“The Lived Experience of School Psychologists in Assessing for Reading Difficulties in the Aftermath of Response to Intervention”

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# Contents

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. 6

Abstract .................................................................................................................................. 8

Chapter 1 .................................................................................................................................. 9

Context and Background ........................................................................................................ 9

Rationale and Significance of the Study .................................................................................. 13

Research Question .................................................................................................................. 16

Definition of Terms ................................................................................................................ 17

Theoretical Framework .......................................................................................................... 19

Rationale for Using Decision-making Theory ......................................................................... 21

Critics of Decision-making Theory ........................................................................................ 22

Chapter 2 ................................................................................................................................ 25

Review of the Literature ......................................................................................................... 25

State and Federal Regulations in the Identification of a Specific Learning Disability .......... 26

The Four-Stage Process of Disability Identification .............................................................. 28

Identification Procedures Using the Aptitude Achievement Discrepancy Model ................. 28

Efficacy of the Aptitude-Achievement Discrepancy Model in the Assessment of Reading ...... 31

IQ achievement discrepancy .................................................................................................... 31

Reading as a Language Based Skill ....................................................................................... 33

Key Components Identified in Reading ................................................................................ 34
Response to Intervention

The Role of the School Psychologist in Reading Assessment

Importance of Phonological Processing skills

Implications for Alternative Assessments by School Psychologists

Changing Role of School Psychologists

Summary

Chapter 3: Research Design

Research Tradition

Hermeneutics

Idiography

Participants

Data Collection

Data Storage

Data Analysis

Data Analysis Process

Reading and Rereading

Initial Coding

Developing Emergent Themes

Connection across Emergent Themes

Moving to the Next Case
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

Superordinate Theme 1: Confidence through Collaboration

Superordinate Theme 2: Confidence through Role Definition

Superordinate Theme 4: Accomplishment through Comprehensive Assessment

Conclusion

Chapter 5: Analysis, Implications and Recommendations

Contribution to the Research

Confidence through Role Definition

Building Confidence over Time

Accomplishment through Comprehensive Assessment

Connections to the Theory of Decisions-Making

Confidence through Collaboration

Confidence through Role Definition

Accomplishment through Comprehensive Assessment
Conclusion..........................................................................................................................131
Recommendations for Practice.........................................................................................134
Limitations of the Study..................................................................................................136
Recommendations for Future Research ........................................................................137
References........................................................................................................................139
Appendix A......................................................................................................................149
Appendix B......................................................................................................................153
Appendix C......................................................................................................................154
Appendix D......................................................................................................................155
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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of twelve licensed school psychologists responsible for the assessment of children in grades kindergarten through grades five in a public school setting. A qualitative research methodology was employed using interpretative phenomenological analysis given that this approach is recommended for studies involving individual’s experiencing a phenomenological change.

The decision-making theory guided the research question: How do school psychologists make sense of and explain their experience in selecting the appropriate assessment for reading problems of K-5 students?

The study revealed that school psychologists relied on the team process and collaboration with reading specialists and special education teachers when deciding how to assess students for reading failure. This study confirmed that school psychologists feel highly qualified and trained to administer and interpret cognitive assessments and are less confident regarding reading assessments and interventions. Furthermore, this study revealed that school psychologists do not value traditional aptitude-achievement assessments to determine reading disabilities and supplement these assessments to ensure accurate data; findings which may warrant further investigation. This study confirmed that school psychologists have confidence in the cognitive assessment and rely on this data to inform their recommendations for students with suspected reading disabilities. Moreover, this study confirmed that school psychologists value RTI efforts and use the data to assist students. Results of this study found that school psychologists continue to struggle with their role in the development and implementation of response-to-intervention efforts and often feel underutilized in those efforts.
Chapter 1

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis was to understand how twelve school psychologists make sense of the experience of choosing the appropriate assessment for K-5 students who may have reading disabilities. Results of this study provide information regarding how school psychologists make sense of the decision-making process on alternatives and traditional assessment and how this impacts their practice when assessing K-5 students for reading problems (Simon, 1993).

This chapter begins with an overview of the context and background of the problem of practice, followed by a discussion of the rationale for and the significance of the study. The research problem, statement of purpose with the research question of this study will follow. Definitions of key terminology used in this study will be identified. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the theoretical framework that guides this study.

Context and Background

Recent changes in the laws governing special education including IDEA 2004 have implication the role of the school psychologist, specifically in the approaches to evaluation of students with suspected reading disabilities. For the practicing school psychologist, the proper assessment for the identification of specific learning disabilities, particularly in the area of reading in grades K-5, is a serious responsibility (Little, 2013; Machek & Nelson, 2010). Failure to acquire basic reading skill in these grades is the most common reason for referral for special education evaluations conducted by school psychologists (Bell, McCallum, & Cox, 2003). Approximately 80% of students identified with learning disabilities are in the areas of reading (Bell et al., 2003). Given the high percentage of students with inadequate reading skills, school psychologists are often required to assess students in order to identify a specific learning
disability, which provides access to special education services to remediate the problem (Chafloulus, Riley-Tillman & Eckert, 2003). When students fail to learn to read as part of a comprehensive program for a specific learning disability, school psychologists must consider numerous factors (environmental factors, attendance, previous interventions including Title I reading instruction and differentiated instruction in the classroom prior to referral for evaluation) in order to choose appropriate assessments.

The purpose of all assessments is to identify acquired skills and target instruction to remediate weak skills. For the school psychologist the purpose of assessment is to identify an educational disability, which is the underlying reason for any unexpected underachievement (Hale, Kaufman, Naglieri, & Kavale, 2006). Therefore, the proper choice of evaluation is critical to ensure alignment between referral questions and proper identification of issues in order to remediate skill deficits and subsequent lack of academic achievement.

The field of special education, and subsequently school psychologists, are facing significant policy and practice debates regarding the identification procedures for specific learning disabilities particularly in the area of reading (Kavale, Kauffman, Bachmeier & LeFever, 2008; Little, 2013; Marrs & Little, 2014).

Since reading failure falls under the broad category of specific learning disability, school psychologists are experiencing professional pressure to adhere to two different approaches to identify and remediate suspected reading disabilities. The concept of unexpected underachievement is the central diagnostic criteria for identification of a learning disability (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Historically the definition of learning disabilities was nebulous and provided insufficient identification criteria that explicitly identified disorders and was universally accepted by scholars and educational researchers (Donovan & Cross, 2002). In 1977, the federal
government passed legislation to rectify this and establish classification criteria for the identification of specific learning disabilities that included a discrepancy between intelligence and achievement, which became the aptitude achievement discrepancy model (Donovan & Cross, 2002, p. 225). Significant data has shown that this model often fails to identify children until they have been struggling academically for up to two or three years (Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly, & Vaughn, 2004; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). In terms of reading, reliance on this discrepancy model is problematic on two levels. First, the discrepancy model fails to adequately identify students at risk for reading failure earlier than age nine; while research has identified screening methods that can identify risk as early as age 5 (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Second, neurobiological research using brain imaging has identified phonological processing as the biological reason for reading problems; something not measured with a traditional intelligence scale. Coyne and Harn (2006) in their study promote a four purpose early literacy assessment with students at risk for long-term reading difficulty. Utilizing case study they measured students in grades K through 3 in one elementary school and strategically focused efforts on prevention reading difficulties through early identification and reading intervention and progress monitoring. Results indicate that scientific advances can provide critical information and assist in providing schools with access to information to help their students. They recommend that school psychologists play a vital role in helping schools to advance the assessment process beyond the aptitude achievement discrepancy model and play a leadership role in the implementation of a comprehensive assessment system. Frijters et al., (2011), in a study on neurocognitive predictors of reading outcomes for children with reading disabilities, reported on several neurocognitive processes as predictors of reading outcomes. Their findings indicated that phonological processing and rapid naming were predictors of early literacy ability. Furthermore, they found
that the conceptualization of young children with reading difficulties may need to be based on more than one skill. Limitations of their study include particular interventions across participants was not targeted and that the analysis did not consider interactions of cognitive and neuropsychological predictors of specific interventions. Thus, the I.Q. test results and the discrepancy between intelligence and underachievement have little significance for identifying and remediating reading problems (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Shaywitz, 2003).

Special education has been facing a change in how to approach assessment and remediation for reading problems in public schools with the advent of a comprehensive curriculum-based process called Response-to-Intervention (RTI). This process utilizes a problem-solving framework to identify and address reading problems (Kavale et al., 2008). The RTI model focuses on the use of effective instruction and progress monitoring of student achievement rather than the identification of a disability of a given students. Effective implementation of evidence-based instruction results in higher achievement and a reduction in referrals for special education assessments (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Kavale et al., 2008).

The traditional methodology for school psychologists to assess students for reading problems has been the use of standardized, norm-referenced intellectual assessments with achievement measures (Chafouleas et al., 2003; Little, 2013; Restori, Gresham, & Cook, 2008). These standardized intellectual assessments do not measure the underlying phonological processes, which impacts early reading acquisition (Torgesen, 2002; Wagner & Torgesen, 1987).

Previous research (Bell et al., 2003) has focused on the efficacy of this aptitude achievement discrepancy model, the response-to-intervention (RTI) model, or the combination of the two, none of which measure the underlying processes involved in reading, which has been identified as phonological processing (Kavale et al., 2008; Shaywitz, 2003). There remains a
lack of research on school psychologists’ perspectives of research in reading and traditional assessments in order to identify specific learning disabilities in reading. While the debate continues regarding the I.Q. achievement discrepancy for identifying disabilities, few studies have looked at how school psychologists integrate current research on early reading acquisition and how they perceive methods to help identify disabilities. Therefore, this study seeks to understand how school psychologists make sense of traditional and alternative assessments and current research on reading acquisition when assessing K-5 students for reading problems.

**Rationale and Significance of the Study**

The rationale for this study is demonstrated in the changing roles of school psychologists and their perception of competence in reading assessment with the changes in state and federal laws regarding the assessment for learning disabilities. The reauthorization of IDEA 2004 has changed the requirements for the assessment of learning disabilities including reading disabilities. The importance of the development of school psychologist’s knowledge in these changes and the assessment of reading disabilities has been explored in previous studies and underlies the importance of the understanding of academic domains like reading (Fish & Margolis, 1988). The need to examine the experiences of school psychologists in adapting to these changes is compelling as there are significant differences in perspectives in the assessment and identification of students with reading disability. It is often unknown the experiences of school psychologists about the benefits and disadvantages of identifying students with reading disabilities using the aptitude/achievement discrepancy model versus the response to intervention model. Their experience in the decision-making process for choosing assessment is important given the high percentage of students referred to school psychologists for an evaluation for reading. Previous studies have focused on assessing school psychologists through survey to
ascertain their attitudes and practices in reading assessment (Fish & Margolis, 1988). The purpose of the study was to examine the lived experience of school psychologist in the decision-making process within the context of changes to the field may provide richer, in-depth information regarding their experiences with choosing the assessment approach for reading.

Fish and Margolis (1988) surveyed and examined the training, attitudes and practices of 151 school psychologists in the assessment of reading. All surveyed school psychologists were members of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Findings indicated that school psychologists had received limited training in reading and frequently left reading recommendations to the special education teacher and reading specialist (Fish & Margolis, 1988).

Nelson and Machek (2007), in a later study, surveyed 517 NASP members to determine their perceptions and ability to use research based techniques and develops interventions. Their research examined school psychologists’ perceptions in the following areas of reading assessment: competence and knowledge related to reading assessment; reading intervention; current practices in the purposes of reading assessments (Nelson & Machek, 2007). Their results revealed major discrepancies between job preparation and job responsibilities. They also compared school psychologists with teaching experience and those with no prior teaching history and found no significant difference in approach. These results indicated that school psychologists rated their knowledge related to reading assessment as relatively high and their knowledge of curriculum based measurements and neurobiological indicators of reading difficulty such as phonological processing deficits as relatively low (Sammons, 2009).

The results of the related research (Fish & Margolis, 1988; Nelson & Machek, 2007; Sammons, 2009) revealed that more than 70% of respondents believed it was important to learn
more about reading assessment and reading remediation. They also indicated they needed to increase their knowledge base regarding evidence-based interventions for students with reading problems. Although school psychologists spend years on education and training in order to address issues of school adjustment and child development, in practice within the public school setting they are required to focus sometimes exclusively on cognitive and psychological assessment and disability classification. Previous studies have indicated the many school psychologists report limited time conducting reading components of education evaluations (Nelson & Machek, 2007). After years of educational and scientific research, more is known about the nature of reading and components of early reading acquisition skills including phonological awareness, rapid naming, and phonological memory (Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007). The National Reading Panel (2002) identified key reading components which include: phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding fluency, (speed and accuracy of word reading, vocabulary and comprehension. In addition research (Shaywitz, 2003) has linked several cognitive processes into several correlates including auditory processing, phonological awareness, short-term auditory memory, visual memory, rapid automatized naming and visual processing speed (Bell et al., 2003).

Changes in special education laws governing the assessment and identification students with specific learning disabilities including reading have a significant impact on school psychologist assessment practices. School psychologists should be prepared for additional roles such as intervention specialist. School psychologists will need more assistance in the implementation of response to intervention based assessment and the implementation of alternative methods for reading disabilities. Traditionally school psychologists are trained to give and interpret standard based tests. They are in a position to provide guidance toward the use of
research based effective strategies. School psychologists should be equipped with the knowledge to provide expertise as consultants in effective educational practices that are current (Torgesen, 2002).

This study explored in depth the perspective of school psychologists regarding their decision-making process in choosing assessment methods when a student is referred for an evaluation in reading. This study provides insight into practicing school psychologists experience in light of the changes in the laws governing assessment for learning disabilities in reading and the implementation of alternative assessment methods. This study was conducted in southwestern Massachusetts. Massachusetts’ recent implementation of multi-tiered instruction (also known as RTI) as a means of addressing academic failure is changing the state’s current practices.

The changes in the law, the requirements of school districts and states and the latest research in the identification of reading disabilities require school psychologists to keep up to date with research and practice (Fletcher et al., 2004). This study investigated how school psychologist experience in choosing assessments for reading disabilities. This investigation explored the decision-making process in choosing assessments based on their experiences with changes in the field, research and how they make decisions regarding how to assess students who have been referred due to reading problems. The findings of this study will be shared with education scholars to help researchers advance the understanding of professional practice of school psychologist in assessment for students suspected of having a reading disability.

Research Question

The research question that this study answered is: How do school psychologists make sense of and explain their experience in selecting the appropriate assessment for reading
problems of K-5 students? The purpose of this study was to understand how twelve school psychologists make sense of their experience of determining the appropriate assessment for reading problems of K-5 students.

The following section of this chapter includes a description and discussion of decision-making theory, which serves as the theoretical basis for this study and how this theory is applied to this study. The remarks of the critics of this theory are included to add perspective and balance.

**Definition of Terms**

Historically the definition of learning disabilities grew out of legislation passed called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142). The initial definition of learning disabilities included a unique group of children who demonstrated unexpected learning failure and specific learning failure. This definition developed from historically relevant reports of children with average to above average intelligence who could not master academic concepts (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003).

The formal definition of a *learning disability* includes the existence of a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in learning; development that is uneven in which a discrepancy exists between a set of intact cognitive process and or one or more disordered processes and underachievement (Hale, Naglieri, Kaufman & Kavale, 2004; Sammons, 2009). Out of the legislation Public Law 94-142, states were expected to identify children with learning disabilities. Subsequently the federal definition of disabilities developed the following procedure recommended for the identification of learning disabilities:

A severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability on one or more areas: (1) oral expression: (2) listening comprehension: (3) written expression: (4) basic reading skill:
(5) reading comprehension: (6) mathematics calculation: or (7) mathematics reasoning. The child may be identified as having a specific learning disability if the discrepancy between ability and achievement is primarily a result of: (1) a visual, hearing, or motor handicap; (2) mental retardation; (3) emotional disturbance, or: (4) environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage.

Fletcher et al., (2002) defined a reading disability as:

Of the category of specific learning disabilities reading, often called dyslexia, is the most common. The definition of dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction (p. 2).

Although states may vary in their implementation and use of the IQ achievement discrepancy model, it is the major classification hypothesis to identify a specific learning disability and all states either use it for definition or criteria to determine the existence of a disability.

The reauthorization of IDEA (2004) has implications for school psychologists as it revised requirements for identifying students with SLD. Local Educational Agencies (LEA) are now permitted to use Response-to-Intervention (RTI) as part of the evaluation approach (Sammons, 2009). Response-to Intervention is a set of processes for coordinating high quality service delivery instructional decisions based on data collected, and specialized instruction, including entitlement programs like special education and Title 1, integrated into general education instruction and practices (Sammons, 2009). Fletcher & Vaughn (2009) describe RTI as a “multi-tiered, layered instructional approach that prevents problems first, and then brings increasingly intense interventions to students who do not respond to instruction (As cited in Sammons, 2009,
p. 37). Thus RTI reconceptualizes the identification of reading problems as a “failure to respond to treatment or instruction” rather than as a deficit within the individual student (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003, p. 139). Fuchs et al. (2004) describe RTI as follows:

1. Students are provided with generally effective instruction in the regular classroom.
2. Their progress is monitored.
3. Those who do not respond get something else, additional instruction by someone.
4. Repeated progress monitoring towards goals.
5. Those who still do not respond either qualifies for special education or an evaluation.

(p. 217)

RTI presently is implemented to varying degrees across states and districts and generally adheres to a three-level tiered system of instruction, progress monitoring and increasing levels of intervention (Fuchs et al., 2003).

**Theoretical Framework**

Decision-making theory served as a theoretical framework for this study as it examines the impact of how humans make decisions based on a series of activities within an organization (Simon, 1995). Decision-making explains how people make choices between alternative courses of action. Simon (1993) describes decision-making as encompassing three stages including: (1) identifying and attending to problems, (2) considering and detailing a list of solutions, and (3) after evaluating the solutions choosing among them (Simon, 1993). According to Simon (1993) decision-making and rationality are central topics of both economics and psychology. Where the two differ is that in psychology decision-making focuses on attention and emphasis in the substance of choice in order to find the substantive solution. Economy by contrast does not focus on alternatives of choice but deals solely with the question of how. Given a menu of possible
actions, one chooses among them (Simon, 1993). While economists focus on maximizing utility when applying decision-making to the field of human behavior, the priority is to find a course of action that is satisfactory and avoids failure (Simon, 1993). Thus decision-making in relationship to psychological rationality focuses on the assistance of technology to advance the science of decision-making and the nature of expertise (Simon, 1993). Simon (1993) describes the nature of expertise as the thinking aloud process when an individual is given a problem and is asked to talk aloud through it to find solutions. Through this technique, data are produced that provide awareness and begin the step-by-step problem solving. Studies of this technique reveal that skills identified as domains emerge as people collectively solve the problem. In psychology the unit of measurement, which measures the body of knowledge or measurement of the minimum size of that knowledge, is called a chunk (Simon, 1993, p. 402). The approximate knowledge base of the expert has chunks of familiar knowledge in an area of expertise. These chunks of information act as an index of knowledge stored in memory. Cues then allow the individual to access a specific set of data in which to analyze and subsequently problem-solve (Simon, 1993). Thus, the expert in an area, when provided with specific data as a cue, will access previous knowledge in order to develop a list of alternatives to the problem. Intrinsic within decision-making theory is the question of logical problem solving versus intuitive problem solving. Simon (1993) describes this phenomenon as one of recognition. In the phenomenon of recognition, there is a process where a person decides whether by logic or intuition how to address a situation by a set of mental processes. In the phenomenon of recognition, an individual has a huge mental indexing device and specific stimuli produces a series of thoughts in which the brain picks out familiar-like situations, or chunks, and accesses possible solutions (Simon, 1993, p. 404).
Central to decision-making theory is the formulation of decisions. The theory addresses decision-making, given two states to choose from, A or B, and how the individual or group chooses one or the other based on a process (Edwards, 1954). The progression of decision-making occurs through one of four key processes including issues process, idea process, objective-directed process, or reframing process (Simon, 1993).

**Issues process** begins with a problem, which is then analyzed to produce options or choices for decision.

**Idea processes** occurs when decision makers begin with a solution already in mind and the process is then less about finding an answer to a problem and more about refining a preexisting solution.

**Objective-directed processes** focus on aims and objectives such as those set out in the organization’s mission statement, which guides decision-making.

**Reframing processes** concentrate on showing why new practices are needed and hence why a decision is required (Simon, 2009).

**Rationale for Using Decision-making Theory**

The rationale for using this theory is its consistency with the different types of processes, which can be allied with the nature of decisions encountered by school psychologists when students are referred for a special education evaluation for reading problems. Decision-making begins with a central activity and then incorporates activities which ultimately lead to alternative courses of action. This process includes defining the problem, analyzing data, and establishing criteria regarding different choices and selecting one that fits the situation (Simon, 1993). School psychologists are required to make sense of divergent information, and to organize equivocal units of information within a social and organizational context and determine a course of action.
The role of the school psychologist is that of the individual who evaluates the problem, identifies appropriate actions in the form of assessments, and interprets results in order to make sense of and stabilize the problem, which is unexpected academic failure. Within the context of this decision-making process, this theoretical framework fits well regarding how school psychologists identify a set of explanatory information in order to operationalize, sequence, organize, make presumptions, be systematic and follow contextual and organizational requirements to address identified issues (Simon, 1993). The acknowledgement that there exists conflicting pressures from stakeholders, including teachers, parents, principals and special education directors and state department of education agencies is taken into account within the theoretical framework of decision-making. School psychologists must consider these contextual factors and plan a course of action within the context of ongoing teaching and learning (Simon, 1993).

