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Using Transcendental Phenomenology to Explore Elementary Teachers' Experiences with Struggling Readers During the Social Restrictions Precipitated by the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Using Transcendental Phenomenology to Explore Elementary Teachers' Experiences
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of the requirements for the degree of
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by

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Abstract

This study provides a window into the experiences of elementary teachers with their struggling readers during the largest world-wide interruption to education that has ever been seen. This study gives insight to educational leaders and educators as they assist their struggling readers in rebounding from the disruption to school caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and as they work to improve the quality of schooling for struggling readers. Since the beginning of the pandemic, there had been a growing body of educational literature in pandemic-related information, practice, and research. Yet, there was a need to bring to light the phenomenon of the collective social interaction experiences existing for elementary teachers with their struggling readers during the social restrictions created by the pandemic rules, restrictions, sickness, and quarantines. This transcendental phenomenological study explored 15 on-site and virtual school elementary teachers' collective experiences with their struggling readers during the 2020-2021 school year amid the pandemic-induced social restrictions. A conceptual framework that included Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological methodology was used to inform both the design and analysis of this study. The goals of this study were to give a voice to the brave teachers and to find out what emerged as vital for those teachers with their struggling readers. The following components of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory provided a focus on the social experiences during the social restrictions: (1) emotions are inseparable from thinking, (2) social interaction is important for learning, and (3) collective activity produces learning. These three sociocultural constructs were put into the spotlight as valuable during the pandemic-related social restrictions, and they also served to draw together the major findings from this study. Creswell's (2013) simplified steps of Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological method were used in this study, which

included: (a) epoche, (b) significant statements, (c) clusters of meaning, (d) textural descriptions, (e) structural descriptions, and (f) essences of the experiences. A criterion sampling scheme was used to obtain data from survey questions and in-depth interviews with the 15 teachers. The teachers' experiences revealed that during trauma and stress "education takes a back seat." The three themes that emerged original to this study were: (a) relationships that include social interaction can mitigate emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers, (b) school absence can cause emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers, and (c) peer collaboration is vital to the learning process for struggling readers. Findings from the study indicated that relationships are the most important aspect of learning for struggling readers and that social interaction, proximity, looking at others' mouths/faces/lips, and a focus on the emotional health and attendance of struggling readers are vital to building those relationships and ultimately for learning.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Bruce, who has believed in me and my dream of obtaining a PhD since the day I told him over 30 years ago. He never gave up on my dream and insisted in 2018 that I finally pursue it. I have been able to accomplish this dissertation with his love, support, encouragement, cooking, and more. I am forever indebted to him and love him infinitely!

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my three boys: Gray, Cole, and Slate. I feel so blessed that God entrusted me to be their mom. I loved spending time with them when they were little, and I love spending time with them now that they are young men. Now I will get to spend even more time with them. I love them, and I am so very proud of them!

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In addition, I need to thank Dr. Kathleen Collins, a member of my dissertation committee, for her assistance throughout and especially during my qualifying exams and dissertation proposal. Her questions and comments surrounding methodology pushed my learning and my dissertation to a clearer, deeper level.

A very special thank you goes to Dr. Vicki Risko for agreeing to be the ex-officio member of my dissertation committee and for her encouragement. Her intellectual legacy and continuing contribution to the field of education, especially in assisting struggling readers and their teachers, is an invaluable influence on my life and on the lives of educators everywhere.

I also would like to thank Dr. William McComas, the professor of my Research Methods and Scholarship in Curriculum and Instruction class, for his assistance as I prepared my working

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This acknowledgement section would not be complete without thanking Dr. Michelle Buchanan, my friend and colleague, who has given freely of her time, support, guidance, and so much more from day one of my PhD journey. She kept telling me to "See it! Believe it! Be it!"

Last and most importantly, I am forever grateful to all the unnamed participants who agreed to be interviewed during what was arguably the most stressful time of their professional lives. One very special second-grade teacher provided the inspiration for this dissertation and deserves an extra, big thank you. Without the participants' time and insight into their experiences with their struggling readers during the COVID-19 pandemic, this dissertation would not have been possible.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

The term struggling readers is defined in a variety of ways and assigned to students for different reasons, yet it is a common, familiar term regularly used in education (Alvarez et al., 2009; Hall et al., 2011). In fact, it is currently a hot topic in the field of education. At the beginning of 2020, the annual *What's Hot in Literacy Survey* reported on the current trends in the field of literacy practice and research, wherein the topic struggling readers was one of the "should be hot" topics (Cassidy et al., 2020, p. 48). At the beginning of 2021, the authors again published the *What's Hot in Literacy Survey* focusing on the current literacy trends that were receiving attention in the literacy field, and the topic struggling readers was then considered a "very hot" topic (Cassidy et al., 2021, p. 4). In addition, the ILA's *What's Hot in Literacy 2020 Report* listed the most chosen topic among those surveyed (66%) as "Determining effective instructional strategies for struggling readers" (International Literacy Association, 2020b, p. 6). The term struggling readers is a current and significant topic in the literacy field of education and will be even more relevant due to the challenges caused by the SARS-COV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic.

For the purpose of this study, *struggling readers* will be defined as those students with low achievement in reading, and/or students with dyslexia, and/or students who are not in line with their peers when it comes to reading (Cassidy et al., 2020; Hoover & Gough, 1990; Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2012; Scammacca et al., 2015). Struggling Readers are not a homogeneous group; they vary by grade levels, communities, economic settings, race, ethnicity, language, access to technology, and home support. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work to meet the needs of struggling readers (Hall et al., 2011; International Literacy Association, 2020a; Risko &

Walker-Dalhouse, 2012). Responding to the needs of struggling readers is a complex issue that involves understanding them from multiple perspectives because they vary in the strategies, skills, and understandings which they have acquired and still need to acquire for success in literacy (Hall et al., 2011; International Literacy Association, 2020a; Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2012). Struggling readers are unique, individual students who are facing difficulty in literacy and need assistance to change their trajectory.

Due to the unprecedented, extenuating circumstances precipitated by the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face instruction was interrupted for almost all students during the 2019–2020 school year. According to the UN, around 95% of the school population world-wide was impacted, creating the largest disruption to education ever seen in history (Engzell et al., 2020). A considerable amount of literature examining the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on schools, teachers, and their students has been published since the beginning of the pandemic. There is a growing body of educational literature developing in pandemic-related information, practice, and research. However, an extensive search did not reveal any research directly investigating elementary teachers' social interaction experiences with struggling readers during this new context of schooling. Therefore, there is a need in the literature to bring to light the collective experiences that existed for elementary teachers, both on-site and in virtual school, with their struggling readers during the pandemic-induced social restrictions of the 2020-2021 school year. Drawing upon that need, this study was designed and carried out to explore the experiences of teachers with their struggling readers within this new context of schooling and to relate the findings that will be relevant during and beyond the pandemic.

The overall structure of this study takes the form of five chapters. Chapter One introduces the study. Chapter Two will give a review of the literature, including the theoretical framework

for this study. Chapter Three is concerned with the methodology employed in this study. Chapter Four analyzes the data and addresses the research questions in turn. Finally, Chapter Five lays out the findings of the research, focusing on the three major themes that emerged.

This chapter presents some background information, the situation to self, the problem statement, the purpose statement, the significance of the study, the research questions, the research plan, delimitations, limitations, and a summary.

Background

The new context for schooling for the 2020-2021 school year was precipitated by the rules and restrictions of the world-wide pandemic (Nierenberg & Pasick, 2020). Some school districts in the United States chose to start the school year online (Edsource Staff, 2020), while others chose on-site school with social-distancing guidelines (Gewertz, 2020). There were districts who put into place a hybrid format – students met on-site part of the time and spent the rest of the time online, or on-site students and online students met with the same teacher simultaneously, also known as concurrent teaching (Boyarsky, 2020; Ferlazzo, 2020; Schwartz, 2021a). Some American families chose to enroll their child(ren) in virtual school (Kamenetz, 2020). Some virtual schools were charter schools, while others were provided by school districts, in addition to their traditional brick-and-mortar schools.

The 2020-2021 school year occurred after the historic world-wide closing of schools in the spring of 2020 (Gewertz, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). At the peak of the spring pandemic crisis, 1.6 billion students (94% of the world's student population) were absent from school (UNESCO, 2020). In addition, many American students were also out of school for their scheduled summer break. This caused some students to be deprived of six continuous months of classroom instruction (Hathaway, 2020). Some have estimated that this lack of instruction caused a 30%

learning loss in comparison to a typical school year, and the damage to students has been called by some the "coronavirus slide" (Hathaway, 2020). However, many have pushed against this, arguing that "learning loss" is a misnomer, is from a deficit-mindset, sends a signal to students that they are at fault, and gives permission for expectations to be lowered (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2021a, 2021b; Hood, 2020; Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2021; Schwartz, 2021b; Ujifusa, 2021). Rather than having a deficit mindset, some worked at having an additive mindset when it came to the pandemic-induced interruption in schooling.

American teachers found themselves thrown into this new context of schooling brought about by responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The teachers were called upon to assist their students, especially their struggling readers, while dealing with new and changing rules, restrictions, sickness, and quarantine. Many struggling readers experienced feelings of isolation and a "sense of loss of connection with peers and teachers" (International Literacy Association, 2020a, p. 5). Most teachers found the 2020-2021 school year even more demanding than the crisis of spring 2020 when the coronavirus pandemic began (Schwartz, 2021a).

Situation to Self

My role as researcher started with an epistemological curiosity of on-site and virtual school elementary teachers' experiences with their struggling readers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This curiosity arose because I was working with struggling readers as a Dyslexia Interventionist, both face-to-face and online concurrently, during the social restrictions of the pandemic. I personally experienced the changes and challenges associated with the social restrictions of the pandemic. I also heard first-hand teacher accounts about the difficulties in meeting the needs of struggling readers because of the educational changes due to the social restrictions. In fact, the topic for this study started to emerge after a conversation with a veteran second-grade teacher in

the teacher workroom. At that moment, I knew this would be an important study to undertake.

Problem Statement

The problem this study sought to explore was that for the 2020-2021 school year, elementary teachers in the United States rebooted school during the COVID-19 world-wide pandemic, bravely doing so virtually or in-person with social restrictions that impacted their experiences with struggling readers. These social restrictions brought about changes to the experiences of social interaction, literacy learning, digital learning, and peer collaboration of on-site and virtual school elementary teachers with their struggling readers.

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic was a novel event. So, despite the extensive struggling reader literature that existed, no previous studies had explored struggling readers within the context of the educational changes due to the social restrictions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore on-site and virtual school elementary teachers' pandemic-induced experiences with their struggling readers in one school district located in the state of Arkansas. The focus was elementary teachers' experiences with their struggling readers during the changes to the structure of literacy learning because of pandemic-induced social restrictions, either as an on-site teacher or as a virtual teacher. For this study, an on-site teacher was a teacher who taught students in a classroom face-to-face, including some online instruction during quarantine and weather events, whereas a virtual teacher was a teacher who taught students exclusively online with an all-digital curriculum and optional Zoom interventions.

Significance of the Study

Using Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, this study provides a focus on the social experiences of teachers with struggling readers during the pandemic social restrictions. Using a qualitative, transcendental phenomenology approach (Moustakas, 1994) to explore the phenomenon of teachers' experiences with struggling readers in on-site school and virtual school during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study makes an original contribution to struggling reader research and to COVID-19 research.

The rapidly changing educational landscape precipitated by the responses and changes due to the coronavirus pandemic required educators and educational leaders to "address collective experiences" in order to "recover and reassemble our students' learning" (Fisher et al., 2021b, p. 1). Educators had to heal from the trauma and stress and help their students do the same. "Relationships are our greatest antidote to loss and trauma" (Collins, 2020, p. 19). Educators had the opportunity to address the impact from the pandemic experiences and "rebound," considering what worked and did not work, and then using what was learned, to "come back better" and "positively change schooling and learning for more students" (Fisher et al., 2021b, p. 1). This study set out to explore the collective experiences of on-site and virtual teachers in one school district in Arkansas to discover the impact from the pandemic-induced social restrictions on the social interaction of teachers with their struggling readers. The findings from this study provide some insight into what these teachers realized was important for struggling readers during the pandemic and beyond the pandemic. This knowledge can provide insight to educators and educational leaders as they rebound from the pandemic and work to improve the quality of schooling for struggling readers.

Research Questions

This transcendental phenomenological study addressed the following two research questions:

- RQ1: How do elementary teachers describe experiences with struggling readers during the educational changes due to the social restrictions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic?

- RQ2: How do elementary teachers describe the contexts of experiences with struggling readers during the educational changes due to the social restrictions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Plan

Guiding this study's conceptual framework was Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological methodology, informing both the design and the analysis of this study.

Using Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory focused the study on the experiences of elementary teachers with struggling readers during the changes to social interaction and literacy learning brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic social restrictions. It was also the guiding framework for the interview questions that were created to explore the experiences of the teachers with their struggling readers through the use of semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2013; McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Weiss, 1995).

Using Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological methodology focused the study on the common perceptions of the teachers as they described the phenomenon of teachers' experiences with struggling readers in on-site school and virtual school during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also the guiding framework for the data analysis of the study, which included epoche, significant statements, clusters of meaning, textural and structural descriptions, and

essences of the experiences.

This study used a criterion sampling scheme to obtain a final sample size of 15 public school elementary teachers, which was determined based on data saturation – no new themes emerged from the data (Guest et al., 2006; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007; Saunders et al., 2018).

Delimitations

This study was bound by geographical location as participants were sampled from one school district located in the state of Arkansas. This study was also bound by criteria with the use of criterion sampling limiting the participants to those who had six or more years of experience and were assigned to first grade through sixth grade. Educators other than elementary classroom teachers were not recruited as respondents for this study. No translators were available for this research, so only English-speaking teachers were selected. In addition, this study was bound by Zoom interviews rather than face-to-face interviews, which would have provided a better opportunity for body language analysis. Finally, this study was bound by one data point - teacher interviews. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, classroom observations were not an option. However, an online focus group could have possibly been scheduled to further advance this study's findings.

Limitations

The small sample size and the small geographical area from which the sample was drawn likely offers a limitation in generalizability, but the consequence of this is unknown because there are no studies available to define the characteristics of the overall population of teachers of struggling readers. However, the findings may represent the experiences of some teachers of struggling readers.

Another limitation may be that discussing their lived experiences in the moment may have

been challenging for some of the teachers. In addition, they may not have approved of the way in which their school district/school chose to react to the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, they may have brought known or unknown biases to the interview. These challenges and biases may have influenced their responses to questions regarding struggling readers.

Other limitations included the lack of racial and gender diversity. Unfortunately, no teachers of color voluntarily responded to the email/survey, and the one man who agreed to an interview did not keep any of the multiple rescheduled appointments.

Summary

The goals of this transcendental phenological study were to give a voice to those teachers who bravely taught their students, and specifically their struggling readers, during the COVID-19 pandemic and to find out what emerged as most important for teachers with struggling readers, both during the pandemic and beyond.

Chapter Two will present the theoretical framework and literature review for this study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

Chapter Two contextualizes this study by providing the theoretical framework, the related literature, and the summary. The related literature includes a historical perspective of struggling readers.

The SARS-COV-2 (COVID-19) world-wide pandemic ushered in a unique, naturalistic experiment for teachers and researchers to reflect on teaching and learning during the world-wide disruption to schooling as usual (Ostroff, 2020). From the beginning of the pandemic, one area of literature in the field of education has focused on information and suggestions for policy makers, school districts, educational leaders, teachers, and families on how to deal with the fallout from the pandemic. Some of the literature dealt with remote learning (Boyarsky, 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2020; Edsource Staff, 2020; Ferlazzo, 2020; Minahan, 2020; Mitchell, 2020; Ostroff, 2020; Schwartz, 2021b). Other literature focused on the trauma and stress experienced by students due to the pandemic (Collins, 2020; Fagell, 2021; Grogan, 2021; Minahan, 2020; Prothero, 2021; Rebora, 2020; Souers & Hall, 2020; Theirs, 2020; Zacarian et al., 2020). Still other literature focused on practical information and advice during and beyond the pandemic (Gewertz, 2020; Minkel, 2020; Nierenberg & Pasick, 2020; Schwartz, 2021a; Ujifusa, 2021; UNESCO, 2020).

Another area of pandemic-related literature dealt with estimating or identifying learning loss precipitated by the pandemic (Angrist et al., 2021; Engzell et al., 2020; Hathaway, 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020). In contrast, other literature has taken a more optimistic stance by looking at what is essential for students' learning during and beyond the pandemic, with some pushing against the learning loss narrative (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2021a, 2021b;

Hood, 2020; International Literacy Association, 2020a; Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2021; Schwartz, 2021c; Ujifusa, 2021).

Educational research specific to the impact of the pandemic on struggling readers assessed the effects of the pandemic on reading ability (Domingue et al., 2021). To date, however, there has been a general paucity of studies focusing on the experiences of struggling readers during the pandemic, and specifically no discussion found, using an extensive search, that explores the collective social experiences of in-person and virtual school elementary teachers with their struggling readers during the pandemic-induced social restrictions. With one of the current hot topics in literacy being struggling readers (Cassidy et al., 2020, 2021; International Literacy Association, 2020b), combined with the pandemic-afforded naturalistic experiment environment (Ostroff, 2020), there is an opportunity for research to explore teachers' experiences with their struggling readers during the social restrictions of the pandemic to gain insight into what they realized is essential and should be prioritized for their struggling readers during the pandemic and beyond. Realizing this gap in the literature, the researcher set out to explore the phenomenon of experiences with struggling readers in the midst of the pandemic, in order to determine the essences of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994) collectively shared by elementary on-site school and virtual school teachers with struggling readers as they rebooted school in the midst of the pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

Most of the researcher's professional life has been spent helping struggling readers directly or helping those who help struggling readers. I believe that "empowering students who struggle in literacy occurs through policy, planning, and practice; it should always remain a cornerstone of literacy priorities" (Cassidy et al., 2020, p. 48). When selecting my dissertation topic, it

became clear that I could choose critical theory as a viable lens to look through to create my study and analyze my data. I could have easily used critical theory, as most of my educational career has been spent teaching and advocating for marginalized students, and that is where my heart is.

However, the lens of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory fit the aim of this study better than critical theory. First, because "the social cultural dimensions of [struggling readers'] lives are often ignored in literacy instruction" (Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2012, p. 19), I wanted to attempt to make sure this didn't occur within research during the pandemic. Second, the aim of my research was to explore elementary teachers' experiences with their struggling readers during the pandemic-induced social restrictions in order to "address collective experiences" as teachers "recover and reassemble our students' learning" (Fisher et al., 2021b, p. 1). My hope is that my research will contribute to a deeper understanding of what is essential for teachers to prioritize with their struggling readers during and beyond the pandemic.

When school started in the fall of 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers had the arduous task of rebooting school constricted by social restrictions due to the rules, restrictions, sickness, and quarantines of the pandemic. These social restrictions caused teachers to have to change their typical ways of providing literacy instruction for their students, and specifically their struggling readers. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory was chosen as the theoretical lens for this study to explore the experiences of teachers with their struggling readers in the absence of or in the reduction of social interaction. The following section discusses Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory as it relates to this study.

Sociocultural Theory

Lev Vygotsky, who was born in 1896 in Russia, created his theoretical work in the 1920s and 1930s. His ideas were brought to the western world in the 1960s and 1970s and gained popularity in the 1990s. It was then, with a focus on Vygotsky's work, that reading researchers delved into the social nature of learning and the major role that teachers and peers play as facilitators during student learning (Pearson & Cervetti, 2015). Vygotsky has been dubbed the "Mozart of psychology" and an extensive field of Vygotskian scholarship exists (Vasileva & Balyasnikova, 2019). Currently, while some still celebrate and apply his work to fields of study from language education to psychology to neuroscience (Tomlinson & Sousa, 2020), others consider Vygotsky's work to be outdated (Vasileva & Balyasnikova, 2019). I propose that Vygotsky's work is not only still relevant in education today, but that its value has been placed into the spotlight due to the social restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following constructs of Vygotsky's work that are the most important for this study are: (1) emotions are inseparable from thinking, (2) social interaction is important for learning, and (3) collective activity produces learning.

