READING INSTRUCTION: AN IPA STUDY OF TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRE-SERVICE READING INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

This qualitative study provides insight into teacher perspectives about their pre-service training in relation to early reading instruction. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was utilized to better understand teachers’ pre-service experiences and the knowledge and skills they learned to teach reading. Five participants provided detailed information about their experiences. Results of semi-structured interviews were viewed through the lenses of transformative learning theory and andragogy. Key findings included the following overall themes: teachers’ pre-service education was enjoyable, teachers felt that their pre-service education didn’t fully prepare them to teach reading once they were in the classroom and teachers professional development after graduation filled the gaps. This study considers the reality of teachers’ experiences and perspectives on reading instruction with the hope of contributing to dialogue about how teachers are trained at the undergraduate level and how they continue to learn as in-service teachers.

Keywords: reading instruction, in-service, pre-service, transformative learning, professional development
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Dedication

To my mother whose lived experiences and perspectives provide me with life lessons, aspirations and inspiration

To all the struggling learners, now readers, who have crossed my path and to those I have yet to meet
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Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

In the early elementary grades, kindergarten through third grade, students are taught how to read. During fourth grade a shift takes place and students are no longer learning how to read, but instead, reading to learn. This clearly marks third grade as pivotal in determining those who will be at risk for later academic failure (Hernandez, 2011). Students who are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to not graduate from high school than their peers who are reading proficiently by the end of third grade (Fiester, 2013).

Unfortunately, this information is not new; in 1998 the National Research Council indicated (p.21), “academic success, as defined by high school graduation, can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by knowing someone's reading skill at the end of grade 3.” Many K-3 teachers including pre-service teachers, general education teachers, special education teachers, and reading coaches of early reading do not possess the fundamental knowledge to teach this skill set (Brownell, et al. 2009; Cheeseman, et al. 2009; Mather et al. 2001 & Moats, 1994).

Several bodies of research have concluded that teachers of early literacy not only lack knowledge but are also misinformed regarding the reading process (Mather, et al., 2001; McCutchen, et al. 2002; Moats, 1994, 1999; Moats & Foorman, 2003 & Spear-Swerling, & Brucker, 2003) and are thus ill prepared to teach reading. This has been mainly determined through teacher surveys related to the structure of language, with the above-mentioned teachers not meeting with success on very basic phonemic tasks. If we could provide all teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to teach children to read, then we could improve outcomes for children. Students will become successful decoders, which will enable them to read for meaning when they move from learning to read, to reading to learn.
According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2015), 36% percent of fourth grade students across the country are currently reading at a proficient level. This is one percentage point higher than 2013 and seven percentage points higher than 1992 when NAEP was first introduced (NAEP, 2015). During the past 23 years we have moved from 71% of our fourth grade students reading below a proficient level to 64% of our fourth grade students reading below a proficient level. Early systematic, explicit, direct instruction in the structure of language (phonology, orthography and morphology) has been identified as improving early reading and spelling outcomes and reducing students reading below grade level (Mather, et al., 2001; McCutchen, et al., 2002; Moats, 1994, 1999; National Reading Panel, 2000; Moats & Foorman, 2003; Spear-Swerling, & Brucker, 2003). Even with this knowledge, K-3 educators of early literacy may not be proficient and may be unprepared for the task of teaching reading to all students, including those at risk.

At present there appears to be deficits in pre-service teacher education programs to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively provide early reading instruction so all students are able to meet with success. Some studies suggest that professional development and changes in teacher preparation programs are necessary if teachers are going to be prepared to teach reading and possess knowledge of the structure of the English language (Guskey, 2002; Podhajski, et al., 2009; Walsh, et al. 2006).

**The topic.** Understanding what pre-service teachers need to know and be able to do to be prepared to effectively teach reading in the K-3 primary grades in an era when the need to be able to read for content mastery is greater than ever in a global, 21st century, information rich landscape.
Research problem. Teachers of early elementary grades are responsible for teaching their students how to read. In their role as generalists, they are also responsible for teaching other subject matter such as math, science, social studies, etc. Their pre-service training must contain a generous amount of content and methodologies, typically over a 4-year period. Insufficient teacher knowledge in the structure of the English language impacts early reading instruction and student performance at the K-3 level (Mather, et al., 2001; McCutchen, et al., 2002; Moats, 1994, 1999; Moats & Foorman, 2003 & Spear-Swerling, & Brucker, 2003). Approximately 200,000 students total, from all 50 states, graduate from traditional teacher preparation programs each year (The Hunt Institute, 2011). If 200,000 new teachers are entering the field of education with limited knowledge to effectively teach early reading, then more must be known about the experiences of teachers in their pre-service preparation programs and how these experiences impact their current work. More must also be known about experiences outside of their pre-service programs they may have engaged in to continue to learn and grow during their early years of teaching to acquire knowledge they may not have received in their pre-service programs. The purpose of this study is to describe and understand teacher perceptions of knowledge gained in teacher preparation programs to teach reading, as well as knowledge gained through other professional experiences and how their training has prepared them for delivering best practice in reading instruction. This study presumes that pre-service programs can only provide so much training, but afterwards teachers may need to continue their learning through professional development, and other job related experiences.

Justification of the research problem. Reading achievement in the United States continues to remain fairly stagnant with 64% of 4th graders in the US performing below a proficient level in reading (NAEP, 2015). Teachers appear to not only lack fundamental content
knowledge but are misinformed regarding the reading process and are ill prepared to teach reading (Mather, et al., 2001; McCutchen, et al., 2002; Moats, 1994, 1999; Moats & Foorman, 2003 & Spear-Swerling, & Brucker, 2003).

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** The literature related to teacher knowledge and early reading instruction has mainly been quantitative in nature, utilizing surveys, and has focused on what teachers are able to do in comparison to what they should know and be able to do. Teacher perceptions have yet to be introduced in the literature.

**Relating the discussion to audiences.** This study will introduce the perceptions of teachers to several audiences, teacher preparation programs, school districts and teachers themselves. Results will help bridge the gap between teacher preparation and classroom practice. Results will also contribute to the field by bringing awareness to Pedagogical Content Knowledge and its significance to the teaching profession. It will also provide valuable information to local teacher preparation programs, and at the district level, will help direct professional development and aid in the review and selection of curriculum resources.

**Significance of Research Problem**

If teachers are not provided with the necessary knowledge and skills to teach reading, we will see little to no improvement in our nation’s reading achievement. This trend of little improvement has been fairly consistent since the United States began measuring students’ reading ability through NAEP in 1992. The average reading score for fourth grade students across the country is only 7 points higher in 2015 than 1992, with 29% of students in grade 4 reading at or above proficiency in 1992 and 36% reading at or above proficiency in 2015 (NAEP, 2015).
Students who are not reading proficiently by the end of grade 3 rarely catch-up (Adams, 1990; Moats, 1999; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Without adequate instruction or remediation, these students will continue to experience reading failure as well as secondary consequences. Reading failure limits access to knowledge and impacts success in school and within society. It is associated with low self-confidence, poor motivation, frustration, anxiety and poor long-term school performance (Adams, 1990; Hall & Moats, 1999). Reading failure is also associated with higher dropout rates, drug abuse, delinquency and underemployment (Adams, 1990; Hall & Moats, 1999). More specifically, the National Commission on Adult Literacy (2008) notes that 75% of illiterate adults are unemployed, 85% of illiterate juveniles appear in court and 60% of illiterate individuals are incarcerated. Illiteracy has a significant impact on individuals, drains resources from communities and limits opportunities for our nation to compete in the global workforce (National Commission on Adult Literacy, 2008).

Reading failure is a significant problem in school districts across the nation. This failure and its consequences are preventable for the majority of individuals if teachers are provided with the necessary knowledge and skills to deliver effective early reading instruction.

It is my observation that insufficient teacher knowledge related to early reading instruction is evident in the school district where I am employed. As a building based reading specialist, I work closely with teachers as well as with students. Many teachers are vocal about their misunderstandings of the structure of the English language, and many others are not aware of their misunderstandings.

**Positionality**

I am positioned through my life experiences, academic training and professional experiences as a special and general educator. As I reflect on who I am as a researcher, I perceive
myself as being an insider with my study’s participants: elementary school teachers. At the same time, based on my individual experiences, I also view myself as being on the fringes of an outsider.

At a very early age, I knew I wanted to be a teacher, but I never knew my path would lead me to becoming passionate about early literacy and those who struggle to learn to read. Immediately out of college, I landed a job as a secondary special educator. In this role I gained great empathy for others and became a strong advocate for students gaining access to appropriate instructional opportunities. Over the next two decades, I purposely found myself in special education positions at the elementary level, all focused on language based learning difficulties, as well as a position as a literacy facilitator and now, as a reading specialist. I am highly motivated by those who struggle to ensure they meet with success as readers.

Since participating in an Ed.S. degree program in Language and Literacy at Simmons College during the early 2000s, I have been strongly influenced by the science of reading, with its beginnings shared through the National Reading Panel’s report (2000). My eyes were opened to reading being a very unnatural, complex act. In order to teach others to read, one would need very specific skills and content expertise. My instructors were some of the leading reading researchers in the nation at that time. I didn’t realize “who” I was learning from or the significance until many years later. Earning my Ed.S. in Language and Literacy also provided me with extensive content and pedagogical knowledge that I don’t believe is typical of most undergraduate or graduate reading programs.

My undergraduate pre-service experience was a sharp contrast to my Ed.S. graduate experience. Even though evidence based reading research did not evolve until the late 90s, much was known about the structure of the English language and the reading process. During my pre-
service experience I was not provided with any of this information. The focus was on disconnected lesson planning from basal readers or through a language experience model. Prior to entering my Ed.S. program, I had self-engaged in a variety of professional development opportunities related to reading instruction and quickly realized how little my undergraduate program had prepared me to teach reading. Due to my lack of knowledge in my earliest years of teaching, I feel I provided a disservice to many children who needed and deserved better.

My volunteer work at the local and national level for the International Dyslexia Association and The Center for Effective Reading Instruction has broadened my scope of understanding of the struggling reader, what teachers need to know and be able to do to teach others to read and how teacher pre-service programs need to prepare teachers to effectively teach reading. Part of my work with The Center for Effective Reading Instruction includes serving as an evaluator for universities and colleges across the country that are pursuing accreditation. This involves reviewing course content and curriculum across all areas of literacy and alignment to standards, reviewing assignments, quality of texts, assessments and instructional resources as well as quality and intensity of practicum requirements and supervision. Although I am providing a service as an evaluator there is definitely a reciprocal benefit. This work enables me to be immersed in continuous learning and reflection at a deep level, and fuels my passion.

Through my current professional role and volunteer experiences I am able to view and understand reading instruction at many different levels. I feel grateful for the magnitude of expertise I have been afforded but also believe it is important for me to give back in a way that positively impacts the greatest number of learners.
Based on my experiences, I view teacher knowledge in relation to reading instruction through a critical lens. This lens will most likely shape my interpretation of participants’ responses.

**Research Questions**

Two research questions guide this research study:

1. How do elementary teachers in a school district in Rhode Island describe their experiences with pre-service reading instruction preparation and how do they make sense of those experiences, and others, that have prepared them to teach reading?

2. What additional opportunities and knowledge do elementary teachers perceive would better prepare in-service teachers to be effective teachers of early literacy?

**Theoretical Framework**

The foundation of this study is adult learning and how adults construct meaning of their learning experiences. Based upon the problem of practice, teacher knowledge of early reading instruction, two complementary theories, *Andragogy* and *Transformative Learning Theory*, have been chosen to better understand and further investigate this problem. Both theories emphasize adult learning and the significance placed on what is being learned. Transformative learning shines a light on processes adult learners go through that involve specific phases along with questioning and critical reflection, and andragogy provides a lens to view how and why adults learn.

*Transformative learning theory.* Transformative Learning Theory, originally developed by Mezirow (1978b), is a constructivist, adult learning theory with its roots in psychology. Mezirow’s theory explains shifts in points of view or meaning perspectives through critical reflection.
Mezirow first became interested in transformation related to adult learning when his wife, Edee, returned to Sarah Lawrence College as a middle aged woman to complete her undergraduate studies. Observing his wife’s experiences and the impact these experiences had on her confidence, academic abilities and willingness to take on new roles inspired him to conduct what would become his seminal study and gateway to the development of Transformative Learning Theory. In 1970, Mezirow conducted a nation wide investigation of women who were returning to community colleges after an extended absence. Using grounded theory, Mezirow sought to determine elements that supported success in these re-entry programs as well as elements that hindered success. As a result of this study, Mesirow (1978a) identified ten phases of transformative learning. The first phase referred to a disorienting dilemma. In this instance returning to school wasn’t necessarily a disorienting dilemma for the women participating in the study, but instead, the result of an upheaval in their lives such as divorce, death of a spouse, loss of income, relocation, etc. that required them to take action.

As Mezirow’s theory evolved, his original ten phases have been slightly revised (2000). In addition to a disorienting dilemma, the following phases will be used in this study to better understand transformative learning that teachers may experience related to content and pedagogy of early reading, a self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame, a critical assessment of assumptions, recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared, planning a course of action, acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans, provisional trying of new roles, building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships and a reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s perspective.
As previously mentioned, transformative learning requires the identification of a dilemma. This identified dilemma or situation no longer fits with our frame of reference or meaning perspective, causing reflection and an openness to other perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). Teachers who are transitioning from pre-service to in-service may encounter contradictions from what was acquired in their teacher training programs to the reality of curriculum implementation and expectations in their professional teaching role. The stages of transformative learning will help explain how teachers of early reading make meaning when presented with conflicting perspectives. Mezirow (1985, 1991, 2009) indicates that his ten phases are not necessarily linear and individuals may not experience every phase in order for transformation to occur. In addition to these ten phases, transformative learning’s key element is critical reflection (Mesirow, 2006; Kitchenham, 2008).

Transformative learning theory describes transformative learning as a process that begins when adults perceive their current frame of reference or meaning perspective to be problematic (Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 1978b, 1981, 1990, 1996). Transformation occurs when a change in a current frame of reference is made based on assimilating new experiences and meaning perspectives that results in action while taking on this new perspective (Mezirow, 1991, 1995, 1996, 1997, 2000). Adults develop frames of reference or meaning perspective based on life experiences, culture, values, feelings, concepts and habits (Mezirow, 1978b). These frames of reference are usually deeply rooted and resist perspectives that are in conflict with our current state.

Mesirow describes two features that make up one’s frame of reference, habits of mind and point of view. Habits of mind are meaning perspectives that are second nature to us and deeply engrained in who we are. They refer to our beliefs, personality traits, standards, values and
experiences, which influence our feelings, thoughts and actions (Mezirow, 2009). The elements that make up habits of mind are reflexive, and in concert, they guide interpretation of our experiences that result in points of view. Unlike habits of mind, which are deeply rooted, points of view are open to other points of view.

