accept the world and the hold our culture has on us (Crotty, 2020).

Steps taken to bolster the rigor and trustworthiness in this study are outlined in the following subsections. These include the researcher's attending to researcher subjectivities, theoretical and methodological alignment, data triangulation, and ethical considerations for research with human subjects.

Attending to Researcher Subjectivities

In this research study, I was both an insider and an outsider (Peshkin, 1993) to the classroom teacher experience. As an educator myself, my position influenced my reactions and emotional connections to the stories participants shared. Because I have worked with some teachers at this school site for over a decade, mutual respect between researcher and participants allowed for cross-boundary connection and mutual respect. I leveraged common elements of our roles and a shared desire to help all students become fluent readers as means to overcome potential issues with transparency and subjectivity

Because of my district position and confidence in the knowledge I have accumulated over this time, I have leveraged federal and state funding to provide LETRS training for middle level educators. The Kansas Blueprint for Literacy does not mandate training nor a seal of literacy beyond the elementary grades (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024); however, my lived experiences,

my accumulated knowledge, and the faces of the students I could not help throughout my own career have driven my work to understand this complex issue. My passion, however, is fueled by *my* lived experiences. This study sought an understanding of the storied experience of others, perhaps similar to mine, perhaps not, yet each reflective of their own complexity of circumstances that contributed to the case and to the understanding of teacher efficacy to deliver middle level reading instruction.

I was closely connected to work of the middle school case study participants and the choices and actions they made every day for implementation of structured literacy practices at their school site. The teachers, the principal, and the other specialized staff in the school engaged in LETRS training voluntarily and chose the model for implementation in their school of their own free will. I was continually searching for correlations that certain elements of this case were positively impacting reading performance for middle level students.

To mitigate these subjectivities and monitor my focus on the authentic storied experiences of the participants, I employed analytic memo-ing and reflexive journaling throughout the data collection and analysis phases. These methods allowed for my immediate reactions and reflection on teachers' descriptions and were revisited throughout data analysis. When tensions arose or I questioned mt interpretations, these accounts of my unfolding understandings and the initial reactions to teachers challenged my subjectivity. Further review of the research purpose at the start of each observation or semi-structured interview anchored the discussion and kept both myself and the participants focus on the lived reality they had to share. The methods and research purpose were were explained to teachers during the participant orientation and are reflected in Table 3.2, *Timeline for the Single Case Study.*

Alignment of the Research Theory and Methods

Among the four turns toward narrative inquiry is a turning away from one way of knowing the world to embrace the multiple ways of knowing and understanding human experience (Pinnegar &Daynes, 2007). When I first set out on my research journey, I was drawn to the objectivity of the quantitative high ground: a place where I could prove the work these teachers have done is getting results for students. Isn't that what we all want? For all students to read successfully at proficient levels? While all educators are tempted by the mythical silver bullet, I knew the lived experiences of these educators were needed to better understand a known reality. The science of reading is vast and has been researched over decades. Reading strategies and effective components of structured literacy and classroom practices are already studied and recreated and studied and recreated again. However, there is little change on the systems level for teachers working with older students, despite stagnant reading growth for all students. I determined a qualitative study honoring the mundane, the lived narrative of real educators engaged with the challenging work of addressing reading skills and providing intervention to older students could allow for a contribution to the field and insight for what teachers and systems in similar situations need.

This narrative case study relied on an interdependent relationship between subject and object (Crotty 2020). The study required rich description of lived experience, including historical experiences and the possible influences of individual and collective experiences on the moment of the study (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2012). I suspected that the historical variations in opposing reading theories over several decades potentially influenced and contributed significantly to the participants' sense of efficacy to learn new processes and implement them effectively. To draw

those experiences to the forefront, to understand the teachers' lived knowing more deeply, and to learn from their depth called for a combination of methods to honor such an approach.

This narrative case study embraced and honored the blurring of research roles to deliver the stories needed for this study. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) assert four turns toward narrative methods, when the researcher, realizing traditional methods are not suitable for the study at hand, must turn away from the norm. The narrative researcher acknowledged and documented the relationship of researcher and the researched, recognizing that in a relationship, "both parties will learn and change in the encounter" (p. 9). As reflected in the prior section, analytic memo-ing and reflexive journaling were employed to record and investigate the reseracher's interpretations and assumptions throughout data collection and analysis.

Table 3.2 provides a record of the careful alignment of theory, methodology, and data collection in this case study informed by narrative inquiry.

Table 3.3.

Rigor in Theory and Method Alignment

Research Questions	**Frameworks and Constructs**	**Semi-Structured Interview Questions**	**Triangulation: Classroom Observation**	**Triangulation: Teacher Team Observation**
How do reading teachers in a midwestern Title I middle school describe past and current experiences learning to read, learning to be teachers of reading, and other experiences impacting their beliefs about reading?	**F1. Teacher Efficacy** C1.1 Mastery Experiences C1.2 Vicarious experiences C1.3 Social Persuasion C1.4 Affective States	Describe your earliest school memories of learning to read. (RQ1.F1.C1.1) Describe other significant memories of reading in your youth, teens, college, teaching, etc. (RQ1.F1.C1.1, C1.2, C1.3) Describe your choice to engage in LETRS training. (RQ1.F1.C1.1, C1.3; F2.C2.2, C2.3;)	RQ1.F1: Teacher Efficacy C1.1 Mastery Experiences C1.4 Affective States C2.2 Free and Informed Choice	
RQ2: How does a team of reading teachers in a midwestern Title I middle school describe their current lived experiences addressing gaps in foundational reading skills amid an epidemic of reading deficiency?	**F2. Collective Teacher Efficacy** C2.1 Shared Leadership C2.2 Free and Informed Choice C2.3 Internal Commitment	Describe your daily work implementing what you've learned in LETRS and other trainings. (C1.1, C2.3) Describe your experiences working with the other reading teachers in the building. (C2.1, C2.3) Consider the story of literacy at this middle school. Describe building-wide factors helping or hindering your success in the classroom. (C1.4; C2.1, C2.3)	C3.3 Directly observable categories C2.2 Free and Informed Choice C2.3 Internal Commitment	C1.3 Social Persuasion C1.4 Affective States C2.1 Shared leadership C2.2 Free and Informed Choice C2.3 Internal Commitment

Data Triangulation

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) outline four approaches to triangulation for rigor in qualitative research. In this study, triangulation by method and by data collection were used. First, each of the data collection methods (interviews and observations) were designed to build from, enhance, and strengthen the other. Initial educator interviews established the body of research directly aligned to the researcher's purpose and questions, which asked how the teachers describe their lived experiences. However, as participaints relayed their experiences, further classroom and team observation methods served to provide a triangulation of data and illuminated threads of connected meanings across participants' storied experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Data triangulation occurs when the researcher collects data from different sources, in different places and at different times to find commonalities that reinforce or strengthen one another (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Case study participants served as sub-units of analysis, and their stories overlapped and highlighted commonalities and differences in their experiences as they knew them. Furthermore, the second cycle of data collection occurred eight weeks after the first, placing the researcher with the individual participants, their classrooms, and the teacher team later in the school year after the first round of data collection. Subsequent interviews and observations allowed for development and deeper understanding of data from the first collection cycle (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Ethical Considerations

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) establishes expectations to guarantee ethical practice in all research involving human subjects. During the initial meeting with potential case study site participants, I reviewed the informed consent and obtained signatures from each

participant. I reviewed the degree of confidentiality in the study and shared my subjectivity as a researcher entrenched in the reality of the case study. Informed consent (Appendix B) further included participants' right to withdraw consent or participation at any time without penalty. Participants were further informed that all transcripts and audio recordings would be kept in password protected files and permanently deleted three years after conclusion of the study.

Throughout the study, participants occasionally shared detailed and specific information about their school structures, colleagues, or current practices that were questionably relevant to the study or potentially harmful or damaging to the participants or their colleagues if shared or misrepresented. Any potentially harmful or damaging information was carefully addressed. Such information was either re-storied with a focus on the critical components to the case study narrative, de-identified and presented in general terms, or removed completely from the analysis and representation of the data.

Chapter Summary

A single case study methodology informed by narrative inquiry was thoroughly justified to support this study of a special group of middle level educators devoted to developing their efficacy to addressing gaps in foundational reading skills so that their students can make meaning from text. Their case was bound by their voluntary engagement in LETRS training, their collective commitment to improvement, the leadership conditions at their school, and their individual efficacy that relied on decades of learned behaviors and experiences with reading and teaching. The state, district, and building leaders reading this study are implored to consider the teachers' stories and their daily experiences addressing gaps in foundational reading skills of their students. Leaders can gain deep clarity on the factors that may be influencing teachers' lived experiences and develop a sophisticated understanding of the actions to be taken as leaders.

If the reading wars are over, we must now embrace the lived reality these teachers have shared and act accordingly to develop their efficacy.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Chapter Overview

Evidence of shared leadership and a collaborative culture were determining factors in choosing the site for this narrative case study. Throughout the study, the data collected affirmed the unique context of this school and the rare qualities of the case study participants. However, interview responses from Mrs. Bryant, Ms. Nikki, Mrs. Shay, and Mrs. Lyndon co-constructed an intricately woven narrative of the collective effort of the teacher team to address reading concerns for their middle level students. Observations of the participants' reading classrooms and their reading team meetings allowed for rich analysis of the teachers' lived experiences. The data analysis for this narrative case study allowed for a sophisticated understanding of the question, "How do the past and current experiences with reading influence the individual and collectice teacher efficacy of a team of reading teachers at a midwestern Title I middle school?"

Research question one is addressed first, illuminating significant experiences from participants' past knowing of reading and teaching reading. In vivo coding was used to draw out the verbatim words from participants and to recognize patterns across their four unique narratives. Five themes from past lived experiences informed two significant findings contributing to the current efficacy of teacher participants. The overall finding from participants' past lived narratives is as follows:

1. First-hand experiences with older struggling readers motivated participants to seek out mentorship and training to address their own effiacy to teach reading and language structures.

2. Participants perceived limited success when scripted or computerized programs, rather than teacher efficacy, were prioritized or mandated for reading intervention for older students.

Following the presentation of the data is a discussion of the themes, findings, and tensions in the data from past lived experiences. The discussion explores how past lived experiences may have shaped participants' current beliefs about reading, reading instruction, and their individual efficacy to address reading needs in their current work.

Research question two is then addressed through four additional findings, providing a sophisticated understanding of participants' current lived experiences addressing gaps in foundational reading skills for their students. Open coding was used to recognize significant trends and tensions in the participants' current lived. Emerging patterns from interviews and observations resulted in four overall findings communicated over nine themes from participants' current lived experiences. Findings from current lived experiences were as follows:

1. Reseracher observations supported participants' expressed confidence in their current knowledge and skill to deliver reading interventions in alignment with the tenets of structured literacy.
2. Participants created positive classroom environments through predictable routines, supportive interactions, encouragement and other practices intended to help students feel safe and valued.
3. Participants perceived strong administrative support for a building-wide commitment to literacy, while expressing uncertainty about the consistency of instructrional expectations across all classrooms.

4. Limited time for team collaboration and reflection on practice was associated with limited confidence in data-based decision-making and uncertainty in intervention outcomes.

Following the presentation of the data is a discussion of the themes, findings, and tensions in the data for current lived experiences. The discussion explores current lived experiences as described by participants to consider plausible explanations for themes in the data through the lens of teacher efficacy.

Chapter Four culminates with an overall analysis of themes and findings from past and current lived experiences. The constructs of model I and model II behaviors defined by the theory of action theoretical framework (Argyris & Schön, 1974) were applied to the research themes and findings to better understand the data and arrive at the conclusions and recommendations for practice communicated in Chapter Five.

Research Question One: Past Lived Experiences with Reading

In the tradition of narrative inquiry, participants' past lived experiences with reading were explored to understand how their individual knowing of reading in the past contributed to their current and collective experiences working to address gaps in reading skills as a unit of study at the research site. The evolution of the codes, themes, and findings for data collected from teachers' knowing of past lived experiences is summarized in Table 4.1. A discussion of major themes, findings, and associated tensions in the data follows, analyzing how prior lived experience has shaped current teacher efficacy and beliefs about reading.

Table 4.1.

Analysis of Past Lived Experiences with Reading

In Vivo Codes	Themes	Overall Finding
Learning to read was easy	Participants remember early reading as easy and natural.	Participants perceived limited success when scripted or computerized programs, rather than teacher efficacy, were prioritized or mandated for reading intervention for older students.
I always loved reading	Paticipants recall teacher preparation programs focused on fostering a love of reading but limited focus on phonics or language structures..	
I didn't know how to teach reading	Participants felt lost and ashamed when they were unprepared to meet students' needs in reading.	
I didn't know what to do		First-hand experiences with older struggling readers motivated participants to seek out mentorship and training to address their own efficacy to teach reading and language structures.
It's shocking to see how much older kids struggle	Participants found the reality of reading deficits for older students to be shocking.	
Now I know more	Participants sought out mentorship, training, and classroom support to learn and implement reading instruction.	

Findings: Influence of Past Lived Experiences with Older Readers

> I still think back to those kids. To remember how I did or didn't help them or how I dealt with them. One kid could not read at all. I didn't know what to do! I just didn't know. Even my co-teacher didn't know, none of us knew what to do. It was a really rough year all around, and everyone was struggling. We had more kids below grade level than at or above. I was in survival mode, but I think everyone was.
>
> --Ms. Nikki

Initial patterns from teachers' descriptions of past lived experiences with reading provided rich description of their early reading experiences, experiences learning to be teachers,

experiences with older readers, and the personal reactions of each participant when faced with the reality of reading deficits in their students.