Emotions Are Inseparable from Thinking

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning embraces the perspective that "cognition and affect are intertwined" (Smagorinsky, 2013, p. 195) or, in other words, emotions are inseparable from thinking. Vygotsky said, "There exists a dynamic meaningful system that constitutes *a unity of affective and intellectual processes"* (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 41). All aspects of life are interrelated, so what happens on the inside cannot be taken apart from what happens on the outside. Humans do not just think about it, they also have emotional reactions to the "drama of life" (Smagorinsky, 2013, p. 195). Emotions impact our memory organization, future

planning, integration of cognitive material, attention, and learning (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Tomlinson & Sousa, 2020). Students should be empowered to engage socially and emotionally in the literacy activities within their classrooms (Alexander & Fox, 2013). There is an emotional component to reading that can be identified by the teacher (Kim et al., 2017). The Vygotskian sense of drama relates to people in relationships with others and themselves, which emerges through those relationships within social settings, including literacy activities.

Social Interaction Is Important for Learning

The importance of relationships in social settings is part of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory that is concerned with the importance of social interaction for cognitive development (Collet, in press). It posits learning not simply as acquiring knowledge, but rather as a social participation process that both precedes and leads to development (Collet, in press). It also views language as a tool for communication that is a product of the social environment and is powerful in shaping thought (Allahyar & Nazari, 2012; Collet, in press; Smagorinsky, 2013). It is through social interaction with talk that learning occurs and then development follows. According to Vygotsky, language learning is internalized as it moves from the social to the internal through interaction and imitation, a reworking of the impressions a student has acquired from others (Allahyar & Nazari, 2012; Anderson et al., 2001; Collet, in press). Vygotsky (1978) explained it by saying, "learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers" (p. 90). The Vygotskian sense of learning relates to students developing knowledge after first talking and interacting with others.

Collective Activity Produces Learning

Cooperation with peers is another component of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. Collaboration is fundamental to human development because students "are capable of doing much more in collective activity" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 88).

Through social interactions and conversation with their teachers and/or peers during assisted or collaborative learning events within groups, students achieve more sophisticated goals than they could on their own (Allahyar & Nazari, 2012; Borthick et al., 2003; Brown et al., 1989). When students collaborate, they acquire mental processes by sharing and interaction, and then they internalize and can use those mental processes independently (Bodrova & Leong, 2006; Vygotsky, 1987). The Vygotskian sense of peer collaboration relates to students sharing and interacting with peers before internalizing knowledge that can then be used independently.

Using Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory helped to identify and explore the social experiences of teachers with their struggling readers during the pandemic-induced social restrictions. In addition, sociocultural theory was used as the lens through which to design the interview questions, enabling the teacher's descriptions of the social experiences, or lack of social experiences, to emerge. Along with this theoretical framework, the following related literature provided the conceptual framework for this qualitative (Creswell, 2013), transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) study.

Related Literature

Historical Perspective of Struggling Readers

Historically, in the United States, there has been an evolution of approaches for assisting struggling readers, who have been known by various labels, which have transitioned from remedial models to early preventative models to response to intervention (RTI) models.

Remedial Approaches

In 1916, Willis Uhl was the first to use the term "remedial" when describing a reading intervention in the first ever American remedial reading journal article (Harris, 1967; Scammacca et al., 2016). He utilized the Kansas and Gray tests, the first standardized tests for determining grade-level reading, for his research (Scammacca et al., 2016). Then, in 1918, Clara Schmitt wrote in the European mode using the terms "developmental alexia" and "congenital word-blindness," advocating a systematic phonic method of remedial instruction and developing one of the earliest known instructional programs specializing in assisting struggling readers (Cassidy et al., 2016; Harris, 1967).

In 1921, Grace Fernald, founder of the first clinic focused on reading disabilities, reported (with Helen Keller) on her kinesthetic intervention for assisting struggling readers (Harris, 1967; Scammacca et al., 2016). In 1922, William Gray, the creator of the Gray Oral Reading Test, advocated for remediation through small group intervention and individualized instruction with a reading specialist, focusing on detection with diagnostic assessments (Harris, 1967; Scammacca et al., 2016). In his first paper on reading problems in 1925, Samuel Orton, a physician, refuted the predominant view of the time that congenital word blindness was caused by irreversible brain damage and advocated for a synthetic phonics method of assisting struggling readers (Harris, 1967; Scammacca et al., 2016). By the 1930s, assistance for struggling readers moved into the public-school systems, including both classroom intervention programs and large-scale remedial programs (Harris, 1967; Scammacca et al., 2016). All the different intervention approaches shared the common end result of assisting struggling readers with reading whole words left to right and improving their attitudes toward reading, allowing for improved motivation and engagement (Harris, 1967; Scammacca et al., 2016).

In the 1940s, the new psychoanalytic-theory-based "mental hygiene movement" connected reading failure with emotional and environmental difficulties (Harris, 1967; Scammacca et al., 2016). During this time, the first study on struggling readers using quantitative methods was conducted by Burt and Lewis, finding the visual approach superior to the phonics approach (Harris, 1967; Scammacca et al., 2016). Also developed during this time were machine approaches to remedial reading, including the Ophthalm-O-Graph and the Metron-O-Scope (Harris, 1967; Scammacca et al., 2016).

The 1950s saw an increase in rigor of research on struggling readers, mainly through using comparison groups to avoid the practice effects of earlier research (Harris, 1967; Scammacca et al., 2016). The 1950s also saw the infamous book by Rudolf Flesch *Why Johnny Can't Read* become a best seller and convince parents that their struggling readers were not stupid, leading to public pressure for improved diagnostic and remediation for struggling readers (Harris, 1967; Scammacca et al., 2016). By the 1960s, psychoanalytic theories were replaced with behaviorist theories, but the remedial model based on failure was entrenched as the method used for assisting struggling readers. The approach was to wait until students failed and then remediate them – using retention or special education (Askew et al., 2002). The passage in 1965 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) started a longstanding tradition which continues to this day of using Title I funds for remediation of students with "reading disabilities" in small-group settings (Reynolds et al., 2011). During this time, a debate between phonics and whole-word instruction ensued. This was not a new debate as Horace Mann had argued in the 1800s that children should not be taught using phonics, debating with those who did, that whole words should be taught instead (Hanford, 2018).

The 1970s saw new approaches to reading interventions which were influenced by cognitive psychologists who had become more interested in studying reading, including reading interventions focusing on the improvement of comprehension and on teaching cognitive strategies. Most notably was Torgesen (1977) who concluded that it was possible to use metacognitive strategies in interventions with struggling readers (Harris, 1967; Scammacca et al., 2016).

Early Prevention Approaches

In the1980s, the approach to assisting struggling readers was no longer predominately the remedial model, but instead had begun transitioning to a preventative model – diagnosing problems early and intervening before they develop into severe conditions (Askew et al., 2002). During this time, students who struggled with reading were known as "retarded readers" (Neville & Hoffman, 1981) or "disabled readers" (Ford & Ohlhausen, 1988). It was during the 1980s that a philosophical debate between phonics and whole language became so intense that it was referred to as "the reading wars" (Hanford, 2018).

The 1990s saw a continuation of the preventative model to assist struggling readers, who were known as "poor readers" (Zabrucky & Ratner, 1992). It was in the 1990s that Reading Recovery, motivation/engagement, and volunteer tutoring found prominence (Cassidy et al., 2016; Slavin et al., 2011). Reading Recovery focused on early identification of reading difficulties in first grade and provided one-on-one tutoring (Cassidy et al., 2016; Slavin et al., 2011). Even though it declined in popularity due to its high cost, it set the precedence for early identification of struggling readers and meeting struggling readers' needs individually and personally (Cassidy et al., 2016; Slavin et al., 2011). President Bill Clinton proposed the America Reads initiative in his 1997 State of the Union Address, which created replicable

programs of volunteer tutors to work with struggling readers, aiming to ensure that students could read independently and fluently by third grade (Cassidy et al., 2016; Slavin et al., 2011).

Response to Intervention Approaches

The turn of the century saw the transition from the early preventative model to the response to intervention (RTI) model for assisting struggling readers. With President George Bush's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), students who struggled with reading were labeled as "at-risk students" or "struggling readers." Students who experienced reading difficulty or who might be at risk were provided supplemental and/or assistance for improvement (Cassidy et al., 2016; Slavin et al., 2011). A Bush administration's initiative – Reading First – focused on small-group interventions for K-3 struggling readers in high-poverty, low-achieving schools (Slavin et al., 2011). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) created research interest in the preventative model for identifying students with learning needs, called response to intervention. According to Reynolds and colleagues (2011), response to intervention models depend on quality initial instruction; early, specific, regular, and ongoing assessment of students' achievement in basic skills; and varying levels of interventions. It was also at the turn of the century that the U.S. Congress convened the 2000 National Reading Panel (NRP) for the purpose of reviewing all research on reading and releasing a report of its findings. The report did not show any positive evidence for the whole language philosophy, but it did show that teaching the connection between sounds and letters is foundational to learning to read (Hanford, 2018).

The 2010s saw the continuation of the response to intervention model for assisting struggling readers, with a focus on identifying student needs from assessment data and then providing small-group interventions or one-to-one tutoring to attempt to solve problems before a referral to special education (Bausell, 2010). The National Early Literacy Panel of 2008 (NELP)

suggested instructional practices should include code-focused interventions, shared-reading

interventions, and parent/home programs. In 2010, the Common Core Standards (CCSS) were

released with the goal of all students in the United States meeting the same expectations

(Bausell, 2010). However, the popularity of the CCSS soon declined because of a lack of support

for implementation, a belief that a reform to content standards could harm students, and other

reasons (Bleiberg, 2021). Studies found the relationship between student outcomes and CCSS

implementation as mixed (Bleiberg, 2021). In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

was passed defining levels of evidence and encouraging school districts and schools to use

evidence for deciding which literacy programs to select. As the CCSS lost popularity, the topics

of "science of reading" and "dyslexia" gained attention. Although the science-based aspect of

research on reading across cognitive psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, and other scientific

fields had been around for decades, the term "science of reading" gained traction in the 2010s.

Similarly, by 2018, dyslexia legislation including identification, intervention, funding, and/or

specialists had been approved by 33 states with proposals by 42 states (Worthy et al., 2018).

Because of their stagnant reading scores, policymakers, educators, and parents had sought to

improve the systems for meeting the needs of those identified with dyslexia (Cassidy et al.,

2021). At the close of the 2010s, the decades-old debate about learning to read had been

reinflamed (Loewus, 2019) and now included a "dyslexia debate."

Dyslexia

In 2020, the term dyslexia was considered a "very hot" topic in the *What's Hot in Literacy*

Survey (Cassidy et al., 2021, p. 4). Currently, controversy surrounds dyslexia, including even the

usefulness of the term. Some feel dyslexia is a distinct disorder (The International Dyslexia

Association, 2016), while others feel there is no foundation for the organizing of one group of

struggling readers as different from other struggling readers (International Literacy Association, 2016). At the behavioral level, the condition of dyslexia is a severe difficulty with decoding the printed word of a language (Vellutino et al., 2004). Early screening with early intervention that is responsive to the needs, strengths, and affective domains of can help change the trajectory with reading difficulty (Cassidy et al., 2021; Stanton, in press). Affective, or emotional, domains have been ignored for a long time in dyslexia literature (Cassidy et al., 2016). Despite the controversy surrounding dyslexia, the huge benefit that has come with the focus and legislation supporting dyslexia is that the push for all students to receive universal screeners with corrective actions has provided many struggling readers, identified as dyslexic or not, the assistance they need to learn to read.

Learning to Read

Reading is an inherently messy, complex, and ongoing skill that is a prerequisite to success in many societies (Cervetti, 2019; Ehri, 2003; NRP, 2000; Rayner et al., 2012; Snow et al., 1998). Because of the complexity of reading, difficulties and breakdowns in the reading process occur for a significant percentage of students and can have lasting consequences (Adams, 1990; Alvarez et al., 2009; Reynolds et al., 2011; Nancy K. Scammacca et al., 2015).

Reading development begins at birth with the first five years believed to be of the utmost importance to establishing a child's reading trajectory (Alvarez et al., 2009; Slavin et al., 2011). The 2008 National Institute for Literacy (NIL) report identified the skills that were positively correlated precursors to reading development: alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, letter names and sounds, and concepts about print (Adams, 1990; Alvarez et al., 2009; Juel, 1988; NRP, 2000; Reynolds et al., 2011).

After entering school, many students will struggle in one or more areas of reading regardless of their IQ (Adams, 1990; Alvarez et al., 2009; International Literacy Association, 2019; Juel, 1988; NRP, 2000; Reynolds et al., 2011). In her seminal piece, Adams (1990) estimated one-third of all students will have difficulty in learning to read, while the 2000 National Reading Panel (NRP) estimated 20% of all students will experience reading difficulties before third grade.

When students struggle with reading in the early years, the consequences can continue into their later school years (Alvarez et al., 2009; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Foorman et al., 1997; Juel, 1988; Reynolds et al., 2011). Juel (1988) reported in her seminal article that the probability that a "poor reader" at the end of first grade would remain so at the end of fourth grade was 88%. Reynolds (2011) and Slavin (2011) added to Juel's findings by reporting that 70% of children who are poor readers at the start of elementary school will probably remain poor readers in eighth grade. Success in elementary school is virtually synonymous with reading success, and students "without strong reading skills by middle school are headed for disaster" (Reynolds et al., 2011, p. 2).

The consequences of the persistence of poor basic reading skills can carry over into adolescence and adulthood (Reynolds et al., 2011; Slavin et al., 2011; Washington et al., 2020). Both individuals and society must deal with the consequences of students not acquiring basic literacy skills (NCES, 2019; Slavin et al., 2011; Washington et al., 2020). In 2019, according to "The Nation's Report Card," The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which measures U.S. students in reading and other subjects (NCES, 2019), only 35 percent of fourth graders in the United States performed at or above NAEP Proficient in reading. This was due in part to the steadily falling scores for the 10% to 25% of students who struggle the most in

reading (Sparks, 2021). In addition, the percentage of fourth graders who performed at or above NAEP Basic in reading in 2019 was even lower than it had been in 2017 (NCES, 2019; Sparks, 2021). The National Institutes of Health (NIH) declared illiteracy a "national public health issue" (Harris, 1967; Scammacca et al., 2016).

Essential Factors for Learning to Read

Research has clearly defined that what is needed to change the trajectory of failure for struggling readers is high-quality, evidence-based core instruction and evidence-based, code-focused and/or shared-reading early interventions aligned within an RTI network (Cassidy et al., 2016; National Institute for Literacy, 2008; Neitzel et al., 2021; Reynolds et al., 2011, p. 2; Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2012, p. 19; Snow et al., 1998, p. 4) rooted in phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary (Neitzel et al., 2021; NRP, 2000) together with "continued interest and motivation to read for a variety of purposes" (Snow et al., 1998, p. 4) and parent/home programs (National Institute for Literacy, 2008) conducted within social learning groups (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Ostroff, 2020; Watkins, 2005) and glued together with positive relationships (Compton-Lilly, 2006; Jennings, 2019; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Learned, 2016; Minahan, 2020) and a culturally responsive environment (Fairbanks et al., 2017; International Literacy Association, 2020a; Keehne et al., 2018; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014; Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2012, p. 19, 2021).

Core Instruction

Core instruction should include explicit instruction in all the five essential components reported by the NRP (2000): phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. In addition, according to many, it should also insure that students read something they like and understand every day with opportunities to talk with adults and peers

about their reading (Foorman et al., 1997; Reynolds et al., 2011; Torgesen, 2006). Reynolds and colleagues (2011) noted the following with regards to the five essential components: (1) phonemic awareness should be taught early and should focus on blending and segmentation, (2) phonics should be taught, though there is not agreement on the approach, (3) fluency has important links to comprehension, but there is a paucity of evidence on how to best teach it, and (4) vocabulary is connected to comprehension and should be taught both directly and incidentally. Recently, a veritable legend in the world of education, P. David Pearson, was quoted as saying, "We can fall into an either-or track, so comprehension and word recognition become a kind of a zero-sum game. And we want to discourage that. Just because we're teaching them word recognition doesn't mean that we can't teach comprehension. And just because we're focusing on building knowledge, doesn't mean that we have to de-emphasize strategy instruction...We want to think of the various instructional components and activities as complementary and integrated rather than completely separated and independent of one another" (Sparks, 2021). High-quality and differentiated instruction benefits struggling readers across socioeconomic status levels, as well as different cultural and linguistic histories (Foorman et al., 1997). When using the three-tiered RTI model, all students in a classroom are screened within core instruction, and those who do not pass the universal screener are seen in Tier I intervention, ideally using scientifically-based interventions in the least restrictive environment within the classroom (Cassidy et al., 2016; Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008; Wixson & Lipson, 2012). Those students receive progress monitoring, which is frequent and quick assessments for gauging the rate of learning, with the expectation that it will address the needs of 80-85% of students within the classroom (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008; Wixson & Lipson, 2012).

Intervention

When students do not make progress within core instruction, they need early reading

intervention to change their learning trajectory (Foorman et al., 1997; Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008;

Torgesen, 2006; Wanzek et al., 2010; Washington et al., 2020). When reading interventions are

started early, the gap in proficiency is still small and the secondary implications of reading

failure are minimal, thus making them more effective in curtailing reading failure (Washington et

al., 2020). Wanzek and colleagues (2010) found when interventions are provided in the first two

years of schooling, they are more effective than those implemented in later years. Therefore, they

argue for developing accuracy and fluency in word identification for students in the first two to

three years of schooling. Torgesen (2006) proposed that if intervention is provided between

semester two in kindergarten through to the end of second grade, struggling readers can get

caught up and maintain an average range of achievement for accuracy and fluency. However, all

students in all grades benefit from targeted interventions when needed (Fletcher & Vaughn,

2009; Scammacca et al., 2016).

In the three-tier RTI model, Tier I intervention is provided within the classroom core

instruction. Tier II is provided for students who did not make the progress required in Tier I,

usually through targeted, small group instruction outside of the classroom core instruction. Tier

III is intensive intervention consisting of smaller groups, increased intervention time, and/or

intervention with a specialized teacher. Because the RTI model is both an approach for

identifying student difficulties early to reduce the number of struggling readers, as well as an

alternate approach to the IQ/achievement discrepancy model to identify students who are truly

learning disabled, students are referred for an evaluation to determine special education

eligibility only after they are unsuccessful in Tier III intervention (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009;

Scammacca et al., 2016). Combining research evidence on core instruction with effective

intervention that is supportive, intensive, comprehensive, and explicit allows for the trajectory of

struggling readers to be changed.

Instructional Format

The literature has defined what instructional formats work well for struggling readers. Whole

class instruction used as the only instructional format is detrimental to struggling readers;

whereas a mixture of small group instruction, peer collaboration, and whole class instruction,

made up mostly of cooperative learning, benefits struggling readers (Fisher et al., 2021b; Neitzel

et al., 2021). Positive outcomes have been reported for one-on-one tutoring and one-to-small

group tutoring (Neitzel et al., 2021). However, whole-class approaches including cooperative

learning and whole-class/whole-school tutoring for struggling readers with interventions aligned

within an RTI network obtained outcomes as large as those found for tutoring on average yet

benefits more students (Neitzel et al., 2021).

      Small Group. A small group instructional format is an instructional approach that

promotes increased learning, social interaction, and accountability within homogeneous or

heterogeneous groupings of two or more students that are flexible (Murphy et al., 2017). Flexible

grouping is based on students' interests, levels, and/or needs and changes based on these

observations/assessments, as opposed to fixed grouping, which is based on static groups with no

fluidity (Bates, 2013). Homogeneous grouping is used to place students together by similar need

or level, allowing a teacher to provide differentiated instruction. Intervention is an example of

homogeneous grouping by similar assessed needs. Heterogeneous grouping is used to place

students together by different levels or abilities, allowing student diversity, interdependence, and

enhanced student learning (Murphy et al., 2017). Examples of heterogeneous grouping include text-based discussion groups, cooperative learning groups, and peer collaboration.

   Peer Collaboration. Research in both cognitive and educational fields have demonstrated that students learn best in a social group, learning with and being tutored by other students (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Neitzel et al., 2021; Ostroff, 2020; Watkins, 2005). According to Foorman & Torgesen (2001), interventions provided by a peer-assisted procedure are not only more intensive but also more explicit than that provided typically by a teacher. Neitzel et al. (2021) suggested that motivation and peer teaching are two important factors to improving the reading skills of struggling readers. Neitzel et al. (2021) notes that peer teaching draws on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, and that peer work is exciting, engaging, and social.

Learning to Read as Social Activity

 Reading research long ago defined reading mostly as a cognitive and/or perceptual process with a focus on what happens inside the individual's head during reading (Mcintyre, 2010). However, from a sociocultural perspective, there is more to a child learning to read than what happens inside his head, there is also what happens outside his head (Mcintyre, 2010).