**Critics of Decision-making Theory**

The research on decision theory is ongoing and criticism of this theory assumes that much of the theory’s proponent’s still view decisions as the result of intentional acts taken by rational decision makers. This is a key criticism as it may be a misleading portrayal of organizational processes, which are influenced as much by emotional and intuitive responses as by rational ones (Miller, 2008). In addition, critics report that processes within decision-making are characterized by uncertainty and indecisiveness so those outcomes are more likely to be the result of uncoordinated and unintentional actions as much as by deliberate choices (Miller, 2008). Although decision-making portrays the process as following specific intentional acts, retrospection may reveal that a *sensemaking* process may have taken place in which people made sense of something in order to comprehend the situation and then make a decision (Miller, 2008).
This theory applies to the current research in that it examines the lived experiences of school psychologists in their role as the assessor for reading problems in K-5 students. The theory of decision-making supports this research by providing a framework for understanding how individuals decide on a course of action and reach decisions incorporating divergent information and interests within the context of special education referral, assessment and intervention development. Although special education processes have stringent guidelines and mandates, within this process there are multiple perspectives and interpretations, which need to be understood in order to make optimal decisions (Miller, 2008).

The steps school psychologists must take in responding to referrals for students experiencing reading failure aligns well with the theory of decision-making, which is a theory that seeks greater understanding of how ideal or real decision makers make or should make decisions within the order of organizations (Sullivan, 2009).

The research examined this process of decision-making including determining methods for assessment, eligibility and intervention and link existing decision-making theory while developing new insights regarding school psychologists’ lived experiences (Sullivan, 2009). Due to the nature of divergent information and philosophies within special education, decision-making as a theoretical framework supports research that examines the nature of a special education team process and examines how school psychologists make the selection of the best option from a set of one or more options (Beach, 1993).

In summary, the research regarding the exploration of decision-making within the process of school psychology assessment practices for reading problems is necessary for two reasons: the study contributes to existing literature regarding the role of decision-making of new research within the field of school psychology. The study provides new information regarding school
psychologists’ lived experiences when integrating research into their practice for assessing students experiencing reading problems.

The following chapter provides a comprehensive review of the literature related to the role of school psychologist engagement with traditional and alternative assessments, their perceptions, issues and concerns about diagnosing reading disabilities, the emerging field of special education assessment and unfunded mandates to remediate K-5 students.
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis is to understand how twelve school psychologists experience the decision-making process for the type of assessment for K-5 students who may have reading disabilities. Although school psychologists spend years on education and training in order to address issues of school adjustment and child development, in practice within the public school setting they are required to focus often exclusively on cognitive and psychological assessment and disability classification. The study explored the lived experience of twelve licensed school psychologists in the decision-making process in determining reading assessments for K-5 students who have been referred for a special education evaluation. The research question for this study was: How do school psychologists make sense of and explain their experience in selecting the appropriate assessment for reading problems of K-5 students?

The research question, combined with the academic decision-making theoretical framework, served as the lens to explore studies conducted on school psychologists and their perspective on reading disability assessments and the efficacy of current assessment methods. There is minimal research on school psychologist’s perspective on reading assessments. This conundrum is rooted in special education law and therefore a brief discussion of the genesis and evolution of learning disabilities and special education legislation as it relates to identification of disabilities, particularly reading disabilities will provide a foundation for the problem of study. The literature includes studies on school psychologists’ perspective on the practice of identifying reading disabilities and the response to intervention initiative considerations. These studies and findings are presented in the subsequent literature review.
These content areas are reviewed in order to link the existing literature regarding assessment and interventions for reading disabilities and highlight its impact on the practice of school psychologists. Given the complex nature of identifying a student as having a specific learning disability in reading, the literature review examines multiple factors that impact identification of disabilities in the area of reading and support the study by illustrating these issues as they pertain to the role of the school psychologist. This review begins with an overview of special education laws that impact this study and provide a foundation for the current problem of practice.

**State and Federal Regulations in the Identification of a Specific Learning Disability**

Special education was borne out of the civil rights movement and has since undergone many challenges due to state and federal mandates regarding the education of all children (Skiba et al., 2008). The education of students with disabilities in the United States has evolved since the passage of Public Law N. 94-142, first enacted in 1976 and now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA (Hope, 2009). IDEA was the first legislation to guarantee equal access to students with disabilities (Skiba et al., 2008). Prior to the 1970’s, students with disabilities were often educated in separate settings with more significantly disabled students and in institutions focused on day-to-day life skills (Osgood, 2008). Since the 1970’s, federal legislation guarantees students with disabilities equal access to educational opportunities in the least restrictive environment with their nondisabled peers. While lower incidence disability traditionally identified prior to entering school meets the standard established by IDEA based on their description and subsequent characteristics, procedures for identification of specific learning disabilities are less clear-cut (Fletcher et al., 2002). The current legislation, IDEA, reauthorized
in 1997 and 2004, aimed to strengthen academic expectations and accountability for all students with disabilities (Biddix, Garrison, Marrow, & Miller, n.d., p.5).

As of 2015, there continues to be significant debate regarding the definition and identification procedures used for specific categories of disability (Kavale et al., 2008). Special education mandates require some form of classification of a student with a disability and have become an accepted process in public schools. Like many classification categories, they presume to designate specific commonalities among school-aged children. Learning disabilities has become an accepted category such as, first grader, gifted and talented, average and above average (Sleeter, 2010, p.13).

The function of classification of disability criteria serves a multitude of purposes including outlining common methods for identification and common understandings of classification terms. Consistent classification serves to ensure uniformity in research, statistical evaluation and consistency in treatment approaches. This is critical information for teachers, school psychologists and practitioners. The inconsistent criteria, practices and approaches becomes problematic when identification is “purely pragmatic,” in other words when students are identified as disabled in order to access assistance (Johnson, Humphrey, Mellard, Woods, & Swanson, 2010, p. 4).

The current American Psychological Association (APA) is revising its definition of learning disability due to a reorganization of the constellation of “mental disorders” and changes to the field of learning disabilities (Scanlon, 2013, p. 26). The most significant proposed change to the definition is the removal of the aptitude-achievement discrepancy assessment from identification criteria. Since a more reliable alternative to identification of learning disabilities
has yet to be determined, aptitude-achievement methods are still in wide use despite research establishing their inadequacy (Scanlon, 2013).

**The Four-Stage Process of Disability Identification**

There is a four-stage process of disability identification. These four stages are (1) prereferral activities (2) referral for special education team (3) assessment and (4) eligibility for special education development of special education interventions.

**Identification Procedures Using the Aptitude Achievement Discrepancy Model**

Consistent with the concept of individuals with learning disabilities, students identified with a specific learning disability generally demonstrate a profile of strengths and weaknesses measured using norm-referenced IQ and Achievement tests. Students with significant difficulty learning in a specific academic area, like reading, who are average intelligence, are subsequently identified as disabled due to a discrepancy between identified ability and predicted academic achievement (Sammons, 2009, p. 36). Students with difficulties in specific cognitive processes and academic achievement with otherwise typical levels of intellectual function are classified as having a specific learning disability based on this model of discrepancy between expected achievement (Büttner & Hasselhorn, 2011). Discrepancy refers to the presence of a statistically significant difference between a student’s ability score and achievement scores on standardized tests. These results from the IQ and achievement assessments are used to determine eligibility for special education services and the data from the assessments are instrumental in the development of an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Once students are identified as having educational disabilities, they are eligible for special education services.

The continued use of the IQ/achievement discrepancy model as part of the identification of reading disabilities is increasingly controversial. Mellard, Byrd, Johnson, Tollefson and
Boesche (2004) hypothesize that as regulations are rewritten, school-based learning disabilities identification practices and the components of those practices are likely to change. As a result the use of cognitive instruments and the aptitude-achievement discrepancy may become less important. Subsequently a students’ responsiveness to intervention may be emerge as the explanation for underachievement. Their research utilized case study to compare sites of students who underwent assessments and schools that utilize response to intervention as a means of identification of specific learning disabilities. Using Response to Intervention as a framework this research focused on preventing reading problems and intervening when students were not successful in the general education setting. This is a conceptual shift as an alternative learning disability identification and demonstrates that RTI is a viable option for prevention, identification and remediation of disabilities.

Researchers have questioned the efficacy of using the aptitude achievement discrepancy model from its inception for numerous reasons, including that identification practices are subjective and that delaying interventions leads to a practice of waiting until the problem is so severe that it warrants an intervention (Gersten & Dimino, 2006).

Restori et al., (2008) have questioned the efficacy of the aptitude achievement discrepancy model and report that a substantial body of research has concluded that using the ability-achievement discrepancy model is not a valid approach to identifying specific learning disabilities, which reading falls under that broad category. A consistent theme in reviewing the research on the divergent models for assessing learning disabilities is the researcher are intent on retaining the construct of learning disabilities and have lost focus on the more important goal of helping children who are struggling academically. Restori et al., (2008) postulated that old habits die hard and that although the discrepancy model employed in most states is based on a
model which lacks empirical evidence it is not a valid approach to the identification of learning disabilities. Lyon et al. (2001) questioned the efficacy of the assessment practices and have stated that, given what we know, it is irresponsible to continue current practices that dictate inadequate identification practices (p. 259).

Vaughn and Fuchs (2003), in their overview of learning disability research, hypothesized that there needs to be a shift away from the concept that there is something inherently wrong with the individual student and toward an examination of the instruction. They stated that student failure should be viewed in relationship to inadequate core curriculum and instruction. Some researchers have questioned the effectiveness of using IQ results as a benchmark for disabilities in the first place, particularly in the area of reading (Siegel, 1989; Stanovich, 1991). Siegel (1989) questioned the logic and lack of empirical data supporting the proposition that intelligence tests are necessary and appropriate for the identification of learning disabilities including in the area of reading. Stanovich (1991) supported Siegel’s hypotheses and suggests that the use of I.Q. tests has led us astray. Evidence does not support the existence of a discrepancy between reading ability and measured intelligence as a logical marker for a disability. Vaughn and Fuchs (2003) argued that the aptitude-achievement method is particularly problematic with young students in grades kindergarten, first and second grade who frequently do not demonstrate a discrepancy between aptitude and achievement until much later grades. This practice essentially denies students in need access to early intervention and assistance. Therefore, students may struggle for years until their academic achievement is low enough to qualify for special education services based on a statistically significant number determined by standardized test results (Restori et al., 2008).
In the area of reading children at risk for later reading difficulties can be reliably identified much earlier and prevent a high probability of a longstanding reading problem. Berninger et al., (1992) in their study compared three approaches to defining disabilities related to reading and writing. Their study measured predicted and actual outcomes using both the aptitude–achievement discrepancy model and response to intervention models to measure reading. Based on their findings, recommendations include continued use of traditional methods once response to interventions methods fail. Recommendations for future study included research to evaluate the empirical validity of the use of IQ to predict how well and how fast children respond to intervention for reading.

**Efficacy of the Aptitude-Achievement Discrepancy Model in the Assessment of Reading**

The change in the identification process delineated by the reauthorization of IDEA 2004 reflected the increasing research which supports the premise that the ability-achievement discrepancy model inadequately correlates with academic deficits and does not differentiate between low achievers who exhibit a discrepancy between ability and achievement from those with non-discrepant profiles (Perkins, n.d., p. 3). Researchers have questioned all levels of the special education process including the definitions of specific learning disabilities, the procedures for identification of disabilities, and the exclusion of students resulting from practices in special education (Fletcher et al., 2005; Johnson, et al., 2004; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

Specifically, research has examined three components of this model: discrepancy, heterogeneity and exclusion (Fletcher et al., 2004).

**IQ achievement discrepancy**

The idea of a discrepancy between achievement and intelligence has traditionally been of critical importance in the concept of a learning disability (Siegel, 1989). The basic assumption
with this model that IQ tests measure intelligence, intelligence and achievement are independent, IQ scores predict reading and that high IQ scores should indicate good reading and a low IQ score would indicate poor reading (Siegel, 1989).

Heterogeneity refers to the seven domains of a learning disability including various disorders in reading, math, written expression and language. Fletcher and Vaughn, (2009) outline the seven domains of learning disabilities as these categories of learning disabilities interpret school failure as the result of something wrong within the individual student in terms of these cognitive processes rather than a problem solving approach to instruction and a failure of the educational system to adequately meet the needs of all students (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2004).

In terms of reading failure, research has continually questioned the validity of this method as studies have demonstrated that there is little difference between students identified as poor readers versus students identified as learning disabled in terms of underlying cognitive processes related to reading acquisition (Büttner & Hasselhorn, 2011). In addition, the variable used to determine a precise numerical cutoff point as evidence of the existence of a disability is subjective and arbitrary and may vary from district to district (Büttner & Hasselhorn, 2011; Fletcher et al., 2005; Fletcher et al., 2002).

Current and historical definitions of learning disabilities and eligibility models have provided an inadequate framework for conceptualizing learning disabilities and rather than considering the total child have focused on isolated abilities (Mathers & Gregg, 2006). As part of the identification process, the regulations require the exclusion of other explanations for underachievement. The exclusion element refers to language within the state and federal regulations, which reflect that a disability should not be identified based on sensory disorder,
mental deficiency, emotional disturbance, economic disadvantage, linguistic diversity or inadequate instruction (Fletcher et al., 2002). In other words, a specific learning disability cannot be explained by issues of environment, language, culture or social or economic disadvantage and students cannot receive special education and related services under the category of a learning disability if any other factors can explain school failure (Fletcher et al., 2002; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2004; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

Fletcher et al. (2005) argue that it is unnecessary to give an intelligence test to every child referred for an assessment for specific learning disabilities in order to rule out mental deficiencies. Furthermore, current research implies that all children can learn to read if healthy, given the opportunity and to not have mental deficiency (Fletcher et al., 2002). Therefore, Fletcher et al. (2002) have determined that all students who are struggling to read are working below their potential. As a result, the goal is to identify and remediate students’ fundamental difficulties, which may be either instructional or cognitive and therefore the use of the aptitude discrepancy model is not necessary and does not contribute to the process of finding a solution (Fletcher et al., 2002).

Ongoing research in the area of reading disabilities is moving the identification process beyond the discrepancy discussion and moving towards a more neurobiological definition of what constitutes a disability (Scanlon, 2013; Shaywitz, 2003).

**Reading as a Language Based Skill**

Efforts at educational reform have focused on accountability and evidence-based instruction in the general education classroom coupled with tiered levels of intervention to address academic failure (Fletcher et al., 2004). These efforts have focused specifically on a problem solving approach to reading instruction as research has revealed precisely how children
learn to read and how best to assist students who fail to learn. Advances in neurobiological research (Frijters et al., 2011; Shaywitz, 2003; Torgesen, 2002; Vandervelden & Siegel, 1997) have identified language centered skills as the underlying reasons for reading failure, specifically phonological processing skills as the most salient predictor of reading ability. Science based research by Shaywitz (2003) identified reading failure as caused by deficits in the language center of the brain, which specifically correlates with phonological processing. This research, coupled with the implementation of Response to Intervention, changed the way many educational teams and school psychologists approached early reading failure and interventions designed to address reading skill acquisition (Restori et al., 2008).

**Key Components Identified in Reading**

Fluent reading depends on a complex set of cognitive processes that must work together in perfect concert in order to efficiently decode and comprehend printed material (Caylak, 2010; Norton & Wolf, 2012, p. 427). Empirical studies have identified five core components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2002; Sammons, 2009). Research (Caylak, 2010; Shaywitz, 2003) has established that the underlying cognitive process identified in reading is within the language center of the brain. Torgesen (2005) identifies reading disabilities as a distinct disability among the specific learning disabilities. It is a specific language-based disorder caused primarily by weaknesses in the ability to process the phonological features of words (Lyons, 1995 as cited in Torgesen, 2005). The phonological processing disabilities of students make it difficult to acquire the skill in using the alphabetic principle to identify novel words in text (Share & Stanovich, 1995, as cited in Torgesen, 2005). Two specific language processes have been consistently linked with the skill of reading which are phonological processing and rapid naming (Frijters et
Phonological processing refers to the ability to hear and manipulate individual sounds in speech. Rapid naming refers to the ability to rapidly and automatically name a series of visual symbols such as letters, numbers, objects and colors. Deficiencies in phonological processing and rapid naming speech have been characteristic of individuals identified with reading disabilities and those identified as having difficulty acquiring basic reading skills. These two skills may impact individuals at differing developmental stages as phonological processing has been linked to the ability to decode earlier in the reading process while rapid naming has more influence on the ability to read with fluency, which is speed and accuracy (Frijters et al., 2011). The identification of a reading disability happens once other exclusionary factors have been established. In educational practice the key defining feature of reading failure is a discrepancy between expected performance of an average student and poor reading achievement. The continued acceptance of the aptitude discrepancy concept is the benchmark of the diagnosis of a learning disability in reading. Yet research has advanced our understanding of the underlying neurocognitive processes responsible for reading skills (Shaywitz, 2003; Stanovich, 1991; Torgesen, 2005). These skills have been identified as language based abilities, specifically phonological processing that are not measured by conventional I.Q. tests. As a result, traditional assessment methods miss the underlying cognitive processes, which are the explanation for the reading failure (Johnson et al., 2010; Siegel, 1989; Stanovich, 1991; Torgesen, 2005).

**Response to Intervention**

The term *response to intervention* is used to describe a systematic problem-solving process within a coordinated system of early intervention services designed to facilitate early recognition of students’ difficulty and to provide for a data-based method for evaluating the
effectiveness of instructional approaches used (Crepeau-Hobson & Sobel, 2010, p. 22). Response to Intervention is a set of processes for coordinating high quality service delivery in schools, in which instructional decisions are based on data collection, and entitlement programs are integrated into general education instruction (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009). The primary goal is to improve academic and behavioral outcomes for all students and eliminate the discrepancies between actual and expected performance (Sammons, 2009). Specific learning disabilities are thus redefined as an inadequate response to research based interventions (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003; Sammons, 2009). The RTI framework is a decision-making one in which the approach is implemented in a three-tier model including the following:

1. All students are provided with researched, evidence-based instruction in the general education classroom
2. Student progress is benchmarked and monitored
3. Students who do not respond are given an intensive, second layer of instruction.
4. Progress is more closely monitored
5. Failure to respond to Tier Two leads to additional instruction and possible referral and qualification for special education under the category of specific learning disability

The implementation of the RTI model requires a substantive shift from the traditional role of the school psychologist. Many researchers believe that RTI offers an improved approach to the identification of learning disabilities particularly in the area of reading (Restori et al., 2008).

While research (Bell et al., 2003) has primarily focused on deficiencies in using standard cognitive I.Q. scores and alternative tiered instruction, there remains a dearth of research in
school psychologists’ perspectives of how research has impacted their practice assessing students for reading disabilities (Chafouleas et al., 2003; Crepeau-Hobson & Sobel, 2010; Fish & Margolis, 1988; Fuchs et al., 2003; Little, 2013; Machek & Nelson, 2010; Nelson & Machek, 2007; Sammons, 2009).

The Role of the School Psychologist in Reading Assessment

A review of the related literature related to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and school psychologists revealed a few current studies. Seven research studies and one dissertation were examined to garner strategies and uncover challenges that might inform the role of the school psychologist in this study (Chafouleas et al., 2003; Fish & Margolis, 1988; Little, 2013; Machek & Nelson, 2010; Nelson & Machek, 2007; Sammons, 2009; Sansosti, Telzrow, & Noltemeyer, 2010; Sullivan & Long, 2010).

Researchers consistently report that reading difficulties are the most frequent reason for referral for the school psychologist (Machek & Nelson, 2010; Sammons, 2009; Sullivan & Long, 2010). Reading problems comprise over 50% of school psychologists total referrals (Nelson & Machek, 2007). As a result, school psychologists spend the majority of their time in the process of assessment and determination of eligibility for special education in the area of reading (Reschly & Wilson, 1995; Sammons, 2009). Research reveals (Fish & Margolis, 1988), up to 77% of school psychologist referrals involved moderate to severe reading difficulties (Fish & Margolis, 1988; Nelson & Machek, 2007; Sammons, 2009). Researchers advocate that a better use of school psychologists’ efforts could be spent on early intervention and prevention activities (Fletcher et al., 2005). Fletcher et al. (2002) and Sammons (2009) concur that the goal of assessment is ultimately to plan for the intervention to address weak skills.
Importance of Phonological Processing skills

Fish and Margolis (1988) conducted a quantitative study to assess the training practices and determine adequacy of training for school psychologists in the assessment for students with reading difficulties. One hundred and fifty one active school psychologists from the National Association of School Psychologists were surveyed in order to ascertain their training, attitudes and practices in the identification of students for reading disabilities. The results revealed major discrepancies between preparation and job responsibilities. The respondents indicated that (1) they received limited training in reading, (2) that 77% of referrals were for reading problems, (3) that they frequently made reading recommendations yet felt they lacked adequate expertise in reading and (4) that they supported the need for more training, practice and expertise in reading. They found that respondents reported limited training and as a result feelings that they lacked adequate expertise in reading to make appropriate recommendations toward remediation (Fish & Margolis, 1988; Sammons, 2009). Fish and Margolis cited small sample size and limitation of survey methodology as limitations to the study.

Chafouleas et al., (2003) investigated school psychologists’ acceptability of three different methods of assessment for reading using quantitative methodology. Participants included 188 members of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) who were randomly assigned to brief experimental analysis conditions. Respondents were randomly assigned one of three assessment conditions in order to read case studies and complete assessment rating profiles. The study examined the acceptability of training, and the use of norm-reference or curriculum based assessment to determine acceptability of usefulness of each approach. Key findings indicate that participating school psychologists rated curriculum-based assessments as helpful in the development of intervention strategies. School psychologists rated
curriculum-based assessments as more acceptable than either brief experimental analysis or norm-reference assessments. More than 50% of potential participants did not respond yielding a usable sample size of one hundred and eighty eight surveys. In addition a further limitation was that the sample was representative of NASP members only and not all school psychologists, thus limiting the study. An additional limitation reported was the assessment methods and the use of one-item measurement of reporting training.