Theme One: Early Reading Came Naturally

> I grew up in a house full of books. My parents always had library books on the coffee table. We read stories before bed every night. My dad is a minister, so I grew up in the church. We read Bible stories every night, and even the reading I did in spaces outside of my home was probably a little bit more elevated than a lot of places because of the complexity of the local text. My siblings and I, we all started Kindergarten knowing how to read. When I say 'knowing how to read,' I mean we memorized all the words.
>
> --Mrs. Bryant

Each participant referenced luck, ease, and/or natural ability to describe how they learned to read. Most couldn't remember specifics beyond a few basic memories of phonics or lack thereof, and one specifically recalls the three-cueing model as part of her early reading. Some participants shared a distaste for the group reading techniques that were used in their elementary school classrooms, indicating the work was easy, boring, and that they found ways to get ahead and avoid the work the whole group was doing to learn to read. Regardless of the "how," all but one participant had positive experiences relative to reading, and all four found reading to be easy or natural from a young age. Unsurprisingly, participants were shocked to experience first-hand how difficult reading can be for those who didn't learn it as easily as they did.

Theme Two: The Shocking Reality of Reading Deficits in Older Students

Participants shared various stories of unexpected moments in their careers when the reality of reading deficits of older students were directly in front of them and could not be ignored. Mrs. Bryant's story of shock began early in her career when she was hired in an

unaccredited district. A company was brought in, and teachers had scripted curriculum to follow without much time to help them understand how reading or the programs worked. Mrs. Bryant shared, "I remember the first time I had to give an oral reading fluency test and realized some of my students couldn't decode a multi-syllable word to save their life." It isn't surprising companies like these were called in. According to Mrs. Bryant, schools were in crisis and no one knew how to handle it other than to push the script and check that teachers were on the correct page of the correct lesson each day.

Ms. Nikki, a third year teacher at the case study site, described her realization that her students' skills were much lower than she expected after starting her first job at the case study site: "We always say in education, 'meet them where they're at,' but when you see what that means in reality, it is shocking." Mrs. Shay, a 14-year veteran with several years of experience teaching reading, offers advice for all middle-level teachers, not just those teaching the English language arts and reading:

> So many kids struggle and have gaps. We may not have been taught how to teach kids how to read at the secondary level, but the reality is we have kids coming to us that struggle with reading quite a bit. We all need to get our heads around that fact.

The participants' first-hand experiences of working with older students who could not read well seemed to impact each of them significantly. Their narratives further illuminated that their initial college preparation had not included training in phonics or language structures.

Theme Three: Limited Preparation to Teach Phonics or Language Structures

The participants shared early career experiences of accepting jobs for which they weren't qualified and following scripts they didn't understand. Mrs. Bryant, whose narrative revealed she highly values knowledge and personal expertise, questioned the wisdom of the scripted programs

at the unaccredited school where she was first hired to teach. She confessed that despite her criticism of the programs, she lacked an understanding on a fundamental level and felt ill-equipped to help her students or to know if the program was of any value. This was not acceptable to her, and she recognized, “If I want to teach middle school, and I'm going to be in a school like this—do I need a bigger toolbox? Because I don't have it.”

All four participants used phrasing such as “I had no idea” or “I was lost” or “I didn’t know what to do” or “no one knew what to do” specifically describing how to teach language structures, grammar, or breaking down the skills of reading to directly teach a student who can’t read yet or can’t read well.

Mrs. Lyndon is a 30-year veteran teacher who first taught 4th grade, then Kindergarten, and now serves as the English Language Learner (ELL) specialist at the case study site. At the time of the case study, Mrs. Lyndon was also serving as a general reading interventionist alongside the other three case study participants. Mrs. Lyndon spoke candidly about past experiences when she felt insecure or underprepared to teach reading. Even as an elementary education major, she recalled little preparation to teach phonics or foundational skills but rather remembered Grimm’s fairy tales as a basis for reading instruction. “There was more emphasis on bulletin boards and ‘making it look good,’ not on how reading works.” Mrs. Lyndon was horrified when placed in a Kindergarten teaching assignment: “I was so worried. I had never taught reading or phonics. I had no idea what to do.” Each of the four participants expressed discomfort and regret, feeling incompetent at various phases and contexts of their careers, but they each responded with a similar resolve to act, to fill their knowledge gaps, and to meet the needs of their students.

Theme Four: Seeking Mentorship and High-Quality Professional Learning

Some participants' narratives storied their effort to find training and mentorship, but for others it was a matter of luck. Mrs. Lyndon's Kindergarten placement would produce an unexpected mentor – a long-term substitute teacher – who offered support and guidance for Mrs. Lyndon as she learned the code of English alongside her students. Ms. Nikki also recognized, in her first year of teaching, that because of her alternate path to licensure she lacked reading content methods. Her undergraduate degree in writing and rhetoric did not include phonics. She explained her decision to volunteer for training in structured literacy during her first year of teaching.

> I just wanted to feel more comfortable knowing how to help those kids when they were struggling with really basic skills that I'd never been taught how to teach someone. Even beyond reading, even in the ELA classroom, I felt like [LETRS] was something I needed.

Like her colleagues, Ms. Nikki refused to ignore or simply accept the deficits in her preparation to help kids read skillfully and endeavored to find training in structured literacy.

As narratives narrowed to the more recent past, participants described in detail the components of reading instruction that they did not know initially but acquired throughout their careers and most recently with training in structured literacy. They named the brain science that supports structured literacy, and they identified methods they have abandoned in favor of methods that build neural pathways for fluent and automatic reading. They emphasized there is a knowledge base that eludes secondary-level teachers, and their experiences suggested they have chosen to reject the go-to solutions of following scripts or plugging students into online programs.

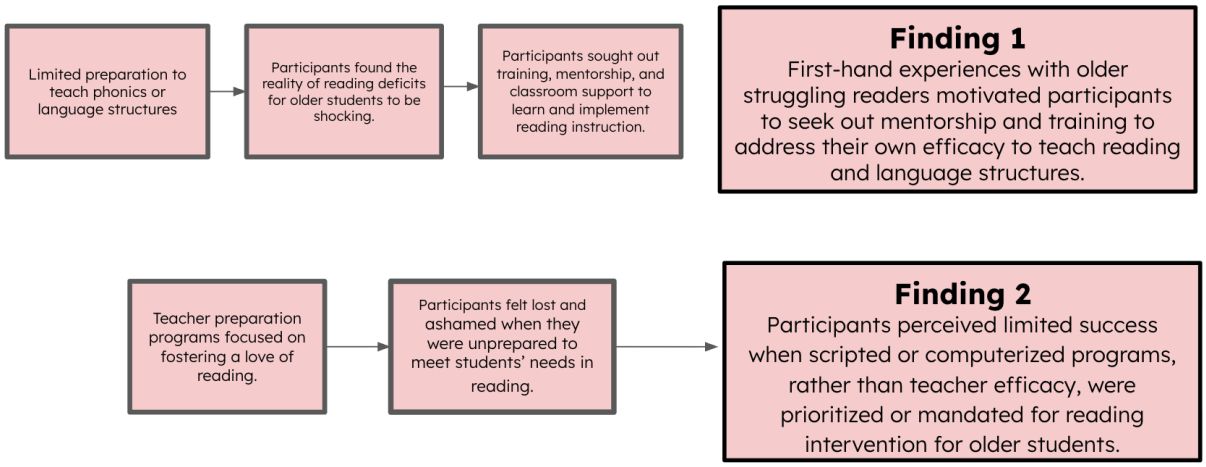
The overall findings for research question one were as follows:

1. First-hand experiences with older struggling readers motivated participants to seek out mentorship and training to address their own efficacy to teach reading and language structures.
2. Participants perceived limited success when scripted or computerized programs, rather than teacher efficacy, were prioritized or mandated for reading intervention for older students.

Figure 4.1 represents the evolution of participants' storied experiences with reading to arrive at the research findings for past lived experiences.

Figure 4.1.

Evolution of Themes and Findings in Past Lived Experiences with Reading



Discussion: Past Lived Experiences and Teacher Efficacy

Teacher efficacy is defined as a function of past experiences and names a teachers' belief in their own capacity to produce desired outcomes, even in the face of great challenges (Bandura, 1997). Donohoo (2018) further elaborates the constructs of self-efficacy to include mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and affective states. Each of the initial themes from participants' storied knowing of the past was analyzed through the lens of teacher efficacy, discussed here.

Regardless of how they learned to read, the case study participants found reading to be easy and natural. While this experience may have had an influence on their beliefs about learning to read, teacher narratives also described early success and positive experiences in school. Most participants were immersed in rich language environments from young ages in which they enjoyed vicarious experiences among other readers. Participants' overall understanding of reading as a critical life skill was often influenced and reinforced by those around them. Their affective states relative to reading were highly positive, and they entered their professional roles eager to teach and confident they knew what to do. It is possible their beliefs about reading and how they personally learned to read set them at a disadvantage to understand why others may struggle to read; however, from the teachers' storied experiences, they each expressed positive attitudes toward learning, accepting challenges, and a general belief in their own capacity to persevere in the face of adversity, mirroring Bandura's (1997) definition of self-efficacy.

Each case study participant shared one or more experience in their teaching career in which they saw first-hand the reality of reading deficits for older students. This is not a positive experience in isolation, but analyzed through a lens of teacher efficacy, each participant felt a powerlessness that was not acceptable to them. Further, findings suggested that while leaders were turning to scripted and computerized programs to support older struggling readers, the teachers were dissatisfied with a shallow understanding of the reading programs they were required to use. Rather than simply accept as the norm that some students would always struggle to read well, or that the scripted programs were the best they could do, these educators instead recognized a deficit in their own training and skillset. The educators looked to research, to credible innovators, to their colleagues, and to their building and district supports, searching for those who had any idea what to do.

Mrs. Lyndon, the only participant initially working in an elementary school setting, was lucky to find support about ten years into her career. The other participants found less help and more helplessness as they recognized no one at the middle level seemed to know what to do other than push scripted curriculum and compliance measures. Initially, this created a highly negative affective state for the educators; however, without these first-hand accounts of reading deficits and the lived experience of following a mandated curriculum, case study participants may not have had reason to commit so fiercely to elevating their own understanding of how children learn to read.

The most common and positively influential experience from participants' past was that they each sought out training, mentorship, and support in order to understand how the brain learns to read and how to address gaps in foundational reading skills. Perceiving they lacked formal preparation and were displeased with computerized or scripted programs, they each actively sought to fill the gaps. Since few educators around them had any insight on how children learn to read, the participants voluntarily engaged in training in the science of reading. They sought mentors to grow their vicarious experiences or engaged with coaching to help grow their own mastery experiences. When LETRS training rooted in science of reading research was offered by their district, teachers described how the popularity of the training grew quickly. Middle level educators voluntarily engaged with the training, saw how it worked, and spoke highly of it throughout their district.

In summary, the analysis of past lived experiences suggests two findings that shaped participants' teacher efficacy. First, participants perceived limited success when scripted or computerized programs, rather than teacher efficacy, were prioritized or mandated for reading intervention for older students. Secondly, that first-hand experiences with older struggling

readers motivated participants to seek out mentorship and training to address their own efficacy to teach reading and language structures.

Research Question Two: Current Lived Experiences Addressing Gaps in Foundational Skills

Participant narratives from current and past experiences with reading came together to inform how the case study participants perceived their individual and collective effort to addressed gaps in foundational reading skills of their students. Findings from current lived experiences to address gaps in foundational reading skills are as follows:

1. Reseracher observations supported participants' expressed confidence in their current knowledge and skill to deliver reading interventions in accordance with the tenets of structured literacy.
2. Participants created positive classroom environments through predictable routines, supportive interactions, encouragement and other practices intended to help students feel safe and valued.
3. Participants perceived strong administrative support for a building-wide commitment to literacy, while expressing uncertainty about the consistency of instructrional expectations across all classrooms.
4. Limited time for team collaboration and reflection on practice was associated with limited confidence in data-based decision-making and uncertainty in intervention outcomes.

Table 4.2 represents the data analysis from interviews and observations, including initial codes that were then organized into themes. Themes were interpreted to arrive at the overall findings for participants' knowing of current lived experience in the context of the case study

site. Following presentation of the data and themes, each finding is discussed through the lens of teacher efficacy.

Table 4.2.

Analysis of Current Lived Experiences Addressing Gaps in Foundational Skills

Open Codes	Themes	Overall Findings
Educator knowledge Educator confidence Observed skill delivering interventions	Participants expressed confidence in their knowledge and skill to deliver interventions. Participants demonstrated skill delivering interventions in alignment with structured literacy. Inconsistent practices were observed across the classrooms of the reading team	Researcher observations supported participants' expressed efficacy to deliver reading interventions in accordance with the tenets of structured literacy.
Classroom culture Classroom management Classroom practices Student apathy	Participants used feedback and praise to motivate students. Participants showed commitment to student success and well-being. Participants demonstrated skill in classroom management.	Participants created positive classroom environments through predictable routines, supportive interactions, encouragement and other practices intended to help students feel safe and valued.
Building-wide support Administrator support Reading team supportive culture	Participants recognized building-wide support for their work and that administrators promoted a building-wide commitment to literacy. Participant perceptions of team and building collaborations were inconsistent. Participants questioned consistency in building-wide expectations.	Participants perceived strong administrative support for a building-wide commitment to literacy, while expressing uncertainty about the consistency of instructrional expectations across all classrooms.
Inconsistent data and results Limited confidence in data-based decisions Educator insecurities	Participants lacked confidence in data-based decision-making. Participants expressed limited trust that other staff members could or would support reading instruction. Participants were unsure what they are doing made a difference.	Limited time for team collaboration and reflection on practice was associated with limited confidence in data-based decision-making and uncertainty in intervention outcomes.