 Before the changes in schooling brought about by COVID-19 pandemic, in the typical context of school, learning often happened as an inherently social activity with teachers and other students (Allahyar & Nazari, 2012; Bloome & Kim, 2016; Fisher et al., 2021b; Ostroff, 2020). Education and cognitive science research have shown that students learn best when they learn in social groups (Ostroff, 2020). With the COVID-19 school crisis in the spring of 2020, reading instruction was being conducted almost completely online with a reduction in or an absence of social interaction. In fact, as many as 6% of younger students in the United States had

no contact with a teacher and 19% had irregular contact with a teacher (Hathaway, 2020). For the 2020-2021 school year, some schools remained completely online while others chose face-to-face instruction, usually with a hybrid option. However, even with in-person instruction, social distancing guidelines forced an almost complete removal of the social activities that teachers typically use in reading instruction. The American Academy of Pediatrics urged policymakers to get students together again within their classrooms because the risk from social isolation was comparable to the coronavirus risk for some students (Ostroff, 2020).

Digital Learning

Studies on the effects of computerized intervention programs, gaming, and online reading curriculum on struggling readers have seen mixed results in recent literature (Henry et al., 2012; Ronimus et al., 2014; Silverman et al., 2020).

According to Silverman et al. (2020) technology use in language comprehension interventions may support reading comprehension, enabling students to develop deeper language comprehension than through teacher instruction alone. The authors state that the way technology is used in language comprehension interventions has not been consistent, however, and considering that the use of technology is sometimes associated with negative effects, such as when it is distracting, much more research is needed.

Ronimus et al. (2014) investigated game-based digital learning of reading on first and second graders' engagement and found that: 1) digital games may be an effective tool for early reading, 2) students must be engaged to reach the learning game goals, 3) the features of the games can affect engagement development, and 4) there is a short-term positive impact from game features. The authors call for further research into the impact of game features on learner's engagement continuing until the learning goals are achieved.

Henry et al. (2012) addressed the needs of struggling readers within a new instructional model, Internet Reciprocal Teaching (IRT), which combined collaborative learning with internet-based texts. The authors presented results that suggested students in their case studies of second graders, fourth graders, and seventh graders, who had been perceived as struggling readers, had a greater engagement in literacy activities and ownership in learning through peer collaboration.

Even the best digital tools are supposed to complement classroom instruction and are not meant to replace it (Herold, 2020). According to the author, feedback based on a student's interests, a student's knowledge, and a student's strengths can only be provided by a human, which is critical to good literacy instruction. In addition, a good teacher has a sense of who a student is, knows what the student knows, and is in tune with a student's facial expressions and body language.

Trauma and Stress

Recent literature has reported on the trauma and stress affecting the lives of children during the universal trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has touched all people on our planet and been a huge stressor for many (Fisher & Frey, 202l; Minahan, 2020; Rebora, 2020; Souers & Hall, 2020; Theirs, 2020; Zacrian, 2020).

Much was already known about the disastrous effects of individual trauma and stress on the health and learning of students. The ACE study brought awareness of the high incidence of childhood trauma, and the effects it can have on life-long health (Felitti et al, 2019). However, with the current pandemic, the results of the collective trauma being experienced by all students is unknown (Fisher and Frey, 2020).

Recent literature has discussed that trauma and stress impact the emotional health of students, and that the students experience emotional responses. One in three teenagers experience anxiety

that is clinically significant, but with the pandemic it is probable that all students of all ages are experiencing anxiety at an even higher rate and subsequent trauma is even greater (Minahan, 2020). When students experience trauma and stress, their systems move to a survival state and release chemicals, causing their brains to leave the learning mode in the school setting (Souers & Hall, 2020; Rebora, 2020). Some resulting responses include: (a) over- or under-acting to stimuli, (b) recreating traumatic events, (c) a lowered ability to manage moods, (d) language development delays and challenges, (e) difficulties listening and concentrating, (f) a lowered ability to follow directions, (g) a lowered ability to process information, (i) a lowered ability to remember key concepts, and (h) a lowered ability to engage with others (Souers & Hall, 2020; Rebora, 2020). Nadine Brook Harris adds that if this survival state response happens too much, it can move from being "life-saving" to being "health-damaging," and then impaired executive functioning can result (Theirs, 2020, p. 12). According to Minahan (2020), the disruption in schooling, along with the increased anxiety levels due to the COVID-19 pandemic, makes learning even more challenging for students. Souers & Hall (2020) echoed this by explaining that scary and unpredictable stressors can impact functioning, including learning.

During this pandemic crisis, it was recommended that students' emotional health should be prioritized over their academics, especially for the most vulnerable students (Minahan, 2020). Some strategies suggested included self-regulation, student safety, and positive relationships (Rebora, 2020).

Current literature is pointing out that students' relationship with their teacher can mitigate the adverse impact of trauma and stress. Fisher and colleagues (2020) discussed how students have been exposed to stress from the news and from their families, so they look to their teacher for guidance. Minahan (2020) stated that a strong relationship with a teacher can help students be

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insulated from anxiety and can help promote academic and emotional growth. Because of this, relationship-building is important, not just during the pandemic, but also in the future beyond the pandemic. Nadine Brooke Harris pointed out that a stable, daily, nurturing relationship with a teacher is the "antidote to the effects of stress on executive functioning and health" (Theirs, 2020, p. 12).

School Absenteeism

School attendance and participation matter to reading success (Hamlin, 2021; Jaume & Willén, 2019; Johnson et al., 2021). Federal guidelines have historically directed states to track truancy (Johnson et al., 2021). In 2015, with the passage of the ESSA, the department of education shifted the focus from truancy to chronic absenteeism, leading to a wider group of health social service personnel available to support families in addressing barriers to school attendance (Johnson et al., 2021). Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of school days and is linked to lack of reading proficiency (Hamlin, 2021; Johnson et al., 2021). With nearly 15% of American students chronically absent from school before the pandemic and evidence linking absenteeism to lower academic achievement and negative later-life outcomes, many states had added chronic absenteeism as a core component to their school accountability plans even before the pandemic (Hamlin, 2021). Research has been clear that lower academic achievement can be due in part to reduced instructional time (Hamlin, 2021; Jaume & Willén, 2019; S. Johnson et al., 2021), which can be caused by general chronic absenteeism, local crises such as a strike or a natural disaster, or even a global pandemic. Student absences reportedly doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic (Johnson et al., 2021). According to an estimate from Bellwether Education Partners, approximately 3 million children had not been engaged consistently with learning from March to October of 2020 (Johnson et al., 2021). It is essential to

get students who are disconnected and/or absent re-engaged in learning (Johnson et al., 2021) no matter when they are absent from school.

Summary

While there has been a paucity of COVID-19 related studies focusing on the experiences of struggling readers during the pandemic, there has been an increasing number of pandemic-related studies focusing on remote learning (Chamberlain et al., 2020; Edsource Staff, 2020; Ferlazzo, 2020; Minahan, 2020; Mitchell, 2020; Ostroff, 2020; Schwartz, 2021b), dealing with the trauma and stress experienced by students (Collins, 2020; Fagell, 2021; Grogan, 2021; Minahan, 2020; Prothero, 2021; Rebora, 2020; Souers & Hall, 2020; Zacarian et al., 2020), information and advice for educational leaders and educators during and beyond the pandemic (Gewertz, 2020; Nierenberg & Pasick, 2020; Schwartz, 2021a; Ujifusa, 2021; UNESCO, 2020), estimating or identifying learning loss precipitated by the pandemic (Angrist et al., 2021; Engzell et al., 2020; Hathaway, 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020), priorities for students' learning during and beyond the pandemic (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2021a, 2021b; Hood, 2020; International Literacy Association, 2020a; Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2021; Schwartz, 2021c; Ujifusa, 2021), and the effects of the pandemic on reading ability (Domingue et al., 2021). Very little research, if any, has focused on struggling readers during the pandemic-induced social restrictions. In order to attempt to make sure that the sociocultural aspects of struggling readers' lives were not ignored during the pandemic and in post-pandemic literacy instruction (Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2012) and to address the collective experiences of teachers as they rebooted school (Fisher et al., 2021b), this transcendental, phenomenological study set out to fill the gap in the literature by exploring the collective social experiences of in-person and virtual school elementary teachers with their struggling readers during the pandemic-induced social

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restrictions. Chapter Three will describe the research design and the research methods chosen for this study.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Overview

In order to explore the phenomenon of teachers' experiences with struggling readers in on-site school and virtual school during the SARS-COV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic, a qualitative study (Creswell, 2013) using a transcendental phenomenology approach (Moustakas, 1994) was designed and undertaken by the researcher. Chapter three discusses the specific methods and how the analyses were conducted. This chapter is subdivided into the research design, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations

Design

The use of a transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative research was the appropriate choice for the design of this study because the phenomenon studied focused on the common meaning of the lived experiences (Creswell, 2013) of a group of elementary teachers assisting struggling readers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a qualitative design allowed the researcher to use inductive and emerging procedures shaped by the collection and the analysis of the data, whereas a phenomenological approach allowed for a fuller description of "what" was experienced and "how" the participants experienced it (Creswell, 2013).

Qualitative Methodology

The design of this study began with the decision to use qualitative methodology. Qualitative methodology, rather than quantitative methodology, was chosen for this study because qualitative methodology is considered most effective for answering questions that ask how and for providing thick descriptive data of a phenomenon (Stake, 1995).

Transcendental Phenomenology

A narrative research approach was first considered for this study because narrative research

is concerned with researching humans experiencing the world and collecting stories from individuals (Creswell, 2009; Moen, 2006). However, it was not chosen because a narrative research approach does not focus on the common perceptions of participants.

Instead, a phenomenological approach was embraced for this study to allow for "a composite description of the experience for all of the individuals" presented as a "universal essence" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). A phenomenological approach allowed for researching the phenomenon of teachers' experiences with struggling readers in on-site school and virtual school during the COVID-19 pandemic, while also allowing the researcher to bracket preconceived ideas concerning struggling readers.

Consideration was next given to which phenomenology approach should be chosen for this study. Phenomenology approaches originate with German philosophy, pursue understanding of human experience as lived, and have common endpoints within the description (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). However, there are two main phenomenological approaches - hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990) and transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). These two phenomenological approaches differ in history, methodology, and proponents. Ultimately, a transcendental phenomenological approach was selected as it best suited the researcher's search to understand the phenomenon of teachers' experiences with struggling readers in on-site school and virtual school during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Transcendental phenomenology is currently credited to Moustakas (1994), who translated the work of Edmund Husserl into a qualitative method. Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological methodology has four major processes: epoche, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. In the *epoche,* one's knowledge is set aside for a phenomenon to be looked at freshly from a "transcendental ego"

(Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). The *transcendental-phenomenological reduction* involves looking at the experiences of a phenomenon as if for the first time by going back to the source of the meaning and deriving a *textural description,* or essences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The *imaginative variation* involves presenting a picture of the conditions of the experiences and deriving a *structural description*, or essences of the conditions of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The *synthesis* step is the "intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100).

Research Questions

To obtain a fuller description of "what" is experienced and "how" the participants experienced it (Creswell, 2013), two key questions are recommended for transcendental phenomenological studies – What were their experiences? In what context did they experience it? (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Therefore, for this transcendental phenomenological study, two central questions were designed and modified during the study to better reflect the types of questions needed to understand the research problem (Creswell, 2013) in order to help describe the "essences of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994).

The two research questions that guided this are:

- RQ1: How do elementary teachers describe experiences with struggling readers during the educational changes due to the social restrictions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic?

- RQ2: How do elementary teachers describe the contexts of experiences with struggling readers during the educational changes due to the social restrictions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Setting

This study was conducted within one school district located in the state of Arkansas with participants at five on-site elementary schools and one virtual school. During this study, the school district served approximately 14,136 PK-12th grade students, of whom 72% were low income and 22% were English learners. The average teaching experience was approximately 13 years for all 313 teachers who were invited to participate. At the time of this study, I was employed in the same school district as the participants. The decision to use the school district in which I was employed was based on the unique conditions created by the pandemic-induced rules, restrictions, sickness, and quarantines. Since I was in the same school district, I was able to "gain access" with a group of participants that were not reluctant to talk with me honestly about their experiences because I was not an outsider; I was able to easily "establish rapport" in order for them to "provide good data" for this study (Creswell, 2013, p. 147). The distinct advantage of inviting participants within the school district where I was employed is that I was able to collect credible data through semi-structured interviews with participants during a time of crisis.

Participants

Criterion sampling was used in this study, wherein teachers who were teaching elementary struggling readers in the same school district and had six or more years of experience were invited to participate. The criterion of six or more years of teaching experience was used to ensure participants were experienced teachers to tap into their knowledge of struggling readers during the pandemic based on their valuable pre-pandemic experiences. The criterion of the same school district was used in order to conduct a study in the "field," where the researcher was also in the "field" and knew the participants, allowing for the researcher to "know what they know from firsthand information" (Creswell, 2013, p. 20). Of the 15 teachers interviewed, 12 were on-

site classroom teachers, while three were virtual teachers. The teachers' grade level placement consisted of three teachers in first grade, four teachers in second grade, four teachers in third grade, two teachers in fourth grade, one teacher in fifth grade, and one teacher in sixth grade. This range of grade levels was a criterion for inclusion to account for differing experiences of teachers with struggling readers of different grade levels. The participants' teaching experience was one teacher with 6-10 years, nine teachers with 11-20 years, three teachers with 21-30 years, and two teachers with 30+ years. The criterion of teaching experience was intentional so that teachers with differing years of experience could be selected to gain insight from their varying levels of experience. Interesting, but not used as a criterion, was the highest degree held for the participants, wherein six of the teachers held a bachelor's degree, eight of the teachers held a master's degree, and one teacher held an Ed.S. degree. Utilizing a criterion sampling scheme enabled me to choose the setting and individuals representing criteria that were appropriate for this study. Due to the invitational nature of this study, the participant pool was limited to a homogeneous group of 15 White women. One man did agree to be interviewed and was selected as a participant; however, he failed to keep any of the many rescheduled appointments.

Procedures

Approval from The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, was sought and obtained (see Appendix A). The semi-structured interview questions from the Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (see Appendix B) were vetted with two teachers in order to both refine the wording of the interview questions and to identify the timeframe for the interview questions (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

After obtaining IRB approval, the Participant Selection Survey (see Appendix C) as a Google Form was sent by email to the 313 teachers in one school district located in the state of Arkansas,

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including its nine virtual teachers, for collecting the teachers' consent to participate, as well as their responses to the demographic criteria-based questions.

All responses to the Respondent Selection Survey were reviewed by the researcher, and 19 participants were selected using criterion sampling (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007; Weiss, 1995). Those 19 teachers were then sent a second email to schedule an interview using Calendly.

Of the 19 participants selected, 16 participants scheduled an interview with the researcher. Once a teacher selected a day and time to be interviewed, a one-time interview was conducted via Zoom, and a signed Participant Consent Form (see Appendix D) was obtained.

One participant did not keep multiple scheduled appointments. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 teachers who, when looked at collectively, displayed what happened within a population that was impacted by an event or a situation (Creswell, 2013; McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007; Weiss, 1995).

The interviews were audio recorded with permission and then transcribed using Rev to be used in the analysis of the data. No compensation was promised for participation, but a small thank you gift card, paid for by the researcher, was sent to participants after the interview and upon receipt of the signed Participant Consent Form.

During the study, all data and files were kept on a password-protected computer. After the study was completed, files were backed up and stored in a secure closet in the researcher's home and will be stored there for at least three years.

The Researcher's Role

My interest in struggling readers pre-dates my current job as a Dyslexia Interventionist and the COVID-19 pandemic. My experience with struggling readers started with my first job as a first-grade teacher in 1995 but formally started in the summer of 1999 when I was asked by my

principal to leave my first-grade spot to apply for a newly created position of Literacy Coach. I

was hired and over the next few years went through in-depth training, earned a master's degree

in reading, and added an endorsement to my teaching certificate of reading specialist. When the

time came to decide on the topic for my dissertation, because of my background with struggling

readers; because I was working with struggling readers both face-to-face and online

simultaneously; and because I was hearing first-hand from teachers about struggling readers

during the pandemic, I knew my topic had to center around teachers' experiences with struggling

readers.

My connection with the school district as an interventionist working with struggling readers

during the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of this study and my connection with some of the

participants required me to practice *reflexivity,* a process of critically self-reflecting on the

biases, theoretical predisposition, and preferences of oneself in order to locate potential bias so

the full research process can be controlled and critically inspected (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010).

Data Collection

This transcendental phenomenology study consisted of data collection techniques including

email, online survey, teacher interviews and interview notes. This data collection allowed me to

explore the phenomenon of teachers' experiences with struggling readers in on-site school and

virtual school during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus was on collecting credible data by

relying on and capturing elementary teachers' perceptions about experiences assisting their

struggling readers during the changes to social interaction and literacy learning during the

pandemic through open-ended discussion (Au, 1998; Creswell, 2009; Moen, 2006; Onwuegbuzie

& Johnson, 2006). Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory was the guiding framework for the

interview questions that were created to explore the experiences of the teachers with their

struggling readers (Creswell, 2013; McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Weiss, 1995).

Online Survey

After receiving IRB approval, the Respondent Selection Survey was recreated as a Google Form and emailed to participants. The questions were criteria-based questions with the purpose of eliciting demographic information from the participants. The specific and appropriate criteria were: (a) classroom teacher, (b) instructional format, (c) grade level placement, and (d) teaching experience in a range of years.

Interviews

Using the vetted Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for the interviews allowed the researcher to proceed in a logical order, ask the same questions in the same order to all participants, and use predetermined probes. The semi-structured interview questions allowed participants to have some freedoms in responding to the questions and the probes (Morse, 2015).

The individual interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes, with most taking around 45 minutes to complete and a few going over. Appropriate protocol for interviewing and recording procedures were used (Creswell, 2013), including asking for permission of each participant before the recording of the session was started. I used the questions from the Semi-Structured Interview Protocol to remain on topic with the participants. I also took interview notes during each interview (Creswell, 2013).

Although I did not personally transcribe each conversation, I listened to portions of the interviews when confirmation of the accuracy of the transcript was needed.

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Data Analysis

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After the interviews were transcribed, I loaded the transcriptions into Scrivener for researcher, not software generated, analysis. The use of Scrivener helped me to effectively

organize my complete dissertation, including the teacher transcripts, significant statements, clusters of meaning, themes, codebook, and more.

The analysis of the data for this transcendental phenomenological study was guided by a phenomenological analysis approach (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The simplified steps of Moustakas' (1994) method presented by Creswell (2013) that were used in this transcendental phenomenological study are illustrated in Figure 3.1 and include: (a) epoche, (b) significant statements, (c) clusters of meaning, (d) textural descriptions, (e) structural descriptions, and (f) essences of the experiences were used in this transcendental phenomenological study including: (a) epoche, (b) significant statements, (c) clusters of meaning, (d) textural descriptions, (e) structural descriptions, and (f) essences of the experiences.
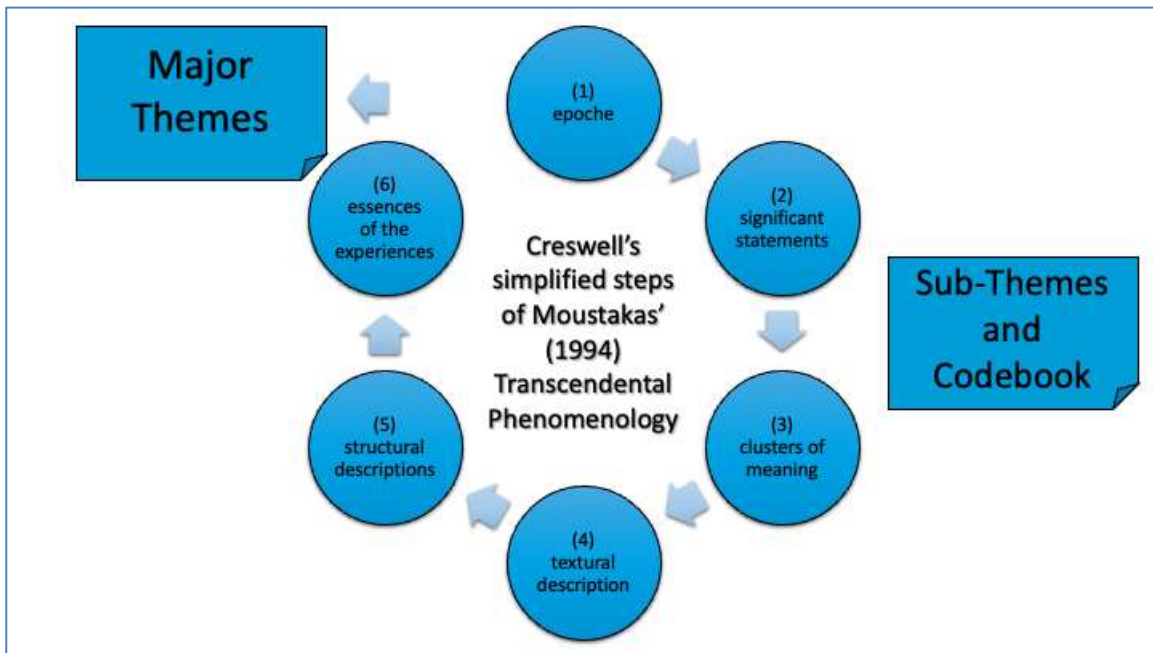
Figure 3.1 Creswell's (2013) Simplified Steps of Moustakas' (1994) Method

Epoche

The researcher began the data analysis with epoche (Moustakas, 1994), a bracketing or

setting aside of personal perceptions of struggling readers during the pandemic, to look at the

participants' perceptions with fresh eyes. This was attempted by setting "aside prejudgments

regarding the phenomenon being investigated" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22) and attempting to take

the "rational path," remaining open to the participants' perceptions of their struggling readers

(Moustakas, 1994, p. 41).