Nelson and Machek (2007) conducted a quantitative study randomly surveying a national sample to determine the perception of school psychologists in training, practice, and competence for reading assessment and interventions. Data were gathered by surveying 496 practicing school psychologists regarding their perceptions of their preparation, ability and use of research-based techniques in reading assessment and interventions. The survey questions consisted of items from the Fish and Margolis (1988) study with additional items based on research advances in the field. Results indicated that nearly half of respondents were not required to take a class specific to reading. Despite the desire to be more involved in early reading intervention, the majority of respondents’ self-reported knowledge of evidence-based reading interventions as low. A considerable number of participants also reported low knowledge of use of research-based reading assessment techniques. Over 90% reported that more training in reading assessment and intervention would be beneficial for them as practitioners (Nelson & Machek, 2007). Regarding alternative methods for the assessment of reading problems, the researchers found that school psychologists reported their knowledge of curriculum-based measurements and phonological processing deficits as moderately low (Nelson & Machek, 2007). The limitation reported in this study included lack of generalizability of the survey results, and a small sample size due to return rate of the surveys. Additional limitations reported include the sample
characteristics included only NASP members and limitations of methodology, which include strictly-prepared survey questions. A final limitation is that results were based solely on self-reporting by the participants.

Sammons (2009) conducted a quantitative study examining the relationship between the attitudes and professional practices of schools psychologists involved in the evaluation of students with reading disabilities. Eighty-one members of the Arizona Association of School Psychologists (AASP) were surveyed. The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between school psychologists’ attitudes and assessment practices in the evaluation of students suspected of having reading disabilities. In addition, the study examined whether there were significant attitudes and practice differences related to school psychologists’ prior teaching experience, their gender status, number of years in practice, certification, grade of service delivery, professional credentials, and ethnicity. Finally the study examined the variability of practices for assessing students with reading disabilities. Finding from this study indicate that school psychologists practices are compatible with their attitudes. The most noticeable suggested that school psychologists find it important to include measure of intelligence and measure of cognitive processing to identify reading disabilities in children, even within an RTI framework. Further examination revealed that school psychologists’ evaluation practices frequently included aptitude –achievement discrepancy measures, oral language measures, and cognitive processing measures in determining reading disabilities (Sammons, 2009, p 101). Her findings indicated that school psychologists perceived the need for a broad working knowledge of assessment requirements despite the emergence of new approaches to reading disabilities. Specifically, knowledge on neurobiological factors involved in reading was needed (Sammons, 2009). The survey sample was limited to school psychologists practicing in Arizona and as a result may not
be generalized across states. A further limitation was the small return rate and subsequent sample size.

Machek and Nelson (2010) in a follow-up study conducted quantitative research surveying a random sample of licensed school psychologists to further determine perceptions regarding the utility of cognitive instruments for students being assessed for reading disabilities. The study surveyed a national sample of practicing schools psychologists from the National Association of School Psychologists. Of the 1480 surveys disseminated, the response rate of 37% yielded 547 school psychologists completed surveys. Key findings included that most school psychologists believe data provided from the administration of individualize IQ tests are useful in understanding reading problems. Results suggest that most practicing school psychologists interpret past the Full Scale IQ score and did not believe in the discrepancy model for the identification of reading disabilities. This study was limited to NASP members only and therefore results may not be generalized to those who are not NASP members, as nonmembers may not share the same characteristics. A second limitation was sample return rates and as the resultant sample size which was only 547 participants. A further limitation was that the questionnaire did not ask about specific cognitive tests or acceptability of a model that uses both cognitive assessments and RTI.

Little (2013) conducted a quantitative study to determine the perception of school psychologists in the engagement of response to intervention initiatives. Over sixty practicing certified school psychologists in the Pacific Northwest completed an online survey on their perceptions of RTI. The purpose of the study was to ascertain the how the RTI initiative is perceived by the educational professionals involved, and the effectiveness of the process. Key findings included that the majority of participants reported that they were prepared to participate
in RTI implementation but that it was not effectively implemented in a collaborative, team based approach. Implication indicated that while school psychologists are prepared to implement RTI they are not always included as an integral part of the implementation process. While school psychologists have unique data based training and can provide consultation regarding knowledge of both human development and educational intervention respondents of this study reported that their skills were underutilized.

The findings of these seven related studies indicated the need for widening the role of the school psychologist as an early interventionist in order to avoid long-term reading problems. Implications of these research findings indicate that school psychologists report the need for further training in the neurobiological components of reading, reading remediation and intervention design (Nelson & Machek, 2007; Sammons, 2009).

Marrs and Little (2014) conducted a qualitative study by interviewing practicing school psychologists to determine the perception of school psychologists regarding the barriers to response to intervention (RTI) measures. Seven practicing school psychologists from the State of Washington were interviewed by phone in order to gain their perspective on the challenges to implementation of RTI. The purpose of their study was to explore how school psychologists experience the transition to RTI practice. Key findings included several barriers and challenges including lack of time and training, and resistance from school staff including school psychologists. A major concern mentioned by participants was how RTI might change the role of school psychologists. The study identified four core ideas, which included fear of change, tradition, psychologist as tester, and loss of status. Participants in the study identified the need for more effective professional development for both school staff and for school psychologists specifically in order to gain a clearer understanding of the RTI process and the roles of various
school staff. Limitations of the study include, small sample size, and sampling method used which were interviews by phone. An additional limitation is that respondents were invited via email and only highly invested psychologists interested in the issues responded.

Sansosti et al, (2010) utilized qualitative case study methods to explore school psychologists’ perceptions regarding implementation of RTI at the secondary level. This study utilized a focus group in order to examine the implementation at the secondary level. The participants included licensed school psychologists randomly selected from 85 public high schools with four counties in a Midwestern state. In total 8 school psychologists participated and the study examined barriers and facilitators to the implementation of RTI in general and not specifically in the area of reading. Findings of this study included four reported themes which either supported or were barriers to RTI implementation including: systems characteristics, systems structures, evidence-based practices and the need for professional development (Sansosti et al., 2010). The focus of this study was on the barriers to implementation at the secondary level rather than on the assessment of reading at the earlier grade levels. This study was limited to the perceptions of 8 school psychologists at the secondary level and did not focus specifically on reading assessment.

**Implications for Alternative Assessments by School Psychologists**

Given the high percentage of students experiencing reading difficulties, school psychologists are frequently involved in the assessment of students experiencing difficulty in acquiring reading skills (Chafouleas et al., 2003). Traditionally, the school psychologists’ role was to administer a norm referenced IQ test for the diagnosis of the student with a specific learning disability in reading. Subsequently, the majority of their time is spent on assessment of
students for eligibility (Sammons, 2009). With the reauthorization of IDEA and the expansion of curriculum-based measurements and the implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI), school psychologists are expected to develop expertise in interventions for reading (Sammons, 2009). In keeping with the role of the school psychologist as part of a multidisciplinary team who evaluates and develops plans, the school psychologist will be expected to develop early intervention plans and remediation (Sammons, 2009). Given the high percentage of students with reading difficulties, the development of early intervention, prevention and remediation prior to evaluation requires school psychologists to be prepared for a shift in their practice to meet the needs of present day students (Berninger, Abbott, Vermeulen, & Fulton, 2006; Nelson & Machek, 2007; Sammons, 2009). IDEA (2004) emphasized collaboration in all aspects of special education decision-making and included pre-referral interventions and data-based decision-making as part of the requirements within special education (Sammons, 2009). Given the high number of students experiencing reading difficulties, the school psychologist’s role as an informed participant in the planning and intervention of systematic approaches to prevent and remediate reading difficulties is critical (Sammons, 2009). School psychologists will be required to inform educators regarding appropriate reading assessment and interventions using a variety of curriculum based measurements, strategies and interventions (Sammons, 2009). Torgesen’s (2002) research on the prevention of reading difficulties concluded that establishing specific instructional objectives and methods for intervention could prevent long term reading difficulties. As the school based consultant, the school psychologist will be required to provide the expertise to understand effective practices and the knowledge base to develop and implement evidence-based strategies (Sammons, 2009).
Changing Role of School Psychologists

Clearly, reading is the greatest area of student difficulties and yet research findings indicated that school psychologists had received limited training in reading. As a result school psychologists reported that they left reading recommendations to the special education teacher and reading specialist (Fish & Margolis, 1988; Sammons, 2009).

Nelson and Machek (2007), and Machek and Nelson (2010), in their follow up quantitative study, continued the research by surveying a larger sample of NASP members to determine their perceptions and ability to use research based techniques and develop interventions. Their research examined school psychologists’ perceptions in the following areas of reading assessment: competence and knowledge related to reading assessment; reading intervention; current practices in the purposes of reading assessments, and current practices in reading assessment, and training in reading assessment and interventions, assessment and training in reading assessment and interventions (Nelson & Machek, 2007). Their findings indicated that the majority of students referred had varying degrees of reading difficulty, even when reading was not the primary reason for the referral.

The results of related research (Fish & Margolis, 1988; Nelson & Machek, 2007; Sammons, 2009) revealed that more than 70% of respondents believed it was important to learn more about reading assessment and reading remediation. They also indicated they needed to increase their knowledge base regarding evidence-based interventions for students with reading problems.

Perceptibly, expectations for school psychologists are shifting from the traditional role as diagnostician. Proficient reading skills affect all students in terms of academic achievement. With the implementation of RTI, the methods of delivery of school psychological services and
assessment have begun to change (Little, 2013). School psychologists have an investment in these changes as major stakeholders in the assessment, implementation and initiation of evidence-based practices (Little, 2013). The changing role of the school psychologist in the wake of RTI is not clearly defined; however, issues of training, instructional methodology, assessment and knowledge of research in reading, allow for school psychologists to be important members in the RTI process (Little, 2013).

Little (2013) suggests that school psychologists have the opportunity to play a leadership role in the implementation of RTI. The implementation of RTI model requires a substantive shift away from traditional roles for school psychologists and requires adoption of new and expanded functions within the profession (Crepeau-Hobson & Sobel, 2010, p. 22).

These studies indicate that the school psychologist is aware of the changing role of the profession in the school and in the identification of reading disabilities prior to referral to special education evaluation. These studies also indicate that the school psychologist recognizes the need for training in RTI intervention and strategies, evidence-based practices, and the neurobiological components of reading. Finally, school psychologists reported fear of change, changing tradition, the reduction of their role to reading tester, and change of status as emotional issues surrounding their changing role.

The school psychologist, in contrast to other psychological specialty areas, requires knowledge, expertise and experience in data collection, and interventions within a school context to facilitate a collaborative and comprehensive approach within an educational team construct (Thomas & Grimes, 2002). School psychologists must be equipped to address the educational needs of today’s students and be able to facilitate instructional and learning environments that support students (Sammons, 2009).
Even though current research is altering the understanding of learning disabilities in various strands of cognitive processes involved in learning, it is unclear how these advances have impacted practice at the school psychologists level (Scanlon, 2013). At the school level, districts and school administrators acknowledge variations in implementation of alternative methods in order to intervene and address reading failure (Fuchs et al., 2003).

This research will provide valuable information regarding the lived experience of school psychologists in integrating the current research with standard methods of assessment when identifying and assessing reading failure. This study will contribute to the literature regarding the perspective of school psychologists as practitioners involved in the process of identification of specific learning disabilities in reading and will provide a voice for school psychologists to describe their complex role in preparing for organizational and individual shifts towards a more inclusive problem-solving model for addressing the needs of diverse students (Crepeau-Hobson & Sobel, 2010).

Summary

The researcher analyzed literature that provided insight into challenges faced by school psychologists when determining assessment methods for students suspected of having a reading disability. This review attempted to create a broader awareness of how the role of school psychologists has changed as a result of foundational and subsequent federal and state legislation regarding the identification of disabilities, particularly reading disabilities, the focus of this study. How school psychologists currently approach student referrals for reading and problem solving within the context of special education regulations is also examined. To date, much of the literature continues to examine the efficacy of traditional approaches versus response-to-
intervention methods. The literature available on how school psychologists make sense of and select appropriate assessment remains limited.

This review observed that previous studies examining school psychologist’s perceptions regarding knowledge, training and expertise show that the majority of school psychologists feel more training is needed in the area of reading and intervention. Additionally, despite research indicating the lack of efficacy of the aptitude achievement discrepancy model in adequately assessing underlying cognitive processes identified in reading, school psychologists further report a lack of training and expertise both in reading interventions and a lack of inclusion when implementing alternative methods of assessment, specifically response-to intervention.

The researcher found that examining issues related to school psychology experiences regarding training, assessment and intervention for students suspected of reading disabilities was relevant to the investigation of school psychologists lived experience in the practice of school psychology within the field of education.

The subsequent chapter explains and provides a rationale for the research design and methodology applied in this study and how the theoretical framework of decision-making theory provides the impetus for interview questions. The following chapter also provides in depth descriptions of the two districts to be involved, the role of the school psychologists within the districts, and the procedures that the researcher will implement to secure volunteers to participate in the study.
Chapter 3: Research Design

The previous review of the literature highlighted a significant gap in the research examining the lived experience of school psychologists within the process of special education, particularly in the area of identifying reading disabilities. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the processes for collecting, validating analyzing and presenting data. The study utilized an interpretative phenomenological analysis as outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) to examine in detail how participants make sense of the experience of incorporating current research into standard practice in the assessment of students for reading failure. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a theoretical approach that is based on the founding principle of Husserl and refined by Heidegger (Smith et al., 2009). Researching school psychologists’ lived experiences provides valuable information regarding how twelve school psychologists make sense of their experience of determining the appropriate assessment for reading problems of K-5 students. This evidence provides the perspective of working school psychologists in choosing approaches to assessment for students referred for reading failure.

Research Tradition

Qualitative methods refer to a broad class of empirical procedures designed to describe and interpret the experiences of research participants in a context specific setting. Participants often describe their experiences in simple yet descriptive everyday language and findings are reported in much the same way. Specific defining characteristics of qualitative methods are dependent on the particular research paradigm and underlying inquiry approach (Ponterotto, 2005). For the purpose of this study the constructivist-interpretivism approach is the underlying paradigm. This paradigm holds that reality is within the mind of the individual. The constructivist-interpretivism paradigm exposes the hermeneutical approach that meaning is
hidden and must be brought to consciousness through deep reflection (Ponterotto, 2005). The reflection is stimulated by the interaction between researcher and participant. The distinguishing characteristic of this paradigm is the central role of the dialogue and interaction between the participant and the researcher. A central tenet of constructivist-interpretivism is that reality is developed by the participant, and the researcher cannot rule out their own experience (Ponterotto, 2005). This paradigm is appropriate for this study as the researcher is a licensed school psychologist who has been responsible for the assessment of students referred due to reading failure. In addition constructivist-interpretivism is appropriate for this study as the goal of this paradigm is to understand the lived experience of those who live it day-to-day this paradigm is an appropriate choice as the goal of this research is to understand the experience of school psychologists’ decision-making process when choosing assessments for students referred for reading disabilities.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis, like all qualitative research, has in common the general process of research that begins with identification of a research problem and process, a research question and the collection of data, data analysis and the final research report, in this case, the research study (Smith et al., 2009). Interpretative phenomenological analysis design grew out of and follows phenomenological inquiry as it explores the individual’s subjective disclosure of events rather than an objective account of proceedings.

Phenomenology is the first underpinning of IPA. Phenomenology is a philosophy and a research method, which is designed to explore and understand peoples’ everyday lived experience (Shosha, 2012). Historically phenomenology evolved as an alternative to more traditional scientific methods within social sciences. Phenomenology emphasizes the notion of the researcher being with the participants. Husserl is credited as the founding father of
phenomenology, which seeks to explore the conscious lived experience of phenomena (Pascal, 2010).

The IPA inquiry is divided into two areas; descriptive (Husserl) and interpretative (Heidegger), and each overlap (Shosha, 2012). Husserl’s work focused on comprehending participants lived experiences as they occurred. His phenomenological account of the world is considered the essential precursor to the scientific inquiry (Shosha, 2012).

**Hermeneutics**

The second major underpinning of IPA research is derived from hermeneutics or the theory of interpretation. Heidegger introduced hermeneutic inquiry to phenomenological philosophy and considered it an explicitly interpretative activity (Smith et al., 2009).

Martin Heidegger, a former student of Husserl, modified Husserlian phenomenology and proposed the novel perspective of the lived world (Shosha, 2012). Smith et al. (2009) theorized that Heidegger was concerned with existence itself and the experiences within daily activities and relationships. Each approach explores the complex meanings which evolve out of simple units of direct experience but may be distinguished by Husserl’s examination of the individual psychological processes such as perception, awareness and consciousness. Hermeneutics is concerned with the theory of interpretation. Hermeneutic analysis requires the correct understanding of text and textual meaning. Heidegger introduced hermeneutic inquiry to phenomenological philosophy and considered it an explicitly interpretative activity (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger’s concern revolved around the question of existence itself and the person within the context of the experience. Moustakas (1994) introduced the hermeneutic process and the manifestation of meaning into text. According to Moustakas (1994) the hermeneutic analysis process includes both a description of the experience and an astute interpretative analysis of the
underlying historical and aesthetic conditions that account for it. This hermeneutic process requires a focus on several procedural elements including (a) fixation of meaning, (b) mental dissociation of the author (c) interpretation of the test allowance of multiple interpretations. In order to structure the research, IPA adapts the approach of in-depth descriptions of participants’ interpretation of their own experiences, background, context, events and meanings (Fade, 2004). The IPA researcher is engaged in a double hermeneutic as the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant making sense of what is happening to them. This captures the dual role of the researcher as he employs similar mental and emotional processes as the participants. As a result of this process the researcher utilizes personal skills and capacities in a systematic way in order to consciously make sense through the participant’s firsthand account of their experience (Smith et al., 2009).

**Idiography**

The third major underpinning of IPA research design is its commitment to idiography, which is concerned with the particular. IPA’s commitment to the particular operates on two levels. At the first level, there is a commitment to the particular in the sense of detail and subsequently the depth of analysis (Smith et al., 2009). On the second level, IPA is committed to understanding how a particular experiential phenomenon has been understood from the perspective of the people within a particular context (Smith et al., 2009).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a relatively new research method based on the theory that experiences should be examined within the context, processes and terms in which they occur (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12). IPA research design follows the phenomenology inquiry and is concerned with the individual self-reported perceptions of their experience (Smith et al., 2009). The method of IPA provides an understanding of how to examine and comprehend the
initial memories and subsequent reflections constructed as part of a lived experience (DuBose-Morris, 2013). Interpretative phenomenological analysis involves detailed analysis of individual transcripts with the primary purpose of understanding the perceptions and experiences of a particular group studied (Chapman & Smith, 2002). IPA research is informed by three key areas of philosophical thinking: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography and has been chosen for this study as the researcher found it the most suitable as it allows her to include her personal experiences within the interpretation of the study (Smith et al., 2009; Brocki and Wearden, 2006).

**Participants**

Utilizing an interpretative phenomenological analysis, this study investigated how twelve school psychologists made sense of their experience of determining the appropriate assessment for reading problems of K-5 students. In keeping with the primary concern of interpretative phenomenological analysis? is with a detailed account of the individual experience the small sample size supports the issue of quality data collection with the focus on a small number of cases (Smith et al., 2009). IPA researchers generally choose a purposeful, typically homogeneous sample in order to find a closely defined group in which the question being explored is meaningful (Chapman & Smith, 2002). For this study, the researcher utilized purposeful homogenous sampling and recruited twelve school psychologists working at several different schools within two public school districts in Northeastern New England (Smith et al., 2009). The participants included currently licensed school psychologists actively working within the districts. Participants were recruited based on their experiences with special education referral and assessment. Many of the participants work or have worked within the same district as the researcher and are licensed school psychologists who are instrumental in the referral and
assessment process for special education. Participants were asked to voluntarily take part in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes, and were identified as open to exploring their experiences in special education referral due to reading failure. The fact that the researcher interviewed all participants at different individual schools mitigated the negative impact of working too closely with people from one’s own “backyard” (Smith et al., 2009).

All participation was voluntary and involvement provided an opportunity for participants to explain the personal meaning they have derived in the experience of determining assessments for learning disabilities utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis.

**Data Collection**

Utilizing an interpretative qualitative research design, the data collection began with semi-structured interviews with working school psychologists. Participants agreed to share their experience within an in-depth, semi-structured interview and granted the researcher permission to tape record and transcribe data (Appendix A). The researcher interview twelve school psychologists individually, utilizing a series of questions to examine how they integrate research on phonological processing and response to intervention when determining when students are referred for a special education assessment for reading failure. Each person was interviewed individually at the time and place of his or her choosing. The semi-structured interview questions were developed using existing questionnaire outlines in order to maximize validity. The interviews were carried out face-to-face when possible and by phone and take approximately 45 to 60 minutes each. These semi-structured, in-depth interviews were recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriber. In addition, the participants were given the opportunity to review and correct data for accuracy, what Smith et al. (2009) refers to as member checking.
Data Storage

The data were organized into files using a password-protected computer and stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home office. With the exception of the paid transcriber and the participant’s review of their interview transcripts, only the researcher had access to data. Data will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

Signed copies of informed consent forms were kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home office will then be destroyed upon completion of the study.

Data Analysis

IPA is characterized by a set of common procedures that are applied with flexibility according to the analytic task (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79). Drawing on the following strategies the research was conducted through a series of semi-structured interviews each lasting approximately sixty minutes. Participants included a purposeful sample of twelve recruited participants based on criteria established recruitment procedures in strict accordance with Northeastern University IRB protocol (Appendix D). The goal was to interview each respondent a minimum of one time for approximately 45-60 minutes in order to assure rich, in-depth exploration of the topic. Data analysis entailed close analysis, line by line of transcribed interviews seeking to understand experiential meaning, concerns and claims of respondents (Smith et al., 2009).

Data Analysis Process

The data collected for this study was analyzed through an IPA process described by Smith et al, (2009). IPA requires researchers to conduct six steps of analysis as a systematic procedure that identifies essential features, experiences and perceptions (Smith et al., 2009).
Smith et al., (2009) established seven steps in the IPA process as a systematic procedure that identifies essential features, experiences and perceptions (Smith et al., 2009). The seven steps include:

6. The close, line-by-line analysis of the experiential claims, concerns and understandings of each participant.

7. The identification of the emergent patterns and themes within this experiential material, emphasizing both convergence and divergent commonality and nuance usually first for single cases, and then subsequent across multiple cases.

