

Literacy Professional Learning: A Qualitative Study Among Elementary School Teachers

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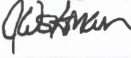
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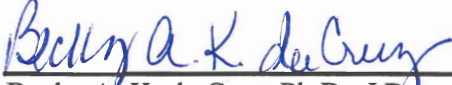
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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study used narrative inquiry to examine the experiences of K-3 teachers as they completed the Georgia Literacy Academy online professional development program. Through in-depth interviews with eight Georgia elementary teachers, the study explored how educators made meaning of the required online training, how the program influenced their instructional confidence and literacy practices, and what professional needs remained unmet after completion of the modules. The narratives highlighted teachers' perspectives as they navigated the implementation of a major statewide literacy initiative within their K-3 classrooms. Findings indicated that the training validated many existing classroom practices while also encouraging teachers to incorporate new instructional strategies aligned with literacy instruction and the Science of Reading. Many participants reported how completion of the modules strengthened their confidence, preparedness, and self-efficacy in teaching literacy. At the same time, teachers identified a continued need for sustained support beyond the online coursework, particularly through opportunities for collaboration, modeling, and practical application. Implications of this study suggest as school districts work to strengthen literacy instruction aligned with the Science of Reading, ongoing and job-embedded professional development is essential to support effective classroom implementation. Additionally, because self-efficacy influenced how teachers engaged with and applied the training, districts should intentionally design professional development experiences that build teachers' confidence through supported practice, peer feedback, collaboration, and opportunities to observe student growth and instructional impact.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction to the Study**

Reading is a pathway to lifelong learning as well as educational and vocational success. Low achievement in reading has negative long-term consequences for individuals, which can include low earning potential, an inability to compete in the global job market, and generally low productivity (Fiester, 2010). Murnane et al. (2012) argued that advanced literacy is needed in today's 21st-century world, as the challenges facing today's youth will only grow in number and severity. Advanced literacy skills could allow students to critically consider conflicting arguments and thoughtfully discern various positions to make well-reasoned judgements about them. Yet, recent national data reveal troubling trends. In 2023, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported a 4-point decline in reading scores from the previous year and a 7-point decline from a decade earlier (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2023).

Reading proficiency by the end of third grade is widely recognized as a pivotal educational milestone. McNamara et al. (2011) found that students with lower levels of reading achievement in first grade continued to demonstrate lower reading achievement through third grade, with the gap between them and their peers widening over time. Conversely, Lesnick (2010) reported that students who read at or above grade level by third grade were more likely to experience successful academic outcomes in later grades, graduate from high school, and enroll in college. Although the importance of early

reading development is well established, equipping all students with strong literacy skills remains a persistent challenge.

Teaching reading is a particularly complex and daunting task. Because effective reading instruction is not intuitive, it demands specialized training grounded in an understanding of how language and reading develop. Teachers must have explicit knowledge on the components of reading, including phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, in order to accurately diagnose reading difficulties and implement targeted, evidence-based instruction (Moats, 2020; Seidenberg et al., 2020). When teachers lack this foundational literacy knowledge, they may be unable to meet the needs of diverse learners, particularly those at risk for reading failure. As a result, insufficient teacher preparation in literacy can undermine efforts to close achievement gaps and improve reading outcomes for all learners.

As noted by Kent et al. (2013), reading instruction is “perhaps a teacher’s most complex and challenging endeavor” (p. 1). However, many elementary school teachers are prepared as generalists, with training that spans multiple content areas rather than focusing deeply on literacy. This broad preparation can lead to limited content knowledge and a lack of linguistic expertise related to the English language and foundational components of reading (Donovan et al., 2022; Peters-Burton & Botov, 2017). Ideally, reading difficulties should be addressed proactively through evidence-based instruction; yet many teachers lack both the content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge required to deliver high-quality reading instruction, especially for struggling readers (Amendum & Liebfreund, 2019; Cohen et al., 2017; Pittman et al., 2020). To meet diverse literacy needs, teachers must not only develop specific intervention strategies but

also be provided with ongoing opportunities to reflect on and evaluate the effectiveness of the professional development training they receive.

This issue persists, in part, because teachers enter professional learning opportunities with widely varying levels of literacy knowledge, instructional experience, and confidence in their ability to teach reading effectively. These differences shape how teachers engage with professional development and how they interpret and apply new instructional practices. Compounding this challenge is the fact that professional development is often delivered as a one-size-fits-all experience, despite teachers being at different stages of their careers and possessing varying levels of prior knowledge (Fairman et al., 2023). As a result, professional learning opportunities may not be equally meaningful or effective for all teachers, limiting their impact on classroom instruction and student outcomes.

Teacher engagement in professional development is further influenced by contextual factors such as autonomy, instructional support, and perceived relevance. Coldwell (2017) found that teachers are more likely to participate passively in professional development when they lack opportunities to apply new learning in their classrooms or have limited control over the focus of their professional growth. Similarly, Kwakman (2003) identified professional attitudes, instructional pressures, and the perceived lack of meaningfulness of professional development activities as significant barriers to active participation. Together, these factors highlight the need to design professional learning that is responsive to teachers' prior knowledge, context, and instructional realities, especially in light of recent policy efforts to improve early literacy outcomes.

## **Overview of the Problem**

In Georgia, reading outcomes reflect national concerns regarding early literacy achievement. The Georgia Milestones ELA assessment evaluates students' grade-level proficiency in key literacy domains, including comprehension, vocabulary development, and written expression, which are essential for academic success across content areas. Performance at or above the proficient level indicates that students can comprehend grade-level texts and apply foundational literacy skills. According to the Georgia Department of Education (2025), based on results from the Georgia Milestones English Language Arts assessment, only 39% of third-grade students scored at proficient or above in English Language Arts in Spring 2023. These results highlight persistent challenges within the state's literacy landscape and have prompted Georgia to direct attention and funding toward improving K-3 literacy instruction.

On April 13, 2023, the state enacted the Georgia Early Literacy Act. A key component of the legislation required all kindergarten through third-grade teachers to complete training on the Science of Reading, structured literacy, and foundational literacy by July 1, 2025. While districts and schools were granted flexibility in how the training was implemented and monitored, the county where this study was conducted, required all K-3 teachers, regardless of prior training or certification, meet the mandate through the Georgia Department of Education's Georgia Literacy Academy (GLA).

The Georgia Literacy Academy (GLA) includes a series of ten modules totaling approximately 25 hours of professional learning. Module lengths range from one to four hours, and all coursework is housed on the Georgia Learns platform, a learning management system designed to provide flexible access to professional learning for

education stakeholders across the state. The GLA training emphasizes evidence-based practices aligned with the Science of Reading, structured literacy, and foundational literacy.

Georgia's approach, mandating teacher training in evidence-based practices, represents an effort to address such concerns by strengthening instructional capacity at the classroom level. However, little is known about how teachers experienced the Georgia Literacy Academy training modules, what knowledge they gained from the training, what gaps remain after the training, and how participation influenced their instructional practices. Teachers' perceptions are critical, as the effectiveness of any professional learning initiative ultimately depends on how it is enacted in classrooms. To strengthen reading instruction statewide, it is essential to understand the knowledge, supports, and conditions K-3 teachers need to effectively apply GLA principles in practice.

Despite the statewide scope of the initiative, research focused on teachers' experiences with the Georgia Literacy Academy remains scarce. Furthermore, as Kehoe and McGinty (2024) noted, rural school contexts present unique challenges in which instructional practice, teacher knowledge, and professional confidence intersect in distinct ways. Examining how rural teachers engaged with the GLA is particularly important, given their often-limited access to resources and professional networks. Without such insight, it is difficult to evaluate whether the Georgia Literacy Academy meets its intended goals or requires refinement to support teachers and improve student literacy outcomes more effectively.

## **Purpose of the Study**

In response to the statewide mandate for K-3 teachers to complete training in evidence-based literacy practices, the school district in this study required all K-3 teachers to satisfy the requirement through the Georgia Literacy Academy, an online, self-paced, series of professional training. The purpose of this qualitative, narrative study was to explore the experiences of K-3 teachers as they completed the Georgia Literacy Academy (GLA) professional development program. Through in-depth narratives from eight Georgia teachers, this study sought to understand how educators made meaning of the required online training, how it influenced their instructional confidence and practices, and what professional needs remained unmet after completion.

Because the GLA was designed to promote evidence-based literacy instruction grounded in the Science of Reading, understanding teachers' experiences provides critical insight into the program's effectiveness, sustainability, and practical impact in classroom settings (Powell & Bodur, 2019). While substantial research exists on professional development broadly, individual programs such as the GLA have rarely been examined in depth, particularly in rural contexts where access to resources and support may be limited (Asterhan & Lefstein, 2024; Kehoe & McGinty, 2024). This study addresses that gap by capturing teachers' voices as they navigated the implementation of a major statewide literacy initiative in K-3 classrooms.

Accordingly, this study was guided by three research questions that reflect the problem and focus of the investigation. Findings from this study have the potential to inform teacher education programs, guide policymakers in designing professional

development that aligns with teachers' realities, and ultimately strengthen early literacy instruction in Georgia schools.

### **Research Questions**

The study was guided by the following research questions:

**Research Question 1.** What experiences did K-3 teachers have before, during, and after the mandated statewide online literacy professional development training?

By interviewing teachers after they participated in mandated statewide online literacy professional development training, I achieved the overall purpose of providing K-3 school teachers an opportunity to explain their experiences with the rollout, implementation, and impacts of the mandated professional development training.

**Research Question 2.** How did the meaning K-3 teachers made of their experiences during mandated statewide online literacy professional development training impact their classroom practices?

This question aimed to find out about how the teachers learned (andragogy) during their completion of the training modules and if these understandings led to changes in classroom strategy implementation or instructional practices.

**Research Question 3.** To what extent did the mandated statewide online literacy professional development training modules impact teacher K-3 teachers' self-efficacy regarding literacy?

This research question focused on understanding the impact the professional development training had on teachers' self-efficacy regarding teaching reading. This idea was directly related to the teachers' beliefs about themselves and their ability to provide high-quality literacy instruction. There is often a correlation between teachers' self-

efficacy beliefs and their evidence-based literacy practices in the classroom. This stance aligned with my aim to explore the experiences of teachers and their associated reactions, perceptions, and beliefs after participating in required professional development modules.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Two theories made up the conceptual framework for this qualitative research study: meaning making and self-efficacy. These theories are closely related to the processes that teachers experience when engaging in professional development. During training, educators may be confronted by new ideas, different methods and strategies for teaching skills, and various paradigms for instruction than they are accustomed to using in their classrooms. The extent to which teachers adapt or maintain their original beliefs and the behaviors they exhibit after the training, by utilizing new strategies or maintaining previously employed techniques, indicate how the educators made meaning of the concepts. Additionally, the way that teachers feel and how they believe about their abilities to successfully instruct learners has a substantial impact on their decisions and actions in the classroom and on students.

The first theory, meaning making, was developed by Robert Kegan. This constructive-developmental theory describes how individuals construct meaning and the systems of thinking they utilize to organize (and re-organize) their ideas and beliefs about the world (Kegan, 1980). More specifically, as individuals have new experiences, they make sense of these events in the context of their own lives. Once the individual has incorporated these experiences into their own understanding, they then act on their unique reality. The meaning-making process occurs over the course of time and experience, and it develops over the course of one's lifespan (Ignelzi, 2000). Individuals

who are flexible and responsive when tackling challenges must possess the ability to make sense of themselves and their work in new ways, which is referred to as “self-authorship” (Kegan, 2000). Self-authoring individuals consult their principles and determine when difficult steps must be taken to adjust or correct a behavior (Helsing et al., 2008). While professional development is designed to positively impact educators, the cognitive schemas and behaviors of individuals must change and adapt to produce new behaviors.

The second theory, self-efficacy, was proposed by Albert Bandura. This social-cognitive theory hypothesized that self-efficacy affects an individual’s choice of activities, effort, and persistence (Bandura, 1977). People who have a low self-efficacy for a task may try to avoid it, while those who believe they are capable may more readily participate in the activity. Educators are faced with complex, dynamic problems that must be solved daily. Hence, it is vital that teachers have a positive sense of personal agency, which is the notion that they can “intentionally produce certain effects” by their actions (Bandura, 2018, p. 130). In fact, there is evidence that an initial increase in self-efficacy beliefs leads to increased teacher effectiveness, which further heightens self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1994). The possibility of enhancing the self-efficacy of teachers during professional development is an especially important concept. Bray-Clark and Bates (2003) argued that “the development of teacher self-efficacy through in-service training is important not only for immediate outcomes but also because such an approach lays the foundation for continuous improvements in teacher effectiveness” (p. 16). As K-3 school teachers are tasked with the monumental undertaking of teaching elementary school

students how to read, it is critical that teachers believe in their ability to help students succeed.

### **Epistemological Premises**

This research study was guided by a social constructivist worldview and sought to understand how K-3 teachers perceived their experiences participating in required professional development through a basic qualitative study. Constructivism theorizes that individuals make meaning of information throughout their lives by interacting with the world and interpreting these experiences within the context of their cognitive schema (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This perspective suggests that individuals construct unique realities from the wide variety of experiences they encounter. Patton (2015) notes: “constructionists study the multiple realities constructed by different groups of people and the implications of those constructions for their lives and interactions with others” (p. 121). This approach aligned with my research goals, as I aimed to understand how teachers experienced and reflected on professional development. My perspective also aligns with Merriam and Tisdell (2016), who state: “there is no single, observable reality. Rather there are multiple realities, or interpretations of a single event” (p. 9). Similarly, I focused on how teachers’ interpretations of the training content shaped their beliefs about reading instruction, classroom practices, and self-efficacy.

### **Methods**

During the study, I sought to understand how elementary school teachers perceived required professional development training modules through a narrative, case study design.

For my study, I utilized narrative inquiry to elevate the voices of classroom teachers as they discussed their experiences with the Georgia Literacy Academy. This is a particularly compelling method of gathering data because of its “approachability, artistic quality, and non-pedantic nature that values stories of laypeople” (Kim, 2016, p. 1). Educators engage in important, nuanced experiences every day that cannot be fully captured through numerical data, charts, or standardized measures. The daily work of teaching involves rapid decision-making, professional judgment, and emotional labor, as teachers respond in real time to diverse student needs, social dynamics, and instructional challenges. These experiences, shaped by classroom context, student interactions, and teacher knowledge, are inherently complex and relational; they resist simplification into quantitative measures. Narrative inquiry allows these varied experiences to be represented authentically, preserving the richness of teacher perspectives, the subtlety of classroom interactions, and the meaning teachers assign to their own practice. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert, “narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience” (p. 18). Accordingly, I analyzed qualitative interview data in multiple ways to explore how educators made meaning of their experiences before, during, and after the required GLA training modules. Due to the nature of the study, both purposeful and criterion sampling were used to select participants. Patton (2015) notes that criterion sampling is particularly effective for ensuring participants meet specific standards relevant to the research questions. All participants selected for the study had completed the required professional development modules and taught grades K-3. These sampling methods helped ensure that rich, in-depth qualitative data could be gleaned

regarding teachers' experiences engaging with the GLA professional development modules.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study lies in its potential to illuminate the interplay between teacher knowledge, instructional practice, and self-efficacy beliefs, particularly given the persistent gap between research and classroom practice (Kehoe & McGinty, 2024). Understanding these dynamics is critical because effective literacy instruction in the early elementary grades has a lasting impact on student outcomes, and reading difficulties become increasingly difficult to remediate after third grade (Varghese et al., 2016). Kehoe and McGinty (2024) emphasize that educational leaders must identify specific gaps in teacher knowledge to provide tailored, literacy-focused professional development, yet little is known about how teachers experience and respond to newly mandated training initiatives. This study addresses that gap by examining the experiences, perceptions, and responses of elementary teachers participating in statewide, literacy-focused online professional development. By capturing teachers' voices, this research contributes to the broader conversation on how professional learning initiatives can support effective early literacy instruction and enhance the preparation of educators to meet students' diverse literacy needs.

### **Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

The assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of the research study are explained below.

### *Assumptions*

As reading instruction is vital for early elementary school students, so ongoing professional development is critical for elementary school teachers, as they continue to refine their reading instructional practices to help students find success. It was assumed that all teachers who participated in the study completed the entire sequence of professional development modules required by the state (25 hours). Additionally, an assumption of the research was the participants provided honest and truthful responses. Finally, it was assumed that all participants taught K-3 students.