Significant Statements and Clusters of Meaning

The data in the study were analyzed inductively beginning with Teacher A's transcript. This

analysis began with identifying and giving equal value to the significant statements from the

teacher. All significant statements from Teacher A were labeled to allow for identification and

then placed in a new document in Scrivener. Next, I read through all of the significant statements

and clustered them into meaningful categories, or clusters of meaning (Moerer-Urdahl &

Creswell, 2004; Moustakas, 1994, p. 41; Young & Goering, 2018). For example, Teacher A said,

"It's not surprising for me that, in trauma and stress, education takes a back seat." This quote was

identified as a significant statement and was placed into a newly created cluster of meaning

called "trauma and stress."

After analyzing Teacher A's transcript, a peer debriefing was conducted with a researcher

who had previously published a phenomenology study to assure that a phenomenological

analysis approach was being followed and that later findings were grounded in the participants'

voices.

Next, the subsequent four teachers' transcripts were analyzed using the same inductive

analysis, including identifying significant statements and placing them into an established cluster

of meaning or creating a new cluster of meaning. For example, Teacher C said, "When they came in, I just had so many needy kids, not only academically but emotionally..." This was identified as a significant statement and was placed in the "trauma and stress" cluster of meaning.

Guest et al. (2006) reported in their qualitative study of 60 semi-structured, open-ended interviews that as early as six interviews the basic themes were uncovered. Therefore, during the analysis of the sixth teacher's transcript: (a) the list of clusters of meaning were consolidated into 27 clusters of meaning, (b) ten sub-themes were created from the 27 clusters of meaning, and (c) a codebook was created with an entry for each of the ten sub-themes. For example, "wearing masks," "impacts of wearing masks," and "COVID rules and restrictions" were three separate clusters of meaning. They were consolidated into one cluster of meaning called "COVID rules and restrictions." Then, the clusters of meaning "COVID rules and restrictions" and "COVID sickness and quarantine" were collapsed into the sub-theme "Restrictions and Sickness." See Table 3.1 for a sample codebook entry.

Table 3.1
Example of a Codebook Entry

Sub-Theme:	Relationship with Pandemic
Cluster(s) of Meaning:	References to Trauma and Stress [may include negative instantiations]
On-Site Example(s) of Significant Statements:	**Trauma and Stress -** "3 When they came in, I just had so many needy kids, not only academically but emotionally, because they had not had any socialization with their friends, they had not had any structure for so long. It was just a whole new ball game."
Virtual Example(s) of Significant Statements:	**Trauma and Stress -** "1 It's not surprising for me that, in trauma and stress, that education takes a back seat."

The codebook was then used as a guide during the analysis of each subsequent transcript. The saturation point was determined when the sample size was big enough to discover a variety of teacher perceptions and when adding more interviews produced no change to the study's codebook (Boddy, 2016; Guest et al., 2006; Morse, 2015; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007; Saunders et al., 2018). No new clusters of meaning or sub-themes emerged with the 14th and 15th participant's interviews, so the final sample size of 15 participants became the saturation point for this study. After the final transcript was analyzed, the transcripts for Teacher A - Teacher E were reanalyzed using this study's codebook.

Textural and Structural Descriptions

A textual description (Moustakas, 1994) was written for the first six sub-themes, providing an understanding of the teachers' shared academic and emotional experiences with struggling readers in on-site school and virtual school during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, a structural description (Moustakas, 1994) was written for the last four sub-themes, providing an understanding of how, or in what context, the teachers had those experiences with their struggling readers.

Essences of the Experiences

Finally, the textural and structural descriptions were synthesized into a composite description of the essences of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994, p. 49). This description became the "essential, invariant structure of ultimate 'essence' which captures the meaning ascribed to the experience" (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004, p. 31). At this final stage of synthesis, the meaning of the essences of the experiences shared by teachers in their experiences with struggling readers emerged creating three major themes as described in Chapter Four.

Trustworthiness

In order to safeguard this transcendental phenomenological study, trustworthiness was

established through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Creswell, 2013;

Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Loh, 2013; Nolen & Talbert, 2011).

Credibility

Credibility was established in this study through a peer debriefing and peer reviews, in order

to ensure accuracy of this study's data (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Loh, 2013;

Nolen & Talbert, 2011; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007; Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). A peer

debriefing was conducted with a researcher who had previously published a phenomenology

study. We independently analyzed the first teacher transcript for significant statements, meaning

units, and themes. We then compared and discussed our analysis. Peer reviews were also carried

out with my advisor throughout the research process, allowing for other "methods, meanings,

and interpretations" to emerge from the data (Creswell, 2013, p. 251).

Transferability

Transferability was established in this study through the use of teacher quotes and "thick

descriptions" in order to ensure this study's information could be transferred to other studies

(Creswell, 2013, p. 251; Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2019). Teacher quotes were used for the findings

section of this study, so that others would be able to create their own possible meanings and

conclusions, deciding for themselves on transferability. Thick descriptions were used when

reporting the findings of this study to allow for comparisons with other studies' participants, data

collection, and data analysis.

Dependability

Dependability was established in this study through the reporting on how the data was

collected and kept, in order to ensure the reliability and replicability of this study (Creswell,

2013, p. 251; Loh, 2013). Thus, the processes used in this study for collecting, analyzing, and reporting the findings were reported in detail, allowing for future replicability. In addition, the interviews were protected through external review of the interview questions and through vetting the interview questions with two external educators.

Confirmability

Confirmability was established in this study through researcher objectivity as established in the epoche, in order to ensure the quality in this study of reporting the findings, interpretations, and recommendations as supported by the data (Creswell, 2013, p. 251; Loh, 2013; Moustakas, 1994, p. 49). To maintain neutrality, I became aware of my biases through the epoche, during which I attempted to set aside prejudgments regarding struggling readers, so as not to interfere with this study (Moustakas, 1994).

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Ethical Considerations

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Ethical considerations were used for the protection of the participants in this study. Before beginning data collection, approval from the IRB at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, was obtained to work with human subjects as participants. Consent was obtained from all the participants with their signature on a Participant Consent Form. With permission from the participants, interviews were audio-recorded. All the audio recordings were secured on a password protected computer. Participants were given anonymity with a pseudonym. There were no anticipated risks for participation in this study with only a slight inconvenience of time related to the interview. A benefit of participating in the study was the chance to reflect on personal experiences and perceptions. At any time during the process, teachers were able to choose to discontinue their participation in the study; no participants chose to discontinue. There was no deception associated with this study.

Summary

This chapter presented this transcendental phenomenology study's systematic procedures and analysis in its design, data collection, and data analysis (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). This chapter also addressed the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of this study. Chapter Four will present the findings of this transcendental phenomenology study.

Chapter Four: Findings

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore on-site and virtual school elementary teachers' pandemic-induced experiences with their struggling readers in one school district located in the state of Arkansas. As a reading interventionist working with struggling readers during the pandemic, I wanted to capture elementary teachers' descriptions of their experiences with their struggling readers during the changes to social interaction and literacy learning during the pandemic through open-ended discussions. A review of the literature upon beginning my research revealed no qualitative studies focusing exclusively on teachers' experiences with struggling readers within the social restrictions of the SARS-COV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic. Therefore, this study focused on elementary teachers' experiences with their struggling readers during the changes to social interaction and literacy learning due to the social restrictions of the pandemic.

The data collection and the data analysis for this study were previously presented in Chapter Three. Chapter Four presents the findings of this study with textural and structural descriptions using the participants' voices. In utilizing a transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994), I attempted to set aside my own judgments to collect and analyze the participants' descriptions of the experiences with their struggling readers. In this chapter, the three major themes and the ten sub-themes that emerged as answers to this study's two research questions are presented. This chapter concludes with a summary of the findings as the essences of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

Two research questions were used to describe the teachers' experiences and the context of their experiences with struggling readers in on-site school and virtual school during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- RQ1: How do elementary teachers describe experiences with struggling readers during the educational changes due to the social restrictions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic?

- RQ2: How do elementary teachers describe the contexts of experiences with struggling readers during the educational changes due to the social restrictions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Participants

The 15 participants in the study were first grade through sixth grade teachers in one school district located in the state of Arkansas having six or more years of experience. Three of the teachers selected were virtual teachers, while 12 were on-site classroom teachers. The on-site classroom teachers met face-to-face with their students, while also meeting with their students online during quarantine and weather events; on occasion this occurred simultaneously. The virtual school core instruction was delivered in an online format without the virtual school teacher. Optional 30-minute Zoom sessions with the virtual school teacher were available for all students, with the requirement that the lowest scoring students – below the 20th percentile – attend 30-minute Zoom reading interventions with the virtual school teacher. In the discussion that follows, on-site teachers and virtual school teachers are referenced by the identifying letter found in the left column of Table 4.1, which contains the participants' demographic data.

Table 4.1

Participant Demographics

Teacher	Instructional Format	Grade Level Placement	Teaching Experience Range (Years)	Highest Degree Held
A	Virtual School	3	11-20	Masters
B	Virtual School	3	30+	Masters+
C	On-Site	2	30+	Masters+
D	On-Site	5	21-30	Ed.S.
E	On-Site	3	11-20	Bachelors
F	On-Site	6	6-10	Bachelors
G	On-Site	2	11-20	Masters
H	On-Site	1	11-20	Masters
I	Virtual School	1	21-30	Bachelors
J	On-Site	4	11-20	Masters
K	On-Site	4	21-30	Bachelors
L	On-Site	2	11-20	Bachelors
M	On-Site	2	11-20	Bachelors+
N	On-Site	1	11-20	Masters
O	On-Site	3	11-20	Masters X2

Findings

The data analysis for this transcendental phenomenological study was guided by a phenomenological analysis approach (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The analysis of the 15 individual interviews revealed common descriptions of teachers' experiences. After synthesizing the meaning of the phenomenon of teachers' experiences with struggling readers in on-site school and virtual school during the COVID-19 pandemic, ten sub-themes and three major themes emerged as the essences of the experiences, and these themes are the findings original to my dissertation. The first six of the ten sub-themes that emerged from the participants' common experiences with struggling readers provided a description of "what" struggling readers had experienced emotionally and academically during the pandemic and are presented as textual

descriptions (RQ1). The last four of the ten sub-themes that emerged from the participants'

common experiences with struggling readers provided a description "how," or in what context,

struggling readers had these experiences and are presented as structural descriptions (RQ2).

The three major themes, that are illustrated in Figure 4.1, include:

- Relationships that include social interaction can mitigate emotional and/or academic
  difficulties for struggling readers,

- School absence can cause emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers,
  and

- Peer collaboration is vital to the learning process for struggling readers.

Findings – Essences of the Experiences

Relationships
that include social interaction can mitigate emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers

School Absence
can cause emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers

Peer Collaboration
is vital to the learning process for struggling readers
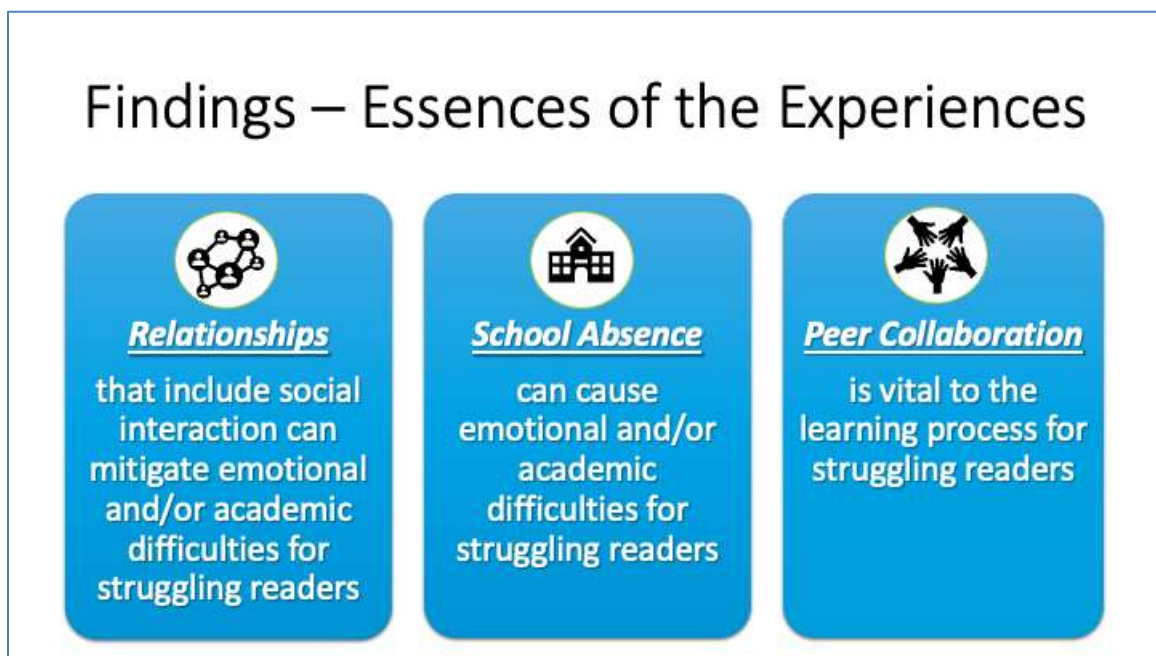
Figure 4.1 Three Major Themes – Essences of the Experiences

Themes

Research Question One

The first research question asked how elementary teachers described experiences with struggling readers during the educational changes due to the social restrictions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The major theme that emerged for research question one was – *relationships that include social interaction can mitigate emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers.* This first major theme and the corresponding sub-themes are shown in Table 4.2 and described below.

Table 4.2

Major Theme Associated with Research Question One

Major Theme:
Relationships that include social interaction can mitigate emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers
Sub Themes:
Relationship with Pandemic
Relationship with Self
Relationship with Learning
Relationship with Family
Relationship with Teacher
Relationship with Peers

Relationship with Pandemic

At the time of this phenomenological study, the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing and around its one-year mark. Some of the on-site teachers and the virtual school teachers reported that their students were experiencing forms of *Trauma and Stress* brought about by the conditions of the pandemic. The teachers described seeing "some fear in a lot of the kids" because it was a "very scary time for them." They felt like their students were "missing the emotional piece," and they wanted to "get the social emotional fixed" "more than the

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academics." The teachers' common perceptions of the experiences with their struggling readers during the social restrictions due to the pandemic were in real-time and created the theme *Relationship with Pandemic*.

Trauma and Stress

When talking about the *Trauma and Stress* experienced by the students, some teachers mentioned the pandemic-induced stresses for families of their students, including their struggling readers, which resulted in *Trauma and Stress* for the students. One on-site teacher, Teacher J, spoke about the *Trauma and Stress* for struggling readers brought about by the needs of their families,

> For struggling readers…I feel like the parents are…struggling to put food on the table, keep money coming in, because of COVID…like a lot of those kids, I mean you can tell when their water gets shut off because they don't bathe, they wear dirty clothes. You can tell when their water gets turned back on. I feel like there's been, for the parents, more stresses.

The virtual school teachers also spoke about the trauma and stress in the lives of struggling readers' families. Teacher B shared an example, "Mom is trying to do this virtual coaching around her job. She yells directives and sometimes you hear her talking on the phone and it's often about collection of bills."

When struggling readers are experiencing emotional *Trauma and Stress* at school and/or at home, "education takes a back seat." Teacher H explained it this way about struggling readers during quarantine events, "they're damaged, shut down, they're at home, they don't want to be working or doing work."

Trauma and Stress impact struggling readers' emotional and academic health. This was evident for their teachers when the COVID-19 pandemic created *Trauma and Stress* for

struggling readers and their families. They reported that the *Trauma and Stress* experienced by

struggling readers affected how they responded emotionally to the pandemic.

Relationship with Self

The teachers' common perceptions of how struggling readers responded emotionally to the

pandemic included their experiences of *Disengagement, Distractions, Isolation, Embarrassment,*

Lack of Confidence, and Quietness. The teachers described how their struggling readers were the

"quietest," "easily distracted kids" who were "pretty isolated at home" while "totally

disengaged," "embarrassed," and with a "lack of confidence" during school. They struggled "just

to get their work done" and they were "a little bit withdrawn, more quiet…just going through the

motions as a whole." All the common perceptions of the emotional responses to the experiences

brought about by the pandemic for struggling readers that teachers shared combined to form the

theme of *Relationship with Self.*

Disengagement

A very common perception of teachers was that of struggling readers' *Disengagement* from

learning. Teacher D, an on-site teacher explained it by stating,

> Some of them purposely get in trouble or they ask to go to the bathroom a lot, stare off in
> space. They're disconnected. They're not engaged or else they give some silly answer if
> you call on them because they want everybody to think they're trying to be funny rather
> than what the truth is that they just don't know the answer.

Teacher A explained disengagement in virtual school, "Some of the struggling readers, we don't

see [in required online intervention]; they're absent. They're not doing something they enjoy

doing. If you're not good at something, you don't want to do it." Teacher B, also a virtual school

teacher, explained what happened in the school district in the second semester, "The disengaged

children have been sent back to on-site." *Disengagement* was an emotional response for the

struggling readers. When academics got difficult, teachers noticed that their struggling readers

actively disengaged from the difficulty.

Distractions

Another very common perception among the teachers was that struggling readers were

experiencing *Distractions*. Teacher C, an on-site teacher, described what the experience was like

in the on-site classroom,

> I can't compete with video games, and I tell my kids sometimes…I'm not going to beep
> and jump and flash at you. You've got to listen and look at me and eye contact and pay
> attention to what I'm telling you. They're easily distracted kids, somebody sneezes,
> somebody drops something, somebody says something, that head is turned and there they
> are.

Teacher A described what the experience was like during virtual school Zoom reading

interventions,

> And then there's kids that you think maybe they're not really doing this. They can't go to
> school, but every time they're in a car during a Zoom and totally distracted and you're just
> like, "Are you really doing this because you are truly social distancing?"

Struggling readers experienced *Distractions* from their learning, both at home and at school.

Isolation

On-site teachers spoke of the struggling readers' experiences with *Isolation* at home, as well

as *Isolation* in school. Teacher C, an on-site teacher, shared her perception about struggling

readers' *Isolation* at home,

> Well, just from, I think not being with their friends for so long. A lot of them don't have
> siblings, and I just don't feel like some of them have been talked too much. I think it's
> been a lot of they get up, and they get on that video game. As long as they're leaving
> everybody in the house alone, that's fine with that parent.

On-site teacher F described her perception of struggling readers' *Isolation* in school,

> Well, I have several that went to virtual [school] and came back, not necessarily because
> the curriculum is hard, though I kind of think maybe for them it might be, but just that
> isolation of being at home and we do need to be around others.

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Teacher A, a virtual school teacher, also described struggling readers' *Isolation* in school,

> So, they do their work, if they want to, 100% separated from us, and then we just grade their work. That's some of the children.

Struggling readers experienced literal *Isolation*, as well as an emotional response of *Isolation* both at home and/or at school during the pandemic.

Embarrassment

On-site teachers explained *Embarrassment* for struggling readers as being embarrassed of themselves, while virtual school teachers explained *Embarrassment* for struggling readers as being embarrassed of their home environment during online intervention.

