Upper Elementary Teachers’ Self-Efficacy and Spelling Instruction: A Qualitative Study

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Brian E. Fernandes
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Acknowledgments

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Thank you to my colleagues for lifting me up when I was down and encouraging me with your advice, honesty, and expertise. I am honored to work within a professional learning community composed of talented and inspiring teachers and administrators. Your can-do attitude makes all the difference in the lives of our students and to me personally.

A final thank you goes out to my current and former students. As a child, I was challenged by reading and writing. Working with students having difficulty learning continues to make me a better educator. I learn so much from you and our conversations. I am hopeful that sharing my story with you will help you understand that smart is not something you are, but something you become. Always remember the words of Henry Ford, whose words I strive to reach every day, “If you think you can or you can’t, you’re right.”
Abstract

A great deal of research has been conducted regarding spelling instruction at the early childhood and lower elementary levels, but not at the upper elementary level. This qualitative study explored the perceptions and experiences of upper elementary teachers to gain a better understanding of how they instruct spelling and their related self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). One question guided this study: What are upper elementary teachers’ experiences with spelling instruction? The researcher derived information from a series of three one-on-one semistructured interviews with eight upper elementary teachers in a Rhode Island upper elementary school. Bandura’s (1977, 1997) self-efficacy theory served as the theoretical framework. This model explained that teachers’ self-efficacy regarding spelling instruction was in part due to the lack of mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states. This study also revealed that self-efficacy is not the only component that impacts teachers’ spelling instruction; teacher knowledge also plays a role.

Keywords: qualitative, spelling instruction, self-efficacy, upper elementary school
Chapter 1: Introduction

Understanding how upper elementary general education teachers perceive their ability to provide spelling instruction to all students while being expected to teach a variety of subjects, maintain paperwork, and improve student achievement was the focus of this doctoral thesis. General educators have appeared to struggle with spelling instruction. In fact, within my organization, the one complaint that teachers have voiced is that there is not sufficient time in the day to cover the English/language arts curriculum with the depth and academic rigor that the standards require. As a result, limited attention is given to the direct instruction of spelling. For example, a teacher stated, “Spelling is the least of my concerns as a teacher. I really need to focus on the students’ comprehension and vocabulary.” Another colleague explicitly stated, “I do not teach spelling. My students can do writing using computers, and isn’t that exactly what spell check is used for?” Another colleague expressed frustration with the lack of direction given to the spelling standards and showed that she did not feel prepared to teach the standards.

Statement of the Problem

Teachers on the front line continue to see a need for systematic spelling instruction in elementary school. Ehri (2000) posited that learning to spell and learning to read are like two sides of the same coin. Reading and spelling rely on much of the same underlying knowledge. Snow, Griffin, and Burns (2005) stated, “Spelling and reading build and rely on the same mental representation of a word. Knowing the spelling of a word makes the representation of it sturdy and accessible for fluent reading” (p. 86).
Furthermore, Ehri and Snowling (2004) found that the automaticity of reading words rests on the ability to map letters and letter combinations to sounds. Since not all words are visually distinctive, it is impossible for children to memorize more than a few dozen words unless they’ve developed insights into how letters and sounds correspond. Learning to spell requires both instruction and the integration of information about print, speech sounds, and meaning, which supports memory for whole words, which is used in spelling and sight word reading.

Not only does spelling benefit reading, but it also benefits writing. According to Singer and Bashir (2004), writers use valuable cognitive resources needed for higher-level aspects of a composition when they think too hard about how to spell. Writing is a “mental juggling act that depends on automatic employment of basic skills such as handwriting, spelling, grammar, and punctuation” so that the writer can focus on the topic, organization, word choice, and audience needs (Moats, 2005-2006, p. 12). Poorer spellers may restrict their word choice, as they write only the words they can spell and eventually lose track of their thoughts when they get stuck spelling a word.

Teachers are exposed to different claims and theories about spelling instruction in both preservice and in-service education. It is important to discover what classroom teachers believe and practice in their classrooms. In her 2001 study, Johnston reported that most teachers expressed that spelling was not adequately addressed in the curriculum and attributed that to the lack of emphasis on spelling instruction, the lack of resources, and the lack of time during the school day. One teacher even described spelling as a “hit or miss” subject. According to Johnston (2001), teachers “lack confidence and a cohesive theoretical basis for what they and their fellow teachers are doing” while instructing
spelling (p. 155). This lack of confidence may be due in part to the lack of agreement on a variety of issues with spelling instruction. Some researchers purport that children who read and write will become capable spellers (Bean & Boueffer, 1987; Wilde, 1990), while others, such as Henderson (1990), Templeton (1991), and Moats (2005), call for systematic instruction.

Not only is spelling de-emphasized at the elementary school level, but it is also de-emphasized at the national and state levels. In 2000, the National Reading Panel omitted spelling from its five core instructional components of a comprehensive reading lesson (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). The five components are phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. According to Moats (2005), the National Reading Panel implied that spelling would develop in response to reading instruction. Moats (2005-2006) stated that students have trouble spelling, “but we do not know how many, or in relation to what standard, because state accountability assessments seldom include a direct measure of spelling competence” (p. 12). Very few state standards specify what a student should be able to spell at each grade level. Authors of the standards subsume spelling under broad categories such as writing composition, or even with the mechanical skills under the category of writing conventions.

Both preservice and in-service teachers who are responsible for instructing spelling may know little about best spelling practices in the schools where they teach. In the building I teach in, there is an English/language arts curriculum, but decisions about how to implement spelling instruction are left up to individuals. Although there has been formal training at the early childhood level in phonics, decoding, and spelling, little or no
time has been given to explore the nature of spelling instruction that is currently implemented or developed in our building. This lack of exploration leads to teachers’ high level of dissatisfaction with the ability of their students to spell conventionally and with their current spelling instruction. Moats (2005-2006) further stated that the research base for claiming that spelling is important for young children is solid, but for older students, the research is sparse.

Failing to address upper elementary spelling instruction can impact student development in the English language arts and its use in everyday life (Ganske, 2008). People read with words. People write with words. People talk using words. People think using words. Without words and the knowledge of the English spelling system—and with teachers minimizing or devaluing spelling instruction—students’ vocabulary, spelling knowledge, and use of words can impact their achievement. Simply stated, students with a more advanced orthographic or spelling knowledge may develop stronger vocabularies over time compared to those with a limited understanding (Ehri & Rosenthal, 2007). Regardless of the barriers and concerns raised by both preservice and in-service teachers, Ganske (2008) stated that spelling instruction “is well worth the effort.”

In addition to its impact on student achievement, spelling can affect an individual’s career and image. The general public views conventionality of spelling as an indicator of the degree of literacy (Templeton & Morris, 2000; Wilde, 1992). Additionally, in work and business, adults are expected to demonstrate spelling proficiency in their daily work and communication, and one’s intelligence is judged on his or her ability or difficulty with conventional spelling (Kosnik, 1998). A lack of conventionality can significantly impact an employer’s decisions about whom to rely
upon, hire, fire, etc. Furthermore, vos Savant (2000) noted that a lack of spelling conventionality was considered a sign of laziness or even a lack of intelligence. Wilson and Given (2010) stated that although spelling is often viewed as a secondary literacy skill, it is essential for clear and accurate communication, and misspellings obscure communication and affect others’ opinions of the person making those misspellings.

Study Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this research was to gain insight into upper elementary school teachers’ self-efficacy in teaching spelling and how beliefs and spelling practices implemented within their classrooms impacted their self-efficacy. Spelling instruction involves the instruction, assessment, and strategy classroom teachers use to develop students’ spelling conventionality. Specifically, this study addressed one overarching research question:

RQ: What are upper elementary teachers’ experiences with spelling instruction?

This study focused on the self-efficacy of teachers. Teachers’ self-efficacy refers to their self-perception of competence in performing a particular teaching task and affecting student performance (Berman, McLaughlin, Bass, Pauly, & Zellman, 1977). This conceptual foundation is necessary for this study because its focus on human agency gives a voice to the teachers themselves. Skinner (1996) posited that Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory is one of the few in the study of human control. It makes a clear distinction between agent-means beliefs (the belief that one can use a particular method) and means-end beliefs (the belief that a particular method will lead to a certain result). At the same time, however, Skinner (1996) recommended Bandura’s (1977) attempt to shift the focus from the distinction between the two beliefs to a missing link: the agent’s
response to the means and how it may affect the ends. This missing link is crucial, for it serves as a more reliable predictor of behavior (Bandura, 1977) than merely examining the agent-means or the means-end relationship alone. For example, a teacher’s beliefs in the effectiveness of a certain teaching practice in spelling may not translate into its adoption if the teacher lacks the confidence to implement the method (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). On the other hand, examining teachers’ perceptions of their abilities may reveal more, such as the teachers’ past training or experience with, feelings about, and contextual factors in adopting a new teaching practice. Thus, teachers’ behavior, cognitive evaluation of their abilities, and environment (triadic reciprocal causation) all play a significant role in affecting teachers’ choices of pedagogical methods and their execution.

**Potential Significance**

As a practitioner-scholar and researcher, I continue to make daily observations and work with faculty and students on spelling techniques and current best practices in spelling. My doctoral thesis contributes to the research on spelling instruction and emphasizes the need for the education community to focus on the importance spelling plays in holistic literacy development.

**Significance for research.** According to Joshi, Treiman, Carreker, and Moats (2008-2009), spelling instruction underpins reading success; there is a high correlation between reading and spelling, as both are dependent upon language proficiency. Proper spelling is critical in developing literate members of our society who can easily communicate through reading and writing. Little is known about teachers’ self-efficacy in spelling instruction for upper elementary students from the perspective of the educators
who experience the phenomenon. At this time, no research has engaged with teachers regarding this problem of practice. We need to know the experiences of teachers to learn what they need to know and how to move forward. Employing a qualitative methodology helped to address the deficiencies in the literature and convey the importance of the phenomenon to select audiences who might benefit from understanding the practices and behaviors of upper elementary teachers who instruct spelling (Creswell, 2009).

**Significance for practice.** Unfortunately, despite the importance placed on spelling by researchers, most upper elementary teachers I have engaged with are frustrated with their lack of understanding of how to best teach spelling to their students. Teachers not only in my school district but across the country want to know more about spelling instruction so that they may improve their students’ academic achievement.

The primary audience that will benefit from this study are teachers in schools. Learning from the teachers in my study will support a significant number of educators who struggle with spelling instruction themselves. They will gain a better understanding of practices and the importance of teachers sharing common language, strategies, and rules that improve their students’ spelling development so that they are ready for spelling instruction.

A secondary audience that will benefit from this study are curriculum directors, college-level educators, and employers. Curriculum directors will learn from the teachers’ voices and learn just how complex yet understandable the English language is. Sharing a vision and understanding of spelling instruction corroborated by the participants in this study will aid curriculum directors to create professional development opportunities for teachers and may benefit them in helping teachers gain a better grasp of
spelling instruction. Furthermore, college educators and employers will benefit from seeing how a community comes together for the betterment of their students’ spelling development. Rather than leave this important learning on the backburner, those at the higher levels of education and employment will learn how spelling instruction occurs. College educators may also learn how they might be able to improve the preservice curriculum with the necessary components of a spelling curriculum, including the use of writing labs and practices deemed essential from this research study. Thus, hearing the teachers’ voices and perceptions may help with next steps in instruction, professional development, and curriculum development.

Positionality Statement

In my role as a reading specialist and literacy coach, I have found that the biggest challenge for my colleagues is spelling instruction. I see teachers utilizing a wide variety of approaches to spelling instruction. What concerns me the most is that from room to room, I see a plethora of practices that work for some, but not all, children. Although I assume that my colleagues have the best of intentions, I realize they are responsible for teaching all subject areas and may not have the knowledge and understanding of how to teach spelling.

After years of working with students who needed more explicit instruction in spelling, I read as much as I could about the subject. I have high self-efficacy regarding my spelling instruction, as I have learned a great deal about the English language by participating in training, applying the Orton-Gillingham approach, and learning how words work. I do not rely on only traditional methods, but also engage in teaching strategies and vocabulary to help build my students’ word and spelling consciousness. I
have found that there is not one best method for instructing students; I use a hybrid approach that carefully examines my students’ understanding of spelling through examining student work and asking questions about their knowledge. Seeing a child acknowledge that you understand them and how they learn is worth its weight in gold, which helps me continue to build and reflect on my spelling instruction for my students. I admit that I find myself biased that explicit instruction is essential in developing conventional spellers. By doing this research, I opened myself to learn from my colleagues.

My dual position as researcher and reading specialist/literacy coach at the site of my study is a significant factor for consideration. While I brought my personal biases into my daily practice as a reading specialist and literacy coach and was careful to reflect on these biases, I was equally aware that my position as a reading specialist and literacy coach might impact my study’s data collection and analysis through my personal and professional biases and current relationships with participants. I took great care to bracket my experiences and ensure that they did not cloud the truth of my participants’ experiences. Prior relationships with participants are not uncommon in qualitative studies. The fact that qualitative research takes place in specific settings with particular participants—and with a limited number of participants (eight in this study)—limits the generalizability of the findings.

**Theoretical Framework**

Through the exploration of teachers’ perspectives on spelling instruction, this study adopted Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory as its theoretical framework, as it pertains to teachers’ beliefs and perceptions. This section provides a brief introduction to
the theory, followed by an explanation of its application to the study of teachers’
motivation to instruct spelling.

**Self-efficacy theory.** Self-efficacy theory focuses on individuals’ perspectives on
their capacity to perform actions (Bandura, 1977). This theory is based on social
cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997a), which posits that individuals can choose
and pursue particular causes of actions, which is known as human agency (Bandura,
1982). Human agency works through what Bandura described as “triadic reciprocal
causation”: behavior is the result of interactions among personal characteristics, behavior,
and environmental factors. The interrelationships and synergy between the three
interactions influence and affect how individuals perceive their abilities to achieve a goal.
Self-efficacy develops based on the four sources described by Bandura (1986, 1997b):
mastery experience, vicarious experience, social or verbal persuasion, and physiological
feedback.