### *Delimitations*

This qualitative study examined teacher responses to interview questions. The sample consisted of a small, convenient sample of kindergarten, first, second, and third grade teachers. All educators taught elementary school in one county in Georgia. Since this case study was conducted with K-3 teachers in one county's school system, there was a relatively small sample size. Participants were selected based on years of experience, availability, and time constraints. These grade-level educators were selected, as grades K-3 are pivotal for students in mastering the principles of literacy. Further, grades K-3 are the focus of current early literacy mandates.

### *Limitations*

Limitations of the study included the ability of participants to accurately recall, recollect, and retell their thoughts and feelings at various points in the professional development process. Additionally, the data that were gathered and analyzed was limited to the information the participants in the study provided the researcher. Finally, due to the context-specific nature of qualitative research, the study has limited reproducibility.

## **Definitions**

**Georgia Literacy Academy:** developed in partnership with the Rollins Center for Language and Learning and Cox Campus; International Dyslexia Association accredited K-3 structured literacy program on the Georgia Learns platform (Georgia Department of Education, 2026)

**Literacy:** the ability to read, write, speak, and listen that allows individuals to communicate effectively and make sense of the world (National Literacy Trust, n.d.)

**Professional Development:** activities and interactions that increase teachers' knowledge and skills, improve their teaching practice, and contribute to their personal, social, and emotional growth (Cohen et al., 1993)

**Science of Reading (SoR):** “a convergence of accumulated and evolving findings from research regarding reading processes and reading instruction (pedagogy) and how the two are implemented across contexts that interactively bridge cultural, social, biological, psychological, linguistic, and historical bases of learning” (International Literacy Association, 2023)

**Self-efficacy:** the assessment and belief in one's ability to impact a particular outcome in a task-based scenario (Bandura, 1977)

**Teacher Self-efficacy:** “the extent to which the teacher believes he or she has the capacity to affect student performance” (McLaughlin & Marsh, 1978, p. 84)

## **Chapter Summary**

This document is divided into six chapters. Chapter I of the research study introduces the research problem and rationale, presents the significance of the study, and states the research questions. It also establishes and defines the theoretical framework and

research design. Chapter II provides the literature review, discusses key topics, background information about the topic, and an overview of the research topic. Chapter III details the methodology and research design, including the site and participant selection, data generation procedures, data analysis methods, and ethical considerations. Chapter IV presents narrative profiles of each participant in the study, offering contextual details to support the interpretation of the findings in subsequent chapters. Chapter V identifies and discusses the themes that emerged from the teachers' narratives, highlighting patterns and insights that illustrate their experiences with the Georgia Literacy Academy professional development. Chapter VI provides a discussion of the findings in relation to previous research, highlights the study's limitations, presents recommendations for educational practice, and offers implications for policy and classroom implementation, as well as directions for future research.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Reading Instruction**

While most children will learn to speak automatically, the same is not true with reading; instead, direct, systematic, and explicit reading instruction is required to gain the necessary skills to become a fluent reader (Rayner et al., 2002). While there are a great number of skills that students must possess to read proficiently, the same is true of the vast requirement of knowledge of teachers who teach reading. To expertly teach reading, teachers must possess a broad range of knowledge that includes an understanding of the basics of reading psychology and development, language structures underlying word recognition and language comprehension, the use of best practices across all components of reading instruction, and the use of validated, reliable, and efficient assessments to inform classroom instruction (Moats, 2020). While a great deal of research has been conducted regarding the necessity for direct instruction in the skills of reading, there is still a significant gap between the scientific research and classroom practice (Castles et al., 2018). One significant gap is that teachers often deviate from evidence-based instruction in the classroom, as much of this research-based information is not provided to teachers in their teacher preparation programs, curricula, and professional development training (Moats, 2020). Unfortunately, research has shown that teachers are unlikely to develop deeper knowledge of concepts related to reading through teaching alone (McCutchen et al., 2002; Pittman et al., 2020). Yet, for optimal student outcomes,

teachers must instruct students directly, systematically, and explicitly, all while imbuing students with an enjoyment and love of reading (Moats, 2020).

### **The Reading Wars**

The publication of Jeanne Chall's 1967 research synthesis, *Learning to read: The great debate* carefully examined previous reading research and explained the differences between two approaches to teaching reading. Essentially, Chall drew a distinct difference between whole word and whole sentence strategies and phonemic awareness and phonics skills. Chall's research concluded that a focus on phonics helped students learn to read better than a focus on whole words or whole sentence strategies (Kim, 2008; Rayner et al., 2002).

After the publication of Chall's research synthesis, Goodman promoted the whole-language approach. This method relies on a child's total experience with language, and Goodman argued that reading was a "psycholinguistic guessing game" (Kim, 2008, p. 373). In this method, a student used context clues and background knowledge to make predictions about the meaning of words; students were also encouraged to use pictures to help them decipher words (Rayner et al., 2002). One tenant of the whole-language approach was that the rules of phonics should not be taught directly (Rayner et al., 2002). Many proponents of whole-language eventually shifted to a balanced literacy approach that blended phonics and other reading-skills instruction while providing time for students to read complete texts (Riley, 2020). While phonics was included in the balanced literacy approach, a structured scope and sequence were lacking from the instruction; in favor of a structured approach, balanced literacy utilized whole and small group settings for reading and discussion (Riley, 2020).

One point that researchers seem to agree on is the ultimate purpose of reading is meaning making, an idea emphasized by Chall in some of the earliest research on reading (Semington & Kerns, 2021). Moreover, an integrated approach to reading instruction, which includes the five pillars of literacy and exposes students to a wide variety of texts, is essential for developing skilled readers (Chall, 1967; McCardle & Chhabra, 2005; Rayner et al., 2002). Although the reading wars highlighted the importance of phonics instruction while reinforcing meaning making as the ultimate goal of reading, they did not fully explain how the many skills involved in reading develop or interact during the reading process. Consequently, researchers began shifting their focus from debating instructional approaches to identifying the essential components that underlie proficient reading.

### **Components of reading**

As literacy research moved beyond the instructional debates of the reading wars, scholars sought to identify the essential skills that consistently support successful reading development across instructional contexts. Rather than offering a theory of how reading operates, this work synthesized empirical findings to clarify which components of reading operates, this work synthesized empirical findings to clarify which components of reading required explicit instructional attention. Armbruster et al. (2001), writing for the National Institute for Literacy based on the National Reading Panel's findings, identified five key components or early literacy: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. These interrelated components provide the foundation for proficient reading. To support optimal student outcomes, these skills must be taught both explicitly and systematically. Explicit instruction involves direct, clear

teaching, where the teacher provides structured guidance rather than expecting students to infer information. This approach requires teachers to have thorough knowledge of oral and written language structures (Moats, 2020). Systematic instruction ensures that skills are taught in a logical sequence, with prerequisite concepts introduced before more complex skills (Mesmer & Griffith, 2005; Spear-Swerling, 2019). Typically, children progress through predictable stages in learning to read, moving from phonological and phonemic awareness to phonics and then to word recognition (Brown, 2014). Mastery of these fundamental skills and their underlying subskills is essential for developing reading proficiency later in life (Moats, 2020).

Building on the framework of early literacy skills, the first pillar is phonemic awareness. Phonemes, the smallest units of sound, form the foundation of spoken language (Cassidy et al., 2010). Phonological awareness, the broader ability to recognize and manipulate sounds, syllables, and words, is a critical component of this pillar (Aşıkcan & Saban, 2021). Phonemic awareness, a more advanced phonological skill, enables students to identify, isolate, and manipulate individual sounds within words (Ehri, 2022). Understanding these sound-symbol relationships is essential before students can learn to read, as it allows them to connect written letters to spoken words (Moats, 2005; Sedita, 2001). This skill is widely considered the most fundamental for reading development.

The second pillar of early literacy is phonics, which builds directly on phonemic awareness by teaching students the relationships between letters and sounds. Phonics is an instructional approach that “emphasizes the connections between spelling (print) and sound (speech)” (Piasta & Hudson, 2022, p. 201). More specifically, it involves

understanding graphemes, single letters or letter combinations that represent individual sounds, to help students decode words (Ehri, 2022; Mesmer & Griffith, 2005). Phonics instruction provides students with a system for recognizing and remembering how words are spelled and pronounced, whether they follow predictable patterns or not (Sedita, 2001). By linking sounds to letters, phonics enables learners to manipulate and decode words, supporting the development of fluent and accurate reading.

The third pillar of early literacy is fluency, which builds on phonics by helping students read words accurately and automatically. Fluency is defined as “efficient, effective word recognition skills that permit a reader to construct the meaning of text” (Cassidy et al., 2010, p. 651). There are three components of fluency: rate, prosody, and automaticity (Rasinski, 2006). Fluent readers decode words effortlessly and group them meaningfully while reading silently (Rasinski, 2006). This skill allows students to read with expression and “in an effortless, flowing manner” (Hudson et al., 2005). Research indicates that fluency distinguishes proficient readers from struggling readers, as poor fluency often signals difficulties in reading comprehension (Stanovich, 1991). Students who can read words automatically and accurately are better able to focus on understanding the text, making fluency a critical component of reading proficiency (Seidenberg, 2017).

The fourth pillar of early literacy is vocabulary, which builds on students’ phonemic awareness, phonics and fluency to support comprehension. Vocabulary refers to “understanding the meanings of individual words” (Muter et al., 2004, p. 665). Researchers agree that vocabulary development is essential for both phonemic awareness and reading comprehension (Manyak et al., 2014; Sparks, 2013). Teaching vocabulary

can be challenging, however, because children enter school with widely varying levels of word knowledge (Sparks, 2013). Effective vocabulary instruction introduces words in multiple contexts, encourages active processing of word meanings, and provides repeated exposures to target words (Beck et al., 2013). In addition to quantity, the types of words students encounter are critical for building knowledge and supporting reading development (Neuman & Dwyer, 2009).

The fifth and final pillar is reading comprehension, which depends on the foundation built by the other four pillars. Comprehension begins with the ability to read words accurately and automatically (Duke et al., 2021). Yet, its ultimate goal is to equip students with strategies necessary to think critically about a text (Harvey & Goudvis, 2013). Instructional strategies such as questioning, clarifying, predicting, and summarizing help students actively engage with texts and improve understanding (Biancarosa, 2005). Harvey and Goudvis (2013) emphasized that students achieve the best outcomes when they read a wide variety of texts and integrate comprehension strategies as part of a rich, varied curriculum. Repeated use of multiple strategies helps embed these skills in memory, allowing students to apply them automatically during reading (Harvey & Goudvis, 2013). While some suggest that comprehension instruction should follow mastery of the other pillars, research indicates that simultaneous instruction across all five pillars produces the most effective outcomes for learners (Duke et al., 2021).

### **Simple View of Reading and Science of Reading**

As literacy research evolved, scholars sought theoretical models that could explain not only the essential elements of reading but also how these elements interact to

produce comprehension. This shift marked a move away from viewing reading as a collection of discrete skills toward understanding it as a coordinated cognitive and linguistic process (Castles et al., 2018). One of the most influential models to emerge from this work is the Simple View of Reading.

The Simple View of Reading, proposed by Gough and Tunmer (1986), conceptualizes reading comprehension as the product of two core components: word recognition and language comprehension. According to this model, proficient reading requires both accurate and efficient decoding of printed words and the ability to understand spoken language; if a student's skills in either of these domains are low, their reading comprehension ability will be compromised (Catts et al., 2005; Hoover & Gough, 1990; Hoover & Tunmer, 2018; Moats, 2020). Although described as "simple," the model captures a process where readers must decode words accurately and automatically, understand word meanings and syntactic structures, and draw upon background knowledge to construct meaning from text (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Moats, 2020). Research in cognitive psychology has demonstrated that automatic word recognition is essential for reading comprehension, as it reduces demands on attention and working memory, allowing cognitive resources to be allocated to meaning making processes (Perfetti, 2007).

Expanding upon the Simple View of Reading, Scarborough's Reading Rope provides a more detailed representation of the multiple, interwoven subskills that contribute to skilled reading (Kim, 2017; Scarborough, 2001). The Reading Rope illustrates how strands related to word recognition (such as phonological awareness and decoding) interact with strands related to language comprehension (like vocabulary and

background knowledge). Over time, these strands become increasingly integrated and automatic, highlighting the cumulative and developmental nature of reading proficiency. Scarborough's model was particularly influential in clarifying how early weaknesses in foundational skills can constrain later comprehension, while also emphasizing the role of oral language and knowledge in supporting reading development (Lonigan et al., 2018; Scarborough, 2001). The model has been widely used to inform instructional frameworks by illustrating how weaknesses in individual strands can disrupt the development of fluent comprehension (Duke & Cartwright, 2021).

Grounded in these complementary theoretical models, the Science of Reading represents an effort to synthesize decades of interdisciplinary research on reading acquisition and instruction. The Science of Reading refers to “the accumulated knowledge about reading, reading development, and best practices for reading instruction obtained by the use of the scientific method” (Petscher et al., 2020, p. S268). Evidence from cognitive psychology, linguistics, neuroscience, and education has consistently converged on the importance of systematic instruction in foundational skills, alongside rich language and knowledge-building experiences, for supporting reading development across diverse learners (Castles et al., 2018; Foorman et al., 2016; Seidenberg, 2017; Turker et al., 2025).

Despite this growing consensus, scholars have noted that translating basic research to classroom practice remains complex. As a result, ongoing research continues to examine how teachers' knowledge of reading theory and development influences instructional decision-making and the effective application of the Science of Reading instruction (Cunningham et al., 2004).

## **Disparity between research and instructional practices**

Despite growing consensus around the cognitive and linguistic functions of reading, translating this research into effective classroom instruction has proven far more challenging (Castles et al., 2018; Foorman et al., 2016). Much time and funding has been devoted to understanding how students learn to read, yet research findings have been slow to influence instructional practice (Duke & Block, 2012). The National Reading Panel report (2000) helped establish key areas for reading instruction, but the report was primarily intended to inform federal literacy policy rather than provide detailed guidance classroom teaching (Duke & Block, 2012). Subsequent work examining the cognitive and neuroscientific underpinnings of reading has advanced understanding of brain processes, decoding, and comprehension; however, relatively little research has addressed how these insights can be translate into effective reading practice (Castles et al., 2018; Perfetti & Stafura, 2014).

Studies exploring teachers' knowledge of language and literacy concepts indicate that many educators lack the specialized content knowledge necessary to implement evidence-based reading instruction effectively. Nevertheless, teachers remain on the front lines, making daily instructional decisions that significantly impact student learning, regardless of their preparation or understanding of reading theory (McCardle & Chhabra, 2005). These findings highlight a critical gap: although much is known about the Science of Reading, comparatively less is knows about the science of teaching reading.

## **Teacher Knowledge of Literacy**

Elementary teachers' content knowledge and use of evidence-based language and literacy practices are crucial, as early elementary school is when students develop the

foundational skills necessary for reading. Highly knowledgeable and skillful practitioners are required to ensure appropriate instruction for young children. However, extensive research indicates that many teachers lack essential literacy knowledge and that significant disparities exist in teachers' understanding of reading-related content (Cohen et al., 2017; Cunningham et al., 2004; Porter et al., 2022; Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2012; Washburn et al., 2011). Even when teachers possess strong literacy knowledge, it does not always translate into effective classroom practice (Cunningham et al., 2004; Kehoe & McGinty, 2024; Parrila et al., 2024). Instructional time spent on language and literacy related concepts, such as phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and oral language development, is most important for young students developing foundational literacy skills.

### **Need for Extensive Literacy Knowledge**

Teachers need extensive knowledge of language and code-based instruction to deliver high-quality, evidence-based instruction in learning to read (Cunningham et al., 2004; Moats, 1994; Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2012). Stated simply, teachers must know both what and how to teach for effective reading instruction to occur for students in early grades. Based on a comprehensive review of research on reading development, Armbruster et al. (2001), writing for the National Institute for Literacy identified five critical components of early literacy: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. These were identified as concepts that support word recognition (decoding and encoding) and language comprehension. Additionally, these components were identified as useful for helping students learn to decipher meaning from a text, expand their vocabularies, and build background knowledge. As students and their

learning needs are different, teachers must have a high level of expertise to provide individualized instruction and differentiate for learners (Moats, 2020). While content knowledge is critical, this is not enough to ensure adequate early reading instruction in the classroom. Early education professionals also must possess pedagogical content knowledge, which consists of the progression of reading skills, knowing the skills that underlie decoding and support language comprehension, and they must be able to use a variety of instructional strategies to help students develop proficiency in these skills (Kehoe & McGinty, 2024). Researchers have found many teachers lack both the content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge required to provide high-quality reading instruction, especially for struggling readers (Cohen et al., 2017; Pittman et al., 2020). It is imperative that teachers learn specific techniques regarding providing interventions to struggling readers, as the foundational skills must be developed for students to become successful readers (Amendum & Liebfreund, 2019). Even the most knowledgeable teachers may struggle when unique situations - which require specialized intervention for students - arise in the classroom (Cohen et al., 2017). Hence, there is a need for ongoing training for teachers to be well-versed in ways to remediate students' learning difficulties (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015). Teachers must possess in-depth knowledge of language structure and code-based concepts to provide accurate instruction and corrective feedback to students (McCutchen et al., 2009). A highly trained teacher plays a vital part in providing effective individualized instruction to all students.