An on-site teacher, Teacher D, explained struggling readers being *Embarrassed* of themselves,

> I know that they wouldn't want to be reading out loud in class because they're embarrassed and not only is it affecting their reading, their reading class, it affects all of the subjects because in some form or fashion there's reading and every one of those core contents. If they don't understand what a question is asking them, that's going to affect their math. They're not going to be able to understand what's going on in social studies or in science. And they're just going to be struggling and they are less likely to participate in class. They don't want to give answers when questions are asked because they don't want to be put on the spot and look stupid in front of their friends.

Teacher B, a virtual school teacher, explained struggling readers being *Embarrassed* of their home environment,

> Others turn off their camera because they're embarrassed about what's going on in their home at that moment. A lot of the struggling readers have a household that's very loud. I have noticed that's been a common factor. The home is loud, there's no quiet place for the child to go and do their work. And they know that and so they want to turn off their sound and turn off their video so that nobody can see what's going on in the background.

When their struggling readers experienced difficulties, either academic or emotional, one of the emotional responses that teachers noticed was *Embarrassment.* If they were experiencing academic difficulty, they were embarrassed of themselves. If, however, they were experiencing

emotional difficulty, such as when a struggling reader was online and things were going on at home that they did not want people to see, they were embarrassed of their environment.

Lack of Confidence

Some of the teachers talked about their struggling readers' emotional responses to difficulties as a *Lack of Confidence.* They described students who would "shut down" and/or need "constant reassurance." Teacher E, an on-site teacher explained the *Lack of Confidence* seen in struggling readers,

> They're very anxious. They lack confidence, I feel like, no matter how much I try to pump them up and "wow, look what you did" and show them how they grew on Istation. And I just feel like we're missing the boat when it comes to all of them in general, but our ones that literally need the most help.

Teacher A, a virtual school teacher, shared that she thought struggling readers could suffer a *Lack of Confidence* with talking less, "I would only imagine that they're talking less and that's going to affect their vocabulary and that's going to affect just their confidence in general and their ability to take a risk when they're reading." Struggling readers responded emotionally with a *Lack of Confidence* when life was difficult academically and/or emotionally, and they needed "constant reassurance" and encouragement from their teacher and/or peers.

Quietness

Struggling readers' *Quietness* was described by some of the on-site teachers as struggling readers being the "shy," "insecure," "quietest kids" in class, especially "with their answers." Some reported that "the kids who are struggling readers" were "a little bit withdrawn, more quiet" and "just are in general talking less, becoming more introverted" because "they're not being encouraged to interact" and they "kind of hide behind the mask when they're reading." For example, Teacher F, an on-site teacher said,

> I have one, she did the entire first semester in virtual [school], and she's very shy and very hard to understand and doesn't want to pull her mask down so I literally with my ear to her like, "One more time." And she in fact even said, "Oh, I didn't realize, others are having this kind of problem too."

Teacher B, a virtual school teacher, mentioned,

> Just the opportunity to talk and engage with many different people might be a deficit, something that as a virtual teacher I worked very hard to make sure that they have.

Struggling readers who were already quiet responded emotionally by becoming even quieter in the absence of social interaction with their teacher and/or peers.

Struggling readers responded emotionally when they struggled academically and/or when they were experiencing trauma and stress, resulting in a weakened *Relationship with Self.* This was highlighted when struggling readers experienced trauma and stress and academic difficulties during the educational changes and social restriction of the COVID-19 pandemic. Struggling readers experienced *Disengagement, Distractions, Isolation, Embarrassment, Lack of Confidence, and Quietness* in on-site school and in virtual school. Struggling readers' *Relationship with Pandemic* and *Relationship with Self* contributed to their relationship with learning becoming damaged.

Relationship with Learning

The teachers reported that their struggling readers' *Relationship with Learning* had become damaged. Of the 15 teachers, 12 teachers reported that they had *More Struggling Readers* than in the past, with most sharing that their struggling readers were "so far behind" "in starting out." Even though the teachers "knew there would be some gaps," they "did not anticipate the vastness of those gaps." For example, one of the two on-site teachers who reported having the same number of struggling readers as in the past, reported that those who were struggling were "really, really low…they have regressed a lot more than what they were." The teachers talked about the

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Missed Growth Time the struggling readers had experienced "because of missing that fourth quarter and not doing a whole lot during the summer," causing them to not be "where they need to be," to not be ready for "standardized testing," and to not be ready to go to the next grade. However, teachers reported that even though some of their struggling readers had "moved really fast" and some had moved "slow," they were showing *Growth.* All these experiences with struggling readers surrounding learning merged into the theme of *Relationship with Learning.*

More Struggling Readers

Of the 12 on-site teachers, 10 teachers reported that they had more struggling readers than in the past. For example, Teacher D reported,

> I have more struggling readers than what I've had in the past, because usually the children I got were either on-level or they were pretty much almost on level, or they were way above level. And this year there was maybe one or two that came in on-level and all the rest of them are way below level.

Two of the three virtual school teachers reported that they had more struggling readers than in the past. For example, Teacher I, a virtual school teacher reported, "I have more struggling readers. Out of 89 first graders, more than 50% are struggling."

Some students, when they were absent from school because of quarantine, missed core instruction and became struggling readers. When students who are already struggling readers were absent from school, they missed core instruction and intervention and fell "way below level."

Missed Growth Time

Many of the teachers shared that their struggling readers had *Missed Growth Time* at the end of the previous school year and were "so far behind." For example, Teacher C, an on-site teacher stated,

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I was just deeply concerned because these kids had been out of school so long. Granted not as long as other places in the U.S. I think we've been pretty lucky. But still I feel like they miss so much growth time at the end of first grade because I've taught first grade before and it's true in second grade too. March, April, May is when we tend to see those readers blossom that were struggling and they just mature.

In agreement, Teacher I, a virtual school teacher, stated,

I expected that they would need kindergarten skills because they didn't finish their kindergarten year. And that's exactly what I saw - that students needed work with letters and sounds and beginning blending, short vowel words. They weren't ready to go into first grade skills, that was true of most of our students.

When struggling readers missed school, they missed grade-level skills and "growth time."

Growth

Some teachers shared that even though their students "had fallen very behind," they had

shown "some growth," "a lot of growth," "big growth," "tons of growth," and even "phenomenal

growth." For example, Teacher O, an on-site teacher, shared,

Well, I am surprised by the progress that a lot of the students have made, since coming back to the actual classroom…I noticed a lot of them were very behind, because most of the students, probably 90% of the students, didn't get on virtual [during the previous spring]. They didn't do what they were supposed to do. So, they had fallen very behind. And so, when they came to the actual classroom, there was a lot of work that needed to be done. And I've been very surprised at how fast a lot of them have caught up and exceeded my expectations of where they could get in the short amount of time that they've had at school this year.

While Teacher I, a virtual school teacher, shared, "And so what I'm doing has made growth and

progress, but at a slower rate, for sure than actual books in hands." Some struggling readers

showed progress and *Growth*, even though they had "fallen very behind."

It was possible for struggling readers who had *Missed Growth Time* and missed grade-level

skills to show academic growth, and for some, it was even possible for them to get "caught up."

Because of the pandemic, struggling readers missed many days of school in the previous spring,

and during the current school year because of quarantine or weather events, yet some struggling

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readers made enough *Growth* to get "caught up." Some struggling readers were able to make progress and show *Growth*, despite the COVID rules, restrictions, sickness, and quarantine. Struggling readers' responses to their emotional and/or academic difficulties during the pandemic were magnified or mitigated by their relationship with their teacher, peers, and/or families.

Relationship with Family

All 15 teachers, both on-site and virtual teachers, spoke about *Family Support* for struggling readers, even though there was not a specific interview question addressing family support. The virtual school teachers spoke about families that were "overdoers in helping the children" and about families that were "underdoers." Some of the on-site teachers shared that before the pandemic "there wasn't a lot of family support" for their struggling readers, and then the pandemic "amplified some things for some families" and families weren't "sure what to do" or "how to support." In contrast, other on-site teachers shared that families were "more supportive of helping their child grow" and they were "very kind and supportive" during the pandemic. All the experiences for struggling readers with their families during the pandemic formed the theme *Relationship with Family.*

Family Support

Some teachers mentioned a perception of positive experiences of *Family Support* for their struggling readers*,* while others mentioned a perception of negative experiences of *Family Support.* Teacher M, an on-site teacher shared this positive perception, "Let's see. I think for the most part [struggling readers] they're trying their best and the parents at home are trying." On the other hand, Teacher J shared a negative perception,

> I feel like the parents are more hands-off in helping their child than ever before for the struggling readers. I feel like I don't know the exact reason…Only the kids whose

parents, I know their parents have secure jobs and secure incomes, those parents, their kids are showing phenomenal growth. But the ones who are struggling economically, their kids are really struggling.

Teacher I, a virtual school teacher, shared a positive perception,

But the ones [families of struggling readers] that say, "Yes, I'll do Imagine Learning for 20 minutes a day. I'll get on Istation for 10 or 15 minutes a day. I will listen to my student work on sight words, and I will use the slideshow that you developed and log on to Reading A to Z." The ones that are buying in, they [struggling readers] don't need interventions.

In contrast, Teacher B shared a negative perception,

If they don't have the support of their parents, then this [virtual school] is really not going to work for a struggling reader or any third-grade child. They have to have somebody to set their schedule, make sure that they get onto their computer, because if you're eight or nine, you're not equipped to do that.

Some struggling readers had families that were "hands off" during the pandemic, and so they struggled. However, those struggling readers whose families were "trying" and "buying in" benefited emotionally and/or academically.

Positive *Family Support* was important for struggling readers' emotional and academic health during the educational changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to struggling readers' relationship with their families, their relationship with their teacher was also important for their academic and emotional health.

Relationship with Teacher

Both the on-site and virtual school teachers spoke about experiences with their struggling readers that constituted the theme *Relationship with Teacher.* Some of the virtual and on-site teachers shared their common perception that struggling readers needed *Interaction During Reading* and *Hugs* of a human teacher, emphasizing that a computer could not replicate the live *Social Interaction with the Teacher.* The teachers shared their perception that struggling readers "needed the interaction" with their teacher, including close enough proximity to "see my lips go

make sounds," but that was "hard to do when you cannot get close to them physically." Almost all the teachers spoke of the importance of struggling readers' social interaction with their teacher because "nothing beats a person, a teacher" and technology "doesn't replace the instruction" nor does it "replace the relationships."

Interaction During Reading

Both the on-site teachers and the virtual school teachers shared stories of not being able to read literature live with their students, and that there was "no interaction" and "no conversation on the way through". Teacher C, an on-site teacher shared,

> We've had to find stories online to read it to them. That's been weird. That's a COVID thing because I would never look for a video of someone reading the story to my class. I would get the book and read it to my class, which that's a different experience because when you're alive and active and reading, you interact with them with the story, and you have your own inflection, and you know those kids and you know the parts to stop on and let them jump in and discuss with you. Versus I Googled someone reading the book and it's just there. That's kind of a COVID moment for me because I don't like that. That interaction is gone. I don't know, it's just been so weird.

Teacher A, a virtual school teacher, shared,

> [Typically, I would be] reading to them every day, like literature. A time where they're sitting down, listening to being read to. This program will do that for them, but it's not a person reading to them. We can do that some, but we just don't have time in the short little sections that we have with them.

When the teachers were not able to read literature live with their struggling readers, their struggling readers missed out on interaction with the teacher that usually helps them have an emotional interaction with the literature and practice with listening.

Hugs

When sharing their stories about the lack of social interaction, some of the teachers mentioned hugging in conjunction with the relationship between them and their students, especially their struggling readers. They shared their perception that "all the kids love" getting

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hugs, "especially the strugglers," because "besides that verbal interaction, they need that love and they need to feel that support, that they're doing well." They pointed out that the social restrictions had "literally taken everything away that has anything to do with touch in any way." Teacher E, an on-site teacher described it like this,

> But a lot of them, I do feel they, even more so than some of the others, just want you to hug them. Every morning instead of hugging them, when I bring both classes in, we either do fist bumps or elbow bumps or toe kicks. I have to be sure I have on tennis shoes. Some of them don't know how to gently toe kick. But there's a couple [of struggling readers], not going to lie. K. is one of them. She's not even mine, but she so desperately needs a hug. So, I'm not going to lie, when she comes in, and she wants a hug, I hug her.

Teacher B, a virtual school teacher, described wanting to hug one of her struggling readers "…he's writing that he wants new shoes, and you just want to hug him." The teachers reported on their struggling readers missing out on social interaction with their teacher, including proximity and/or a hug. Some teachers felt that struggling readers needed something to form a connection with their teacher.

Social Interaction with the Teacher

Many of the teachers, both on-site and Virtual, shared their perception that "having that connection with the teacher" is "so important." They also shared the perception that a computer cannot replace a live teacher because a "huge part of reading is understanding the human interaction and human language" and "too much time on a computer is going to hinder that." Also, the teacher-student "relationship is better in-person" because you can "build that trusting relationship," whereas a screen between the teacher and the student "breaks down a little bit of that trust" so that struggling readers do not "buy in as much for their reading growth." Ultimately, it is "harder to make that emotional connection virtually than it is in-person." Teacher C, an on-site teacher, described it like this,

I just felt like the struggling readers needed more of the parent-child type relationship of the reading and to be felt loved by their teacher. That's hard to do when you cannot get close to them physically, and I did miss that. Carpet time, I just thought that was so weird trying to teach without my kids right there with me. It kills me that some people think that computers can teach kids to read, then they don't get it because they don't get the emotional part of reading.

A virtual school teacher, Teacher A, described it like this,

So, part of being a good reader is there's a purpose to reading. They're reading to understand or reading to grow. And then if they are just always on the computer and that is the only source of feedback and there's not that human element…it can turn reading into something mechanical…when it's supposed to be something that's enjoyable and there's a purpose to it.

Teachers felt that struggling readers needed social interaction with their teacher to build trust, to ensure reading is not mechanical, and to experience the emotional component of reading.

Teachers shared that positive social interaction with a live teacher, especially during reading of literature in school, was important for their struggling readers. They noted that struggling readers needed human, emotional, verbal interaction with their teacher; they needed proximity and human feedback from their teacher; they needed to be felt loved by their teacher; and they needed social interaction with their teacher. Teachers described how the pandemic limited or eliminated struggling readers' social interaction with their teacher, putting its importance into the spotlight. In addition to struggling readers' relationship with their families and their relationship with their teacher, teachers felt that students' relationship with their peers was also important.

Relationship with Peers

In addition to the lack of social interaction for struggling readers with their teachers, there was also a lack of *Social Interaction with Peers* due to the COVID-19 social restrictions. Both on-site and virtual school teachers mentioned that students had a need for *Social Interaction with Peers, Talking with Peers,* and *Building Relationships with Peers.* They shared that their students were "more aware of the fact" that they were not "getting to talk and visit and be on the floor

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with each other." They pointed out that their students were "so far behind being able to just communicate, knowing how to talk to someone, what to say, how to respect social norms." They noted the importance of "giving them reasons to talk to their classmates, and learn about their classmates, and build new relationships." They emphasized their students' need for "social interaction with each other" and "time to play with each other" and "time to be academic with each other." Both on-site and virtual school teachers shared stories that embodied the theme *Relationship with Peers.*

Social Interaction with Peers

Both on-site and virtual school teachers reported that struggling readers were missing out on *Social Interaction with Peers* because of social restrictions. Teacher G, an on-site teacher stated,

> Because of the social restrictions, we didn't start out the year, or even last year, interacting. They don't know how to interact with someone else because we've been told to stay away. And a lot of the activities that we have done, especially at our level, if it's manipulating something, if they don't know, they haven't been able to partner, we haven't been able to turn and talk. We're too far away, we can't whisper, we don't know how to interact and get support.

While Teacher B, a virtual school teacher, stated,

> And then you have to worry about the kids that don't have the interaction. I try to save all of the discussion type activities for Zoom meetings.

Struggling readers missed out on formal and informal *Social Interaction with Peers.* They were not able to do activities built into the curriculum in which they could "be academic," and they missed out on activities in which they could "play with each other." One specific *Social Interaction with Peers* area that teachers noticed struggling readers were facing difficulty with after having been out of school was *Talking with Peers.*

Talking with Peers

Some of the teachers mentioned that their struggling readers needed "the opportunity to talk

and engage with many different people" because they had forgotten some of the skills needed for

Talking with Peers and it was harming their academic health. Teacher J, an on-site teacher,

described it like this,

> Well, I do feel like my struggling readers, they're not able to communicate effectively, and they're already insecure. I have one that nobody can hear him. Only if they are sitting right next to him can you hear him talk. I feel like that's really affected him. At recess he runs around and plays, but no one ever communicates with him, and I can see him kind of on the outside of the group. But I feel like because of the lack of communication, he is not learning. That's holding him back because he's not discussing anything.

Virtual school teacher A described it like this,

> I don't think that it's a different need [from on-site] of talking and socialization, but I think when the kids are virtual, we have to intentionally allow for that and build that in…making sure they have the opportunity to talk, go to breakout rooms, that kind of thing.

Struggling readers had missed out explicit instruction and practice with *Talk with Peers,*

including following social norms, during the pandemic. This damaged their relationships with

peers, so teachers pointed out that their struggling readers needed opportunities for *Building*

Relationships with Peers.

Building Relationships with Peers

On-site teachers shared about the need of their students for *Building Relationships with*

Peers, even on the playground*,* during the pandemic-induced social restrictions. Though not

specific to struggling readers, Teacher G's perception applies to struggling readers. She said,

> So, giving them reasons to talk to their classmates, and learn about their classmates, and build new relationships, that's been a struggle…Taking turns, that working together, building community, feeling safe, just building even those relationships, because we've been so isolated, even within our own class this year, you go out to recess and you can only play with your class.

Teacher A, a virtual school teacher, said, "But, we totally make sure throughout it that they're building relationships with each other." All students, including struggling readers, need opportunities in class, on the playground, and online for *Building Relationships with Peers*, including learning to take turns, working together, building community, and feeling safe together.

Social interaction with Peers, *Talking with Peers,* and *Building relationships with Peers*, is vital to the emotional and academic health of struggling readers. With the pandemic-induced social restrictions, *Social Interaction with Peers* was altered or absent, placing the focus on its importance for all students, especially struggling readers. The major theme and the sub-themes, associated with research question one, are shown in Table 4.2

Research Question Two

The second research question explored how elementary teachers described the contexts of experiences with struggling readers during the educational changes due to the social restrictions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The two major themes that emerged for research question two were - *school absence can cause emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers* and *peer collaboration is vital to the learning process for struggling readers*. These major themes and the corresponding sub-themes are shown in Table 4.3 and described below.

Table 4.3

Major Themes Associated with Research Question Two

Major Theme:	Major Theme:
School absence can cause emotional/academic difficulties for struggling readers	Peer collaboration is vital to the learning process for struggling readers.
Sub Themes:	**Sub Themes:**
Restrictions and Sickness Reacclimating to School Restructured Learning	Reduced Peer Collaboration

Restrictions and Sickness

The context of the teachers' experiences with students, including struggling readers, during the educational changes precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic that make up the *Restrictions and Sickness* theme include *COVID Rules and Restrictions* as well as *COVID Sickness and Quarantine*. on-site teachers were "all trying to make it work given what [they] were given and just all the rules and stuff" and their classrooms were "such a mess this year trying to follow all of the COVID pandemic rules." Some on-site teachers shared that their students' "compliance has been really good" "following the new guidelines."

COVID Rules and Restrictions

The on-site teachers reported common experiences with their students during the pandemic-induced social restrictions. They spoke of everyone wearing masks, staying six feet apart, playing in quadrants at recess, sanitizing hands and materials, following strict bathroom rules, and more. However, with following all those *COVID Rules and Restrictions*, they reported lost instructional time, "You have those times you have to wipe everything off, prep everything, sanitize everything, all of that is class time you lost." In addition, some teachers discovered that by trying to "follow all of the COVID pandemic rules," their "students did not make a whole lot

of growth." So, they "got to the point with all of this and being told to social distance" that they went ahead and did "the activities" that "they would normally do," but they made sure to "spray their hands before" they would do the activities, or they would alter the activities.

When talking about *COVID Rules and Restrictions*, all 12 of the on-site teachers mentioned the mask rules and the impacts of the masks on their students, including their struggling readers. Some of the teachers pointed out their realization that they could not see their students' lips, and their students could not see their teacher's mouth when "talking or when…putting words together." Teacher N explained the experience this way,

> Trying to teach reading and phonics to kids, when they can't see your mouth, and you can't see theirs? Man, that's tough. That's one of the hardest things. I mean, I'm constantly having to pull my mask down and say a word, and they're having to pull theirs down, too, because frankly, I mean, I'm deaf in one ear, and having a mask on a child, it's very difficult for me and for them. It's very hard for me to tell everybody, "Say the word slap." Then, I'll say, "Now, take away the... and put in a..." They're like, "What?" so then, I have to pull my mask down. I'll say, "Now, say the word slap. Take away the... and put in a..." I mean, they have to see it [my mouth].