8. The development of a dialogue between the researcher, their coded data, and their psychological knowledge, about what it might mean for participants to have these concerns, in context, leading in turn to the development of a more interpretative account.

9. The development of a structure, frame or gestalt, which illustrates the relationship between themes.

10. The organization of all of the material in to a format which allows for analyzed data to be traced right through the process, from initial comments on the transcript, through into clustering and thematic development, into the final structure of themes.

11. The use of supervision, collaborative, or audit to help test and develop the coherence and plausibility of the interpretation.

12. The development of a full narrative evidenced by a detailed commentary on data extracts, which takes the reader through the interpretation, usually theme-by-theme and is often supported by some form of visual guide a simple structure, diagram or table (Smith et al., 2009, p. 80).
13. Beginning with the data analysis process the researcher taped the interviews and had them professionally transcribed.

**Reading and Rereading**

The researcher listened to the tapes and compared the written transcripts to the auditory tapes to ensure quality. The analytical steps required the transcriptions to be read and reread while taking copious notes. By repeating the process multiple times, the researcher relived the interview and took notes and recorded recollections about the interview to help describe the participants’ firsthand accounts of the experience (Smith et al., 2009). The close, line-by-line analysis allowed for the experiential claims concerns and understandings of the participants to be explored. This is consistent with step one outlined in Smith et al. (2009).

**Initial Coding**

The purpose of initial noting is to look for semantic content and language at the exploratory level, which is outlined in step two of Smith et al. (2009). The researcher utilized notation to allow an examination of the semantic content and language used to document anything of interest within the transcript (Smith et al., 2009). Continued analysis of the transcriptions included exploration on three levels including the conceptual, descriptive and linguistic level (Smith et al., 2009). This examination of the grammatical context is consistent with Smith et al. (2009), step two and facilitated active engagement with the data and immersion in the nuances of the participant’s meaning.

**Developing Emergent Themes**

Step three was utilized and through this process the interview data expanded and forms the focus of the next stages of analysis, which included the development of emergent themes. To develop emergent themes this phase of analysis discussed how the researcher categorized the
interviews into meaning units and noted them in the margins of the transcripts (Smith et al., 2009).

The researcher was responsible for the development of a structure that illustrates the themes and the relationship between themes and united experiences of participants’ experiences to reveal patterns related to each individual. The researcher edited the details gathered during the interview by mapping connections, interrelationships and patterns between exploratory notes (Smith et al., 2009). Emergent themes identified represent both the participant’s words and the researcher’s interpretation to reflect the combined description and interpretation of events (Smith et al., 2009).

**Connection across Emergent Themes**

Step four required the searching of connections across emergent themes as outlined in Smith et al. (2009). Throughout this phase of the analysis the researcher developed methods of drawing themes together to form a structure that detailed the most interesting and relevant themes of the participants experiences (Smith et al., 2009). A systematic analysis of all graphical representations was manually examined to determine whether there existed any connections which highlighted information across cases which developed into major themes which was step four as described by Smith et al. (2009). The researcher created a graphic representation to capture the most important superordinate and subthemes that emerge from the study. Through the use of abstraction the researcher ordered themes chronologically and develop clusters of related themes. Abstraction is a method utilized to identify patterns among themes and to group similar themes together to develop subordinate themes (Smith et al., 2009).
Moving to the Next Case

In keeping with IPA tradition step five was utilized and each individual interview transcript was considered its own; one case for each of the twelve school psychologists interviewed (Smith et al., 2009). Each individual interview underwent the same process of IPA analysis outlined above and was repeated for each participant (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher then grouped ideas from preceding cases while working on the next case in order to allow for new themes and ideas to emerge.

Looking For Patterns across Cases

Step six was used which involved a systematic analysis of the graphic representations and connections among themes in order to highlight major themes. Graphic representation in the form of an excel spreadsheet to note and organize emergent themes was used (Smith et al., 2009). During this stage of data analysis the researcher placed each graphic representation or figure across a large surface and looked for patterns across cases, which led to reconfiguration and relabeling of patterns and themes. This led to recognition of superordinate themes, which were particular to individual cases but also represented higher order concepts shared by several cases.

The development of a full narrative in the form of a dissertation includes detailed commentary on data and data extracts, including interpretation by themes and is supported by visual guides including tables. Included within the interpretation of the data are the researcher’s own perceptions, conceptions and processes (Smith et al., 2009).

Trustworthiness

Traditionally phenomenological researchers utilize *epoche* to establish trustworthiness in their studies, which entails setting aside bias, pre judgment and preconceived notions (Smith et
al., 2009). This study utilized an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to deliberately include the perspective of the researcher in approaching her study. Full disclosure of the role of the researcher, as a licensed school psychologist working within the same school system as some of the participants, was revealed. The researcher positioned her stance within the study and included information about her background, experiences and interpretations; what Smith et al. (2009) describe as representation, which contributed to the credibility of this study.

The study included semi-structured interviews, which provided rich, thick descriptions of the participant’s experience to increase trustworthiness. Member checking was utilized which included providing participants with transcription of interviews and the opportunity to review and clarify any responses.

In order to provide validity to this research the steps for this IPA research included keeping initial notes on the research question, the research proposal, an interview schedule, audiotapes, annotated transcripts; excel spread sheets of themes, draft reports and a final report, which is the research study. Utilizing this method systematically with transparency allowed for the possibility that the particular details of the study can be verified and were carried out in such a way that the account is a legitimate representation of events (Smith et al., 2009).

**Positionality Statement**

The researcher choose IPA in order to achieve a meaningful understanding of the participants experiences regarding the decision-making process for the assessment of reading through the interview process. Smith and Osborne (2007) emphasize the dynamic process with an active responsibility of the researcher to take an active insider’s view of the participant’s experience. The relationship between the researcher and the participants played an important role in the research process. This process required the researcher to become intimately familiar with
her participants and their views and take an insider’s perspective while exploring their experience in making decisions regarding assessment for reading. This study explored the experience of making decisions when choosing assessments for students for reading disabilities and the researcher identified herself as a licensed school psychologist who has extensive experience and training in evaluating students in public school. The researcher disclosed her traditional training in evaluation practices, and her understanding of the decision-making process for assessments in reading. The researcher also identified herself as a person with additional training in multi-tiered instruction and response-to-intervention. While the researcher originally embraced traditional methods of assessment, eventually with further training experienced the phenomenon of dissatisfaction with the status quo and the acceptance of new more radical, problem solving approaches to reading assessments embedded in the response-to-intervention process. The researcher attempted to view herself objectively within this process and disclosed her experience as a psychologist charged with making decisions regarding what methods to choose when assessing students for reading failure. IPA was chosen as this method supports the use of a small homogeneous sample size in order to provide the opportunity for meaningful contextual exploration of experiences (Brocki & Wearden, 2007).

Similarly to all qualitative designs IPA includes the use of interviews, the units of analysis and the exploration of the human experience whether individually, as in a narrative design, or collectivity as in a phenomenological design. The rationale for using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was that it is rooted in psychology and interpretation. It is focused on the individual making sense of his or her own experience and connecting those experiences to the meaning the participant develops within the larger events in his or her life (Smith et al., 2009). Within IPA the researcher is in a dual role referred to as a “double
“hermeneutic” of trying to make sense of the participant attempting to make sense of what is happening to him or her. This dual role allows the researchers to employ their own experience, personal and mental skills and capacities within the dynamic relationship of researcher and participant (Smith et al., 2009, p. 21).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is conducted in a systematic way, using small sample sizes, which allow for convergence and divergence of respondents in detail (Smith et al., 2009). Interpretative phenomenological analysis aligns with the objectives of this study as it will allow for careful examination of the process of school psychologists and permit the inclusion of the researcher’s experiences as a school psychologist in the role of making assessment choices for early reading failure.

**Protecting Human Subjects**

In order to protect the well-being and identity of all participants, careful consideration of the ethical responsibility of the researcher was given in developing this study. In ensuring that participants were treated in an ethical manner, the researcher was committed to adherence to Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) recommendations regarding confidentiality. Sensitivity to the unique nature of the interview process and the assertion that all participants were treated with honesty and respect was ensured by a number of measures.

Interview questions and results were shared with participants. The purpose of the study was fully disclosed to participants and participation was completely voluntary. Signed consent from all participants was obtained and submitted to the Northeastern University IRB (Appendix A) prior to the commencement of the study. A recruitment letter and transcription agreement was included and provided to participants as a measure of transparency (Appendix B). A letter outlining the purpose of the study and permission to access school personnel was submitted to
the superintendents prior to commencement of the study (Appendix C). No students were directly contacted, interviewed or observed.

The design of the study and interview questions was submitted to the IRB for approval prior to the commencement of the study (Appendix D and Appendix E). As the sample size was small and all participants’ work or have worked in the same district, one risk of participation included being identified with the study, which could jeopardize professional relationships or cause embarrassment. In order to address this risk, the researcher disclosed specific measures planned to reduce any threat of identification with the study. Participants and the sites were given pseudonyms in order to ensure confidentiality and protect the identity of individuals. The names of all participation sites were assigned a pseudonym. Data collected, including interview questions, were kept secure and only the researcher and a paid transcriber was given access to the information. The data, including field notes and taped interviews, were kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home office and only the researcher had access.

Participation was strictly voluntary and participants could have withdrawn at any time. During the interview process participants may have chosen not to answer specific questions based on the nature of the question and were not pressured or penalized in any manner. Their information was given the utmost consideration and respect as sharing was done with informed consent and was completely voluntary.

Limitations of the Study

The results of the study should be interpreted in light of the following limitations. Generalizability should be considered in relationship to the small sample size and the fact that all participants were from a similar region and where white, middle aged and in mid-career in a semi-rural area in the Northeast part of the United States. The characteristics of the sample size
may not be generalized to all practicing school psychologists in general. The results of the study are based solely on self reports of the school psychologists and are limited to their experience in choosing assessments for reading. Future research may want to investigate actual curricula offered by school psychology training programs and directly explore program directors and others involved in training for assessment and reading intervention.

One of the limitations of this study is the fact that participants knew the researcher and her role within the district and work environment. This familiarity may have influenced respondents’ breadth and depth of descriptions of their experiences based on assumptions regarding a common understanding of the phenomena being examined. The researcher attempted to address this by asking for elaboration or expansion of ideas whenever possible.

Finally as previously noted in the positionality statement, the researcher is a licensed school psychologist in the state of Massachusetts. Although interview questions were designed to be objective qualitative data leaves itself open to response bias. Smith et al. (2009) defines response bias as the tendency of participants to provide responses they believe the researcher wants to hear.

**Summary**

This research study investigated the manner in which practicing school psychologists make decisions in their practice regarding reading assessment. This study delved deeper into the phenomena of how school psychologists make sense of the experience the decision-making process when required to assess students for reading problems. As noted in the literature review, changes to school based assessments and the implementation of response-to-intervention has impacted the role of school psychologists. This IPA study explored the impact of these changes and the significance of the impact on practicing school psychologists in a public school setting.
The subsequent chapter will address the study’s findings and the analysis of the data obtained from the participants.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis was to understand how twelve school psychologists made sense of the experience of choosing the appropriate assessment for K-5 students who may have a reading disability. The researcher explored the challenges and the experiences of twelve licensed school psychologists responsible for the assessment of children in grades kindergarten through grades five in a public school setting. Their accounts were analyzed utilizing an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach in order to understand how they make sense of their experiences. More specifically, the participants’ accounts were analyzed within a particular context including the choices available within public education and specific educational initiatives including traditional assessment methods and response to intervention models to address reading failure. Twelve participants were interviewed, and each individual provided detailed accounts of their unique experience in making sense of the process for choosing assessments for reading disabilities within public education. Specifically, the participants elaborated on their individual background and training as a school psychologist and their process in exploring information in order to better understand and assess reading.

All twelve participants were licensed school psychologists in the southeastern United States, eleven of them still actively assessing students referred for suspected disabilities. One participant, although still actively involved in the decision-making process, had moved to an administrative position. The participants differed in terms of age, gender, length of experience, undergraduate major, and state where they attended graduate programs in school psychology. Participants varied by age, gender and length of employment as school psychologists. The chart
below outlines participant characteristics. All participants have been assigned a pseudonym in order to protect their identity.

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Experience as a school psychologist (years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craig</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedro</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiley</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katrina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrystal</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabrina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mallory</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analysis of the data collected led to four superordinate themes and twelve subordinate themes. The superordinate themes and subordinate themes are presented in table 2. All four superordinate themes resulted from similar experiences reported by the majority of participants. This number is acceptable according to Smith et al. (2009).

The superordinate themes and subordinate themes analyzed are presented in Table 2.
Table 2.

Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Themes</th>
<th>Subordinate Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. Confidence through Collaboration
   1.1 Reliance on Team Effort
   1.2. Relying on the Perspective of Colleagues
   1.3. Informed by Analysis of Prior Intervention

2. Confidence through Role Definition
   2.1. Contribute to Team through Cognitive Assessment
   2.2. Uncertainty Regarding How to Assess Reading

3. Building Confidence over Time
   3.1 Gratified by Self-confidence
   3.2. Energized by Professional Development

4. Accomplishment through Comprehensive Assessment
   4.1. Affected by Response to Intervention
   4.2. Importance of Phonological Processing Skills
   4.3. Loss of Confidence in Aptitude Achievement Methodology
   4.4. Dedication to the Use of Cognitive Assessments
Superordinate Theme 1: Confidence through Collaboration

The first superordinate theme, *Confidence through Collaboration*, was identified as central to addressing the issue of reading failure and describes participants’ experience in working with others when deciding how to approach the assessment process for students referred for an evaluation. Collaborating with their colleagues and working as a multi-disciplinary team captures the challenges of how to address deficits in their own knowledge when determining how to help struggling students. Participants recalled experiencing a sense of being overwhelmed by the job and seeking guidance from reading teachers and special education teachers on what to do and how they could work collectively to help the students struggling with reading. The participants perceived themselves as good at understanding specific requirements of assessments for cognition and social emotional functioning of students. They recalled experiencing feelings of under confidence about achievement testing including that for reading. Originally, participants described feeling somewhat overwhelmed with the difference between graduate training and job expectations. Eventually participants learned to work collaboratively and contribute by relying on the team approach and providing their expertise on cognitive and social emotional functioning. Among participants, expectations varied regarding their level of involvement in reading assessment and intervention. They all experienced doubt regarding their ability to recommend specific strategies to remediate reading problems and relied on reading specialists and teachers to provide that expertise.

All participants experienced surprise regarding job requirements and were not fully cognizant of what the job would really be once they worked in an actual school. They reported doing well in graduate school and understanding the fundamentals of cognition and learning. Yet
when they entered the work force, participants experienced feeling overwhelmed and under confident in their ability to test and remediate reading problems. They addressed this deficit by collaborating with colleagues they perceived as having the expertise that they lacked.

Participants experienced the consultation with teachers, including classroom teachers, special education teachers and the reading specialist as the first step in the decision-making process. Participants experienced feelings of being an integral part of a team of professionals that could collectively assist students that struggled with reading. Participants felt confident in their ability to give tests but less competent in their ability to recommend specific reading programs, interventions, or how to help students learn to read. Participants consistently reported feeling that teachers were much better trained, and their experience working with children and teaching reading made them more qualified to actually make recommendations. This led to the first subordinate them of reliance on team effort.

Subordinate theme 1.1. Reliance on team effort. Respondents experienced several aspects of their jobs as demanding and taxing of their personal and professional resources. As a result of limitations to their own training and expertise, respondents relied on a team effort with special education teachers and reading teachers to assess reading. Additionally, respondents experienced challenging time constraints and caseloads, which led to experiencing feelings of being overwhelmed with the workload and trying to complete all assessments. As a result of this pressure, they relied heavily on others on their team to meet the demands of the job. This reliance on the team reassured participants that they were capable of assisting students who needed help. Participants identified others as having the background and the perceived general education, and special education and reading teachers as having more training and expertise in reading. Careful examination of the participants’ comments demonstrated consistent reliance on
the team approach in order to provide a comprehensive evaluation. Reliance on others within the special education department provided participants with a sense of confidence in their abilities as a collective group to provide a thorough evaluation and that they could not fulfill all the required assessments based on their other job duties. Further, interpretation of their interviews indicated that participants perceived themselves as highly qualified to evaluate reading and interpret test scores but did not feel their expertise was in understanding specific reading skills and developing interventions for reading. Katrina’s description of her thought processes illuminate her experiences:

You know, I can do the assessments. I can get the scores, but as far as interpreting and then trying to figure out where to go from there, what might the best method to teach or where you might start, I think reading is so complicated, such a specialized area that you really need to know a ton to do a really good assessment and then write recommendations. (personal communication, December 5, 2015)

Katrina’s discerning description reflects her confidence in her ability to give the actual tests but not that she has the expertise to interpret and develop interventions. The data suggests that participants see the reading and special education teachers are responsible and better able to assess and develop interventions for reading.

Katrina’s account regarding her skills in reading assessment reflected her experiencing uncertainty regarding her expertise in reading. As a result of her insecurity she relied on the team effort to ensure students were properly assessed for reading problems. This is also conveyed in her statements that she felt more adequate at examining students’ social emotional profiles. Katrina described her perspective that she does not do the reading assessments indicating that she relied on the special education teacher in her building whom she perceives to have better skills.
She stated: “I very seldom do reading assessments, so I trust heavily on our special education teacher who is excellent at teaching reading by all accounts. I count on her to know what to test, and how to design solutions” (personal communication, December 5, 2015).

In a similar tone, Chrystal clarified her view of assessments and that she does not see herself as responsible for assessing for reading disabilities. She described her role in the assessment process: “Again, I would say that I wasn’t really the person identifying reading disabilities. I would do a cognitive and then the special education teacher would do the reading batteries and then we would compare our results” (personal communication, December 28, 2015).

Chrystal and Katarina’s accounts illustrate what the majority of participants experience regarding the team process in public schools. The majority of participants experienced reliance on the team effort as an integral part of assessing students for reading. Often this was conveyed in a manner that acknowledged the importance of the demands and the experiences of teachers and special educators and the acknowledgement that the system was established to share the responsibilities. This experience and perception was equally present across subjects and that all participants reported this across districts and schools. Ann describes when she first started her job the focus was on the cognitive instrument and the score comparison between her results and the special education teachers results. Ann stated: “So in that particular district at the time I was doing the IQ test, typically a WISC-IV and then the special education teacher would do a WIAT-III” (personal communication, December 10, 2015). Participants experienced a lack of satisfaction in the assessments and the method for identifying disabilities in students.

Ann’s experience reveals a sense of frustration in her description of defending a professional practice that did not make sense to her. Frequently participants explained that they
were trained in assessments and expected to interpret theme based on statistical formulas that did not always explain or justify the use of IQ and achievement tests in order to assist students with academic problems.

Participants experienced feelings of trust in their colleagues and procedural structures within the team process that allowed participants to rely on the expertise of the reading and special education teachers when choosing assessments to help struggling students. Many participants experienced performing the dual role of assessing students and also being the team chairperson in their school. As a result of the demanding nature of performing two roles within the team assessment process, participants relied heavily on the expertise of the reading and special education teacher.

Across the participants, this trust and reliance on the reading teacher and special education teacher was consistent for both the assessment and particularly for designing the intervention to remediate the reading problem. The participants’ demeanor and attitude conveyed a great deal of respect and trust in the expertise of reading specialists in understanding and addressing reading problems.

The majority of participants experienced consistent confidence in the special education teacher or reading teacher when choosing assessments for students referred for an evaluation. Trust and reliance on the expertise of the reading teacher and special education teacher allowed participants the opportunity to problem solve and share results to develop interventions for the students and also fulfill additional demands of their jobs. Often this was conveyed in a manner that expressed participants’ confidence and dependence on the expertise of these two positions and viewed them as an integral part of the process when addressing referred students.
The researcher interpreted the participants’ reliance on the expertise of their coworkers as a feeling of trust and a deep respect for their abilities and expertise. The participants’ level of trust and confidence in their coworkers skills were captured in the data through many statements of “I rely on them; they really know what they’re doing”. The participants did not have the educational background knowledge and expertise equal to their colleagues and applied a team-based approach to continue to contribute to the team efforts. Participants made sense of their inadequacies in reading assessment and knowledge in that they contributed their own expertise in other skills in order to remain relevant to the team process. The participants relied on the team, which led to the next two subordinate themes, *relying on the perspective of their colleagues* and *informed by analyzing prior interventions*.

**Subordinate theme 1.2. Relying on Perspective of Their Colleagues.** The next subordinate theme identified by participants refers to their experience using the information shared by colleagues about the presenting problem as a means to guide their choice of assessment. The importance of listening to colleagues’ descriptions of the problem, often referred to as the referral question, was instrumental in influencing their choices in assessment for reading disabilities. Referral questions are defined as the identified reason that a student has been recommended for an evaluation. The majority of the participants experienced developing better listening skills as a way to assist the analysis of the initial presented problem as the process that guided them in how to approach assessing students. Specifically participants experienced the ability to listen to the referral question and then probe more deeply into the descriptions of the students in order to explore the pertinent issues in order to get at the root of the problem and subsequently choose the appropriate evaluation.
Participants indicated that they listened carefully to information provided by the referral questions and sought clarification from general and reading teachers when choosing an assessment to determine the underlying problems. From this perspective, the researcher explored the participants’ experience in using information provided by colleagues in understanding how to approach student referrals. Participants described the experience of clarifying the information provided by their colleagues to make sense of the issues and to approach the evaluation process. For example, the psychologists’ described listening to teachers and using their intuition and previous experiences in order to understand and assist with specific problems like inattention versus weak phonics skills, which is also impacting the student. The uniqueness of the students’ experience and their problems is explored so that the school psychologists can determine the appropriate assessment; whether it is for attention problems versus reading problems. This reliance on others was emphasized by all participants as an important distinction to clarify for students who may demonstrate significant problems academically but for different reasons. Several participants emphasized the point that they relied on descriptive information as well as data in order to guide their approach to assessment:

I rely heavily on whatever the teacher describes as the referral question and whether or not a child has received intensive instruction through our RTI model whether it is reading or behavior. For example; when I’m given a referral I listened carefully and really want to know what it is from this evaluation you hope to find. (personal communication, December 16, 2015)

Similarly, Mallory described using her colleagues reports and the referral question as a guide to choosing the assessment:

So how we would identify learning disabilities is we listened to and examine the referral question and if it is about reading we would measure for reading and if it was for math we would
look at math scores. Was it short-term memory or long-term memory? So if the teacher describes them as not making progress in reading we would supplement reading achievement scores and the reading specialist would look and that is how it all came together. (personal communication, December 9, 2015)

Kiley described using the referral question to guide the process she follows when choosing assessments for pre-K to grade 2 students referred for suspected reading problems: “Usually the referral question is pretty similar, it’s not retaining their phonics, not fluency, comprehension sometimes, but usually it’s more of those foundational skills, so the battery tends to be similar for what I’ll choose to do” (personal communication, December 13, 2015).