### **Difference in Literacy Content Knowledge**

Language and literacy related content knowledge varies greatly between educators, and being a proficient reader is not sufficient to ensure effective classroom

instruction. Instead, teachers must possess specific content-related, evidence-based knowledge to deliver high-quality instruction in classrooms (Moats, 2019). A foundational study by Moats (1994) demonstrated this need as reading, language arts, and special education teachers performed poorly on a survey of linguistic tasks, suggesting that many lacked a thorough understanding of spoken and written language and would therefore struggle to teach those concepts to young readers. Subsequent research has found only modest improvements in teacher knowledge since that time (Binks-Cantrell et al., 2012; Cunningham et al., 2004; McCutchen et al., 2002; Puliatte & Ehri, 2018; Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2012). Further, teachers' understanding of language structure and literacy concepts continues to be uneven, underscoring the persistent knowledge gaps in pre-service and in-service educators likely stem both from preparation programs and ongoing learning opportunities (Moats, 1994; Porter et al., 2022).

An individual's perceived awareness of what they know or do not know is referred to as knowledge calibration, which is particularly important for educators. Research shows that individuals learn more effectively when they can identify areas where they need to focus their attention versus domains where they already have expertise (Cunningham et al., 2004). Cunningham et al. (2004) assessed 722 teachers of young children to compare their perceived versus actual knowledge of phonological awareness and phonics concepts. Teachers rated their confidence on a series of questions about linguistic skills, and their responses were compared to performance on objective assessments of the same concepts. The researchers found that, while teachers believed they were highly knowledgeable, their actual knowledge scores were significantly lower than their perceived knowledge, highlighting a persistent overestimation of skills critical

for early reading instruction. Similarly, Cohen et al. (2017) investigated the perceived knowledge of teachers regarding English phonology, orthography, and morphology. Teachers rated their confidence in content-related questions, and again, their confidence often exceeded their actual knowledge. These studies indicate that a persistent gap exists between the knowledge educators are expected to have and what they actually know.

Disparities in literacy knowledge can also differ across teacher roles in elementary schools. Porter et al. (2022) examined the literacy knowledge of classroom teachers, reading interventionists, and special education teachers using an assessment of foundational reading concepts, including phonics, morphology, and text comprehension strategies. Researchers found that reading interventionists demonstrated the highest level of content-related literacy knowledge, while special educators consistently had the lowest scores, despite working with students who often require the most intensive reading support. These findings indicate that gaps in teacher knowledge may disproportionately affect the students with the greatest literacy needs.

Clearly, there is a need for elementary educators to improve their literacy-related content knowledge to support emergent readers effectively. Evidence suggests that professional development focused on scientifically based reading instruction can increase teacher knowledge and influence instructional practice (Podhajski et al., 2009). Targeted, evidence-based professional development is essential to address this gap and equip teachers with the necessary understanding to deliver high-quality literacy instruction. Professional learning opportunities that deepen teachers' linguistic and instructional knowledge are critical for enabling educators to make informed, responsive instructional decisions that promote students' reading development.

## **Teacher Knowledge and Classroom Instruction**

The amount of knowledge a teacher has regarding literacy may or may not have a close relationship to the time teachers spend on reading instruction in the elementary classroom. Researchers have found disparate information regarding the relationship between teachers' knowledge and their classroom practices. Some studies have demonstrated a clear association between knowledge and literacy instruction. For example, McCutchen et al. (2002) found that higher scores on a teacher knowledge survey were correlated with greater observed use of explicit language and literacy instruction in the classroom. Similarly, Piasta et al. (2019) reported significant, positive correlations between early educators' language and literacy content knowledge and their classroom emergent literacy practices. Extending these findings, Jordan and Bratsch-Hines (2020) also examined the relationship between early elementary educators' knowledge of reading and their instructional strategies, finding that greater teacher knowledge was significantly associated with the use of comprehensive, multi-domain literacy instruction.

However, not all studies have found a direct or consistent relationship between teacher knowledge and classroom instruction. Piasta et al. (2009) found teachers' code-related knowledge was not directly correlated with the amount of time spent delivering code-related instruction in the classroom. In fact, the researchers observed that teachers with less content-related knowledge often used inaccurate examples and were less effective at correcting student errors. Related to this, McNeill and Kirk (2014) found that even teachers who demonstrated adequate knowledge of letter-sound associations and orthographic patterns did not necessarily implement this knowledge during spelling

instruction in their classrooms. More recently, Kehoe and McGinty (2024) reported that elementary school teachers did not consistently implement evidence-based instructional practices in their early reading classrooms. Taken together, these findings suggest there is not a reliable or uniform pattern linking teachers' knowledge to their classroom instruction (Hindman et al., 2020).

The inconsistency across studies indicates that teacher knowledge alone is insufficient for predicting instructional practices. Language- and literacy- instruction is a complex and multi-faceted task that requires extensive knowledge as well as the ability to select and apply a wide range of instructional strategies. Teachers make numerous instructional decisions related to literacy each day, and the relationship between what teachers know and what they do in the classroom appears to vary considerably across contexts and studies.

### **Teaching Self-Efficacy**

The notion of teacher self-efficacy is important because it impacts individuals' classroom practices and instructional decision-making. The concept was first conceived by the RAND Research Center in the late 1970s, when researchers first proposed that teachers hold beliefs about their ability to influence student (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). In the RAND study, teaching self-efficacy was defined as "the extent to which the teacher believes he or she has the capacity to affect student performance" (McLaughlin & Marsh, 1978, p. 84). Armor et al. (1976) found evidence that teachers' beliefs about their instructional capabilities helped explain differences in teacher effectiveness.

Building on this early work, Bandura's social cognitive theory further conceptualized self-efficacy as a key motivational belief. Bandura (1977) defined self-

efficacy expectancy as the belief that an individual has the knowledge, skills, and ability to execute a specific action, asserting that efficacy beliefs may be more influential than actual ability. Gibson and Dembo (1984) later distinguished a difference between general teaching efficacy and personal teaching efficacy, suggesting that teachers may believe certain instructional practices can improve student outcomes (general), while simultaneously doubting their own ability to successfully implement those practices (personal). Teaching self-efficacy expectancy, therefore, refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to directly influence student outcomes (Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011). This sense of awareness and confidence in one's instructional abilities is critical, as teachers who believe they can positively affect students are more likely to engage in practices that support student success (Goddard et al., 2000).

### **Sources of Self-efficacy**

Bandura (1977) defined an efficacy expectation as “the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcome” (p. 193). For individuals to persist when challenges or difficulties arise, they must believe they have personal agency to positively impact the situation. As Bandura noted, “the stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the more active the efforts” (p. 194). Expectations of efficacy are informed by four primary sources of information: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal. Together, these beliefs play an important role in shaping individuals' self-knowledge and motivation (Bandura, 1997).

The first source of self-efficacy is derived from mastery experiences. Bandura (1977) noted that as individuals experience success in their actions, their self-efficacy

increases. Conversely, unsuccessful attempts can lower efficacy expectations, particularly when failures occur early in the development process. However, Bandura (1997) emphasized importance of learning to overcome obstacles through self-motivated persistence, as positive behaviors can transfer to various situations. For example, as K-3 teachers engage in successful reading instruction (mastery experiences), their beliefs in their ability to teach reading may strengthen, thereby increasing their self-efficacy.

The second source of self-efficacy is vicarious experience. Through observing models of desired behavior, individuals may gain confidence in their own abilities or, in some cases, experience a reduced sense of confidence, especially when they have little prior experience. Modeling is most influential when the observed individual is perceived as similar to the observer or when the modeled behavior produces clear and observable outcomes (Bandura, 1997). For individuals with lower confidence or weaker self-efficacy beliefs, observing others successfully perform a task can strengthen beliefs in their own capabilities by demonstrating effective or more efficient ways to carry out the task (Bandura, 1997).

The third way to influence self-efficacy is through verbal persuasion. This technique is commonly used because of its ease and accessibility (Bandura, 1997). The idea is that individuals are verbally encouraged to believe they can overcome challenges they may have previously struggled with. Verbal persuasion can be positive or negative: encouragement can strengthen confidence, while criticism or doubt may undermine it. However, the impact of verbal persuasion is generally less powerful than other sources of efficacy information, as it lacks an experiential basis (Bandura, 1997). The effectiveness of verbal persuasion also depends greatly on the source of feedback. Encouragement or

affirmation from someone perceived as knowledgeable, credible, or respected within a specific context carries more weight than feedback from a less influential source.

The fourth source of self-efficacy is emotional arousal. Individuals often interpret their reactions to stressors and their moods as signals of their personal capabilities. Bandura (1994) explained: “people who have a high sense of efficacy are likely to view their state of affective arousal as an energizing facilitator of performance, whereas those who are best by self-doubts regard their arousal as a debilitator” (p.72). When individuals feel less stressed or more in control of their emotions, they are likely to experience greater confidence in their ability to succeed. It is also important to note that the four sources of efficacy beliefs can change over time, as life events and circumstances evolve.

### **Teaching Self-efficacy**

Fives and Buehl (2012) described teachers’ beliefs about themselves as “a messy construct”; although individuals hold views about their knowledge, these do not necessarily align with their abilities (p. 471). A teacher’s sense of self-efficacy can be either positive or negative, shaping how they approach challenges in the classroom. For example, a teacher with high self-efficacy might try new instructional strategies when students struggle, believing that persistence and adaptation can lead to improvement, whereas a teacher with low self-efficacy may avoid trying new approaches and feel that student difficulties are beyond their control. These beliefs influence not only the effort teachers invest, but also the goals they set for the students in their classrooms (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Teacher self-efficacy and student outcomes are closely intertwined. Positive student results can reinforce a teacher’s confidence and strengthen their sense of self-efficacy, encouraging continued effort and risk-taking in

instruction. Conversely, repeated student struggles may lead teachers to doubt their effectiveness, lowering self-efficacy and potentially influencing the strategies they use or avoid in future lessons (Guskey, 1987). This reciprocal relationship highlights that self-efficacy is both shaped by experience and influential in shaping teacher behaviors.

Beyond classroom behavior, self-efficacy also affects teachers' professional commitment. Coladarci (1992) found that teachers with higher self-efficacy demonstrated greater commitment to teaching and were more likely to remain in the profession. Expanding on this, Zee and Koomen (2016) noted that while self-efficacy did not directly determine retention, it influenced job satisfaction. Teachers with high self-efficacy experienced greater satisfaction, which encouraged them to stay in the profession; those with low self-efficacy were more susceptible to emotional exhaustion, reducing the likelihood of their staying in the teaching profession. Interestingly, research indicates that self-efficacy is not strongly correlated with years of teaching experience, suggesting that confidence is not automatically gained over time (Page et al., 2014; Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011).

This pattern may be explained, in part, by novice teacher overconfidence. Evidence suggests that beginning teachers often report relatively high self-efficacy early in their careers, sometimes before they have extensive classroom experience or fully developed pedagogical skills. For instance, McDowell et al. (2014) found that novice in-service teachers scored significantly higher on self-efficacy measures than pre-service teachers, suggesting that new teachers often enter the profession with elevated confidence that may not fully reflect their classroom competence. While this early confidence can reflect optimism and enthusiasm for teaching, it may not always align with actual

instructional skill. As novice teachers encounter the complexity of classroom practice and the challenges of diverse learners, their self-efficacy may fluctuate and gradually become more accurately calibrated to their experience.

The development and maintenance of self-efficacy are complex. Bandura (1977) argued that self-efficacy beliefs tend to be established early and are resistant to change. In the context of education, general self-efficacy beliefs are reflected in teacher self-efficacy, which refers to a teacher's confidence in their ability to effectively plan, deliver, and manage instruction. Because teacher self-efficacy is shaped by experience and perceptions of success, professional development, through providing vicarious experience, opportunities for success, and supportive context, plays a critical role in shaping these beliefs. In particular, professional development can provide vicarious experiences, allowing teachers to observe effective instructional practices that they believe they can implement themselves. These experiences help teachers refine their instructional approaches, build confidence in their abilities, and gradually recalibrate their teacher self-efficacy in response to real classroom challenges.

Even when teachers adopt new practices that should improve outcomes, Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) observed that self-efficacy often temporarily declines. During these periods, support and encouragement are critical (Guskey, 1986; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Holzberger et al. (2013) found both novice and veteran teachers experienced variations in self-efficacy over the course of a school year. This finding indicates that self-efficacy is not a constant construct but a dynamic, context-dependent belief that fluctuates over time. Teacher self-efficacy is also influenced by the context in which teaching tasks are performed (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Varghese et al.,

2016). Factors such as the quality and availability of instructional materials, student abilities and motivation, classroom environment, and access to technology can either support or hinder teachers' confidence in their instructional effectiveness. The significance of these variables differs for novice and veteran teachers, emphasizing the role of both experience and context (Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011).

There is some evidence that teacher self-efficacy is related to the academic achievement of students. Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to maintain an academic focus in their classrooms and implement strategies aligned with effective teaching practices (Gibson & Dembo, 1984). Holzberger et al. (2013) confirmed that higher teacher self-efficacy corresponds with better instructional quality over time. Confident teachers communicate higher expectations, persist in helping students master challenging content, and adapt instructional methods to support learning (Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011). Conversely, teachers with low self-efficacy may criticize students, persist with ineffective strategies, disengage from instruction, or give up on students (Gibson & Dembo, 1984). Although the link between self-efficacy and student achievement is indirect, teachers with strong self-efficacy consistently engage in practices that promote student learning (Guo et al., 2012).

### **Literacy Teaching Self-efficacy**

When children do not receive high-quality, evidence-based instruction early in their schooling from skillful practitioners, patterns of poor reading emerge, and these difficulties become increasingly challenging to remediate as students get older (Kehoe & McGinty, 2024). Effective literacy instruction requires teachers to make instantaneous decisions, adjusting instruction to meet students' needs in complex and diverse ways

(Pinnell, 2002). Many teachers find literacy instruction, with its wide range of student abilities, particularly challenging (Baumann et al., 2000). This challenge is closely related to self-efficacy, as teachers must believe they possess the requisite skills to carry out instructional tasks and support students in mastering literacy concepts (Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011). Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to try new instructional techniques and strategies to promote student success (Guskey, 1988).

While there has been an abundance of research regarding preservice teachers and their self-efficacy, far less research has focused on in-service teachers' perceived literacy teaching self-efficacy. In one of the earliest quantitative studies on self-efficacy and literacy, Armor et al. (1976) found that students demonstrated higher reading achievement in classrooms where teachers reported higher self-efficacy. Notably, little impact was attributed to teacher demographics; instead, student outcomes were more strongly associated with teachers' beliefs in their ability to positively impact student learning (Armor et al., 1976). These findings were later confirmed by Tschannen-Moran and Johnson (2011), who also reported that years of teaching experience and highest degree earned were not significantly related to literacy self-efficacy. Additionally, they found only moderate correlations between general teaching self-efficacy and literacy-specific self-efficacy, suggesting these constructs are related but distinct.

Higher levels of teacher literacy self-efficacy have been associated with more effective literacy environments and stronger use of evidence-based classroom practices (Guo et al., 2010, 2012; Justice et al., 2008; Varghese et al., 2016). Teachers who feel confident in their literacy instruction often create classrooms environments that foster greater student engagement and improved reading achievement through consistent use of

evidence-based strategies. For example, Guo et al. (2010) found that preschool teachers' self-efficacy beliefs positively influenced classroom quality and were associated with gains in students' print awareness. Similarly, Varghese et al. (2016) reported that growth in primary teachers' self-efficacy was associated with improvements in elementary students' literacy achievement. Guo et al. (2012) also found that teacher self-efficacy was a positive and significant predictor of fifth-grade literacy outcomes. Overall, positive literacy teacher self-efficacy for literacy instruction increases a teacher's confidence, shapes instructional decision-making, and ultimately supports improved student literacy outcomes.