In addition to going through some or all of the 10 phases of transformative learning, Mezirow (2000, 2009) explains a metacognitive process involving instrumental and communicative learning for adult transformation to occur. This process was influenced by Habermas, a philosopher who referred to his own process of *communicative action* as presenting optimal conditions for adult learning based on the use of dialogue (Mezirow, 2009). Instrumental learning is task-oriented problem solving related to how to do something, making sure actions align with values and beliefs. Communicative learning uses language or discourse to understand the perspectives of others in an effort to engage in reflective problem solving to interpret the unfamiliar (Mezirow, 2000, 2009).

**Andragogy.** Andragogy suggests a set of tenets specific to adult learning. These tenets include life experience, adult involvement in the planning of instruction, learning that has immediate relevance to personal or professional life, and learning that is problem centered (Knowles, 1984). It also emphasizes that adults find it necessary to know why they need to learn something in order for it to hold value. Andragogy will shine a light on what teachers need to know about the structure of language and why they need to know it. This theory will also help to better understand how to effectively increase teacher knowledge in the area of the structure of language by focusing on the needs of the adult learner.

An important aspect of Andragogy is that adults learn best when material presented is perceived as very relevant and immediately applicable to their personal or professional lives.
This will inform how the acquisition of specific knowledge related to the structure of language will directly affect instructional practice in early reading, which occurs in classrooms on a daily basis. Andragogy will also help to understand how immediate application of learned knowledge further informs teachers’ understanding of the structure of language and the effectiveness of their instruction.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Reading achievement continues to be a major concern in the United States. More than 8 million American students in grades 4-12 are not fluent readers (US Department of Education, 2001). The National Assessment of Education Progress (2015) reinforces this by indicating that 64% of fourth graders in our country are reading below a proficient level. Speaking to the House of Representatives in 2001, Reid Lyon referred to reading failure in the United States as a national public health problem. On a global scale, the United States ranks 25th among 29 nations in student reading achievement (UNESCO, 2005).

Several bodies of research have concluded that K-3 teachers of reading that include generalists, special educators and reading coaches, lack knowledge or are misinformed regarding the reading process (Mather, et al., 2001, McCutchen, et al., Moats, 1994, Moats, 1999, Moats, & Foorman, 2003 & Spear-Swerling, & Brucker, 2003) and are ill prepared to teach reading. This has been determined through teacher surveys related to the structure of language, with teachers not meeting with success on very basic phonemic tasks. How can you teach what you don’t know yourself? This lack of teacher knowledge impacts quality instruction and contributes further to reading failure in our nation.

Early systematic, explicit, direct instruction in the structure of language (phonology, orthography and morphology) has been identified as improving early reading and spelling skills and reducing students reading below grade level (Mather, et al., 2001, McCutchen, et al., 2002, Moats, 1994, Moats, 1999, National Reading Panel (2000), Moats & Foorman, 2003, Spear-Swerling, & Brucker, 2003). Even with this knowledge, educators are not proficient and are unprepared for the task of teaching reading to all students, including those at risk.
Some studies suggest that professional development and changes in teacher preparation programs are necessary if teachers are going to be prepared to teach reading and possess knowledge of the structure of the English language (Guskey, 2002, Podhajski, et al., 2009 & Walsh, et al. 2006).

**Review of the Literature**

Literature selected for this review was based on relevance to the topic of teacher knowledge and the structure of language. In addition, seminal pieces of work in the field of reading were included as well as research conducted by those considered seminal researchers and/or practitioners in the field. Current research from the past two decades was considered for inclusion. Older pieces of work were included if they were considered seminal. Included literature is consistent with reading acquisition and practice that is considered scientifically based. Instructional practice related to reading has been and continues to be debated in our country. Even so, literature related to practice that is implicit in nature, often referred to as whole language, was purposely not included in this review. At this time, whole language is not supported by current research, refuting the necessity of systematic, direct, explicit instruction related to language structure. Literature on whole language was also excluded to steer away from debating explicit versus implicit practice and remaining focused on the topic of teacher knowledge.

Reading is one of the most unnatural processes in which humans engage (Adams, 1990). Although our brains are hard wired for speech, which follows a natural, developmental sequence, and is utilized for communication, written language was created by man (Adams, 1990, Moats, 2009). Given that written language is essentially an invention, it requires direct instruction to decipher and is not acquired in the same fashion as speech. The structure of our language system...
is complex and challenging to master, but necessary for teachers of reading to understand and demonstrate proficiency if they are to successfully teach children to read. Several decades of research support explicit, systematic instruction in the structure of language when teaching beginning and struggling readers (Chall, 1967, Adams, 1990, NIHD, 2000, Moats, 1994, Moats, 1995, Moats & Foorman, 2003, Moats, 2009). The impact of students not learning how to read is too devastating to ignore.

**What do Students and Teachers Need to Know?**

In 1997, the National Reading Panel (NRP) was created by the federal government. This panel was led by the director of the National Institute of Child Health (NICHD) and charged with performing a meta-analysis based on scientifically based reading research studies in order to determine what types of knowledge students need to acquire to become proficient readers. This report was made public in 2000 and indicated five areas of reading that are essential to a comprehensive reading program, phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. The report of the National Reading Panel states these areas need to be explicitly taught, which is supported by past research (Chall, 1967, Adams, 1990). The federal government also supports scientifically based reading instruction through the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). In addition to the National Reading Panel, several bodies of research (Mather, et al., 2001, McCutchen, et al., Moats, 1994, Moats, 1999, Moats, & Foorman, 2003 & Spear-Swerling, & Brucker, 2003) have determined that the following information is necessary for teachers to know to be able to effectively teach all students to read. Teachers need to know and understand phonology, phonetics, morphology, orthography, semantics, syntax and text structure. These areas serve as umbrellas to complex, detailed knowledge that allow access to the structure of our language. Students also need to learn these details in order to become automatic, fluent readers.
If we have this information at our disposal, why aren’t we able to arm teachers with this knowledge before they set foot in a classroom?

**What do Teachers Know, or Think They Know?**

Being literate and experienced with language doesn’t equate to a deep understanding of the structure of language. Moats (1994) confirmed this through a study that examined teacher knowledge of phonemes, morphemes and sound/symbol correspondences. Surveys were administered to 89 individuals consisting of teachers, special educators, reading specialists and instructional assistants prior to participating in one of six sections of the same course on the structure of language. This course was not part of a degree or certification program. Those who were enrolled had a high interest in the subject matter. Results of the surveys indicated that most teachers have little knowledge of the concepts of the structure of language.

The survey was broken down into the following categories, Terminology, Phonics Knowledge, Phoneme and Morpheme Awareness, Spelling Rules and Other Misconceptions. Examples of specific results within the category of Terminology include that teachers could not distinguish between phonetics, phonology and phonics. Errors under Phoneme and Morpheme Awareness were related to identifying component morphemes in words and confusion with speech sounds and symbols. Teachers were very weak on Phonic Knowledge. Only 10 to 20% of teachers were able to consistently identify consonant blends within words. And a mere 25% of participants were aware that the word ox contains 3 speech sounds. “Ignorance was the norm,” (Moats, 1994, p. 93) with regard to spelling rules and conventions. Only 15% knew the six syllable types and 30% knew the rule for use of ck. Other Misconceptions included common beliefs that the silent letters in words such as *balk, calm* and *comb* should be pronounced and that the letter x corresponds to the sound of /z/. 
The results of this study presented alarming information and insight into why many children may struggle to learn to read. It appears that poor instruction could be a major factor. If teachers are uninformed and lacking basic skills, they will provide misinformation to students and not be able to teach these skills. They will also be unable to analyze student errors or respond appropriately to those who struggle or have identified reading difficulties (Moats, 1994, Moats, 2005, Moats, 2009). Although the sample size was small, it clearly points to a need to increase teacher knowledge. Without being exposed to this survey, the teachers who participated in this study would continue to not know what they don’t know.

Similar studies using knowledge surveys followed the initial work by Moats, reaching the same conclusions, that teachers lack knowledge in the structure of language to effectively provide reading instruction (Moats, 1995, Moats & Lyon, 1999). Knowing that teachers are ill prepared in this area, other researchers (Mather, Bos & Babur 2001) explored teachers’ perceptions of their feelings toward research-based explicit instruction and their knowledge related to language structure and reading instruction. The researchers were also curious to know if these teachers were aware of current research indicating the significance of systematic, explicit instruction for beginning readers and at risk readers as stated by the National Reading Panel (NIHD, 2000). Would these teachers indicate awareness of the importance of phonemic awareness, segmenting and blending speech sounds, and accurately decoding words with automaticity? In addition Mather et, al. (2001) wondered if experienced teachers would be more knowledgeable than pre-service teachers. Their study examined the perceived knowledge of 324 participants, 293 pre-service and 131 in-service teachers through two surveys, one measuring perception and one measuring knowledge. The perception survey focused on explicit practices related to the findings of the National Reading Panel (2000) and the knowledge survey was
adopted and modified from several existing surveys, including the Moat’s (1994) survey measuring knowledge of language structure. The researchers found that both groups perceived context as being one of the most beneficial strategies to determine an unknown word. This implicit strategy is not supported by evidence and contradicts current research that indicates only 10-20% of words can be determined using content; proficient readers explicitly decode sounds when encountering unknown words (Lyon, 1999). Experienced teachers performed slightly better on the knowledge surveys, but neither group produced high scores, 68% correct for the in-service teachers and 50% correct for the pre-service teachers. Experienced teachers also expressed more positive perceptions toward the use of explicit, code-based instruction.

Even though the in-service teachers scored slightly better than the pre-service teachers on the knowledge surveys, both groups demonstrated limited proficiency in language structure. Less than half of the teachers in both groups showed mastery of the following terminology, consonant blend, diphthong, digraph and schwa. Both groups experienced the greatest difficulty with phoneme counting, with very few knowing that there are four phonemes in the word box, /b/ /o/ /k/ /s/.

Most teachers expressed frustration related to their limited knowledge of language structure and wondered why they had never been taught these skills in the past. The results of this study beg the question, how are future teachers being prepared to enter the classroom? The in-service teachers may have scored slightly better on the knowledge survey due to possible professional development at their schools or through simple on-the-job learning from teachers’ manuals and other colleagues. Given that they only demonstrated 68% proficiency, they are most likely not qualified to provide accurate and effective reading instruction. Just as we wouldn’t expect a surgeon to have mastered only 68% of a surgical procedure and operate daily on
patients, we should find it unacceptable that many teachers only know 68% or less of content that is needed to teach reading.

These studies concur with current research indicating that teachers lack necessary knowledge of language structure and are underprepared to teach reading. Teachers are missing critical concepts needed for effective instructional practice. These missing concepts are one factor contributing to reading failure. But why are teachers so unprepared and unaware that they are unprepared?

**How are Future Teachers Being Prepared to Teach Reading?**

Although teacher certification and licensing procedures vary from state to state, the traditional path to becoming a teacher has been to earn a four year undergraduate degree, take necessary state certification tests, pass, and voila, off to a classroom.

The education that future teachers are receiving through higher education appears to be questionable and inconsistent within and across schools throughout our country (Moats, 2009). In response to the science of reading, especially to the findings of the National Reading Panel (2000), the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ, 2006) decided to examine how future teachers are being prepared to effectively provide reading instruction that meets all components of this scientific criteria (phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension). After reviewing syllabi from 223 required reading courses at 72 randomly selected schools within the country, the NCTQ concluded that only 15% of schools are presenting the science of reading to pre-service teachers. NCTQ’s criterion for reading courses to be considered acceptable was not rigorous. A syllabus only needed to reference the 5 components of reading to meet expectations. It appears that most schools of education aren’t teaching the science of reading and upon close review of syllabi; it appears that these schools are
ignoring current research and perpetuating the myth that reading is a natural process that only requires motivation and exposure to children’s literature to become proficient (Moats, 2005). Based on the syllabi reviewed, the NCTQ also concluded that schools of higher education have low expectations for future teachers, with most schools not requiring evidence or demonstration of practical application of knowledge. The NCTQ brings to light a lack of consistency and lack of agreement surrounding the science of reading within schools of education. It can be argued that looking at syllabi is not the same as experiencing what actually takes place in various reading courses across the country, but if instructors and not even making reference to the components of reading identified by the National Reading Panel (2000) and mandated by federal policy, they are most likely not teaching that information.

Instructors of higher education, like classroom teachers, need to know what they don’t know. Malatesha, Binks, Hougen, Dahlgren, Ocker-Dean, & Smilth (2009) found that when presented with surveys of language structure, instructors of reading courses only performed slightly better than teachers who had completed similar surveys through previous studies (Moats, 1994, Moats, 1995, Moats & Foorman, 2003). A total of 118 teachers were surveyed in two studies by Malatesha et al. 2009). The first study provided multiple-choice surveys to 78 reading instructors from 30 different colleges and universities in the southwestern United States. The majority held doctoral degrees and 10 were doctoral candidates. All indicated that they perceived themselves as competent in their ability to teach reading. Fifty-four percent were able to correctly recognize the definition of phonological awareness and performed poorly on tasks related to number or morphemes and syllables within words. In the second study 40 instructors from 12 universities in the Midwest received a variation of the original survey in the mail and later participated in recorded interviews. All 40 instructors had earned doctoral degrees. Eighty
percent of these instructors incorrectly defined phonological awareness and never mentioned phonics as a method to teach reading. When asked to provide reasons for reading failure, responses included socio economic status, family background and English language learners. Instruction was never mentioned. These studies suggest that instructors may be over confident in their ability to teach reading. Participants in the second study had received their surveys in the mail and apparently didn’t collaborate on the answers or seek information from outside resources. The findings also suggest the need for professional development and support for instructors of pre-service teachers. If their knowledge base does not improve, the trickle-down effect will continue, creating inadequate teachers who will in turn create poor readers. Classroom teachers are currently practicing with limited knowledge of language structure, which they most likely have not been exposed in their pre-service training, but they clearly need access to this information.

**What are the Implications for Professional Development?**

Most of the previously mentioned research on teacher knowledge has focused on surveying what teachers know in the area of language structure and knowledge about scientifically based reading instruction. This is important information, but even more important, is what is done with this information. Teachers need support to improve their knowledge and apply it to their daily practice with the intent of increasing student outcomes. The need for professional development is recognized and recent studies present various models that address increasing knowledge in the structure of language.

Moats & Foorman (2003) completed a four-year longitudinal study that attempted to identify specific areas of need in structured language for teachers in grades K, 1, 2, 3 and 4, as well as filtering able teachers from less able in regard to knowledge. A survey was developed
initially for teachers in grades K, 1, and 2 and was later modified based on the responses from the first set of participants. Results from these surveys confirmed that teachers in these grades had difficulty with sound and syllable counting, phoneme matching, syllables, spelling conventions and a general deficit in the phonological aspects of words. Surveys for teachers in grades 3 and 4 were refined to include interpretation of reading and writing. These teachers also had difficulty with phonology and orthography and many were not able to identify ending consonant blends, discriminate between digraphs and blends or identify vowel-consonant-e syllables. Results weren’t surprising and is supported by other studies on teacher knowledge (Mather, et al., 2001, McCutchen, et al., Moats, 1994, Moats, 1999, Moats, & Foorman, 2003 & Spear-Swerling, & Brucker, 2003).