**Teacher self-efficacy.** This study focused on the self-efficacy of teachers in a
single school district as they instructed students in spelling as well as the English
language arts. In the context of this study, teacher self-efficacy refers to how teachers
perceive their motivation to implement spelling instruction. Understanding teachers’ self-
efficacy formation helps to identify the root of this research’s problem of practice:
teachers must teach a great variety of subjects, including the English language arts, as
well as provide instruction in spelling. Bandura’s (1997a) concept of teacher self-efficacy
beliefs helps justify the focus on teacher perceptions because the theory posits that beliefs
in their capacity (self-efficacy) to perform a teaching act can reveal a more holistic
picture of teachers’ choices, effort, persistence, and resilience (Pajares, 1997). At the same
time, self-efficacy beliefs help reveal the root of the problem of practice: Although teachers teach a variety of curricula, it is of utmost priority to help teachers develop and adopt different teaching practices. However, teachers must first understand their own beliefs in their abilities to execute different instructional methods—in other words, their self-efficacy beliefs. Only then will the teachers be able to reflect on their pedagogy. The four sources of self-efficacy—mastery experience, vicarious experience, social or verbal persuasion, and physiological feedback—help explain the base of teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs in adopting spelling instruction.

Before selecting teacher self-efficacy theory, I contemplated using andragogy, an adult learning theory. Andragogy, according to Knowles (1984), is based on the tenets of life experience, adults planning instruction, learning that has relevancy to one’s personal or professional life, and basis in a problem. Since my research focuses on teachers, the theory appeared to be a good fit. However, since I was trying to learn about adults’ experiences with spelling instruction and not exclusively focus on how they learned to teach spelling, self-efficacy theory was the better option of the two.

Self-efficacy theory allowed me to gain insight into the upper elementary teachers’ beliefs and experiences in regard to spelling instruction. This theory provided a lens through which I could determine critical next steps and themes to help improve spelling instruction.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Spelling instruction continues to be a debated topic in English/language arts education (Heald-Taylor, 1998). Parents advocate for formal spelling instruction, while some teachers across the country have abandoned spelling altogether. As a result, writing fluency is impacted, as many students in grades 4 through 8 don’t have the automaticity to access essential words and spelling patterns, and their teachers have had little support in understanding the importance of spelling instruction (Gentry, 2007).

This literature review discusses research about spelling instruction. The discussion begins with a history of spelling instruction. That is followed by a presentation of theories of spelling development and the history and predictability of the English language. Spelling instruction in schools today is then reviewed, as well as spelling difficulties and the influence of spell check. The chapter closes with a summary.

The History of Spelling Instruction

To better understand contemporary spelling instruction, it is vital to acknowledge historical research. From colonial times until the early 19th century, spelling consisted of instruction through the use of spelling texts such as Webster’s “blue-backed speller.” Not only were these books used for spelling instruction, but they were also key to the teaching of pronunciation and grammar. The reading passages included in these texts focused on the individual’s moral and religious development (Schlagal, 2002). The books’ spelling lists were extremely long and were presented for rote memory and personal development; they included words that adults should know.
A more narrow focus was directed toward spelling beginning in the 20th century. Long lists of up to 50 words per week continued to be the norm (Hanna, Hodges, & Hanna, 1971). A prioritization on memorization without particular attention to the orthographic features that made up the list was the norm. Some lists were presented alphabetically, while others controlled difficulty by the number of syllables in a word.

In the 1930s, word lists were organized around word frequency for both reading and writing (Rinsland, 1945). Organization regarding word frequency automatically promoted differentiation with the words a student would need for reading and writing. In fact, the 4,000 most frequently used words comprise nearly 98% of the vocabulary used by both children and adults in and out of school (Schlagal, 2002). Since the high-frequency words were not representative of all the spelling needs of a given learner, personal notebooks for recording misspellings and important words became the norm (Hanna et al., 1971).

As research continued throughout the 1930s and 1940s, memory-based strategies evolved. The strategy of “look, say, cover, write, check” was developed, and writing individual words several times until memorizing them gave way to the practice method, in which a misspelled word was rewritten three times. Writing words more than three times, according to Schlagal (2002), was counterproductive, as it affected the quality of attention to writing. This repetitive writing could “induce” students to write the first letters first, then the second, etcetera, which destroys the kinesthetic image of the word (Fernald, 1943; Gillingham & Stillman, 2000).

It was during this period in history that the test-study-test approach led to the regular use of a pretest before spelling practice. When pretests were self-corrected, the
test-study-test method resulted in greater gains than other instructional plans (Horn, 1947; Reid & Hieronymus, 1963). With the focus placed on pretest data, teachers gained more awareness of individual differences among students, leading to differentiation in spelling instruction. Recently, however, Duke (2016) posted a blog regarding literacy practices in need of abandonment. These abandoned practices included the weekly spelling test. She stated, however, that according to Palmer and Invernizzi (2015), whole-class spelling tests are less effective than an approach in which different students have different sets of words depending on their stage of spelling development. This approach emphasizes analyzing and using the words rather than taking an assessment.

Beginning in the 1950s, experts started looking more closely at the presentation of words in spelling texts. Although word lists controlled for difficulty, they were not organized to enhance the orthographic generalizations (Schlagal, 2002). At this time, according to Hanna et al. (1971), the first major computerized investigation into the nature and consistency of phoneme-grapheme correspondence was conducted. Surprisingly, the results yielded consistency in the system, and as a result, the spelling lists were designed to illustrate the orderly function of the spelling system.

More contemporary researchers have focused on how learners acquire orthographic knowledge and have argued for instruction based on research rather than more traditional techniques (Graham, 1983). Graham (1983) posited that individualization is key, as no two individuals are alike in their spelling development. He was also cognizant that spelling instruction is not an end unto itself, as it is an integral part of the writing and communication process. He further recommended that students need lots of practice in applying their spelling in a variety of writing. Graham (1983)
stated: “A spelling program should provide practice designed to ensure skills learned in isolation can be used successfully during writing” (p. 566). Graham recommended the application of seven key research-based practices to classroom spelling instruction:

1. Use the test-study-test method, which allows students to exhibit what they know and aids teachers in identifying next steps for instruction.
2. Have students correct their own misspellings as part of the assessment process.
3. To help students learn how to approach unknown words, equip them with explicit and systematic word-study techniques.
4. Present words in columns to focus the student’s attention on individual words.
5. Introduce whole words students are learning to spell. Dividing words into syllables impairs a student’s ability to acquire the correct visual image of a word.
6. Use spelling games to supplement and increase motivation for learning.
7. Allot 60 to 75 minutes per week for spelling instruction.

Although Graham provided key research-based practices, a successful practice for word study includes word sorting (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2000; Ganske, 2000; Henderson, 1990; Zutell, 1998). Word sorting, according to Zutell (1998), is a technique in which key words are written on individual cards. These words are then organized into columns according to patterns of similarities and differences and may include “oddballs,” or words that may or may not fit a given pattern. Table 2.1 describes the different types of word sorts.
Table 2.1
Types of Word Sort

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<th>Word sort</th>
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<tr>
<td>Picture sort</td>
<td>Uses pictures to emphasize phonemic awareness, focusing on the sounds of words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept or meaning sort</td>
<td>Introduces the idea and procedure of word sorting to those who may be new to the concept; sorting by word meanings, visuals, concept words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling sort</td>
<td>Focuses on the relationship between pronunciation, visual patterns, meaning units, and/or word origin and spelling. Most sorts conducted in a word study program are spelling sorts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed sort</td>
<td>Uses key words in categories specifically chosen by the teacher along with a question mark or oddball category.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open sort</td>
<td>Has students choose the categories for sorting and then organize words based on those categories. Students meet in small groups and try to complete a given sort.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ganske (2008) took the idea of word study and raised the bar for students in the upper elementary and middle school levels by placing more focus on polysyllabic words.

As children move into more sophisticated word study, Ganske described word study with a pneumonic: THAT’S Word Study, as outlined in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2
THAT’S Word Study

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<tr>
<td>T = Thinking</td>
<td>Students build their awareness of the spelling and meaning of words by engaging in thinking and questioning. With the right amount of support, students should be actively involved and wonder about how some words work to fit patterns, and others do not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H = Humor</td>
<td>Humor—with a focus on words such as idioms, puns, oxymora—adds a fun part to the daily routine of word study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A = Appropriate instruction</td>
<td>After administering a formal or informal assessment, a teacher determines the appropriate instruction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T = Talk</td>
<td>Students share how categories of words are alike and different and share their thinking about how words work through talk, which helps them to clarify and expand their thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S = Systematic approach and some sorting</td>
<td>Systematic instruction is based on formal and informal assessments and is planned and purposeful, as it builds on that assessment and student performance. Sorting activities help students compare the new to the known and to generalize to new words they may come across in their materials.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theories of Spelling Development

At this time, spelling instruction is defined as the instruction, assessment, and strategy classroom teachers use to improve students’ spelling conventionality. There are two different approaches to instruction, each with a framework that represents different perspectives. These approaches are the broad approach, which focuses on the global stages of spelling development, and the narrow approach, which concentrates on the linguistic development of individual spelling features. Both frameworks aim to provide a description of spelling development toward conventional spelling.

The broad approach. The broad approach describes a series of stages that capture developmental patterns signaling changes in student performance. Stage theory, which is qualitative in nature, places patterns of development in various time frames (Bear et al., 2004; Reece & Treiman, 2001). Many researchers have developed their version of stage theories, but the most known are those created by Gentry (1982), Henderson (1985), and Ehri (1986).

Although each theory lists different numbers of terms and periods, they all capture spelling development over time. Gentry’s (1982) theory consists of five stages (precommunicative, semiphonetic, phonetic, transitional, and correct spelling). In comparison, Ehri (1986) theorized that spelling develops across three stages (semiphonetic, phonetic, and morphemic), and Henderson (1985) detailed spelling development across five stages, including a lifelong approach to spelling development. This additional stage of spelling development dramatically contrasted with the views of Gentry, who proposed that complex spelling development was completed during early
academic instruction (Cassar & Treiman, 1997; Gentry, 2004). Table 2.3 provides an overview of the theories.

Table 2.3
**Broad Approach Spelling Stage Theories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Precommunicative—Strings together random letters; has no concrete knowledge of the sounds the letters represent.</td>
<td>Preliterate–Makes meaningless marks on paper with a crayon or pencil; has no understanding that writing represents speech.</td>
<td>Semiphonetic–Uses letters with no knowledge of the sounds that match.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Semiphonetic—Attempts to spell using the letters that match the sounds in the word; consonants are used more often than vowels.</td>
<td>Letter-name spelling–Understands that each sound represents a letter and has knowledge of letter names.</td>
<td>Phonetic—Demonstrates partial awareness of sounds and letters that match.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Phonetic—Represents the surface-sound features of words.</td>
<td>Within-word pattern—Has learned spelling from exposure to print during reading; knowledge of sight words assists in the spelling of unfamiliar words.</td>
<td>Morphemic—Applies orthographic and morphological awareness skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Transitional—No longer relies on sound to spell words; applies orthographic and morphological information to spellings.</td>
<td>Syllable-juncture—Applies spelling rules, such as doubling of consonants to mark short vowels in words.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Correct spelling—Has concrete understanding of the fundamentals of spelling, with spellings more likely to be conventional or correct.</td>
<td>Derivational principles— Understands root words and the meaning they carry; develops throughout life.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both Ehri (1986) and Gentry (1982) shared a similar view that Stage 1 consists of strings of letters carrying no real meaning. Henderson (1985), however, included random doodling with a writing utensil in Stage 1. The researchers have similarities for Stage 2, revealing early knowledge of letters and the sounds that represent each letter. Stage 3 shows the greatest amount of variation, as Ehri considered students at this stage to demonstrate advanced morphological skills, while Gentry’s and Henderson’s Stage 3
included only phonetic and orthographic skills. Ehri’s Stage 3 is more developmentally advanced than that of Henderson and Gentry. Ehri believed that the development of orthographic and morphological skills was the final stage where students learned word regularities during morphological development, which leads to conventional (correct) spelling. Conventional spelling skills, according to Cassar and Treiman (1997), continue throughout life and are thus not classified as a specific stage. Gentry and Henderson’s Stage 3, however, consists of beginning spelling skills. Both Stages 4 and 5 are similar in that students are learning and applying more advanced spelling rules. Henderson (1985) suggested that individuals would not completely master these skills because vocabulary continued to build and understanding of word roots, origins, and meanings continued to develop as well. In contrast, Gentry (1982) believed spelling skills become automatic because the student no longer relies on sound to spell but can apply orthographic and morphological information to spell (Cassar & Treiman, 1997).

**The narrow approach.** Proponents of the narrow approach of spelling development do not adhere to stage theory. Apel, Masterson, and Hart (2004a) posited that phonological, orthographical, and morphological knowledge, as well as mental graphemic representations, simultaneously interact during all levels of spelling development. Sulzby (1996) proposed the idea that students use a repertoire of skills and strategies to spell based on the integration of various linguistic aspects such as those mentioned by Apel et al. (2004a). All of these skills and strategies at any given time interact and assist students with spelling words, which is also known as repertoire theory.

Apel, Masterson, and Niessen (2004b) further indicated that older students must access various linguistic components to meet the demands of conventional spelling as the
complexity of words increases. In their view, misspellings occur because the linguistic complexity of the word exceeds the student’s ability to utilize one or more of the linguistic components.

The narrow approach, in comparison to the broad approach, focuses on the analysis of individual linguistic features and allows the educator a window into what affects students’ misspellings (Reece & Treiman, 2001; Silliman, Bahr, & Peters, 2006). The analysis allows educators to view what the students use but confuse. This somewhat limiting analysis focuses on one linguistic feature at a time. Whether using the broad or narrow approach, educators can gain valuable information about a student’s spelling development for instructional purposes.