Despite these findings, qualitative research examining teachers' self-efficacy related specifically to literacy instruction remains limited. An exhaustive search yielded only three qualitative studies focused on elementary teachers' perceptions of their literacy teaching self-efficacy. In the first study, Berry (2024) interviewed teachers regarding their perceptions of literacy teaching self-efficacy and the factors that impacted their self-perceptions. Teachers reported that professional development supported their literacy instruction; however, they also expressed frustration with limited instructional time and difficulty meeting diverse student needs in reading. The second study qualitatively examined elementary teachers' experiences during a transition from one core literacy instructional approach to another. Participants reported insufficient training, unclear guidance from leadership, feelings of overwhelm during the change process, and a simultaneous desire for instructional improvement (Arnold, 2024). The third study explored elementary teachers' perceptions of how working in a departmentalized setting influenced their literacy self-efficacy. Although trained as generalists, teachers were

expected to integrate literacy across content areas. Lawrence-Smith (2023) found that teachers felt unsupported by administration, lacked time for collaboration with colleagues, and experienced frustration with available professional development related to literacy. While all three studies emphasized the importance of literacy-focused training, the specific type and amount of professional development needed for teachers to feel confident in literacy instruction remained unclear.

### **Self-efficacy in High-needs Schools**

Understanding teacher self-efficacy in high-needs schools is particularly important. Students in rural schools (especially in the U.S. South) often experience higher levels of poverty, greater geographic isolation, and lower academic achievement than their peers in suburban or urban settings (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017). Because rural schools frequently face high teacher attrition and an increased need for intensive literacy instruction, supporting novice educators is especially critical for developing literacy teaching self-efficacy and for building a network of high-quality, committed early literacy teachers (Outlaw & Grifenhagen, 2021). Additionally, rural schools often employ a higher proportion of teachers who enter the profession through emergency certification or alternate certification pathways. Given these contextual factors, further research is needed to identify how teachers' literacy self-efficacy develops in rural settings. Novice teachers in rural schools may develop self-efficacy in unique ways compared to their counterparts in suburban or urban schools, as they frequently navigate challenging conditions such as high staff turnover, elevated rates of student poverty, and historically low literacy achievement (Reagan et al., 2019).

Research examining teacher self-efficacy across school contexts has yielded mixed findings. Knoblauch and Chase (2015) found teachers in rural and urban schools reported lower teaching self-efficacy than those in suburban schools. In contrast, Page et al. (2014) found no significant differences in self-efficacy between rural and suburban in-service teachers. Overall, empirical findings regarding teachers' self-efficacy in rural contexts remains limited. Nevertheless, there is a clear need to better understand how teachers' literacy self-efficacy develops and evolves over time, particularly in rural and high-needs schools.

### **Building Self-efficacy in Literacy**

A variety of professional development models have been utilized to cultivate teachers' literacy self-efficacy. Before instructional changes can occur, however, teachers must perceive the proposed changes as relevant to their own practice. Teachers with high self-efficacy who feel adequately supported often view instructional change as a challenge to be met and mastered, whereas teachers with low self-efficacy may perceive reform as a threat and resist projected changes (Gregoire, 2003). Research indicates teachers with higher self-efficacy are more likely to adopt new instructional strategies and implement innovations introduced in professional development (Guskey, 1987). Bandura (1997) suggested that slightly overestimating one's self-efficacy can promote perseverance and resilience when facing difficult tasks, whereas others argue that questioning one's self-efficacy may be necessary to reflect on and integrate new insights following challenges (Wheatley, 2002).

Researchers have conducted some quantitative studies on literacy and teachers' self-efficacy. Timperley and Phillips (2003) studied teachers who reported low self-

efficacy and held low expectations for students. After six months of literacy-focused professional development, these teachers' self-efficacy and expectations for student achievement increased. The researchers concluded that professional development must simultaneously address teacher beliefs and classroom instructional practices. Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009) examined the impact of different professional development formats on primary teachers learning a new literacy strategy. Teachers reported the highest self-efficacy when they participated in mastery experiences with follow-up coaching, whereas teachers who only observed demonstrations, engaged in planning, and practiced without follow-up coaching reported the lowest self-efficacy. Other research has found participation in quality professional development opportunities, such as teachers-as-readers groups or book clubs, can also increase literacy teaching self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011). However, not all findings are consistent; Varghese et al. (2016) reported no significant differences in self-efficacy between a control group and an intervention group of teachers participating in a coaching-based, professional development program.

### **Professional Development**

Teachers must participate in carefully designed professional development to strengthen their instructional practice. Participation in purposeful learning experiences advances teachers' knowledge and instructional skills (Kalinowski et al., 2020). High-stakes testing and increased accountability measures have intensified the need to strengthen teachers' competencies in order to enhance student outcomes has increased (Powell & Bodur, 2019). Teachers must also develop current knowledge, competencies, and skills to effectively support an increasingly diverse student population. In the context

of early literacy, these demands are reflected in recent state legislation and district policies that require K-3 teachers to complete professional development in research-based reading instruction and implement structured literacy instruction to support their students' reading development.

Researchers have identified several essential characteristics of effective professional development; these include a focus on specific content, sustained engagement over time, the use of models of effective practice, opportunities for collaboration, coaching or other expert support, feedback and reflection, and active learning components (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). These features promote meaningful learning experiences for teachers. Desimone and Garet (2015) emphasized the strong connection between professional development and classroom instruction, a point echoed by Steeg and Lambson (2015), who highlighted the importance of aligning professional development with teachers' instructional practices.

For professional development to have maximum impact, teachers must perceive the content as directly relevant to their daily classroom responsibilities and applicable to their instructional needs. Sims et al. (2021) noted the importance of teacher reflection and the adoption of new instructional approaches for meaningful change to occur. Similarly, Carrillo and Flores (2020) underscored the value of collaboration, noting that professional development benefits increase when teachers learn from one another's experiences, engage in problem solving, and share instructional strategies. When teachers have opportunities to discuss instructional challenges and reflect collaboratively, they are more likely to benefit from professional development sessions. The direct relevance of professional development to classroom instruction remains a key factor in producing

positive outcomes. Finally, Weathersby and Harkreader (1999) emphasized that ongoing, focused professional development supports both effective instruction and improved student achievement. These characteristics and conditions are particularly important when professional development is delivered through online formats.

### **Implementation of Professional Development**

Successful implementation of professional development depends on several critical components, which makes the analysis and evaluation of these programs particularly challenging. Although educators widely view professional development as beneficial, researchers have reached little consensus regarding how it functions or how it alters teaching practices (Kennedy, 2016). When teachers engage in professional development, they are expected to examine new information in relation to their existing knowledge, a process that can create a “change-provoking disequilibrium” (Woolfolk Hoy et al., 2009, p. 645). How teachers interpret and resolve this disequilibrium shapes their meaning making and can either strengthen or weaken their confidence in implementing new literacy practices. For professional development to succeed, teachers must integrate new ideas into their conceptual beliefs and classroom practices or, in some cases, modify their processes entirely. This process often proves difficult and time-consuming, particularly for teachers who have already established consistent instructional routines (Kennedy, 2016). When the gap between teachers’ current practices and the information presented becomes too great, teachers may disregard the new information altogether (Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008). Research indicates that teachers are more likely to adopt concepts introduced in professional development when those concepts align with their existing practices (Tillema, 2000). Therefore, professional development

must present new information in ways that help teachers recognize both the benefits and feasibility of incorporating alternative instructional approaches into their current practice.

Beyond implementation processes, several environmental factors influence the success of professional development. Guskey and Yoon (2009) asserted that leaders play a critical role in determining when, how, and for how long professional development should be delivered. Whitworth and Chiu (2015) further emphasized leadership's role not only in implementing professional development programs but also in fostering sustained instructional change. Decisions regarding whether external consultants deliver professional development or teachers collaboratively draw on their own expertise also influence program effectiveness. Additional factors that may affect professional development outcomes include teachers' working conditions, financial incentives, and access to curriculum materials (Asterhan & Lefstein, 2024). Collectively, these considerations underscore the complexity of selecting and implementing effective professional development for a given group of teachers.

### **Teachers' Beliefs about Professional Development**

In popular culture, teachers are often depicted as eager learners, excited to acquire information about the latest educational trends or as ridged authority figures, lording over their pupils with disdain. In reality, teachers have a wide range of attitudes toward professional development that range from "naysayers" to "enthusiastic" to "offended" (Patton, 2012, pp. 16-17). Invargson et al. (2005) surveyed teachers and found that they viewed receiving feedback, collaborating with colleagues to review student work, and engaging in follow-up activities as the most helpful aspects of professional development. Despite this, schools rarely consult teachers about the format or content of professional

development before implementation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). This lack of input proves particularly concerning because teachers often recognize what they need to improve their practice, yet professional development plans may fail to address these critical needs.

Teachers' perceptions of professional development strongly influence how they implement new learning in their classrooms (Whatley & Smith, 2023). Joyce and Calhoun (2010) further noted that these perceptions shape teachers' capacity to learn from professional development experiences. For teachers to perceive the training as useful, the content must remain relevant and directly connected to their specific classroom needs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Similarly, Kwakman (2003) found that teachers learned most effectively when the information connected to their daily tasks and instructional responsibilities. These findings underscore the importance of addressing teachers' specific content and relevance needs to maximize professional development outcomes.

An often-overlooked issue is the variation in teachers' knowledge levels and career stages during professional development participation (Fairman et al., 2023). Effective professional development must account for individual differences and provide appropriate scaffolding for learning, though this requirement presents challenges due to differences in teachers' prior knowledge (Delaco et al., 2022). Teachers may participate passively in professional development when they lack classroom support or autonomy in directing their learning (Coldwell, 2017). Howard (2021) found that inadequate support increased the likelihood of teacher disengagement from professional development, regardless of institutional mandates. Additionally, Kwakman (2003) identified

professional attitudes, instructional pressures, and perceptions of limited meaningfulness as factors that may deter full participation in professional learning opportunities. For professional development to be effective, planners must consider these varied factors and intentionally design experiences that address teachers' diverse needs.

### **Duration for Professional Development**

Research consistently indicates that the duration of professional development plays a significant role in its effectiveness. However, researchers have not established an agreed-upon minimum for adequate knowledge acquisition. Desimone (2011) suggested that professional development centered on a common theme include at least 20 hours of instruction, whereas Desimone and Stuckey (2014) identified a potential tipping point at approximately 14 contact hours for achieving positive effects. In their analysis, Guskey and Yoon (2009) found that programs offering 30 or more contact hours produced positive outcomes. Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of sustained engagement in professional development, as one-time workshops or brief seminars rarely produce lasting instructional change. Despite this general trend, Basma and Savage (2018) conducted a systematic review of teacher professional development and student literacy achievement and found improved student reading outcomes only when teachers participated in 30 hours or fewer of professional development. The researchers proposed several explanations for this discrepancy, including a focus on simpler, more targeted literacy practices, greater ease of classroom implementation, and reduced disruption to ongoing instruction and learning.

These findings suggest that both the duration and content of professional development require careful planning and execution to maximize teacher learning.

Beyond the number of contact hours, Gulamhussein (2013) emphasized that teachers need a minimum of 20 opportunities to practice a new skill to develop mastery.

Gulamhussein (2013) also highlighted the importance of ongoing support during the implementation phase of new practices. Collectively, this research reinforces the need for sustained professional development that supports teachers as they apply new strategies and instructional techniques in their classrooms.

### **Literacy Professional Development: Teacher and Student Outcomes**

In recent years, the literacy community has focused on designing professional development to train early childhood educators in systematic literacy instruction (Amendum & Liebfreund, 2019). Research indicates that professional development, with or without coaching, sometimes produces the intended teacher and student outcomes and at other times does not (Markussen-Brown et al., 2017). Podhajski et al. (2009) implemented targeted literacy professional development for first-grade teachers and observed increases in both teacher knowledge and student reading achievement. Similarly, Wasik and Hindman (2011) reported that students demonstrated increased proficiency in two of the three targeted language and literacy domains after teachers participated in professional development. Cunningham et al. (2015) and Jolly et al. (2023) found that teachers' knowledge of reading-related concepts increased following professional development. Medina et al. (2021) likewise reported that teachers perceived professional development focused on reading comprehension strategies as improving their instructional practices and contributing to positive changes in students' reading behaviors. However, not all studies have produced comparable results. Piasta et al. (2017) examined the effectiveness of a state-sponsored, literacy professional development course

for early childhood educators and found little to no change in educators' knowledge, beliefs, and practices during the 18-month study period. Similarly, Markussen-Brown et al. (2017) conducted a meta-analysis of literacy-related professional development literature and found no overall improvement in teachers' knowledge.

Additional research has raised questions about the impact of extended professional development. Piasta et al. (2020) examined a program that provided teachers with 30 hours of face-to-face literacy professional development accompanied by coaching and found no evidence that participation contributed to improvements in students' literacy learning. Collectively, these mixed findings highlight the need for further research to better understand how and why literacy-focused professional development does or does not produce the intended teacher and student outcomes.

### **Online Professional Development**

Educators can access a great deal of information about classroom practice, instructional materials, and professional development online. In recent years, online professional development has grown in popularity, allowing programs to reach more educators while using fewer financial resources. Some online professional development programs rely on self-directed learning, enabling participants to explore topics of interest independently and focus on issues most relevant to their practice (Beach & Willows, 2014). Other formats include synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid approaches. One large-scale model, termed a massive open online course (MOOC) for educators, presents unique design challenges, as courses must engage a diverse online audience (Hew, 2016; Lee et al., 2020).

Online professional development offers several advantages. Participants can engage at flexible times, work at their own pace, and review materials as needed (Wynants & Dennis, 2018). The online format allows participants to read text, watch videos, and listen to discussions at a comfortable rate. Because materials remain accessible in the online environment, users can revisit whenever necessary. Parsons et al. (2018) noted the advantages of online professional development for participants as they were able to develop broader professional networks, engage with new colleagues, and acquire new information. Powell and Bodur (2019) added that online platforms encourage communal learning, even among educators who might hesitate to participate in face-to-face interactions. The wide array of materials and flexible participation options enhances convenience and accessibility for users. However, Powell and Bodur (2019) cautioned that although online platforms increase access to professional development and materials, they do not guarantee high-quality experiences or automatically improve teacher and student outcomes.

### **Needs of Teachers for Online Professional Development**

While teachers' needs and preferences are especially important when designing professional development, online professional development presents additional challenges for instructional designers. Because the delivery medium differs from traditional formats, designers must adjust participant engagement, content delivery, and technical functionality to the needs and abilities of online learners. Dede et al. (2009) noted that although empirical research on online teacher professional development is abundant, it often lacks "teacher voice in its design" (p. 237). Gathering teachers' perceptions of design and implementation features is crucial for creating effective online

professional development, as this information can help ensure learning experiences that increase pedagogical content knowledge and transform instructional practices (Dede et al., 2009).

Lee et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of designing online professional development with features that positively influence teachers' beliefs about teaching. They also highlighted the need to deliver content in ways that align with participants' interests and abilities. Such alignment is essential if professional development is to improve classroom practices effectively. Although course participation can vary widely among individuals, evidence suggests that participants can still benefit if the material is presented in a usable and engaging format. Jacobsen (2019) found that even when participants did not complete an online course in its entirety, they reported learning new content-related information. Donovan et al. (2022) observed increased pedagogical knowledge following participation in online professional development. Participants require time to reflect on their practice and think about how to apply new material in their classrooms. Teachers especially valued experiences where they thoroughly engaged with the content and analyzed material deeply, as this time supported them in adjusting or refining instructional practices (Yurkofsky et al., 2019). Teachers also reported positive perceptions of online professional development that included clear objectives, structured modules, and the use of multimodal presentation styles (Wynants & Dennis, 2018). At times, teachers found online professional development lacking when content was not relevant to their classroom contexts, underscoring how a one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective (Powell & Bodur, 2019). Overall, although teachers' opinions of online professional development vary, reflections tend to be mostly positive. This suggests

strong potential for this type of learning in the future, provided designers and implementers carefully consider context, relevancy, and participant needs.

### **Coaching as an Extension of Professional Development**

Ongoing, embedded support remains an important consideration for teachers, even after they complete structured professional development. To retain knowledge gained through professional learning, teachers often require continued assistance to implement and apply instructional strategies in their classrooms (Amendum & Liebfreund, 2019). Walpole and McKenna (2013) described literacy coaching as school-based professional development delivered by reading specialists who support teachers' instructional efforts. Building on this definition, Dixon (2015) emphasized the importance of literacy coaches working alongside educators in their classrooms to support students' reading proficiency. Regardless of specific definitions, literacy coaches generally serve within schools to help teachers improve literacy instruction and, in turn, promote student achievement gains.