The difference with this study is that it started to identify specific areas to target as entry points for professional development for each grade level. Over the four years, results of the surveys appear to indicate that teachers are misinformed and lack knowledge of specific skills they should be teaching in their particular grade levels. Knowing where to begin with professional development is valuable information and models of professional development have been explored that value these meaningful entry points.

Pre and post surveys used to measure teachers’ entry and exit knowledge associated with a university course or summer institute designed to increase teacher knowledge in language structure suggest that teachers can increase their knowledge through instruction, apply this knowledge to classroom practice, and increase student outcomes (McCutchen et al., 2002, Podhajski et al., 2009).

Although much has been published on teacher knowledge, there has not been evidence to connect improved teacher knowledge with improved student outcomes. Podhajski et al., (2009)
offers a model of professional development that suggests this causal relationship. Their recent study involved a very small sample of 4 teachers in an experimental group; 2 first grade teachers, 1 second grade teacher and 1 1st/2nd multi-grade teacher in an urban district. Teachers in this experimental group received a 35-hour course in language structure, 10 mentorship visits and continuing education credits at no cost. A control group consisted of 3 teachers from a nearby rural community; 1 first grade teacher, 1 second grade teacher and 1 1st/2nd multi-grade teacher. The experimental group received 5 consecutive days of a professional development literacy course during the summer on effective instruction. Areas covered included phonological awareness, phonics and fluency. Vocabulary and comprehension were covered but the emphasis was on the first three areas. Teacher measures included pre/post surveys on knowledge of language structure and early reading and spelling. Student measures included subtests from curriculum-based measures as well as several standardized tests that measure various literacy skills. On the posttest surveys, teachers in the experimental group increased from an average of 69% accuracy to 81% accuracy. The control group of teachers had an average pre test score of 69% and also increased to 81%. Initially, students in the experimental group performed below the control group on all measures. By the end of the school year, the experimental group had caught up to the control group and in some areas, exceeded them. This study suggests positive outcomes as a result of professional development and the use of data to drive instruction when teachers are trained explicitly. Podhajski et al. (2009) incorporated many support strategies to increase the likelihood of a successful outcome. They combined traditional professional development (university course) with embedded professional development in the form of mentorships. Additionally, they not only taught teachers about language structure, but also how to administer and interpret assessment data to make instructional decisions. The small sample
most likely made assessing students with several measures a manageable task and demonstrates what could be possible on a larger scale to document progress and effectiveness of instruction. Teachers in the experimental group reported that their increase in knowledge was a result of the course, but it is interesting that the control group of teachers improved on their surveys to the same level of accuracy, which questions the direct link of improvement to participation in the university course.

**Pedagogical Content Knowledge**

Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) is specialized knowledge unique to teachers. PCK emphasizes the interrelationship between teacher content knowledge and instructional practice (pedagogy) that brings understanding to learners (Schulman, 1986). PCK addresses two different types of content knowledge, a specialized content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. Specialized content knowledge is in depth subject matter specific and unique to teachers and different from everyday users of that same subject. Pedagogical content knowledge uses the deep understanding of subject matter to deliver instruction adeptly, anticipate various student responses and provide accurate and timely feedback and additional instruction to increase student understanding.

Knowing more about teachers’ perceptions and understanding of PCK will provide a better understand of teachers’ pre-service experiences related to specialized content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. It will also help distinguish whether the teachers’ descriptions and perceptions align with what the literature purports they need to know and be able to do.

**Summary**

Scientific research has clearly identified explicit instruction in language structure as the best method for teaching beginning reading skills and to address the needs of struggling readers.
Results of teacher surveys from a substantial body of research indicate that teachers lack knowledge or are misinformed regarding language structure. Research also delineates what teachers need to know to effectively teach reading. They need to have working knowledge of phonology, phonemics, orthography, morphology, syntax, semantics and text structure.

Also concerning is the lack of knowledge that pre-service instructors have in the area of language structure. Instructors who are teaching reading courses indicate a need to have an understanding of current research and recommended best practice as well as working knowledge of the structure of language. Instructional methods for reading have been continuously debated, often with support for methods that have no scientific evidence of being effective. Individual philosophies regarding reading instruction need to be checked against this scientific evidence.

It is also important to recognize the specialized knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, which is required of teachers of early literacy to possess to effectively provide instruction as well as appropriately respond to student queries and misunderstandings.

Teacher preparation programs and teacher certification/licensing requirements need to be reviewed to ensure appropriate content is being presented. Coursework should be standardized across institutes of higher education to provide equal learning of effective methods to all pre-service teachers.

It is unacceptable for students to struggle to learn to read, or not learn to read at all. It is doubtful that a child enters school with the belief that he or she will not learn to read. Most children look forward to their first experience with formal education and anticipate the learning that will take place. No child should be denied the opportunity to learn to read because of teachers may have been misinformed in regard to reading instruction.
It is unfortunate that our country has such a high rate of illiteracy, more so because the evidence is available, but somehow not accessible, to reduce this rate. Examples of successful professional development models give promise to improving teacher knowledge and practice and reducing the numbers of students who struggle to learn to read. Providing teachers with the knowledge they need through professional development should be a high priority across the nation. The knowledge to improve practice is available; it just needs to be disseminated with sufficient time allocated for teachers to participate in these opportunities. Learning to master the structure of language is challenging and requires practice and feedback over time.

Following the completion of a pre-service program, teachers will most likely require professional development provided by individuals with expertise in language and reading instruction with long term supports in place to achieve high levels of teacher proficiency and student outcomes.

In support of increasing teacher knowledge, teacher licensing and certification requirements need to align with current standards of practice and need to measure content knowledge to ensure we are sending the best qualified teachers into classrooms to provide reading instruction.
Chapter III: Methodology

Teachers of early elementary grades are responsible for teaching their students how to read. In their role as generalists, they are also responsible for teaching other subject matter such as math, science, social studies, etc. Their pre-service training must contain much content and methodologies, typically over a 4-year period. Insufficient teacher knowledge in the structure of the English language impacts early reading instruction and student performance at the K-3 level (Mather, et al., 2001; McCutchen, et al., 2002; Moats, 1994, 1999; Moats & Foorman, 2003 & Spear-Swerling, & Brucker, 2003). Approximately 200,000 students, total, from all 50 states, graduate from traditional teacher preparation programs each year (The Hunt Institute, 2011). If 200,000 new teachers are entering the field of education with limited knowledge to effectively teach early reading, then more must be known about the experiences of teachers in their pre-service preparation programs and how these experiences impact their current work. More must also be known about experiences outside of their pre-service programs they may have engaged in to continue to learn and grow during their early years of teaching to acquire knowledge they may not have received in their pre-service programs.

The purpose of this study was to describe and understand teacher perceptions of knowledge gained in teacher preparation programs to teach reading, and any other professional development experiences they have had, which prepared them for delivering best practice in reading instruction. This study presumed that pre-service programs can only provide so much training, but afterwards teachers may need to continue their learning through professional development, and other job related experiences. Teacher knowledge is defined as the content knowledge necessary to teach early reading.
Qualitative research focuses on understanding the lived experiences of participants and how they interpret and make meaning of these experiences (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research as an overarching design aligned well with the purpose of this study, as it facilitated describing and understanding teacher perceptions of knowledge acquired in teacher preparation programs, and other opportunities, to teach reading for elementary teachers. Interaction is a key element of qualitative research and allowed the researcher to directly engage with participants to better understand their experiences and perspectives related to their pre-service programs and knowledge gained, both content based and pedagogical, to teach early reading. This Constructivist (Interpretive) paradigm is concerned with the reality of individuals and their lived experiences and invited participants to construct their reality through interaction with the researcher (Ponterotto, 2005).

Unlike quantitative research, which is objective, seeks to explain through measurement, controlling variables, determining causal relationships and using numbers to describe, qualitative research is subjective, seeks to understand and make meaning and uses words to describe. In the past, quantitative research was considered the gold standard of research methods in the behavioral and social sciences, as opposed to qualitative, which wasn’t considered as rigorous and often referred to as soft science. This is no longer the case.

Five specific strategies of inquiry are contained under the umbrella of qualitative research and include narrative, phenomenology, ethnography, case study and grounded theory (Creswell, 2009). A phenomenological approach, more specifically, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), was the research tradition best suited for this study, allowing for shared interpretation of individual teacher experiences related to teacher preparation of early reading instruction.
Research Method

The research design selected for this study was Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is concerned with sense making and understanding individual experiences related to a specific phenomenon. In this instance, the phenomenon was the common experience of participating in teacher preparation programs, and other professional opportunities where knowledge was gained to teach early reading. This design not only records the personal accounts of individuals but also depends on the researcher to make sense of these accounts. It is a process of interpretation that is impacted by the researcher’s own conceptions (Smith & Eatough, 2006). IPA allows for rich, individual descriptions by participants and meaning making based on the input of the participants and the researcher. This shared meaning making between the researcher and participant is referred to as a double hermeneutic (Smith, Flowers & Larken, 2009).

Jonathan Smith (1996), in a seminal paper, developed IPA to add an experiential approach to psychology. At the time, the field of psychology was committed to quantitative research. Through the development of IPA, Smith intended to show that both quantitative and qualitative methods could offer contributions of equal value by providing a balance between experiential and experimental methods (Shinebourne, 2011). IPA is rooted in Psychology, focuses on interpreting the lived experiences of individuals and is informed by three theoretical perspectives, phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography and the influences of four phenomenological philosophers, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre (Smith, Flowers & Larken, 2009).

Phenomenology seeks to determine and describe the essence of an experience or phenomenon. Husserl, a well-known philosopher in the field of phenomenology referred to the essence of an experience as the ‘thing’ that should be closely attended to (Smith, Flowers &
Husserl did not believe in taking life’s experiences for granted and emphasized active reflection, or deliberately remembering these experiences through intentional, subjective lenses in order to go beyond the concrete aspects of our experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larken, 2009). As a philosopher, Husserl was not necessarily driven by the world of science, but instead the human aspect of lived experiences. Husserl’s focus on the process of reflection has had a strong influence on IPA. IPA does not attempt to go as deep as Husserl in capturing the core of one’s experience, but instead seeks to better understand the lived experiences of individuals through reflection and interpretation.

Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre further developed Husserl’s work in phenomenology by viewing individuals and their experiences as part of a bigger world of objects and relationships that also included language and culture (Smith, Flowers & Larken, 2009). They also moved toward an interpretive perspective and away from Husserl’s abstract, descriptive perspective. Heidegger was a student of Husserl’s but emphasized reflection and existing in an interrelationship with the world, which he referred to as intersubjectivity. Merleau-Ponty was concerned with the physical aspect of the body in relation to the world as well as individual perception, not abstractions, to understand and make sense of lived experiences. Sartre claimed that individuals are a work in progress that are constantly evolving and making meaning by interacting with the world. He also said that meaning continues to be made even when interactions do not occur as expected or anticipated. He coined the concept of “nothingness” explaining that things that are not present are just as important to those that are present.

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation. Schleiermacher, Heidegger and Gadamer are important hermeneutic theorists whose work has influenced IPA with their individual perspectives on hermeneutics. Schleiermacher offers a holistic approach to interpretation related
to text. He suggests that in order to interpret meaning, the reader must understand the contents of the text as well as the intentions of the writer (Smith, Flowers & Larken, 2009). Heidegger believed a phenomenon has two parts to uncover for interpretation. The first part being what the phenomenon shows us, and the second part being what is waiting to be uncovered. He also refers to fore-structures, which refer to our existing meaning perspectives, and cautions us to be aware of these fore-structures when interpreting a phenomenon. Gadamer concerned himself with the analysis of historical and literary texts. He shares Heidegger’s perspective on the complex relationship between interpreter and the interpreted and also shares concern about preconceptions influencing interpretations (Smith, Flowers & Larken, 2009).

The hermeneutic circle assists with meaning making and refers to the relationship between the part and the whole of text when making interpretations. The hermeneutic circle is widely used but is not attributed to a single theorist. Its iterative process is relevant to IPA by allowing data to be revisited in a non-linear fashion.

The final theoretical perspective influencing IPA is idiography. Idiography focuses on the particular and contains two levels. When studying the particular, idiography attends to detail through extensive, thorough analysis as well as focusing on understanding meaning perspectives of individuals (Smith, Flowers & Larken, 2009). This is very time consuming and reflects the usually small samples found in IPA studies.

The three above mentioned theoretical perspectives that serve as a framework for IPA served this study well by inviting rich description, reflection and interpretation to answer the posed research questions. They also paralleled well with transformative learning theory.

Gathering rich descriptions and analyzing the data in an IPA study is usually extremely time intensive, therefore, IPA sample sizes tend to be small, ranging from 1 to 15 participants,
but are sometimes larger (Smith, Flowers & Larken, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). A sample size of 3 is recommended for novice and student researchers doing IPA for the first time (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This allows the researcher to become fully engaged with each participant and deeply immersed with the data without becoming overwhelmed, which could impact the quality of data and the analysis. IPA samples should also be fairly homogenous. Random sampling is not useful for IPA because the intent is to make sense of and understand experiences pertaining to a specific phenomenon (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Participants

The population being studied included elementary general education teachers who teach in grades K-3 in the school district where the researcher is employed and who have graduated from a teacher preparation program. A teacher preparation program is defined as an on ground undergraduate program offered by a college or university or a series of course work to gain certification. Participants included five teachers who teach grades K-3 as these are the grades that provide early reading instruction. It is recommended that novice and student researchers conducting initial IPA studies limit the number of participants to 3 (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Exceeding this recommendation will ensure a minimum of 3 participants in the event a participant or participants opted out of the study. The researcher attempted to use maximum variation by selecting participants from various teacher preparation programs. The sample was also convenient and purposeful. Limitations included a small sample size and the inability to generalize findings.

Recruitment and Access

The researcher recruited and gained access through the district’s superintendent’s office. The superintendent granted permission for the study to take place within the district and
approved recruitment of teachers. Participants were recruited through a recruitment letter sent to them as an email attachment. Access to participants during the study occurred outside of working hours in their home schools or at the researcher’s home.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Informed consent was used to protect participants. Subjects were made aware that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time during the process. Participants were provided with a thorough understanding of the purpose and methods involved in the study as well as expectations and timelines. They were also provided with possible risks and benefits. The researcher provided each participant with contact information for the researcher and the primary investigator. In addition to receiving verbal information regarding the study and consent, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form. The IRB process regarding consent was followed as outlined by the University.

The researcher participated in the required training for research involving human subjects. Upon successful completion of the training, the researcher forwarded documentation of the training to the Office of Human Subject Research Protection via an email attachment. Approval to conduct the study was received from the Office of Human Subject Research Protection.

**Data Collection**

The researcher collected data through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. A series of three, separate 20-80 minute interviews per participant took place two days to one week apart. Seidman (2013) identifies specific purposes for each interview. The first interview served to establish the purpose of the study and gather contextual information related to participants’ personal history and life experiences; this interview lasted no more than 20 minutes. The second
interview asked participants to share their experiences related to the research question by reflecting and making meaning of those experiences. This interview constituted the main body of the data, lasting as long as 40 minutes. The final interviews followed up on themes or questions raised from the second interviews across participants. This follow-up interview lasted no more than 30 minutes. A semi-structured interview protocol was used for each of the interviews and included prompts and probes. Interviews took place in the home schools of participants, or at the researcher’s home.

Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. The researcher kept field notes to document non-verbal behaviors. The interview protocol is included in the appendices.

Data Storage

Audio recordings of interviews were stored in a password-protected file on the researcher’s computer. This file was also backed up to a thumb drive and a web based storage site. Both were password protected. The researcher was the only individual with access to this data. Participant’s confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudo names. Their teacher preparation programs are identified using letters, i.e. Program A, Program B, etc. and are presented with participant background knowledge in Table 1 in chapter four.

Digital data will be erased/removed and written data will be shredded and disposed of when the study has been completed, defended and uploaded to ProQuest. Signed consent forms will be stored for three years, as required, and then will be shredded and disposed of.

Data Analysis

As the research study was a qualitative IPA study, analysis was content based and driven by the lived experiences of participants. Before data analysis took place, participant interviews were transcribed by an outside service.
The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim; in full to capture the participants lived experiences in relation to the research questions. The basic transcription system offered by King & Harrocks (2010), based on Poland’s (2002) work was used. Although details are important, they were not at the level of discourse that would have required systems such as Jefferson’s (1984) or Silverman’s (1993).

Care was taken to ensure accuracy of transcriptions. The researcher used quality-recording equipment and was conscious of clarity of speech and pacing, as well as that of the participants’. Non-verbal communication and paralinguistics, referred to as missing context by King & Harrocks (2010) was documented in field notes and described in the transcripts. Transcriptions did not attempt to correct perceived errors. Mispronunciations and inaccurate grammar was transcribed verbatim. Interview files were uploaded to the researcher’s computer, and backed up, on the same day interviews occurred.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data. Themes and thematic structures were developed over time. Drafts were dated and filed to document the process. The final themes in response to the research questions are presented in Table 2 and Table 3 in chapter five. Table 4, also in chapter five presents the overall key findings.

Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) offer six steps to analyzing IPA data, reading and re-reading, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across themes, moving through the next case, and finally, looking for patterns across cases. These steps are considered to be guidelines as opposed to a rigid sequence. Steps 1-4 are intended to be followed to analyze each participant’s set of individual data separately and then repeating the process with each data set. Smith, Flowers and Larkin’s (2009) steps served as a framework for this study to guide data analysis. Specific coding was embedded within these six steps and included Initial
Coding, Descriptive Coding and Pattern Coding (Saldana, 2009). Initial Coding and Descriptive coding were used for first cycle coding and Pattern Coding was used for second cycle coding.

Reading and re-reading supported the first look at the transcribed interview data. It involved repeatedly engaging with each data set to get to a sense of each participant’s overall perception of their experience gaining knowledge to teach early reading skills through their pre-service teacher preparation program. Reading and re-reading also provided solid familiarity with the interview protocol before initial coding took place.

First cycle coding utilized Initial Coding and Descriptive Coding. Both are recommended for novice researchers as well as studies employing interview transcripts (Saldana, 2009). Initial coding took the place of step 2, initial noting. Initial noting concentrates on taking extensive, exploratory notes and coding for descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments.

Using initial coding, the researcher coded line-by-line, recording short phrases taken from participants’ comments. Memo writing, also part of initial coding, was completed after initial coding, and served as an additional code. Descriptive coding was used in conjunction with initial coding. Descriptive coding summarized sections of the interview transcripts using a single word, usually a noun, or a short phrase.

Based on initial and descriptive coding, emergent themes within individual data sets were explored, followed by identifying connections across these themes. This process continued until each participant’s individual data has been coded.

During second cycle coding, pattern coding looked for patterns across participants’ data and identified similarities and differences among the teachers’ perspectives of their pre-service programs to teach early reading.
Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to a study’s worth. Guba (1981) offers four constructs for qualitative researchers to use to establish trustworthiness, or a study’s worth. These constructs correspond to quantitative constructs. He suggests the following criteria when qualitative researchers are considering trustworthiness, credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity/generalizability), dependability (reliability) and confirmability (objectivity).

Credibility parallels internal validity and seeks to build confidence that the findings of a study are plausible. Credibility is evident when well-established research methods are utilized to ensure honesty and accuracy. Qualitative research in general is well established and procedures specific to IPA were followed as prescribed. Additionally, this study used member checking to further establish credibility. Member checking tests data and interpretations from those who have provided the data, the participants, and can be formal or informal. For the purpose of this study, member checking was informal and continuous during the interview process. This allowed the researcher to restate participants’ stories and perceptions to confirm accuracy, and to correct errors with participants in an ongoing manner (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Informal member checking, as opposed to formal member checking, which requires participants to review interview transcripts, minimized participants second-guessing or regretting their stories. It also removed any impact the experience has had on their perceptions since the interviews and eliminated conflicts over interpretation (Angen, 2000; Morse, 1994).

Transferability refers to the study being applicable to other, similar contexts. Transferability can be compared to external validity in quantitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) offer thick description as a way to ensure transferability. Thick description involves the
detailed accounts of participant’s experiences. The detail should be rich enough to draw conclusions that determine whether conclusions are applicable to similar contexts.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe dependability (reliability) and confirmability (objectivity). Dependability addresses being able to replicate a study. A researcher offers dependability by providing sufficient details of the processes employed so that future researchers can easily repeat a study. Confirmability ensures the experiences of participants are accurately depicted and represent participant’s views as opposed to the views of the researcher. Triangulation and detailed documentation of methodological processes support confirmability in qualitative research.

Validity is also built into the three-interview process itself (Seidman, 2013). This structure supports generalization of responses within context, reflections of participants for internal consistency and the overall goal of making meaning of lived experiences. Notes taken by the researcher during each interview to document nonverbal behavior also supported validity. Reflective journaling by the researcher was an additional way to ensure validity. Potential threats to internal validity include reluctance of subjects to fully disclose their perceptions, and researcher bias.

Depending on their experiences, participants may have feared they appeared less than qualified for their current role or that the researcher would judge them. To minimize these possible feelings, the researcher will make a strong effort to build rapport with participants. The researcher was also conscious of self-presentation and the importance of creating an atmosphere of equality and trust.
The interview protocol was both structured and flexible. Prompts and probes question were incorporated into the protocol to keep the researcher clearly focused and able to reign in participants if they moved too far off topic and began a tangent.

The researcher needed to be aware of personal bias and avoided comments that negated or supported participant responses. The researcher was also conscious of referring to the prompts and probes within the interview protocol to maintain unbiased interaction.

**Limitations**

This study took place with five K-3 teachers in a small school district. Due to the nature of this IPA study, a small sample size was utilized, impacting the ability to generalize findings to larger groups. The intent of IPA and qualitative research overall, is not to generalize, but instead, to capture detailed accounts of particular lived experiences. In this instance, interviews produced large amounts of transcript data about experiences related to teacher preparation programs, and required extensive amounts of time and attention to the words of participants to effectively gain insight and findings. This could not have been accomplished as in depth with larger samples. Although generalization may be considered a limitation, results of this study may be transferable. In qualitative research, results are considered transferable if they can be applied to similar contexts.

Information gained through interviews may be considered a limitation because it has been provided second-hand from participants and filtered through their recollections over time. It has also been filtered through a double hermeneutic where the researcher, through dialogue with participants attempted to interpret the participants’ interpretations of their experiences.

The quality of research is also heavily dependent on the skills of the researcher. The researcher of this study was a novice and was developing skills as they were being learned.
Although the researcher was conscious of following an interview guide and adhering to interviewing procedures and recommendations, being a novice researcher could also be considered a limitation of this study.
Chapter IV: Findings

The purpose of this study was to describe and understand teacher perceptions of knowledge gained in their teacher preparation programs to teach reading, and any other professional development experiences they may have had, which prepared them to deliver best practice in reading instruction.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) allowed the participants to share their lived experiences, in detail, about their pre-service programs. While the participants shared their stories and attempted to make sense of these experiences, the researcher was also trying to make sense of their experiences. A small sample size of educators was purposely selected to reveal patterns and themes related to their shared phenomenon, attending a pre-service program. Two primary research questions guided this study.

1. How do elementary teachers in a school district in Rhode Island describe their experiences with pre-service reading instruction preparation and how do they make sense of those experiences, and others, that have prepared them to teach reading?

2. What additional opportunities and knowledge do elementary teachers perceive would better prepare in-service teachers to be effective teachers of early literacy?

Five participants responded to a series of 3 semi-structured interviews, describing their experiences in detail. Through these interviews several specific themes emerged related to teacher preparation programs and experiences after completion of their teacher preparation programs. Themes related to teacher preparation programs included, children’s literature left a positive impact, learned how to write lesson plans, methods, materials and final projects; field work and practicum experiences were highlights, embedded professional development, a bridge between pre-service and in-service, not prepared for the real world. Themes related to better
preparing and supporting teachers included: knowing what you don’t know, filling the gaps through professional development, teachers need more training aligned with the real world and their job expectations and uncertainty continues.

During the first interview participants provided biographical information and responded to the question, “How did you come to be a teacher?” All five of the participants were female with 1-20 years of teaching experience in grades K-3. Four of the 5 participants attended a 4-year undergraduate teacher preparation program immediately following high school. One participant, who already held a Bachelor of Science degree, returned to a community college in her late 30s to complete certification courses. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of the participants. The specific universities and colleges that participants attended were not referenced by name. Past and present school districts and schools where participants have working or are currently working were also not referenced by name.

**Participant Profiles**

Five teachers agreed to participate in this study, as can be seen in Table 1

Table 1

**Participant background information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Pre-service Program</th>
<th>Current Position</th>
<th>Years in Current Position</th>
<th>Total Years Teaching</th>
<th>Highest Degree Earned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Program A</td>
<td>Grade 2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>Program B</td>
<td>Grade 3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>Program B</td>
<td>Grade 1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>Program B</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>Program C</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Emma. Emma has been teaching for a total of 13 years with 10 of those years in the district where she is currently employed. She has experience teaching preschool, Kindergarten, 3rd grade and also served as a reading specialist and coach for a year in another school district. She is currently teaching 2nd grade, a position she has held for the past 3 years. Emma was excited to tell the interviewer that the school where she is now working is the same school she attended as a child. She also mentioned that one of her grade 2 colleagues, and partner teacher, was actually her kindergarten teacher. In addition to earning a Bachelor’s degree in early childhood education, Emma minored in special education and has a Master’s degree in Reading. Her teacher certifications include reading specialist, early childhood and elementary grades.

Emma spoke of her journey to become a teacher with great adoration and enthusiasm. Ever since she was a young girl she knew she wanted to be a teacher. She loved playing school, she loved learning and she loved all of her teachers. Amidst all of this love, Emma explained that she also struggled as a learner, especially with learning how to read. She remembers working with a reading teacher all through grades K-5, describing how reading words and putting sounds together were hardest in the early grades with comprehension becoming the main struggle in grades 4 and 5. During 4th grade, difficulty with reading and comprehension led Emma to engage in “fake” reading during class, staring into thick chapter books beyond her reach, to blend in with her classmates. She also told about copying answer keys to quizzes for reading passages she was required to complete. This “strategy” allowed her to soar through the levels of this reading program, without reading a word. At the end of elementary school, Emma was exited from reading services. She depended on a tutor from 3rd grade through high school to help her meet with success in spite of her reading difficulties.
Deciding on a college wasn’t based on a teacher preparation program for Emma, but instead, her decision was based on location. Initially, she wanted to go far away from home but soon realized she wouldn’t be able to handle being away from her family. She chose to remain in state and attended a small seaside university. She continued to love learning, loved her instructors and loved all of her experiences related to her teacher preparation classes. She especially enjoyed her student teaching practicum experience and continued to volunteer for her practicum teacher when the experience had ended. Emma mentioned that she didn’t seem to struggle in college and received excellent grades compared to the grades she received in high school that she referred to as “teetering” on the edge of passing, which she had to work very hard to earn. Emma was also proud to share that during graduation she received the Departmental Award for the Early Childhood Department. At the time, she was both shocked and excited, as she didn’t think of herself as capable of achieving academic recognition. She was now ready to begin her teaching career.

**Annie.** Annie has been teaching 3rd grade for the past 6 years. She has also taught grades 4 and 5 and has taught health to grades K-8. Annie has a Bachelor’s degree in English and elementary education. She also has a Master’s degree in special education. Her teaching certifications include elementary grades, special education K-8 and health education K-8. She has been teaching for a total of 17 years.

Annie stated that she enjoyed playing school with her older sister when she was growing up but she never had a sense at a young age that she wanted to be a teacher. She did know that she enjoyed working with young children from her experiences as a sailing and swim instructor at the YMCA since she was 14 years old. While she was in high school she wrote for the school newspaper and thought she was destined to be a journalist. When it came time to decide on
college, Annie began to consider teaching. To keep her options open she decided to double major in English and elementary education, choosing an in state university that offered both.

Right after graduation, Annie was west coast bound; she had been offered and accepted an opportunity to direct a sailing program for young children. In less than a year she realized she wanted to be in a classroom and easily found a teaching job on the west coast in a 4/5 multiage classroom. She loved her job and the area and remained there for two years, until the promise of a marriage proposal brought her back to the east coast.

**Maya.** This is Maya’s 20th year teaching. She has been with the same school district since the start of her career and has been teaching 1st grade for the past 10 years. Prior to this she taught second and third grade. Maya has a Bachelor’s degree in elementary education and a Master of Arts in teaching. She is certified to teach grades 1-5.

A giant chalkboard in Maya’s basement served as the backdrop to her first classroom. She would spend hours playing school with her stuffed animals, mimicking her teachers and passing out extra copies of worksheets she had saved from school. She remembers loving everything about school, especially the kindness of her teachers. She can still recall specific moments in time, classroom decorations and reaffirming comments made to her by teachers about her abilities.

Maya’s family valued education and teachers were well respected. School always felt like home to her for many reasons. Her mother was a teacher for more than 30 years and Maya remembers helping her get her classroom ready every summer, cleaning, organizing and decorating. She did this from the time she was very little until she had graduated from college. During grades 2, 3 and 4, Maya was a student in a multi-age program where her mother was one
of three teachers who taught Maya for part of each day. This would most likely be unheard of today, but this was during the 70s when the world was a different place.

Within weeks of graduation, Maya was hired by a school district in her hometown as a short-term substitute as a reading specialist. This would be unchartered territory for her and the start of her career in the district where she continues to teach.

**Katherine.** Katherine has been teaching for 13 years. She is currently a Kindergarten teacher, a position she has held for the past 2 years. Prior to this, Katherine worked for a different school district for 11 years teaching Kindergarten and grades 1 and 2. She earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Human Development and Family Studies with a concentration in early childhood education. She is certified to teach grades K-2.