Irrespective of approach, Moats (2005) asserted that children benefit from being instructed about the structure of the written English language in a logical progression from sounds and symbols to syllables and morphemes, as it is what good spellers know. Knowledge of letter patterns within syllables, spelling patterns, and meaning parts of words are learned as students’ spelling vocabulary expands. Poor spellers, however, need more systematic practice and an approach that builds each of the component spelling skills in parallel strands, according to Moats (2005). Rote visual memory, as researched by Treiman and Bourassa (2000) and Cassar, Treiman, Moats, Pollo, and Kessler (2005), is neither the basis nor the culprit in determining what makes a good or poor speller. The International Dyslexia Association (2008) stated that a common mistaken belief is that spelling problems stem from students with poor visual memory for letter sequences in words. Visual memory plays only a minor role in learning to spell. Spelling problems are akin to reading problems and originate with language learning weaknesses.
The English Language: History and Predictability

Understanding the history of the development of the English language is important, as some developmental research suggests that children may repeat this process as they learn to spell (Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004; Templeton & Morris, 1999). Students increase their level of sophistication in spelling by moving from the use of phonetic knowledge to the use of patterns and word meanings. For example, students learn to spell short vowel words such as in cat and then become adept at long vowel patterns, as in rain, and finally can grasp meaning-based spelling relationships such as in sign and signature.

The English language began nearly 1,600 years ago with the decline of the Roman Empire. According to Invernizzi and Hayes (2004), “The evolution of written English explains why our spelling system is the way it is—the organization and the key features within this organization” (p. 217). Moats (2005) asserted that Germanic tribes known as Jutes, Angles, and Saxons invaded, which resulted in the westward movement of the Celts. As a result, Celtic and eventually Latin words and roots were eventually absorbed into their low West German language, creating Anglo-Saxon (Old English). Words regarding animals, family members, numbers, common objects, emotions, and universal daily activities are all derived from Anglo-Saxon. For the most part, there was a great deal of consistency in letter-sound correspondence. Courtney (1991), however, indicated there was no correct or conventional spelling at the time, as scholars spelled words as they thought best. Moats further stated that “the spelling of a word usually changes much more slowly than its pronunciation. Common words such as said, friend,
and does have retained spellings that represent how words were pronounced over eight centuries ago” (p. 200).

Following the Norman Conquest, French pronunciations and spellings were introduced primarily in the areas of legal and government vocabulary. As a result, Norman French contributed to the addition of sound and symbol correspondence to our English language spelling system. This contribution became known as Middle English. It is during this time that the great vowel shift occurred, with long vowels changing in pronunciation. For example, according to Kosnik (1998, p. 2), the long ‘e’ sound was originally pronounced like the modern long ‘a’ sound, with the word clean pronounced as “clain.”

During the Renaissance, there was an explosion in knowledge, art, music, and literature, requiring an increase in vocabulary. Soon, Greek and Latin words were added to English. Greek and Latin word parts were orthographically regular, based neither on letter-sound correspondence nor pattern but rather on meaning (Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004; Kosnik, 1998).

It was in the later phase of Modern English that English dictionaries were first written. These were meant to standardize spellings in common usage (Kosnik, 1998). A view of spelling as an exercise in memorization developed. Despite the instruction of rules, there were as many exceptions and words to which the rules applied inconsistently. As English has evolved, the language adopted words from many other languages and, with it, their spellings as well. The words barbecue and chocolate come from Spanish; ballet and bureau from French; and piano and piazza from Italian, to mention a few.
The spelling of words in the English language is more regular and pattern-based than what is commonly believed by most educators. By sound-symbol correspondences alone, half of all English words can be spelled accurately (Hanna, Hanna, Bergquist, Hodges, & Rudorf, 1966). By spelling on the sole basis of sound-symbol correspondence, an additional 34% of words in English would have only one error. Therefore, the spelling of 84% of words is mostly predictable. Moats (2005-2006) further added to this understanding by stating that more words could become conventionally spelled if students took other information into account. This other information includes word history and language of origin, a word’s meaning and part of speech, and the knowledge that the spelling of speech sounds occurs with single letters and/or combinations of up to four letters. Furthermore, the spelling of a sound varies by its position in a given word, and some sounds are governed by established conventions of letter sequences. Table 2.4 provides other information and examples. Thus, only 4% of words are unpredictable (Hanna et al., 1966).

What is most vital to remember is that according to Moats (2005-2006), based on our knowledge of the history of English, our language uses 26 letters, 40 phonemes or sounds, and over 250 graphemes or ways to spell the sounds, and spelling is more predictable and regular than most educators think.
Table 2.4
Principles of English Spelling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. The spelling of a given word is often related to and even explained by its history and language of origin. | • Anglo-Saxon: water  
  • Latin: aquifer, aquarium  
  • Greek: hydraulic, hydroponic |
| 2. A word’s meaning and part of speech can determine its spelling.       | • A word’s spelling correlates not only to its sounds or phonemes but also to its meaningful parts or morphemes. The spoken sounds of words differ. For example: define and definition, wild and wilderness. |
| 3. The spelling of speech sounds consists of single letters and/or combinations of up to four letters. | • A phoneme is the smallest speech sound that distinguishes words. A grapheme is a letter or combination of letters that spell a phoneme. Graphemes may be composed of one or a combination of up to four letters. For example, the long /a/ sound is recorded in the following ways: a, a-e, a-i, ay, ei, and eigh, as in baby, made, rain, maybe, vein, and neighbor. |
| 4. The spelling of a given sound can vary according to its position within a word. | • Knowing how to spell a particular grapheme relies on the position of the sound in the word. Not all consonant or vowel spellings are complicated, but the choice of grapheme for a given speech sound is determined by the speech sound that precedes or follows it. For example, when the sounds /f/, /l/, or /s/ directly follow a short vowel in a one-syllable word, a double f, l, or s is used to spell the sound, as in glass, fluff, fill. |
| 5. The established conventions of letter sequences and patterns govern the spellings of some sounds. | • No word in English ends in a j or a v; according to Sacks (2003), j and v were easy to confuse visually with i and u. A –ge or –dge represents the /j/ spelling at the end of a word; –ve, as in give, prevents the word from ending in a v.  
  • The letter u is a marker for the hard /g/ sound in guest and guide. Without the u, the g would have a soft /j/ sound, as it does when an e, i, or y follows. |

Spelling Instruction in Schools Today

Teachers who instruct today’s students at the elementary, upper elementary, and intermediate levels employ a variety of methods to teach spelling. J. Richard Gentry (2004) described seven methods: nondifferentiated, differentiated, word sorting, incidental learning by reading, focusing on writing and teaching spelling in use, fad programs, and teacher choice. This section describes each of the seven methods.
The *nondifferentiated* method is explicit in nature. Word study occurs in word lists that are alike for all learners. Many publishers of reading anthologies utilize this “one-size-fits-all” approach. Gentry (2004) stated that these spelling books provide valuable resources for teachers and provide some consistency in helping students develop word-specific knowledge throughout the grade levels. He further raised the concern that the method leads to rote memorization of the given word lists.

The *differentiated* method is also explicit in nature and is anchored in word lists. This method may employ a spelling book and be based on spelling lists; instruction, however, is differentiated by offering above-grade-level, on-grade-level, and below-grade-level lists of words. Students are also encouraged to collect misspelled words to help with differentiation and further individualization. These words are high-frequency words that are easier than a student’s given instructional level and have a high utility of future use. Spelling books, if utilized, tend to be more comprehensive and research based, according to Gentry (2004). The utilization of a pretest helps teachers create different lists based on a student’s mistakes. Gentry further warned that individualized word lists can be time-consuming and arduous for teachers to manage within their classroom.

A third method is *word sorting*. Word sorting entails having the students sort words according to patterns until they recognize the patterns automatically and form a sense of the probability that a particular pattern is correct. Children are engaged in explicit instruction in words out of context. Teachers can also employ speed sorting and writing of a given sort. Gentry posited that this approach has many positive aspects, since it explicitly studies common spelling patterns that have high utility and utilizes conceptual memorization rather than simple rote memorization. Gentry further indicated
that when these lessons are multimodal and implemented correctly, they may lead to automaticity with high-frequency words that students can use in their writing. Word sorting is student friendly and collaborative. Gentry further noted that a liability is that it is time-consuming and is not easily differentiated to meet the needs of all learners. A further liability is that instead of differentiating word sorting, teachers can utilize whole group word sorting, which was not envisioned by Bear et al. (2000). According to those authors, word sorting was designed to complement a given phonics, spelling, and vocabulary curriculum.

A fourth method, *incidental learning of spelling by reading*, is also known as teaching spelling in context. Incidental spelling builds on the theory that readers and writers learn to spell incidentally. Although spelling has a connection to reading, there is little research validation of the effectiveness of teaching spelling using this technique (Gentry, 2000).

*Focusing on writing and teaching spelling in use* is the fifth technique utilized by educators. It focuses on the combination of incidental learning along with selected mini-lessons for teaching spelling in the context of writing. Allal (1997) criticized both the fourth and fifth techniques, as they “did not constitute a well-recognized instructional option validated by long-term empirical research in the classroom” (p. 145).

A sixth technique utilized by teachers is known as *fad programs*. Gentry (2004) described these programs as having little theoretical or research base. Many of these fad programs have one or two research-based features but lack overall effectiveness and the research base required for a high level of effectiveness.
The final technique utilized by teachers is known as teacher’s choice. Gentry (2004) called this a default method used when educators lack resources and professional development. He described this as a “smorgasbord” of all the techniques mentioned earlier with additional options that can be harmful to learners, such as teachers coming up with an ineffective practice or even deciding that spelling is trivial and not teaching it.

Allal (1997) stated that although the utilization of word lists is a common practice in schools, many educators don’t apply the principles that ensure instructive effectiveness. She posited that individualization, sufficient spelling practice, and time learning high-frequency words for students to apply when writing are key to improving teacher practice effectiveness.

**Spelling Difficulties and Implications for Instruction**

According to the International Dyslexia Association (2008), spelling is difficult for many people, but there is much less research on spelling than there is on reading, for example. Many educators and the public commonly believe that a speller has a poor visual memory for the grapheme’s sequence of letters. In reality, the difficulty originates with language learning weaknesses. The kind of visual memory necessary for spelling is closely “wired in” to the language processing networks in the brain of the learner (International Dyslexia Association, 2008). Compared to strong spellers, those who have difficulty with spelling have difficulty remembering the letters in words because they have trouble with noticing, remembering, and recalling the features of language that those letters represent. The International Dyslexia Association further stated that like reading achievement, spelling is influenced by inherited traits, but with good instruction and accommodations, children can learn to spell.
The classroom spelling curriculum should be organized to teach a progression of regular spelling patterns. Within this curriculum, spelling instruction should explore word structure, word origins, and word meaning. After the first grade, the International Dyslexia Association recommends that spelling instruction should follow and complement decoding instruction for reading. Children should be able to read the words in their spelling lesson, and most learners can read many more words than they can spell.

It is important that students learn to spell words for writing and not just for the spelling test. Ehri (2000) stated that all learners require two types of knowledge regarding written words. They need knowledge about the general alphabetic system, along with knowledge about the spellings of individual words stored in memory as a result of experiences reading or writing. Teaching students to read without also teaching them to spell may result in reading and spelling skills that are less closely related, a condition characterizing poor readers and spellers.

The key to effective instruction is integration fostering close articulation between reading and writing, so their acquisition is mutually facilitative and reciprocal. Withholding spelling instruction or subordinating spelling to computer spell checkers is “indefensible” because of the important role spelling plays in learning to read. Poor spellers do not develop into skilled readers. Spelling instruction must remain a major goal of teachers and schools.

**Spell Check and the Need for Spelling**

With the advancement of technology, some students, teachers, and families have questioned why they need to know how to spell. “Computer spell checkers are mainly a tool for correcting typos,” stated Moats (2010). She described in detail some limitations
of spell checkers. Spell checkers cannot understand what writers intend to say. Besides, spell checkers cannot catch the misuse of words that are spelled correctly, such as “them” for “then” or “that” for “than.” Furthermore, spell checkers cannot catch the wrong use of homophones such as “there” for “their” or “they’re,” “to” for “too,” or “steel” for “steal.” She further asserted that spell checkers perform well only if a word is spelled phonetically. Moats entered the following sentence with several misspellings. *The bevers bild tunls to get to their loj.* The spell checker produced the correct spelling for beavers and build, but, as shown in Table 2.5, could not suggest good replacement suggestions for tunls and loj.

Table 2.5
*Suggested Spell Check Corrections*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Suggestions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tunls (tunnels)</td>
<td>tuns, tunas, tunes, tongs, tens, tans, tons, tins, tense, teens, towns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loj (lodge)</td>
<td>lost, lorid, load, lock, lode, lout, lo, lob, lose, low, logs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Moats (2010), “Sometimes, spelling instruction ends up on the back burner because of the existence of computer spell checkers” (para. 1). She further stated that spell checkers do not eliminate the need for students to learn how to spell accurately. A study conducted by Dalton, Winbury, and Morocco (1990) reported that two fourth grade boys with learning disabilities utilized spell check, and it provided the correct spellings of misspelled words between 51% and 86% of the time. Also, two other studies found that the rate of the spell checker identifying the correct spelling ranged from 25% to 80% (MacArthur, Graham, Haynes, & De La Paz, 1996; Montgomery, Karlan, & Coutinho, 2001). Spell checkers identified a phonetically misspelled word with the
correct word around 80% of the time. The spell checker only identified the word 25% of the time when the word’s misspelling was nonphonetic.

MacArthur (1996) found additional problems with spell checkers. These additional problems included words spelled correctly but used inappropriately and students’ inability to pick the correct word from a suggested list of words determined by the spell checker. Although spell checkers are useful in today’s technological world, Moats (2010) put it best: They cannot substitute for explicit spelling instruction.

**Summary**

The research has detailed that over time, as English has changed, our knowledge and understanding of the language’s spelling has changed. It is clear that spelling instruction at the elementary level is of great importance, but little research has been conducted at the upper elementary and upper grade levels. Nevertheless, spelling aids students’ reading, writing, and vocabulary skills, and most importantly impacts people’s perception of a person’s literacy skills in our society.