Finding: Teacher Efficacy to Deliver Reading Interventions

Interview and observation data strongly supported the overall finding that participants demonstrated the knowledge, confidence, and skill to deliver reading interventions in alignment with the tenets of structured literacy. Rich descriptions from teacher interviews and detailed observations of teacher skills in the classroom are presented here to support the second research finding.

Theme One: Teacher Confidence in Knowledge and Skill

> Going through the whole LETRS experience and then also training to be a LETRS facilitator solidified my understanding. I practice my skills and get more comfortable with the routines and content every day, and I'm teaching LETRS to others as a facilitator. I am more confident in my expertise to analyze why students are making the errors they are, why they're struggling where they are.
>
> --Mrs. Shay

Teacher interview responses evidenced a strong knowledge of structured literacy and the routines required to effectively deliver explicit reading instruction and intervention. Further, teachers were cognizant of their skill and exuded confidence in the work they were doing to address gaps in foundational reading skills. Participants appeared empowered with these understandings and, with or without a scripted program, expressed they know how to address gaps in foundational reading skills.

Mrs. Bryant compared her current knowledge to past experiences. She reflected on a time prior to any training in the science of reading when she did not yet understand how the structures of language aid overall comprehension of text. Mrs. Bryant shared about her early career when her district was unaccredited and when a federal program dictated their daily work:

> Before it was that the government said we're not good enough, so they handed us a [scripted program] and it didn't make sense. With LETRS, I feel like I have an educated background about why I'm doing what I'm doing, rather than being handed something and told, 'these kids can't read; you're the English teacher, so do this program.'

Teacher participants referenced strong belief in their knowledge and understanding of the specific elements of teaching someone to read. They communicated an understanding of the data they have collected and how to execute the routines and lessons prescribed to fill the various gaps. Their learning was continuous throughout the case study. Mrs. Shay's description of her confidence emphasized the practice she gets every day by putting her learning into action and serving as a LETRS facilitator. Ms. Nikki echoed Mrs. Shay's ongoing growth, stating, "It's hard to figure out what's going with a kiddo. Is it phonics, comprehension, working memory, etc.? I'm getting more comfortable trying to figure it out."

Theme Two: Observed Skill in Delivery of Interventions

During classroom observations, teacher participants demonstrated accurate knowledge of structured literacy as they delivered interventions, with various strengths across the group. They modeled correct pronunciation and phonemic awareness; they connected word parts to meaning and context; they emphasized spelling and language conventions; they directly taught vowel teams; and they drew students' attention to evidence of their progress, connecting improvement to student effort.

Mrs. Lyndon stated directly for her students the how and why of their echo reading activity. She told her small group of four 7th graders, "I am going to be reading, and you are going to repeat after me. Remember, I am modeling fluency so you want to make your voice sound as much like mine as you can." Ms. Nikki explicitly stated a similar focus during a fluency

routine with her whole group. “Think about your intonation,” she reminded them, “which words are emphasized, carry more emotion? If it’s a question, what do you need to do to your voice to convey it’s a question?” Other observed interventions included explicit instruction in vowel teams and consonant blends, meaningful word parts, and corrective feedback during oral reading.

Moment of Tension: Inconsistent Classroom Practices

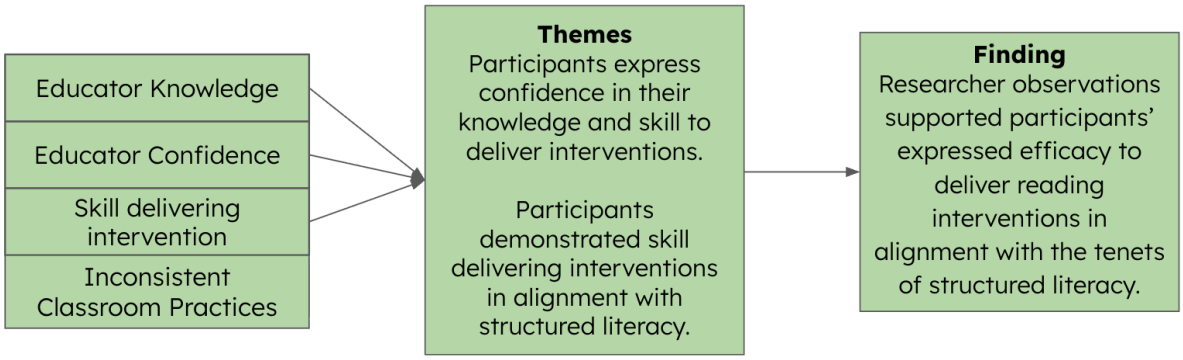
Depite their confidence and efficacy to deliver reading instruction, tensions arose in the data as inconsistent practices were observed across the classrooms. Teachers’ intervention class periods had been intentionally scheduled during the same periods of the day so that they could form small groups based on targeted skills and then share students across classrooms. Each teacher then has more time to develop expertise and focus on one intervention skill at a time rather than attempting to address several skills in one class period. However, in some classes the anticipated shared groups were not observed. Also observed in the classrooms without shared groups were generally different forms of interventions. All of the classroom practices were aligned to structured literacy and the LETRS training teachers had received, but participants were attempting different interventions for the same skills across the classrooms where groups were not shared. Plausible influences for these decisions could be a lack of trust across the team or limited time for collaboration to plan interventions together. The tension will be further explored as additional themes and findings are discussed.

Observations affirmed that participant delivery of interventions was aligned to recommended practices based on their training in structured literacy, and the participants’ narratives were steeped in the language and understanding of reading science and language

structures. Figure 4.2 represents the evolution of themes to arrive at the overall research finding for teachers' current knowing of delivering reading interventions at the case study site.

Figure 4.2.

Evolution of Finding in Teacher Confidence to Deliver Reading Interventions



Discussion: Teacher Efficacy in Delivering Reading Interventions

Teacher experiences and observed skills in delivering interventions were analyzed for the constructs of teacher efficacy and alignment to their training in structured literacy. Their narratives attributed confidence to the mastery experiences they have had after engaging in LETRS training to study of the science of reading and structured literacy. Participants each knew a comparative state of ignorance in which they felt helpless to support their students, when the lack of mastery or vicarious experiences meant they had no model on which to build their classroom practice for addressing gaps in reading skills. The social persuasion they experienced was strong as well. District leaders, national organizations such as The Reading League, and state entities have asserted that knowledge in the science of reading is fundamentally important to teaching children how to read. Finally, confidence in their knowledge base allowed participants to face challenges in the classroom head on. They knew what to do, they knew how to dig deeper for more information, and they faced each student's needs as a puzzle that could be solved.

Finding: Classroom Cultures Designed for Student Success

Case study participants each created positive and productive classroom environments through predictable routines, supportive interactions, encouragement, and other practices intended to help students feel safe and valued. Data from interviews and classroom observations supported each case study participants' strong commitment to the wellbeing and success of every student they served. Their classrooms were inviting spaces, where routines and structure prevailed, and positive interactions contributed to a safe learning environment for students.

Theme Three: Motivating Students with Gaps in Foundational Reading Skills

During classroom observations, participants consistently explained to students the purpose of their lessons, drawing attention to success and growth, no matter how small, and connecting each success to their classroom work and effort. One participant shared how she motivates students. "I tell them, 'I know you don't like choral reading, but look at your growth! Look at how far you've come and that's because of these activities we do each day.'" She said she has a goal to put students in charge of their own progress. "I've seen how much it motivates them, to see that data and growth. Moving forward, I hope we can be more individualized. I want them to track their own fluency progress. I want them to set their own goals." Participants believed their work addressing the gaps in foundational reading skills was paramount to their students' future success in school and in life.

Theme Four: Safe and Supportive Classroom Structures

Observation data collected from all four classrooms confirmed participants put students first and were fiercely committed to their growth and well-being. For example, teachers were aware of and responded with respect if students were disengaged. While teachers led their small groups, the students working in the computerized application frequently read aloud, softly into a

headset microphone, having been directed by the program to read or repeat a sound, word, or phrase. All teachers provided positive feedback and firm yet kind redirection or correction as needed. In one classroom, a student was prompted to reread a sentence after making several errors. After the second read, the teacher told him, "Good work. When you read it a second time it is always better." In another classroom, the teacher repeated small group instruction multiple times so she could focus on just 3-4 students at once. The teacher laughed and joked with the students as she redirected or corrected them, referencing their personal interests and characteristics as the small group work evolved.

Theme Five: Classroom Management Skills

Observation data further confirmed that participants utilized predictable classroom routines, both managerial and instructional. With little to no prompting, students seemed to know where materials were located, what to do when entering the classroom, and when and how to transition from whole group to small group to individual tasks. Small group instruction consistently spanned 10-15 minutes, and then students rotated. A second group came to the teacher-led station while those in the prior small group returned to their computer for individualized instruction. As each teacher delivered instruction to their respective small groups, they simultaneously monitored the other students who were working on the computerized application. The routines appeared well-oiled, suggesting the procedures had likely been taught, practiced, and reinforced over time, all contributing to the predictability of a safe space where learning could occur.

Moments of Tension: Challenges to Classroom Culture and Management

Case study participants referenced student motivation as a barrier to implementing interventions to address foundational gaps in reading skills. Mrs. Bryant and Mrs. Lyndon

discussed at length the differences they see between English language learners and native English speakers, and Mrs. Shay and Ms. Nikki shared disquieting stories of transience and apathy among their students with the highest needs.

Mrs. Lyndon, who usually works with English language learners, noted specific differences for native English speakers:

> English learners are different than a thirteen-year-old who has heard English from birth yet struggles with foundational reading skills. ELLs, especially newcomers, always make growth, they thrive on the routine. Native English speakers at this age get bored quickly, the same thing every day.

Mrs. Shay elaborated as well, describing a resigned compliance among her students that didn't sit well with her:

> Most of the kids are just going with the flow. I have a sprinkle of kids who really want to make progress and be better readers, and they believe, 'yeah, I can get better at this.' But most believe this is just how it is. They think, 'I'm not going to get much better than this regardless of what I do.'

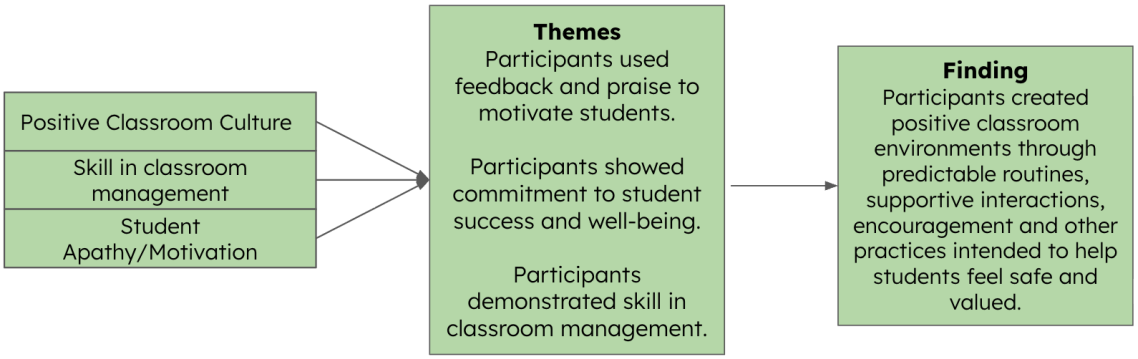
Another less-known reality in any school setting is when a placement or decision is made for a student based on logistics, behaviors, parent requests, etc., rather than on the academic needs of the student. Ms. Nikki recounted,

> A student had to be moved into my class, an [ELL] newcomer. The student couldn't be in the ELL classroom anymore because she was getting in fights after school with others in that class. She's a nice kid, seems to be trying, but I don't know where to begin or what they were working on in the prior classroom. I have to figure out what to do.

The teachers' experiences as they perceived them reflected that in spite of learning new instructional skills, putting them into practice, and doing all they could to establish routines and manage multiple student needs in one setting, the classroom culture could turn quickly when individual student factors beyond the teachers' control were prevalent. Figure 4.3 outlines the evolution of themes to arrive at the overall finding that case study participants created a positive and productive classroom culture where students felt safe, valued, and celebrated for their effort and progress.

Figure 4.3.

Evolution of Themes in Classroom Cultures Designed for Student Success



Discussion: Teacher Efficacy in Designing Classroom Cultures for Student Success

Regardless of case study participants' knowledge and skill, it is their strong commitment to their students that has set them apart and driven them to take on the elusive and challenging work of addressing gaps in foundational reading skills in older students. This is reflective of the educators' highly positive affective states. They did not give up. They persevered, even when the classroom culture quickly shifted with the addition of a new student or unexplained decisions. The teachers expressed personal commitment to their students, and researcher observations of their classrooms captured further evidence the teachers did not necessarily share – behavioral and managerial routines, high expectations for students, kind but corrective feedback, and

specific praise that connected effort to outcomes. In spite of challenges in student motivation and apathy, participants have created positive classroom environments through predictable routines, supportive interactions, encouragement and other practices intended to help students feel safe and valued.

Finding: Building-wide Culture and Commitment to Literacy

> When I taught high school, everyone was very much in their own corner of the world. If you asked someone, they'd help you, but it wasn't very collaborative. Here it is a totally different environment. The administration is supportive, and the PLC is supportive; I never feel like I'm burdening anyone. I don't think I would have had [structured literacy] training, and I wouldn't have had my eyes opened as much to the discrepancies and the struggles that students are facing.... I think the middle school level is like the trenches, where you really see.
>
> --Ms. Nikki

Participants perceived that administrators supported their work and promoted a building-wide commitment to literacy. Teachers described professional learning sessions geared toward literacy and collaborative team structures as a priority at the school. The teachers referenced various collaborative team structures; however, their uncertainty about consistent expectations for literacy instruction suggestsed potential complexities and tensions woven into the fabric of the school's culture.