Effective literacy coaches must possess specialized knowledge of literacy processes, language acquisition, assessment, and instruction. They must also observe classroom instruction, provide supportive feedback, discuss assessment data with teachers, and model effective lessons (L'Allier et al., 2010). Even when coaches possess these skills, teachers may resist implementing recommended interventions or adjusting instructional practices (Parsons et al., 2018). Coaches often face the challenge of building trusting relationships while simultaneously advocating for school and district mandates (Bean & Ippolito, 2016). As a result, the importance of a collaborative relationship between teachers and coaches cannot be overstated. To foster trust and establish

productive working relationships, literacy coaches must maintain confidentiality, communicate clearly, and position themselves as collaborators working toward student success (L'Allier, 2010). Nevertheless, teachers may perceive coaching observations as intrusive or threatening unless clear expectations and boundaries are established at the outset of the relationship (Dixon, 2015). Additionally, Toll (2007) emphasized the importance of allowing teachers to identify areas for improvement or select instructional goals. When teachers choose the focus of coaching, they are more likely to adapt their instruction and demonstrate greater investment in the process. Although Schachter et al. (2018) highlighted the value of literacy coaching, they emphasized that effective coaching must address both instructional content and the relational processes that shape interactions between coaches and teachers. Because coaches often enact their roles differently, variations in coaching frequency, feedback practices, and instructional focus may influence teachers' responses to and acceptance of the coaching framework.

### **Impacts of Coaching**

Research on the effectiveness of literacy coaching for elementary school teachers remains mixed, with some studies reporting positive outcomes. In a mixed-methods study, Amendum (2014) examined teachers who received professional development followed by weekly coaching focused on supporting struggling readers. By the end of the academic year, teachers reported a shift in their literacy beliefs from a balanced literacy meaning-oriented approach to a more individualized balanced literacy framework. This shift reflected a greater recognition of the need to provide individualized literacy instruction, particularly during early reading instruction. Hsieh et al. (2009) found that literacy coaching increased teachers' use of instructional strategies targeting vocabulary,

phonological awareness, and print concepts. Similarly, Landry et al. (2009) reported improvements in both the quality of teachers' emergent literacy practices and the frequency with which they implemented these strategies in their classrooms. In contrast, other studies have found minimal effects of literacy coaching on teachers' instructional practices. Lonigan et al. (2011) compared two professional development models, one that included coaching and one that did not, and found no significant differences in teachers' classroom instruction. These mixed findings suggest that additional research is needed to better understand the conditions and variables that contribute to effective literacy coaching in elementary schools (Powell & Diamond, 2013).

Some research has also attempted to link literacy coaching to student reading outcomes. Swartz (2005) concluded that literacy coaching contributed more to reading gains in Grades K-4 than traditional professional development. Similarly, Walpole and Blamey (2008) found that schools employing literacy coaches were more likely to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets than comparable schools without coaching.

### **Meaning Making**

Robert Kegan developed a theory grounded in Piaget's constructive developmental framework, identifying five stages he termed *orders of consciousness*. Whereas Piaget's framework focused primarily on the cognitive development of children and adolescents, Kegan expanded these ideas to include both cognition and emotion through adulthood (Kegan, 1980). Kegan (1980) further explained that his model shifted the focus from innate stages of development to "include the processes that bring the stages into being" and the "internal experience[s] of developing" (p. 374). The theory rests on three core assumptions: individuals actively construct their own meaning; adults

vary in how they make meaning; and meaning making evolves across the lifespan as individuals encounter new experiences. Learning and teaching, therefore, are strongly influenced by how individuals make meaning (Ignelzi, 2000). As individuals change, the meanings they assign to events and experiences also change. Kegan (1982) explained that there is “no feeling, no experience, no thought, no perception, independent of a meaning-making context in which it becomes a feeling, an experience, a thought, a perception because we *are* the meaning-making context” (p. 11). Meaning thus emerges through individuals’ experiences and their responses to the situations they encounter. This concept has important implications for professional development, as two individuals can participate in the same training yet construct entirely different meanings from the experience.

Kegan (1994) identified three primary meaning-making structures in adulthood: the socialized, the self-authoring, and the self-transforming minds. Individuals operating within a socialized meaning-making structure seek external approval and rely on others’ beliefs and values to construct meaning. As individuals transition to a self-authoring meaning-making structure, they gain the capacity to reflect on others’ perspectives without allowing those perspectives to determine their beliefs or actions (Ignelzi, 2000). Taylor and Baxter Magolda (2015) noted that individuals “who grow into the *self-authoring capacity* develop their own internal philosophy for what to believe” (p. 18). Research has shown, however, that many adults in the United States do not consistently operate from a self-authoring mindset (Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Magolda, 2014). This finding is particularly concerning because individuals must reach the self-authoring stage to effectively navigate contradictions and complexity (Ouellette-Schramm, 2016). As a

result, professional development may have limited impact for individuals who have not yet reached this developmental stage. Those operating within a socialized meaning-making structure may show minimal engagement or disregard new information altogether, which presents a challenge for professional learning initiatives aimed at improving instructional practice. In contrast, individuals who reach a self-transforming meaning-making structure integrate multiple perspectives to refine and expand their self-authored philosophy (Taylor & Baxter Magolda, 2015).

Transitions represent a natural part of life; however, as Merriam (2005) observed, “not all life transitions become learning experiences” (p. 7). Individuals may reject experiences that conflict too sharply with prior knowledge; alternatively, they may ignore experiences that closely resemble prior experiences (Merriam, 2005). While it is common for organizations to promote new approaches, it is often difficult for individuals within the system to adapt or change. Kegan and Lahey (2009) explained this notion as an *immunity to change*, which includes unnoticed or unexamined assumptions and beliefs. They argued that for one to overcome this immunity, it was necessary to bring the underlying beliefs into the consciousness. Only then could the individual concurrently examine and reflect on their previous knowledge and the new information. Hence, professional development must strike a balance to be “discomforting, disquieting, or puzzling” enough not to be rejected, but interesting enough to be attended to and contemplated (Merriam, 2005, p. 8).

### **Chapter Summary**

The literature review examined early elementary reading instruction, educators’ literacy knowledge, self-efficacy, professional development, and meaning making.

Through this review, I identified two gaps in the scholarly research. First, Yurkofsky et al. (2019) noted that limited research has examined the outcomes that learners value in online professional development settings. Because the modules required by the state of Georgia are delivered entirely online, it is particularly important to understand which aspects of professional development participants find most useful and which components contribute to changes in teachers' instructional practices. Second, the literature reveals a gap in qualitative research examining current educators' literacy self-efficacy (Outlaw & Grifenhagen, 2021). Because self-efficacy strongly influences teachers' effort and persistence in the classroom, decision-makers must understand how professional development supports and reinforces positive teacher self-efficacy. Tschannen-Moran and Johnson (2011) asserted that "little is known about teachers' self-efficacy beliefs in the complex realm of literacy instruction and the antecedents of these beliefs" (p. 752). In today's volatile education climate, teachers regularly face challenges to their instructional competence. Hence, understanding teachers' beliefs about their ability to deliver evidence-based literacy instruction and how professional development shapes those beliefs, is critical. Through this case study, I sought to examine teachers' experiences before, during, and after completing the required Georgia Literacy Academy (GLA) modules. Understanding how teachers made meaning from professional development content, how they implemented instructional strategies, and how participation in the GLA influenced their literacy self-efficacy is essential to understanding how professional learning can support effective reading instruction and promote student literacy success.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methods**

In chapter three, I explain the research design selected to examine K-3 school teachers' experiences with literacy-focused modules housed on the Georgia Learning Academy online platform. I employed a qualitative case study approach because it allows participants to share their experiences with minimal constraints (Yin, 2016). This design is appropriate because a case study "investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context" (Yin, 2018, p. 15). This case study investigated the beliefs of Grade K-3 public school teachers in one county in Georgia. This approach allowed participants to share their unique experiences completing the required professional development training. The following sections describe the research design, research questions, site and participant selection, data generation procedures, and data analysis procedures used in this study.

#### **Research Questions**

The study was guided by the following research questions:

**Research Question 1.** What experiences did K-3 teachers have before, during, and after the mandated statewide online literacy professional development training?

**Research Question 2.** How did the meaning K-3 teachers made of their experiences during mandated statewide online literacy professional development training impact their classroom practices?

**Research Question 3.** To what extent do the mandated statewide online literacy professional development training modules impact K-3 teachers' self-efficacy regarding literacy?

### **Research Design**

For this study, I used narrative inquiry to elevate the voices of classroom teachers as they described their experiences with required professional development training. This method was particularly well suited for data collection because of its “approachability, artistic quality, and non-pedantic nature that values stories of laypeople” (Kim, 2016, p. 1). Educators have important experiences every day that cannot be reduced to data, charts, and graphs. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated, “narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience” (p. 18). Given (2008) noted that qualitative research allows the researcher to explore an individual’s feelings, thoughts, and beliefs. This was essential for understanding how teachers made meaning of their online, literacy-focused professional development training. Stahl and King (2020) further noted that “qualitative research is uniquely positioned to provide researchers with process-based, narrated, storied, data that is more closely related to the human experience” (p. 26). Throughout the study, I prioritized honoring each participant’s voice, striving to understand the nuances of their experiences in order to accurately re-tell their accounts of professional development participation.

I conducted one-on-one interviews with each participant in the study. I used semi-structured interviews because they offer versatility and flexibility, allowing participants to share their perceptions and experiences fully (Kallio et al., 2016). I designed the questions to be open-ended, giving participants space to provide rich, detailed responses,

and I avoided leading questions to prevent researcher bias (Yin, 2016). Semi-structured interviews also foster reciprocity between researcher and participant (Galletta, 2013), which enabled me to ask follow-up questions as needed to generate comprehensive data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Site and Participant Selection**

All K-3 teachers in the county where this research took place were required to complete the mandated, online, language- and literacy-focused training modules through the Georgia Learning Academy by July 1, 2025. This study focused on teachers in one Georgia county. I recruited eight participants who taught kindergarten through third grade. Specifically, I interviewed two teachers from each grade level across two elementary schools within the district. This sampling structure allowed for comparisons across grade levels and school contexts while maintaining depth of inquiry consistent with qualitative research. I selected teachers with varying levels of teaching experience, including both novice and veteran educators, to capture a range of perspectives. Because teachers' professional learning experiences and instructional practices often differ across career stages, this variation strengthened the study's interpretive depth. I conducted all interviews via Zoom to maximize accessibility and accommodate participants' schedules and locations.

I used purposive sampling to select participants for the study. This approach was appropriate because “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). More specifically, I utilized intensity sampling to identify participants who represented “rich examples of the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 1990, p. 171). In qualitative research, sample size is not

determined by statistical representation but by the depth and richness of the data collected. As Patton (1990) noted, “there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry” (p. 184). Instead, sample size depends on multiple variables.

The goal of this study was to generate sufficient data to develop a deep understanding of teachers’ experiences completing literacy training modules and the meanings they constructed from professional development content. Kim (2016) emphasized that depth of information allows researchers to “fully describe the phenomenon being studied, which is necessary to achieve richness and depth of analysis” (p. 161). I conducted interviews until thematic saturation was reached, as indicated when participants no longer introduced new information but instead confirmed or repeated previously shared ideas (Kim, 2016).

Before recruiting participants, I obtained approval from the school district to conduct research within the school system. I submitted an application to the Director of Elementary Schools for review and approval to ensure protection of students’ and staff members’ rights, preservation of instructional time, promotion of continuous program improvement, and contribution to the field of education (Appendix A). I then obtained approval from Valdosta State University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix B). After receiving IRB approval, I contacted principals at each elementary school to obtain permission to recruit participants from their schools (Appendix C). Using school websites, I identified eligible teachers and invited them to participate via email. The recruitment email included an overview of the study, eligibility criteria, information about a \$25 digital gift card incentive, a request for preferred contact information, and my contact information for questions (Appendix D). I, as the researcher, paid for the gift

cards independently. After teachers expressed interest, I contacted them using their preferred method of communication to schedule interviews.

I ensured confidentiality throughout the study. I stored all data on a password-protected computer and a separate external hard drive accessible only to me. I assigned each participant a pseudonym and removed identifying information from all transcripts and reports (as shown in Table 1). Participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

**Table 1**

*Participant Data and School Location*

| Novice Teachers   | School | Grade Level Taught | Veteran Teachers   | School |
|-------------------|--------|--------------------|--------------------|--------|
| Charis – 2 years  | A      | Kindergarten       | Maren – 29 years   | D      |
| Jamey – 4 years   | B      | First Grade        | Ainsley – 21 years | A      |
| Kris – 7 years    | C      | Second Grade       | Landis – 22 years  | E      |
| Kathryn – 5 years | C      | Third Grade        | Summer – 19 years  | E      |

*Note.* This table represents participants in the study, their number of years of teaching experience, and the school where they taught during the study.

**Data Generation**

I conducted semi-structured interviews with K-3 teachers to collect narratives about their experiences completing required professional development modules. At the beginning of each interview, I provided participants with an informed consent document and asked them to give verbal confirmation of their agreement to participate in the study

(Appendix E). I used an interview guide (Appendix F) to support participants in reconstructing their experiences and exploring the meanings they assigned to them (Seidman, 2019). This guide provided structure for the interview topics while allowing flexibility to explore, probe, and ask follow-up questions that clarified participants' experiences (Patton, 2015). I maintained a conversational interview style to encourage participants to share their experiences in depth. I intentionally worked to build trust and rapport with participants, recognizing that the study relied on their willingness to share personal and professional experiences. At the same time, I remained mindful of maintaining appropriate boundaries, as excessive closeness can introduce bias (Maxwell, 2013). As Seidman (2019) noted, "the interviewing relationship can be friendly but not a friendship" (p. 103).

I recorded all interviews using two devices: the Zoom platform and a voice memo application on my phone. Before recording, I reminded participants that the interview would be recorded and obtained their verbal consent. During the interviews, I actively listened, minimized distractions, maintained eye contact, and took detailed notes to remain fully engaged with participants' responses.

I reviewed and verified the automated Zoom transcripts for accuracy. I then provided each participant with a copy of their interview transcript and the final research write-up for review. This process allowed participants to confirm the accuracy of their statements and the constructed narratives representing their experiences (Maxwell, 2013; Stahl & King, 2020). Member checking also provided participants with an opportunity to reflect on their responses and clarify meanings or values expressed in their stories. Tracy (2010) explained how this process enhanced credibility of the analysis.

Because limited time is a persistent challenge for teachers, I modified Seidman's (2019) three-interview series and conducted two interviews with each participant. In fact, Seidman (2019) noted that "what is important is the goal of each of the three interviews, not necessarily the format for pursuing the goal" (p. 25). Although I reduced the number of interviews, I maintained the recommended duration of 60 – 90 minutes per session and preserved the sequence and intent of the interview structure.

During the first interview, I asked participants to describe their teacher preparation programs, early literacy instruction experiences, and prior professional development related to teaching reading that "establish[ed] the context of the participants' experience" (Seidman, 2019, p. 21). I also asked them about the rollout of the GLA training modules and their initial impressions of the training. These questions allowed participants to "reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occur[ed]" (Seidman, 2019, p. 21). The second interview focused on participants' reflections on the meaning the experiences held for them, including how they interpreted the training content and applied it to their instructional practice (Seidman, 2019). I conducted the two interviews within a seven-day window, as recommended by Seidman (2019), which supported consistency checks across participants' responses.

In addition to interviews, I reviewed the literacy modules housed on the Georgia Learns platform to better understand the structure and content of the professional development. This review informed my interpretation of participants' descriptions and supported analysis of how teachers made meaning of the training and identified components they found most useful.

## **Data Analysis Procedures**

Once I gathered all interview data, I began coding. I chose to complete coding by hand, as I feel more confident with pens, highlighters, and paper than I do with computer programs. Saldaña (2021) noted that programs can overwhelm researchers, shifting their focus from the data to the software itself. To maintain careful attention to the data, I conducted all coding manually. I printed participant transcripts and used colored pens, highlighters, and flags for initial coding. I began with descriptive coding to familiarize myself with the data and generate an initial list of subtopics. Saldaña (2021) noted that descriptive coding was appropriate for most types of qualitative studies, but “particularly for beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code data” (p. 134). This approach allowed me to develop a foundational understanding of the data by using short words and phrases to indicate the topic of each passage in the transcripts.