Katherine explained that she never had a yearning or desire to become a teacher. She recalls enjoying a summer job working with children as a camp counselor while she was in high school. She described the work as easy and natural and she received positive feedback about her work with children from others. Katherine felt she didn’t have any sort of academic direction when she started college. She decided to focus on journalism classes because she loved writing in high school, especially in her honors writing class, where her teacher informed her that she had special talent, so Katherine figured she should major in something she knew she was good at. Unfortunately, she didn’t enjoy the journalism classes and the clock was ticking at her university. She felt the pressure to declare a major. She thought back to her job as a camp counselor in high school, and declared education as her major through the Human Development and Family Studies Program, without ever taking an education course. Thankfully, this turned out to be the right decision for her. She gained additional experience while working at the university’s child development center on campus, which she enjoyed.
As graduation was approaching Katherine didn’t feel quite ready to start a career. Instead, she moved to a nearby city with friends and took a job in retail at a trendy clothing store. She describes this as a time she spent having fun, relishing her 40% discount at the clothing store, and growing up. After 2 years had passed she felt she had matured. She packed up and headed home to use her degree. She landed the first job she applied for, a full time building substitute in a low-income urban area at a K-2 school. This job would significantly impact her as a teacher and a learner.

**Linda.** This is Linda’s first year as a public school teacher. She is teaching Kindergarten after many years as a Pre-K teacher in the private sector. Initially, as a Pre-K teacher she wasn’t required to hold state certification, but 5 years ago the Pre-K landscape was changing and obtaining certification was encouraged. The Rhode Island Department of Education determined that Linda would need 4 courses to qualify for K-2 certification. She enrolled at a nearby community college across the state line from where she lived and was certified within a year. Due to her previous teaching experiences she was not required to complete a practicum. She has been teaching for a total of 16 years and has a Bachelor’s degree in human services and counseling. She is certified to teach K-2.

As a young girl, teaching had never occurred to Linda as something she might like to do in the future. As a matter of fact, she perceived teachers as individuals who were mean in nature. Growing up she attended Catholic schools and remembers her 3rd grade teacher leaving a deep impact on her. Unfortunately, it wasn’t a positive impact. This teacher would ask individual students to stand up so she could publicly inform them of what they had done wrong in class or on their assignments, using embarrassment as a “teaching method.” Linda recalls becoming very shy after that year. She didn’t always do well in school, feeling like she wasn’t good enough.
This followed her for many years along with knowing the power this teacher and all teachers have over students, as well as the life long impressions they leave.

Linda went to college in northern New England to earn her degree in human services and counseling. As part of her program requirements she worked at a mental health facility with children who had been physically and sexually abused. She also interned with a guidance counselor in a public school setting. It was during this time that she fell in love with the school environment and began to think about an additional degree in education.

Immediately following graduation Linda enrolled in a summer graduate course with the same college. This course took her to England where she worked for 2 months in a Kindergarten classroom. This experience confirmed her decision to switch gears to education. While she took additional courses she worked full time at the mental health facility. Within 2 years this work began to feel depressing instead of rewarding and she knew it was time to move on.

She landed a one-year position as a 3rd grade classroom teacher in a nearby small, rural community, which didn’t require any type of teacher certification. When the year was up she returned to her hometown and began her career as an early childhood Pre-K teacher, which she continued doing for the next 12 years. At this point in time, Linda was in her late 30s and set a new goal for herself, to become a Kindergarten teacher.

**Research Question 1: How do elementary teachers in a school district in Rhode Island describe their experiences with pre-service reading instruction preparation and how do they make sense of those experiences, and others, that have prepared them to teach reading?**
Upon a deliberate and iterative analysis of the participants’ transcripts, the following five themes emerged in relationship to research question 1 and are presented in Table 2 and discussed below.

Table 2
Themes in Relationship to Research Question 1

- The children’s literature course left a positive impact on teachers
- The teachers learned how to write lesson plans
- The focus of learning was methods, materials and final projects
- Fieldwork and practicum experiences were highlights
- Embedded Professional Development was a bridge between pre-service and in-service learning.

**Children’s literature course left a positive impact.** All five participants excitedly mentioned taking a children’s literature course and most recalled it as the only reading course that came to mind within their program of study. Criteria for selecting quality literature and hands on activities were emphasized. Participants described this course as one of their most enjoyable and memorable classes during their pre-service experience. For example, Annie said, “I got to write my own children's book, and I thought that was the best. I still have it. I wanted to publish it at one point; I loved it so much.” Katherine expressed similar feelings about the class, “There was a children's literature class that I took that I loved. That was one of my favorite classes. That's the one that made me decide to be a teacher.”

Participants found their instructors to be knowledgeable and inspiring, and their excitement about children’s books was palpable. Emma enjoyed listening to read alouds in class, “I remember my instructor was Mrs. Grey, and she would always start every single class by reading us a story.” Annie reinforced this positive experience, “…just in the way she would read
to us, I could just see her as an elementary teacher, and it was inspiring.” Katherine never remembered being excited about reading or about books when she was younger and attributes her children’s literature instructor to opening her eyes and mind to this wonderful world, “She was excited about books. She read to us. She gave us this really great list of books to read. I think ‘Miss Rumphius’ was on there and ‘My Great Aunt Arizona.’ ‘Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone’ had just come out. It was all the rage. We read this. It just was a fun class.”

Books were used to focus on specific skills and strategies. These skills and strategies were mainly related to comprehension but some participants reported targeting early foundational skills such as rhyme. Children’s literature offers the opportunity to explore various levels of comprehension found along Bloom’s Taxonomy or the more recent parallel, Webb’s Depth of Knowledge, as well as addressing vocabulary and additional areas such as author’s purpose and message. Linda was required to develop hands on activities to teach understanding through the use of children’s literature. She described an early childhood project that helped to build background knowledge and vocabulary, “I would bring in my bags of all the materials. I remember I did the ‘We're Going on a Bear Hunt’ book, and I had the kids squishing in the mud and grass, with their hands making the squishing noise.” Maya describes learning how to develop comprehension through reflective journaling based on children’s books. She also recalls this as very motivating. Her instructor would place her undergraduate students in the role of elementary students, having them respond to various prompts in reciprocal journals. Maya explained this journaling and the importance of her instructor’s feedback, “She assigned us books to read, children's literature books. Then we kept a journal and she would write back and forth to us. I would look forward to seeing what she thought of my work.”
Emphasis was also placed on how to select quality children’s literature based on topics that were going to be taught such as foundational skills, themes, messages, author studies, etc. Participants enjoyed this learning and continue to use this information in their current positions. Katherine explained, “If you’re working on rhyme right now, let’s go find some good books to teach rhyme. I remember ‘Sheep in a Jeep’ was like a huge big deal.” Linda remembers developing an author study, “I did this whole project on Margaret Wise Brown and her literature, and that was one of my favorite components of everything that I did.”

**Learned how to write lesson plans.** All of the participants recalled learning how to write lesson plans. This was required in all of their methods courses and during their practicum experiences. Large amounts of time were spent on this task during their pre-service years. These plans were described as formulaic in nature but the layout and content varied from school to school. All 5 participants cited elements of the lesson plans they learned and articulated the purpose of the designs they were taught. Emma’s university, Program A, taught students how to use the Madeline Hunter lesson plan. Madeline Hunter is well known for her research on lesson plan design, especially as it relates to direct instruction. Emma explained this format as she remembers it,

> We would follow this Madeline Hunter lesson plan format where you activated prior knowledge, did a set to introduce what you were trying to teach and kind of practice together, then the students would go and do some independent practice and then you’d bring them back in.”

As part of the Human Development and Family Studies Program, Katherine was trained to create lesson plans that focused on specific dimensions of the whole child. She provided the following example, “Essentially, we learned to write lesson plans based on 4 areas of a child's
development: physical, social, cognitive, emotional. It was a totally different animal than your math, science, reading setup.”

Linda also recalls writing many lesson plans that were specific to her early childhood certification coursework. She remembers writing lesson plans using a template provided by her instructor, which included objectives, materials and procedures. At the time, her template was heavily focused on the Rhode Island Early Childhood Standards, differentiating instruction and strategies for English language learners. Linda describes her lesson plan template in the following way, “It had all the standards on the side. I loved it though, because it had ELL strategies on it too, and extensions to down-scale it or make it a little harder.”

Although the participants did not learn a “universal” format to develop lesson plans, their stories suggest their instructors where using direct instruction or a model similar to the Madeline Hunter design when teaching students how to develop and write lesson plans.

Methods, materials and final projects. Four out of the 5 participants spoke about creating instructional materials and completing culminating projects that weighed heavily on their final grades. These tasks ranged from creating games to constructing large portfolios. Some found these activities beneficial while others did not. Most said they did not apply these materials beyond the walls of their preservice classrooms. These assignments were part of the requirements of the children’s literature class mentioned above, as well as required methods courses.

Methods. Methods courses were usually described as combining subject areas such as science and social studies and math and reading. Participants had little recollection of the instructors, content or experiences. For example, Annie said, “I remember the science and reading and writing methods classes, but I felt like those were dry. I didn't think I got a lot out of
them.” Emma offered something similar, “I remember everything like science and social studies were incorporated. I think it was one course together and it was based on children's literature. There wasn't really anything else I remember from those courses. And I don't remember anything about math ... at all.”

**Hands on materials.** Emma enjoyed the hands on materials she was required to make. She liked being creative and saw the benefit of these materials. “I remembered making a game called blending blocks. “I made these blocks, this is the part that I really enjoyed because you got to be a little creative, not necessarily teaching a lot of skills, it was just for practice. You would take two cubes and you'd roll them, and you'd put the two parts of the words together and you'd make a word.” Along with blending blocks, Emma made other games intended to use at centers. She still has them but she doesn’t use them in her current classroom. “I think it's just because, either some of them are, I don't want to say outdated, but outdated or it just doesn't apply to what we're learning and where our focus is.”

Linda also enjoyed creating materials as part of her preservice coursework. Her materials mainly focused on foundational skills. Similar to Emma’s blending blocks, Linda’s materials appeared to be intended for practice as opposed to direct instruction. “It was just early literacy things, like left to right progression, things like that. Letter recognition. I was just thinking back to one of the things we had to do, we had to make up a whole bunch of file folder games. One of them that I did was uppercase, lowercase identification. I could take them with me into the classroom when I started.”

**Final projects.** Katherine recalls taking one methods course where all content areas were presented together. She continued writing lesson plans in this class and was also required to complete a culminating project but she wasn’t able to recall other specifics of this course. “In
that class, we wrote a thematic unit. That was kind of the end of that class, and that was weighed very heavily for our grade. I did a thematic unit on frogs. Then, the following year, when I did my student teaching, I implemented the unit.” Katherine doesn’t recall using her frog unit again.

Part of Annie’s methods classes included the creation of a portfolio that was intended to be useful during job interviews. She remembers a strong emphasis being placed on making these portfolios and they always seemed to be working on them, although she never understood why they had to be so large. While motioning with her hands to show the size, she went on to describe the portfolio, “It was literally a doorstop, it was like, this thick.” She struggled to recall what else she might have learned from these classes. “I guess I felt like the only thing I got out of it was how to prepare my portfolio, and they would give us checklists, so we just had to make sure that we had...what we needed, X, Y, and Z.” Her metaphor of a doorstop suggests this portfolio wasn’t all that valuable to her; instead it was more about task completion. She later dismantled her portfolio and only brought select information with her to interviews.

Fieldwork and practicum experiences were highlights. Four out of five participants said the practicum and field work were their favorite parts of their programs. One participant wasn’t required to complete fieldwork or a practicum. Emma spoke of enjoying her fieldwork. “We would go out to the schools, and that was the part I loved the most, going into the schools to apply what we were learning.” Maya also enjoyed her practicum work that took place in inner city schools. “I learned the most about being a teacher by actually working with the kids in the practicums. I felt like you learned what it was like to actually teach and engage kids.” Katherine shared Emma and Maya’s enthusiasm, “I student taught in kindergarten at an elementary school near my university, and I loved that.”

Collaboration. Collaboration was a common element across fieldwork and practicum
preparation and experiences. Participants indicated that dialogue, reflection and feedback were significant aspects of their collaboration. Although Linda was not required to complete a practicum she also reported collaboration as a significant part of her preservice coursework. “It was a lot of small group work that we did together. We would come in and share in small groups a lot of curriculum building and lesson plans that we would do on our own. Everybody was comfortable. It was a safe place,” stated Linda. Participants indicated planning lessons, completing projects, reflecting and providing feedback occurred in partners and in small groups.

Emma explained that she and her classmates would develop lessons together and then implement them as part of their fieldwork. “You would have discussions about what you were learning and then you would go into the schools, you would try it out and then you would come back and talk some more.” Talking after implementing their lessons allowed them to reflect and support each other before they would teach the lesson a second time while their instructor observed. Emma elaborates, “And then we would make changes based on how the lesson went and then at the end our instructor would come out and observe us and provide us with feedback.”

Maya described a similar experience. She recalls working with a partner to prepare lesson plans together. “We submitted the lesson plans ahead of time to the practicum teacher. Then she would give us ideas, this will work or try this, a lot of general notes.” Maya and her partner would make adjustments based on the practicum teacher’s notes and would then teach in an inner city school as part of their field work. Then the teacher would watch us as well as a bunch of other people that were doing the same thing with her group of kids.

**Embedded professional development was a bridge between preservice and inservice learning.** Before they had their own classrooms, 3 of the 5 participants held unique, short-term positions in public schools. Some of these positions offered ongoing embedded and direct
professional development related to reading. These positions influenced participant’s perceptions of how well they were prepared to teach reading and therefore it is important to mention these experiences.

Maya graduated in January and immediately landed a job as a short-term substitute as an elementary reading teacher until the end of the school year. The reading teacher had fallen and broke her hip so she wasn’t able to help prepare Maya. Maya was provided with a list of student’s names and times she would meet with them, but nothing else. She wasn’t sure what to do with the kids so she looked through the materials and tools in the room and made a decision. She was clearly on her own, without direction. “I focused a lot on vowels, I did a ton of work on vowels. No matter what grade they were in. It seemed to work.” At the start of the next school year Maya was hired again by the same school district for another short-term substitute position, also as a reading teacher, this time in a different school than her first position. It was a planned leave so the reading teacher was able to meet with Maya and provide guidance. Maya considers this reading teacher to be one of her most important mentors. This reading teacher introduced her to a basal reader, running records, and a phonics program and showed her what to teach and how to plan. She also checked in with her throughout her absence. “I felt like that particular job I learned ... Talk about learning by doing. I feel like I emulated her style a lot, her lesson plan format.”

Linda worked for a year as a Kindergarten intern, providing interventions to individual students and small groups in the areas of reading and math.

Looking back on my year as an intern, being in that position, I learned so much. With the help of the reading specialist at the school, I did lesson plans based on the children’s
needs. Just these lesson plans, and the techniques that the reading specialist taught me, really helped me to learn the process. It was unbelievable the stuff that I absorbed.

Katherine took a position as a building substitute in a K-1 school for a year. When she wasn’t needed to cover a classroom, she floated and as she describes it, “took in a whole year’s worth of professional development with some amazing teachers.” She learned to use a specific phonics and phonemic awareness program and was also able to attend any professional development that was being offered to the other teachers, which she took advantage of.