Theme Six: Supportive Culture at the Building Level

Teachers described how the cross-curricular literacy team at the case study site planned regular professional learning for the school. Two case study participants served on the team and celebrated the growing confidence across the school staff to focus on literacy in all

classrooms. The teachers explained that professional learning sessions at the school often intentionally featured colleagues across various content areas sharing and demonstrating lessons in which they have embedded common vocabulary and common writing routines.

> A math teacher on our team, she did a lesson with math terminology. In a word problem, they broke the word apart and looked at the prefixes and the suffixes and talked about how that helped students figure out the meaning of the word and how that would help solve the math problem.
>
> --Ms. Shay

In addition to the school literacy team, participants' stories of current experience revealed a network of collaborative team structures at the middle school site. The three ELA teacher participants described their grade-level ELA teams. In these collaborative teams they worked with the other ELA teachers in the school to review data and respond to student needs learning grade-level skills and content. The three also participated in interdisciplinary teams where they had collaborative time with other core-content teachers who shared the same students.

Mrs. Bryant asserted that word study instruction based in structured literacy has been a powerful addition to her ELA and reading classes. She and Ms. Nikki both teach 8th grade ELA in addition to reading intervention, and their professional learning community (PLC) has embraced the new routine. "We've learned so much about the importance of word study, morphology, and strong vocabulary instruction. Ms. Nikki and I were excited to introduce a common vocabulary routine that all 8th grade students would use." The ELA teacher team expressed they wanted their knowledge and skill to transfer to the whole grade-level team, not only for students who received reading intervention and not only in the ELA classroom, but across all the content areas at the school.

Theme Seven: Supportive Culture at the Reading Team Level

At the reading team level, participants knew the administrators expected them to execute intervention models aligned to structured literacy in their reading classrooms with fidelity. Participants also knew administrators trusted in their expertise and allowed them autonomy to adjust as needed. Participants expressed that their administrators directly supported the team by encouraging participation in district-provided professional learning and a range of continuing education opportunities to stay abreast of current research in reading science. When the team asked for time to meet and discuss reading data, the administrators arranged for team meeting times.

Participant narratives included other supportive staff at the site. The school counselors, according to the participants, intentionally scheduled intervention classes during common periods of the day, supporting the practice of grouping and sharing small groups of students for intervention. The school instructional coach, also trained in structured literacy, regularly supported the team to make sense of reading data, plan targeted interventions, and manage small groups within the participants' classrooms.

> We are meeting with our instructional coach today. We have a group of kids who are accurate but not fluent, and we need to determine next steps for them. We'll look at kids' information and their data and determine if we need more information, like a phonics or word-reading screener. We're always asking, do these kids really need decoding and phonics-level intervention in these courses, or is there something else?
>
> --Mrs. Shay

The data from teachers' lived experiences supports that their administrators and other school staff have prioritized literacy for all staff and have supported the reading team at the school site.

Moments of Tension: Inconsistent Expectations

While participants agreed their administrators have supported their work, they worried about inconsistency and lack of accountability for all staff to actively address reading skills. A few comments highlighted their uncertainty about what was really happening across other classrooms in the school.

> I feel like it's hard to say because I'm not in science classrooms. I'm not in math classrooms. I don't really know what reading or vocabulary looks like in those classrooms. One thing I do know is I don't have any teachers on my team coming to me specifically to ask, 'how do we support this individual kiddo in reading?'

Participants also acknowledged the range of responsibilities their administrators must attend to. One educator reflected on her concern for the wider implication of that reality, beyond the case study site:

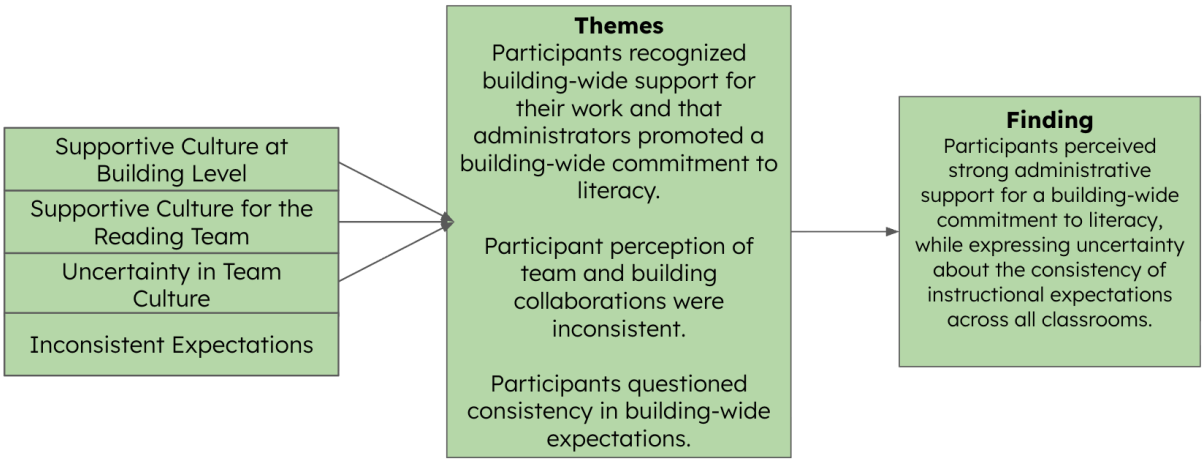
> I don't believe other [content areas] are being held accountable as they should be. Our admin is supportive, but they get stuck in the weeds of other issues and can't follow up. It makes me wonder: What happens when a school has an administrator who doesn't believe in this work or doesn't care to hold people accountable for it? What happens in a school like that?

Another important tension in the storied experience is Mrs. Lyndon's relative isolation compared to the rest of the reading team. Mrs. Lyndon served ELL students in addition to teaching general education reading intervention during the time of the case study. Hers was the only participant narrative lacking reference to the collaborative structures beyond the reading teacher team. Mrs. Lyndon admitted, "I don't know if those kids' teachers even know that I teach them reading. I feel like it's an isolated class." Mrs. Lyndon, a reflective practitioner, proposed

she would reach out to the other teachers and make more effort to collaborate with core area teachers. Figure 4.7 reveals the overall finding that teachers perceive strong administrator support for a building-wide commitment to literacy, while expressing uncertainty about the consistency of instructional expectations across all classrooms.

Figure 4.4.

Evolution of Themes and Findings for Building-wide Culture and Commitment to Literacy



Discussion: Teacher Efficacy and a Building-wide Collaborative Culture

Participants noted their administrators supported their work as reading interventionists and promoted a building-wide focus on literacy instruction at the school site. However, participant responses reflected varying degrees of confidence that other teachers across the building either could or would support the work of addressing gaps in reading skills. Participants serving on multiple school teams had opportunity to see more in action, such as other English teachers embedding strong vocabulary instruction or math and science teachers actively breaking apart words for an advanced study of morphology. Some, however, reported feeling their class was isolated and that other teachers don't even realize their students need such intensive support in reading. Participants recognized that many staff members understood the research and content the literacy team provided during professional learning, taking it to heart, and applying it in their

lessons. Still, the team collectively communicated a sense that something is missing, fearing many staff prefered not to change their ways nor considered it their responsibility to support reading growth for all students.

Finding: Limited Confidence in Data-Based Decision-Making and Results

> I ask myself every day if I'm making a difference for kids. I'm still trying to figure out how to teach this and what works and what doesn't work. You don't see the effects immediately. It's not like you use one strategy for a week and suddenly your kids have it… Just last week I was so discouraged because a lot of my students have plateaued and aren't growing as much as they were at the beginning of the year. I'm constantly questioning and reevaluating.
>
> --Ms. Nikki

Teacher understanding of structured literacy and their efficacy to deliver interventions was found to be aligned to expectations. Teachers further communicated knowledge of using data to drive instruction and understood processes and the protocols for responding to monitoring data as part of a multi-tiered system (KSDE, 2026); however, making those decisions in the reality of their daily experience was clouded with uncertainty for the case study participants. Themes emerging from the data supported the overall finding that limited time for team collaboration and reflection on practice was associated with low confidence in data-based decision-making and uncertainty in intervention outcomes.

Theme Eight: Limited Confidence in Decision-Making

Teachers in the study frequently referenced hesitantation or uncertainty in making the decisions that needed to be made based on student progress data. Observations of team meetings

and teachers' stories of current experiences pointed to potential factors contributing to their resistance to decide, such as inconsistent data and varying motivation and behaviors of students.

> One student is inconsistent based on the energy he's bringing on any given day, and his behavior impacts his success, too. One day he couldn't pass a phonics screener or identify vowel teams; then a few days later he read multisyllable words fluently. As a middle school teacher, you wonder, 'what's the truth here? Is he faking it?'….It's hard to figure out what's going with a kiddo.
>
> --Ms. Nikki

Theme Nine: Limited Time for Reflection and Analysis

Teachers also perceived they did not have adequate time to regularly analyze student data together and expressed needing more opportunity to reflect on practices they had tried. "A lot of the work felt haphazard, each of us trying to figure out what works best for kids, but then never having time to come together, compare data, and follow up on how things had gone." In some cases, participants discussed carving out snippets of time to consult with building staff, collaborate, or reflect on data and practice; however, these snippets, as described by staff, appeared to be rare and arranged rather than embedded in regular practice.

Moments of Tension: Educator Insecurities and Trust Across the Team

Case study participants' lived experiences suggested a lack of trust in intervention factors outside their spheres of control. Observation of the reading team meetings showed a strong resistance of the team to respond to data as prescribed, seemingly when a response meant moving the student to a higher or lower intensity of intervention. In these cases, the student would be moved into a different intervention setting or out of the intervention setting altogether. One participant shared,

> I just don't trust the next step. I don't trust it here in this building, and I don't trust it for the 8th graders who go on to high school from here - what does intervention even look like in high school?

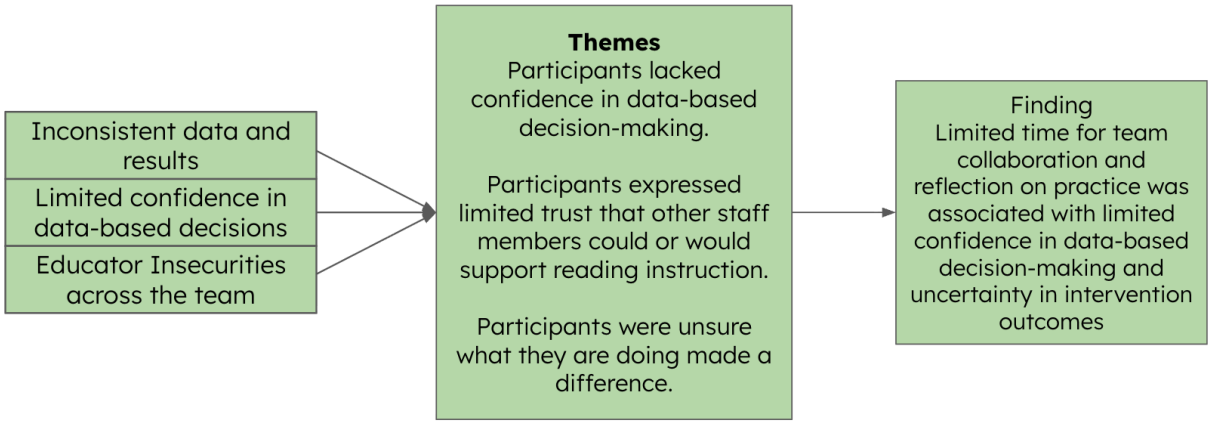
The weight of the responsibility to analyze and respond to data was overwhelming to participants at times and caused doubts in their capacity to meet students' individual needs. Interview and observation data supported that participants were each motivated toward continuous improvement and considered their work of dire importance; however, inconsistencies across classrooms and unpredictable student behaviors sometimes muddied reading data. Teacher participants openly shared concerns for making the wrong decision. One participant stated,

> Everybody likes to be good and proficient at what they do, but in these classes the stakes are high. If I'm not good at it, if I screw up, then I'm not helping these kids and it's hurting them. I don't feel incompetent, but the pressure to make the right decision can be overwhelming.

Figure 4.9 communicates the final overall findings from the case study participants' current lived experiences. Teachers attributed limited time for team collaboration and reflection on practice as contriubuting to low confidence in data-based decision-making and uncertainty in interventions outcomes.

Figure 4.5.

Evolution of Themes and Findings for Confidence in Data-Based Decision-Making and Results



Discussion: Teacher Efficacy in Confidence to Make Data-Based Decisions

Participants shared the looming uncertainty they felt, possibly daily, wondering if the work they did was making any difference to address gaps in foundational skills for their students. They expressed understanding that addressing gaps in foundational skills is a long process, and recognized growth is rarely seen from week-to-week or even month-to-month. They were learning to focus on small, incremental changes and growth, and to make sure students saw the growth as well. They were excited and energized when small victories reminded them their work mattered, but often the apathy and behaviors of students brought them down, making them question if the current reality was possibly the best some students would ever be as readers.

The finding reveals a gap in collective efficacy, suggesting that the team struggled with trust in others and confidence where collective decision-making were concerned. Participant experieces may offer direction for leaders wanting to impact their teachers' confidence to make decisions and trust more fully in the collective efforts of the reading teacher team and the school-wide staff who support all readers. A synthesis of research findings concludes the chapter to

bring together teachers' past and current experiences and consider the overall influence of lived experience on teacher efficacy to address gaps in foundational reading skills.