These collaborative experiences of listening carefully to teacher descriptions of problems framed the referral question and subsequently informed participants regarding the decision-making process. Utilizing reported problems and pinpointing specific academic issues the student was experiencing was a means for participants to understand the issues and then determine how to assess students. Participants reflected on how they made sense of student’s problems and that colleagues detailed descriptions and analysis of the problem was the critical in determining the assessment choice. The participants experienced satisfaction with this but some frustration when the referral questions were unclear or information was not sufficiently detailed or specific enough to assist with understanding what students were struggling with. Participants experienced a high level of responsiveness towards changing the way that educators addressed difficulties in reading prior to the evaluation process. Their accounts conveyed strong positions about providing differentiated instruction and reasonable interventions prior to referring students for a formal evaluation. Similarly, participants experienced colleague support as critical in changing how reading problems were handled and how to utilize school psychologist’s time to
best serve the needs of students, including pre-referral activities, data analysis and teaching of students in the general education classroom.

As participants described their experiences with the referral process, many voiced resentment. The participants expressed frustration when they felt sufficient pre-referral activities had not taken place and there was a rush to evaluate based on special education services were the only option to get help (Kiley, personal communication, December 23, 2015). The researcher interpreted the experience of listening and focusing on the referral question as a means for participants to clarify the student issues and provide assistance to the struggling student. The tendency to rely on the referral question to choose an assessment is not indicative of a discreet event but a reflection of a collective occurrence experienced by participants. Thus, the participants considered the referral question as an entry point to help the student and their role was to provide guidance and assistance to help clarify the issues. Consequently, the referral question is the beginning of the decision-making process by analyzing the presenting problem as a team and then determining solutions out of a set of solutions. This led to the emergence of the next subordinate theme, analyzing prior interventions.

**Subordinate Theme 1.3. Informed by analyzing prior interventions.** A third subordinate theme identified by participants was their experiences analyzing prior interventions. This subordinate theme illuminates the participants’ experience of making sense of the referred student’s prior interventions so that they would know how to approach the evaluation. Prior interventions refer to how struggling readers were helped prior to referral for an evaluation. Respondents reported that prior to response-to-intervention (RTI) methodology; their experiences had been strictly focused on being the psychologist who assessed students with cognitive tests. Post response-to-intervention, participants began to experience more time
working with teachers considering what was done before deciding how they would proceed with an evaluation. The majority of participants had minimal experience with curriculum-based measurements prior to the introduction of RTI. Although participants were familiar with considering what types of different services might have been tried, like Title 1 services, the introduction of RTI changed the nature of the team process. Participants experienced a shift in the focus of assessments and began considering assessments, which reflected what was being taught in the curriculum in order to understand student progress in reading. Participants indicated that the experience required a shift in their thinking from looking at individual students and standardized test scores to thinking about data in a new way. They were used to listening to teachers and considering referrals without examining any supporting data and the expectation was that teacher opinion was enough to support an evaluation. Thus with changes in methodology through RTI the participants experienced a new way to look at disability as more than just a cognitive weakness but also as a lack of response to instruction. This shift in thinking was experienced by the majority of participants. The participants also experienced frustration at times when previous interventions were neglected or not done with fidelity and teachers expected evaluations to take place immediately. Participants indicated experiencing frustration when teachers did not differentiate instruction or develop interventions to assist students but expected solutions to come from outside of the classroom. Participants experienced the consultation process with regular education teachers as an opportunity to examine data, which was a new phenomenon that changed the dynamic of how they approach assessments. They also experienced frustration with inadequate interventions and a rush to assess for a learning disability. Participants experienced a sense of pressure to somehow deal with the problems by providing an evaluation.
Aaron experienced teacher resentment when requiring teachers to provide evidence of previous assessments and interventions when they referred a student. He stated: “Well, I wasn’t very popular but eventually I was somewhat effective in changing the approach” (personal communication, December 23, 2015).

The researcher perceived these experiences as school psychologies learning how to tolerate some discomfort when working with regular and special education teachers to ensure that required pre-referral activities were sufficient to assist in choosing reading assessments. The participants experienced doubt about the veracity of interventions and questioned how consistently interventions were tried before students were referred for an evaluation for a specific learning disability. Participants experienced a level of dissatisfaction when response-to-intervention efforts were inconsistent and there was a lack of teacher buy-in. Betty describes some of her frustrations that you need buy in from your colleagues. “RTI has been a long time coming. We have come a long way in ten years. I recently switched districts and I feel like I’ve gone back in time” (personal communication, December 13, 2015).

Lily highlighted some of the experiences in the referral process. She described the adoption of a school wide literacy initiative and its impact on the classroom instruction and referral process in team meetings: “Our approach is to look at what has been done. We are lucky we have a lot of interventions for literacy before we go to testing” (personal communication, December 22, 2015).

The participants experienced changes in the way reading problems were handled by examining previous interventions and data. Participants also reported experiencing changes in attitudes when dealing with regular education teachers who previously may have expected an evaluation as an automatic result of referring students. Participants consistently experienced a
shift from earlier experiences when a referral meant assessment. With the new focus on data
collection and evidence, participants experienced the phenomena of more remediation activities
prior to a referral for a special education assessment. The participants experienced this as
positive as they described efforts as more collaborative across special education and regular
education efforts. Participants experienced the efforts of regular education teachers as more
responsive to struggling readers and a shift towards taking more responsibility for these students
particularly in the area of reading. Participants experienced this as positive as it offered students
much more support prior to an evaluation. Lily elaborated on the impact of interventions on the
amount of students referred for reading problems.

Now we have a lot more interventions so most of the student [referrals] comes from
teachers. I’d say many have at least one supplemental reading intervention and so that is really
helpful to just be able to talk to the teachers and get a sense of where the breakdown is occurring.
(personal communication, December 22, 2015)

Lily’s experience highlights the impact of response- to- intervention methodology on the
decision-making process for evaluations. Her perception that intensive instruction and prior
reading interventions assist in identifying where the breakdown in skills occurs and what
assessments to choose that would provide helpful information to intervene with the specific
weakness in reading. Lily also conveys feelings that teachers are beginning to share ownership of
the student’s achievement in reading even after they have been identified as having a reading
disability. This experience of better collaboration due to prior interventions was shared by
several respondents.

Participants’ experiences highlight a shift in attitudes of the staff, which impact their
approach to their own practice. The researcher interpreted this as changes in how they approach
reading problems as participants experienced more of a collaborative, team-based approach, which included both regular and special educators. The experiences led to the next superordinate theme, confidence through role definition.

**Superordinate Theme 2. Confidence through Role Definition**

The second superordinate theme emerging from the data related to participants’ experience in gaining confidence in their role definition, which included recognizing their expertise in cognitive and social emotional functioning rather than specific reading assessment. Participants experienced their role as school psychologists, which led them to identify themselves as highly qualified in their abilities to give and interpret cognitive assessments responsible for specific learning disabilities. They did not see themselves as being responsible for reading assessments, which they maintained was as an achievement evaluation administered by the special education teacher. As a result of this role definition, participants experienced a sense of work identity that included viewing themselves as experts in cognitive assessment, and the reading assessments were not their responsibility or area of expertise. Aaron describes his role as a school psychologist who provides and explains information regarding test results and disabilities to inform parents and team members. “I try to explain to parents and teachers carefully and concisely how and why we learning determined disabilities” (personal communication, December 23, 2015).

Participants made sense of their experience as school psychologists who provided valuable information regarding students cognitive abilities and learning strengths and weaknesses. With regard to specific assessments, participants’ experiences across schools and districts indicated a division in role responsibilities, which led to a sense of confidence regarding their contribution to the assessment of students. The participants experienced feelings of
accomplishment and skill in their ability to measure for cognitive processes and social emotional behavior. Ann described her experience of how she provided information to her colleagues. “So I really focused on patterns of strengths and weaknesses in their cognitive assessments so we would know what we were looking at” (personal communication, December 10, 2015).

As a result of the specific, specialized role of the school psychologist within an elementary school, participants experienced satisfaction with their abilities and contributions to the team process. Kiley experienced that her evaluations provide important information in determining eligibility for special education services as part of the team. “So my assessment, in conjunction with other information that’s done by the special education teacher, I feel those cognitive processes piece of reading, I incorporate that into the findings, that’s my contribution” (personal communication, December 13, 2015).

Due to the nature of their roles within the team assessment process, participants reported relying on the expertise of the reading and special education teacher. This division of labor among school psychologists allowed participants to experience themselves as important contributors to the team effort. They provided expertise in specific assessments, which matched their views of themselves as highly knowledgeable and skilled in this area. This led to the next subordinate theme of contributed to team through cognitive assessment expert.

**Subordinate theme 2.1 Contributed to team as expert in cognitive.** The data suggested that participants experienced their role as evaluators as the expert psychologist in the school. Participants experienced a strong sense of confidence based on their training in administration and interpretation of cognitive assessments and social emotional and behavioral assessments. They experienced a sense of confidence in their own role and the expectation that special education teachers are trained and experienced in achievement testing including reading.
Their experiences working in schools were with a multi-disciplinary approach further aligned with their self-perception as an important contributing member of the team. The participants’ experiences demonstrated a concerning divide between responsibilities and assessment practices of special education teams within public schools. Repeatedly participants described their role as a key evaluator who determined the existence of a cognitive process, which determined a specific learning disability in reading. Mallory described her role in the team process: “We always worked as a team and I gave the cognitive assessment and focused on the strengths and weaknesses in the profile” (personal communication, December 9, 2015). Sally elaborated on her experience as a school psychologist: “So my experience is giving and interpreting assessments and as part of the team I am the team chairperson as well” (personal communication, December 18, 2015).

The participants consistently used traditional models to identify disabilities and felt qualified to administer specific tests that measured cognitive abilities and social emotional functioning. As a result of this expertise they fulfilled specific requirements of special education evaluations. They perceived themselves as a part of a team process and performed the role of the person qualified to give and interpret assessment including for reading skills. Aaron describes his experience: “The experience I think of most psychologists, and certainly in this district, is with cognitive assessments and achievement and making special education determination as a team. My work as a school psychologist is largely traditional” (personal communication, December 23, 2015).

Participants consistently reflected on their experience as part of a team and their role in providing the specific information regarding cognitive processes. They relied on other team
members to provide specifics on reading assessment. This led to the subordinate theme of experienced uncertainty in reading knowledge.

**Subordinate theme 2.2. Experienced uncertainty in reading knowledge.** The majority of participants experienced confidence in their abilities to assess students for cognitive and social emotional disabilities. Conversely, they experienced a lack of confidence in their reading expertise as they viewed others as experts in these areas. They explained this as a lack of focus on reading in their graduate training as their programs focused on cognitive and social emotional assessments. Several participants identified limited training in reading and how to assess and remediate for reading disabilities, which emerged as the subordinate theme of uncertainty regarding assessing and teaching reading. This experience of uncertainty led to a reliance on others who they perceived as having the experience that they lacked once they began working in public schools. The lack of training in specific components of reading led to experiences of feeling that the reading teacher and special education had more expertise in reading. Participants identified that the combination of lack of in-depth understanding of how students learn to read combined with limited exposure to reading assessments led to increased and continued reliance on the special education teacher and the reading teacher as the first resource they turned to regarding students referred for reading difficulties.

Katrina was frank about her limited achievement testing in reading. Her concern was that she was not the best person to do it. She admitted: “I felt someone who really knew the ins and outs of teaching reading would be better at picking out the strengths and weaknesses and what was really going on. So I did the best job I could but I didn’t feel like I was really that capable of assessing reading” (personal communication December 5, 2015). Katrina’s reflective description of her experience as insecurity as an evaluator of reading, as well as the concern in her voice as
she spoke, which painted a picture of someone lacking confidence in their skills. Participants consistently reported that their training to be a school psychologist did not focus on reading skills and assessment. Participants were cognizant of their limited training in the components of reading during graduate school. Most of the participants reported one class in reading and a concentration on cognitive assessment as part of their graduate training to be a school psychologist. Participants experienced this as a limitation of their abilities and felt that this was inadequate preparation for them to understand and design interventions for reading problems.

Sabrina described her graduate training in reading as minimal, which led to feeling that she lacked understanding of the achievement tests. “We touched on it but we didn’t spend a lot of time on the more narrow assessments like reading assessments. Over 3 courses we learned all about cognitive assessments and in the second class we learned about social emotional and achievement” (personal communication December 17, 2015).

Among the participants in the study, the majority experienced being unprepared for understanding the complexity of reading by their graduate program. All participants experienced uncertainty about their qualifications to assess reading. This led to relying on the reading teacher or special education teacher to teach and develop interventions for reading disabilities.

Ann described a similar experience regarding her initial training to be a school psychologist:

I did have initial training through graduate courses in assessing with a small focus on reading. When I was in graduate school we learned about response-to-intervention and curriculum based measurement but it was minimal. When I got out of school I read everything I could find so that I would understand reading. (personal communication, December 10, 2015)
Betty described her perception of her graduate training as a strong foundation for assessing learning disabilities but lacking in other areas. “It [the graduate program] really did not provide that much guidance in the whole neuropsychological piece at that time so a lot of that has been self-study and going to as much professional development as I can to understand reading” (personal communications, December 16, 2015).

Betty, Ann, and Sabrina experienced graduate school as a foundation and a beginning, but needed to learn more about reading once they were working in a school. Their experiences reflected a need to seek more information after graduate school. Betty and Ann spoke of needing to know and understand more of the intricacies of why students are not succeeding in reading and both independently sought out resources to fill in the gaps of their knowledge. Despite extensive training and education, participants experienced insecurity regarding their training in reading and they needed to rely on colleagues they perceived as the real experts. These experiences led participants to perceive their knowledge and skills as deficient and not enough to understand the components of reading. Nonetheless, the participants compensated for these deficiencies through their own tenacity and thirst for knowledge and a dedication to helping struggling students.

In summary, the participants demonstrated high levels of dedication and intellectual curiosity, and made sense of their experience by identifying areas where they needed more training and conscientiously seeking out the appropriate resources to acquire the knowledge base they lacked. The participants themselves compensated and recruited help from mentors. They developed trusting relationships with other school psychologists as well as reading and special education teachers and relied on their expertise and opinions when choosing a course of action and assessments to help struggling students. Many participants described performing the dual
role of assessing students and also being the team chairperson in their school. This led to the next superordinate theme of building confidence over time.

**Superordinate Theme 3. Building confidence over time** The next superordinate theme explores how the participants experienced an increase in confidence over time as they learned about how to approach the problem when students were referred for suspected reading disabilities and developed their own practice after graduate school. Participants reported feeling that graduate school gave them a good foundation for assessing students, but that they learned how to approach assessment decisions during their practicum and on the job. The participants described how their practice evolved over time and that they eventually developed a practice, learning to trust their intuition beyond just test scores to determine how to assist struggling students. All participants had a similar experience of learning the expectations of the job and also of continuing to seek information from colleagues, mentors, and professional development, which helped them to gain a more in-depth knowledge of reading disabilities. The participants described the experience of finding additional resources and how this information influenced their choices in assessment approaches and their practice. The researcher interpreted on the job learning as tenacity, resourcefulness, and dedication. The participants’ attitudes conveyed a deep level of commitment to helping students who were having difficulty learning. Learning all they could about their job responsibilities was reflected in their desire to do a good job and assist students. In order to increase their knowledge, participants continued their education through on the job activities, mentorship, and when making decisions regarding assessment choices rather than seeking completely new methodology. This led to the next subordinate theme, gratified by self-confidence.
**Subordinate theme 3.1. Gratified by self-confidence.** The next subordinate theme, *gratified by self-confidence*, refers to participants’ reporting that they gained confidence in their abilities and trust their own instincts when making decisions regarding assessment and interpreting test results for students referred for suspected reading disabilities. In the data collection, many participants experienced gaining confidence in their abilities over time and not one reported losing confidence in their abilities. On the job practice played a strong role for participants in developing confidence in their own abilities. A strong desire to help people was evident in participants’ accounts and an interest in education from an early age motivated them. The participants experienced increasing confidence in their own skills and judgment after years of giving and interpreting assessments.

Katarina described how her professional practice of 25 years has evolved:

I think I trust my own judgment more based on the hundreds of assessments that I’ve done and the hundreds of kids that I’ve seen. I don’t just trust my gut feeling by any means, but I think I make better decision because of all the assessments that I have done over the years. (personal communications, December 5, 2015)

Craig described gaining overall confidence with the use of a variety of assessments: “I feel more confident with the instruments. When I was brand new in the field I felt under confident compared to colleagues, now I’m starting to feel like I’m developing a practice and I use different instruments” (personal communications, December 29, 2015).

Betty described how she developed her own ways of making sense of assessments by developing her own style of questioning. She became more interested in additional research, which may impact students referred for assessments due to academic difficulty.
I think in reality you learn what you start to want to know and then you can develop your own ways to probe for the global child. I feel professionally as though a lot of my time on my own has been on research and just keeping up to date and developing as a professional. (personal communication, December 16, 2015)

Across participants, the researcher interpreted a sense of confidence in their professionalism and a belief that their abilities and decisions were appropriate. Participants felt they were helping students. The participants talked about their graduate school educational experiences and how they learned to incorporate outside information including information from colleagues, professional journals and professional development in order to improve their practice and better understand the processes involved in reading and the impact of variable factors on learning. Participants found further study and information critical to staying up to date in their jobs and their field. Participants acknowledged the importance of the training and experience in traditional testing and described looking beyond just test scores to understand the needs of the students.

All participants sought additional resources, which assisted them in doing their jobs well and helped them in making confident assessment decisions. Participants sought solutions in the form of additional information in order to support that traditional team process of assessing students for disabilities. This led to the next subordinate theme: energized by professional collaboration.

**Subordinate theme 3.2 Energized by professional collaboration.** The participants experienced collaboration as a force that helped them to network and think collectively and creatively to solve problems. Participants experienced seeking and exchanging information with colleagues as their greatest resource, whether the people worked in their building or in their
district, when making decisions about assessment and what to do with struggling students. When asked how they accessed resources, participants consistently utilized colleagues as their number one resource. Specifically, participants experienced relying on and seeking consultation from reading teachers and special education teachers as used these people as their number one resource and other school psychologists as a secondary resource.

Sally experienced the consultation with teachers as an exchange between expert knowledge and a sense of belonging in a professional network: “So I definitely use people, we’re all professionals so you use the teachers you work with, other psychologists, you know it’s a network of people that are professionals and they can help you guide your practice” (personal communication, December 18, 2015).

Sally’s experience illustrates the sense of belonging among a select, highly trained group of colleagues and how their relationships represent an exchange of ideas and creativity shared among select experts. Her description of the support she experiences when she is allowed to bounce ideas off of her fellow school psychologist reflects the “aha” moments when something she struggled with becomes clearer through discussion with other professionals. As she talked about the colleagues that she relied on, she reveals her position that these were people that represented her network of support and she relied on them to give her important assistance to help her approach assessment. Sally’s tone and attitude reflected a confidence and respect toward her colleagues and a sense of belonging among a network of experts.

Kiley also experienced relying on a network of colleagues who help her decipher information when struggling to choose a reading assessment. Kiley’s language revealed a feeling of connection with her fellow school psychologists and a sense of comfort in having them as a resource when she needed advice regarding assessments. “People are my first resource; I have
Participants experienced collaborating with colleagues as their greatest resource. They consistently identified working within a network indicating a set of connections, which assisted them in different facets of their job including figuring out difficult cases, eliminating stress and sharing the work responsibilities. Across the participants, the researcher interpreted the reliance on colleagues and belonging to a network of professionals as considered the most valuable resource when making sense of assessment information. Reliance on a team of experts was the greatest source of assistance and further help and participants conveyed trust and reliance in the collaborative process as a critical to meeting the needs of students. The researcher found that the professional development and areas of interest varied, yet participants benefited from further study and the information gave them a sense that they were staying up to date in their field. Participants consistently sought information in books and journal articles by experts in the field, which helped them to understand brain functioning as it relates to reading. Finding this information through self-study, professional development, and district based resources allowed the participants to expand their knowledge of reading skills and improve their professional practice.

Participants acknowledged the importance of the training and experience in traditional testing and described looking beyond just test scores to understand the needs of the students. The language and demeanor of participants reflected an experience of being energized by professional collaboration and development. Participants expressed the feeling that they were fortunate to have this network of professionals and experienced a comfort level in and reliance on them to assist in making the proper choices when choosing assessments. Ultimately, the
reliance on a network of professionals allowed participants to provide a comprehensive assessment of students, something they identified as important to meeting the needs of struggling students. The superordinate theme of building confidence over time and the two subordinate themes addressing different aspects of self-confidence can be summarized as participants gaining confidence through various experiences. Participants experienced increasing confidence over time by being part of a team effort. Further, the second subordinate theme revealed increased enthusiasm and confidence through varied professional development activities. This led to the fourth superordinate theme of a sense of accomplishment through comprehensive assessment.