**Research Question 2: What additional opportunities and knowledge do elementary teachers perceive would better prepare in-service teachers to be effective teachers of early literacy?**

A deliberate and iterative analysis of the participants’ transcripts resulted in the identification of the following five themes in relationship to research question 2. These themes are provided in Table 3 and presented below.

**Table 3**

*Themes Related to Research Question 2*

- Not prepared for the real world
- Knowing what you don’t know
- Filling the gaps through professional development
- Teachers need more training aligned with the real world and their job expectations
- Uncertainty continues

**Not prepared for the real world.** For four out of the five participants, the real world, the world after pre-service, was their first encounter with a basal reader and formal curriculum.
This was usually experienced with their first position as a classroom teacher. When Annie took her first teaching position as a 4/5 multiage classroom teacher on the west coast, she expected to find children’s literature like she had been exposed to in her pre-service program. Instead, she was presented with her first basal, a collection of stories bound together within a hard cover. “They weren't real books, they weren't real stories, and they were written for the basal so they weren't genuine literature.” Emma was also used a basal in her first year teaching Kindergarten. It wasn’t totally new to her though because a basal was used in her student teaching placement, even though she hadn’t been exposed or trained during pre-service. “We used the anthology in the basal reader 5 days a week.”

The time participants spent on lesson plans and instructional decision making in pre-service was not applicable to reading instruction in their new in-service roles. For example, Emma shared the disconnect from what she learned in her pre-service program. “I was learning to use certain lesson plans and design lessons around literature and books. Not necessarily follow a curriculum.” She went on to further describe her experience and feelings. “I was given this curriculum to follow, lesson by lesson, with a script there for you. So what I learned at my university didn't really line up with what I was being asked to do in my job.” Annie also experienced a disconnect between pre-service and what was expected of her in her current role. She refers to using a basal in the following manner. “You just followed the monthly or the weekly or daily plans that were in the teacher's manual.”

Maya also didn’t learn about basals in her pre-service training but being new to teaching and feeling less than prepared for what was expected of her, at the time, she was grateful to have some direction. As a first year second grade teacher, Maya appreciated the basal for the order and content it provided. “I followed it and it was a really helpful tool to hang my hat on because
it gave you what you needed to teach. The stories were selected for me. I didn't like everything, but it was a place to begin.”

**Knowing what you don’t know.** Each participant had turning points in their teaching careers when they realized they had limited knowledge to teach reading and that they were not fully prepared to do this important work. For some of the participants, this realization came early on and for others, it was a gradual evolution. Context impacted individual timelines. Those who had experienced ongoing professional development between pre-service and in-service came to this realization sooner than those who had spent more years as an in-service teacher. Being presented with unfamiliar curriculum or professional development caused questioning and reflection that would eventually lead to change.

Annie had primarily been teaching grades 4 and 5 across 3 states before she transitioned to 3rd grade where learning to read was emphasized as opposed to reading to learn. “I'll never forget when I first heard the word diphthong, I thought I was going to ... I was laughing because I'm like, what is that?” and then I thought, "Why do I not know this?" Several years into her teaching career Emma also began questioning her own knowledge base and instructional practice, through spelling, which is the reciprocal of reading. At the time, she was teaching 3rd grade. Her previous work as a reading specialist for one year in a different district had provided her with professional development on the structure of language, but her current district was using a basal series, so she conformed, but it didn’t feel right. She describes creating spelling lists with her grade level team.

We worked together to differentiate lists based on the scope and sequence. It was almost like we were pulling words out from wherever that followed a certain pattern regardless if we had taught things previously or not. For example, I might have been pulling words to
focus on digraphs with a short vowel sound, but we were pulling words with digraphs with long vowels even though we hadn’t taught long vowels yet and so then it would become more of a memorization task to memorize the spelling versus assessing and understanding the parts of the word.

This was the beginning of what would be a journey of transformation for Emma. “Oh gosh. It’s hard to look back at that and see what I was teaching and not really fully understanding and just following with the tools that I was given and just going along day to day.” Maya reflects on the days before she knew what she didn’t know and has similar feelings as Emma, “You look back and you feel different things. Some of the things you feel aren't always good.” Maya had been exposed to phonics and language structure with the reading specialist who she describes as a mentor to her, but when she transferred to another school, she, like Emma, conformed to the practices in that building. She asked about this particular phonics program but no one knew what it was. “It was almost like a bad word. ‘We're whole language. We don't do that.’ So I never used it.” She also remembers having to find her own materials and resources and describes an experience similar to Emma’s, “It felt bad as a new teacher to be pulling from here and there and everywhere and hoping that the kids had gotten the sounds that they needed to by the end of the year.”

Katherine and Linda also questioned what they knew about the structure of language during their first assignments following pre-service. For example, Katherine describes a piece of her practicum. “For a student teaching practicum, we went out and did some felt board stories, nothing that got me ready to go into a classroom and teach kids how to read, being completely honest, that I can remember.” Being a building substitute and a building intern, respectively, they were afforded learning opportunities that didn’t align with what they had learned in their pre-
service programs. Both Katherine and Linda were exposed to and implemented programs and strategies they had never heard of and saw students make progress while they continued to learn themselves. They continue to apply this foundational knowledge of the structure of language in their roles. “I feel like everybody should start off as a building intern and then grow into your own classroom because what an amazing experience ... That's 180 days of professional development at your grade level,” stated Katherine. “I take all of those things that I learned and incorporate them into my own reading groups that I have in my own class. I use those very same lesson plans. I use those very same techniques. They're very effective,” said Linda.

Not knowing information, especially the complexities of the English language that you are required to teach, caused 4 out of the 5 participants to feel somewhat vulnerable. They only felt comfortable sharing with colleagues they trusted, and initially, some did not want to be “discovered.” Annie remembers the following; “there was a time where all third grade teachers sat at a table just like this one, like a horseshoe table. We were panicked. ‘We don't understand this, we don't know what this is. We need more training.’ Annie went on to describe how her grade level team approached their reading specialist for help with the district’s core phonics program. “Some of the language that they were using I wasn't familiar with. The reading specialist sat with all of us and gave us instruction on it. I felt fine because I wasn't the only one. I think if I were the only one, being a pretty veteran teacher, I would have felt like a moron. I would've felt really uncomfortable that I didn't know it.” Annie added that she is a good speller and a good reader but phonics was foreign to her. “I literally felt like the building’s reading specialist had to teach me phonics.”

Emma describes letting other colleagues know what she didn’t know. “ I did share with certain colleagues I felt comfortable with, and they would agree with me. That you're right we
didn't learn this, especially the ones who went to the same graduate school as I did.” Emma sought support from her building’s reading specialist and tried to learn as much as she could on her own and with her colleagues.

After realizing what they didn’t know about content and instruction related to early reading, all participants indicated they didn’t learn how to teach reading in their pre-service programs but couldn’t have known this until new information was presented to them, calling into question their current knowledge base. For example, Katherine said, “I don't remember taking classes that taught children how to read. I don't feel that I had any kind of preparation in that area at all. I teach kindergarten. That's the main part of my job. “Annie also doesn’t recall learning how to teach others to read and she didn’t feel prepared. “There wasn’t a true connection. It didn’t prepare me for my first teaching experience.”

**Filling the gaps through professional development.** Participants told about a variety of professional development experiences that have supported them in gaining knowledge to be teachers of early reading. These experiences fell into 2 subthemes, previous districts and ongoing self directed professional development. Only 2 of the 5 participants have worked in a previous district or districts therefore, they are the only participants who were able to report on this subtheme. Participants’ experiences vary but the common thread was the need for professional development to further develop their skills where their pre-service programs left off, or fell short. Participating in professional development may be district directed or self-directed.

**Previous districts.** Katherine and Emma are the only participants who have worked in a previous district or districts. Katherine has worked in 2 previous districts and Emma has worked in 1 previous district. Although this subtheme cannot be shared across all participants, or a majority, these experiences are important to share to better understand opportunities that exist to
prepare and support teachers of early reading. Both Katherine and Emma described their experiences as transformational, changing their perspectives on early reading instruction. As previously mentioned, Katherine spent a year after pre-service as a building substitute in a K-1 school. During her year in this position she participated in any professional development that was available to her. Taking advantage of this professional development would later prove beneficial to herself and to her future students. The following year Katherine applied for a Kindergarten position in a district that would be piloting the phonemic awareness and phonics program she had learned as a building substitute. “When I ended up getting a job in another district the following year, I was able to bring the PD that I had gotten as a building substitute. It was a huge help for the people who were just starting.” Katherine also believes this knowledge helped her secure the position and enabled her to meet with success during her first year as a classroom teacher. “Everything that I did, when I was charged with, ‘You have to teach these kids how to read.’ All of that came from my experience when I was a building substitute, 100% of it.”

Emma worked for one year outside of her current district as a reading specialist. During this time she was exposed to a variety of professional development focused on early reading. One particular training continues to resonate with her. This particular training presented her with a published program to teach early reading. In addition to implementation, information on the structure of language was also presented to show ‘why’ not just ‘how.’

“When I had that training in Program X, that one two-day training, I feel like I learned more in that training about the structure of language and words and how to teach kids that were struggling, or just in general, about the parts of a word and how the words are made
up and put together. I think I got more out of that than I got out of definitely my undergrad and then in my graduate work.”

As an adult, the content of this training was new to Emma and she did not know how to teach it until she participated in this professional development. She took this knowledge with her to her current district and was able to apply it to their core phonics program. “Now I at least knew what a digraph was. And knew, a set of materials and resources that I could go to, even though that wasn't what we were using in the classroom. I could make that personal connection.”

**Ongoing self-directed professional development.** In relation to reading instruction and the structure of language, all of the participants are self-motivated, and engage in a variety of professional development during their own time, but most would like the district to provide professional development to support individual needs. Annie shared how she has tried to better understand the complexities of the reading process. “I've had to do my own reading and my own research. Summertime I always pick one book that I'm going to focus on.” Linda also reads and researches on an ongoing basis to support her understanding and would like to experience more learning. “Other than the regular PD that is worked into our schedules, I wish there was more of an opportunity for me to do more learning. I wish I had a little bit more of a choice in some of the things that I could do.”

**Teachers need more training aligned with the real world and their job expectations.**

When asked what would better help to prepare and support teachers, responses focused more on in-service rather than pre-service. This could be because this is more directly related to where participants are in life and their current work. When talking about pre-service, the focus was on courses, content and practice. In-service recommendations were focused on cohesion, collaboration and professional development.
**Pre-service.** All participants suggested there be a stronger emphasis on foundational knowledge as it relates to the reading process and reading instruction. Emma said it’s not just about learning strategies and creating activities and pre-service would be improved by “going back to the foundational skills and understanding of language, also knowing the five areas of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension and emphasizing them.” Annie also recommends that pre-service focus more on content knowledge. “It's not just about finding a good book and sharing your love of reading with kids. Teaching is more than inspiring. You need to have knowledge too.” Linda wonders if there is even a class that exists to address these concerns. “I wish I had taken more classes on how to teach reading, is there actually a class on how to teach it, with the phonics and all? I've actually heard some other teachers say similar things.”

In addition to a strong content and pedagogical knowledge base, observing and doing were considered important elements needed to improve pre-service. Quality was also mentioned. If students are observing practitioners, those practitioners should have content and pedagogical expertise. Practicum and cooperating teachers should not be selected based on availability or ease of access. For example, Annie said, “Students need to learn how a good reading teacher plans for the needs of her students. Whether that's through videos, or going into a lab classroom and actually watching what happens. Not just once. And they need to do it themselves.” Katherine also suggested that pre-service students would benefit from observing and practicing. She mentioned an internship as opposed to a practicum or student teaching experience where students have the opportunity to see a tremendous amount of expertise in action and be able to practice under those experts. “Experience is needed before you get started. I think spending time in classrooms, before you get in here, doing an internship, would be a huge benefit.” Katherine
bases this on her own experience in an internship before she had her own classroom and credits this experience for her successful transition from pre-service to in-service.

*In-service.* In this instance, in-service refers to the participant’s current context, which includes their roles within the district where they are all employed, as opposed to speaking about in-service needs of the general teaching population. Participants expressed a need for cohesion, cohesion in practice, knowledge materials and overall direction. Katherine summed this up by saying, “Everybody's doing something amazing but everybody's doing something amazingly different. I think everybody needs some sort of common vision. I feel like that's a major issue.”

Emma spoke to needing cohesive materials and approaches for reading instruction, which includes implementing the core phonics curriculum.

I feel like sometimes we’re given so much and not really putting any thought into what we’re being given, we’re just being given things so much in the sense of yes we are given a lot of books and it’s good for kids to read and re-read, but just have maybe some no nonsense tools or something, getting back to some kind of structure, like how do you do your Project Read warm up every day or just reviewing the breakdown of a typical Project Read lesson in the beginning of each year would be helpful to teachers to refocus that and put some more emphasis on the importance of it.

All participants indicated collaboration is a needed support for in-service teachers, from large cohorts to individuals collaborating with each other. Collaboration was also described in a vertical fashion, reaching to other grades and within and between schools. Collaboration between specialists and generalists was also suggested as a needed support.

Linda provides an example of the need and desire to collaborate, “Talking with other teachers within the district to make sure we're on the same page or getting their take on things
they're doing. I believe in collaboration and learning from other people, and I think that would be very helpful as a teacher.” Katherine discussed positive collaborative experiences from her previous district in the area of reading instruction and sees this type of collaboration as a needed support for in-service teachers. “I think that there's not enough time for people to sit down and really dig in deep to what it is that we're supposed to be doing. I think that if we had more time to collaborate, it would be really great.” She addressed the need to collaborate around the foundational standards (Common Core State Standards), which directly link to the structure of language, “When you think about teaching the foundations, that set of standards is so important and such huge stepping stones that it deserves a collaborative look.”

Maya spoke of collaboration in general and reflected on a time in her district when teachers collaborated at the district level. She valued collaborating at that level and believes it is still needed. “Those days where we got together at the grade level are gone and that's too bad because we could find out as a group what was working. I think there's power in our collective voices, as opposed to four teachers saying it to a principal who may or may not filter it in.”

Four out of the five participants identified collaboration with the reading specialist as a needed in-service support. Annie explained all that she is responsible for in a given day how this collaboration would support her and other teachers. Annie described looking at and interpreting assessments. “What information am I suppose to get out of this? I make my groups. I decide where I'm going to start. I'm not really sure if that's the best. I need the reading specialist sitting with us when we're having those conversations.” Linda practically mirrored Annie’s comment. “I would love time to sit down with the reading specialist and say, ‘hey, this is what I'm doing in my reading groups right now. Is this sufficient? How can I push this student or pull this student back?’ I mean, I teach everything. They have the craft honed.” Linda elaborated by indicating
there is only time reserved to work with grade level colleagues and time is also needed to
“collaborate with other people too, beyond common planning time with your team of teachers.