Synthesis of Findings: Past and Current Lived Experiences

The tradition of narrative inquiry informed the single case study to understand if lived experiences with reading influenced teachers' current efficacy to address gaps in foundational reading skills. The units of study – the four case study participants at the middle school case study site – each relayed a unique narrative of past lived experiences that were individually and collectively woven into the current context and shared understanding of the case study site. This section looks across the themes and findings from past and current experience and digs deeper to interpret how the data are interrelated and to better understand the trends and tensions of the case study.

Significant findings including themes and moments of tension in past and current lived experiences are considered through the constructs of I and model II behaviors as defined by Argyris and Schön (1974). Simply put, these are the behaviors that may be trapping participants in an undesirable state of inaction (model I). Likewise, certain behaviors or experiences that may evidence the team is primed for success (model II), thus illuminating what leaders could consider to support teacher and collective efficacy to address gaps in foundational reading skills.

Analyzing Model I Behaviors

Case study participants demonstrated only a handful of potentially limiting model I behaviors throughout the period of the case study. Two themes from their current lived experiences, however, may provide insight for leaderhip action to support developing educators and teams. The themes, low confidence in data-based decision-making and limited trust that others can or will support the work of addressing gaps in foundational reading skills, are

analyzed in the following sections to interpret a deeper understanding of the teachers' lived reality.

Low confidence in data-based decision-making

Participants may have had limited opportunity to make decisions based on reading data and then experience success as a result of having made that decision. In some cases, the team was directly observed as stuck and not making any decisions at all. During reading team meeting observations, the educators were hesitant to move students even when data suggested they should. Several plausible explanations for the teams' hesitation can be associated with their experiences. For some, a fear of making the wrong decision was direct. One participant expressed, "In these classes, the stakes are high…the pressure to make the right decision can be overwhelming," which illuminated a real fear of making the wrong decision. Some educators' limited mastery and vicarious experiences may be trapping in a cycle in which they question new choices, and are uncertain the outcome of the choice is the right thing to do.

In other contexts of the study, the lacking mastery experiencing may be temporary and required only time and continued support from leaders. For example, Ms. Nikki, who was in her third year of teaching and finished LETRS training during the period of the case study, has not yet accumulated the same experiences as the other case study participants. Ms. Nikki stated, "I hope to grow in my ability to be comfortable with the decisions I have to make. I want to look at the situation and say, 'okay, I've seen this before, and I know what to do.'" Over time, educators like Ms. Nikki may have more opportunity to experience success as a result of her data-driven decisions.

Limited trust that others could or would support the work of addressing gaps in foundational reading skills.

Trust across a school staff is critical to collective teacher efficacy and collective agency (Lambert et al., 2016) and is a hallmark of an organization with high leadership capacity where teachers engage in and solve their own problems (Lamber et al., 2016). Several case study participants expressed limited trust that others could or would support the work of addressing gaps in foundational reading skills. While participants cited their colleagues' skills in delivering vocabulary instruction, writing instruction, and the general inclusion of literacy strategies across disciplinary content areas, they also described their lived experiences with uncertainty, questioning that their leaders held others accountable outside of ELA and reading teachers.

One consideration is that participants sought out extensive training with the science of reading, motivated by the shocking reality of reading deficits in their students and feeling unprepared to address them. It is possible that participants' don't believe others are aware of how low some students' reading skills may be. They may also doubt the competence of other educators who have not received the same intensive training as they have. Further, participants associated limited time for collaboration as a barrier to their practice, so it is also plausible there is limited opportunity to observe one another and other teachers across the school. Peer observations could help amass vicarious experiences *seeing others be successful* with the intense work of addressing gaps in foundational skills. Without such experiences, the individual teachers' trust in others may be causing them to resist releasing control of students' instruction to someone else.

Analyzing Model II Behaviors

Model II behaviors are defined by Argyris and Schön (1974) as the characteristics needed for an individual or team to intentionally close the gap between perception and reality so that their theory *in* action is aligned to that which they espouse. Some model II behaviors include

having a positive attitude toward change, being open to feedback without feeling weak, and being willing to publicly test and practice an espoused theory (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Modell II Behaviors in Lived Experiences

Themes from teachers' past lived experiences revealed strong evidence of model II behaviors among case study participants. As was recognized through analysis of past experiences with reading, each of the participants had moments in their lived experience in which they were shocked and dismayed by the gaps in foundational reading skills of older students, each of them reporting feelings of helplessness and regret that they could not meet their students' needs. Faced with this scenario, they each had choices at the time to either accept the helplessness and justify students' skills as the norm or to endeavor to do something about it. The narratives of these educators' lived experiences showed they each chose to do something about it in their own way, even knowing that learning how to address foundational reading skills would be challenging. They sought training voluntarily and have grown their respective toolboxes rather than shut them down. Their past experiences storied their positive attitudes toward change and willingness to embrace new knowledge and training, especially when presented with a clear picture of reality.

Tensions in Current Lived Experiences

Themes and findings were analyzed for model I behaviors in the prior section, yet an additional insight emerged when considering participants' experiences through the lens of model II behaviors. The case study was initially bound by the unusually favorablve conditions at the middle school site. The teachers relayed a strong commitment to their work and have taken great strides to develop their efficacy to address gaps in foundational reading skills. However, participants reported negative affective states around data-driven decision-making, limited confidence in their capacity to make data-driven decisions, and limited trust that other educators

could or would support the challenging work of addressing gaps in foundational reading skills. One model II behavior that could be associated with these uncertainties is an ability to be vulnerable without feeling weak (Argyris and Schön, 1974). Participants' willingess to accept feedback and be vulnerable varied significantly across the case, and for some it was not a deficit at all. Developing this potential area of growth utilizing the theory of action will serve as a launching point for recommendations in Chapter Five.

Summary of Data Presentation and Research Findings

Analysis of the research findings inrterpreted solid teacher efficacy in current experiences with an abundance of model II behaviors resulting from teacher knowledge, confidence, and skill, a student-centered culture of growth, and supportive and collaborative leadership at the case study site.

The analysis also points to the significant teacher lived experiences that allowed for a real and shocking understanding of the unsettling levels of deficit some older students demonstrated in reading. Some past experiences with reading may have negatively contributed to teachers' efficacy to address gaps in foundational skills, but the most important overall finding from past experiences was that those hindrances were not insurmountable. With a clear picture of reality and highly positive affective states, teachers chose to find training in structured literacy and improved their capacity to address gaps in foundational reading skills.

Finally, close analysis of current lived experiences shows teachers often felt uncertain or lacked confidence in themselves or their colleagues. These instances did not support constructs of teacher efficacy and instead reflected the highest concentration of the model I behaviors that limited case study participants to successfully address gaps in foundational reading skills. The overall analysis of the findings through the constructs of teacher efficacy and model I and II

behaviors will be applied to the theory of action in Chapter Five to determine research conclusions and recommendations aligned to the research problem and literature outlined in Chapters One and Two.

In conclusion, this single narrative case study at a midwestern Title I middle school sought to answer the overarching question, "How do the past and current lived experiences of reading teachers in a midwestern Title I middle school shape their individual and collective efficacy to address gaps in foundational reading skills amid an epidemic of reading deficiency?" Research question one explored past reading experiences and illuminated that participants' early mastery experiences with reading were important to developing later teacher efficacy; however, past experiences were not insurmountable when teachers were unprepared to explicitly teach students how to read. Instead, the findings showed that gaining a clear picture of reality motivated teachers to address deficits in their teaching methods and seek out training and mentorship to address foundational reading skills for older students. Taking steps to grow their own efficacy was preferable to relying on scripted and computerized programs.

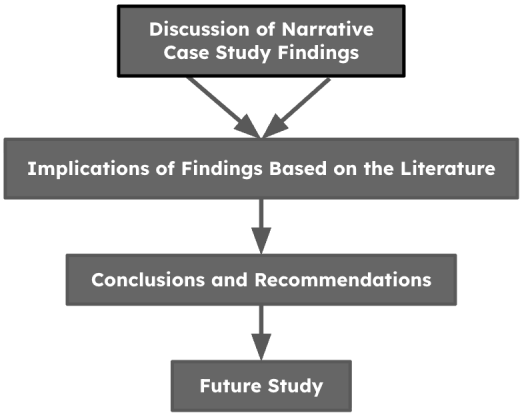
Research question two explored teachers' current lived experiences addressing gaps in foundational skills of their students. The findings support that the teacher participants have been empowered with the knowledge, skill, and therefore confidence to deliver reading interventions in alignment with the tenets of structured literacy. The team demonstated efficacy in creating positive classroom environments in which students were safe to learn and grow. Finally, a school-wide system of support had been established through supportive building leaders, but participants felt something was missing and needed to be addressed in the building-wide culture. Chapter Five explores how leaders might leverage the teachers' commitment and expertise and enhance their capacity to respond to data with confidence.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions

A reflective practitioner knows there are times we act in alignment with our beliefs and look back with pride at the outcome or effect we perceive we influenced through our actions. Throughout this qualitative study, I endeavored to explore the culminating influence of past experiences, particularly with reading, to understand how those experiences played a role in shaping the current efficacy of case study participants in their work to address gaps in foundational reading skills. I was interested in the tendency of humans *not to act* in accordance with their beliefs to better understand why this happens and what might be lacking in professional practice that could be addressed through a system of support. Chapter Five employs the known constructs of teacher efficacy, which generally culminate from teachers' *past* experiences (Bandura, 1997), and examines them alongside the theory of action (Argyris & Schön, 1974) to illuminate for leaders what teachers may need as they engage in the very challenging work of addressing gaps in foundational reading skills at the middle level. Research findings are interpreted with the frameworks in mind to inform implications for practice. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are outlined for school, district, and state leaders for action and for future study. Figure 5.1 provides an overview of the organizational structure of Chapter Five.

Figure 5.1.

Organizational Structure of Research Conclusions



Discussion of Findings

Findings from the narrative case study were analyzed in Chapter Four and then synthesized to arrive at six overall research findings. To summarize the findings, participant experiences of learning to read were varied and reflected reading trends over various eras of the reading wars (Flesch, 1981; Goodman, 1967; Goodman, 1989; Hanford, 2018; Semingson & Kearns, 2021). Each participant recognized their seemingly natural ability to read that came easily, without much effort, and the literature supports that approximately 50% of children learn to read without explicit instruction in phonics (Moats & Tolman, 2019). Commonalities arose across narratives, including the participants' limited preparation to teach reading, phonics, or language structures, that they were hired for jobs for which they weren't really qualified nor trained to do, and that they had to learn to teach reading on the fly, motivated by the shock and subsequent guilt over the students they felt had been disserved over time. Strong mentors and mastery experiences helped each educator to overcome deficits in understanding and to persevere eventually, with their most recent experiences learning about science of reading and structured literacy providing the knowledge and understanding they perceived as previously lacking (Moats

& Tolman, 2019). Gaps in participants' undergraduate preparation to teach reading or the structures of language were upsetting but not insurmountable for case study participants.

Teachers' positive affective states were associated with their own sense of efficacy to address student needs (Bandura, 1997). All of the participants expressed confidence in their current knowledge and believed strongly in their ability to learn, adapt, and commit to supporting their students (Bandura, 1997; Lambert et al., 2016). However, participants cited varied experiences with success (mastery experiences) across the teacher group. Some participants simply have fewer years of teaching experience in comparison to others. Educators may have lacked opportunities to see others being successful which potentially limited trust in the collective efficacy of the group and other teachers across the school (Donohoo, 2016). The teachers who were most willing to be vulnerable, accept feedback, and live in the uncertainty of their growing efficacy were also those who expressed optimism they could and would meet student needs after more practice and time as reading teachers (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Participants' lived experiences told a story of internal commitments that served as the driving force behind their willingness to change and restructure past learned behaviors to better serve the needs of their current students (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012).

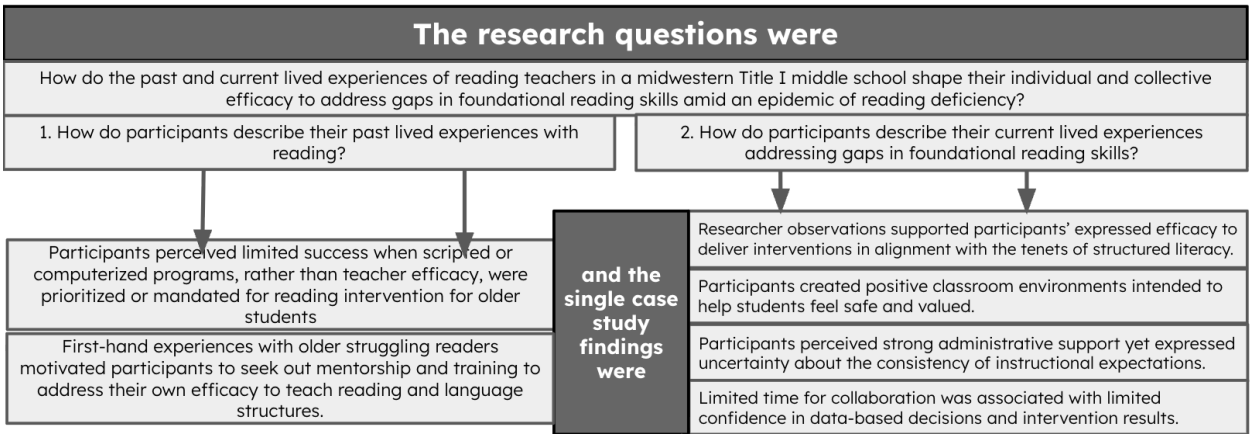
The context of the case study site was unusually favorable, a deviant case with a strong collaborative culture and shared leadership. While the teachers felt siloed and disconnected at times, and some wished their leaders would more directly mandate common literacy practices, the context influenced participants' confidence to execute their training and to meet students' needs (Lambert et al., 2016).