After descriptive coding, I recoded the transcripts using emotion coding, which allowed me to analyze the data “with a more attuned perspective” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 15). I used emotion coding because it supports research that explores “intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions, especially in matters of identity, social relationships, reasoning, decision-making, judgment, and risk-taking” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 160). As teachers completed the training modules, their feelings about content likely influenced how they used the information presented. Because participants actively considered, processed, and made instructional decisions based on the content, emotion coding helped me examine how professional development shaped their beliefs about teaching literacy. Together, these first-cycle coding procedures enabled a thorough

investigation of the data and supported a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives and meaning making processes (Kim, 2016),

I used pattern coding as a second cycle coding process. Pattern coding provided “a way of grouping those summaries [first cycle codes] into a smaller number of condensed categories, themes, or concepts” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 322). This method proved useful because it “pull[s] together a lot of material from first cycle coding into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 322). Through this process, I gained a deeper understanding of each participant and their experiences during the professional development training. Kim (2016) noted that researchers must be “keen observers of our participants' life worlds in order to retell their stories in full, closer to their reality” (Kim, 2016, p. 175). Pattern coding supported the aim by helping me move from discrete codes toward coherent narrative understandings of participants' experiences. In doing so, I narratively coded the data to shape field texts into research texts, which required constructing summarized accounts across multiple data sources (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Finally, I “stor[ied] and restor[ied]” the data to highlight participants' perspectives and actions throughout the analysis.

After completing initial and second cycle coding, I created participant-level concept maps. I used these visual displays to organize key ideas, experiences, and instructional shifts described in each participant's narrative and to examine relationships among codes within each case. Creating concept maps supported deeper meaning making at the participant level and allowed me to identify patterns within each narrative before conducting cross-case thematic analysis. Researchers recommend visual analytic displays as a qualitative strategy for organizing and interpreting complex data and strengthening

analytic rigor (Miles et al., 2020). These concept maps also informed reflective analytic memos, providing a foundation for deeper interpretation and documentation of emerging insights, which I captured further through ongoing memo writing.

During the coding process, I kept analytic memos to document my thinking as I coded the data (Kim, 2016; Seidman, 2019). Saldaña (2021) asserted that “coding and analytic memo writing are concurrent qualitative data analytic activities” (p. 58). I wrote reflections that included descriptive summaries of the data, my personal connections to the participants, participants’ actions and reactions, aspects of the data I found intriguing or surprising, and my coding decisions and underlying reasoning (Saldaña, 2021). I also maintained memos related to the identification of patterns, categories, and concepts across the data, which supported ongoing reflection and deeper interpretation. Periodically, I wrote “metamemos” to evaluate the progress of the study and my analytic process (Saldaña, 2021). According to Saldaña (2021), this technique provides the researcher with a “reality check” of the study and analysis in progress (p. 67). I organized and categorized memos regularly to facilitate retrieval and ensure systematic documentation of my reflections, biases, and analytic decisions. Collectively, these memos strengthened the trustworthiness of the study by providing a detailed audit trail, supporting consistency of interpretation, and enhancing the rigor of data analysis.

### **Trustworthiness**

Stahl and King (2020) asserted that the goal of qualitative research is for readers to “have a sense of confidence in what the researcher has reported” (p. 26). For research findings and interpretations to be considered credible, establishing trustworthiness is essential (Patton, 2015). Due to the nature of qualitative research, Maxwell (2013) noted

that an “ultimate truth” is not necessary for research to be believable (p. 122). Instead, qualitative researchers must actively monitor their own biases and how those biases may influence participants and interpretations of the data gathered (Maxwell, 2013).

Establishing trustworthiness, therefore, requires intentional and transparent research practices that allow readers to evaluate the credibility of the findings.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To ensure credibility, I reviewed each transcript and checked it carefully against the corresponding audio recording for accuracy. I conducted two interviews with each participant, which supported prolonged engagement and strengthened credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To promote transferability, I provided detailed descriptions of the participant population and the context in which the data were collected. I maintained thorough records of the research procedures and timelines used during fieldwork (Stahl & King, 2020). Additionally, I reported rich, thick descriptions of participants’ experiences, drawing on multiple interactions with each participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Collectively, these strategies supported the confirmability of the findings and interpretations presented.

Throughout the data generation and analysis phases, I maintained a self-reflexive fieldwork journal (Kim, 2016). This journal enabled me to document my thoughts before and after interviews, track decisions related to coding, and reflect on how my assumptions influenced the research process. It also served as a record of the “substantive and methodological” aspects of the study (Kim, 2016, p. 99). By logging reflections prior

to and following each interview, I was able to monitor the biases and subjectivities that emerged during the research process (Patton, 2015).

### **Positionality**

Another important component of trustworthiness is acknowledging my own beliefs and experiences related to the topics I investigated. I bring personal experience with education mandates to this research, as I have served as a classroom teacher for 18 years. During this time, I am not aware of instances where teachers were invited to contribute professional perspectives to state-level decisions regarding literacy or English instruction. Instead, classroom mandates are typically determined by individuals in decision-making positions outside the classroom. At times, these directives have felt overwhelming and, in some cases, unrealistic to implement.

I have participated in professional development experiences that were relevant and applicable to my instructional practice, as well as others that felt perfunctory and rote. To better understand the experiences of teachers interviewed in this study, I completed several literacy-focused modules on the Georgia Learning Academy platform. Because I do not possess in-depth expertise in teaching students to read, my perceptions of this professional learning likely differed from those of elementary educators with specialized knowledge in this area. Nevertheless, I found the modules informative and engaging, and I was struck by the breadth and complexity of the content. I gained a deeper appreciation for the intricacies involved in teaching students to read. At the same time, the first module consisted of nine lessons and required approximately four hours to complete. Additionally, as someone who considers herself a technological novice, I encountered technical difficulties that made navigating the modules cumbersome. As a

result, my overall impression of the online literacy modules was one of strong interest accompanied by periods of frustration.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training and maintained this certification throughout the duration of the study. Prior to recruiting participants, I obtained approval from Valdosta State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix B). I also secured approval from the local school board, which granted permission to recruit participants from elementary schools within the county (Appendix A). Throughout the study, I maintained a log of all communication with participants. I stored all electronic communication on a password-protected computer and a secure external hard drive.

During the data generation phase, I ensured ethical research practices in several ways. At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the informed consent document with participants and obtained verbal confirmation of their consent. I stored all written and audio data on a password-protected computer and a secure external hard drive. To protect confidentiality, I used pseudonyms when reporting data and removed any identifying information. I will retain all study data for three years following the conclusion of the study. I will destroy all consent forms and research materials in accordance with university policy at the end of that period.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter III outlined the methodology used to investigate teachers' experiences before, during, and after completing the required Georgia Literacy Academy training modules. This chapter presented the research questions, described the research design,

detailed site and participant selection, and specified the data generation and analysis procedures that guided the study.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Narrative Profiles**

The purpose of this study was to learn about K-3 school teachers' experiences completing the Georgia Literacy Academy training modules. Additionally, the study sought to understand how teachers made meaning of the information presented in the professional development training, ways the content was utilized in their classrooms, and how their confidence teaching literacy was impacted. The purpose of these profiles is to illustrate each teacher's unique journey through the training experience, the integration of new literacy practices, and their evolving confidence teaching literacy. The narrative profiles were crafted carefully and deliberately to honor the voices of the participants. The participant profiles are narrative constructions which reflect both the voices of the individuals and my interpretive role as a researcher. In line with narrative inquiry methodology, these profiles are best understood as interpretive constructions rather than neutral accounts. While participants' words and stories provide the foundation, the shaping of their narratives necessarily reflects my role as researcher, requiring careful attention to balancing authentic representation with analytic interpretation.

The individual interviews provided the framework for the narratives of the eight participants. Because each teacher had a distinct experience, their narratives took on unique forms as they reflected on their journeys. Each profile begins with a brief overview of the educator's professional background. This is followed by their reflections of the training modules, a short explanation of how they incorporated information from

the modules in their classroom practice, and their self-reported confidence levels at various points before and after the training process. By highlighting individual voices, this chapter aims to provide a rich, contextualized background of the participants. The narratives were constructed carefully and intentionally, drawing on interview data to provide a holistic view of each teacher's experience using their own voice. All participants were assigned randomly generated pseudonyms.

### *Charis*

Charis joined me for interviews during post-planning. She was displaced from her room, due to remodeling, so Charis found an empty room to use for a few hours. While she has been an educator for 11 years, Charis has only taught kindergarten for the last two years. In fact, she chuckled, “[kindergarten] was the one grade level I said I would never teach; look at me now.” Prior to my interview with Charis, the only communication we had were a handful of emails regarding the interview process and coordinating schedules.

When asked to reflect on her first experiences teaching literacy, Charis replied, “I did, and I didn’t feel confident. I feel like college prepared me, but I would have appreciated more hands-on experiences before I had a classroom of my own.” She credits the team of teachers in the grade level for helping her become “the teacher she is today.” Charis noted how her colleagues helped and guided her when she moved to a new grade level. Learning how to manage early elementary students was particularly difficult, as they were supposed to move between various stations and complete work independently.

Charis mentioned the Georgia Literacy Academy modules were introduced on a designated Professional Learning Day at her school. The academic coach at the school

walked teachers through logging into the platform, navigating the content, and troubleshooting common technical issues. After that, teachers worked through the modules independently. Charis said, “it was hard to get through that many hours of information.” Still, the content of the training was what she expected, and she was “thankful that she was at a school that was already implementing many of the things the modules talked about.” Instead of trying to learn a great deal of new information, Charis was encouraged and comforted by the material provided in the training. It gave her and her colleagues confirmation that they were doing the right things for their students when teaching literacy. Still, Charis made modifications to the curriculum after watching the training modules. Not only did her students enjoy the new instructional techniques, but also the data on student growth was positive. Additionally, she felt like she learned a great deal about words and the rules of grammar. This helped Charis feel more confident teaching literacy. She explained, “teaching kindergarten is scary because you are teaching the fundamentals of reading.” She takes her responsibility for teaching reading very seriously, as she considers it a fundamental building block of the remainder of a child’s education.

This past year, the academic coach at the school implemented a system where teachers reviewed the material presented in the Georgia Literacy Academy. Groups of teachers were assigned various modules to review for their colleagues; these materials were presented during professional learning sessions throughout the school year. While Charis found this helpful for keeping the information at the forefront of her literacy instruction, she also emphasized the importance of teachers observing instruction in their colleagues’ classrooms. In the past, she and her colleagues visited other classrooms

within the school, and they went to different elementary schools to observe the implementation of curriculum. She noted how she learned a great deal from watching other teachers “interact directly with their students in the classroom.” She feels like visiting classrooms with similar compositions is especially useful for helping her consider how instructional practices might work with her own students. Charis noted how learning from other teachers has been more beneficial to her than any training manual or independent training session.

Charis will return to her kindergarten classroom next year eager to set her students on the path toward literacy success. She is eager to continue collaborating with her team members to develop the best possible instruction for students. Charis reminds new teachers to “trust the process” when implementing Science of Reading principles. Even though she felt unsure at times last year, the great progress she has seen with students has filled Charis with anticipation for the upcoming school year.

### *Maren*

When Maren joined the call for our interview, she was poised in a rocking chair next to a set of floor-to-ceiling windows. She explained how after 29 years in the classroom, this is where she spent most afternoons. While she spent one year teaching second grade, the remainder of her teaching career was in the kindergarten classroom. The ease with which she described her teaching and classroom spoke to a quiet confidence and her firm belief in the fundamental importance of early education. While I taught one of Maren’s children several years ago at the high school, I did not know her well prior to our interview. Other than a handful of pleasantries exchanged a few years ago, we had not had any additional conversations since that time.

Maren commented she did not feel prepared to teach literacy in the beginning of her career. She added, “you had that one student teaching experience and then went into the classroom.” Fortunately, there was a teacher across the hall who helped her feel more confident in her own classroom. Maren chuckled, “I asked her everything I could think of about teaching. At that point, teachers taught one letter per week to students. Also, she used these little readers, so that’s what I did.” As she did not feel confident making decisions about literacy in her classroom, Maren simply followed the lead of a veteran teacher. Upon reflection, she reasoned, “with this system it took 26 weeks before the students even knew all of the letters.” Due to this, Maren noted how it was not until after Christmas when she felt comfortable having students begin to blend letter sounds to make words.

A few years into her teaching career, the next literacy movement in the county occurred. This was termed Literacy Collaborative (LC). Maren was selected to host a consultant who advised teachers in the county about the new initiative. The first thing Maren was asked to do was take everything off her classroom walls, which she lamented, “that about killed me.” She was concerned for parents and students to see blank walls during open house; however, she reluctantly complied. Next, Maren explained how the consultant helped her learn to create a “literate environment.” Over the next 26 days, Maren introduced a letter per day to students. Instead of pre-printed posters, her walls were decorated with student-created letter posters, which she reasoned, “gave [her students] ownership of literacy in their own classroom. Their work was everywhere in the classroom, from day one.” She also utilized a word wall and a great deal of environmental print to help create an immersive literacy environment. The consultant

stressed how Literacy Collaborative was not a program, but instead a set of best teaching practices. Maren ruminated, “I believe, in my heart, there were a lot of good intentions with LC. I liked that it took us to a small group setting in the classroom teaching reading.” In fact, she noted many of these practices she maintains in her classroom today.

Maren indicated teachers were told about the Georgia Literacy Academy modules during a grade level meeting. The teachers were expected to complete the 25 hours of instruction independently, outside of school hours. She commented, “I do feel like it was a lot all at one time. It was just too much.” However, Maren was determined to finish the professional development training before summer began. In fact, she thought, “okay, if I’m going to do this, then I’m going to do it right.” She tried to learn and retain the information simultaneously, while taking notes during the learning courses for future reference. Regarding her experience of completing the modules, Maren quipped, “I expected it to be torturous and it was. I mean, here I am learning all this new information in my last two years [before retirement], and I felt like they were totally switching things.” In fact, the new information made her reminisce on former students. Maren fretted and “cried over all of this because I’ve wondered if I did something wrong before or if I hurt kids early in my career.” Clearly, her greatest desire is to put students first and meet their learning needs.

Once Maren started digging into the materials, she realized there needed to be a greater emphasis on phonics in her classroom. Additionally, she stopped using leveled readers and moved to mostly decodable passages. Yet, there were many classroom strategies and instructional practices she already used which aligned with the Science of Reading principles. In fact, Maren realized there were more practices she could retain

than those she needed to amend. This gave her a renewed confidence teaching literacy to her kindergarten students. She concluded, “If you’re not willing to change, or if you think you know everything, you need to get out of education.” While the changes have not been easy, Maren has been pleasantly surprised by the positive results from students.

Maren’s kindergarten students spend approximately three hours every day on some type of literacy learning. When she began the school year, Maren wondered “if the students could understand everything we were being asked to teach.” She was concerned maybe students were being pushed to learn too much, too fast. Upon reflection, though, she marveled, “they have done really, really well. They are learning spelling rules we have never learned. I mean, I’ve never learned some of the rules that they’re learning.” Maren sometimes still worries she is doing too much with them. However, she remarked, “they are like little sponges. I just try to encourage that and keep them excited about things. I don’t ever want to dampen their spirits or their desire to learn.” Maren wishes to create a positive learning environment which supports diverse student needs and a love of learning. She is looking forward to her last year teaching kindergarten students, and she is excited to learn with her students again in the upcoming school year.

### *Jamey*

Jamey is an early career teacher, as this is only her fourth year as the lead teacher in a classroom. She was initially hired as a first-grade teacher, moved to kindergarten for two years, and she is back in a first-grade classroom this year. Jamey spent some time substitute teaching, and the following year she worked as a paraprofessional in a kindergarten classroom before she was hired as a primary classroom teacher.

Interestingly, I knew Jamey when she was in high school. However, we had not communicated since that time.

When asked about her preparation to teach literacy during her undergraduate courses, Jamey recalled writing lesson plans and developing possible writing prompts for students. Yet, when she tried to recall specific instructional techniques to teach students how to read or strategies to help students with reading comprehension from her undergraduate work, Jamey remarked: “We talked about those things [teaching reading and reading comprehension], but they didn’t really give us ways to go about it. I didn’t feel as prepared leaving my undergrad as I had hoped I would be.” Instead, Jamey gained a great deal of practical experience when she was a substitute teacher. She remembered, “I was thrown in, in the best way.” While lesson plans were provided, Jamey had to figure out what worked for her students through trial-and-error in the classroom. Further, her time as a paraprofessional allowed her to observe a veteran teacher as she led students through daily literacy lessons. This provided Jamey the opportunity to see numerous literacy strategies utilized in the classroom and to try them out under the guidance of a confident educator.