There are different theories about how spelling skills develop and a variety of narrow and broad approaches for spelling instruction. Many of these theories and approaches are used in schools today. Today’s teachers may not implement best practices. Sometimes they rely on how they learned as a child, or they create their own spelling programs. As diverse writing is generated in classrooms, many teachers are frustrated with their students’ lack of conventionality in spelling. No one can doubt that building students’ orthographic knowledge and engaging them in word study where there is a great deal of explicit instruction, thinking, and talking about words is essential in developing students’ literacy skills.
With the availability of spell check, many teachers believe that spelling instruction is obsolete. It is clear that spell check relies on phonetic spellings; without an ability to identify the correct words, many students choose the wrong word, which impacts their message. Even more importantly, spell check cannot be relied upon for commonly confused words if they are spelled correctly, including “there,” “they’re,” and “their” and “two,” “too,” and “to.”

Additional research is needed into instruction on spelling in the upper elementary grades. The current qualitative study began to address this issue, and its methodology is described in the next chapter.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Understanding the experiences of teachers with spelling instruction and how they make sense of curriculum instruction and assessment across grades 4 and 5 can enable upper elementary teachers to better meet the spelling needs of students. Therefore, this study sought to engage with the primary stakeholders, the upper elementary school teachers, with the aim of discovering their current state of spelling instruction, their overall experiences, and their beliefs regarding spelling instruction with the intention to help improve spelling instruction for all students.

This study addressed one research question: What are upper elementary teachers’ experiences with spelling instruction? In doing so, the study incorporated Bandura’s (1977) theory of self-efficacy, individuals’ perceived ability to execute a particular course of action. According to Bandura (1977), four different beliefs may impact individuals’ self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states. Mastery experiences are most important in developing self-efficacy. Success builds success, and failure inhibits it. Modeling is an important vicarious experience. When individuals see someone succeed, their self-efficacy increases. The alternative is also true. According to Highland and Highland (2014), observing people succeed who are similar to them increases individuals’ beliefs that they can master a similar activity. Direct encouragement or discouragement from another person is considered verbal persuasion. Verbal persuasion can include individuals’ own reflection or verbal feedback from others. Constructive feedback is important to develop a sense of efficacy, as it can help individuals overcome self-doubt (Highland & Highland, 2014). Physiological states such as stress, fatigue, or distress can impact individuals’ level of
self-efficacy. In addition to considering self-efficacy, this study also aimed to understand general education upper elementary classroom teachers’ motivational factors in making pedagogical decisions in spelling instruction.

This chapter presents the study’s qualitative research design with a constructivism-interpretivism paradigm and describes procedures for participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. It then describes efforts to ensure the study’s validity and trustworthiness and to protect human subjects.

**Research Design**

**Constructivism-interpretivism paradigm.** The constructivism-interpretivism paradigm was appropriate for this study, as the goal of this paradigm is to understand lived experiences, which provide the “primary foundation and anchor for qualitative research methods” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). According to Creswell (2007), in the constructivism worldview, researchers seek to understand the world in which participants live and work. He further posited that individuals develop the subjective meaning of their experiences, which are varied and multiple, “leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than the narrow meanings into a few categories or ideas” (p. 20). Thus, the researcher relies on the participants’ views of a situation. Researchers utilizing the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm then interpret what they find—an interpretation shaped by their personal, cultural, and historical experiences.

**Qualitative research tradition.** Qualitative research investigates the quality of relationships, activities, situations, or materials (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). It provides a greater emphasis on the lived experiences of the participants and how they interpret and make meaning of these experiences (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research
fit the purpose of this study, which focused on describing and understanding upper elementary teachers’ beliefs and perceptions of instructing spelling.

Strauss and Corbin (1988) defined qualitative research as follows:

Any type of research that produces findings not arrived by statistical procedures or other means of quantification. It can refer to research about persons’ lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings as well as about organization for activity, social movements, and cultural phenomena. (pp. 10-11)

**A general qualitative approach.** Creswell (2009) described five specific strategies of inquiry that are considered qualitative in nature: narrative, phenomenology, ethnography, case study, and grounded theory. Since no one single tradition best suited this study, I chose a general qualitative analysis to allow me to explore the participants’ experiences with spelling instruction in the upper elementary grades through the administration of semistructured interviews within the participants’ classrooms.

Merriam (2009) posited that given the variety of qualitative research strategies, especially in education, a basic qualitative study is best for individuals who want to construct reality in the interaction within their social worlds. Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage in the world they are interpreting (Crotty, 1998). The primary goal of basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret meanings and how people make sense of these meanings (Merriam, 2009), with the eventual determination of “what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and can provide a comprehensive description of it” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13).

Josselson and Lieblich (2003) preferred the term “plan of inquiry” to a specific “method.” In their opinion, methods describe the procedure and not how the researcher
thinks about the question. The reader needs to know the research strategy and how the data will be collected (Rudestam & Newton, 2007).

**Site and Participant Selection**

The sampling strategy was purposeful and convenient. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), the sampling needs to align and be consistent with the paradigm. “Participants are selected on the basis that they can grant us access to a particular perspective on the phenomena under study” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 49). Participants had to meet three criteria. They had to be general education classroom teachers who provided instruction in spelling for grades 4 or 5, and they had to have at least 3 years of experience teaching in this capacity. Additionally, they had to agree to participate. According to Patton (1990), selecting participants with information-rich cases highlights the questions under study (p. 169). With the given quantity of information-rich participants, a small number of people can be precious in qualitative research (Patton, 1990, p. 181). Smith et al. (2009) stated that selecting participants is not an issue of quantity but quality; given the complexity of human phenomena, it is better to place a focus on a small number of participants.

The site selected for this study was an upper elementary school in suburban Rhode Island, which had 22 general education classroom teachers. With a limited number of possible participants to start with, I did not seek to obtain maximum variation in the sample. My goal was to obtain eight to 10 participants.

After receiving approval from Northeastern University’s institutional review board (IRB), I contacted the school district administration for permission to recruit for the study. Once granted permission, I contacted the building principal requesting permission.
With the principal’s approval, I sent an email to the general education classroom teachers with 3 or more years experience seeking their participation (see Appendix A). Ultimately, eight agreed to participate. All eight participants—one man and seven women—were current teachers of grades 4 or 5. One participant’s highest earned degree was a bachelor’s degree, and the remaining seven participants had earned a master’s degree. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of the participants. In addition, the study did not report any identifying information, such as the specific universities and colleges that the participants attended and the name of the school and school district where they were employed.

**Data Collection**

I collected data through semistructured interviews, which allowed me to gain a better understanding of the teachers’ experiences when instructing spelling and to describe the meaning of the phenomenon for the classroom teachers who experienced it (Creswell, 2007). According to Smith et al. (2009), interviews provide a snapshot in time to help the researcher make sense of the lived experiences of the participants.

There were three interviews for each participant, ranging in length from 20 to 70 minutes, over a 3-week period. Interviews took place in the teachers’ home school after school hours and were scheduled at the participants’ convenience within the overall timeline of the study. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, as suggested by King and Horrocks (2010), by a professional transcription service. Adopting a consistent manner for the transcription process ensured clarity not only for the researcher, but for any other person reading the data. I also recorded handwritten notes to document any nonverbal behaviors captured during the interviews. Together, the
transcripts and notes provided rich and deep evidence of the participants’ experiences and viewpoints.

Interviews followed a semistructured protocol (see Appendix B) that included prompts and probes to draw out the participant (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Each interview served a particular purpose (Seidman, 2013). During the first interview, which lasted no more than 20 minutes, the researcher established the purpose of the study and gathered contextual information related to the participant’s personal history, educational background, and life experiences. Participants provided biographical information and responded to the questions, “What do you remember about learning how to spell?” and “Are you a good speller?” During the second interview, which lasted no more than 70 minutes, the participants shared their experiences and beliefs related to the research question. Most of the research data came from this interview. A third final interview, which lasted up to 20 minutes, followed up on questions and themes raised from the second interview. In this final interview, the participant had the opportunity to read, confirm, or refute any information that was recording during the prior interview.

During the interview process, I attempted to create trust and an environment in which the participant could be engaged and open. Weiss (1994) confirmed the importance of the relationship between researcher and participant, noting that the researcher has to work with the “respondent as a partner in the production of useful material” (p. 119).

I stored all notes, audiotapes, and transcripts detailing the interviews in a locked file cabinet at the site of the research. All data were contained in an archival envelope
with a master inventory list. All audio recordings were destroyed after the conclusion of the research process, and the destruction was documented.

Data Analysis

After I received the interview transcripts back from the transcription service, I read them to find commonality in the upper elementary level general education classroom teachers’ perceptions about spelling instruction. Fraenkel et al. (2012) described this commonality of perception as the “essence” or the essential structure of a phenomenon under study (p. 432). I employed an interactive inductive analysis, an approach that utilizes a detailed reading of raw data to derive concepts and themes (Smith et al., 2009; Thomas, 2006). The process is designed iteratively to allow nonlinear lines of thought and the creative assessment of such thoughts (Smith et al., 2009). The process is also inductive because it starts with broad research questions so that unexpected themes can emerge during analysis, instead of bounded hypotheses or theories (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005).

I followed the six-step data analysis recommended by Smith et al. (2009) to interpret the interview data. Smith et al. (2009) advised researchers to conduct an in-depth analysis of the first case—usually the most detailed, complex, and engaging—before moving to the next case. The six steps are as follows:

1. **Reading and rereading.** This step allows the researcher to become immersed in the original data and keep the participants as the foci of the analysis. I relived the interview experiences through repeated reading of the transcripts and located both rich sections and contradictions.
2. **Initial noting.** This step involves a free textual analysis with no rules or specific requirements. I developed a three-column chart, with the original transcript in the middle. The left column included the initial comments, and the right column had the emergent themes. Only the richer sections of the interviews warranted further commentary, and the comments were descriptive, linguistic, or conceptual.

3. **Developing emergent themes.** This step made use of the “emergent themes” column. Developing emergent themes involved a dual process of description and interpretation based on the participant’s original words (the initial notes in Step 2) my own analysis. Notes were transformed into higher-level phrases or expressions that captured conceptual connections.

4. **Searching for connections across emergent themes.** I arranged the emergent themes in Step 3 chronologically in a Word file and interpreted and made connections among them. In the process, I clustered some themes and discarded others that did not fit well in the emerging structure or had weak evidence. I produced a table of the new list of themes, which included major themes and subordinate themes underneath them. I annotated themes with the page and line numbers from the original transcript and a few keywords. I had to keep an open mind during this step, since interpretative analysis involves going back to previous steps and reevaluating the importance of some themes.

5. **Moving to the next case.** Smith et al. (2005) noted that researchers would inevitably be influenced by the themes developed for the first case, but they strongly advised acknowledging new emergent themes when analyzing a new case. Steps 1 to 4 recurred in the analysis of each case.
Looking for patterns across cases. By paying attention to convergences and divergences in the themes in all cases, I was able to produce a final table of superordinate themes by looking for patterns across all cases. The table containing the superordinate themes (reconfigured or relabeled) captured high-level concepts shared by all or most cases. At the same time, I presented the particularity of individual qualities. The clustered themes included instances (keywords and page number in the original data) from different transcripts. Superordinate themes were identified based not only on frequency, but also on the richness of the original data.

Developing the table in Step 6 led to writing a narrative account evidenced by verbatim extracts and detailed commentary from the transcripts. The participants were invited to review their interview transcripts and my interpretations as part of the member checking process. I made adjustments to the transcripts and the narrative accounts based on their feedback.

**Efforts to Ensure the Study’s Validity and Trustworthiness**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), four criteria are utilized to assess the validity of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This section discusses each criterion in turn and also addresses the related concept of trustworthiness, indicating steps I took to address these areas.

The purpose of *credibility*, in a qualitative study, is to ensure an accurate description of the subjectively created lived experience of individuals sharing a common phenomenon (Krefting, 1991). In this study, a potential threat to credibility was that some participants might offer preferred social responses to achieve social desirability (Miles &
Huberman, 1994), because sharing negative teaching experiences may make them feel incompetent. To encourage free sharing, I guaranteed participants’ anonymity and the confidentiality of their interview data and documented this protection in the informed consent form. I also used probes and iterative questioning in the interviews to avoid preferred social responses, as recommended by Shenton (2004).

Transferability in qualitative research is concerned with whether the research results can be applied from one group or setting to another. Although this study had a small sample size of eight participants, the study was both descriptive and interpretative in nature. The extraction of common themes was representative of the study’s research population. To facilitate the transferability judgment made by readers, demographic data of each participant were provided (Guba, 1981; Seidman, 2013), and a thick description was produced to account for each participant’s lived experiences (Guba, 1981). Member checking was also applied to check whether the data were typical or atypical (Krefting, 1991). The readers can judge the interpretation accuracy through the verbatim extracts of each interview (Smith et al., 2009).

In qualitative studies, dependability can be an issue due to the changing nature of the phenomenon investigated (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). As Smith et al. (2009) noted, in qualitative studies, research findings do not constitute a single definitive report but a credible one (Smith et al., 2009). Dependability was further ensured through the provision of supporting interpretations with proportionate verbatim extracts from the study’s participants. Various perspectives were explored to present a detailed and multifaceted account of the phenomenon (Reid et al., 2005). I followed a code record
procedure wherein I waited at least 2 weeks after the first coding activity before recoding the same data and checking for consistency (Krefting, 1991).

While admitting that researcher bias is inevitable, Patton (1990) suggested that researchers focus on confirmability in a qualitative study to ensure objectivity. As suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), from the outset I clarified my predispositions in conducting this study, such as the choice of qualitative approach, the interpretive paradigm, and the detailed methodological description. I also conducted an ongoing reflective analysis through the field journal to achieve corroboration of the results.