The reading teacher participants were allowed space to arrive voluntarily at the study of reading science and chose to grow their capacity to intervene on reading skills (Lambert et al.,

2016). Leaders at the case study site may understand that other staff members at the school must also be allowed the space to embrace the need for literacy initiatives. Participant narratives storied how the administrators have allowed for shared leadership and valid knowledge-building, have provided models of desired practice, and have encouraged practice and growth through embedded professional learning, as defined by high-capacity leadership schools (Lambert et al., 2016). Even with these favorable conditions, teachers remained uncertain about data-based decisions and the effectiveness of interventions. The team's individual efficacy was strong, but their collective efficacy wasn't as developed where trusting others or interpreting data were concerned. Figure 5.2 provides an overview of significant findings for how teachers' lived experiences shaped their current efficacy to address gaps in foundational reading skills at the middle level.

Figure 5.2.

Summary of Research Questions and Findings



Implications for Practice

As a district leader committed to impacting middle level students' ability to read fluently, I want to understand how I can better serve teachers who carry out the daily work addressing gaps in foundational reading skills. I also want school and state leaders to understand the same

needs for systems-level support. I expected findings from prior lived experiences, even those from early years learning to read, would have an influence on the efficacy of the educators. I also wondered if mandates like those in place at the elementary school level in Kansas were necessary at the middle level so that educators may enter the profession better prepared to meet the needs of all students. However, implications drawn from the findings suggest there are other steps that could be taken prior to considering extensions to state-imposed mandates. Other implications are drawn in conjunction with the literature presented in Chapter Two.

Implication #1: A Clear Picture of Reality

Research findings from educators' prior experiences showed that most motivating to them across the study was the firsthand lived experience of working with older struggling readers. A clear picture of reality is necessary for teachers and leaders to recognize that significant gaps in foundational reading skills of middle-level students are real and must be addressed. Chapter One outlined the research problem that, amid an epidemic of reading deficiency, we are now drowning in the mandates of an era of reform. NAEP reading data has continued to drop or stagnate, indicating things are not getting better. National and state testing results, numbers communicated in aggregate, are incongruent with classroom grades and graduation rates (KSDE, 2025; NCES, 2025; Watson, 2024). With two sets of data pointing in opposite directions, direct experiences with students who cannot read well are needed to understand the urgency for action at the middle level.

Implication #2: The Complexity of Teacher Efficacy

Past experiences contributing to each educators' teacher efficacy must be understood and fostered so that, when confronted with challenging problems of practice, educators are empowered to seek out and engage in the professional learning they need to overcome the

challenge. Case study participants showed strong individual efficacy and shared commitment to address their problems of practice, to seek out training, and to apply their learning to address gaps in foundational reading skills. The internal commitment to student success and well-being further fueled the efficacy and the desire of the participants to guarantee they could serve the needs of their students. However, the team remained less secure where trust in others and inconsistent data clouded their decision-making.

The literature outlines the confusion and uncertainty around reading instruction over the past three decades, and participant narratives describe that their undergraduate training did not prepare them for the reality of addressing gaps in foundational reading skills. Even if they had received more training in foundational reading skills, only some of the grade-level ELA standards touch on the structures of the English language that middle school educators need to know and understand (KSDE 2023b). It is the system of multi-tiered supports operationalized in most states (KSDE, 2026) that puts middle level educators, particularly ELA or reading teachers, in the position to address gaps in foundational reading skills from the elementary grades despite any preparation to do so. Research findings support that educators in the study knew what to do and attended to deficits in their prior knowledge of reading science and structured literacy. However, their narratives and the literature both support that knowledge of structured literacy is only one facet of efficacy. Multi-tiered systems of support rely on heavily on the response to data. This higher-level of efficacy remained underdeveloped for the team and suggests there is more to be done by leaders to strengthen and elevate teacher efficacy.

Implication #3: Clear and Common Expectations for Literacy Instruction

Embedded professional learning must support clear and common expectations for building-wide literacy practices so that all educators are empowered to support reading growth

for all students. While educators acknowledged the building-wide focus and administrative support for literacy at the case study site, tensions in the data suggested that the depth of leaders' knowledge may fall short in being able to coach or expect high levels of structured literacy practice across disciplinary content areas. The literature named directly observable categories as a defining factor for supporting a culture of growth (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Naming and referencing directly observable categories guarantee educators and leaders alike have a clear and common understanding of the specific expectations in behavior and practice. Leaders must be willing to be learners and to be vulnerable as they dive into the complexities of structured literacy and what those practices look like in the various contexts across the school site, including the reading intervention classroom, the ELA classroom, and disciplinary classrooms.

Further, a high-capacity leadership school is one in which distributed leadership flourishes (Lambert et al., 2016). Slightly different from shared leadership, distributed leadership in a high-capacity school means staff members are not only engaged in shared decision-making and shared responsibility for the success of every student, but they are also confident in the efficacy of their team, and trust that each individual can and will carry out their respective roles for the good of the whole (Lambert et al., 2016). The case study narratives support that uncertainties in expectations from classroom-to-classroom have caused doubts about the overall efficacy of the staff. Clear and common expectations for literacy instruction could instead allow a high capacity staff to rally around goals for literacy and further develop their collective agency (Lambert et al., 2016).

Implication #4: Time for Reflective Practice to Strengthen Decisional Capital

Educators need extensive opportunity to engage in reflective practice, to observe one another, to learn from each other, to establish trust across the contexts of the school, and to

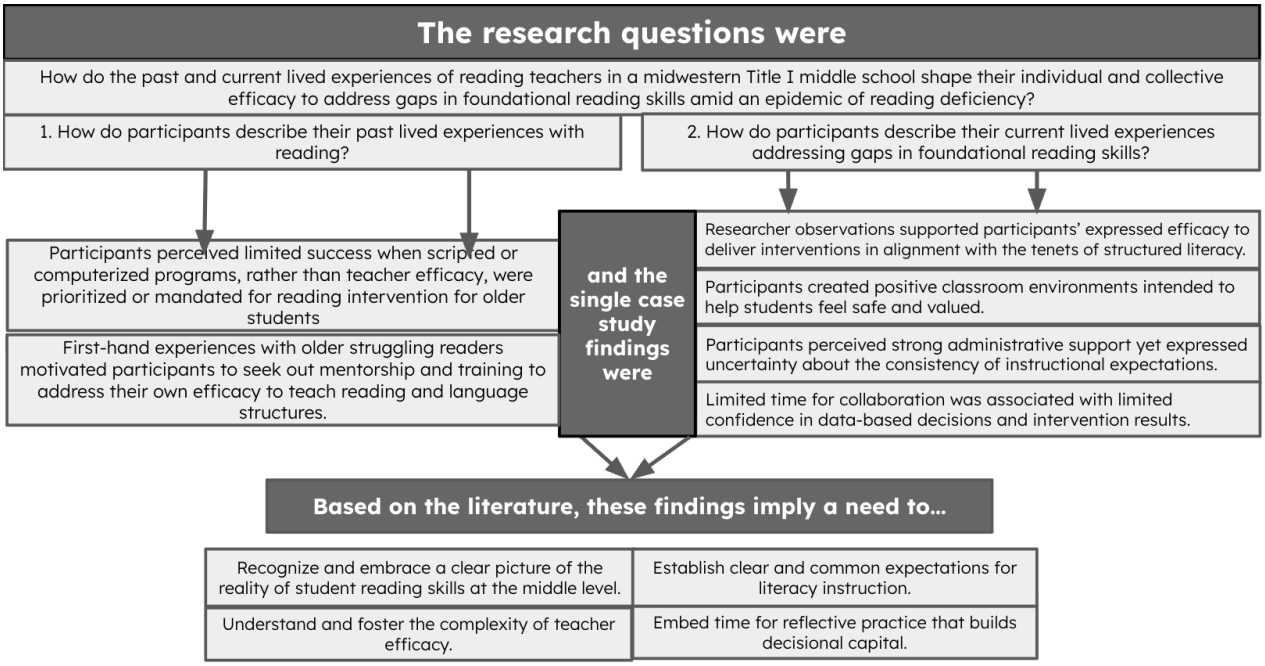
develop their decisional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Teachers trained for the middle-level may have limited prior experience responding to reading progress monitoring data. The limitation hinders their capacity to make the quick decisions needed in the multi-tiered response model most states, including Kansas, require for accreditation (KSDE, 2026). The literature clearly outlines the KSDE curriculum standards in phonics and fluency skills that elementary teachers are trained to execute (KSDE, 2023b). These are compared to middle level standards and reveal that teachers with middle-level certification have not been trained to address deficits in foundational skills (KSDE, 2023b). Implementing structured literacy practices skillfully while also knowing and understanding how to respond to data is double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Educators at the middle level must not only learn new skills and new schema but must also learn to execute the skills and respond to data with finesse. This more likely becomes a reality with intentional practice of instructional delivery and time prioritized for educators to reflect on their delivery, their decisions in response to data, and the outcomes of their decisions (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Finally, if educators feel safe to learn from both their successes and their missteps in decision-making, their practices and the system as a whole can fully benefit from reflective practice where vulnerability is seen as a strength rather than weakness (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Trust across a team is further elevated when leaders devote intentional time for observation and reflective practice across the school site (Baecher, 2019). It is possible clear and common expectations had been set at the case study site, but teacher participants were unaware and expressed a blindness to practices in other content areas. This blindness to the reality of other classrooms, other teachers, and other practices to support literacy may underlie the participants' perception that their building leaders are inconsistent in expectations and

accountability for literacy instruction in all classrooms. With more time for observation of peers and reflective practice, all staff members can engage in the conversation and contribute to the overall impact on student learning (Baecher, 2019; Lambert et al., 2016). Figure 5.3 outlines the implications derived from the narrative case study research findings.

Figure 5.3.

Implications for Addressing Gaps in Foundational Reading Skills



Boundaries of the Study

This single narrative case study is bound by the context of one midwestern Title I middle school in which the four case study participants came to their understanding of structured literacy voluntarily. They are an unusually favorable and unique case, worthy of study for their internal commitments and passion for meeting their students' needs. They have supportive administrators believe in the need for literacy instruction. Even with these strong qualities that should allow for high levels of leadership and impact, there are still doubts and questions and gaps and areas for growth for this team. How would a similar study play out amongst a team of teachers who did

not actively seek training and mentorship to learn reading science and to build their repertoire of skills? A boundary for this study was the established baseline that participants were motivated to engage in intensive training voluntarily, and a case with different or varied motivations for participation in training could yield more varied results.

The study was further limited by the ages and experiences of the participants relative to their respective undergraduate teacher preparation programs. Mrs. Lyndon represented over 30 years of teaching experience, and Mrs. Bryant and Mrs. Shay each had approximately 15 years of experience with teaching reading and the English language arts. These three educators' stories of learning to teach reading reflect past practices in teacher preparation programs. The landscape has changed drastically in the last decade and even in the six-month period of the case study. The literature confirms that recent developments in reading research based on neuroscience (Dehaene, 2010; Ehri, 2020; Moats &Tolman, 2019) have led to state-wide initiatives for reading instruction and for reading teacher preparation that were likely not in place 15-30 years ago (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024). An assumption in the study is that in the absence of legislation at the middle level, teacher preparation programs have not been adjusted to include changes for reqruied coursework.

These initiatives impact current elementary (K-6) educators as well as new educators graduating from elementary teacher-preparation programs, and consequently the content and focus of K-6 teacher preparatory courses (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024). What remains uncertain from this study is the current reality of middle-level ELA teacher preparation programs. Ms. Nikki was only in her third year of teaching, and her experiences could have reflected a more recent middle-level teacher education program; however, her alternate path to licensure was focused on general methodology and did not reflect the programming specific to a

current middle-level ELA teacher preparation program. Therefore, no challenges to the researcher's assumption of middle level teacher preparation coursework were evident in the particpants' narratives.

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Future Study

The theory of action framework (Argyris & Schön, 1974) has framed the design of this study from start to finish. First, the framework provided an understanding that our past has a hold on us and must be challenged if we are to employ a constructionist perspective and willingly re-examine our knowing of teaching reading (Crotty 2020). Next, the framework calls for an exploration of lived past and current narratives of a unique and highly competent team of reading teachers to better understand how their past experiences may have shaped their current efficacy and questions if the hold of their past is a limitation in the present (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Throughout the data collection and analysis, the themes that emerged were interpreted with an understanding that some behaviors may paralyze us in the the hold of our past and others allow us to move forward and align behaviors in action to the beliefs we espouse in theory (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Finally, the findings, interpretations, and implications are synthesized into conclusions and recommended actions for leaders to support model II behavior and thus move practitioners from desired, espoused practice to a realized theory in action (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Argyris and Schön (1974) recommend leaders maximize valid information, promote free and informed choice, and reinforce practitioners' internal commitment to their espoused theories. Conclusions aligned to the research purpose are presented alongside recommendations for school, district, and state-level leadership in the following sections.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Sustained Commitment to the Knowledge Base of Structured Literacy

The first recommendation is to sustain the current state-wide commitment in Kansas to the knowledge and implementation of structured literacy. Structured literacy is named as one of the four fundamentals for continuous school improvement in Kansas (KSDE, 2026). Research conclusions supported that when teachers and school leaders faced a clear picture of reality in student reading skills, they were motivated to act (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Further, the study affirms that teachers who were allowed autonomy to learn, grow, and engage in the professional learning they see as valuable are then motivated to apply their learning and continue growing over time (Lambert et al., 2016). While state-wide mandates have motivated educators at the elementary level, middle level educators need something else to motivate them. A clear picture of student skills in the upper grades struggling to decode effortlessly is possibly more powerful than any state-imposed requirement to drive a collective commitment for reading reform.