**Superordinate Theme 4. Accomplishment through Comprehensive Assessment**

The fourth superordinate theme, accomplishment through comprehensive assessment, illustrates the participants’ experiences of gaining a sense of accomplishment through comprehensive exploration of the students’ learning within the context of the students’ cultural and environmental history. Many participants experienced grappling with several variables that impact a student and reported that they, along with the team of teachers, reading teachers, and special educators consider the history, background, and previous educational experiences when deciding how to assess students for reading failure. Participants experienced struggling to make sense of a lot of information, and over the years they relied on more than just test scores. They characterized this experience as looking at students within a context in order to understand factors that may impact their achievement. Over their years of experience, participants began to understand how important these contextual factors could be in understanding student profiles.

Katrina describes her experiences with the team approach as happening in a meeting with teachers where they discuss students when deciding how to approach assessments. This type of
collaboration includes discussions about whether they have specific concerns regarding students’ academic and social emotional functioning, which would impact learning.

Well, we would have a discussion and at the meeting where we look at the whole child, of course to see if the student has anxiety or behavior problems. I don’t do any reading assessments but I do cognitive assessments and I often do assessments for attention, executive functioning, even if attention is not an issue. (personal communication, December 5, 2015)

Katrina shared her experience as being part of a team of experts and professionals who consider the information in order to determine how to help students with presenting problems. Her description of how she and the group reflect on information illustrates their emphasis on being comprehensive in their evaluations. Katrina experienced the comprehensive approach as the best way to assist students by considering the whole child and not overlook underlying issues. In her tone and description, the researcher construed her experiences as someone who tries to be holistic in how she views students and what impacts their learning. Participants experienced a sense that by being thorough and comprehensive in their assessments, they were grasping what was really impacting the student’s educational experience.

Lily described her graduate program experience which trained her to focus on both the whole child and specific assessments and test scores: “Okay, well the program at my graduate school was definitely very holistic and has a lot of emphasis on kind of like a system-wide problem solving and counseling approach and it definitely gave an overview of assessments” (personal communication, December 22, 2015).

Ann described her experience of how she explores different nationally co-normed, standardized cognitive and achievement test batteries to ensure that she is doing a thorough job when the referral concern was reading:
I think you’re always looking at the whole child when you do that, so even if you’re assessing for reading issues, you’re still, when you observe, looking for other factors that may impact the child in terms of their ability to acquire new skills or retain. (personal communication, December 10, 2015)

From the perspective of the participants as school psychologists, they experience the process of making sense of a lot of complex information by compiling data, discussing the issues among themselves and investigating the student’s background history. As a consequence, they use their expertise and experience in analysis of data, cultural background, and prior learning and consider all the information and variables impacting the students in order to help them the most. Katarina’s, Lily’s, and Ann’s descriptions relay the experience of considering how factors beyond analyzing data like test scores impacts learning and that identifying students based on test scores does not provide adequate information. The researcher interpreted the participants continually examining factors impacting the students as a desire to help struggling students and to be seen as knowledgeable and supportive. Participants shared feelings of wanting to help students, wanting to be comprehensive in their approaches, and wanting to be collaborative. The participants experienced gratification in their work by being comprehensive and in so doing, they helped students and contributed significantly to the team effort providing valuable assistance to students and colleagues.

Thus in assessing the whole child, participants were able to help the students, the teachers, and the families who sought help for struggling students. By considering more than just test scores, participants experienced a sense of contribution that provided important assistance to the students. They also considered their contribution to the team effort and voiced their commitment to helping students beyond just providing a single assessment. The
participants’ accounts relayed a sense of accomplishment and pride in being comprehensive to assist students.

**Subordinate theme 4.1. Affected by Response to Intervention.** The subordinate theme, *affected by response to intervention*, refers to the impact the introduction of response-to-intervention initiatives had on the experience of participants. All participants experienced an impact in their practice since the implementation response-to-intervention methodology, which subsequently impacted their decision-making regarding the assessment of students. Concerning the collection of data, participants experienced changes to their practices including learning and participating in universal screening of all students for early literacy skills, the use of standard instruments, progress monitoring, and the presence of school-based teams to assess students for early reading skills. In many cases, the participants experienced using response-to-intervention as a methodology to assess reading prior to and as a supplement to traditional methods of assessment. A description of standard-based instruments within this methodology refers to specific web based approaches like AIMSweb and DIBELS data-based management. It was apparent that the participants were well versed in a variety of methods to collect data. In addition to progress monitoring efforts, participants experienced expanded school wide collaborative efforts to improve overall pre-referral strategies based on hard evidence that student instruction was meeting their needs in the classroom prior to referring for an evaluation. Several participants experienced frustration and conflict over a lack of teacher priority in implementing RTI efforts, which impacted fidelity and effectiveness in their classrooms. Examination of the data reflected that all participants identified some form of RTI and that curriculum-based information was used to assist them in the decision-making process when choosing assessments. The participants experienced a positive perspective of the use of this
information to supplement and help to determine if the students needed further assessments. When asked about the curriculum based approach at her school, Katrina explains the response to intervention model as prevalent: “We do have excellent reading teachers and if they are not making progress with those excellent reading teachers that implies to us that there is a significant problem” (personal communication, December 5, 2015). Katrina further explained the curriculum-based measurements and how the special education team utilized the information to inform their team decision-making.

Well, when we first start looking at a student, we will look at the various scores that we’ve gotten from the STAR assessment or whatever else we’re using at the time. Compare it also to their individual progress but compare it to the other kids in the school and if a student is getting help from the reading specialist and not making the growth that another student who had a similar profile at the beginning is making that tells us something. (personal communications, December 5, 2015)

Katarina experienced changes in how her colleagues utilized response-to-intervention methodology as helpful and her voice and story reflect a trust and satisfaction in the progress this model has taken. In contrast, Kiley describes the move towards it but she also describes frustration that it is not better quality.

“We don’t really have an RTI system. I mean we’re moving towards that and how do you help teachers differentiate instruction across classrooms? I think there are systematic things that need to happen to better assess” (personal communications, December 13, 2015).

Sally experienced the impact of response-to-intervention strategies on her practice as school psychologists by describing them positively as the biggest thing to change since she began her career:
“We have a lot of response-to-intervention steps before we get to a special education assessment, which is positive. I think we the biggest thing that has changed is that we use a lot more data to improve reading and reading instruction” (personal communications, December 18, 2015). Sally experienced excitement at her initial introduction to RTI and thought herself possibly naïve about how the information would be received:

When I left graduate school, a lot of schools there were implementing RTI. I was so enthusiastic. I decided to present RTI and how it would change everything about learning. It was not well received and if they could have thrown me out they would have. I was an idealistic fool and I thought it would be great and everyone would do it together but teachers asked if it would be in their contracts. (personal communications, December 17, 2015)

When queried, Sally continued: “Well for some people it’s all about the kids and learning but for some people it’s all about ‘please don’t give me more work and that is the reality. There is a ton of work and a ton of paperwork that people touch each day” (personal communication, December 18, 2015). Sally thought the introduction and implementation of RTI was a positive thing, but it came with some resistance from teachers and she was naïve in thinking that everyone would embrace a new methodology, and all parties would happily work together. The researcher found that Sally did not perceive the reaction of others as abnormal but did seem amused by her own naïve ideas. Sally explained: “I don’t know if I would do anything differently today as now we are doing RTI” (personal communications, December 17, 2015).

The researcher found that participants reported varied experiences in learning and implementing RTI and interpreted these experiences as typical for school-based initiatives. Statements like “It’s nice to be part of a team and work on this together”, and “there’s not this
black line between regular education and special education” and “I use curriculum-based measurements as part of the review to see what’s been done before I assess.” This information has assisted the school psychologists to make informed decisions regarding what resources and interventions have been tried and what may assist in providing information to help students achieve. The sense of helpful information provided by these curriculum-based measurements provides vital information for the school psychologists to use when making decisions and considering options. The participants also spoke of being included in the development and implementation of RTI initiatives and feeling a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment when their efforts continued even after they left one school for another.

The researcher interpreted the participants’ experiences as a combination of feelings of accomplishment as well as frustration when implementing RTI. The participants unanimously embraced the methodology and information provided and the importance of the initiative was supported. Collectively, all participants experienced the implementation of response to intervention as worthwhile and helpful endeavor that provided valuable information and opportunities for teamwork. The participants spoke about teacher support as critical to the success of RTI as well as administrative buy-in including principals, assistant principals, and special education directors. Participants also experienced frustration and dismay when efforts were met with resistance, lack of support, or done without fidelity. The differences in phases of implementation and the levels involved did vary; however, all participants reported more positive attitudes and impact on their practice when RTI initiatives were supported in their schools. This is consistent with the reframing process in which participants concentrate on demonstrating why a new solution is necessary. Implementation of RTI as an alternative to
traditional based assessment is a rationale for choosing an alternative option in the decision-making process.

**Subordinate theme 4.2 Importance of phonological processing skills.** Participants were impacted by research on phonological processing and its causal impact on reading problems and all experienced a shift in their understanding and subsequent approach to reading assessment. All twelve participants experienced an impact of research on phonological processing deficits on how they assess reading. Several participants sought professional development activities, as they were under confident in their training and understanding of its impact on reading. The participants all changed their practice as a result of learning about the significance of phonological processing deficits and their causal relations to reading skills. This change emerged and gained importance as they broadened their knowledge base regarding phonological skills and then reorganized how they considered factors when students were referred for reading problems. Changes in their practice happened over time, particularly for school psychologists who completed graduate school prior to 2000. As a result, participants working in the field over a longer period of time experienced a shift in interpretation and the focus on phonological processing as a significant change which impacted how they view reading problems and what they consider for assessments.

The participants who experienced under confidence in their knowledge sought professional development and other resources in order to understand, supplement their existing abilities, and learn skills which targeted phonological skills. Specifically, participants changed their approach to assessing reading and they acquired new knowledge and a greater understanding of the specifics of how to measure these skills. Participants sought new methods
to evaluation of phonological skills and identified standard-based measurements like the CTOPP (Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing) appropriate for students grades K through grade five who were having difficulty with early reading skills. Nine of twelve participants experienced changes to their practice of assessment after graduate school, which required learning how to administer and interpret assessment for phonological processing and all participants’ reported post-graduate study about the significance of this in early reading acquisition. The participants stressed the significance of the additional research and changes in their practice to incorporate this information into assessments for reading deficits. Several participants identified specific cases where they needed to utilize new assessment like the CTOPP [Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing]. As a result of this experience, participants supplemented traditional cognitive assessments and expanded what they did in order to make sure they measured the right skills related to reading. Betty explained her use of the CTOPP:

I find that for most kids that have reading issues they are most evident when you give an assessment like the Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing or some of the tests that measure rapid naming. (personal communications, December 16, 2015)

Lily described experiencing embarrassment regarding her earlier lack of knowledge of the importance of phonological processing to reading.

Just what skills constitute reading and how to look at it, is it phonological processing, is it rapid naming? Like that’s not really things that we discussed in my program and those are things I just learned from the teachers at my school. (personal communication, December 22, 2015)
When probed about learning these things on the job, Lily answered “it is really unbelievable when I think about it now” (personal communications, December 22, 2015).

Across most participants, the researcher perceived that competence in assessments and interpretation was a source of pride and that lack of knowledge often became a source of frustration or embarrassment for some who felt they were supposed to have expertise in the identification of learning disabilities. Kiley experienced collaborating with colleagues as the way that she began to look at phonological processing.

So in the district I am in now, for years we looked at the discrepancy, model and tried to link it directly to reading and directly to math. Now we look at it differently, so if a student also has weaknesses say in phonological processing, rapid naming for example, and then we know that their reading achievement scores are below then we see a link there. So looking at phonological processing skills and how it relates to reading specifically has changed. (personal communications, December 13, 2015)

The majority of participants found a change in their assessment practice and interpretation of reading disabilities based on their understanding of phonological processing deficits and how they are linked to early reading skills. It was apparent that at the elementary school level these early skills were considered important by participants, who exhibited eagerness for current research and methodology to assist students. Ann describes her experience in seeking out information to best serve students: “I was always hungry for that knowledge.” She elaborated further:

I don’t know what individual brought the information into the light. It may have been a graduate course that really focused on a pattern of specifics within child’s profile. So that sort of opened a window to other assessment. We would bring portions of additional
testing to look at more specific areas, like using the CTOPP for the phonological piece. We would bring more components if we knew we were looking for reading disabilities and we didn’t have RTI in our district yet. (personal communications, December 10, 2015)

Across participants, the researcher interpreted a strong commitment to research on best practices, and the proper identification of disabilities was top priority order to help the students referred for reading disabilities. The participants experienced searching for information and consulting with other professionals in order to ensure they were looking at the right information and seeking the right answers. They acknowledged the gratification of seeking professional development, reading professional journals, and seeking out colleagues in order to have the most current information available. The participants’ professionalism and dedication was omnipresent. The participants’ commitment to seeking new solutions to reading problems is in line with the reframing process, which concentrated on showing why new practices are important.

**Subordinate theme 4.3. Loss of confidence in traditional IQ achievement discrepancy model.** The subordinate theme, loss of confidence in traditional IQ achievement discrepancy model, emerged in reference to the question of how participants assess for reading in particular. Participants consistently experienced a loss of confidence in the efficacy of the aptitude achievement discrepancy model to identify students for specific learning disabilities in reading. Participants consistently experience relying on a greater variety of assessments to understand the breakdown in reading skills and that they found traditional achievement tests do not reflect how the student is actually performing in the classroom.

Katrina described how she views the disconnect between what test scores report and how students actually perform in the classroom:
So sometimes on a standardized test students are identified as average but over time they are still struggling. So we don’t throw standardized tests out the window but I think we trust what we are seeing more because we are the specialists, we are the experts. We use response-to-intervention and we have excellent reading teachers so if they’re not making progress that implies to us that there’s a significant problem beyond test scores. (personal communications, December 5, 2015)

Ann described how professional development changed how she approached assessments and spoke of her disappointment with additional graduate courses:

I had taken a graduate course, which focused on the whole notion that the discrepancy model just doesn’t make sense to us and it’s not helpful. So in addition to having the option of response-to-intervention, the professional development was the most helpful thing that we as a district did to understand how to help students. (personal communication, December 10, 2015)

The participants experienced frustrations with the aptitude achievement discrepancy model and how they began to seek and utilize a variety of different methods and assessments in order to support students who were referred for reading problems. Aaron explained his training in graduate school in RTI and how it shaped how he approaches reading assessments:

So my graduate program focused minimally on traditional norm referenced, assessments and significantly on curriculum based measurements. It was part of the program philosophy that the nationally norm referenced tests assessments are largely inadequate for identifying reading problems. So what I’ve learned then and since in my experiences really supported that traditional tests are inadequate. (personal communication, December 23, 2015)
All participants experienced a lack of confidence and reliance on data from the traditional widely used achievement test and several stated that they had “no faith” in the results, as they did not reflect what the student did in the classroom.

Aaron described his lack of faith in the most popular and widely used achievement tests:
I did the cognitive and the special education teacher did the achievement and I had no faith in it. I think it is ethically important to let people know that the way that we determine learning disabilities using a cognitive and achievement test is not supported by research. (personal communication, December 23, 2015)

Betty reported a similar sensitivity and loss of faith that the most popular achievement test does not assist in understanding the reasons why a student is not achieving in reading:
“When I’m looking at a reading assessment we would use to assess whether they are on grade level or not, our information comes from curriculum-based measurements. For example I put no weight what so ever into the WIAT [Wechsler Individual Achievement Test-Third Edition]” (personal communication, December 16, 2015).

Both Betty and Aaron exuded a deep sense of dissatisfaction with the aptitude achievement discrepancy model and a sense of frustration that it is still in existence despite research that reports that it is ineffective as a method to assess reading. Aaron reported that he no longer assesses for disabilities; his role is primarily in administration. However, he reports that he is frustrated that schools are still doing it at all.

I had no faith in it and sure it’s frustrating and troubling that we’re still doing it. “I’ve been in this district fifteen years now and we’re still operating with that methodology. To be honest, if I think about it, it’s troubling of course but I don’t think it’s unique” (personal communication, December 23, 2015).
The participants’ experiences with the aptitude achievement discrepancy model reflected dissatisfaction, particularly as it relates to reading problems. The participants’ descriptions of their training, their experiences interpreting and comparing results, and their convictions that this did not assist struggling students conveyed their lack of faith in the model. Participants reported analyzing and learning to use more curriculum-based measurements to understand how to help students with reading difficulties. Throughout the participants’ accounts, dedication to assisting students and the importance of being up to date in methods to assist students were the major themes expressed. The participants experienced frustration with the IQ-discrepancy model and questioned its alignment with the curriculum and classroom expectations. Thus, in experiencing dissatisfaction, the participants begin the process of seeking new alternatives to existing practices. Their stories reflected a commitment to seeking and implementing the most current methodology to identify reading disabilities to avoid over identification of students as having special needs and mislabeling them. The researcher interpreted this as a reflection of a commitment to advances in assessment in order to be accurate when identifying students with disabilities. It embodies a topic participants experienced in wanting their assessments to be valid and up to date in the most recent methodology.

**Subordinate theme 4.4. Dedication to the use of cognitive tests.** The final subordinate theme identified by participants’ concerns the dedication to the use of cognitive tests. The participants continued to experience confidence and feelings of satisfaction in using cognitive tests and maintained that they provided valuable information and were part of a comprehensive school assessment when students were referred for a school-based assessment. Being comprehensive in their assessments and providing the most up to date assessments was a top priority of school psychologists. The participants identified the cognitive portion of assessments
as an integral part of a comprehensive evaluation when students were suspected of having any
disability. Furthermore participants’ described the increasingly common experience at team
meetings of progressively more savvy parents and educational advocates, expecting and
sometimes demanding the inclusion of a cognitive assessment as if it was standard and
acceptable practice. This was combined with their belief that the best practice was to always
administer a cognitive assessment in order to be thorough and comprehensive. The participants
relied on information provided by their administration of cognitive tests was important to
understand student’s learning styles, patterns of strengths and weaknesses, and also in order to
make sure they did not miss something.

Participants experienced confidence in the value of cognitive assessments in order
provide a profile of students’ strengths and weaknesses and to ensure they did not miss an
underlying issue was present. In reflecting on their practice, participants made statements like,
“I always give a cognitive assessment.” All but one of the participants experienced complete
confidence in always giving a cognitive assessment as part of a comprehensive assessment and
said they felt it provided baseline data on a student’s ability in school. Only two participants
questioned the practice of always giving a cognitive assessment and its effectiveness to measure
a student specifically for reading skills. However, the majority of participants expressed belief in
the importance of giving the cognitive tests to ensure that they did not miss something while
others used the information to explain the reading problem.

Katarina stated her belief in always administering a cognitive assessment as part of a
comprehensive assessment:

I think things can be overlooked if we don’t do that. For example, a student we recently
evaluated was really struggling specifically in math, and we identified a visual-spatial
deficit that was keeping her from being able to process the math. We would not have known that if we hadn’t done a cognitive. I think it’s very important. (personal communications, December 5, 2015)

Sally elaborated on the theme of administering a cognitive assessment: “So I often times start with a WISC -5 cognitive and kind of see where they are at generally with that assessment. Specifically as it measures from the general assessment to the more specific assessment and identifies memory, learning and specific cognitive skills” (personal communications, December 18, 2015).

Betty conveyed her commitment to the use of cognitive assessments, which help her decision-making for other additional assessments for reading: I also like the WISC-5 cognitive assessment as I think it really taps into all of those areas that I can provide or make a decision about for their assessment based on their performance. I found an underlying issue recently with a student that I strongly believed that he had an expressive language disorder and although he performed average on some of the verbal subtests his ability to formulate an appropriate sentence was severely compromised. So at that point I would elicit the support from the speech and language pathologist. (personal communications, December 16, 2015)

All but one of the participants concurred with statements like, “At the elementary school level I always do a cognitive assessment” and “I always do a WISC-5 cognitive assessment as it’s helpful because there’s a correlation between certain subtests that kids do poorly on which transfers to reading in terms of being able to process what’s been seen.”

The participants experienced confidence in their choices and conviction in the way that they interpreted information provided by the cognitive assessments. It was apparent through
examining participants’ descriptions of their practice that they made sense of the use of cognitive assessments by rationalizing that it provided baseline information that informed their choices for subsequent assessments. Specifically, participants used the data from these assessments to determine the need for additional assessments based on the students profile or whether they needed to refer the student for additional assessment from another specialist. The respondents were firm in their belief in the value of giving cognitive assessments and their demeanor and emphatic language demonstrated this with comments like “It absolutely helps.”

Participants’ experience of giving a cognitive assessment as the way they made sense of the practice is positive. Participants’ conviction in the value of these assessments and how they relate to reading skills may be explained by the amount of time and energy utilized in learning and interpreting these assessments. The participants held their conviction of the value of these assessments was the result of years of practice coupled with study and research into the components of reading. The participants intended to continue this practice as it made sense to them in order to provide comprehensive and valuable information regarding the students they assessed. The researcher interpreted a high level of professionalism, which was reflected in their commitment to professional development and research into best practices as reported by the participants. Although participants sought a variety of resources and collaborated with colleagues, a cognitive assessment was the foundation of their comprehensive assessments. Participants consistently maintained they always administered a cognitive as part of a comprehensive evaluation. Thus, although participants reported seeking up-to-date practices, the foundational practices imbedded since graduate school in decision-making were evident.

The superordinate theme of accomplishment through comprehensive assessment and the subordinates themes are summarized here including addressing RTI, phonological processing
skills, and loss of confidence in the aptitude achievement tests. Participants’ experienced RTI implementation has having a positive impact on their assessment choices. Participants experienced a shift to consider phonological processing and their impacted on reading skills but continued to see value in utilizing cognitive tests.