Ensuring trustworthiness during the research process is essential. In qualitative research, trustworthiness or credibility corresponds to the concept of validity (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2006), and design validity is described by using a broad range of terms and perspectives (Creswell, 2007). As cited in Creswell (2007), Polkinghorne believed that validation of a concept is achieved when it is well grounded and well supported (Harris & Guillemin, 2012). Angen (2000) argued that validation is a judgment of the trustworthiness or goodness of a piece of research. Additionally, Creswell (2007) noted that a researcher’s accuracy emerges by spending extensive time in the field, transcribing precise and deeply detailed descriptions, and connecting or developing rapport with the participants. Conversely, Lincoln and Guba (1985) used a more naturalistic approach by stating that trustworthiness is a term that establishes credibility, authentic transferability, dependability, and confirmability as being equivalent to internal and external validation, reliability, and objectivity.

To ensure trustworthiness in this study, the researcher utilized three main strategies:
1. **Rich, thick descriptions.** Detailed descriptions allow the reader to determine if information is transferable to other settings. Therefore, I presented rich descriptions of data through verbatim transcripts of individual teacher interviews. Through direct observations, further detailed notes about the participants’ specific interactions, behaviors, and any other events or activities were noted. Finally, descriptive details were included in the data interpretation, reporting, and results.

2. **Member checking.** Member checking or informant feedback consists of soliciting participants’ views on the credibility of data interpretations and conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that member checking is the “most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). To eliminate any possibilities of misinterpretation or misrepresentation, I asked participants to reflect on and judge the accuracy of the preliminary analysis of descriptions and themes gained throughout the study (Harris & Guillemin, 2012).

3. **Peer review.** In qualitative research, the researcher is the main instrument for data collection, analysis, and interpretations (Creswell, 2007; Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2008). Peer review or debriefing is a means of providing an external evaluation of the research process (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers have innate biases that must be acknowledged and identified (Miles & Huberman, 1994). According to Onwuegbuzie et al. (2008), bias occurs when a researcher has presumptions or personal prejudices that he or she is unable to bracket (Harris & Guillemin, 2012). Thus, bias can occur at any phase of the research process, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Harris &
Guillemin, 2012). Lincoln and Guba (1985) commented that the role of a peer reviewer is to keep the researcher honest by posing difficult questions concerning the methods, procedures, and interpretations of the research study. The peer reviewer was a colleague who reviewed transcripts and clarified their responses.

The strategies mention above—ensuring participant confidentiality, using probes to move beyond socially acceptable responses, exploring various perspectives to present a detailed and multifaceted account of the phenomenon, and conducting an ongoing reflective analysis through the field journal—also apply to the concept of trustworthiness.

Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2012) cautioned that unbiased and perfectly valid data are nearly impossible to obtain in a qualitative study. The interpretive role of an investigator makes bias and invalid data serious concerns. To preserve the integrity of qualitative research, investigators must address these concerns. Therefore, I endeavored to preserve the integrity of this research study using the safeguards suggested for qualitative researchers (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Stake, 2010).

Protection of Human Subjects

Ethical considerations were addressed before the study began as well as throughout the study. To ensure the protection of human subjects in this study, I adhered to the three principles identified by the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978): respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. I completed the National Institutes of Health’s online training, “Protecting Human Research Subjects,” offered by the Northeastern University IRB. The study itself was approved by the IRB (Appendix C), and the interviews did not begin until this approval was obtained. In addition, the study carefully followed the
informed consent process. All teachers were aware that their participation was voluntary and they could choose not to take part or to end their participation at any time. The eight participants voluntarily agreed, and the informed consent form was reviewed with them. Fairness and equity for all participants were maintained in this study.

Of utmost priority was anonymity and confidentiality. This study maintained participants’ confidentiality; their names were replaced with pseudonyms and any identifying information was removed from the reporting of results.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the research design utilized for this general qualitative study and outlined the steps I took to thoroughly explore the experiences and teacher viewpoints involved in teaching spelling to upper elementary school students. The eight participants were purposely chosen from among general educators at a single upper elementary school in Rhode Island, and each had at least 3 years of teaching experience. Data were collected through three interviews of each participant, following a semistructured interview protocol, and data were analyzed through a series of iterative interpretive steps to elicit major themes. Throughout the process, efforts were made to ensure the study’s validity and trustworthiness and to comply with all ethical requirements. The next chapter presents the results of the study.
Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into upper elementary school teachers’ self-efficacy in teaching spelling and how these beliefs and spelling practices implemented within their classrooms impacted their self-efficacy. This qualitative study allowed the participants to share their lived experiences regarding spelling instruction in their classrooms. While the participants shared their experiences and attempted to make sense of them, I was also trying to make sense of their experiences. A small sample size of educators was purposely selected to reveal both patterns and themes of their shared phenomenon. The study had one primary research question: What are upper elementary teachers’ experiences with spelling instruction?

Eight teachers participated in a series of three semistructured interviews, describing their experiences in detail. Profiles of the participants are provided, followed by a discussion of the themes that emerged in the interviews related to spelling instruction at the upper elementary school level. Themes included a shared purpose of spelling with limited time and clear expectations, inconsistency among methodologies employed, the desire to increase peer collaboration and professional development, and concern about the overreliance on technology.

Profiles

Eight educators (seven women and one man) participated in this study, and the names used are pseudonyms. Four of them taught Grade 4, and five taught Grade 5. Their years of teaching experience ranged from 9 to 19, with 4 to 19 years of experience.
teaching in their current positions. Seven of the eight participants had master’s degrees.

The background information on the participants is summarized in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1
Participant Background Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Current grade level</th>
<th>Years in position</th>
<th>Total years teaching</th>
<th>Highest degree earned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>Grade 4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adele</td>
<td>Grade 4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reese</td>
<td>Grade 4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leia</td>
<td>Grade 4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarlett</td>
<td>Grade 5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>Grade 5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabrina</td>
<td>Grade 5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoey</td>
<td>Grade 5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The teachers participated in three private semistructured interviews in their classroom that each lasted from 15 to 85 minutes and were held after the conclusion of the school day. Classroom doors were closed to provide privacy so the participants could feel free to express themselves in a supportive environment. The classrooms included a student lending library filled with fiction and nonfiction texts, and the walls featured student work, a class mission statement, and whole-class data walls aligned to smart goals for literacy, as well as mathematics for most teachers. Academic vocabulary walls were also posted for science and/or social studies (depending on courses taught). Participants shared student work folders, which included personalized dictionaries in which they recorded difficult and challenging spelling words from their writing.

**Sophia.** Sophia had worked as a public classroom teacher over the past two decades in three different states. She was currently employed as a fourth grade teacher responsible for teaching English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.
She held a bachelor’s of science degree in science, psychology, and education and a master’s in education in technology and education.

Sophia recalled the use of spelling workbooks to instruct spelling when she was enrolled in elementary school. The lessons were rule based and required her to rewrite words, complete fill-in-a-blank sentences, and complete crosswords correctly with her spelling words. Every week she was given a weekly spelling test and had to complete the required assignments.

Sophia described herself as a good speller who was at the top of her class because spelling came easy to her. She found herself competing with her friends. She recalled taking a language study class in high school that taught word parts, especially Greek and Latin roots, which helped with her vocabulary as well. Although she considered herself a good speller, she found autocorrect frustrating. It often introduced mistakes, particularly for names.

Adele. Adele was currently employed as a fourth grade classroom teacher. Before starting her current position, she worked for 5 years as a building intern and substitute in the same upper elementary school. She earned a bachelor’s degree in English and a master’s in education in elementary education. Adele was responsible for teaching English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies to her fourth grade students.

She recalled doing spelling homework as a child. Adele had difficulty remembering the “r” in the middle of the word “restaurant.” She asked for help from her dad and he replied that she needed to figure it out. She found herself feeling frustrated as she did not understand it. Adele vividly remembered cheating on spelling tests in middle
school because 20 words was too overwhelming to learn since she procrastinated and didn’t have the study habits to learn spelling.

When asked whether she was a good speller, Adele replied that she was. She described herself as a visual learner; if she couldn’t spell a word, she would try to write it a different way and decide which one was conventional. Adele believed that her spelling ability came from all of the reading and writing she had done, especially the creative writing she did. She considered herself a constant learner who would look things up if she wasn’t completely sure how to spell a word. She strived to model this behavior with her students.

Reese. Reese had been employed as a fourth grade classroom teacher for the past 19 years. She had a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education and returned to school after several years of successful classroom teaching to earn her master’s degree in reading.

When Reese discussed her experiences learning to spell in school, she vividly recalled her teacher using word lists from a spelling book. Reese remembered doing a great deal of memorization and having a spelling test on Friday. She also remembered writing words several times, completing tasks from her spelling book, and focusing on memorization. At home, she would write each word five times and write words in sentences. She also recalled that her school hosted spelling bees as well. Overall, she believed she was a good speller because she could sound words out and almost picture them in her mind. She believed she was good at memorizing, which helped her become a good speller, and that she would get 100% correct on the weekly spelling text and sometimes forget a few spellings now and then.
Leia. Leia had been employed as a fourth grade classroom teacher for the past 11 years and had taught in the same elementary school and grade level since completing her student teaching and long-term substitute assignment as a Grade 5 classroom teacher. Leia was responsible for teaching her fourth grade students English language arts, mathematics, and science. Leia also served as the school district’s K-5 elementary science coordinator.

When Leia recalled her spelling instruction, she vividly recalled folding her paper into thirds and writing her words three times each in cursive. She remembered spelling lists being rule based but described spelling as “kind of boring” because she could spell the words. She remembered her teachers using a spelling book. She mentioned writing words in a sentence and completing little activities. She considered herself a decent speller. She indicated that she would spell a word correctly and then look at it and think it was wrong.

Scarlett. Scarlett had been employed in public education for 13 years as an upper elementary school classroom teacher. She currently taught fifth grade English language arts, mathematics, and science. Scarlett held a bachelor’s of science in elementary education and a master’s of education in reading, and she was a National Board Certified Teacher.

When Scarlett recalled spelling instruction in her elementary years, she remembered doing a great deal of memorizing, as the lists had very little rhyme or reason to them and were not rule based. She added that she always scored 100% on the weekly spelling tests.
Scarlett did not see herself as a good speller. She could not picture the word or pull it up. As a result, she found writing difficult. Since she could not visualize different ways to spell a word, she often thought words that were conventionally spelled were wrong. She stated, “I can’t pick it up.”

**Luke.** Luke had been an upper elementary classroom teacher in the same school for 14 years. He currently taught fifth grade. Luke held multiple degrees, including a bachelor’s degree in fine arts in graphic arts/design, a master’s of art in teaching in elementary education, and a master’s of education degree in education administration. Luke was responsible for teaching English language arts and social studies to his fifth grade students.

Luke vividly recalled that in fifth grade, no spelling instruction occurred, and the one time he remembered a lesson, he was bored out of his mind. Luke recalled that there was a great deal of assigning and telling during spelling instruction. Most of his practice was done at home, where he would have to write each word three times and use it in a sentence. Looking up definitions and writing them was a consistent practice across his elementary school.

Luke did not consider himself a good speller but professed that he was getting better at understanding it and teaching it. He spelled what he knew because he knew the words he got wrong consistently. One example was the word “guard.” Even when it was spelled correctly, he still had to rely on spell check. The word haunted him to this day as he worked as a lifeguard and once painted a sign “Life Gaurd on Duty.”

**Sabrina.** Sabrina had worked in both private and public education throughout her educational career. During her first year of teaching, she taught kindergarten in a small
private school and then began substituting and working at a variety of grade levels in her current school district. She had been a fifth grade classroom teacher for the past 6 years. Sabrina taught English language arts, mathematics, and social studies to her fifth grade students. She held an associate’s degree in business office technology, a bachelor’s degree in elementary education with a concentration in English and literature, and a master’s degree in elementary education and also earned certification as an English language learner specialist.

Zoey. Zoey had been employed in public education for 15 years as an upper elementary school classroom teacher. She was currently employed as a fifth grade classroom teacher and taught the English language arts, mathematics, and science curricula. She actively participated in district professional development and held a bachelor’s degree in elementary education.

Zoey stated that spelling was a good subject for her because it came easy to her because of a strong visual memory. She could see and hear the parts at the same time and she could pretty much remember it. She described herself as an avid reader from a young age and a very visual person. She recalled doing fine on spelling tests. She was also very interested in vocabulary and recalled her older sibling reading and talking a lot about books and remembered picking up words to enhance her vocabulary.

Zoey considered herself a good speller because she found words easy to memorize based on their looks and their parts. Taking Latin for 4 years in high school also benefited her spelling. It helped her understand words and write them well. She constantly mixed up certain words and recognized that she was not a perfect speller, but a good one.
Themes in Relationship to Research Question

This study identified four themes, which are discussed in this section in detail:

- Frustration with the current state of the spelling curriculum and instruction
- Use of inconsistent spelling methodologies within and across grade levels
- Desire for professional development in spelling instruction
- Concern about overreliance on technology

**Frustration with the current state of the spelling curriculum and instruction.**

All eight participants expressed frustration with the current state of the upper elementary spelling curriculum and instruction. Of great frustration was the lack of a clear curriculum and scope and sequence for the upper elementary teachers to utilize to guide their spelling instruction.

Zoey shared the same sentiments as her colleagues when she discussed the lack of clear expectations regarding spelling instruction:

I don’t think I have ever been asked about my spelling practices from an administrator. I don’t think anyone has, so I don’t think they really know what happens in the classroom at all about spelling. I don’t think we’ve been given any directive in terms of what we’re supposed to be doing with spelling either. We’ve been handed stuff, but without any instruction, without any specific: This is how you should do it or this is how much time you should spend on it or anything like that.

Sophia indicated that clearer connections to the curriculum were needed, and a clear organization of grade-level spelling scope and sequence was essential. Luke summed it up as needing “clear responsibilities outlined by grade level for teachers.” Leia
mentioned that a concrete set curriculum or path was needed and stated that she and her colleagues would feel better about spelling instruction if a clear structure was in place.

Adele also indicated a need for a clear spelling curriculum that was structured districtwide, with a pacing guide with materials and professional development. She added that spelling needed to be built into the English language arts curriculum; the literacy program itself needed to be included in the schedule to have the time to build it in. Scarlett wanted more consistency so they would not end up feeling like they had to try to fill huge gaps. More children than ever did not have basic spelling conventions, and the numbers seemed to be increasing every year.