The second recommendation is that a sustained focus on knowledge of structured literacy could be extended to the middle grades and the administrators who lead at this level. School leaders need concise and ongoing support from district leaders and content experts to grow their capacity over time. Even with LETRS training for administrators, school leaders' understanding of structured literacy may be limited at the middle level. The work is complex and cannot be mastered through one-time training and then forgotten. Considering the limited time leaders can devote to such nuanced content, it is essential for the district and content leaders to build administrator capacity in small chunks reinforced over time.

The final recommendation is that middle level leaders are open to the change and challenge of implementing literacy instruction across their school. Administrators, too, must be

willing to be vulnerable without feeling weak and to learn alongside their teachers (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Lambert et al., 2016). Leaders who have committed to the knowledge and understanding of structured literacy can coach and support teachers by naming the directly observable categories they expect in a reading classroom and then providing explicit feedback. Upon entering a classroom, leaders must be able to discern sound practices from the not-so-desirable ones. Without a sophisticated understanding of the science of reading, leaders won't know how to name the expectation nor to show how the teachers' practice is in or out of alignment with the expectation.

Recognize and Reinforce Internal Commitment

Leaders must recognize and reinforce the internal commitment of educators who embrace the work of addressing gaps in foundational skills. Even with a strong knowledge base, educators need opportunities to practice their craft and to experience success in expertly delivering content they were not initially trained to deliver (Bandura, 1997; Donohoo, 2018).

The first recommendation is for leaders to honor the time teachers need to develop expertise in addressing foundational skills at the middle level, but also set clearly defined, small goals for incremental changes to practice. Armed with the language of directly observable categories, leaders can encourage educators and celebrate small victories aligned to expected practices. Leaders should prepare for the work to become uncomfortable, challenging, and ambiguous. Leaders should expect that educators will look to them for support in decision-making, which can be done if the leader has attended to their own understanding of structured literacy and the demands of data analysis in a tiered system of support. As the literature supports, if school leaders do not have a sophisticated understanding of the magnitude of change being

asked of their teachers, they will not be prepared to effectively manage nor respond to teacher frustrations and insecurities as they transition the learning into practice (Neuman et al., 2023).

The second recommendation is for leaders to leverage existing teacher commitment by growing educators' decisional capital. Decisional capital is a contributing factor to one's overall professional capital and defines an ability to quickly make difficult decisions, even under pressure in challenging scenarios (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). The case study findings tell a clear story of teachers who have learned the content of structured literacy. While they know what to do in theory, they may continue to hesitate and doubt their efficacy without ample opportunity to make decisions and reflect on the outcomes of their actions.

The final recommendation is that leaders commit to clear expectations for structured literacy in all contexts of the school, including common instructional routines, common terminology, and consistently high expectations that all teachers understand their role in supporting literacy development. The success of each of these recommendations hinges on the shared understanding of structured literacy and commitment to the directly observable categories that name precisely the practices we target and monitor for effectiveness in the classroom. (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Investigate Middle Level ELA Teacher Preparation

The recommendation implores state leaders and university systems to consider the lived reality for middle school ELA teachers who are serving as reading interventionists in the absence of any requirement for training or specialists at the middle level (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024). Current reforms in Kansas focus only on training and licensure requirements at the elementary level, despite expectations to screen for reading difficulty through 9th grade (KSDE, 2023a; Kansas Board of Regents, 2024). All participants' past experiences revealed their lack of

preparation to teach reading or to understand how children learn to read and limited background on the language structures of English. Their stories chronicle their shock and discomfort when experiencing first-hand the reality of reading deficits in older students.

Ms. Nikki, in her initial interview, shared a favorite quote from her high school ELA studies, when her love for literature was evolving and closely aligned to her identity. “There are years that ask questions and years that answer” Ms. Nikki attributed to Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* Later, Ms. Nikki was asked if her years learning about structured literacy to support older students represented years that *asked* or years that *answered* questions for her. Ms. Nikki replied as follows:

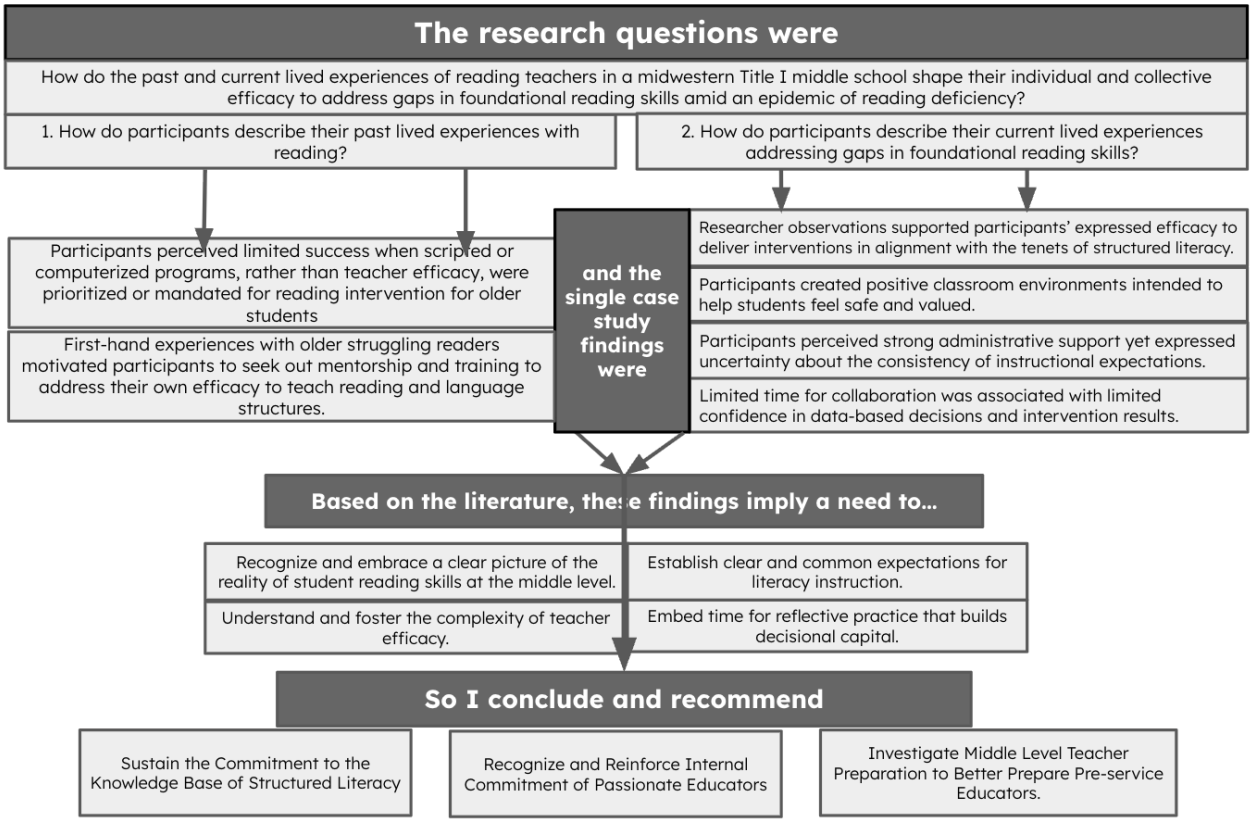
> Engaging in LETRS training was overwhelming at first. All of those basic decoding and phonological skills, and I don’t recall learning to read that way. Then as you get into it more, the brain research helps show the why behind student deficits, and you start to see the connection to gaps at our [middle] level. I had a lot of questions about the way reading is taught, compared to the way I learned to read. It was definitely different, so how do I teach this the right way? As I learned more, I got answers, but then more questions arose. Okay, now I know how kids are supposed to learn to read, but how do I implement this with older kids who have gaps? I'm in the LETRS cohort with elementary teachers, so the presentation of content is framed for their level, not mine. That’s understandable, but then I’m having to translate. How does that make sense in a secondary room? How does that make sense in my classroom? The presenters weren't doing that for me, so I had to figure it out. Every time I figured one thing out, then there was another question and another question and another question about how things translated for the middle level.

Ms. Nikki's account implies layers of knowing and questions buried in the complex work of understanding how to address gaps in foundational reading skills at the middle level. Middle-level educators like Ms. Nikki may have learned to read through the three-cueing method. Middle level educators like Ms. Nikki likely did not receive training to teach reading and possibly didn't receive training to teach the basic structures of English. Middle level educators like Ms. Nikki may observe upon entering the field that their students have significant difficulties with reading and quickly recognize they are not prepared to address the deficits. Middle level educators like Ms. Nikki, who are motivated to fill their toolboxes and to support their middle-level readers, will find themselves in complex training programs geared toward elementary educators. It is not acceptable to expect middle level ELA teachers to embark on their careers needing to immediately receive additional training that must be translated for application with their middle-level students.

The gap in teacher preparation can be addressed in more than one way, and new training programs geared toward middle-grade teachers are flooding the market. However, one thing I have learned throughout this study is that mandated policy is rarely effective in creating a positive culture for educators. Before expanding literacy mandates for licensure and training to the middle level, state leaders and university faculty should investigate the course requirements for middle level teacher preparation. With appropriate adjustments to coursework, all middle level educators could enter the field equipped to address literacy and language in their classrooms. Figure 5.4 outlines the overall discussion of research findings and evolution of research conclusions and recommendations.

Figure 5.4.

Evolution of Research Questions, Findings, Implications, Conclusions, and Recommendations



Future Study

Both teacher efficacy and the theory of action honor the profound influence of experience on an individual's belief in their capacity to overcome challenges and align their practices with their desired actions (Bandura, 1997; Argyris and Schön, 1974). Research question one and associated interview questions were designed to elicit the storied narrative of the influential experiences that shaped each participant's current beliefs about reading, teaching, and their efficacy as teachers of reading. These educators engaged in the demanding two-year LETRS training voluntarily; however, a multiple or comparative case study is needed that includes perspectives of educators who completed LETRS or other training in the science of

reading and structured literacy as a result of state-wide or district mandates. A study of this nature could illuminate how strongly teacher efficacy and openness to change are impacted by free and informed choice, as defined by the theory of action (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Another strong implication from the study was that all four participants were not prepared through undergraduate coursework to address gaps in foundational reading skills. Mrs. Lyndon, the only participant who completed an elementary teacher preparation program, did so in the 1990s, prior to the report of National Reading Panel, and prior to the reforms of today. Her experiences did not mirror the reality of university programs today, and the Kansas Blueprint for Literacy indicates reform in elementary teacher education programs is upon us (Kansas Board of Regents, 2024).

However, because mandates for teacher preparation do not extend to the middle level ELAs, a study to evaluate middle level ELA licensure requirements and teacher preparation programs is needed. Rather than extend mandates or impose training requirements, a study of current teacher preparation programming and priority skills needed to address adolescent literacy could inform incremental changes to required coursework so that all middle level educators enter the field with an operational knowledge and understanding of structured literacy.

Final Words

This study of teachers' past experiences with reading revealed that those experiences mattered significantly but were not insurmountable, even when they were perceived as negative. The teacher participants in this single narrative case study were empowered with knowledge and understanding of how to address gaps in foundational reading skills, but their commitment was only ignited when they saw and understood first-hand the shocking reality of low reading skills for many older students. Other teachers like them who may have learned to read through the

whole language era, and who were also taught to be a teacher during the whole language era, may have multiple layers of learning they must embrace as they endeavor to address gaps in foundational reading skills.

To close, leaders must be cognizant of the sustained effort and intentional focus reading reform requires. Discomfort, gray areas, and patience are often barriers to change, so as leaders we must commit to a long and deliberate process and resist the temptation to move on to a new initiative when we tire with this one or believe we aren't seeing results fast enough. The wise Dr. Jeanne Chall (1991) predicted decades ago that society would continue to debate and sit in opposition to one another over reading instruction, and beseeched educators to remain focused on research and science in the best interest of students. The pendulum has reached is apex, and it may fiercely swing back once again if we aren't able to maintain a commitment to high-quality reading instruction and a system of response rooted in structured literacy at all grade levels.

Epilogue – The Future Narrative

> Experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences. Wherever one positions oneself in that continuum—the imagined now, some imagined past, or some imagined future—each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2)

My assumptions as researcher honor this narrative study as only a snapshot of lived experience. The current knowing of reality for the case study depends on the past experiences of each participant and then leads to an experiential future in which each participants' narrative is changed based on the shared experience of the individuals bound by the case. Worthy of note is the future narrative at Shadow Vale Middle School, the case study site, where participants have grown, changed, and moved on to a new version of reality that was impacted by our time together during the case study (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

Mrs. Lyndon's Future Narrative

Mrs. Lyndon's participation in the narrative case study was a lucky twist of fate. The study called for those who voluntarily engaged in LETRS training who were also teaching general education intervention. In any given year, Mrs. Lyndon would have been exclusively teaching ELL reading intervention and co-teaching as the ELL specialist in core content classes. At the time of the case study, however, Mrs. Lyndon was assigned to teach one class of general reading intervention, which qualified her as a participant and allowed for the inclusion of her unique insight that otherwise would have been missing. Mrs. Lyndon represented the perspective of a non-ELA trained teacher, an elementary trained teacher, and a teacher trained prior to the report of the National Reading Panel in 2000.

Over her three decades of teaching, Mrs. Lyndon's experiences are strong, numerous, and varied enough to encompass the wisdom of one who has seen it all before. She is the influencer that others look to for direction, but that does not mean she thinks she has all the answers. She is humble, willing to be vulnerable, and willing to change her mind or even apologize when she is wrong. She is patient and has the experience to know the value of seeing something through and evaluating effectiveness based on complete information.