Many of the teachers talked specifically about the masks' impact on their struggling readers. They reported their struggling readers as being "muffled," not "as animated of a reader," and "hard to understand" when they were "reading with those masks on." Teacher L, an on-site teacher, described the experience for her struggling readers,

> Well, I have one, two groups basically in reading that are below level, like way below. I have one that will probably make it, they're super close. But those two groups, which consists of five kids total, so three in one group, two in the other. I'm just thinking about the whole school day, when you have a mask covering your face, I mean, they have to see your mouth. And they have to see your lips move. And plus, the masks, a lot of what you say, it muffles it. And I can't imagine for them, it already being a struggle anyway, and then having to deal with, I don't know, trying to hear behind a mask.

Teacher B, the only virtual school teacher to mention masks, shared her perception that the glitching of the computers were comparable to wearing masks:

The glitching of computers is that same thing because I'm not wearing a mask, they're not wearing a mask, but the social restriction is, we can't all be in the same room together. And if you don't have good internet connections or if you've got too many tabs open, or if everybody in your home is trying to use the internet at the same time, then you get glitchy reception, and that's hard for the kids to deal with and to learn with, because of those things.

Struggling readers needed to be able to see their teacher's mouth when the teacher was making sounds and reading, and the teacher needed to be able to see the mouths of struggling readers when they were making sounds and reading.

COVID Sickness and Quarantine

On-site teachers described the beginning of the year context with their students, including their struggling readers, of the *COVID Sickness and Quarantine* in which everyone was "very nervous coming back" to "face-to-face" school because they did not know "a lot about the virus then." They also shared the ongoing context of "the revolving door" of "students on quarantine" and trying to match the instruction they received with "what the students in the classroom" received because the ones that were quarantined were "nowhere to where the ones that were in class were." When that happens for a struggling reader, they "get further behind because they're not there for core instruction." Teacher K, an on-site teacher, described the context of *COVID Sickness and Quarantine* for her struggling readers in this way,

Yeah, so I'm thinking of my lowest group, my intervention group that I meet with. And three of those four were in quarantine, and so I was making the Zoom so they could join at the time that we were online in class, so they wouldn't miss it. And still have that intervention time with their group each day. But one would come and most of them would not. And that's one of the big struggles that I've found is that - when they're in quarantine.

Since *COVID Sickness and Quarantine* did not affect teachers and students in virtual school in the same way as on-site school, Teacher A, a virtual school teacher, talked about *COVID Sickness and Quarantine* in this way, "I've been surprised that there haven't been more kids

getting sick and adults getting sick and school closures more widespread." When struggling

readers are absent from school and miss core instruction and intervention, they can fall behind

even more.

The context of the COVID rules, restrictions, sickness, and quarantine pointed out the

importance of both teachers and students watching each other's mouths when speaking, making

sounds, and reading. Struggling readers benefited academically from proximity to their teacher,

hearing and seeing their teacher's mouth, and being present with their teacher for core instruction

and intervention. When struggling readers were absent from school, they missed out on the

benefits of being with their teacher, and, when they returned, they had to reacclimate to school.

Reacclimating to School

The theme *Reacclimating to School* emerged from the teachers' perceptions of the context of

the experiences with students, including struggling readers, when reacclimating to on-site school

or virtual school after being out of school for the spring and summer due to the COVID-19

pandemic. Teachers' perceptions included the eight months of the 2020-21 school year, which

was often interrupted with quarantine events and weather closures. Teacher D, an on-site teacher,

described the context of reacclimating to school in on-site school,

> And it's really been hard, getting them back into the groove of doing work because they
> were out for so long without being held accountable for doing the work. And that has
> been a battle since day one of going back face to face.

Teacher I, a virtual school teacher, described the context of reacclimating to school in virtual

school,

> We started by having just good procedures for those virtual meetings, learning how to
> mute and unmute. And I share the screen and how we interact, that we don't play while
> other kids are reading. We're interactive and stay focused.

Struggling readers had to reacclimate to school when they were absent from school, reacclimating to "procedures" and getting "back into the groove of doing work." The COVID-19 pandemic provided teachers with the realization of how students must reacclimate to school when they have been absent. When struggling readers had to reacclimate to school, they also had to reacclimate to learning, including instructional format, literacy learning, computer/digital usage, and books.

Restructured Learning

An additional context of teachers' experiences with struggling readers during the pandemic was one of *Restructured Learning.* Teachers reported that social restrictions, because of the pandemic, had caused them to have to restructure *Instructional Format, Literacy Learning, Computer/Digital Usage, and Books* for their students, including their struggling readers.

Instructional Format

Most of the teachers shared the changes they had to make to their *Instructional Format*, which included *Whole Group* and *Small Group* instruction.

Whole Group. Many of the Teachers reported that the *Instructional Format* for struggling readers had changed to mostly *Whole Group* work due to all the social restrictions, which was not beneficial for struggling readers. Teacher L, an On-site Teacher, described the use of *Whole Group* instruction,

> I keep saying the two groups that I'm mainly focusing on in this conversation. It's actually in small group, it's way better. I have their attention. I don't have a behavior problem. The behaviors come in whole group. So, because small group is more targeted to where they are and building on what they know, and whole group is more your second grade, your standard for second grade. And that's when the, well, the behaviors of not listening, not paying attention, come in. And small group, the behaviors are attentive. And I don't know. I feel like we make progress.

Teacher B, a Virtual Teacher, also described the use of *Whole Group* instruction,

So, we'll do that whole group. I'll read it aloud to them or some of the kids that I know that read well, will read out loud and then they will go back into a breakout room to re-read, and then they have to formulate questions to ask and answer with each other.

Small Groups. Due to the pandemic, most on-site teachers shared they had to eliminate *Small Groups,* or homogeneous grouping of students placed together by similar level or similar need for instruction, while a few on-site teachers shared they altered *Small Groups*. Virtual school teachers used "breakout rooms," the online version of small groups. Teacher J, an on-site teacher explained the problem with not having *Small Groups* for her struggling readers,

Well, I think I really struggle with not being able to have small groups. I think for reading, and learning to read, and struggling readers, you need to be able to sit close to them and you need to be able to work with them, watching their behaviors very closely. It's really hard not to see their lips, to know. Sometimes of course with struggling readers they are already kind of quiet because they're intimidated, and so they're already kind of quiet. With the mask, it makes it very difficult to hear the letter sounds. I sometimes wonder if I hear them correctly or not if they're really making the correct sounds. For me that's been a real struggle.

Teacher B shared the use of *Small Groups* in virtual school,

In the small group, they usually participate, they're happy to see me, they're happy to get their work done because the intervention is more of a tutoring. What they need exactly at that moment to get through what they're trying to learn…

Teachers had to use more whole group instruction and noticed that struggling readers "get lost" in whole group discussions. They felt like their struggling readers would benefit from targeted, small group instruction like they had used in the past where they could be attentive, receive help from their teacher and peers, be heard, and "talk through things."

Literacy Learning

The context of teachers' experiences with struggling readers during the pandemic in *Literacy Learning* mentioned by the teachers were writing, prosody, fluency, comprehension, decoding, encoding, phonics. letter ID, reading level, vocabulary, oral language, fine motor skills/handwriting, background knowledge, self-monitoring, sight words, multi-syllable words,

read aloud, and phonemic awareness. An on-site teacher, Teacher E, described some of the difficulties in *Literacy Learning* for her struggling readers,

> Our struggling readers, one of the things we've been working highly on ... And I know they're tired of hearing me say the F word, but we are still working on fluency. And sometimes I feel like they're struggling with even basic reading, because they're not even really having normal conversations.

Teacher B, a virtual school teacher, described some of the difficulties in *Literacy Learning* for her struggling readers,

> They have struggles with fluency, just like the kids in the classroom, and the comprehension is another big issue. There are some that struggle with decoding and encoding. I think that it reflects the same issues in a regular classroom, very reflective.

Struggling readers struggled in different areas of *Literacy Learning*. During the pandemic, a struggling reader was "everybody because everybody has those gaps." Teacher N said it like this,

> "That's been very educational for me, very surprising to me, to realize that you cannot look at a child and say, 'Okay, well, they come from a great home. I know they have lots of books, and I know everybody there's well educated. I know that they work, and I know those parents are behind those kids to learn. I know that they've got everything going for them,' and they're still not one of my high readers. Because that's not all the pieces. so, they look like anybody is who they look like. That was brought home to me this year more than any other year."

The teachers felt struggling readers had the same struggles as before the pandemic, but who the struggling readers were during the pandemic was different and how much they were struggling was different.

Computer/Digital Usage

Teachers were mixed on their perceptions of how *Computer/Digital Usage* has helped or hindered their struggling readers, with most reporting an increase in *Computer/Digital Usage*. Some spoke quite positively about increased *Computer/Digital Usage*, while others spoke negatively about it, often with the perspective of "nothing beats a person, a teacher." In fact, all

but three teachers talked about how the "teacher component" was missing with *Computer/Digital Usage* work for their students. Teacher M shared an on-site *Computer/Digital Usage* positive,

> We've never done a whole lot of computer work in first grade. We've never had computers until this year, and being new to that, in general, it was how are we going to be able to adapt to using Google Classroom? Are they going to be able to do it? They have really surprised me. They can do so much more than I ever thought that they would be able to with the technology.

Teacher L shared an on-site *Computer/Digital Usage* negative,

> You can't raise your hand and ask a computer or tell it to stop or explain it further. It's going to explain it in one way. And so, I mean, and you're in the classroom and you're teaching, you know who's going to, who's not, and then you can pull that small group or if they're on a computer, you can't. I mean, I guess you could Zoom, but it's still, so, it's not intimate. And they're scared. They're like, look at, and Zoom, their eyes like they're afraid to talk. So, it makes them uncomfortable and it's so hard to teach that way.

Teacher A shared a virtual school *Computer/Digital Usage* positive,

> Gosh, the great thing about these digital resources is that they're going to catch these gaps that we might miss. We're going to have bias and we're flawed, and they're flawed too, but together, hopefully, we'll figure it out, find the gaps.

Teacher B shared a virtual school *Computer/Digital Usage* negative,

> If you're a virtual and you're teaching with technology…how you would stick your finger in if the child doesn't know how to break the word into parts and help them see the parts as they're reading in text, well, you can't do that anymore.

Computer/Digital Usage helped struggling readers by identifying gaps, but it couldn't replace the real-time, social interaction with a live teacher. Struggling readers needed proximity to a teacher in a small group where they could interact, watch the face and lips of the teacher, and ask the teacher "to stop or explain it further."

Books

Due to the pandemic, teachers were told that students could not share materials, including *Books*. Some teachers talked about being told to "put things away, don't have your libraries out." Some teachers shared that they chose to put "books in their hands" anyway because "some of

them were begging for books," while other teachers talked about using digital books. Teachers

who used digital books reported that some of their struggling readers loved reading using "online

books," while others liked to "read actual books better than just online." Some teachers shared

their perception that print books are better for struggling readers, especially when they are

beginning readers. Teacher D, an on-site teacher, shared about experiences with digital books,

> We do have access to Sora [digital library checkout system] for checking out a book through that and actually reading it online. A lot of them [struggling readers] won't. And I think if I actually had the books in my classroom so that I could monitor it more, I think that would help.

Teacher I, a virtual school teacher, shared about experiences with books,

> With my struggling readers, they need to hold the books. We need to be able to guide them and see how they're tracking that print. When I'm looking through a screen, I can't see how they're really interacting. sometimes I wonder, is the print large enough? Is it clear enough? Are they seeing what I see? So, when it's a book right in front of them, they can pull it closer. They can adjust it better than a screen. And I just feel like these little beginning readers [struggling readers], we need those tactile experiences with books. And so, what I'm doing has made growth and progress, but at a slower rate, for sure than actual books in hands.

Struggling readers, especially beginning readers, needed to hold a print book for the tactile and

tracking experience as well as for teachers to monitor their reading behaviors, which was not

offered by a digital book.

Literacy Learning was a struggle for anyone at any time, especially when they missed school

for quarantine. *Computer/Digital Usage* assisted teachers in identifying and closing gaps in

Literacy Learning for struggling readers, but it couldn't replace the teacher. Struggling readers

needed social interaction in proximity with their teacher, being able to see, hear, and talk with

their teacher. Struggling readers also needed to be able to collaborate with their peers.

Reduced Peer Collaboration

Every teacher shared altered or absent peer collaboration experiences, such as *Group Work* or *Pairs,* for all their students during the pandemic, with many sharing examples of the impact on their struggling readers. They spoke of their struggling readers "not talking with their friends about what they're reading," not being able to access friends as "tutors and helpers," and not having the "accountability" with "peer pressure to do expected learning behaviors." This context of experiences with struggling readers established the theme of *Reduced Peer Collaboration.*

Group Work

Many teachers spoke about the absence of *Group Work*, a heterogeneous grouping of students placed together by different levels or abilities which allows teachers to utilize student diversity during peer collaboration, while a few teachers spoke about the alternatives for *Group Work* such as "letting them work together, as long as they have their mask on." Teacher J, an on-site teacher, described the impact of the absence of *Group Work* on struggling readers,

> I have...almost no group work at all because of COVID. I think that has been the single most, biggest challenge, and I think it is really something that I have come to realize is vitally important, is that group work to help those kids [the struggling readers]. It not only helps the high kids, because then they can reexplain everything that they've learned, but it helps the low kids because they can see other kids doing it. It helps more kids in a short amount of time than me going one-to-one-to-one…I just haven't been able to do any group work, and I think that's what we all miss.

Teacher A, a virtual school teacher, talked about alternatives for *Group Work* for struggling readers in Zoom intervention, such as,

> We found ways to do it, like on Nearpod [the digital resource]. You could call that collaboration because there's a slide, and then they're all answering on there, and they're talking about it together. We have done some, but it feels a little forced. Whereas before it feels like the goal is like, "This is the goal and we're going to collaborate to make that happen," where it's not like, "Ooh, I'm going to come up with some kind of awesome dog and pony show," now it feels more like it's like, "We've got to have these kids [struggling readers in Zoom intervention], talking to each other, working together." It feels a little bit forced sometimes.

Teachers realized due to its absence that *Group Work,* in which struggling readers can get a reexplanation from peers, watch peers, talk with peers, and work on goals with peers, is "vitally important" for struggling readers.

Pairs

On-site and virtual teachers talked about not being able to have their struggling readers work in *Pairs*, including "pair and share," "shoulder buddies," and "buddy reading." Teacher D, an on-site teacher, described the context of the experience like this,

> I'm not able to let them collaborate and communicate in a normal classroom like I would have…They could go sit in a certain spot and read with each other. Now they can't do that because they're confined to six feet apart.

Teacher I, a virtual school teacher, described the context of the experience like this,

> [Before COVID] I did do a lot of partner-reading where I would pair a higher student with a lower student or an average student with a lower student, different levels together…but I haven't tried the Zoom rooms with the little ones [first grade struggling readers in Zoom intervention], because I don't trust that the behavior will be appropriate. And I feel I need to monitor that. So yes, we are missing that piece.

Teachers pointed out that struggling readers were missing out on the benefits of being paired in proximity with other students on different levels to collaborate, communicate, and read together.

Teachers realized how important *Peer Collaboration* is as an alternate to and an efficient way for struggling readers to have the benefits of one-on-one time with their teacher. The social restrictions brought about due to the educational changes precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic reduced or even eliminated *Peer Collaboration*, causing struggling readers to be "missing that piece" of the learning puzzle.

The Essences of the Experiences

The essences of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994) that was shared by the teachers in their experiences with struggling readers in both on-site school and virtual school during the COVID-

19 pandemic was that during trauma and stress "education takes a back seat," and what emerges as vital to the ongoing emotional and academic health of struggling readers is positive relationships, social interaction with others, being present at school, and peer collaboration. The teachers had a shared pandemic perspective of realizing "how important teacher-student relationships are, and the kid-to-kid relationships are," "that the socialization is extremely vital to the learning process," especially for struggling readers, as well as "[struggling readers] get further behind because they're not there for core instruction." In addition, every teacher spoke about the pandemic-induced paucity of peer collaboration, and how important it is to the learning process.

The three major themes that emerged as the meaning of the essences of the experiences shared by teachers in their experiences with struggling readers were: (a) relationships that include social interaction can mitigate emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers, (b) school absence can cause emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers, and (c) peer collaboration is vital to the learning process for struggling readers. The major themes, sub-themes, clusters of meaning, and sample significant statements for this study are presented in Table 4.4.

Chapter five will present the discussion of this transcendental phenomenology study.

Table 4.4

Themes, Clusters of Meaning, & Sample Significant Statements

Sub-Themes	Clusters of Meaning	Sample Significant Statements
Major Theme #1: Relationships that include social interaction can mitigate emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers		
Relationship with Pandemic	Trauma and Stress	"It's not surprising for me that, in trauma and stress, education takes a back seat."
Relationship with Self	Disengagement	"…how many students, when they're virtual, how many parents just let them be totally disengaged."
	Distractions	"They're easily distracted kids, somebody sneezes, somebody drops something, somebody says something that head is turned and there they are."
	Isolation	"I feel like a lot of the kids that are coming to school are pretty isolated at home."
	Embarrassment	"[When they are reading] they will act embarrassed."
	Lack of Confidence	"There is a lack of confidence there too. I can tell you."
	Quietness	"I think my struggling readers, I would say, are some of my quietest kids. They are my quietest kids."
Relationship with Learning	More Struggling Readers	"I definitely have more, and I think most people would agree with that."
	Missed Growth Time	"I was just deeply concerned because these kids had been out of school so long…I feel like they missed so much growth time at the end of first grade…March, April, May is when we tend to see those readers blossom that were struggling, and they just mature."
	Growth	"Starting out, I had a lot of struggling readers that were behind, but most of them have caught up and have really jumped."
Relationship with Family	Family Support	"I think part of the thing is before pandemic there wasn't a lot of family support with my readers. So, with the pandemic, I think it's a little more strained but maybe for different reasons."

Table 4.4 (Cont.)

Sub-Themes	Clusters of Meaning	Sample Significant Statements
**Major Theme #1 (Cont.): Relationships that include social interaction can mitigate emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers**	
Relationship with Teacher	Interaction During Reading	"I would get the book and read it to my class, which that's a different experience because when you're alive and active and reading, you interact with them with the story, and you have your own inflection, and you know those kids and you know the parts to stop on and let them jump in and discuss with you. Versus, I Googled someone reading the book and it's just there. That's kind of a COVID moment for me because I don't like that. That interaction is gone."
	Hugs	"I think they are missing the emotional piece and sometimes...I try not to hug them, but sometimes they just need that…More than academics."
	Social Interaction with Teacher	"Nothing beats a person, a teacher. That's just so important and that technology…doesn't replace the instruction, and it doesn't…replace the relationships. And I think that it will always be the number one key, because if you don't have that, then you're not going to have anything. And it's all about that before it comes to instruction."
Relationship with Peers	Social Interaction with Peers	"I think they are more aware of the fact that they aren't getting to talk and visit and be on the floor with each other."
	Talking with Peers	"…they are so far behind being able to just communicate, knowing how to talk to someone, what to say, how to respect social norms…like the norms we're going to follow, such as, if my partner's talking, I'm going to be a good listener…"
	Building Relationships with Peers	"So, giving them reasons to talk to their classmates, and learn about their classmates, and build new relationships, that's been a struggle…"

Table 4.4 (Cont.)