Participants described the impact that time had upon their instruction, and seven of the eight participants shared their frustration regarding the lack of time to teach spelling. The participants on the whole reported that the lack of instructional time was impacting their teaching of spelling and affecting their students’ achievement. For example, Sophia stated, “I feel like there’s just not enough time, so it’s constantly being used, so if I have all these other assessments or writing assignments, or a math test has to go longer, something has to go.” She further stated, “I haven’t been consistent with spelling instruction as much as I’d like to be.” Adele concurred with Sophia regarding time being a weakness in her spelling instruction. She explained:

Time to look back at what the kids have done to make sure they really understand it and also to be able to reteach if they don’t. A lot of times I’ll use their writing and then I’ll pull them and do a quick lesson and then give them sort of practice to do. That used to go home to practice but we’re not supposed to assign homework like that.
Adele also mentioned the challenge since spelling could not be done at home:

“My colleagues and I find it hard to find the time to fit in the direct instruction now that it’s [spelling practice] not allowed to be done at home due to the new homework policy.”

Zoey noted the time spent catching students up in fifth grade as a deterrent:

There is just huge background filling that you just don’t have time for because they can’t have a specific spelling program in fifth grade. I don’t have time for that. They’ve got to be reading and writing at that point, so it’s more like word attack at that point.

Zoey went on to say that “colleagues often say there’s no time for spelling. They don’t really know what to do about it. They do feel like they don’t have enough time to teach spelling and not enough materials or training to do it well.” She highlighted competing priorities:

I literally don’t have time for that. I have way too many things I have to teach them, and that’s why it’s important that spelling becomes an authentic thing and that they’re doing in relationship to what they’re reading and writing and that we’re having conversations about it all the time, but I do feel like some kids do need that kill and drill with spelling. They need to do those words 14 times before they learn them and apply them, and I just don’t have time for them to do it because it’s just not valid use of my time at this point when I have so many other things I have to hit.

Sabrina also discussed writing and reading as competing priorities:
I think the writing and reading are the major things we need to focus on, and then there’s just not enough time in the day to worry about the other stuff. I think at least that’s up to the classroom teacher on how they would best think it’s best to improve their students’ skills and their spelling.

Time was also referred to in a more positive light. Time was described as never letting a missed opportunity go by. Leia enthusiastically discussed the need for embedding spelling throughout her day of instruction:

I don’t have: On Monday we do this, and then Tuesday we do this, and then . . . I don’t do that. It’s embedded in my day all day. I mean, we could be reading something about plants and we’re looking at prefixes, and you know, what that means and all the words that you know, geo-, all the words you can think of with geo- or bi-, or whatever, or -ology. Then they’re consistently spelling algae and they’re attaching the words that they know to it. It’s like all day every day and to just not let something go by, because if it’s there at the time that mean’s it’s very relevant. To try to not have any missed opportunities. I want to improve my students’ self-editing. I think that’s something I could definitely improve on.

This view was echoed by Scarlett, who wanted to spend more time on spelling strategies and having students apply them in their writing:

Being able to have more time, I guess, with more individual students to be able to have strategies to attack and tackle because there’s so many words that come up and they don’t know the rule for every one. I try to hold them accountable for the rules they know, but then also have strategies for how you attack words that maybe you haven’t explicitly learned that rule. Breaking it apart, having a go,
trying it three times, things like that. I guess I wish there was more time to work with students on that.

Zoey would also have liked to have had more time to improve students’ spelling strategies: “I think for the kids who have huge gaps—I mean, there’s not a huge amount of time to address those gaps.” Luke would have liked to have time to “do more of the word histories and relationships.” These comments illustrate these teachers’ desire to make the most of the time they had with their students to help them become better spellers.

Despite their frustration, participants did the best they could to teach spelling, but they knew what they needed to do a better job: a clear scope and sequence, a strong curriculum, and time to engage with their students.

Use of inconsistent spelling methodologies across and within grade levels. All of the participants described in detail how they taught spelling to their students. The one commonality that was shared was the importance of direct instruction in helping their students learn to spell. Despite the importance of direct instruction, educators’ practices differed considerably between classrooms and grade levels.

For example, Scarlett utilized the Words Their Way program to help her students build their conventionality in spelling. Scarlett described her instruction, which included a great deal of practice:

For practice I have them do different sorts. We do a buddy sort, we do writing sorts, word hunts. I spend the primary practice, and then I do an assessment as well that is really essentially a writing sort, having them write into the columns based on which rule they follow to see if they have it, and then we also then
reinforce that once they know, they’ve been taught that rule, that they apply it in their writing.

Regardless of the methodologies used throughout the research site, she emphasized, “I think we need more professional development on it. We just need something to help us have a more developed spelling program.”

Luke, another fifth grade participant, described his spelling instruction:

During workshop, typically, I don’t work on a week-to-week list and typically we don’t do it whole class. The way things are pretty much run is that there’s a half hour put aside each week for one-on-one, well, one-on-six instruction to directly teach a particular strategy that I think that they need. . . . We’ll talk about their particular strategy. We’ll look at examples of how they do it and then throughout the week as I see examples and that will point it back out to them individually.

He went on to describe the assessment he utilized to teach these groups:

In the beginning of the year, I make sure all the kids see the syllable types based upon general classroom observations and the fact that most of the kids haven’t seen it since they’re graded and most of them don’t remember it. Most of them when you say, “Hey, show me the syllables,” will default back to clapping, which is great, but not very specific. At this point in time, I’m trying to get them to strive for more accuracy in terms of where exactly a cut point is. We use the spelling inventory from the linguistic, including pretest of that program, Project Read Linguistics. Then I highlight any sections where the kids miss a significant number of that particular skill and use that to build the groups, so the groups are
based on how they did on the spelling inventory from the beginning of the assessment.

In her interview, Sabrina highlighted that many methodologies were being used for spelling instruction at the research site:

Well, there’s a lot of philosophies going around. I have not had honestly enough professional development how to teach spelling. I was old school. This is the list you have, pretest you, if you know it you’re good. If you don’t, you’re going to pick some challenge words. You’re going to work with these words a week. We’re going to work with them in ELA workshop throughout the week. I would review the spelling rule. This is the rule of the week. They would have to be able to read them, sort them, memorize them, put them in a sentence to show they know the meaning of the word and how to use it and then they would be quizzed on them. Some philosophies have been shared that tell me weekly spelling list should not be sent home, memorization is not beneficial, and that they should be doing word study versus spelling rule memorization and what not. I think, personally, it’s a combination of both. I think that there’s nothing wrong with study skills and learning how to memorize.

I also believe it’s very important to teach spelling rules, being able to use word in meaningful sentences and understand the meaning. I do, I can understand how kids can memorize and then they forget it or lose it, so that would be like not profitable. If there’s a way to continue to practice those words as they go throughout the year in their writing and recognize them or highlight them and
make them go back and say, “We’ve learned this word. Go back,” I think it could be beneficial. I’m not totally against a weekly spelling list or spelling rule on that case.

She went on to describe what she saw in fifth grade as a whole:

Most of my colleagues were not sure what to do at all. I feel like we all show the same opinion on a lot of things. We all would agree that spelling is getting worse. We would really like a spelling program to follow. Within my collaborative team, we talked about the challenges of spelling. There are a couple of us that like I’m doing what I’m doing and there’s another person who is using a resource that was given to us a couple of years ago. It’s working basically on words and prefixes and word study, so it’s not consistent within our building, which I think could be a problem and my kids are all over the place.

Reese, a fourth grade participant, described spelling instruction in her classroom and her focus on using a variety of spelling strategies in her instruction.

I do a lot of small groups to kind of show them best practices in spelling. Having them kind of write the words, you know, circle the words in their daily writing that they’re noticing that they’re spelling the wrong way, having them really use tools to kind of fix them. Like I said, the dictionary, kind of spelling it three different times and checking to see which one, ask a buddy, come up and ask me, spell check on the computer. But just the biggest thing for them I think is . . . I find with a lot of kids that they come to fourth grade and they’ve really missed the
strategies from the lower grades, that it wasn’t built up enough, so they just kind of come to us and they have a really hard time with spelling.

She further described her use of student writing to help her determine what she would teach in spelling.

A huge part is every day when I go around and make my observations on their daily writing. And I guess for myself, I try to do that district last year spelling inventory three times during the year. I do little no-excuse for the Grade 4 words. I kind of chunk those every couple of weeks. We will almost do like a pretest and then a post. So especially for the kids that their pretest they’re showing me they need a little bit of work. And we during the next few weeks, we do a lot of small group. You know, based upon the rules and different things for the red words too and different ways to practice those. Then I give them a post-test in the small group just to see that they’re growing and they’re kind of understanding those words quickly like you need to.

Leia, another fourth grade participant, shared what spelling instruction was like in her classroom. She embedded spelling throughout all her lessons in all curricula. She detailed:

It’s [spelling] embedded in my day all day. I mean, we could be reading something about plants and we’re looking at prefixes and, you know, what that means. . . . Then they’re consistently spelling algae and they’re attaching the words that they know to it. I have the word builders, I have the Bananagrams I’m a huge fan of. I had a lot of hands-on manipulatives to do for word work, different art sort of things, like a lot of hands-on things, so that can be a station. Yeah.
Again, if it’s a prefix and a suffix, if I want to focus on that or a particular root, I’ll try to tie it to the science or social studies.

Sophia also shared her love of using Bananagrams to help teach spelling. She described spelling in her classroom as follows:

I do sometimes give them a spelling packet at the beginning of the week that incorporates defining words, reading a passage with the words in the context, identifying them. We do a lot of synonym, antonym work, root work. Right now, this week we are focusing on Greek root words, morphology of words like photograph, and what does that mean, the photo and the graph. There might be some sort of spelling assessment that is understanding how the words . . . Like you look at a variety of the words that sound the same, which one is spelled correctly and how do you know, by going back to the actual rule. And then just kind of play games.

A recurrent theme in the interviews was a sense that the participants worried about their overall impact on student achievement and having their students prepared to succeed in their next grade level.

**Desire for professional development in spelling instruction.** Issues related to the need for professional development were prominent in the interview data. The theme was stressed by most participants. For example, Zoey shared that she believed that she and her colleagues would benefit from professional development. “We need specific materials and training in the stages of spelling, and having these is so important along with techniques that are easy to use—word list arranged developmentally to the stages and how to best integrate spelling into daily reading and writing.” She further indicated...
that the school needed to “create a culture where spelling is emphasized.” Scarlett echoed Zoey’s comments when she stated, “I think we need more professional development on it. We just need something to help us have a more developed spelling program.”

Furthermore, participants wanted to help students become more competent and conventional spellers by utilizing spelling strategies and they sought professional development on spelling strategies. For example, Zoey stated,

I wish spelling was taught a little bit differently and they were taught specific strategies more than rules when they were younger so they wouldn’t get to a certain age and go, “I’m a bad speller and that’s the way it’s going to be.”

Because I think at some point they’re right: They’re going to be a bad speller if they’ve never figured out how to unlock the code, and that is the way it’s going to be for them. But that shouldn’t be a mindset you have at 10 years old, and it does put a big wall up for a lot of kids with their writing. It slows them down because they don’t want to fluidly write if they’re constantly making spelling errors, if they get hung up on it.

Reese also shared her beliefs about the importance of strategies in helping students with their spelling:

Giving them the strategies to be able to fix the words on their own is huge. Because I think they might notice that it’s spelled incorrectly but they don’t really know then what to do or how to use what they know to fix the spelling of the word. You know, so I know we can go to the dictionary, they can go on the computer and do like a spell check. But I think it’s going back to those rules and
strategies that they didn’t quite get in the lower grades . . . and really helping them to understand that.

Luke even stated that he would like to have some form of a flow chart to help him help his students: “I’d like a very detailed flow chart of here’s problem A, here’s how you attack with strategy B. Something that would be very deliberately spelled out.”

An increase in efficacy was also desired by the participants through their participation in efficacious learning opportunities. The participants wanted to learn how to teach spelling and help their students grow to meet the high expectations of the school community. Having professional learning opportunities would build teachers’ efficacy and equip them with the tools and strategies to help their students’ communication skills.

**Concern about overreliance on technology.** Most participants shared their concern regarding technology use and how it was impacting their students’ spelling and stamina. Luke, for example, described seeing his students not taking the time to edit their writing and the role of technology in that habit:

I don’t know if I would say it’s more than it was 15 or 20 years ago, but it’s definitely endemic to 10-year-olds. This system of I’m going to get it down. I’m going to get it down the easiest way that I can, and that’s what I’m going to put out and down in on paper. This sort of not wanting to double back, not wanting to look back at it, and being sort of really cognizant and how careful we are with our work. It’s probably gotten a little bit worse with digital era, because that sort of lends itself to not having to check your work. Even if you are texting, it will auto fix it for you before it goes out, so as long as you’re close, the person still sees that element of correctness when it comes to them.
Zoey echoed some of Luke’s concerns about student stamina and technology. She described her students’ challenge:

The more we have the Chromebooks, the kids get more dependent on being able to type them. They’re used to typing stuff. They get tired faster when they’re handwriting. Their writing becomes less of good output because they’re not handwriting as much and they’re not used to it. They’re used to just typing stuff up on the Chromebook and getting that immediate feedback of is it spelled wrong or not. Then they never have to go through that analysis process, so when I make them do it, it’s like pulling teeth. I think that it’s a really interesting time in terms of the use of technology and availability for kids, how much we’re going to lose in spelling, in different things that happen because you handwrite it.