Mrs. Lyndon's future narrative places her exclusively in the ELL reading intervention setting, but with Mrs. Shay serving as co-teacher during one of the class periods. I believe this study was strongly impacted by the perspective Mrs. Lyndon provided, and I am grateful that her brief stint in the general reading intervention realm allowed for it. Now, with Mrs. Shay as co-teacher, Mrs. Lyndon's wisdom and expertise will continue to impact the overall team at Shadow Vale Middle School as Mrs. Shay continues to benefit from her mentorship in their co-taught classroom.

Mrs. Shay's Future Narrative

Mrs. Shay's experiences and lived reality served as an anchor for this story and the case study narrative. Her volumes of past mastery experiences allowed for a strong confidence in her ability to adjust, to be vulnerable, to learn, and to grow alongside the reading teacher team. She has embraced her training to the degree of becoming a LETRS trainer herself, committing to the development of other middle level teachers' capacity to address gaps in foundational skills.

Mrs. Shay's future narrative at Shadow Vale Middle School includes stepping away from the ELA classroom to serve fully in an intervention role. Mrs. Shay is ELL endorsed, so the school leaders have strategically placed her and Mrs. Lyndon together as co-teachers for the ELL reading intervention course. Mrs. Shay will also co-teach general reading intervention during

another period of the day with Ms. Nikki. In this way, Mrs. Shay will continue to learn and grow from the wealth of experience Mrs. Lyndon has to give but will also build a collaborative connection with Ms. Nikki, who values and welcomes mentorship.

Mrs. Bryant's Future Narrative

Mrs. Bryant's narrative is unique for her strong foundation in the structures of the English language. Her experiences supported that she is committed to excellence, expertise, and getting results for her students. Mrs. Bryant embraces her passion for grade-level, system-wide instruction that will impact literacy skills for all students. She is empowered with her knowledge, affirmed in that which she previously knew but could not name, and recognizes she can leverage her leadership roles at Shadow Vale Middle School for change.

Mrs. Bryant's future narrative places her exclusively in the ELA setting where she and the other 8th grade teachers will continue their important work on grade-level reading skills. Mrs. Bryant has also trained to become a LETRS facilitator and serves to bridge the application of structured literacy from the intervention classroom to the core ELA classroom. This bridge will not only impact those at Shadow Vale Middle School but all middle level ELA teachers across the district who are currently enrolled in LETRS training.

Ms. Nikki's Future Narrative

Ms. Nikki's role teaching both reading and ELA will continue, and her potential for growth is considerable. Mrs. Nikki is willing to learn, to be vulnerable, and to persevere in pursuit of excellence in her practice. Paired with Mrs. Shay as a co-teacher, the capacity for both educators to grow in expertise is high. As a teaching team, they can share student groups, reflect on practice, make decisions together and reflect on those decisions to analyze their efficacy. Over time, they are sure to amass mastery and vicarious experiences. Further, Ms. Nikki will

continue to benefit from the leadership and expertise of Mrs. Bryant on the 8th grade ELA teacher team. With this strong system of support in place, Ms. Nikki's future narrative is limitless. She already exhibits strong teacher efficacy; her willingness to be vulnerable, to respond to feedback, and to seek continuous growth indicate the promise of a master teacher in the making.

With Gratitude

I anxiously anticipate my own future narrative as I continue to work with this outstanding team of educators. Watching as these professionals grew individually, observing from afar as their team evolved collectively, and getting to know each of them as they allowed me into their classrooms, their lives, and their histories has been one of the greatest honors of my career. I will be forever changed by this experience, and I conclude with the sincerest gratitude for the opportunity to develop and grow as a leader alongside the team at Shadow Vale Middle School.

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Appendix A - Participant Recruitment Email

Recruitment Email, to be sent from K-State email address:

Good Afternoon,
I am writing to ask for your support as a participant in a critical learning step of my doctoral studies. I am working toward a Doctorate in Educational Leadership at Kansas State University. This qualitative narrative case study is designed to tell the complex story of teachers who are learning and implementing structured literacy practices at the middle school level. Your school site and reading teacher team has been chosen for the study based on team-members' voluntary participation in LETRS, the support of building leadership at your school, and the commitment of each reading teacher to support students in the school with gaps in foundational reading skills.

This work is obviously very close to my heart, but the study is conducted independently of the school district. The results of the study may warrant further research and may be published professionally; however, your participation and any specific data collected from you will remain anonymous and be de-identified to the greatest extent possible.

The study will take place throughout the remainder of the 2025-26 school year and will involve an initial orientation (15-30 minutes) and two in-person individual interviews with me. Over the course of the study, I will schedule two observations of your reading classroom and will observe two reading teacher team meetings to gather observational data regarding problem-solving and team approach to response to intervention. At the conclusion of the study, you will receive a summary of study findings for your review to verify accuracy in my interpretation of themes from the data.

You will receive an invitation to the group orientation to be held via Webex. At this time, I can share further details of the study and answer any questions you may have before committing to the study. You will also receive an informed consent document that we will review during the informational meeting.

Thank you in advance for your consideration to participate in this study. I am excited to hear and share the real experiences of classroom teachers working every day to impact the lives of young people with reading deficits. National, state, and district leaders need to hear stories like yours to truly understand the urgency and complexity of addressing reading gaps for all students.

Sincerely,

Kristin Ridgway
kmridgwa@k-state.edu
913-302-0130

Appendix B - Informed Consent

PROJECT TITLE: Teacher efficacy in addressing gaps in foundational reading skills: a narrative case study of lived experiences at a midwestern Title I middle school

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE:		**PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE:**		**LENGTH OF STUDY:**	6 months

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Donna Augustine Shaw

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Kristin Ridgway

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:
Dr. Donna Augustine-Shaw
donna5@ksu.edu

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:
Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects
203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506
rubin@ksu.edu
(785) 532-3224
Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance
203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506
(785) 532-3224

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the research study is to understand how English language arts teachers in a Title I middle school address gaps in foundational reading skill for their students. I want to learn about and study the unique experiences of teachers like you and your colleagues who have engaged voluntarily in LETRS training and collectively committed to impacting reading gaps in your school. Your current experiences implementing principles of structured literacy and your unique personal experiences with reading throughout your life, prior to and including your current commitment to middle level reading instruction, helps tell a story designed to bring a deep understanding to the reality all educators face in today's classrooms. The study also investigates the eras of education policy and trends influencing educators like yourself, going back to the time you learned to read, the experiences you had learning to teach reading or the English language arts, and your cumulative experiences in the classroom to date. Understanding the complexity of addressing reading gaps at the middle level and supporting the efficacy of the teachers doing the work is essential as widespread legislation for reading reform continues to evolve.

Procedures or Methods to Be Used

This qualitative single narrative case study will be conducted by gathering detailed stories of lived experiences from English language arts teachers at the case study site. Your experiences and story will be collected through two in-person interviews that I will be audio record to guarantee accuracy. Each interview will take approximately 45 minutes. The two interviews will be scheduled about 8 weeks apart to provide opportunity for reflection and evolving stories in the time between the two interviews. After each interview, I will visit your reading classroom to

observe your instructional practice for 20-40 minutes of a traditional 45 minute class period. The purpose of the observation is to deepen understanding of your practices and provide first-hand insight to the experiences and information you share in the interviews. I will also observe at least one meeting of the reading teacher team so I can gather a complete sense of how the team works together as well as individually. Due to time and scheduling restraints, a third interview may be necessary depending on the depth and detail of information gathered in the first two interviews.

You may elect not to answer any specific question posed at any time during the interview, observation, or follow up process. You may elect not to answer or participate at any time and may do so without explanation, penalty, loss of benefits, or employment standing.

Risks and Benefits Anticipated:
There are no physical risks or discomfort associated with participation in this study; however, you may benefit from reflective practice and personal insight for future implementations as a result of this study. You will be informed of the findings, implications of research results, and recommendations for future study.

Extent of Confidentiality:
I will make every effort to de-identify information (pseudonyms for names and schools) and report all findings in generalized terms and summaries of information so that you remain anonymous to the greatest extent possible. All participants will be included in checks for accuracy of information. All interview transcripts, artifacts, and audio recordings will be kept in password protected files and will be destroyed within three years of the study.

With identifiable information removed, the information that will be collected as part of this research may be used for future research studies or distributed to other investigators for future research studies without additional informed consent from you.

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or employment standing to which I may otherwise be entitled. I verify that by initialing below, I indicate my consent for each portion of the research study.

☐ **In-person interview**	☐ **Classroom Observation**	☐ **Reading Team Observation**

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, that I willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT NAME: _____ **DATE:** _____

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE: _____ **DATE:** _____

WITNESS: _____

Appendix C - Group Orientation Protocol

1. Welcome and thank participants for their interest and willingness to be a part of the study.
2. Share researcher subjectivity, purpose of research, and review informed consent.
3. Provide time for questions and clarification of purpose.
4. Ensure all details of the informed consent are highlighted and explained thoroughly.
5. Secure signed consent forms or deadline for signing if participants request more time to review.
6. Clarify next steps – scheduling of first-cycle individual semi-structured interview, classroom observation, and team observation.

Appendix D - Interview Protocol

Two semi-structured interviews will be conducted individually with each participant for a focus on their personal experiences with reading and current classroom teaching. Each semi-structured interview will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy and will last 45-60 minutes. Due to time constraints, a third interview session may be necessary to accomplish the intended depth of the semi-structured approach.

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

1. Welcome and thank participant for their time and willingness to be a part of the study.
2. Revisit informed consent to highlight the protocol for the interview, including audio-recording.
3. Revisit research purpose and researcher subjectivity to anchor in the value of the participant's lived experience as they know it.
4. Begin audio recording.
5. Conduct Interview. See below for semi-structured interview questions for each cycle of data collection.
6. End Audio Recording
7. Thank the participant for their time and schedule classroom observation if not already scheduled.
8. Immediately complete analytic memo to capture initial reactions and meaning making from the interview.

First Cycle Interview Questions: Focus on participant's lived experiences with reading

- Can you describe your earliest school memories of learning to read?
- Can you describe other significant memories of reading in your youth, teens, college, teaching, etc.?
    - Can you elaborate on your prior experiences with teaching reading?
    - Can you elaborate on your experiences teaching middle level students with gaps in reading skills?
    - Can you elaborate on the experiences prior to recent changes and LETRS training?

Second Cycle Interview Session(s): Focus on current experiences with training and teaching reading

- Tell me about your choice to engage in LETRS.
- Describe your daily experience implementing what you've learned in LETRS.
    - Can you elaborate on your lived experience of completing LETRS training?

    - Can you elaborate on (indicate specific success, challenge, roadblock, frustration mentioned).
- Consider the story of literacy at this middle school. Describe building-wide factors helping or hindering your experiences teaching reading in the classroom.
- Describe your experiences working with other teachers in the building to meet the needs of all readers.

Anticipated follow up question stems: are as follows.

These questions prompt deeper reflection on specific responses. They may be used during the first cycle interview, but in the second cycle interview(s) serve to guide participants to reflect more deeply on elements of model I or model II behaviors observed in the classroom. The second-cycle questions will evolve and be specific to the data collected in the first cycle of data collection and coding:

- Tell me more about the time you….
- Can you clarify the experience you mentioned…
- I'd like to better understand why…
- During the group observation, I heard you say….. can you tell me more about that?
- During the class observation, I (saw, heard, observed)…. can you tell me more about that?
- How would you describe the greatest lesson you have learned during this experience?
- What further lessons do you hope to learn as this experience continues to unfold?

Appendix E - Classroom Observation Protocol

Classroom observations will be conducted to triangulate data collected during the interview process; furthermore, connections to the espoused theories of the participants based on semi-structured interview data will be analyzed for alignment to the directly observed behaviors in the classroom. The observation tool will include the following components:

Participant:

Date:

Time:

Description of Classroom Setting:

Class Segment	Directly Observed Behaviors in action	Researcher Notes (during)
Beginning		
Middle		
End		
Analytic Memo (after):		

Appendix F - Team Observation Protocol

Protocol

Team observations will be conducted to triangulate data collected during the interview process; furthermore, connections to the espoused theories of the participants based on semi-structured interview data will be analyzed for alignment to the directly observed behaviors in the classroom. The observation tool will include the following components:

Participants Present:

Date:

Time:

Focus of Meeting Agenda:

Meeting Segment	Directly Observed Behaviors in action	Researcher Notes (during)
Beginning		
Middle		
End		

Appendix G - Debriefing Statement

Dear **[Participant]**,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study, titled "Teacher efficacy in addressing gaps in foundational reading skills: a narrative case study of lived experiences at a midwestern Title I middle school." I appreciate your willingness to share your experiences with reading and your work to support students who have gaps in foundational reading skills.

Purpose of the Study
This research aims to better understand participants' experiences with addressing gaps in foundational reading skills. Your insights will help us identify key themes and improve our understanding of how individual teachers' prior lived experiences with reading and teaching reading impacts their current classroom experience with implementation of reading intervention.

Confidentiality
Please remember that your participation is completely voluntary, and all of your responses will remain confidential. Any identifying information will be removed during the analysis process. Findings will be presented in a way that does not link any responses to specific individuals.

Your Rights
As a reminder,

- You may withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty.
- You may request to have your data removed after participation by contacting me directly or any of the research faculty listed below.

Questions or Concerns
If you have questions about the study or your participation, or wish to withdraw your consent or your data from inclusion in the study, please contact any of the research faculty listed below:

Kristin Ridgway, Graduate Student
Email: kmridgwa@ksu.edu
Phone: 913-302-0130

Donna Augustine-Shaw, Principal Investigator
Email: donna5@ksu.edu

Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects
Email: rubin@ksu.edu
Phone: 785-532-3224

If any of the interview topics raised concerns or emotions you would like support with, we encourage you to visit the school district Employee Assistance Program website at **[insert district EAP email].**

Thank you again for your time, openness, and valuable contributions to this research.