Although Jamey had previous experiences teaching literacy, when she was in her own classroom for the first time, she felt intimidated. With high expectations placed on her for student learning, and without another teacher in the classroom, she “felt challenged every day when teaching literacy.” However, the academic coach at the school provided a great deal of support for new teachers. She met with new teachers monthly, and the coach answered questions as they arose in the classroom. She modeled a handful of literacy lessons, which allowed Jamey to see various instructional strategies

implemented with the students in her room. Jamey noted the importance of these visits, as she felt more confident trying different techniques on her own. These experiences helped Jamey develop a plan to set her students on the right track for literacy learning. In fact, after several difficult weeks working with a student who struggled with letter sounds, Jamey witnessed a breakthrough. One day, “everything clicked for the student. I remember thinking: Ok, maybe I *can* do this [teach reading].” Several successes with students her first year helped Jamey feel more confident about her ability to help all students achieve growth in literacy.

When the required Georgia Literacy Academy modules were introduced at Jamey’s school, teachers were offered a financial incentive to complete the modules in a specified time frame. Teachers were required to log their time spent completing the training (outside of the school day), as they were not permitted to complete the training during school hours. Regarding the concept of completing the modules, Jamey said: “Personally, I didn’t mind it a whole lot. We have to do modules every year as a teacher, anyway.” However, when she began completing the modules, she noted: “These were more interactive than I expected. I had to listen really well to answer the questions, which was unexpected. And that’s when I thought, ok, I’ve got eight more of these things to get through.” Jamey expressed a clear preference for in-person training or group learning versus independent, online learning. Jamey confessed, “I tend to zone out when I’m on my computer.”

Jamey reported how teachers she knew in other counties used Science of Reading principles and they “swore by it.” This year, the school where Jamey teaches has fully transitioned away from reading levels. Instead, she commented, “we’re really looking at

the literacy standards and seeing if students are meeting the standards, instead of worrying about their reading level.” This shift in focus allowed her to concentrate on individual students and their growth versus every student in her group meeting the same metric(s) by the end of the school year. Although she remarked this year was a “learning year” for her, Jamey felt like students gained literacy skills and made good progress toward their goals. As she reflected on changes in her classroom practices, Jamey reflected, “It made me look into what I was doing as a teacher, especially a newer teacher. The modules really helped me think about my phonics-based lessons and my other literacy lessons.” Aside from specific techniques, though, Jamey reflected on how the training made her consider the varying needs of her students. She focused on different kinds of learners and how to help them make necessary connections for success.

This broader approach to student learning emphasized the need for Jamey to reinforce essential skills, while worrying less about students achieving mastery of standards each day. In terms of Jamey’s confidence teaching literacy in her classroom, she discussed how the information from the Georgia Literacy Academy helped raise her confidence “a little.” She listed specific instructional strategies which she has utilized in her classroom since completing the training. Still, she mentioned her worries about meeting each student’s individual needs. She is interested in learning more about managing reading groups in the classroom, as she is not able to monitor every student during this time. Jamey worries about “pushing some students to the side in order to help others.” Further, she noted a need for vertical planning. While there was some follow-up on the training modules during the school year, Jamey hopes to collaborate more with her colleagues next year on literacy lessons. Additionally, she plans to continue researching

classroom strategies and instructional techniques which can help the students in her classroom. Jamey will teach first grade again next year. Though, she is almost finished with her master's degree in School Counseling. After next school year, Jamey hopes to move into a counseling role, as she sees "needs beyond the classroom" which she cannot currently address. She explained, "While I love teaching, I have a heart for students who need more help than I can give them as a classroom teacher. I think counseling is a way for me to do more for students." In the meantime, Jamey intends to help her students achieve literacy success in her classroom.

### *Ainsley*

Ainsley is a seasoned veteran with twenty-one years of teaching experience, fifteen of which have been in the first-grade classroom. When we talked, Ainsley was seated at the table where she conducts reading groups with her students. She indicated this was the most comfortable space for her because she spends so much time in this location. Aside from the few emails we exchanged prior to the first interview, our conversation was my first introduction to Ainsley.

When asked about her preparation for teaching literacy, Ainsley remarked, "Well, I thought I was prepared until I actually started teaching, and I realized I was not." Fortunately, at the time, the county was implementing an initiative called Literacy Collaborative (LC). Ainsley reflected, "during my first few years teaching, I either had someone in the classroom with me or I was in another teacher's classroom watching them teach often." She appreciated the frequent feedback, check-ins, and conversations regarding literacy. In fact, the continuous communication made her feel "very supported" as a novice teacher.

A pivotal moment occurred approximately ten years ago when Ainsley attended a professional learning conference, Striving Readers. She described the experience as “life changing” and as one which set her on the path to becoming the reading educator she is today. On the first day of the conference, all educators took a quiz about language and linguistics. The assessment covered a variety of topics, which included core components of language, language acquisition, and sociolinguistics. Every person at Ainsley’s table “failed the quiz miserably.” This made Ainsley realize how much she still had to learn about literacy. Thus, began her personal journey learning about language - its history, its development, its rules, and its nuances – to become the most informed, knowledgeable teacher possible. She reflected on this moment, noting, “How can I teach students about language if I don’t understand it myself?” Ainsley added, she considers herself a lifelong learner who is constantly evolving as an educator. Ainsley has had many successes in the classroom, but she conceded, “I have had lots of failures along the way, also.” She concluded that failures are particularly important, as this indicates an educator is trying new strategies and attempting to respond to student needs.

Ainsley is an innovator who frequently tries new strategies in her classroom. This year, she incorporated a bookshop station. Students were encouraged to select books which interested them, and they took them home to share with their families. Additionally, she began providing more trade books (versus decodables) for her students to read to help increase their reading fluency. Ainsley emphasized, “it’s not the program that makes a classroom successful, it’s the responsiveness of the teacher.” She believes a teacher must use all their accumulated knowledge to address student deficiencies to help them gain success. She is determined to tackle reading issues head on versus moving to

the next lesson, since students are “learning how to be good readers and writers” in her classroom.

At the school where Ainsley teaches, grade-level teachers completed the first module on the Georgia Learns platform together. Then, they were tasked with completing the remaining training modules independently. For Ainsley, the training was a helpful reminder of information she was previously exposed to, so it did not feel overwhelming. While there has been sufficient follow-up on the material during the school year – through check-ins with the academic coach and grade-level meetings regarding how to utilize various strategies presented in the modules – Ainsley still feels like a piece is missing. Often, academic coaches and teachers are learning about science of reading concepts concurrently. Ainsley noted: “it would be great to get feedback from someone who knows more than me, but they’re learning as we’re learning.” As academic coaches support all teachers Grades K-5, there is a plethora of information they must know. This makes it especially difficult for the individual to provide guidance to teachers quickly and efficiently.

As the grade-level leader at her school, Ainsley created a Google classroom for colleagues both at her school and across the county. She hoped to promote collaboration about literacy instructional strategies and teaching techniques. While many teachers joined the group, far fewer actively contributed to the group throughout the year. She believes there was trepidation about sharing unsuccessful attempts at literacy instruction. Still, Ainsley believes continuous communication is the only way for teachers across the county to best provide differentiated instruction for all students in first grade. This is particularly important for her, as she has taught several students who transferred schools.

When this happened, students inevitably had skill gaps due to differing pacing guides and instructional emphases. Ainsley plans to continue encouraging teachers in her grade level to collaborate, in various ways, next school year. Further, she looks forward to welcoming a new group of young learners in the upcoming school year.

*Kris*

Kris has been teaching for seven years. Interestingly, all her experience has been in the second-grade classroom at the same school, which positioned her to be the grade-level lead for several years. Next year, she has decided to move to the fourth grade, as she is eager to try something different. Kris remarked, “I am looking forward to moving from teaching students how to read to helping them read to learn.” She is excited to help students find texts they are interested in and those that can bolster their knowledge on various topics. Though we exchanged a few emails before the interview, our first meeting was my first introduction to Kris.

Kris loves reading, so she expected literacy would be her favorite part of teaching. However, she found the opposite to be true. Her first year in the classroom, there was a great deal of flexibility in teaching literacy. However, instead of feeling free and autonomous, Kris reflected, “I was having to create my own resources, which was very hard and very time-consuming.” Hence, she worked closely with the academic coach to plan and identify appropriate resources for the learners in her classroom. And, while Kris noticed “a lot of success with [her] struggling readers,” she saw little growth in her higher-level students. The second year in the classroom, the school moved to the *Fountas and Pinnell* reading program. While all necessary resources were provided, an opposite problem emerged as the curriculum was scripted and rigid. Teachers were required to use

the lessons with fidelity and complete one full lesson per day. This prevented Kris from tailoring instruction for different students and it required her to move to the next lesson in the series even when students did not fully grasp the concepts. She disliked this, as she felt like students were always “falling through the cracks.” Some students understood lessons, but others lagged in their skills; Kris felt like there was very little she could do to help those who were behind, since she had to keep progressing through the curriculum.

When Kris heard about the required Georgia Literacy Academy training modules, she had just completed her master’s degree. She mused, “with the number of hours required for this training, it’s like I’m getting another degree.” Substitute teachers were provided for half of a day so teachers could begin working through the modules. After that, teachers logged the time they spent completing the training to receive a stipend. Kris noted the information in the modules was “reassuring,” as the content largely aligned with her observations of students’ needs and skill gaps. Further, sound walls and small group work, which Kris had previously implemented, were similar to the instructional videos provided in the Georgia Literacy Academy modules. However, she did make modifications to her classroom practice based on the professional development training. This past year, the administration at her school also allowed greater autonomy for teachers when choosing aspects of the literacy curriculum. With these changes, Kris has noticed significant improvement in both students’ reading and writing skills. Further, she noted growth across learner types. Kris changed her perspective this year from looking at whole-group data to “focusing on individual student growth.” This, in combination with target ranges (versus specified reading levels), allowed her to identify areas where students’ skills grew markedly.

These changes have increased Kris's confidence teaching literacy in her classroom. She feels more prepared to help students take charge of their own learning, as they have a shared vocabulary to discuss various concepts. When remediation is needed, Kris has the tools to help diagnose students' skill gaps, and she has numerous interventions to suggest for improvement. She mentioned how her students "have seen her make mistakes here and there." She believes this is important, as her students see how errors are part of the learning process. Kris wants to encourage students to try new things without fear of embarrassment or failure.

This summer, Kris is eager to attend a literacy conference where she will have the opportunity to focus on reading comprehension and instructional conversations. While she is excited about her move to a new grade level, Kris is also glad to have the opportunity to connect with other educators before she goes back to the classroom. She is eager to continue helping students grow in both their reading and writing skills as she moves into the fourth-grade classroom.

### *Landis*

Landis joined me from her classroom where she was sitting in front of a bank of windows. Outfitted in a T-shirt and jeans, she warmly greeted me with her southern drawl and warm eyes. Interestingly, Landis first earned a business degree and worked in the garment industry for a few years. Later, she went back to school and earned a teaching degree. Landis's first experiences as an educator were in special education and physical education. However, it was the second-grade classroom where Landis felt most at home. While she has a total of 22 years of experience, the last 18 have been in second grade at the same elementary school. Though she teaches at the elementary school my children

attended, neither of them was in her classroom. Other than a wave and a smile, we had minimal interaction before the interviews.

Landis noted how terribly unprepared she felt to teach elementary school literacy at the beginning of her career. She reflected, “you walk into a classroom of 20 students, you close the door, and they are all yours. You are kind of shell-shocked in that moment.” While there was a literacy coordinator at the school, who went in classrooms and helped teachers locate resources, the onus for teaching all standards was placed on the teacher. Additionally, Landis was surprised to learn students who arrived in her class with skill gaps were her responsibility to remediate. Initially, she could not fathom how she could find time in the day to provide supplemental instruction. Although Landis felt “scared” and “unsure” about her skill level, she still runs into a parent of one of her first students who thanks her for teaching her daughter how to read. This provided a measure of confidence for Landis early in her career.

As a veteran teacher, Landis was accustomed to the safety and training modules required at the beginning of each year. However, the added requirement of training modules on the Georgia Learns platform felt “very overwhelming.” There was a great deal of information she was trying to remember, as there was a quiz at the conclusion of each module. Landis joked if the Georgia Literacy Academy modules were required each year, she might “look for a different job.” The number of hours required to complete the training was “simply too much” to have hanging over her head at the beginning of a new school year. Landis felt like she was “taking a college class” with much of the information provided in the first modules. In fact, the first two training sessions included information from conception through preschool, which did not feel particularly relevant

for the students in her classroom. She went on to explain how much of the training seemed geared toward novice teachers versus veteran teachers. While some of the information was interesting, it was not directly related to the literacy instruction which takes place in her class.

Landis reported her favorite part of the training modules were the video clips of teachers implementing an instructional strategy in the classroom. Techniques for teaching vocabulary and the proper pronunciation of letter sounds proved beneficial. Further, the training encouraged Landis to be more cautious about her own pronunciation of letter sounds and words in the classroom, as she has a self-proclaimed “North Georgia twang.” And, while she adapted a few strategies from the training for use in her classroom, much of her literacy instruction did not change. Landis reflected, “I know a lot of things that work in the classroom because of trial and error over many years.” She reiterated her dedication to implementing the Science of Reading practices in the classroom, but she also refuses to abandon time-tested teaching practices that work for helping students achieve success in literacy.

Landis will continue encouraging her students to demonstrate their understanding of texts through a variety of mediums. Students enjoy making posters, creating slide decks, and giving presentations about books to share with their peers. This is the “best part” of literacy in her classroom, as both she and the students enjoy the creativity in “showing what they know.” She looks forward to the upcoming year of students learning and growing in her classroom.

*Kathryn*

Kathryn graciously agreed to meet with me during post-planning. As an educator who earned degrees in early childhood education and special education concurrently, she is a “self-proclaimed lifelong learner.” Next year, Kathryn will be the academic coach at her elementary school. While she taught a total of 13 years, the last five years were in third grade. While she enjoyed her time as a classroom teacher, she is excited about her new role, as Kathryn hopes to help even more students by “lifting the learning load for teachers.” With new English standards being introduced in Georgia in the upcoming school year and the continued rollout of updated literacy expectations, she is committed to supporting teachers in addressing the complexities of lesson planning to better meet their students’ needs. While we exchanged emails regarding coordinating a meeting time, this was my first interaction with Kathryn.

When asked about her confidence teaching literacy at the beginning of her career, Kathryn stated, “in the moment, I felt ready to teach students to read.” While she noted there is research now which says there are better ways to teach students how to read, she felt like she was doing the best thing for her young learners at the time. Still, there were a handful of students who continued struggling even when Kathryn tried all the instructional strategies and techniques she knew. She reflected, “it was very frustrating as their teacher because I didn’t know how to help them.” Even with a reading endorsement and a bevy of special education endorsements, nothing she tried in the classroom seemed to help the students who struggled most. Though there were professional development trainings which provided information about data gathering, guided reading, and writing

instruction, none of this instruction explained how to help students who were not progressing toward reading success.

Kathryn was especially interested in the Georgia Literacy Academy modules, as she attended a literacy conference the summer prior. Educators at Kathryn's school completed the required professional development training independently. Additionally, teachers completed a feedback form at the conclusion of each module. These were used by the academic coach to discuss various modules during professional learning time this school year. Most of the information contained in the Georgia Literacy Academy modules was very affirming for Kathryn. As she and her team had already identified many of the issues presented in the modules (and in some cases had located resources to help remediate these skills gaps). Still, Kathryn noted the professional development "provided the science behind why certain strategies were the best to help students move toward success." The information provided regarding the five pillars of reading, Scarborough's reading rope, and the way the brain maps words was useful as it gave her a solid foundation for understanding the Science of Reading. This information was helpful as it provided a clear basis for the "why behind what we do." Further, common language for concepts between teachers and students has been useful for reducing misconceptions and increasing student understanding.

As a result of the professional development modules, Kathryn noted she and her team implemented updated instruction with interactive read alouds and repeated reading this past year. Consequently, students were more proficient at understanding vocabulary words, inferencing, comprehension, and text-monitoring skills. However, this did not necessarily translate to an increase in standardized test scores in literacy the way Kathryn

and her peers had hoped. Kathryn remarked, “some kids have to be guinea pigs because we are all figuring this out together.” While the students learned words and became better readers, Kathryn felt students’ scores on standardized testing were not fully reflective of their increased competencies. She noted, “we had resources that we tried to match with our standards instead of starting with the standard and finding a resource to match.” In fact, her elementary school had access to an abundance of resources, so it felt particularly overwhelming to figure out which tools would produce the best outcomes for students.

In response to the test scores from this year, third grade students will be ability grouped at Kathryn’s school next year. She and her colleagues believe this will help teachers focus on whole-group instruction that is tailored to the needs of students in the same room. This way, teachers can conduct instruction with the entire group, instead of relying on individual or small group work to bolster students’ skills. As the academic coach next year, Kathryn will continue to integrate information from the training modules into professional learning for teachers. Particularly as teachers delve into the new English standards, Kathryn plans to revisit many of the Science of Reading concepts covered in the training modules.