Sabrina, another fifth grade participant, reiterated Zoey’s concerns regarding overreliance on technology:

I believe, though, in this day and age with the growth of technology that we are getting farther and farther away from students scratching out word and saying, “That doesn’t look right. Let me give it a second try. Let me give it a third try. Let me look it up in the dictionary.” It doesn’t happen anymore. They have Siri. They can just say, “How do you spell this?” They’re using more technology with laptops and iPads where their misspelled word is underlined. They can right click and they can click on the right word. Things come much faster to them, where research has shown in the past, where if they’re taking words and they’re memorizing and they’re practice writing it, and you’re writing it and you’re
practicing it and writing, it connects more with your brain. I think as the years go on, spelling in children and their skills is going to get worse.

Sabrina shared similar concerns:

I also think that there’s Chromebook, and the Google Docs, and autocorrect, so we’re missing out a generation of students when it’s given to them, that they don’t have to go through this process. It will underline it and you click on it and it changes it, so there’s no connection to it.

These concerns regarding technology were widespread. Most participants were concerned whether students were doing the work themselves and thinking or were relying on a device to help them write conventionally.

In addition to the themes shared, all eight participants shared the view that the purpose of spelling is to communicate a message to a reader clearly. Furthermore, all eight participants believed that assessment in the form of spelling inventories and student work drove their instruction. Finally, in the 21st century, all of the participants suggested that their students may overly rely on technology and were missing the drive, strategies, and stamina to conventionally spell, edit, and revise their writing.

Summary of Findings

The study attempted to understand the experiences and beliefs of upper elementary classroom teachers about spelling instruction. Each participant shared his or her own experiences in great detail. Themes emerged about shared similar experiences, confusion, and concerns regarding spelling instruction at the research site. In particular,
all of the participants shared a clear understanding of the purpose of spelling and using assessment to drive instruction, which was impacted by time and the lack of clear expectations. Recognizing the variety of methodologies being used in different classrooms, they shared a desire to increase collaboration, agreed on the need for professional development, and agreed that students exhibited an overreliance on technology. The final chapter interprets these findings in the context of the literature and draws conclusions and implications for research and practice.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

Teachers on the front line continue to see a need for systematic spelling instruction in elementary school. Ehri (2000) posited that learning to spell and learning to read are like two sides of the same coin. Reading and spelling rely on much of the same underlying knowledge. Snow et al. (2005) stated, “Spelling and reading build and rely on the same mental representation of a word. Knowing the spelling of a word makes the representation of it sturdy and accessible for fluent reading” (p. 86). Furthermore, Ehri and Snowling (2004) found that automaticity of reading words rests on the ability to map letters and letter combinations to sounds. Since not all words are visually distinctive, it is impossible for children to memorize more than a few dozen words unless they’ve developed insights into how letters and sounds correspond. Learning to spell requires both instruction and the integration of information about print, speech sounds, and meaning, which support memory for whole words, which is used in spelling and sight word reading.

Not only does spelling benefit reading, it also benefits writing. According to Singer and Bashir (2004), writers use up valuable cognitive resources needed for higher-level aspects of composition when they think too hard about how to spell. Writing is a “mental juggling act that depends on automatic employment of basic skills such as handwriting, spelling, grammar, and punctuation” so that the writer can focus on the topic, organization, word choice, and audience needs (Moats, 2005-2006, p. 12). Poorer spellers may restrict their word choice, as they write only the words they can spell and eventually lose track of their thoughts when they get stuck spelling a word.
Both preservice and in-service teachers are exposed to varied claims and theories about spelling instruction. It is important to find out what classroom teachers believe and practice in their own classrooms. In 2001, Johnston conducted a study in which she reported that most teachers expressed that spelling was not adequately addressed in the curriculum, which was attributed to the lack of emphasis on spelling instruction, the lack of resources, and the lack of time in the school day. One teacher even described spelling as a “hit or miss” subject. According to Johnston (2001), teachers “lack the confidence and a cohesive theoretical basis for what they and their colleagues are doing while instructing spelling” (p. 155). This may be due in part to the lack of agreement on a variety of issues in spelling instruction. Some researchers have purported that children who read and write will become capable spellers (Bean & Boueffer, 1987; Wilde, 1990), while others, such as Henderson (1990), Templeton (1991), and Moats (2005), have called for systematic instruction.

Not only is spelling de-emphasized at the elementary school level, it is also de-emphasized at the national and state levels. In 2000, the National Reading Panel omitted spelling from its five core instructional components of a comprehensive reading lesson (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). The five components are phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. According to Moats (2005), the National Reading Panel implied that spelling would develop in response to reading instruction. Moats (2005-2006) stated that students had trouble spelling, “but we do not know how many or in relation to what standard because state accountability assessments seldom include a direct measure of spelling competence” (p. 12). Very few state standards specify what a student should be
able to spell at each grade level. Spelling is subsumed under broad categories such as writing composition or is even lumped in with mechanical skills under the category of writing conventions.

Are teachers prepared to teach spelling, and how much self-efficacy do they have in instructing spelling in an upper elementary school? Both preservice and in-service teachers who are responsible for instructing spelling may know little about best spelling practices in the schools they teach in. In the building I teach in, there is an English/language arts curriculum, but decisions about how to implement spelling instruction are left up to individuals. Although there has been formal training at the early childhood level in phonics, decoding, and spelling, there has been little or no time to explore the nature of spelling instruction that is currently implemented or developed in our building, leading to teachers’ high level of dissatisfaction with the ability of their students to spell conventionally and with their current spelling instruction. Moats (2005-2006) further stated that the research base for claiming that spelling is important for young children is solid—but for older students, the research is sparse.

**Review of Methodology**

This study was designed to answer one research question: What are upper elementary teachers’ experiences with spelling instruction? To answer this question, a qualitative analysis was conducted to explore upper elementary teachers’ experiences with spelling instruction. Participants included eight teachers from a suburban Rhode Island school district who taught grades 4 and 5. The participants’ experiences were explored through in-depth semistructured interviews. Participants’ responses were transcribed, read, and reread to explore and identify common themes across their
experiences. Study data appeared in chapter 4, with the presentation of themes along with illustrative quotes from the participants. This chapter reviews key findings; discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and the existing literature; offers implications for practice; highlights the study’s significance, limitations, and directions for future research; and closes with a conclusion and personal reflection.

**Key Findings**

The eight participants recounted their experiences related to instructing spelling in their upper elementary classrooms. Through deep analysis of the interview transcripts, four key findings emerged (Table 5.1).

<table>
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<th>Key Findings</th>
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<td>Frustration with the current state of the spelling curriculum and instruction</td>
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<td>Use of inconsistent spelling methodologies within and across grade levels</td>
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<tr>
<td>Desire for professional development in spelling instruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concern about the overreliance on technology</td>
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**Frustration with the current state of the spelling curriculum and instruction.**

The eight participants shared common beliefs about spelling instruction and assessment and expressed the need to improve spelling instruction at the research site. It was clear that all the participants agreed that the purpose of spelling instruction was to improve written communication. Besides agreeing on the purpose of spelling, all participants shared that assessment was key to helping their students’ development as conventional spellers. For example, all of the educators interviewed shared that they utilized a districtwide spelling inventory at least twice a year to help plan and differentiate spelling
instruction. Furthermore, all of the participants stated that they utilized student work to help them drive instruction and monitor student progress.

All the participants also noted that improving spelling instruction would require clearer expectations in regard to the curriculum. In fact, the largest frustration shared by the participants was that clear expectations regarding what to teach students were not provided. All of the participants mentioned that the curriculum needed a scope and sequence of spelling skills students were expected to know by the end of a given grade level. Luke even stated that he would like to have some form of a flow chart to help him help his students. “I’d like a very detailed flow chart of here’s problem A, here’s how you attack with strategy B. Something that would be very deliberately spelled out.”

The participants expressed their frustration about the lack of clear expectations repeatedly throughout their interviews. In addition, all of the teachers were told not to “test” students on spelling words due to the district’s new homework policy that only provided for writing and reading practice throughout the week. Teachers were extremely frustrated that they were not given the opportunity to explore ways to incorporate more spelling instruction without a home study component prior to the homework policy’s implementation.

**Use of inconsistent spelling methodologies within and across grade levels.** A wide variety of methods were utilized throughout the research site, primarily due to the lack of clear expectations and differing belief systems about spelling instruction. Some teachers relied heavily on word sorting from Words Their Way, others utilized the Project Read Linguistics program, a few utilized a combination of those programs, and some
teachers taught incidentally throughout the day. There was also inconsistency in the amount of time spent instructing spelling.

The participants shared their concerns that there was no clear way of teaching spelling to their students. Although there was limited time to share and learn from their peers, participants expressed their frustration that their students not only entered grades 4 and 5 with a wide variety of levels of understanding and spelling development, but also did not leave the upper elementary school with clear benchmarks and understandings. Furthermore, there was a recognition that everyone taught spelling to their students in a different way throughout the upper elementary school. Each participant in this study described in detail how he or she taught spelling. The one commonality was the importance of direct instruction in helping students learn to spell. Despite the importance of direct instruction, educators’ practices differed considerably between classrooms and grade levels.

Sabrina summed up the largest concerns raised with the lack of consistency across the research site. She stated:

We all would agree that spelling is getting worse. We would really like a spelling program to follow. Within my collaborative team, we talked about the challenges of spelling. There are a couple of us that like I'm doing what I'm doing and there’s another person who is using a resource that was given to us a couple of years ago. It’s working basically on words and prefixes and word study, so it’s not consistent within our building, which I think could be a problem and my kids are all over the place. I think it would be very helpful because we don’t have a lot of professional development in spelling. If we had either professional development
or we had a program that we could justify and be able to use consistently throughout the district.

Having more consistency was a huge concern among the participants. Consistency around spelling instruction would be beneficial to the educators, the students, and their parents, since it would lead to clearer outcomes and understanding for all involved in the educational process.

**Desire for professional development in spelling instruction.** Participants shared a strong desire for professional development. For example, Zoey commented: “We need specific materials and training in the stages of spelling, and having these is so important along with techniques that are easy to use, word list arranged developmentally to the stages and how to best integrate spelling into daily reading and writing.” She further indicated that the school needed to “create a culture where spelling is emphasized.” Another participant echoed Zoey’s comments. Scarlett stated, “I think we need more professional development on it. We just need something to help us have a more developed spelling program.”

**Concern about overreliance on technology.** Most participants shared the concern that children’s spelling skills had decreased and that they tended to be overly reliant on technology, especially spell check. Teachers were well aware that technology is a tool for learning, but noticed that students utilized spell check and often selected the wrong word or selected the first word on the list of words to choose from. The participants also shared that they noticed that students who used spell check still had mistakes with homophones such as there, their, and they’re and two, too, and to. A word could be spelled correctly, but not be grammatically correct.
Sabrina, a fifth grade participant, shared her concerns regarding the overreliance on technology:

I believe though in this day and age with the growth of technology that we are getting farther and farther away from students scratching out word and saying, “That doesn’t look right. Let me give it a second try. Let me give it a third try. Let me look it up in the dictionary.” It doesn’t happen anymore. They have Siri. They can just say, “How do you spell this?” They’re using more technology with laptops and iPads where their misspelled word is underlined. They can right click and they can click on the right word. Things come much faster to them, where research has shown in the past, where if they’re taking words and they’re memorizing and they’re practice writing it, . . . it connects more with your brain. I think as the years go on, spelling in children and their skills is going to get worse.

**Summary.** The upper elementary teachers who instruct spelling at the study site have done their best with spelling instruction despite the current state of the district’s spelling curriculum and lack of professional development in this area. Without the clear expectations of a core spelling curriculum and professional development, the participants rely on what they believe is best practice and have even created their own instruction based on the needs of the students. Although this may seem like a great idea, teachers lack the knowledge of how spelling develops in students and often rely on practices that are not deemed effective. As a result, students are not getting the spelling instruction they require to effectively communicate, which ultimately impacts other people’s perception of their literacy skills.
Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework

This study was based on self-efficacy theory. Teachers’ self-efficacy refers to their self-perception of competence in performing a particular teaching task and affecting student performance (Berman et al., 1977). Table 5.2 reviews the study’s themes and the implied impact of self-efficacy.

Table 5.2
Study Themes and Their Impact on Self-Efficacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Implied impact on self-efficacy</th>
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| 1. Frustration with the current state of the spelling curriculum and instruction. | • Lack of mastery experiences
|                                                                       | • Psychological state                    |
| 2. Use of inconsistent spelling methodologies within and across grade levels | • Lack of mastery experiences
|                                                                       | • Verbal persuasion                      |
| 3. Desire for professional development in spelling instruction         | • Vicarious experiences                  |
| 4. Concern regarding overreliance on technology                        | • Lack of mastery experiences            |

Bandura (1997b) described four experiences that can impact self-efficacy, as summarized in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3
Four Experiences to Increase Self-Efficacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mastery experiences</th>
<th>Vicarious experiences</th>
<th>Verbal persuasion</th>
<th>Physiological states</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of mastery are most important in developing one’s self-efficacy. Success builds success and failure inhibits it.</td>
<td>Modeling is an important experience. When one sees someone succeed, one’s self-efficacy increases. The alternative is also true.</td>
<td>Direct encouragement or discouragement from another person affects one’s self-efficacy.</td>
<td>Perceptions of physiological states such as stress, fatigue, or distress can impact one’s level of self-efficacy.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. From Bandura (1997b).
Frustration with the current state of the spelling curriculum and instruction. Although, as discussed above, participants were frustrated with the current state of spelling instruction, teachers were trying to put their best forward. This situation has an implied impact on self-efficacy due to the lack of mastery experiences the educators have had. A greater number of success experiences leads to greater feelings of self-efficacy, while failing to deal with a task or challenge can undermine and weaken self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). In addition, the teachers’ psychological state was also impacted by their frustration. It is important to note that self-efficacy is not based on one’s actual ability to complete a task but rather on one’s perceived ability to complete the task. One who is extremely nervous, for example, begins to doubt and develop a weak sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Most of the participants indicated that their perceived ability to complete the task was impacted by the lack of clear expectations and scope and sequence.