Sub-Themes	Clusters of Meaning	Sample Significant Statements
**Major Theme #2: School absence can cause emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers**
Restrictions and Sickness	COVID Rules and Restrictions	"We're all trying to make it work given what we're given and just all the rules and stuff."
	COVID Sickness and Quarantine	"Just trying to be safe in that school environment and then a family member gets sick and then you've got like half of your class quarantined…So, that even made those students [SR] get further behind because they're not there for core instruction. And then again, they go home. Who wants to do work on the computer at home? So, it's just been a battle all year."
Reacclimating to School	On-Site School	"Just the structure even of being at school and understanding that this is our routine."
	Virtual school	"We started by having just good procedures for those virtual meetings, learning how to mute and unmute. And I share the screen and how we interact, that we don't play while other kids are reading. We're interactive and stay focused."
Restructured Learning	Instructional Format	"My struggling readers get lost in those whole group discussions."
	Literacy Learning	"I had several that didn't even know their alphabet fully. Usually you might have one, but I had about five who did not firmly have their letter ID down. That's not the sound, just telling me the letter, that was weird."
	Computer/Digital Usage	"It's gone to mostly digital work and me going and sitting with them and kind of walking them through it because I have to keep my distance as well. Because, if you're there for 15 minutes or longer, and if something happens, you get quarantined."
	Books	"…some of them were begging for books to be honest, too, because at first, we were told to put things away, don't have your libraries out.
**Major Theme #3: Peer collaboration is vital to the learning process for struggling readers**
Reduced Peer Collaboration	Group Work	"I have...almost no group work at all because of COVID. I think that has been the single most, biggest challenge, and I think it is really something that I have come to realize is vitally important, is that group work to help those kids [the SR]."
	Pairs	"…having them pair and share and shoulder buddies and all that. They just, they're not given that opportunity."

Chapter Five: Discussion

Overview

The 2020-2021 school year was like none other ever experienced for American schools, teachers, students, and families. It was a new context for schooling which took place after the historic spring 2020 closing of schools all over the world (Nierenberg & Pasick, 2020) which was all due to the SARS-COV-2 (COVID-19) world-wide pandemic. Many teachers discovered that the start to the 2020-2021 school year was even more demanding than the spring 2020 school crisis had been (Schwartz, 2021). American teachers found themselves rebooting school and assisting their students, specifically their struggling readers, amid new rules, restrictions, sickness, and quarantines due to the pandemic. Since the pandemic crisis began in the spring of 2020, much pandemic-related educational literature has been published. However, an extensive search revealed no research directly investigating elementary teachers' social interaction experiences with struggling readers during the social restrictions due to the pandemic.

This study was conducted to bring to light the collective experiences that existed for 15 on-site and virtual elementary teachers with their struggling readers during the social restrictions of the pandemic. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of elementary teachers who bravely rebooted school for their students, including their struggling readers, amid the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic.

On-Site and Virtual School Environments

Although there was some variability for the 15 teachers in this study, the on-site environment and the virtual school environment in which they rebooted school for their struggling readers is explained in the following description. As the three virtual school teachers rebooted school, they did so in an online environment that was a new format for them and for their students. The

virtual school platform was a completely digital program in which the students did their work 100% separated from the virtual school teacher. There was no flexibility for the virtual school teacher to change or adjust anything within the program. The students who were part of the English as a Second Language (ESL) program in the school district had access to an additional app called Imagine Learning. As a support, the virtual school teachers offered optional 30-minute Zoom intervention sessions for different subjects, for which the students were able to attend three a day. The all-digital platform did not include a digital reading intervention.

Some of the virtual school teachers provided digital peer collaboration using Nearpod and/or breakout rooms with a teacher-generated assignment. Some provided social interaction using breakout rooms, letting students talk and develop friendships with no connection to a lesson.

The virtual school teachers used digital books in place of print books Teachers pointed out that all the students were distracted, but those who had a family member nearby to redirect them were able to refocus.

According to teacher participants, some families treated the virtual school format as a hybrid homeschool/public school mix with the families supporting the students by setting a daily schedule, ensuring the students completed assignments, and giving them human feedback. Teachers stated that most of those students did not need the intervention Zoom sessions, though some families chose to attend.

Teachers reported that other families did not support the struggling readers with their virtual work. Some of the virtual school teachers reported contacting the families about how to help their child(ren), with some teachers finding family support. One virtual school teacher explained it like this,

> I have a lot of parents telling me, "I'm not a teacher. I don't know what to do with this."
> And so, sharing strategies has been really important to say, "You can do this," and

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educating parents that, "Here's some things you can do. You can do this." And parents are willing. One of the things that's better than I thought it would be is that parents are willing if they have more guidance. If you say, "Please do this for 10 minutes every day," most parents are going to want to help their child learn.

However, not all teachers found support from the families of their struggling readers. After the first semester, the school district required the virtual school teachers to identify those students who were below the 20th percentile for reading and required that they attend the Zoom intervention sessions. Even then, there were some child(ren) who did not attend Zoom intervention sessions. Ultimately, the students with high rates of absence and/or those who were deemed disengaged were required to withdraw from virtual school and to attend on-site school.

The 12 on-site teachers were back at school in-person. However, just like the virtual school format, the on-site school format was new for both teachers and students. Being back in-person was very different than it had been pre-pandemic due to the educational changes precipitated by the COVID-19 rules, restrictions, sickness, and quarantines.

The lesson planning format for on-site teachers was different. Not only did teachers have their normal lesson plans, but they also had remote lesson plans for those students who were absent due to sickness or quarantine. They had to "keep up with the kids" that were in-person, but they also had to "keep up with the kids" that were being taught online via Zoom.

The instructional format also looked very different for on-site teachers. Because of the COVID-19 rules and restrictions, teachers had been told by their principals to do whole group sessions with the students sitting in their desks six feet apart from each other. They were told that they could not have the students sitting on the carpet, and they had to have all their students facing the same direction as far apart as possible – which caused them to be sitting and staring at the back of someone's head all day. This made it vastly different and much more difficult for the

on-site teachers to keep their students' attention. Normally, the teachers would have students in the lower grades sitting at the carpet and working in centers instead of out at their desks. The teachers in the upper grades would typically have students sitting in groups at tables or in groups at pushed-together desks.

Some teachers spoke about smaller class sizes – because students were attending virtual school or were out for quarantine – and that it was easier to get to all their students in the classroom.

Peer collaboration looked very different for on-site teachers and students. Most of the teachers reported that they were not able to have the students in homogeneous nor heterogenous groups – no group work, no pairs, and no small groups. There were no groups to discuss their reading. Both the teachers and the students found it difficult to not be able to have groups. In fact, one teacher said, "This year, for me, that is my biggest change of activities - not being able to do group work." Some teachers talked about how since they couldn't pull small groups of five kids who are missing one skill, they had to figure out how to help one child at a time with individual skills they were missing. Interestingly, a few teachers did pull reading groups, but they modified them by creating smaller groups, having the students together for a shorter time-period, and having the students more spread out. One teacher even talked about holding small groups via Zoom with the students spread out around the classroom with headphones on!

The use of materials looked very different as well. All the learning centers, shared manipulatives, social play, and more were "out the window." No hands-on materials were allowed – not even print books, paper, and pencils. This was frustrating for the teachers as they felt that hands-on materials are important for student learning. A few of the teachers worked around that a little bit by providing each student with their own manipulatives, so they wouldn't

be touching anyone else's items.

Every day was a new day for the teachers who were teaching on-site because of the revolving door that existed due to the student absences from sickness and quarantine as well as the return of students from virtual school due to their disengagement in virtual school.

A typical day in the life of a teacher during the 2020-2021 school year was very different from anything that had been experienced in the past. The lack of social interaction – due to the social restrictions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic rules, restrictions, sickness, and quarantine – put the importance of social interaction, relationships, and collaboration into the spotlight for most of the teachers.

Research Questions

The following two research questions guided this study:

- RQ1: How do elementary teachers describe experiences with struggling readers during the educational changes due to the social restrictions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic?

- RQ2: How do elementary teachers describe the contexts of experiences with struggling readers during the educational changes due to the social restrictions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic?

To answer these questions, credible data from survey questions and in-depth interviews were conducted and analyzed, wherein three major themes and ten sub-themes emerged. The themes that emerged revealed the common experiences of 12 on-site and three virtual school teachers as they reacclimated their struggling readers to school amid a world-wide pandemic.

Chapter five is the final chapter which summarizes the principal findings and discusses the practical implications of the study. This chapter is organized by the sections: summary of findings, implications, delimitations, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

Chapter Three provided the specifics of how both a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2013) and a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) were used to explore on-site and virtual school elementary teachers' pandemic-induced experiences with their struggling readers in one school district located in the state of Arkansas.

Using a qualitative design allowed for inductive and emerging procedures, and a phenomenological approach allowed for a collective description of "what" was experienced and "how" the participants experienced it (Creswell, 2013). The data from in-depth interviews with the 15 participants revealed common descriptions of their experiences with their struggling readers amid the pandemic, as described in Chapter Four.

The first six of the ten sub-themes that emerged from the participants' common experiences with struggling readers answered research question one and were presented as *textual descriptions*. The last four of the themes that emerged from the participants' common experiences with struggling readers answered research question two and were presented as *structural descriptions*. When these textural and structural descriptions were synthesized, the meaning of the essences of the experiences shared by teachers in their experiences with struggling readers emerged revealing three major themes: (a) relationships that include social interaction can mitigate emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers, (b) school absence can cause emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers, and (c) peer collaboration is vital to the learning process for struggling readers.

Research Question One Findings

Research question one asked how elementary teachers described experiences with struggling readers during the educational changes due to the social restrictions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The first major theme that emerged was – *relationships that include social interaction can mitigate emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers*. This first major theme suggests: (1) trauma and stress impacts struggling readers' emotional and academic health, (2) struggling readers respond emotionally during emotional or academic difficulties, and those responses can be magnified or mitigated by relationships, (3) it is possible for struggling readers to make progress and show growth, even if they have missed "growth time," (4) struggling readers benefit emotionally and/or academically when they have positive family support, (5) positive social interaction with a live teacher, especially during reading, is important to the emotional and academic health of struggling readers, and (6) social interaction with peers, talking with peers, and building relationships with peers is vital to the emotional and academic health of struggling readers.

Research Question Two Findings

Research question two asked how elementary teachers described the contexts of experiences with struggling readers during the educational changes due to the social restrictions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The second major theme that emerged was – *school absence can cause emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers.* This second major theme suggests: (1) struggling readers benefit academically from proximity to their teacher, hearing and seeing their teacher's mouth, and being present with their teacher for core instruction and intervention, (2) struggling readers have to reacclimate to school when they are absent from school, reacclimating to "procedures" and getting "back into the groove of doing work," and (3)

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computer/digital usage may assist a teacher in identifying and closing gaps in literacy learning for struggling readers, but it cannot replace the teacher. The third major theme was – *peer collaboration is vital to the learning process for struggling readers.* This third major theme suggests: (1) struggling readers benefit from collaboration in proximity with other students on different levels and (2) collaboration in proximity allows students to collaborate, communicate, and read together to get a re-explanation from peers, watch peers, talk with peers, and work on goals with peers.

Discussion

This study was guided by a major theory relative to social interaction – Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. His theory was used for this research because the new context of schooling precipitated by the pandemic included social restrictions, causing social interaction to be reduced or eliminated from most facets of learning. It was a unique context in that at no other time and in no other way has social interaction been reduced or completely eradicated. Exploring teachers' perceptions of their experiences with their struggling readers in the absence of social interaction to explore its importance was a rare and important opportunity.

Sociocultural Theory

Previous literature has suggested that learning is a social act, that students must be willing and empowered to engage socially and emotionally in literacy activities, that students learn through talking, and that interactions with their teacher and peers is an important factor in achieving higher order thinking (Alexander & Fox, 2013; Allahyar & Nazari, 2012; Collet, in press; Fisher et al., 2021b; Ostroff, 2020; Tomlinson & Sousa, 2020). Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory helps to explain the interconnectedness of these ideas and gives a framework for not only this study, but also for classrooms with struggling readers during the pandemic and beyond.

Vygotsky posited that social interaction is the genesis for changes in cognition (Collet, in press) by saying, "the most significant moment in the course of intellectual development, which gives birth to the purely human forms of practical and abstract intelligence, occurs when speech and practical activity, two previously completely independent lines of development, converge (p. 24). The following three constructs of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory are illustrated in Figure 5.1 and served as a framework for this study and can also serve as a framework for working with struggling readers during the pandemic and beyond: (1) emotions are inseparable from thinking, (2) social interaction is important for learning, and (3) collective activity produces learning. These constructs were put into the spotlight as valuable during the pandemic-induced social restrictions, and they can also serve to draw together the major findings from this study, providing insight beyond the pandemic.

Discussion - Theoretical Framework
Constructs of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

EMOTIONS ARE INSEPARABLE FROM THINKING

SOCIAL INTERACTION IS IMPORTANT FOR LEARNING
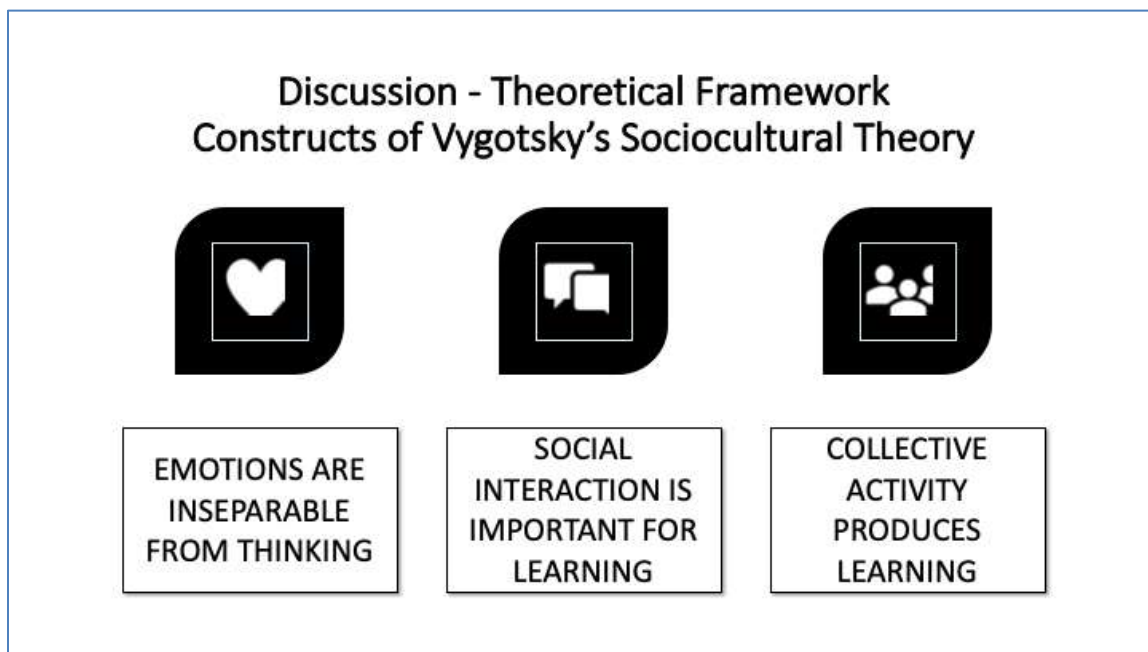
COLLECTIVE ACTIVITY PRODUCES LEARNING

Figure 5.1 Three Constructs of Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory

Emotions Are Inseparable from Thinking

The first component of sociocultural theory that was put into the spotlight as valuable during the pandemic-induced social restrictions was – *emotions are inseparable from thinking*. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory embraces the perspective that the affective, or emotion, and cognition are intertwined (Smagorinsky, 2013). Vygotsky said, "There exists a dynamic meaningful system that constitutes *a unity of affective and intellectual processes.* (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 41).

Our emotions impact our future planning, memory organization, integration of cognitive material, attention, and performance at complex intellectual tasks (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). In other words, "emotions are a gateway to cognition and learning" (Tomlinson & Sousa, 2020, p. 18). Prothero (2021) noted that a focus on students' academics was only half the battle of what educators would have to grapple with during and after the pandemic because educators would also have to deal with students' emotional state from the trauma and stress incurred from the pandemic. Fagell (2021) and Ujifusa (2021) recommended upon returning to school buildings that teachers should prioritize students' emotional well-being. The participants' experiences with their struggling readers were in line with this literature as they shared that they felt their struggling readers needed the teacher's focus to be on the students' emotional health as a priority over their academic health. The teachers described seeing "fear in a lot of the kids" because it was a "very scary time for them." The teachers felt like their students were "missing the emotional piece," and they wanted to "get the social emotional fixed" "more than the academics."

Students move to a survival state, respond emotionally, and even shut down when they experience trauma and stress (Rebora, 2020; Souers & Hall, 2020; Tomlinson & Sousa, 2020, p.

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18). The teachers in this study described their struggling readers' responding emotionally to the trauma and stress of the pandemic. They spoke of struggling readers' emotional responses of disengagement, distractions, isolation, embarrassment, lack of confidence, and quietness. These emotional responses not only impacted struggling readers' emotional health but also their academic health.

When students experience trauma and stress, they leave the learning mode while in the school setting (Rebora, 2020; Souers & Hall, 2020) and their relationship with learning is damaged (Fisher et al., 2021b; Hood, 2020). The findings of this study are consistent with the recent literature, revealing that when struggling readers are experiencing trauma and stress, they "shut down" and "do not want to work;" "education takes a backseat." In addition, most of the participants are in agreement with the idea proposed by Hood (2020) and Fisher et al. (2021b) that students' relationship with learning is a factor important to teaching and learning that needs to be balanced with attention to students' well-being. The participants described their struggling readers' experiencing trauma and stress and therefore their relationship with learning was damaged, reporting that they had more struggling readers than in the past, and that those who were struggling were further behind than was typical. However, just as Fisher et al. (2021b) proposed with their idea of "learning leaps," many of the participants did state that they had seen growth, some reporting substantial growth. Some of the teachers attributed the growth they observed to their high expectations of and their influence on their struggling readers. The literature supports this. Hood (2020) and Fisher et al. (2021b) deemed high expectations as an important factor to teaching and learning, and Nadine Burke Harris said, "One role educators can play is helping to create that stable relationship and environment that really is the antidote to the effects of stress...Educators can provide those stable nurturing relationships and environments

that we know are healing" (Theirs, 2020). Emotions and thinking are intertwined for struggling

readers and when they are experiencing trauma and stress, their relationship with their teacher

can mitigate the effects. Teachers can build the relationships through social interaction with their

struggling readers that are so important for struggling readers' emotional and academic health.

Social Interaction Is Important for Learning

The second component of sociocultural theory that was put into the spotlight as valuable

during the pandemic-induced social restrictions was – *social interaction is important for*

learning. From a Vygotskian perspective, learning can be defined as becoming knowledgeable in

principles, concepts, and ideas resulting from social interaction, including being guided by others

(Borthick et al., 2003; Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2012). Neuroscience confirms that the social

aspect of learning is important, and that the frequent use of technology with little face-to-face

interaction may impact the mirror neuron system in brains that are developing (Tomlinson &

Sousa, 2020, p. 18).

Minahan (2020) suggested that a strong relationship with a caring, supportive teacher can

help a vulnerable student be insulated from anxiety and can also help promote academic growth.

A teacher's impact on a student's life and learning is nothing new. It has been known since the

early First-Grade Studies of the 1960s that a student's academic progress is impacted more by

the teacher than a specific instructional program (International Literacy Association, 2019).

Supporting this within the context of experiences with struggling readers during the pandemic,

both on-site and virtual teachers shared that their struggling readers needed social interaction

with the teacher during the trauma and stress of the pandemic for both their emotional and their

academic health. The findings of this study showed that struggling readers need human,

emotional, verbal social interaction with their teacher; they need proximity and human feedback

from their teacher; and they need to be felt loved by their teacher to build trust, to ensure reading

is not mechanical, and to experience the emotional component of reading. Kim et al. (2017) echoed this study's finding that there is an emotional component to reading that can be identified by the teacher, noting that there are both emotional and cognitive engagement aspects to reading. The authors collected intervention teachers' reports of their students' emotional engagement as well as their cognitive engagement during reading. Not only do struggling readers need social interaction with their teacher, but they also need social interaction with their peers as a collective activity.

Collective Activity Produces Learning

The third component of sociocultural theory that was put into the spotlight as valuable during the pandemic-induced social restrictions was – *collective activity produces learning*. If learning is supported through social interaction, then groups are particularly important because it is within groups that social interaction and conversation can take place (Brown et al., 1989).

Fisher et al. (2021b) posited that classroom discussion has a positive impact on learning. When students are given opportunities to use academic language in talking with other students, they can move from surface learning to deeper learning. In other words, they "grow into the intellectual life around them" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88). Tomlinson & Sousa (2020) stated that neuroscience has confirmed that the social aspect of learning is important. The participants corroborated this by sharing their realization of how vitally important peer collaboration is for struggling readers. They shared that their struggling readers needed to build new relationships, play with each other, be academic with each other, get a re-explanation from peers, watch peers, talk with peers, work on goals with peers, experience accountability, and more. One teacher summed up the impact of peer collaboration on learning by saying, "It not only helps the high kids, because then they can reexplain everything that they've learned, but it helps the low kids

because they can see other kids doing it. It helps more kids in a short amount of time than me going one-to-one-to-one." Along those same lines, Anderson (2001) said peer influences are strong and, in many circumstances, they are stronger than teacher influences.