Uncertainty continues. All of the participants expressed that they continue to struggle
with content knowledge and pedagogy related to the structure of language. Without strong
proficiency in this area, the curriculum and related materials also contribute to this struggle and
leads to misunderstandings. Although most have participated in various professional
development over the years related to reading, they feel they are missing a deeper level of
understanding of the structure of language. Without that deeper level of understanding,
misinterpretations occur and are passed on to students. It is an ongoing process for teachers to
gain pedagogical content knowledge to the extent needed to feel fully competent in this area. “I
think it is probably one of my weakest points as a teacher,” said Annie.

Three of the five participants commented that they have never received professional
development in the district’s core phonics program for the grade they are now teaching or have
previously taught. This, paired with lack of instruction in this area during pre-service creates a
barrier to competence, delivering instruction and providing corrective feedback to students.
Katherine and Maya spoke to concerns about being able to provide accurate corrective feedback.
Katherine said, “I think pre-service for me, it was just the ideal. I never new what to do when it
didn't look like the right way.”

When discussing teaching with the current phonics core curriculum, all 5 participants
feel the curriculum is needed and are grateful for this tool, but believe they are missing a deep
enough foundational understanding of language to fully comprehend all the content and deliver it
with confidence. “I was glad, and I know a lot of other people were glad that the district was
finally realizing that this was a weak link in what we were doing,” said Maya. Maya also
explained that a 2-day summer training was provided by her district to learn this phonics program but no additional follow-up professional development was offered, which contributed to struggling with the curriculum when it was put into practice and over the years since implementation. “Then we were left to try to figure out what pieces of Project Read we wanted. There are so many components to it. So many different things it's overwhelming. If you tried to do every component of it, it would take over your whole day. Then again you're left to wonder, am I pulling the right things from it?”

Being unsure causes one to question their ability and judgment, and to say the least, leaves them feeling uncomfortable. Annie offered insight into this struggle, “It's very unclear right now for me where I'm supposed to start. I have to look at the students again and figure it out and even then, I don't know if I'm right. I don't know if the decision that I'm making is the best one. I don't have that guidance.”

Emma spoke about the need for knowledge of the structure of language and supported this by saying, “I would think that getting that whole foundational learning and understanding of reading and of words, parts of words, is needed, and even with the program that we have now, Project Read, I feel like it does go down to that level and tries to go deeper but I think it’s also masked because it’s not calling things (phonemes, concepts, etc.) by their real names.” Emma further explained this by providing the following example,

Instead of calling digraphs ‘digraphs,’ they call them ‘H Brothers’ and there is this whole thing about blends and mixing them in a bowl together. I feel like even teachers … I didn’t even have training in the program, so I just had to pick it up and go with it, but other teachers had gotten this whole training, and I think there’s a big misconception of
certain things (phonemes, concepts, etc.) within that program because of the names that they’ve given them.”

Annie agreed with Emma, “I think Project Read is good, but I think that it isn't deep enough. If they would give me PD I would say that I want that. I want to know that information. I want to be comfortable with it and I want to practice it and play with it.” Maya would also welcome ongoing support, “It doesn't feel good when you feel you're using parts of Project Read, you’re reading the manual, you're using all these different things. Really trying your best, but not quite sure.” Through Emma’s experiences as a student and as a teacher she continues to identify the need to “get that basic understanding of language structure” through a refresher. She wonders if it would be hard for teachers to accept needed this instruction themselves as new learning and states, “It’s either new learning or a refresher because I honestly think that it would be … Coming from someone who went and got their degree in reading, it would definitely be new learning for me.”

**Summary of Findings**

The findings in this chapter attempted to understand the perspectives of teachers on their experiences in pre-service teacher training programs in relation to early literacy instruction. The findings also attempted to better understand, from teachers’ perspectives, what would better prepare and support teachers to provide early reading instruction. Although each participant described in detail, their own unique experiences, several similarities in experiences and perspectives were present.

In particular, all participants enjoyed their pre-service experiences but upon entering the in-service world they realized they hadn’t been fully prepared for the job. Over time they would also come to learn they were not provided with the knowledge and tools to provide effective
early reading instruction. Their pre-service programs primarily focused on children’s literature, methods courses and lesson planning. Participants have depended on professional development to gain knowledge and hone their skills. Even with the support of professional development, participants continue to question their abilities related to content and pedagogy of reading instruction.
Chapter V: Discussion of the Research Findings

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

Along with teaching other subject areas, teachers of elementary grades, especially those teaching grades Kindergarten to three, are responsible for teaching their students how to read. This is a tremendous responsibility with severe consequences for students who do not meet with success. Students who are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to not graduate from high school than their peers who are reading proficiently by the end of third grade (Fiester, 2013). Teachers need to be provided with knowledge in the structure of the English language as well as pedagogical knowledge to effectively provide effective reading instruction.

Are teachers being fully prepared to teach reading through their pre-service programs? According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2015) 36% percent of fourth grade students across the country are currently reading at a proficient level. This information is not only discouraging but also alarming. Knowing more about teachers’ experiences in their pre-service programs will provide a better understanding of how teachers are being prepared to teach reading, as well as identifying challenges or issues when translating this preparation to real world practice.

Review of Methodology

This study was specifically designed to answer the following two research questions:

1. How do elementary teachers in a school district in Rhode Island describe their experiences with pre-service reading instruction preparation and how do they make sense of those experiences, and others, that have prepared them to teach reading?

2. What additional opportunities and knowledge do elementary teachers perceive would
better prepare in-service teachers to be effective teachers of early literacy?

To answer these questions an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was conducted to explore the experiences of a common phenomenon, participating in a pre-service program, with five elementary school teachers from a small school district in Rhode Island who teach Kindergarten or grades one, two or three. Their experiences were explored through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Participants’ responses were transcribed and read and reread to explore and identify emerging common themes across these experiences.

While Chapter 4 provided the data of the study through the presentation of themes along with the provision of illustrative quotes from the participants, this chapter will provide the following: the presentation and discussion of key findings, as identified by the researcher; a discussion of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework; a discussion of the findings in relation to the literature review; implications for practice; limitations; conclusion; future studies and significance.

**Discussion of Key Findings**

The participants recounted their experiences related to pre-service teacher training programs, as well as other training opportunities, with a specific focus on preparation to provide early reading instruction. Through deep analysis of the interview transcripts, the following key findings, as presented in Table 4, emerged through the participants’ stories of their experiences.

Table 4

**Key Findings**

- Teachers’ pre-service education was enjoyable
- Teachers felt that their pre-service education didn’t fully prepare them to teach reading once they were in the classroom
- Teachers professional development after graduation filled the gaps
Teachers’ pre-service education was enjoyable. Teachers’ pre-service education was clearly a great experience for all of the participants of this study. They were impressed and inspired by their instructors, enjoyed their classes, collaborating with classmates to create hands-on projects, and they loved fieldwork. Emma especially enjoyed her practicum, “In college, I really liked the practicum piece, where you would go out into the field and do observations, and learn in the classroom with teachers that worked closely with the college.” Participants also enjoyed the overall experience of their school and their classes. Maya shared this, “I did love college. I had a great experience. I loved my university. My days were really fun and I loved the teachers there too.”

Of all of their classes, every participant stated Children’s Literature was their favorite. Although three different learning institutions were represented, all had a very similar experience in their Children’s Literature course. This is where they were exposed to a wide variety of text from picture books to chapter books. These books were used to create lessons that focused on various levels of comprehension. Their instructors even read aloud to them! Linda and Katherine loved being introduced to new books and looked forward to someday being able to share them with their own students. “It was an excellent class. It was a really fun, light atmosphere,” said Linda.

Fieldwork gradually introduced them to the trenches by first allowing them to observe, then conduct small group lessons with a partner, and finally, engage in a half year of student teaching. The four participants who were required to participate in practicum work indicated this is where they learned the most about teaching. This where they also learned to collaborate with partners and small groups to create lessons, reflect and provide feedback to each other. They also learned to trust in their teaching partners as they shared the responsibility of creating materials
and providing instruction in the field. In a sense, they were preparing for the type of professional interaction required as part of professional learning communities.

**After being in the classroom, these teachers’ did not feel that their pre-service education fully prepared them to teach reading.** The real world of being a classroom teacher was both surprising and somewhat unfamiliar to the participants. The trade books they had learned about in Children’s Literature did not fill their shelves and they would not be the primary teaching source for reading. They were handed curriculum, usually a basal, and followed the script. There was no need to create lesson plans. Most of the participants had not been exposed to basals or formal curriculum during their pre-service training. They “blindly” followed the teacher’s manuals and hoped for the best. Emma did encounter a basal series during her student teaching experience but prior to that, there was no mention of basals during her pre-service coursework.

Initially, Annie wasn’t sure if being unprepared was just a result of location. Her pre-service training took place on the east coast and now she was on the west coast, responsible for a multi-age classroom of 4th and 5th graders. When she was hired, she received two basals, one for each grade she would be teaching. She immediately scanned the teacher’s manuals to get the gist of them. She decided the best way to approach this new experience was to meet with all the 4th graders at once and then meet with all the 5th graders. Based on his or her grade, every student would do the same thing during reading instruction.

Phonics was just as foreign to participants as basal readers. Most of the basals that were described during interviews did not have a specific phonics program but they did have a spelling component. This component usually offered weekly spelling lists for students to “memorize” so
they could take a test on the words at the end of the week. Most of the participants didn’t come across phonics instruction until they had been teaching for several years.

Emma realized how much she didn’t know about the structure of language and phonics when she participated in professional development as part of her role as a reading specialist in a different district. The district would be implementing a published program that provided instruction in the five areas of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension) but was heavily focused on the structure of language. Emma was initially confused by this professional development and needed time to reflect to make sense out of what she didn’t know, realizing how that lack of knowledge had been impacting her instructional decision making and her instructional practice. She was also frustrated that she hadn’t learned these foundational skills of reading earlier.

**After they entered the profession, then professional development filled the gaps in their knowledge and skills for teaching reading.** The teachers in this study stated that they depended greatly on professional development to improve their understanding and practice of the structure of English language to teach phonics. Some of this professional development was offered through their current and past school districts. They have also sought out professional development on their own such as attending workshops, researching via the internet, working with their reading specialists, and reading self-selected books and articles.

However, each participant stated that professional development through their current school district has been inconsistent and without ongoing support. For example, some participants received an initial two-day training for their current phonics curriculum, but there hasn’t been follow-up training based on teachers’ need. Additionally, teachers new to the district
or teachers who have moved to a new grade level have never received training in the districts’ phonics program and are left to manage on their own.

Each of these teachers stated that they do their best to navigate the phonics curriculum such as meeting with their building’s reading specialist for group and individual support, reaching out to colleagues and sometimes attending professional development on a weekend or during the summer that is paid for by teachers. However, being unsure, or simply not knowing the information presented in the phonics curriculum, has left some teachers feeling vulnerable and less than capable. Learning with and from trusted colleagues such as their same grade level teachers and reading specialists has been helpful, but there is not sufficient or scheduled time for this.

Participants who had received professional development form their current school district are grateful for the initial information but are frustrated with the lack of ongoing support in this area. Katherine and Emma were fortunate to receive high quality professional development form previous districts that was mapped out and based on the needs of the district and students and their teachers. Katherine describes her monthly literacy meetings with her building’s reading specialist as an authentic form of professional development that met an ongoing need.

**Summary.** In short, while each of the four participants in this study enjoyed their pre-service education, once in the classroom, they did not feel it fully prepared them to teach reading. They had to rely on their district’s professional development, support and guidance from colleagues, and their own pursuit of information and professional development to adequately serve their students.
Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework

Two theories comprising the theoretical framework for this study included transformative learning theory and andragogy theory. Both theories emphasize adult learning and the significance placed on what is being learned. Transformative learning speaks to the processes adult learners go through that involve specific phases along with questioning and critical reflection. Andragogy provides a lens to view how and why adults engage in learning.

**Transformative learning theory.** Transformative learning theory is a constructivist, adult learning theory with its roots in psychology (Mezirow, 1978b). Mezirow’s theory explains shifts in points of view or meaning perspectives through critical reflection. The process of transformative learning begins when adults perceive their current frame of reference or meaning perspective to be problematic, or they are experiencing what Mezirow refers to as a disorienting dilemma.

Teachers are constantly being presented with dilemmas, but not all will lead them to question their current perspectives. For example, teachers from this study who were entering the field right out of their pre-service programs were certainly perplexed when they were presented with basal readers and formal curriculum but it wasn’t disorienting in the sense that it questioned deep rooted perspectives about reading instruction. Their perspectives on reading instruction were newly developing and consisted of their own personal experiences with learning how to read and what they learned in their methods and children’s literature classes. The participants in this study didn’t question the materials they were provided with as novice teachers. Although they were unfamiliar with them, they accepted them and gladly used them as best they could.

As time moved along in their teaching careers, some of the participants did begin to question how and what they were being asked to teach in relation to reading instruction. Three of
the five participants described transformative learning experiences, one participant did not
describe her experiences as being transformative and one participant’s description of her
experiences would consider her to be moving through the phases of transformative learning this
year.

During our interviews, Emma spoke passionately about a professional development
experience that occurred while she was a reading specialist for a year in a different district. This
was her first experience learning about the structure of language. That experience would guide
her through transformative learning and would remain a constant when reflecting on her own
teaching and learning.

When Emma returned to her current district she went back to implementing a basal series
and the district’s core phonics program. The knowledge she had gained from that specific
professional development conflicted with the curriculum and her own instructional practices. She
was no longer sure of her perspective on teaching phonics in a habitual fashion. She also
recognized her perspective was changing when she noticed the spelling lists she and her grade
level colleagues were creating included words with patterns they had not yet taught. As she said,
“I didn’t realize that at the time. Now looking back on it, it didn’t really make any sense.” Emma
would continue to recognize other pieces of the phonics curriculum that didn’t make sense and
refused to habitually deliver instruction. Instead, she would reflect and engage in dialogue with
her grade level peers and the reading specialist. Her practice looks very different now than it did
a couple of years ago. She no longer uses spelling lists, is very reflective and purposeful when
choosing examples of patterns in the English language and has definitely taken on a change in
her perspective of reading instruction. She states this change occurred over time and solidified
approximately two or three years ago. She also expressed that this change in perspective is
permanent for her and continues to evolve as she is always learning and gaining confidence in her own knowledge of the structure of language.

Annie and Katherine have also experienced transformative learning related to reading instruction, but at different paces and within different contexts. Annie’s perspective on reading had been in the context of grades 4 and 5 where comprehension was the main focus. If any students struggled to actually read, a specialist would pull them out of her class and provide this service. Since Annie did not learn how to teach reading in her pre-service program, this arrangement worked well for her, until she transferred to 3rd grade. When she arrived in third grade, a new curriculum was being implemented to teach phonics. Once she and her colleagues began to share concerns and reflect on their own lack of knowledge they decided that they needed to not only learn the content, but also how to teach the content. They took action by enlisting the building’s reading specialist to teach them phonics. Annie considers herself to still be in the process of change and states that phonics and the structure of language is her weakest area as a teacher. She would like to build her competence, which in turn, will build her self-confidence.