**Conclusion**

This study investigated the experiences of 12 school psychologists in making sense of the experience of choosing the appropriate assessment for K-5 students who may have a reading disability. This investigation explored the decision-making process in choosing assessments based on their experiences with changes in the field, current research, and how they made decisions regarding how to assess students who have been referred due to reading problems.

The researcher collected, analyzed and synthesized the interview data, which reflected four superordinate and eleven subordinate themes regarding the experiences and perceptions of twelve licensed school psychologists and the progression of their decision-making process. The superordinate themes revealed in this study include: *Confidence through Collaboration*, *Confidence through Trust and Role Definition*, *Building Confidence over Time*, and *Accomplishment through Comprehensive Assessments*. These superordinate themes led to eleven subordinate themes including: *reliance on team effort, relying on the perspective of colleagues, informed by analysis of prior interventions, contribute to team through cognitive assessment, uncertainty regarding how to assess reading, gratified by self-confidence, energized by professional development, affected by response to intervention, the importance phonological processing, loss of confidence in the aptitude achievement discrepancy model and dedication to cognitive assessments*. Most importantly, the data generated perspectives that shed light on how
the participants made sense of their experiences in choosing assessments for student struggling
with early reading in grades K through 5.

At the beginning of their professional school psychologist experiences, almost all
participants experienced confidence in traditional methodology and strict adherence to test scores
to determine the existence of a reading disability. They endeavored to follow protocol to ensure
the validity and reliability of their results. The participants reflected on the development of their
own practice based on continued research, professional development, and teamwork, and the
gaining of confidence due to extensive experience. The overall experience of participants reflects
gaining knowledge, experience, and confidence in themselves and their ability to evaluation
students to assist teams in determining what needs to be done. Although participants experienced
uncertainty in their abilities regarding reading assessments, all participants experienced
confidence in their expertise and role definitions and recognized that they contributed to the team
process with the skills, knowledge, and expertise with which to assist students. The participants
experienced a loss of confidence in aptitude achievement discrepancy methodology but
maintained that traditional, standardized cognitive assessments continued to provide important
information in order to identify student strengths and weaknesses and also to reveal any
underlying cognitive issues, which may negatively impact learning.

Ultimately, participants experienced satisfaction and a positive perception of the practice
of using standardized cognitive assessments as part of a comprehensive evaluation and
combining this information with response-to-intervention methodology.

Participants experienced a very positive impact of response to intervention to remediate
reading problems and help to provide data regarding student achievement. None of the
participants were willing to abandon their current practices regarding regularly administering
cognitive batteries as they firmly believed they were an integral part of a comprehensive assessment, which was a top priority for participants. As a result, participants adopted methodology that reflected a combination of traditional assessments and an RTI framework in the decision-making process.

The subsequent chapter discusses the implication of these in terms of existing literature and includes recommendations for practice and future research.
Chapter 5: Analysis, Implications and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to understand how twelve school psychologists make sense of the experience of choosing the appropriate assessment for K-5 students who may have a reading disability. The researcher explored the challenges and the experiences of twelve licensed school psychologists responsible for the assessment of children in grades kindergarten through grades five in a public school setting. The theoretical framework applied in this study, decision-making theory, was constructed by Edwards (1954) and interpreted by Simon (1993). This framework analyzed the decision-making process of participants when faced with two different solutions to a problem and examined the process that individuals go through when making choices to solve a presented problem (Simon, 1993).

As demonstrated in the literature review, there is limited data available regarding the experiences of school psychologists in choosing assessments for students for reading disabilities, particularly since the introduction of response-to-intervention strategies (RTI). Hence, the findings of this study are aimed at expanding the existing research base regarding school psychologists’ experiences of the decision-making process when choosing methods for struggling students in the area of reading.

Four themes emerged from this study and reflected to the participants’ experiences and adaptations to the demands of their profession. Based on participants’ interviews, four superordinate themes, with eleven subordinate themes, emerged in response to the research questions. The superordinate themes included: (a) Confidence through collaboration, (b) Confidence through role definition, (c) Building confidence over time, and (d) Accomplishment through comprehensive assessment. The three subordinate themes for confidence through
collaboration included reliance on team effort, relying on the perspective of colleagues and informed by analysis of prior interventions. Corresponding to the superordinate theme of confidence through role definition were the subordinate themes: contribute to the team through cognitive assessment and uncertainty regarding how to assess reading. The two subordinate themes for building confidence over time included gratified by self-confidence and energized by professional development. The superordinate theme, accomplishment through comprehensive assessment, included subordinates of affected by response-to-intervention, importance of phonological processing skills, loss of confidence in aptitude-achievement methodology, and dedication to the use of cognitive assessments.

This chapter discusses the contributions of the research by linking the research findings of this study to existing literature and the theoretical framework. Conclusions of this study are then presented in relation to the thematic findings. The implications for practice, the limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

**Contribution to the Research**

Confidence through Collaboration. The participants in this IPA study elaborated on their role as part of a multi-disciplinary special education team and their perception of themselves as an important part of the evaluation process. The participants’ experiences in this study indicated that they sought to make sense of student’s academic difficulties and their role in evaluating students referred for reading failure. Through collaboration with general education teachers and reading and special education teachers, the participants gained confidence through collaboration in order to address academic failure. These findings echo the work of Allen and Graden (2002), who describe collaboration as a significant role for school psychologists in assisting school personnel to meet the needs of students. Thus, in describing the technical procedural
requirements embedded in special education regulations, the superordinate theme of confidence through collaboration emerged as a paradigm in which participants gained confidence. By using a systematic approach of collaborating with others within the context of special education team process the participants experienced increased confidence in their ability to provide valuable insight and resources to identify concerns, analyze and assess factors affecting students, design and implement a course of action, and evaluate specific intervention outcomes, shared problem solving occurs within the decision-making framework (Allen & Graden, 2002). These findings also echo the findings of Zins and Erchul (2002) that identified consultation as one of the primary functions of many school psychologists and one of the means by which psychological and educational services are provided. These systematic stages of decision-making emerged as a pattern in which participants gained confidence in their decisions through a collaborative problem-solving model. Kurpius and Lewis (1988) identified this process as having an orderly, systematic step-by-step process of problem solving which is dynamic, evolving, flexible, and cyclical in nature. The data revealed that participants in this IPA study experienced an increase in professional confidence through a process of consultation and by collaborating with colleagues. Through this model, participants worked together with colleagues to solve problems and share responsibilities and expertise. In order to determine the best approach to reading assessments, participants experienced increasing confidence in their abilities through the process of meeting as a team of professionals to examine the presenting issue, discuss options, and choose a solution. Zins and Erchul (2002) noted a sense of empowerment though consultation, which requires different assumptions and behaviors on the part of consultants during the problem-solving process.
Participants experienced this sense of empowerment during the process of collaboration and consultation continuously as part of their decision-making practice. All participants in the present study identified consultation and collaboration with colleagues and nearly all referenced themselves as feeling confident in their own abilities and contributions to the team effort in conjunction with input from other professionals with whom they consulted. This is supported by research findings of Allen and Graden (2002), which identify collaborative problem solving as the framework for approaching service delivery, which guides assessment and intervention choices. Moreover, the participants’ reliance on consultation with the reading teacher and special education teachers is in keeping with a special education multidisciplinary approach and their evaluations were oriented more toward a holistic approach to students. The participants experienced a lack of confidence in their abilities to assess reading and develop interventions. Participants compensated for this lack of knowledge by relying on specialists they perceived as experts in reading.

The majority of participants experienced a reliance on the perspective of their colleagues to inform their choices of assessments. In addition to seeking the opinion and knowledge of experts, participants discussed the problem collectively which represents the thinking aloud technique described previously (Simon, 1993). The participants’ reliance on collaboration with colleagues was interpreted as a means to organize information and to identify a course of action based on experience with similar student profiles. Furthermore, the discussion among colleagues was interpreted as a means of identifying the problem, which framed the activities and the proposed solutions based on the existing problem, consistent with the decision-making theory. This also reflects the philosophies of Witt and Martens (1988), who stated that consultation requires that recipients already possess and can develop competencies necessary to deal with
student- and system-related problems, given the right opportunities and the right knowledge and resources available. Participants expressed that the experience of examining previous interventions influenced how they chose a reading assessment and the discussion with colleagues informed their decisions. Subsumed under this superordinate theme is the concept that participants experienced themselves as an integral part of the assessment process. Despite experiencing feelings of inadequacy surrounding reading assessments specifically, participants perceived themselves as an integral part of the four-step process of special education disability identification.

Participants experienced this collaboration as a way to be supportive of struggling students. The specific methods described by the participants of this study were within the context of the collective team approach required in special education. In order to meet the requirements of their jobs and the legal requirements of special education, the participants experienced the collaboration of colleagues as a confidence builder. They experience this collective problem solving as a function of assisting students and used traditional methods of assessment coupled with response-to-intervention within the context of a collaborative approach to problem solving for students experiencing academic difficulty in reading. Procedures for the identification of students suspected of having a reading disability follow a special education process that allows for some latitude since the reauthorization of IDEA 2004 attempted to strengthen academic expectations and school accountability for students with disabilities (Biddix et al., n.d.). The participant’s interview responses captured rich detail about how their colleagues assisted them in framing the problem and making decisions regarding assisting students. As part of the role of school psychologist, collaboration with colleagues is vital to improving student achievement and the quality of work within the field of school psychology.
Although there remains a need for future research regarding consultation and collaborative models within school psychology, there is acknowledgment that school psychologists must collaborate with professionals within their schools and districts to build positive relationships and to meet the needs of students. The degree to which this has been researched previously is minimal. The results of this study indicate that collaboration is vitally important to the participants in order to fulfill their job responsibilities. Consultation as a form of problem solving and decision-making is embedded within the role of the school psychologist and typically begins with concerns regarding the individual student (Tilly, 2002). Tilly (2002) identified four levels of problem solving within the team process including: between teachers, other resources, the special education team, and outside resources, although there are many models of school psychological services and problem solving paradigms. The experience of participants in the present study indicates that collaboration, as part of problem solving, was essential in order to address issues of student reading failure.

**Confidence through Role Definition**

Each participant in this study elaborated on their role as a school psychologist and their perceptions of this role in relationship to problem solving for students referred for reading problems. Although approaches to their role varied slightly, the overall pattern of experiences among participants led to the next superordinate theme of gaining confidence through role definition. Reschly and Wilson (1995) noted that school psychologists spend the majority of their time in the process of assessment and determination of eligibility for special education within the special education team process. Each participant in this study described the role of evaluator and experienced confidence in his or her role as the person who had specific expertise in cognitive assessment and the ability to provide consultation to colleagues within the special education
team. As part of their role, participants expressed that they provided colleagues with consultation that was valuable to the team process, which contributed to the decision-making regarding the choice of assessments and interventions to alleviate the concerns regarding reading. This consultation included providing consultative services to others on their team including the reading specialist, classroom teachers, and special education teachers and parents. The participants experienced feelings of responsibility for providing interpretation of cognitive assessments and providing valuable information regarding student strengths and weaknesses within the cognitive profile.

These findings supported findings of Sullivan and Long (2010), which found that school psychologists were well trained in a combination of problem solving and traditional psycho-educational assessments and felt comfortable in both roles. The role of the school psychologist is dynamic; it continually evolves to better accommodate the needs of changing students and their families, as well as professional colleagues. Furthermore, the studies of Sullivan and Long (2010) and Nelson and Machek (2007) indicated that fears of significant role changes for school psychologists are unfounded and that school psychologists embrace the opportunities for leadership roles in problem solving methodology initiatives. In addition, these studies reported that school psychologists express the need for further professional development opportunities in order to expand their current role and embrace changes to the expansion of the role of school psychologists. These findings also echo findings of Wnek, Klein, and Bracken (2008), which identified professional development issues for school psychologists in order to fulfill their changing job responsibilities. Research by Fletcher et al. (2005) supported the expansion of the role of school psychologists in order to facilitate RTI initiatives and advocated that a better use of their efforts could be spent on early intervention methods and prevention activities. The
participants in this study expressed a desire for more professional development in order to address reading including planning interventions and prevention activities.

Nelson and Machek (2007), in their study of school psychologist training in reading assessment, identified findings that included deficits in school psychologists’ experiences regarding training and competence in reading assessment and intervention. Results of their study indicated that participants reported confidence in their ability to assess for cognitive abilities and a lack of training in reading in graduate training programs. Results of this study concurred with findings from Fish and Margolis (1988), and Sammons (2009) that reported minimal training in reading, and, as a result, relied on reading specialists and special education teachers, whom they perceived as better trained to assess and remediate reading. These studies reported that many school psychologists tended to possess self-perceptions of inadequate competence to deal with the large numbers of reading related referrals.

Participants in this study reported similar experiences regarding confidence in their abilities to assess specific to their role of assessing students for cognitive abilities rather than specific reading tests. This led to feelings of uncertainty regarding reading assessment. Consistent with research by Bramlett, Murphy, Johnson, Wallingford & Hall (2002), this IPA study found that participants primarily allocate a substantial amount of their time to cognitive assessments, and the predominate role they fulfill is that of an evaluator. In addition to their role as evaluator, and consistent with the literature, participants expressed they spent the remainder of their time consulting regarding crisis intervention and behavior management (Bramlett et al., 2002). Secondary to their role as evaluator, participants expressed confidence in fulfilling the role of consultant regarding student learning. Participants experienced overall confidence in the model of team consultation to adequately fulfill their job responsibilities, although participants
did experience doubt and uncertainty regarding their abilities to assess reading and develop interventions. Participants credited the consultation and collaboration with excellent colleagues and seeking their expertise as assisting them in addressing reading assessments. Moreover, the participants reported that limited time and time constraints made it difficult to fulfill all requirements and that collaborating with the reading teacher and special education teacher allowed them to complete their job responsibilities in a timely manner.

The majority of the participants of this study reported extensive training in cognitive assessment and limited training in reading. This is consistent with Aaron’s (1995) observations that graduate students may complete school psychology programs, become licensed, and go on to become school psychologists without ever taking a reading, reading disability, or reading instruction class, and thus are often underprepared to assist in efforts to prevent or remEDIATE reading problems. Despite a lack of training in reading assessment, the participants in this study expressed confidence in their abilities to fulfill their job responsibilities, which had increased over their years on the job. This led to the superordinate theme of building confidence over time.

**Building Confidence over Time.**

The participants’ responses indicated that in an attempt to fulfill their job responsibilities as school psychologists, they learned to adapt their practices and as a result, over time, experienced increased confidence in their own abilities. The data revealed that the participants’ professional practice evolved over the course of their careers, and participants found themselves seeking and participating in a significant amount of professional development and independent research in order to fulfill their job responsibilities. This is supported by research by Crepeau-Hobson and Sobel (2010), which explored the need for professional development for school psychologists as a result of education reform and substantive shifts in the job description over the
last few decades. Their findings indicated that respondents used the information from professional development to help inform their decision-making when students were assessed. The participants in this study experienced the ability to develop their own knowledge base and increase their confidence to fulfill their job responsibilities by seeking professional development opportunities and fill in gaps in knowledge. Sobel and Steele (2009) further postulated that changes in the demands of diverse populations of students in schools required additional training and professional development for school psychologists to reflect increasing needs for the problem-solving model and the implementation of RTI for today’s schools.

Reschly (2002) noted that evaluation as the primary traditional role for school psychologists within the school system will continue to be prominent. A wider variation of those roles can be expected with the adoption of alternative methods for disability identification like RTI. As such, school psychologists may spend some of their time on less standardized assessment methods and more time on prevention strategies. Marcotte and Hintz (2010) hypothesized a multi-step problem-solving model like RTI, which assesses academic skills in reading without the need for traditional norm-referenced assessments commonly utilized by school psychologists, will be the model of the future. Within the context of this model, early literacy is measured in terms of specific skill deficits rather than global cognitive processes typically utilized within the special education construct of specific learning disabilities. An implication for the shift in the construct of this dynamic process is the impact on the role of school psychologists. Although the majority of participants in this study had some experience in response-to-intervention methodology, there was considerable variability in the level of implementation across schools. In addition, although participants experienced response-to-intervention as having a positive impact on their role, they consistently reported confidence in
the continual administration of a cognitive battery as part of a comprehensive assessment. The subsequent theme in this study is related to the participants’ experiences of a sense of accomplishment through providing a comprehensive assessment, which was the next superordinate theme.

**Accomplishment through Comprehensive Assessment.**

Each of the participants in this study elaborated on the importance of being comprehensive in their approach when assessing students for specific learning disabilities in reading. While the literature is extensive regarding the implementation of response to intervention, there is little research on school psychologists’ experiences regarding the assessment of students suspected of having a reading disability (Crepeau-Hobson & Sobel, 2010; Hale et al., 2006; Fuchs et al., 2003; Restori et al., 2008; Sammons, 2009; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

Participants made sense of this by repeatedly incorporating new information into their practice of assessment and being comprehensive by including this information in their interpretation of student assessment. The findings of this study echo finding by Fuchs et al. (2004), who found that practitioners rely on an assortment of assessment procedures including and within an RTI framework and can produce unreliable diagnoses. As a result of concerns regarding consistent identification procedures, participants in this study utilized a combination of methodologies, and subsequently experienced a sense of accomplishment.

Issues experienced by the participants of this study included a loss of confidence in the aptitude achievement discrepancy model, the importance of phonological processing skills, and the effect of response to intervention on the practice of school psychology. Hale et al. (2006) explored the merits of both the response-to-intervention approach and the comprehensive
evaluation of basic psychological processes and postulated that both have merit. Both RTI and comprehensive assessment methodology help address long-standing problems regarding identification of disabilities.

Little (2013) noted with the changes in IDEA and the implementation of RTI, there may be concern among school psychologists regarding their roles and how they will be affected by problem solving approaches. Limitations of their previous role as psychometricians, with little focus and heavy reliance on the discrepancy model for identification of learning disabilities, are well documented as causing concern regarding job security. Results of the current study indicated that participants experienced RTI implementation as positive and eagerly embraced opportunities to learn about the components of reading and response-to-intervention methodology.

The majority of participants in this IPA study experienced increased confidence in their abilities to incorporate changes in methodology and assessment requirements to fulfill special education regulations. This is supported by research conducted by Chafouleas et al. (2003), which indicated that school psychologists found curriculum-based assessments were acceptable as alternatives to more traditional methods and found these methods helpful in identifying intervention strategies.

While participants experienced a loss of confidence in the traditional aptitude achievement discrepancy model, they experienced confidence in their ability to shift toward assessment that incorporated RTI methodology and phonological processing and its impact on reading. The findings of this study were consistent with the majority of participants who experienced looking beyond the test scores in order to identify students for reading disabilities. This study found these findings similar to the results of research by Little (2013) and Sammons
(2009) regarding how school psychologists often use the IQ discrepancy model in conjunction with RTI methodology. The data in the current study revealed that participants lost confidence in the aptitude discrepancy model and used the information only when the results were extreme. Thus, consistent with Little (2013), the data of the current study reveals that school psychologists implement both traditional comprehensive assessments and RTI in order to be comprehensive in their approach to help address long-standing problems surrounding the identification of learning disabilities for students with specific learning disabilities.

Machek and Nelson (2010) reported similar results to this IPA study, which revealed that school psychologists support RTI methodology and no longer persistently adhere to simplistic formulaic approaches. Participants of the current study all experienced a change and virtual abandonment of a previously determined statistical number that would indicate a learning disability. All participants reported adhering to previous statistical numbers between one and one half to two standard deviations below the mean as a numerical number that determined a disability. Such practices were unanimously abandoned by all participants who experienced such practices to be misleading or invalid in identifying students for specific learning disabilities. Rather, the participants of the present study experienced increased confidence in their professional judgment and reported relying on components of traditional assessment, coupled with the use of RTI data in the decision-making process for both assessment and the determination of eligibility for special education.

The researcher found that participants were hesitant to fully implement RTI without any standardized assessments as a means to identify specific learning disabilities in reading as they felt that these measures provided a comprehensive assessment of the student’s strengths and weaknesses. This is consistent with findings from Watkins, Glutting, and Lei (2007), whose
research verified the utility of utilizing general intelligence tests as a predictor of academic achievement. This finding confirms the research of Nellis (2012), which studied the philosophical barriers to RTI and included a reluctance to completely abandon traditional methodology. Participants of this study experienced confidence in consistently utilizing cognitive assessments as part of a comprehensive assessment for suspected reading disabilities, despite research that consistently refutes the validity of IQ scores in identifying reading disabilities (Lyons et al., 2001; Restori et al., 2008; Siegel, 1989; Stanovich, 1991).

**Connections to the Theory of Decisions-Making**

This study utilized Edwards’ (1954) theory of decision-making as interpreted by Simon (1993) as a theoretical framework for the research question and analysis. Simon (1993) described the nature of decision-making as processing choices between two states, A and B, and how individuals or groups make that decision. Within the progression of decision-making, four key processes occur including identifying, analyzing, focusing on objectives, and reframing for new practices. In choosing to have participants describe their experiences of decision-making for evaluating students, each participant characterized components of the decision-making theory within their process of reflection that allowed them to consider their decisions within the context of changes within special education requirements. These processes were evident in participants’ responses and their descriptions of the phenomena of change they experienced within their field and individual practices for assessing students referred for reading disabilities. In this study four superordinate themes emerged which were component factors in the participants decision-making process.

It is important to note that Simon (1993) identified decision-making as a process that undergoes various stages which are dynamic and interchangeable though not necessarily linear.
Based on what participants experienced the first stage of identifying the problem is consistent with the theory. In practice within the dynamic school setting, the second and third phases differ and are much more collaborative and circular, and more complicated, than outlined by Edwards (1954) and Simon (1993). In addition, the process of decision-making is further complicated by the context of the problem and pressure from stakeholders regarding how quickly the problem defined and addressed in order to find a solution. Internal and external factors including staffing, resources and parental pressure influence the speed at which solutions are chosen and attempted. At times, more than one solution may be tried at once, for example an assessment may be recommended while an intervention is simultaneously attempted and is ongoing. In the sections that follow, each theme will be discussed in relation to the theoretical framework of decision-making.