Students need strong core instructional experiences, which includes collaboration or student-to-student interaction built into the curriculum (Fisher et al., 2021b). Every participant reported the impact on their struggling readers of not having peer collaboration experiences such as group work or pairs. Findings from this study include that social interaction with peers, talking with peers, and building relationships with peers is vital to the emotional and academic health of struggling readers.

"Decreased socialization opportunities with peers" have had a destabilizing impact on many students, causing damage to their relationship with learning (Fisher et al., 2021b, p. 40). As one participant shared,

> This has really made me see that the socialization is extremely vital to the learning process, especially for the lower kids. I hate that it took something so drastic to make me say, well, I've always been a proponent of an extra recess, but mainly that was because I thought the extra exercise and fresh air helped revitalize the kids, not because of socialization. But I now believe that socialization is equally important and that in order for students to grow they have to have that interaction, whether it's casual conversation or directed and guided conversation about a specific topic.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory is helpful as teachers reflect on the importance of social interaction in their classrooms and prioritize what is most important for their struggling readers during the pandemic and going forward.

Practical Implications

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe elementary teachers' experiences with their struggling readers, both on-site and in virtual school, within one school district located in the state of Arkansas during the social restrictions encountered from the COVID-19 pandemic. The collection of the data for this study was in-depth interviews with 15 teachers, and the analysis of that data revealed three major themes: (a) relationships that include social interaction can mitigate emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers, (b) school absence can cause emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers, and (c) peer collaboration is vital to the learning process for struggling readers. Implications of the study are presented below.

Students must be willing and empowered to engage socially and emotionally in the literacy activities within their classrooms (Alexander & Fox, 2013). The practical implications of this study are recommendations for educators as they focus on helping their struggling readers to be present and to engage emotionally and socially, while furthering their academic goals during the rebound from the pandemic and in the future. Teachers will want to prioritize building into the curriculum social interaction, peer collaboration, and relationship-building.

Relationships that Include Social Interaction Can Mitigate Emotional and/or Academic Difficulties for Struggling Readers

As teachers work with their struggling readers during the rebound stage of the pandemic, they will want to look for struggling readers who are experiencing trauma and stress. They will likely be "shut down," disengaged, distracted, isolated, embarrassed, lacking confidence, and/or quiet. Struggling readers are not the same as they were before the pandemic, so teachers need new lenses to use to look at them. Using a trauma-informed, and even a grief-sensitive lens, to

view how trauma and stress intersects with teaching and learning will help mitigate struggling readers' new emotional and academic needs (Collins, 2020; Grogan, 2021). An implication from this study is to prioritize efforts to "get the social emotional fixed" "more than the academics." Minahan (2020) and Fagell (2021) supported this by suggesting that teachers should prioritize a student's mental health over academics. Similarly, Ujifusa (2021) and Prothero (2021) cautioned that just focusing on a student's academics and ignoring a student's emotional health could backfire; academics is only half of the battle of rebooting from the pandemic. Teachers will also want to prioritize rebuilding struggling readers' confidence while building their competence.

Teachers can help their struggling readers during trauma and stress by helping them build relationships, because those relationships can mitigate emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers. Minahan (2020) noted that when students can connect with their teachers in a time of change and crisis, that relationship can insulate students from escalating in their anxiety, can promote behavioral, emotional, and academic growth, and can mitigate the negative impacts of trauma and stress.

Building teacher-student relationships are important to the emotional and academic health of struggling readers and should include social interaction. A finding from this study was the benefit of building teacher-student relationships through daily proximity and touch, such as a hug, elbow bump, fist bump, or toe kick, to show "constant reassurance" and encouragement because "besides that verbal interaction they need that love, and they need to feel that support that they're doing well." A novel finding of this study was the importance of teachers and struggling readers looking at each other's face/lips/mouth when talking, making sounds, and reading. This was highlighted with the wearing of masks during the social restrictions of the pandemic. A second-grade teacher explained it like this, "For me, making my sounds with my

mask on has been very hard for them, especially a B and a P and a D and a T, and there's been days I've ripped that mask off and I'm just like, "Forget this right now. This is too important. Then for them to respond to me, it's been hard because it's muffled, and I never realized how much I read lips until I couldn't see anymore." In conjunction with looking at each other's faces, proximity was an important finding of this study. Social interaction during reading and even during computer/digital usage was highlighted as essential. In addition to proximity when struggling readers are using computers/digital devices, "human feedback" is important because "technology doesn't replace the teacher." Struggling readers need human, emotional, verbal, and proximate social interaction with their teacher to build trust, which then in turn builds a positive, strong relationship.

Building relationships with families of struggling readers is important to the emotional and academic health of struggling readers. There are decades of research that has demonstrated teachers' relationships with students and their families are strongly connected to both a student's sense of belonging and a positive belief in their ability to succeed in school (International Literacy Association, 2020). Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2020) noted that during the pandemic, many schools connected with families more frequently, building "relational trust" between schools and families (p.52). A finding from this study was that positive relationships with families included maintaining constant contact during the pandemic, as well as providing resources and giving explicit instructions for teaching families how to help students at home.

Building student-student relationships is important to the emotional and academic health of struggling readers. An implication from this study is that teachers can help struggling readers in building student-student relationships by creating opportunities in the curriculum that "intentionally allow for social interaction with peers," including being able to "talk and engage

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with many different people," "learn about classmates," "build new relationships," "play with each other," and "be academic with each other." Tomlinson (2020) recently reported on findings from neuroscience demonstrating that the nature of the environment alters brain chemistry and subsequently brain functioning. Neuroscience research shows that negative emotions shut down cognition and positive emotions enhance learning. So, Tomlinson (2020) confirmed in neuroscience a recommendation from psychology to create classrooms that are accepting, challenging, affirming and supportive. Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2020) supported this idea by recommending cultivating environments that are emotionally safe and belonging, dedicated to creating opportunities for intentional community building. This study is aligned with these recommendations with the implications of teaching students to "take turns," "work together," "build community," and "feel safe together" and having students to practice "social norms" so they can learn how to properly communicate with others. A novel implication from this study which adds to these recommendations is teaching struggling readers to look at peers' face/mouth/lips when others are talking, making sounds, and/or reading.

School Absence Can Cause Emotional and/or Academic Difficulties for Struggling Readers

The research on school absenteeism has shown that school attendance matters to reading success; clear predictions have been demonstrated for lower academic achievement due to reduced instructional time (Hamlin, 2021; Jaume & Willén, 2019; Johnson et al., 2021). Chronic absenteeism was reported as a problem before the pandemic, and during the pandemic student absences have doubled (Johnson et al., 2021). The findings from this study corroborate the literature in the need for prioritizing student re-engagement with learning upon returning to school after an absence. The implication from this study is that teachers should prioritize struggling readers' attendance for core instruction and intervention. Then, when they are absent,

prioritize reacclimating struggling readers to "procedures" and getting "back into the groove of doing work."

Another implication from this study is that when struggling readers have missed school, teachers should have a "missed growth time" mindset, rather than a lost learning mindset. In conjunction with this, teachers should prioritize having high expectations of growth and progress for their struggling readers, recognizing that growth has occurred. In line with these implications from this study, Risko and Walker-Dalhouse (2021) challenged educators to recognize that learning has occurred for their students and to believe that their students can succeed. High-expectations for all students was also a recommendation by Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) and Fisher et al. (2021b). Fisher and colleagues (2021b) stated that teacher expectations are important, and that teachers who have high expectations believe students will make accelerated growth, not just normal progress.

Two practical implications from this study to help struggling readers see growth are to teach struggling readers, especially beginning readers, using "real books" over digital books so they can benefit from the "tactile" and "tracking" experiences and the teacher can "monitor student reading" as well as to have students ask the teacher to "stop and explain further" during core instruction or intervention.

Peer Collaboration is Vital to the Learning Process for Struggling Readers

The social restrictions of the pandemic brought about many educational changes, including to peer collaboration. Research has demonstrated that students learn best in a social group, learning with and being tutored by other students (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Neitzel et al., 2021; Ostroff, 2020; Watkins, 2005). The teachers in this study realized with fresh eyes the importance and benefits of peer collaboration. Fisher and colleagues (2021a) spoke to

this by stating, "Peer collaboration and discussion is a linchpin of student learning" (p. 30). A finding of this study was to use peer collaboration for struggling readers, so they are "hearing the other perspective," "building on what each other says," "helping others because it gives them a sense of pride," and accessing the "camaraderie of their peers to help pull them along" because "they're learning better from each other."

An implication regarding peer collaboration is for teachers to create opportunities in the curriculum for peer collaboration within homogeneous grouping, such as small groups, including proximity to struggling readers, watching reading behaviors closely, watching each other's' face/lips/mouth, ensuring struggling readers are attentive and participatory, allowing help from peers, creating opportunities to "talk things through" with the teacher and peers, and making it "exactly what they need at that moment to get through what they are trying to learn." Opportunities in the curriculum for peer collaboration can also be created within heterogeneous grouping, such as "pairs" or "group work," so struggling readers can talk "with their friends about what they are reading," experience "accountability," and feel positive "peer pressure to do expected learning behaviors" "around a goal." Supporting this implication, Slavin and colleagues (2011) in their best-evidence synthesis on effective programs for struggling readers found that cooperative learning can have very positive effects for struggling readers. Building on Slavin's study, Neitzel and colleagues (2021) found in their synthesis of quantitative research on programs for struggling readers in elementary schools that whole-class approaches made up of mostly cooperative learning approaches showed outcomes for struggling readers as large as those found for one-to-one and one-to-small tutoring, on average, and benefited many more students. Interestingly, both studies found that computer-assisted/technology-supported adaptive instruction did not have statistically significant positive outcomes for struggling readers.

In addition, this study provided the implication for teachers to create opportunities in the curriculum for struggling readers to be "tutors and helpers." Minkel (2020) made a similar recommendation to "teach them to be helpers," stating that children need the chance to do some helping along with the teacher (p.16).

Delimitations

This study contained delimitations and limitations, as does all research. This study was bound by geographical location, criteria, grade-level assignment, language, Zoom interviews, and one data point – teacher interviews. Different data results may have resulted with the use of a different set of delimitations.

Limitations

An important limitation of this study was the lack of racial diversity, as all the participants were White. Hence, this study is limited in terms of answering questions about the interplay of race. Another important limitation was the lack of gender diversity. This limitation was due to the invitational nature of the study which created a homogeneous group of 15 participants who were all women. One man did agree to be interviewed and was selected as a participant; however, he failed to keep any of the many rescheduled appointments. Different data results may have resulted with the use of a more diverse group of participants. Other limitations included the small geographical area of the sample, the memories of the participants, and the biases of the participants.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was conducted amid a novel event – the rebooting of school during the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic – with 15 teachers from one school district in the state of Arkansas. It fills the gap in the empirical literature on elementary teachers' social interaction experiences with struggling readers during the pandemic-induced social restrictions of the 2020-2021 school

year. Replicating this study in the 2021-2022 school year in a different school district that will be rebooting school face-to-face for the first time would provide a richer description of the phenomenon. Also, replicating this study with middle and/or secondary teachers would add to the teacher description of the phenomenon. In addition, replicating this study in the 2021-2022 with student interviews would add the student perspective to the phenomenon.

Although the methodology of this study was looking for the collective experiences of elementary teachers with their struggling readers, interesting distinctions emerged. So, my future work could include using my data with more of a comparative case study focus. There are various ways that the data could be disaggregated to consider differences that existed within the collective experiences. For example, I could (a) explore differences in the settings for struggling readers – on-site vs. remote learning situations or younger struggling readers vs. older struggling readers – asking *how did the pandemic affect instruction in different settings*? or (b) explore differences between virtual teachers and on-site teachers asking the question, *how did teachers differ in their responses and reactions?*

I could also expand on my findings from this study. For example, I could (a) expand on the importance of building relationships to support struggling readers, asking *how does caring relate to reading instruction?* (b) focus on instruction supporting students returning to school by asking the question, *how does holding high expectations help teachers recognize growth?* (c) situate my research in the working theories about the importance of place and space in classrooms, asking *how do teachers intentionally create spaces for student talk?*

The COVID-19 world-wide pandemic created a unique, naturalistic experiment for researchers to investigate teaching and learning during the disruption to school as usual (Ostroff, 2020). There will be even more research that will be undertaken to explore the short-term and the

long-term impacts of the educational changes precipitated by the pandemic. Some of that research should be conducted related to struggling readers to inform families, educators, educational leaders, and policymakers on the essentials and the priorities for struggling readers during and beyond the pandemic.

Summary

Utilizing a theoretical framework of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, this transcendental phenomenological study explored on-site and virtual school elementary teachers' experiences with their struggling readers as they rebooted school amid the COVID-19 world-wide pandemic in one school district located in the state of Arkansas. Credible data from survey questions and in-depth interviews with 12 on-site teachers and three virtual school teachers were conducted and analyzed, wherein three major themes and ten sub-themes emerged. The three major themes were (a) relationships that include social interaction can mitigate emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers, (b) school absence can cause emotional and/or academic difficulties for struggling readers, and (c) peer collaboration is vital to the learning process for struggling readers.

Although there has been a growing body of research in pandemic-related literacy practice and research, there was a need in the literature to bring to light the social interaction experiences that existed for elementary teachers, both on-site and in virtual school, with their struggling readers during the pandemic-induced social restrictions of the 2020-2021 school year. Drawing upon this need, this study was designed and carried out, with the findings providing some insight into what was important with struggling readers during the pandemic and beyond.

This insight provided by the participants addressed the gap in the literature by giving a voice to teachers who bravely started the 2020-2021 school year during the historic world-wide

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pandemic. This study provides insight to educational leaders and educators as they assist their struggling readers in rebounding from the effects of the pandemic and work to improve the quality of schooling for struggling readers now and in the future. This study encourages educators to prioritize struggling readers' emotional and academic health and to plan into the curriculum opportunities for struggling readers to build positive relationships through social interaction with their teacher and their peers. Educators are urged to be a strength-spotter rather than a deficit-detective when it comes to their struggling readers' progress and growth, focusing on creating accelerated learning opportunities. Additionally, it is recommended that educators teach their students social norms, how to give encouragement to others, and how to celebrate to properly communicate and build community.

In conclusion, this study has brought to light through the pandemic perspective of its 15 teachers that relationships are the most important aspect of learning for struggling readers and that social interaction, proximity, looking at others' mouths/faces/lips, and a focus on the emotional health and attendance of struggling readers are vital to building those relationships and ultimately for learning.

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Appendices

Appendix A: IRB Approval

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

To: Wyann Stanton
                 BELL 4188

From: Douglas J Adams, Chair
                 IRB Expedited Review

Date: 02/22/2021

Action: **Exemption Granted**

Action Date: 02/22/2021

Protocol #: 2101310117

Study Title: Struggling Readers: Elementary Teachers' Perceptions During Educational Changes
                 Precipitated by COVID-19 Responses

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

cc: Vicki S Collet, Investigator

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Interview Questions	Probes
Please think back to what you thought this 2020-2021 school year was going to be like with social restrictions due to the C19P. …Has there been anything that surprised you? …Has there been anything that was worse than you thought it would be? …Has there been anything that was better than you thought it would be? Can you share a story that would describe what it is like to be an elementary teacher of SRs during the COVID-19 Pandemic? Would you say that you have more or less SR than you have had in the past? Do you have any data?	Could you explain that a little bit more? Tell me more. Can you think of a story?
Thinking now about your SRs – who they are, what qualities they have, and how they act during reading. Let me ask you… Before school started this school year, what did you think SRs were going to be like due to the interruption of instruction in the spring and summer? Overall, what are your perceptions of SRs this school year during the present pandemic? What are some characteristics of SRs that you have noticed this year? (Who SR are, their features or qualities) What are some behaviors of SRs that you have noticed this year? (How SR act during reading, things SR do) What are some needs of SRs that you have noticed this year? (What SR need help with) *Thinking about the social restrictions that have been put into place due to the pandemic…* What are some characteristics of SRs that you have noticed because of social restrictions? (Who SR are, their features or qualities) What are some behaviors of SRs that you have because of social restrictions? (How SR act during reading, things SR do)	Could you explain that a little bit more? Tell me more. Can you think of a story?

Interview Questions	Probes
What are some needs of SRs that you have noticed because of social restrictions? (What SR need help with) Are there any characteristics, behaviors, or needs of SR that are different now compared to before the pandemic? Do you think there is a difference in the human interaction SRs are receiving at school this year? How do you perceive this difference might be affecting SRs?	
Thinking now about assisting your SRs… *Let me ask you some questions about learning activities…* What are some learning activities for reading that you have typically done with your SRs to help meet their needs but haven't been able to do because of the current pandemic? Are there any learning activities for reading that you have chosen to do despite social restrictions? Are there any modified, innovative, or different learning activities that you have done for your SRs? *Let me ask you some questions about student collaboration…* What are some student collaboration activities for reading that you have typically provided for your SRs to help meet their needs but haven't been able to do because of the current pandemic? Are there any student collaboration activities for reading that you have chosen to do despite social restrictions? Are there any modified, innovative, or different student collaboration activities that you have done for your SRs? *Let me ask you some questions about digital resources…* Are you using computer/digital resources more/less with SRs to meet their needs during the current pandemic? Do you think SRs have been helped with more/less computer/digital resources? How?	Could you explain that a little bit more? Tell me more. Can you think of a story?
Do you think SRs have been hindered with more/less computer/digital resources? How?	

Interview Questions	Probes
Is there anything else you would like to share with me about you and your SRs?	Could you explain that a little bit more?
Is there anything else that you can think of that you are doing to assist your SRs during the current pandemic?	Tell me more.
	Can you think of a story?

Appendix C: Participant Selection Survey

Invitation to Participate

If you are an elementary classroom teacher who works with struggling readers, I would love to invite you to participate in my dissertation research study. Please help me by letting me interview you one time via Zoom for about 45 minutes regarding your perceptions of struggling readers during COVID-19.

Name?

May I interview you one time via Zoom about your perceptions of struggling readers during COVID-19?

Survey Questions

What is the best time of the day and best method to contact you?

Email Address?

Phone Number?

What grade level do you teach?

What Elementary School are you at?

How have you taught struggling readers this school year: in-person, online, hybrid, or a combination?

How many years have you been a teacher?

What are all your certification and licensure areas?

What is your highest degree?

Thank you for your willingness to help me with my dissertation research study. If you have any questions, please contact Wyann C. Stanton.

If your information submitted in the survey qualifies you to participate in the study, I will contact you to complete the consent form and set up an interview. If you do not participate in the study, your survey responses will be destroyed. Your anonymity will be maintained throughout the study. No real names and no location names will be used in the study. All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

What Participants Should Know About the Research Study

Who is the principal researcher for the study?
The principal researcher is: Wyann C. Stanton

What is the purpose of this research study?
The purpose of this study is to explore elementary teachers' perceptions of challenges faced by struggling readers, as well as teacher practices to meet the needs of struggling readers, within the context of social restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

What am I being asked to do?
You are being asked to participate in an interview, which will last approximately 45 minutes. Interviews will be conducted via Zoom. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?
There are no anticipated risks for participation in this study, with only a slight inconvenience of time related to the interview.

What are the possible benefits of this study?
Participating in the study will provide a chance to reflect on personal perceptions.

How long will the study last?
The study will consist of one 45-minute interview.

Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?
No, there is no compensation for participation in this study.

Will I have to pay for anything?
No, there will be no cost associated with your participation.

What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?
If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate. Also, you may choose not to participate at any time during the study.

How will my confidentiality be protected?
All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy. Your anonymity will be maintained throughout the study. No real names and no location names will be used in the study. You may withdraw from the study at any time. Data will be stored on paper in a secure area and electronically as audio recordings and digital files on a password-protected computer for a period of three years past the completion of the study.

Will I know the results of the study?

You will have the opportunity to review any publishable or publicly available documents resulting from this study. At the conclusion of the study, you will also have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the Principal Researcher, Wyann C. Stanton. You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

What do I do if I have questions about the research study?
You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher, or the Supervisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Principal Researcher: Wyann C. Stanton   Supervisor: Dr. Vicki S. Collet

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

> Ro Windwalker, CIP
> Institutional Review Board Coordinator
> Research Compliance
> University of Arkansas

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

_____   _____
Participant's Signature   Date

I agree to have the interview audio recorded and transcribed, recognizing that data will be de-identified with pseudo-names and kept in a secure location.

_____   _____
Participant's Signature   Date