Katherine’s journey through the transformative learning process began when her previous district engaged in systemic change related to literacy. The district had a disorienting dilemma, poor student performance on high stakes testing in reading and writing, which they shared with teachers. Although Katherine did not learn how to teach reading during her pre-service years, she had been exposed to various systematic approaches to reading instruction while she served as a building substitute for one year. During that time, Katherine did not put much thought into what made these approaches successful or not. When she moved on to her next job, she was provided with curriculum and materials for reading. She did not really have a perspective on reading
instruction. She never asked questions. She followed the scope and sequence and the teacher’s manual. This continued for several years but would be disrupted with her district’s change initiative around literacy.

Katherine was exposed to reading research, best practice and continuous professional development. She and her colleagues reflected on past and present practices through dialogue and work with their reading specialist. They were not just learning how to implement curriculum, they were learning criteria for why they would select particular curriculum. Katherine gained deep knowledge and practice skills and feels very confident in her abilities. She stated that she could never return to “blindly” using curriculum.

Maya has also been exposed to a variety of reading curriculum during her twenty years of teaching. She did not learn how to teach reading during pre-service and views the school district as being responsible for making decisions about curriculum. Her exposure to different curriculum and professional development has not been transformative for her. Maya did not reveal any dilemmas over the years that would be considered disorienting. Her dilemmas centered on having to learn new curriculum and being overwhelmed and frustrated by materials and resources not being easily accessible and user friendly. She would like to improve her knowledge and skills on the structure of language by engaging with her same grade level peers across the district, but doesn’t believe her district places value on this type of collegial interaction.

This is Sam’s first year as a public school Kindergarten teacher and she appears to be moving through the stages of transformative learning. When she started working as a building intern last year, she almost immediately questioned why she had never learned what she was being asked to do. She was open to different perspectives and welcomed the professional
development she received from the reading specialist, almost weekly, to meet the needs of the students she was working with. Her knowledge, skills and confidence grew. Her students also made tremendous progress. Now that she has her own classroom, Sam is utilizing all she learned the previous year, building her competence and self-confidence.

**Andragogy.** Andragogy is an adult learning theory that explains how and why adults learn. In order for adults to engage in learning they need content to be relevant and immediately applicable to their personal or professional lives. Adults learn best when they are involved in the planning and when learning is problem centered. All of the participants in this study participated in their pre-service programs expecting that what they were learning would be relevant and applicable to their anticipated professional roles as teachers. In a sense, they also participated in planning this learning because they selected their major and the classes required.

In their professional roles as teachers, participants were often presented with professional development. Often, but not always the content would be relevant and applicable but participants could not recall being involved with planning their learning. Through the participant’s stories, they revealed the desire to be involved in deciding on professional development offerings and they want that professional development to be relevant and applicable.

What is relevant to a school district and what is relevant to teachers may not have the same meaning. School districts usually plan one-size fits all for various grade levels or groups of teachers that address district wide goals and improvement plans. This allows districts to target specific curriculum areas or to easily disseminate information in a cost effective manner. Teachers often have particular professional development needs that support district goals and school improvement plans, but are more individual or group specific.
For example, Emma, Sam and Katherine have never received professional development related to the district’s core phonics curriculum. All three have expressed a desire and need to learn this information. As adult learners, this information is very relevant and applicable to their daily professional roles and a high value is placed on the content. Emma, Sam and Katherine recognize this lack of training as a problem but there are no procedures or supports in place to meet the needs of these adult learners, which in turn, will meet the needs of students.

All participants indicated they would like ongoing professional development in the structure of language to support the district’s core phonics curriculum. They have self-identified this as an area that needs problem solving around content. As adult learners, the participants view this content as relevant, applicable and highly valued. They consult with their reading specialists but would like the time formalized to meet their needs.

Katherine experienced an environment that was very in tune to the needs of adult learners while working in a different district for several years. She described ongoing professional development opportunities on a monthly basis. These opportunities were based on major curriculum areas and district initiatives and were facilitated by district specialists and administrators. She recalls this ongoing work as collaborative, relevant and immediately applicable. Katherine also recalls value being placed on dialogue, reflection and small groups of teachers solving problems together as professional learning communities. She misses theses aspects of her former district.

**Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Literature Review**

The findings from this study strongly align with the literature as presented in Chapter 2. What follows is a presentation of those connections.

**What do teachers know or think they know?** The body of literature detailing what teachers know or think they know about the structure of language clearly indicates that most
teachers have little knowledge of the concepts of the structure of language. Most teachers expressed frustration related to their limited knowledge of language structure and wondered why they had never been taught these skills in the past. These sentiments also rang true for the participants of this study. Teachers in this study thought they knew enough from their children’s literature class to teach reading and were surprised to find a different world waiting for them.

Results of one particular study presented alarming information and insight into why many children may struggle to learn to read. It appears that poor instruction could be a major factor. If teachers are uninformed and lacking basic skills, they will provide misinformation to students and not be able to teach these skills. Participants in this study clearly expressed their lack of knowledge related to the structure of language, especially when they first heard words such as diphthong and digraph, and had no idea what they were.

During an interview, Emma elaborated on her concern about teachers misinterpreting phonics curriculum and then providing misinformation to students because they are simply unaware and lack the necessary knowledge to not only provide instruction, but to provide accurate corrective feedback.

**What are the implications for professional development?** Teachers need support to improve their knowledge and apply it to their daily practice with the intent of increasing student outcomes. Teachers who participated in this study echoed this sentiment. Participants want to improve their knowledge and skills and they want support to make this happen. Most of the research in this area featured summer courses or year round professional development that occurred after school. Both of these options might be feasible for the district where all the participants are from but because of the hours, it would be considered voluntary and not able to meet the needs of all.
Other research utilized mentors for teachers and focused on entry points for professional development for teachers. Although participants identified that they need more training in the structure of the English language, and consider it a weakness, none of the participants could verbalize their individual weak areas. This is consistent with the current body of research. One way to identify teacher entry points is to provide a survey and then sort the teachers by area of need or greatest areas of need per grade level. This would target professional development in a more individualized fashion.

**How are future teachers being prepared to teach reading?** Although teacher certification and licensing procedures vary from state to state, the traditional path to becoming a teacher has been to earn a four-year undergraduate degree, take necessary state certification tests, pass, and then jump into a classroom. Participant’s experiences in their pre-service programs aligned with this current research. Just as participant’s experiences varied from school to school, teacher preparation programs vary from state to state. The education that future teachers are receiving through higher education appears to be questionable and inconsistent within and across schools throughout our country (Moats, 2009).

Participants in this study recall children’s literature as their favorite course and the most memorable. Although children’s literature is important it seems to be weighted heavily by schools of education with many schools considering a methods course, as opposed to teaching the structure of language. It appears that these schools are ignoring current research and perpetuating the myth that reading is a natural process that only requires motivation and exposure to children’s literature to become proficient (Moats, 2005).

Katherine had an interesting suggestion for teacher preparation. She described an internship instead of a half-year student teaching placement. She bases this on her one year
experience as a building substitute, which she believes every teacher should have the opportunity to experience. During this internship, teachers would not be responsible to “taking over” a single classroom. They would have an entire year of observing, teaching small groups, working with mentor teachers, participating in professional development and taking over classes in different grade levels as a substitute. This would allow time in the trenches surrounded by a support system.

**Implications for Practice**

There are many implications for practice to be considered. School districts should not assume teachers know how to teach reading. Consistent supports should be put into place such as professional development that directly corresponds to what teachers are being asked to do. Districts also need to be aware that there will be new hires and teachers who move to different grade levels. This requires a professional development plan to be in place to ensure that all teachers are receiving the training in the curriculum they are required to use so they can deliver effective instruction.

One-time trainings are not sufficient for teachers to master and skillfully implement reading instruction. The reading process and the structure of language are very complex. Ongoing, scheduled professional development opportunities should be made available to all teachers.

School districts need to be cognizant of the needs of adult learners. Districts need to reach out to teachers and listen to what it is they need. As adults, teachers should have a voice in planning their professional development to ensure it will be relevant and immediately useful. Teachers need to see the value in what they are being asked to due. Often, planning and directives come from places that are far removed from the work that takes place in classrooms.
Limitations

The small sample size of this IPA study impacts the ability to generalize findings to larger groups. It’s important to keep in mind that the intent of IPA and qualitative research is not to generalize, but instead, to capture rich, detailed accounts of particular lived experiences. This study met these criteria by conducting interviews that produced large amounts of transcript data about experiences related to teacher preparation programs. Although generalization may be considered a limitation of this study, the results of this study can lead to the question of whether the shared experiences of this small group of teachers may not be the case across many more teachers in similar contexts.

Information gained through interviews may be considered a limitation because it was provided second-hand from participants and was filtered through their recollections over time. The researcher took careful precautions to reduce this limitation by following an interview guide with prompts and probes and using informal member checking by frequently restating their responses and asking for clarification.

A novice researcher is often considered a limitation due to developing skills and lack of experience. The researcher designed this study according to qualitative and IPA standards. An expert primary investigator who provided ongoing support and recommendations also guided the researcher.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because teachers need to be provided with the necessary knowledge and skills to teach reading or we will continue to see little to no improvement in our nation’s reading achievement. Teacher training programs are responsible for providing teachers with this knowledge and the skills to provide effective reading instruction but there seems to be a disconnect between preparation and real world practice. And, if the experience of the teacher
participants in this study is true of other teachers, they are then left to rely on the professional
development of their schools or districts, colleagues, or their own self-study to obtain the
information that can be used to ensure their success in the classroom.

Students who are not reading proficiently by the end of grade 3 rarely catch-up (Adams,
1990; Moats, 1999; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Without adequate instruction or remediation
from highly knowledgeable and highly skilled teachers, these students will continue to
experience reading failure as well as secondary consequences. Reading failure limits access to
knowledge and impacts success in school and within society. It is associated with low self-
confidence, poor motivation, frustration and anxiety and poor long-term school performance
(Adams, 1990; Hall & Moats, 1999). Reading failure is also associated with higher dropout rates,

Conclusion

The research questions that directed this study were ‘How do elementary teachers in a
school district in Rhode Island describe their experiences with pre-service reading instruction
preparation and how do they make sense of those experiences, and others, that have prepared
them to teach reading?’ and ‘What additional opportunities and knowledge do elementary
teachers perceive would better prepare in-service teachers to be effective teachers of early
literacy?’ Although all of the participants thoroughly enjoyed their pre-service experiences they
weren’t able to identify what they didn’t know until they entered the real world and became
responsible for delivering reading instruction. They were clearly disappointed to discover they
were lacking significant content knowledge in the structure of language.

The participants have been supported in the area phonics and the structure of language
through professional development but this professional development hasn’t been sufficient
enough to adequately develop their skills. The type of professional development teachers need has not been recognized by the district as valuable enough to give it time and attention. Teachers continue to find their own way, just as they did when they first entered the field.

**Future Studies**

There is still more that can be learned about teachers’ experiences in their teacher preparation programs in relation to be prepared to provide effective reading instruction. Surveys offer an opportunity to capture information from larger groups. A larger sample size of in-service teachers within a school district and across districts in the state could be surveyed to learn more about their pre-service experiences. Recent graduates from pre-service programs could be surveyed to learn more about the content they are learning to compare to the content participants from this study were exposed to. Focus groups could explore what else is needed to better prepare and support teachers of reading.

**Personal Reflection**

As an educator, the reason I did this study is because I wanted to know if other educators had similar experiences to my own in their teacher preparation programs. More specifically, I wanted to know how they felt about their preparation to teach reading. I remember learning the language experience method, which focused on student background knowledge. Students would dictate stories based on their experiences. Incidental learning of words and word parts were based on these stories. I also learned about basal readers.

During my methods classes, I spent a lot of time writing lesson plans and preparing lessons by gathering needed materials and practicing with classmates. But I never learned how to teach someone how to read. It seemed all my preparation classes assumed students were already readers, or would learn to read through incidental experiences. My role was to enhance
background knowledge and provide quality literature to support incidental learning. I never learned about sub skills such as phonics. As an aside, I had taken a linguistics course as an elective during my undergraduate program and loved it, but never associated what I was learning in this class to reading instruction.

I graduated from college in the mid 80s when whole language was emerging as the latest educational method. It seemed similar to the language experience approach I had learned so being young and new to the profession I wanted to be on the cutting edge of my field. I began attending any and all professional development trainings and read the prominent works of the whole language gurus of the time. I became quite skilled in whole language practices and carried on in this manner for about ten years.

By being in the right place at the right time, I was able to participate in a professional development experience that would lead to my own transformative learning experience. While I was working for a collaborative, the district where my classroom was located was offering training in Wilson Reading with certification. It would be a yearlong endeavor and a significant commitment involving a supervised student teaching component. It was during this training that my mind was opened to the structure of language and I began questioning my own practices and beliefs. During this time I was also introduced to the science of reading which also made me question my methods. I was working with some of the neediest students, students that districts had determined they could no longer effectively serve so they were provided with outside placements such as the collaborative. Witnessing the progress of a particular student during my student teaching component of this training was all I needed to put this new learning into consistent practice and become a better-informed consumer of educational practices in reading instruction.
This study was important because it revealed that teacher preparation programs continue to provide questionable information and methods to pre-service teachers. One participant completed her course work only five years ago. She learned what I was learning 30 years ago. How do we rectify this situation? Are teacher preparation programs antiquated and need to be overhauled or should school districts be responsible for job embedded professional development? Maybe both? Clearly, the current model of teacher preparation in our state is not effectively producing teachers who know how to teach reading. This is not only an injustice to pre-service college students, but to the students they will be teaching.

Educational reforms and instructional practices in general are constantly in flux so it would seem difficult for teacher preparation programs to keep up with these real world changes in real time.

I hope to use the results of my study to benefit my school district. I’m sure administrators would be very surprised by the results. Most administrators, even those who are building based, are far removed from the actual work of teachers, and even further removed from what teachers know or don’t know. We cannot change the information teachers’ come to our district with, but we can provide needed supports to increase their knowledge and improve student outcomes.
References


158.


No Child Left Behind Act (2001) Public Law 107-110, US Department of Education


Appendix

Interview Questions

Participant Pseudonym:___________________________________________________

Date:___________________________________________________________________

Location:________________________________________________________________

Interviewer: Dawn Feeley Carusi

Interview I: Establishing Context

1. Where did you attend school?

2. How long have you been teaching?

3. What grade do you currently teach?

4. What is the highest degree you have earned?

5. What is your age?

6. Describe how you came to be a teacher.
Interview II:  Reconstructing Details

1. Think back to your teacher preparation program; please describe what it was like from your perspective as a student?

2. Now think about a specific course in this program related to reading, describe that experience.
   a. What did you learn?
   b. How did you learn?
   c. What did the information in this course mean to you?

3. Tell me about your first teaching experience that involved teaching reading.

4. How did what you learned in your teacher preparation program fit into this new experience?

5. Now that you have X number of years of experience teaching reading describe how your instructional practices have changed over time.

Interview III:  Reflecting

1. Given what you have said about your experiences to become a teacher of reading, how do you make sense of these experiences?

2. What opportunities would better prepare and support teachers of reading?

3. Is there anything else you would like to share?