Confidence through Collaboration

In Simon’s (1993) conception of decision-making theory, the progression of decision-making occurs through stages including processing the issues and ideas. In Simon’s (1993) foundation of the theory is the formulation of decisions and that, given two states to choose from, individuals or groups make a choice based on a process of defining the problem and then choosing the best option. Within this progression, decision makers often begin with a solution in mind, a stage that Simon (1993) identifies as an idea process. This idea process is tied to the superordinate theme of building confidence through collaboration. As such the individuals in this study exercised the idea process of deciding on methodology to address the problem including choosing an assessment to measure students reading abilities. As such, individuals focus on the possible solutions based on their refining of the preexisting solution of assessment for the identification of a specific learning disability and the need for special education support. Within
these processes, individuals identify the problem, seek expertise to discuss and share bodies of knowledge, and choose the best course of action through collaboration.

Participants in this study described experiencing the beginning of the decision-making process by seeking assistance from the professionals that they perceived as the reading experts, having discussions, and then identifying the issues. Each participant noted that they identified the issues through the referral process and problem solved through collaboration with building and district experts. As part of the decision-making process over time, the participants experienced increased reliance on collaboration with colleagues in order to approach decision-making.

The participants experienced the team discussions as a way to strategically approach, identify problems, collectively examine, and choose a solution regarding student difficulties with learning including, but not limited to, reading. Integral to organizational decision-making is the process of collectively seeking solutions including seeking the opinion of experts with extensive expertise in the subject. Through the process of collaboration and seeking out the opinion of other experts, participants were accessing what Simon identifies as a large knowledge base. Additionally, within this framework of decision-making, the information provided by experts is categorized into narrow bodies of information called chunks which allows individuals to make sense of familiar patterns (Simon, 1993). Simon (1993) defined chunking knowledge as organizing information into units that become familiarized to the person who has it. Similar to word knowledge, these chunks act as a sort of index card to the information held within the expert’s memory. Therefore, by engaging in collaboration with colleagues, the participants in this study effected and facilitated the decision-making process.
Confidence through Role Definition.

In Simon’s conception of decision-making when applying the theory to the field of psychology, the first consideration is the attention and motivation given to a problem. In deciphering the psychological processes involved in decision-making, Simon described the nature of expertise; that by giving someone a problem and asking him or her to talk aloud is the beginning of decision-making. Each of the participants noted that they discussed with colleagues the issues and had discussion regarding student difficulties then used the information and the expertise of others to shape their course of action. This format is identified as talking aloud with experts regarding the fine points of the presenting issues and assists participants in solving the problem (Simon, 1993). Within this context, the term expert means a person who is in possession of a large body of knowledge. The participants consistently described themselves as providing the expertise on cognitive assessment and social emotional functioning to assist in the discussion. This experience is tied to the superordinate theme of confidence through role definition. In this instance participants identified or defined themselves as having specific expertise, which in turn determined their role and contribution in fulfilling the assessment process within the special education team process. This IPA study’s participants’ expertise in cognitive and social-emotional assessments allowed them to contribute to the collective problem solving effort for students experiencing reading failure. The respondents experienced themselves as contributing expertise in cognitive assessment while they relied on others to provide expertise in reading and intervention. The identifying specific roles and responsibilities allowed participants to experience confidence in their contribution, which allowed for the process of decision-making. Participants experienced confidence in their role as the psychologist who examined and
contributed their expertise in psychological functioning and they expressed that this confidence increased over time.

Building Confidence over Time. Simon (1993) noted that strategic decision-making requires analytic capabilities coupled with the ability to quickly categorize ordinary situations and intuitively identify and form a solution. Within this construct, Simon (1993) noted that there was a rationale in the processes of decision-making which included a logical sequence of collecting information, analyzing and organizing it, and evaluating all positive solutions. In practice, time, costs, and limited information processing capabilities of participants meant that it was not feasible. As a result, Simon (1993) suggested that decision makers operate within bounded rationality and make decisions that satisfy and suffice rather than optimize (p.363).

Simon (1993) noted that most of the time experts encounter familiar problems and have a repertoire of familiar strategies for the solutions. When presented with a problem, someone with expertise in an area recognizes cues in the presented problem and, these cues access the memory of things related or similar. Thus, in recognizing similarities of the referral question, the cues ignite recognition of similar problems and solutions. Although participants reported that they used the referral question to guide their choices, the experience of this process aligns with recognition of the bulk of referral questions and subsequent solutions (Simon, 1993, p. 403). Participants expressed that they used the referral question to guide their choices; however, their experiences of this process aligned with the chunking and cueing, which assists as part of the recognition process identified within decision-making (Simon, 1993). The participants used cues from their experiences with previous students in order to assist them in deciding how to evaluate students with similar profiles.
Accomplishment through Comprehensive Assessment.

Simon (1993) noted that most of the time experts encounter familiar problems and have a repertoire of familiar strategies for the solutions. At times, the decision-making process is impacted by information which requires participants to undergo a process of incorporating such information, thus creating a paradigm shift. This shift is tied to the superordinate theme of accomplishment through comprehensive assessment. In this case, participants required changes in methodology created by RTI and research on phonological processing. This created a need for a paradigm shift among participants emerging as subordinate themes of being impacted by RTI and the importance of phonological processing. Once the participants learned of the importance of phonological processing in early reading skills, they incorporated this information into their practice of assessment. For the participants, information provided by RTI methodology, coupled with a loss of confidence in traditional methodology, led to experiences of changes in how they approached their practice and view of students struggling in reading.

Additionally, participants’ experiences echo two distinct processes outlined within Simon’s (1993) decision-making process, including the objective directed and reframing processes. Objective directed processes focus on aims and objectives of an entire organization for example a mission statement. In this case the participants were fulfilling the requirements of IDEA 2004, such as those set out in special education regulations in order to support students with disabilities. The reframing process concentrates on showing why new practices are needed (Simon, 1993). For example, participants incorporated information and assessments for phonological processing and RTI methodology due to their experiences with additional professional development. This was evident in the participants’ responses when describing
fulfilling mandated regulatory requirements of special education while shifting their practices to incorporate RTI methodology.

Beach (1993) hypothesized that within the theory of decision-making, there is a screening process where a pre-choice screening of options happens prior to the choice of solutions. Screening can be defined as the process that governs the choice set (p. 215). Most participants described their experience of considering previous interventions as a method for screening out what has already been done which impacted how they approached their role and how they fulfilled their job responsibilities. The majority of participants also expressed that they always use a cognitive assessment and continue to have a firm belief in its value as part of a comprehensive assessment. The participants expressed being comprehensive in their evaluations as how they fulfilled their responsibilities and this led to experiences where participants felt confident in their practice in assessing students for reading disabilities.

Conclusion

This study was guided by the primary research question: How do school psychologists make sense of and explain their experience in selecting the appropriate assessment for reading problems of K-5 students? Through this question, this study sought to explore the experiences of twelve licensed school psychologists responsible for the assessment of students referred for a suspected reading disability. The researcher applied a qualitative interpretative analysis (IPA) research design, which interpreted participants’ various perceptions of experiences of working in a public school setting.

Congruent with the literature review completed as part of this study, several key findings remained constant in terms of school psychologists’ experiences with collaboration, reliance on colleagues, and gaining confidence over time through experience and continued confidence in
the value of cognitive tests. The rich data elicited from participants in this study corroborates the literature with reference to the reliance and value of cognitive testing, measuring phonological processing as it relates to reading, and the coordinating of RTI efforts with traditional methodology. It also substantiates research published by Fish and Margolis (1988), Machek and Nelson (2010), and Sammons (2009) regarding school psychologists’ perceptions and experiences in reference to lack of training and competence in reading assessments. This study also revealed that school psychologists are significantly influenced by their graduate program and the focus of that program on future practice. However, the data generated in this study revealed several unique findings including a sense of accomplishment through collaboration, a sense of confidence through role definition, and a continued commitment to the use of cognitive assessments.

The findings of this study indicated that all respondents continued to experience a belief in the value of the information provided by traditional cognitive assessments. All but one participant reported that they always gave a cognitive assessment as part of a comprehensive evaluation to determine the existence of a specific learning disability including in the area of reading. Consistent with the results found by Machek and Nelson (2010), respondents of this study found the data provided from the administration of an individual IQ test to be useful in understanding reading problems. As in the Machek and Nelson (2010) study, respondents in this study used sub test scores and interpreted past the full-scale IQ score and looked at strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, this research is consistent with the results of Sammons (2009), who established that school psychologists found it important to include measures of intelligence to identify reading disabilities even within an RTI framework. Participants in the current study experienced a loss of confidence in the discrepancy model for the identification of reading
disabilities; however, they continued to demonstrate a solid faith in the cognitive assessment data to determine if the weaknesses in specific areas were linked to reading weaknesses. Respondents believed that the newly updated Wechsler Individual Scale for Children, Fifth Edition (WISC-5) provided information on phonological processing which assisted in the identification of a specific learning disability category, and subsequently provided the data to support the label of specific learning disability. Almost all of the respondents believed that poor readers who were low average to average should not be identified as learning disabled based on lower scores alone, which is consistent with the findings of Machek and Nelson (2010).

Similar to the results of the Machek and Nelson (2010), participants of the current study expressed support for the RTI approach. Respondents experienced the model as advantageous over the discrepancy model including assisting more children earlier and improving core classroom instruction. Respondents in the current study expressed their belief that more professional development was needed for classroom teachers in differentiating instruction to reach hard to teach readers. The participants’ experiences included some frustration at the continued practice of expecting students to be tested, placed in special education, and then no longer be the responsibility of the classroom teacher. Participants expressed concerns about their qualifications to interpret and provide valuable information regarding instruction in reading; they often felt inadequately trained and prepared to make specific recommendations in terms of reading interventions. Participants experienced their role as providing a resource for colleagues; however, they experienced self-doubt in being able to share more than resources with teachers, specifically regarding pedagogical strategies.

As Machek and Nelson (2010) reported, school psychologists have a unique and longstanding relationship with the IQ assessment (p. 242). Findings of this study indicated that
the participants expressed continuing to believe in the value of administering cognitive assessments as part of a comprehensive assessment when students are referred for academic difficulty, regardless of the referral question.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Utilizing a qualitative research method and interpretative phenomenological analysis in particular, this study explored the experience of school psychologists in choosing reading assessments. The research was concerned with the unique perspective of the individuals studied and the effect of particular changes to their practice in choosing assessments for reading disabilities. This research analyzed the lived experience of licensed school psychologists who are responsible for the assessment of students referred for a school-based assessment due to reading failure. This research may provide an entry point for academic practitioners to examine the effects of change on assessment practices for school psychologists within a public school setting. Better understanding the potential influence of research, information, and methodology on assessment may impact the outcomes of special education disability classifications on students. Thus, it is of paramount importance for scholar practitioners to continue to explore best practices in school psychology, reading assessments, and reading interventions. Four specific recommendations are made as a result of this study.

**Recommendation 1.** This study indicated that participants experienced a lack of confidence in their abilities to adequately address reading disabilities. The data indicated that graduate programs have a great influence on school psychologists in terms of philosophy as well as practice when assessing students for learning disabilities in reading. With reference to graduate programs, university officials should consider that school psychology programs include additional instruction in reading assessment and intervention classes. Implications for practice at
the local level include providing professional development opportunities for school psychologists in the area of reading and reading intervention. Based on what participants reported, opportunities to incorporate these findings within professional development programs may be warranted.

**Recommendation 2.** Presenting new data that expands on the existing literature, the research demonstrated that school psychologists do not value the aptitude discrepancy model and do not adhere to formulaic methodology to identify students with specific learning disabilities in reading. The findings demonstrate that participants value the methodology of RTI, but continue to value and rely on information provided by standardized, norm-referenced assessments in conjunction with RTI data in determining how to identify reading disabilities. As such, graduate programs and faculty should reconsider the focus on traditional assessments such as the cognitive achievement discrepancy model and incorporate additional training in response to intervention and additional reading assessment rather than focus on the aptitude achievement discrepancy formula when determining learning disabilities. These programs should provide additional curriculum-based, response-to-intervention components as well as specific instruction in reading. Furthermore, this study established a greater understanding of the unique perspective of school psychologists in their perception of their role in the assessment process with the special education team. It follows that greater training in response to intervention will positively impact overall instruction and intervention methodology while assisting more students who are struggling with reading.

**Recommendation 3.** The research further suggests that those initiating response-to-intervention initiatives would benefit from understanding the role of school psychologists in the assessment process. One of the factors influencing special education teams is the quality of the
implementation of response-to-intervention efforts. The researcher further recommends that those initiating response to intervention methodology include the school psychologist in all phases of the initiative. One of the factors influencing school psychologists’ choice of assessment is the examination of earlier interventions. Since school psychologists provide a critical role in the identification of reading disabilities, it is important that they be included in the intervention and progress monitoring process in order to best inform their course of action. The participants in this study clearly identified positive impacts of RTI on student reading abilities and their subsequent practice when RTI efforts failed. Furthermore, this study also revealed that implementation of RTI was experienced as inconsistently implemented. It is recommended that change agents engage with school psychologists in the implementation of RTI in terms of how to design, implement, and accomplish these efforts as part of interventions for reading.

**Recommendation 4.** There remains a great need for future research on all aspects of the collaboration and consultation process among special education teams and the role of the school psychologist. Consultation has become an increasingly important role for a school psychologist, which is supported by the present study. It is unclear the level of training allotted to consultation within graduate training to become a school psychologist. It is recommended that consideration be given to this important aspect of the role of school psychologists in designing graduate programs. The participants in this study clearly relied on the collaboration with others and the consultation with teachers in fulfilling their job responsibilities. It would be beneficial for future school psychologists to be well prepared for the role of consultant. Recommendations include future research on the efficacy of school psychologists’ consultation services and the training needs in order to prepare to fulfill this role.

**Limitations of the Study**
The intent of a qualitative study is to examine the experience of participants and not to generalize. Therefore, the number of participants could be perceived as a limitation, although this is not necessarily the case. The researcher ensured that IPA methodology was followed and participants were from a recommended make up of small, homogenous subjects. The geography of the study, a small area of the Northeastern part of the United States, could limit the study in terms of the experience of school psychologists in other regions of the U.S. A final limitation may be that the researcher was familiar with many of the participants. Familiarity may have influenced their answers in terms of the respondents’ breadth and depth of descriptions of their experiences based on a common understanding of expectations within their respective districts. As a result of familiarity, participants may have been hesitant to be completely forthcoming regarding their experiences.

It should be noted that all of the participants in this study understood their role as it related to assessments of students for reading disabilities. This may have influenced the ways in which various participants viewed and answered questions regarding their professional practice. It is a final suggestion that future studies utilize a different methodology to examine the relationship between role definition and specific professional practices in order to help clarify what participants mean by their interpretation of assessments for learning disabilities.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The majority of studies on school psychologists related to their perspectives on their role in fulfilling the job requirements as a school psychologist primarily responsible for providing evaluations for cognitive profiles. Although experiences varied, all experienced the impact of RTI on their practice. The participants all noted their experiences in training and competence in reading assessments or their perspective on the implementation of RTI. Some expressed
differences in initiatives and implementation, while the majority noted a positive impact and reliance on data from RTI efforts in informing their assessment practices. While the implementation of RTI is at an important juncture in the field of school psychology there continues to be gaps in the literature regarding the competencies of school psychologists in assessing and remediating reading problems. The researcher recommends future studies that analyze the competence and effectiveness of school psychologist’s assessment practices in reading.

The researcher endorses additional investigations in order to assist practicing school psychologists to gain competence in reading assessments and reading interventions. While research continues to reveal that school psychologists feel confident in their abilities to provide cognitive assessments and interpret data, research also notes the levels of inadequate training in reading assessment and intervention development. Future studies might focus on the importance school psychologists place on reading assessment within the context of their job responsibilities.

Also noted was the lack of inclusion of school psychologists in initiatives to implement problem solving methodology and response-to-intervention. It is recommended that future research examine the role of the school psychologist in RTI initiatives as well as leadership roles for implementation of systematic reading initiatives and response to intervention implementation. A future study may further illuminate the experiences and perceptions of school psychologists regarding the effectiveness of RTI on the field of special education.

Implications for practice include future research using either case study or different methodology regarding preparation programs for school psychologists to examine if they are adequately trained to understand and remediate reading problems at the K-level.
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Appendix A

Northeastern University, Department of Education

Investigator: Shannon Alpert, PhD, Pamela Troutman Ed.D. Candidate

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

You are being asked to take part in a research study regarding your experience as a practicing school psychologist. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it first. You may ask any questions that you have regarding the study. When you are ready to make the decision you may tell the researcher if you would like to participate in the study or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a licensed school psychologist in the state of Massachusetts and you are actively involved in the assessment of students referred for special education due to reading problems/failure.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to explore how school psychologists choose methods to assess reading and how they experience the decision-making process when choosing assessments in their current practice of assessment for reading in the aftermath of RTI.

What will I be asked to do?
Study participants will be interviewed by the researcher. The interview will focus on your experience of deciding on assessments in your professional practice when assessing students for reading failure. These interviews will be taped.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

The interview will take place at a location and time which is convenient for you. The interview will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes. If you decide you have more information to share then a second interview will be scheduled. The second interview will last no longer than 30 minutes.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

There are no known risks associated with this study. The confidentiality of all study participants will be strictly maintained. Pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants and every effort will be made to avoid sharing unique circumstances or characteristics that may inadvertently identify a participant.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study will be used to increase the understanding of the experience of school psychologists in their professional practice.

Who will see the information about me?

Your participation in this study is strictly confidential. Only the researcher will have access to your name and contact information. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way as being part of this project.

The researcher, Pamela Troutman, will maintain your confidentiality by assigning you a different name before transcribing your taped interview. Your community of residence and
school will not be identified on any tapes, notes or transcripts, but will be kept on a list maintained in a locked file cabinet solely accessed by Pamela Troutman.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?

Your participation is strictly voluntary. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. You may stop the interview at any time.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?

No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of my participation in this research.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. You may request to have all information about your returned, removed from the research records, or destroyed prior to the end of the research project. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you may do so without giving a reason and without penalty.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Pamela Troutman at 508-274-8902, troutman.p@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Shannon Alpert, the Principal Investigator at s.alpert@neu.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA, 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.
Will I be paid for my participation?

There is no payment for participation in this study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

There is no cost to participate in this study.

Is there anything else I need to know?

You must be a licensed school psychologist currently working in a public school setting and be responsible for the assessment of students.

Thank you for your participation.

____________________________________________ ________________________
Signature of person ________________________
Date

____________________________________________
Printed name

____________________________________________  ________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent ________________________
Date
Appendix B

Recruitment and transcription agreement for licensed school psychologists through email

Dear (School Psychologist Name):

I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University studying how school psychologists integrate research into their practice of assessment for reading failure. This project explores the special education process and considers the experience of school psychologists in meeting the demands of special education requirements.

I am writing to ask if you would be willing to participate in one in person interviews regarding your experiences as a school psychologist. Our individual interviews will last approximately 90 minutes. I would be happy to provide my list of questions in advance of our conversation. I will take notes and tape-record the interview. Any notes taken during our conversation will be sent to you for review and approval. The confidentiality of your identity will be strictly protected through the research project and doctoral thesis publication. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

I hope that you will consider contributing to this research effort on the experience of school psychologists in special education. If you are interested in participating please e-mail me at troutman.p@husky.neu.edu.

Sincerely,

Pamela Troutman

Ed.D. Candidate, Northeastern University
Appendix C

Dear Superintendent:

I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University studying how school psychologists integrate research into their practice of assessment for reading failure. This project explores the special education process and considers the experience of school psychologists in meeting the demands of special education requirements.

I am writing to ask permission for school psychologists within your district to participate in one interview regarding their experiences as a school psychologist. Individual interviews will last approximately 90 minutes. I would be happy to provide my list of questions in advance. I will take notes and tape-record the interview. The confidentiality of each individual’s identity will be strictly protected through the research project and doctoral thesis publication. Subject participation is entirely voluntary. All interviews will be conducted after school and not on school property.

If you have any questions regarding this research project please e-mail me at troutman.p@husky.neu.edu.

Sincerely,

Pamela Troutman

Ed.D. Candidate, Northeastern University
Appendix D

Interview Questions for school psychologists

This interview focuses on your experiences as a school psychologist in how you decide the appropriate assessment for students referred for reading problems.

We have previously spoken on the phone and I have gathered some background for my study. While I have several specific questions to ask you, I am hoping that our conversation will be somewhat informal and want to make sure that you have a chance to include any information that you would like to share with me. If as we talk about your experiences you find anything upsetting, please let me know if you need to take a break or end our interview. I am also happy to talk more with you after the interview.

1. Tell me how you decided to become a school psychologist.

Training

2. Tell me about your experience in learning about assessments for learning disability in reading?

3. Give me an example of something that you found helpful in assessing reading? How do you use this in your reading assessment process today?

Decision-Making

4. Tell me about the process you follow when choosing a reading assessment.

   Prompt: What influences your choice of reading assessment tool?

   Prompt: Can you tell me more about that?

5. Tell me about a time when you had to choose a reading assessment.
6. If you were assessing for a different issue like attention problems how would that be different from assessing for reading issues?

7. Tell me about a time when you struggled with choosing a reading assessment.

8. Tell me about the kinds of resources you turn to when struggling with choosing a reading assessment. These might include other people, research articles etc.

9. What advice would you give new school psychologists regarding reading assessment?

10. How has your decision-making process changed since you first began your career?

11. As a practicing school psychologist are there any experiences that make you wish you could do something differently to assist students who are having difficulty with reading?

Prompt: can you tell me more about that?

Closing

Are there any other thoughts you have that you would like to share regarding reading assessment?

Is there anything else you feel is important to share regarding reading assessment or your experience with assessing students for learning disabilities?