Use of inconsistent spelling methodologies within and across grade levels. Due to the lack of mastery experiences, teachers were left to create their own curriculum for spelling. Although they had the best of intentions, they could lack the knowledge from mastery experiences and therefore rely on their teacher-created or online resources for spelling instruction. The lack of verbal persuasion also impacts teachers’ self-efficacy. Hearing words from other educators and administrators about their performance can either inhibit or promote a teacher’s level of self-efficacy. Those who receive encouragement from others, especially with constructive feedback, tend to believe they can complete a given task (Bandura, 1977). Not hearing these statements reinforces that teachers are on their own and also reinforces that spelling is a “hit or miss” subject to instruct.
Desire for professional development in spelling instruction. Participants shared their desire for professional development in spelling instruction to improve their instruction of spelling within their upper elementary classrooms. All of the participants recognized that without this professional development, they would not be able to meet the needs of their students. This desire falls under the umbrella of the lack of vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1997b). Teachers had not been given the opportunity to visit classrooms to see spelling instruction in action and reflect on their current practices, which are important vicarious experiences. Teachers were implementing their own spelling curriculum but did not have the opportunity to learn or view spelling instruction in action. These vicarious experiences can help affirm or deflate a teacher’s self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1997b).

Concern regarding overreliance on technology. The teachers shared their concerns about overreliance on technology and students’ lack of the skills and stamina to edit and revise as needed. Although technology can be helpful to educators, a possible lack of mastery experiences may be driving this theme. If teachers knew how spell check worked, they might understand how difficult it is for a student who misspells to select the correct form of spelling from a given list. Equipping teachers with the strategies and knowledge they need may help to build their efficacy regarding this particular theme. It is implied that the lack of mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997b) with technology and a variety of spelling strategies for students to edit and revise their work impacts their self-efficacy.
Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Literature Review

The findings from this study closely align with the literature presented in chapter 2. This section presents these connections.

**Broad vs. narrow approach.** Most participants strongly viewed their spelling in terms of both a broad approach and narrow approach. It is important to recognize that regardless of the approach, Moats (2005) asserted that children benefit from being instructed about the structure of the written English language in a logical progression from sounds and symbols to syllables and morphemes, as it is what good spellers know. As their knowledge of letter patterns within syllables, spelling patterns, and meaning parts of words grows, students’ spelling vocabulary expands. Although spelling instruction was occurring, the teachers interviewed felt confused about the progression of spelling. The lack of understanding of how spelling progresses was affected by the lack of clear expectations for spelling, along with an unclear scope and sequence. Teachers sought professional development to increase their understanding of how to instruct spelling to help build students’ literacy and communication skills.

**Spelling instruction in schools today.** Gentry (2004) described seven different methods teachers utilize to instruct spelling. Of those seven methods, participants described using four in their classrooms: differentiated lists, word sorts, incidental spelling, and teacher choice. Employing differentiated lists, according to Gentry (2004), takes a great deal of time. The participants raised concern about time and the lack of training impacting their ability to provide differentiated spelling instruction. Furthermore, according to Bear et al. (2000), word sorting was designed to complement a given phonics, spelling, and vocabulary curriculum, not be the primary way to teach spelling.
Similarly, Gentry stated that word sorts were not to be used as the primary instruction for spelling. There is little research validation of the effectiveness of teaching spelling using incidental spelling (Gentry, 2000), although this method does have a connection to reading. Allal (1997) warned that educators do not necessarily apply the principles that ensure effectiveness when utilizing teacher choice programs. She posited that individualization, sufficient spelling practice, and time learning high-frequency words for students to apply when writing are key to improving teacher practice effectiveness.

**Overreliance on technology.** Teachers in this study were concerned with the overreliance on technology regarding spelling, especially the utilization of spell check. Moats (2010) described in detail some limitations of spell checkers. Spell checkers cannot understand what writers intend to say. Besides, spell checkers cannot catch the misuse of words that are spelled correctly such as “them” for “then” or “that” for “than.” Furthermore, spell checkers cannot catch the wrong use of homophones such as “there” for “their” or “they’re,” “to” for “too,” or “steel” for “steal.” She further asserted that spell checkers perform well only if a word is spelled phonetically. Spell checkers identified a phonetically misspelled word with the correct word around 80% of the time. The spell checker only identified the word 25% of the time when the word’s misspelling was nonphonic. MacArthur (1996) also found additional problems with spell checkers, such as words spelled correctly but used inappropriately and the inability of some students to pick the correct word from a suggested list of words determined by the spell checker. Although spell checkers are useful in today’s technological world, Moats (2010) put it best: They cannot substitute for explicit spelling instruction.
Implications for Practice

This study has several implications for school leaders. School leaders need to provide all teachers in upper elementary school with the professional development they need to understand English orthography and best practices for spelling instruction based on research. This professional development cannot be a one-time offering. Sustained professional development over time, revisiting topics and reviewing them, is required to ensure that all teachers have a common understanding of spelling.

Although the district has employed a linguistics program and is utilizing a common assessment to drive instruction in spelling, the upper elementary teachers have not been trained in this program. If the district wants to continue with the current program, a clear scope and sequence needs to be developed along with the building of knowledge of how children and spelling develop over time. The district should also consider providing professional development in this program and measuring its effectiveness through the use of program assessments. Currently, the assessments are being utilized and teachers are using a wide variety of methods. It is important to ensure that we are measuring what we are supposed to measure.

If the district believes that the current spelling program is not effective in developing effective communicators, it should look into and pilot other programs. These could be utilized and evaluated with program assessments or a spelling inventory to determine which program is most effective with a given population. Teachers are key in this effort, as they will be able to administer a given program with fidelity and measure student growth accordingly.
School leaders should be looking at the current literacy block to determine where spelling instruction fits in. Students need word study and spelling instruction to increase their reading, writing, and vocabulary skills. Carving out time for instruction of this important subject is crucial in developing students who can conventionally spell and communicate well.

Technology is a great tool but spell checkers do not always work to help students with their spelling. Teachers should use technology to enhance and practice spelling with their students after explicit spelling instruction. Spelling is not a throwaway subject and is essential in this day and age, as spell checkers cannot detect all errors. Teaching students a variety of strategies to revise and edit their work is essential.

In order to help teachers improve their level of self-efficacy and their knowledge about spelling instruction, I highly recommend robust and engaging professional development. The goal of the professional development would be to increase teacher knowledge in the following areas: the history of English; theories of spelling acquisition; ways to teach a structured spelling program with inquiry, individualization, and differentiation of instruction; and a variety of spelling strategies teachers can bring back to their students. This professional development would occur throughout the school year and would allow more vicarious experiences in which teachers could visit each other’s classrooms to see effective spelling instruction in action. This, in turn, could possibly help build common vocabulary and help with collaboration to build shared practices throughout the upper elementary grades.

It is my understanding after completing this research that the most effective program is one that is a hybrid of tried and true practices and newer approaches. Teachers
should instruct spelling with clear and consistent expectations that guide them to develop
their students’ literacy skills. It is important to note that spelling is best practiced through
writing, and continuing to examine student work and administer formal and informal
assessments is key to developing students’ literacy skills. Based on this information,
teachers can implement strategies within their literacy block to help their students spell
more conventionally and increase their literacy skills over time.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is significant for a number of audiences. Whether a teacher is at the
preservice or in-service level, learning is key to developing understanding regarding
spelling instruction. Equipping teachers with the professional development and learning
they need will greatly impact student achievement. Regardless of the increased use of
technology, one cannot deny the importance of learning to spell conventionally. Knowing
how to spell a word makes it sturdy and accessible (Snow et al., 2005, p. 48). Teachers in
the trenches desire professional knowledge on how to teach spelling and want to apply
their learning in their classrooms.

Without spelling instruction, individuals who have difficulty spelling may
continue to face negative perceptions about their literacy abilities. Constant misspelling
can become extremely embarrassing and give the impression that one is less educated.
Hopefully, knowledge of spelling instruction will help educators give spelling the
attention it deserves.
Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, its small sample size impacts the ability to generalize findings to a larger group. Since the intent of qualitative research is to capture rich, detailed accounts of participants’ lived experiences teaching spelling in an upper elementary classroom, this study detailed the lived experiences of the eight participants through interviews, which yielded rich data.

The study results were considered from the framework of self-efficacy. This is a limitation in that other theories and topics could have been chosen and could have been relevant but were not the focus of the analysis. For example, teacher knowledge was not in the forefront of this research. A student’s academic growth is affected more by a knowledgeable teacher’s instruction than any other single factor (Rowan, Correnti, & Miller, 2002; Sanders & Rivers, 1996), so teacher knowledge is a recommended area of focus for future studies.

Despite the limitations of this study, the analysis provided insight into teachers’ self-efficacy regarding spelling instruction. Although self-efficacy was not the sole basis for the difficulty and frustration the participants shared, their interviews revealed that the four experiences teachers need to develop self-efficacy were not present.

Future Studies

There is still a great deal more to learn about teachers and their experiences with spelling instruction. Since this study focused on a small number of participants, a larger group of educators could be surveyed to find out more about their beliefs on spelling instruction. In addition, it might be fruitful to elicit the participation of both preservice
and in-service teachers to better understand their needs and beliefs and to better prepare all teachers for spelling instruction.

Furthermore, it may be beneficial for district curriculum leaders and teachers to work together to create a viable curriculum and develop resources or explore current spelling programs that are available to implement. They could then collect data to determine which program creates the most conventional and savvy spellers.

**Conclusion**

The research study focused on the question, “What are upper level elementary teachers’ experiences with spelling instruction?” Although it is implied from this study’s findings that self-efficacy impacted spelling instruction at the study site, self-efficacy is likely one of many factors affecting spelling instruction. There is a great deal of information that teachers need to know and understand to implement effective instruction. Not only does the school district need to finalize a scope and sequence and curriculum, it needs to offer professional development for its teachers so that they can experience mastery experiences and vicarious experiences to build a more solid spelling program. Their development will, in turn, help provide children with an important base upon which to build to improve student achievement.

**Personal Reflection**

After several years educating children in various school districts and the high level of professional development I have participated in, I find myself fascinated by the students who can and can’t seem to spell well. When I first began my position at the research site,
spelling instruction had always been a concern of teachers. No matter what classroom I entered, I saw a multitude of methods being used without a clear focus and goal.

Having the opportunity for professional development in how our English language works and how to help explicitly teach spelling has benefited me greatly and has led to my high self-efficacy regarding spelling instruction. It is my hope that those teaching preservice educators have the opportunity to delve deeper into spelling instruction to better equip these individuals with strategies, curricula, and methodologies to help students spell conventionally.

In my undergraduate work, I learned how to teach the English language arts with a whole language approach. This approach was all well and good, but did not provide me with the knowledge I needed in the trenches once I began teaching. After mentoring and learning from my peers, I learned a great deal about teaching the English language arts. If it had not been for my desire to improve and learn from others, I doubt I would be the teacher I am today.

This study was important not only to me, for it is my passion, but also to my fellow colleagues. It speaks a great deal about their passion to improve their current knowledge and methodologies and improve their practice. So many of the teachers I work with are from the generation of whole language and did not learn how English and its spelling system work.

As a result of conducting this research, I have come to appreciate the knowledge, skills, and ethic researchers must have to engage in this process. The research and writing process had its challenges. I have learned what Henry Ford stated, “If you think you can or you can’t, you’re right.” These are words to live by and appreciate.
It is my hope that this research will benefit my school district and provide my colleagues with the tools and understanding they need to help students spell conventionally. We can help them grow from where they are and take them on the journey from good to great.
References


*Reading Research and Instruction, 40*, 143-156.


Rowan, B., Correnti, R. J., & Miller, R. J. (2002). What large-scale survey research tells us about teacher effects on student achievement: Insights from the Prospectus study of elementary schools. *Teacher’s College Record, 104*(8), 1525-1567.


Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

Student Researcher: Brian E. Fernandes

College of Professional Studies, Graduate School of Education

Dear Teachers:

I am currently a doctoral student at Northeastern University and will be conducting a research study as partial fulfillment of my degree requirements. The purpose of this research is to better understand teacher experiences with spelling instruction. You are being asked to consider participating in this study because you have taught, or are currently teaching in either grades 4 or 5 (with at least three years’ experience).

If you volunteer to participate, I am asking you to meet with me during 3 separate sessions to answer a series of interview questions pertaining to experiences in instructing spelling in upper elementary classrooms. All sessions will be audiotaped for the purpose of transcription.

The first interview session should be approximately 15-30 minutes; the second session will be approximately 80 minutes and the final session approximately 20 minutes. These sessions will be conducted outside of school hours in your home school or in a neutral setting of your choice.

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the overall research benefit may help school leaders, teachers and curriculum developers better understand the experiences of teachers of upper elementary spelling instruction.

Your participation in this study will be confidential. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

If you are interested in participating or if you have any questions please contact me at 508.837.7383 or fernandes.b@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you for your consideration.

Brian E. Fernandes
Appendix B: Interview 2 Questions

1. What is spelling?
2. What do you believe about how children learn to spell?
3. What do you consider to be “best practices” in spelling?
4. Describe how you teach spelling.
6. What do you see as the strengths in your spelling instruction?
7. What do you see as the weaknesses in your spelling instruction?
8. Do you see spelling carrying over into your students’ writing? How?
9. Do you see spelling carrying over into your students’ reading? How?
10. What feedback have you received from parents? Colleagues? Administrators?
11. What are your expectations of your students and yourself in regard to spelling instruction?
12. What makes a good speller?
13. How do you feel about the spelling instruction in your classroom?
14. If there was one thing you could improve upon regarding your knowledge of spelling and instructing students, what would that be?

All questions adapted from Hagerty, Foster, and Cobb (1997).
Appendix C: Institutional Review Board Approval

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: November 22, 2016  IRB #: CPS16-10-23
Principal Investigator(s): Billye Sankofa Waters
                        Brian Fernandes
Department: Doctor of Education Program
            College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
         Northeastern University
Title of Project: Upper Elementary Teachers’ Self-Efficacy and Spelling
                 Instruction: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
                 Study
Participating Sites: School Permission forthcoming
DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: NOVEMBER 22, 2017

Investigator's Responsibilities:

1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when
   recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new
   information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must
   be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month
   prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any
   other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630