### *Summer*

Summer has been teaching for nineteen years. Aside from two years spent teaching second grade early in her career, she has spent most of her teaching career in a third-grade classroom at the same elementary school. While I have been acquainted with Summer for many years, as my children went to the elementary school where she teaches, neither of my children were in her class. I was interested to learn about her journey as a

literacy educator, as it is clear she strives to provide the most effective instruction to her students.

When asked about her preparation to teach literacy during college, Summer remarked, “I feel like I was given a lot of the basics, but because I did not practice or use that terminology – phonemes, encoding, decoding, morphemes - I kind of lost it somewhere in the middle.” She asserted there have been many different programs used to teach literacy to students. Each of the curriculum initiatives lasted a few years, until the school district selected a new program. Summer noted how the continuous changes led to a focus on the details of the individual programs, instead of broad, overarching ideas about the way students’ brains process written language and the most effective strategies for teaching reading.

At the school where Summer teaches, information about the Science of Reading and the Georgia Literacy Academy modules was disseminated to teachers a little at a time because the administration did not want to overwhelm teachers. Eventually teachers were given the list of modules and a due date for completion. Summer noted, “I’m a task-oriented person, so I was focused on completion. I think it would have been beneficial to take it piece by piece, instead of all at once. I wonder if I would have gotten more from the modules.” Further, she reflected on the time requirement for completion of the modules, and she noted she had to watch some of the videos more than once to earn the percentage of correct answers to pass the quiz and move to the next module. This frustrated her, as she was completing the learning courses after school hours, and this took additional time away from her family. While she wanted to learn new information to help her students, many hours focused on her computer often felt overwhelming.

Although she was frustrated the training had to be completed outside of contract hours, Summer conceded, “I knew I was missing some pieces in the classroom. So, it was good to hear the different perspectives on what could be changed so my students could improve and grow.” She had read and listened to information from various news outlets and podcasts, which detailed numerous ways schools were not meeting the literacy needs of early elementary school students. The information in the training modules largely affirmed what Summer was working through on her own. She explained her evolution, “Now, I think about how I can help my struggling readers, but also, I consider how I can help good readers understand what they are reading better; I have done a lot of soul searching myself.” Summer is determined to help all her students learn more deeply.

Summer has spent a great deal of time considering how she can become a better classroom practitioner. Once our conversation turned to the specific content of the modules, she acknowledged how she expected to know most of the information contained in the professional learning before watching the videos. However, she remarked, “While some of the information was a review, there were other things that either I wasn’t familiar with previously or things that I had known and forgotten.” Fortunately, many of the classroom practices and instructional strategies found in the modules were techniques Summer already utilized in her classroom. This reaffirmed her belief in many of her teaching practices. Further, the move to Science of Reading principles allowed her to focus on literacy in a holistic way. Summer explained, “I am thinking about how I can help my students grow as readers.” Instead of relying on certain formulas or programs for teaching concepts, she focuses on individual skills students must learn.

The conversation eventually moved to Summer's confidence level teaching literacy. She mentioned how she felt like she had been "doing it wrong" and "felt a little down" immediately following completion of the modules. Initially, she dreaded the thought of having to start from scratch to develop new literacy lessons in line with the Science of Reading. After a great deal of collaboration with her team, Summer realized much of the literacy instruction she was doing with students already aligned with best practices. It was simply a matter of finding a few additional resources and modifying her teaching strategies to create the best outcomes for students. Finally, she began to feel more certain about the direction her literacy instruction was taking. Now, after a year of using the Science of Reading strategies in her classroom, Summer declared, "I am way more confident today than I was even a year ago teaching literacy." She feels empowered to help her students learn, as they have a shared language for literacy concepts.

Summer will return to her third-grade classroom next year with a renewed sense of purpose and a desire to keep learning herself. Summer was pleased with the changes she made in her classroom and the ensuing progress her students made in literacy this year. She is eager to see how next year's students will learn and grow.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided narrative profiles of participating teachers who completed the literacy training modules. Through their stories, insight was gained regarding how individual teachers experienced the training process, interpreted its content, and implemented new literacy practices within their unique classroom contexts. The profiles revealed a wide range of experiences with the training. However, despite varied starting points and levels of prior experience, most teachers reported an increase in confidence

and a deeper understanding of effective literacy instruction following the training. The narratives also highlighted themes related to professional growth, adaptation of materials, and the influence of prior beliefs on implementation. These stories illustrate how teachers engaged with the training, integrated practices, and made meaning of their experiences. In the next chapter, I interpret these narratives across cases to identify shared patterns and insights.

## **Chapter V**

### **Themes**

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative study was to explore the experiences of K-3 teachers after they completed the Georgia Literacy Academy professional development program. By creating in-depth narratives from eight Georgia teachers, I sought to understand how educators made meaning of the required online training, how it influenced their instructional confidence and practices, and what professional needs remained unmet after completion.

This chapter discusses themes that emerged from the participants' narratives and how these themes coincide with the study's research questions. Kim (2016) emphasized how narrative inquiry involves exploring the meanings embedded in participants' stories and experiences. Thus, the themes were derived from rereading, coding, and clarification by participants.

#### **Lack of Preparation to Teach Literacy**

Before engaging in the state-mandated literacy training, many teachers described entering the classroom with limited preparation for teaching reading. Their stories revealed how feelings of uncertainty, trial and error, and informal mentoring shaped their early literacy instruction experiences.

One theme that emerged from this study was a pervasive sense of unpreparedness among teachers when it came to literacy instruction. All participants expressed feeling ill-equipped to effectively teach literacy and address the diverse needs of their students. This

sentiment was shared by both novice and veteran teachers, though the timing of their realization differed. Some educators recognized their lack of preparation during their undergraduate training, while others only became aware once they entered the classroom. Still others did not fully grasp the extent of their instructional gaps until they were tasked with supporting a wide range of learners in mastering literacy standards. Finally, one teacher reported it was only after several years of classroom experience and exposure to the Science of Reading principles that she fully understood how unprepared she had been to implement research-based strategies.

Three teachers, two veteran and one novice, Maren, Landis, and Jamey, knew they were unprepared to teach literacy even before they had their own classrooms. Maren reflected on her limited preparation, noting, “I only had one, short student teaching experience.” As Maren was hired in November, she had little time to ease into teaching. Experiencing a mix of uncertainty and admiration for the experienced teacher across the hall, Maren reached out to her for guidance. Fortunately, the teacher became an informal mentor, offering steady support and advice as Maren navigated her first year teaching literacy. Although Maren relied on her mentor to help, she emphasized that ultimately, she had to learn through experience, spending time with her students and discovering which approaches best fit her own style of teaching.

Similarly, veteran teacher Landis mentioned, “the classes did not adequately prepare me for what I was going to face in the classroom.” As she changed careers and added on a teaching certificate to her degree, she asserted, “I was shell-shocked.” Landis found it difficult to figure out where to begin in terms of finding the right materials to teach various literacy standards. While the literacy coordinator provided support, Landis

was taken aback to learn she, rather than the coordinator, was responsible for remediating her students' learning gaps. She described the process as one which required considerable trial and error, as well as a great deal of patience, particularly during her initial years in the classroom.

A novice teacher, Jamey, echoed these concerns and added how she spent time during her undergraduate work making lesson plans with various books, but she did not recall a great deal of time spent on learning fundamental information required to teach literacy. Jamey admitted she "didn't feel prepared leaving undergrad." However, her experiences as a substitute teacher and later a paraprofessional allowed her to explore and refine her instructional strategies. Over time, Jamey became more confident identifying which methods worked best for her and which techniques most effectively supported student learning.

Four educators, two veteran and two novice, Ainsley, Summer, Charis, and Kris, realized their lack of preparedness as soon as they began teaching in the classroom. Ainsley reflected, "I thought I was prepared until I actually started teaching." Although she initially felt confident upon completing her undergraduate program, the reality of meeting the diverse needs of her students quickly revealed gaps in her instructional knowledge. Fortunately, Ainsley received substantial professional development during her first few years teaching, which helped her feel supported.

Veteran teacher Summer described her early experiences teaching literacy similarly. She explained, "I was given a lot of the basics, but because I did not practice and use the information immediately, I kind of lost it [literacy instructional strategies and classroom strategies] along the way." When she began teaching, Summer realized she

needed to relearn much of the literacy content she had studied during her teacher preparation program. Even then, she still encountered students who had literacy needs which exceeded her skill level.

Charis, a novice teacher, also mentioned her lack of hands-on experience prior to having her own classroom. While Charis felt “somewhat prepared” in her undergraduate studies, she emphasized the importance of the collaborative team of teachers who helped her gain proficiency in literacy instruction. Her colleagues offered consistent guidance during her early years, which she credited as instrumental in her development as a literacy instructor.

Another novice, Kris, entered teaching with an enthusiasm for literacy stating, “I loved reading; I was sure it would be my favorite thing to teach.” However, her classroom experience did not align with those expectations. Although she collaborated with the school’s literacy coach to develop many resources for instruction, she found the process to be both frustrating and time-consuming. While her struggling readers demonstrated growth, she was discouraged that her higher-achieving students did not demonstrate similar progress.

Finally, one novice teacher, Kathryn, noted “when I was teaching literacy, I felt like I was prepared and that I was doing the best things for kids.” However, after attending a literacy conference and completing training on the Science of Reading, her perspective shifted. She became aware of more effective, research-based instructional strategies which challenged her previous practices. Reflecting on this experience, she admitted, “there is still so much I need to learn.”

These narratives reveal a critical gap in teacher preparation: a widespread disconnect between teacher education programs and the practical demands of literacy instruction. All participants ultimately arrived at the same conclusion, acknowledging effective literacy instruction requires more targeted, research-based training than they initially received.

### **Confirming Current Practices**

The theme of confirmation of current practices captured how many teachers found the state-mandated literacy modules partially aligned with what they were already doing in their classrooms. Rather than prompting significant changes, the training affirmed their existing instructional approaches and validated their professional judgment. This finding reflects how teachers' prior knowledge and classroom experience influenced their engagement with the professional development content.

Among novice teachers, the training often served to affirm their developing instructional practices were aligned with state expectations. Charis explained how the information was "confirmation of what I was doing in the classroom versus learning a great deal of new information." She appreciated her school had already begun integrating new literacy programs focused on phonics, which made the content feel familiar rather than overwhelming. Similarly, Kris recognized many of the strategies highlighted in the training videos closely paralleled her own instructional approaches. She explained, "I have been doing a lot of these things in my classroom, but I wasn't necessarily calling it the same thing." For Kris, this alignment between her practice and the training content was reassuring. Kathryn echoed these sentiments, adding "the training modules affirmed for me the *why* behind what we are doing in classrooms." Her comments reflected how

the training not only validated existing practices, but also strengthened teachers' conceptual understanding of the principles guiding effective literacy instruction. While Jamey found that many of her existing classroom practices were reinforced by the training modules, she also appreciated the value of the videos which featured teachers applying strategies in real classrooms. She recalled one example where a teacher modeled questioning techniques that used varied prompts to "lead them [students] to the answer instead of telling them the answer." Although this concept was not new to her, Jamey found the demonstration helpful for refining how she implemented the strategy in her first-grade classroom.

Veteran teachers, drawing on years of classroom experience, described the modules as largely a review of familiar concepts. Maren commented, "they [the training modules] covered what I expected." She anticipated information about phonics and decodables, which were both emphasized at length in the modules. Similarly, Ainsley noted, "I felt like a lot of it was review for me." Although she appreciated the refresher, she reflected, "if I had been a first-year teacher, the density of information would have made the experience overwhelming." Other experienced teachers shared similar impressions but also reflected more specifically on how the structure and delivery of the modules shaped their learning experience. Landis observed the training placed a heavy emphasis on terminology and focusing on the "nitty gritty of things," which she found frustrating due to the quizzes that had to be passed before progressing to the next module. However, she valued the short clips showing "teachers utilizing different practices in classrooms." These short (5 to 6-minute) video clips provided concrete demonstrations and sparked ideas for adapting strategies to her own students. Summer echoed Ainsley's

appreciation for the review. She explained, “I have been teaching for a long time, so it was interesting to revisit information I had forgotten.” Like Landis, she found the repeated use of the same classroom video clips across multiple modules inefficient. She stated, “I understand a lesson could work for multiple skills, but I already watched this once, and my time is valuable.” She suggested that a greater variety of examples would have made the training more meaningful. While veteran teachers recognized the value in revisiting core literacy concepts and observing instructional demonstrations, their comments suggest a desire for differentiation that acknowledges varying levels of prior knowledge and experience.

### **Changes to Practice**

One theme that emerged from participants’ reflections was changes to practice. Through their reflections, teachers demonstrated how the understandings they gained from the state-mandated literacy training translated into concrete instructional shifts. At the same time, district directives shaped how these understandings were enacted in classrooms, as teachers aligned their practices with both state guidance and local expectations.

Two district-mandated changes directly influenced classroom implementation. First, the district required a transition from the use of *Fountas and Pinnell* letter-based reading levels to the adoption of grade-level Lexile ranges as defined by the Georgia Department of Education. Second, teachers were required to shift from using leveled texts to incorporating decodable passages in reading instruction. The shift reflected a districtwide commitment to systematic phonics instruction, positioning decoding, rather than contextual guessing, as the primary pathway to reading proficiency.

While these directives established a shared framework for reading instruction, teachers' classroom practices varied depending on their levels of experience and professional judgment. Novice teachers tended to focus on implementing specific strategies modeled in the Georgia Literacy Academy (GLA) modules, whereas veteran teachers often integrated new ideas into existing routines or adapted them to fit their students' needs. The following reflections illustrate how teachers across experience levels translated policy and professional learning into practice.

Novice teachers commented most on the specific instructional strategies they implemented as a result of completing the GLA training modules. Their reflections emphasized application, as they tested and refined strategies learned through the modules within their classrooms. Charis spent considerable time discussing her use of repeated reading with a different purpose for each cycle of reading. She noted, "I saw the value and power for students in reading a text three times." Charis explained how the use of this strategy increased reading comprehension, reading fluency, and vocabulary knowledge. Jamey mentioned her implementation of Elkonin boxes (a tool that helps students segment words into individual sounds) into her instructional practices. She emphasized how helpful these were for students in developing phonological awareness, improving spelling, and developing phonics skills. Jamey plans to continue utilizing these in upcoming school years due to students' skill improvement with this strategy. Kris explained how she has students complete word chains, a strategy where students change one sound (phoneme) at a time. She shared how students manipulate magnetic tiles or write the words on small whiteboards, which has helped them gain proficiency in phonics and phonemic awareness, spelling skills, and sound-symbol relationships. Finally,

Kathryn expressed her success with the use of Interactive Read Alouds (IRA) in her third-grade classroom. This strategy utilizes strategic pausing, teacher modeling of thinking processes, and student participation to engage learners. More specifically, Kathryn has focused on vocabulary instruction during her IRA lessons. She noted how students have had great success learning new vocabulary, as they learn about words in the context of a story, and she often has them discuss vocabulary words with their peers.

In contrast, veteran teachers also described experimenting with new techniques, but their reflections revealed a more nuanced process of integration. While novice teachers tended to adopt strategies more directly from the training, experienced teachers engaged in a process of selection and adaptation, deciding which approaches to incorporate, modify, or set aside based on their instructional judgment and classroom context. This contrast underscores how teachers' levels of experience influenced both the degree and the manner of instructional change following professional development.

Landis, a second-grade teacher, represented one end of this continuum. She described experimenting with “a few lessons” from a new reading program, but she found the experience frustrating for both her and her students, as “the examples provided did not follow the rule” she had just taught. The inconsistency between the materials and her instructional approach led her to limit the use of the program to what was required by her school. While Landis follows district mandates, she relies primarily on her trusted instructional methods that she believes better support student understanding. Her response illustrates how experienced teachers may comply with expectations while maintaining autonomy over day-to-day instruction, using professional judgment to preserve coherence and consistency in their teaching.

In contrast, Maren, a kindergarten teacher, sought to balance adherence to expectations with her own professional understanding of developmentally appropriate practice. She explained how she primarily uses decodable texts because she is “trying to do what they [those in school administration] are asking me to do.” At the same time, she allows her students to take home picture books to read with their families, believing these texts provide essential developmental balance for young readers. Maren also implemented the “turn and talk” strategy from the GLA training modules to help students process ideas, verbalize thinking, and practice listening skills. She observed this approach encouraged full participation and led to more thoughtful responses during whole-group discussions. Maren’s reflections highlight how veteran teachers often adapt new expectations to align with both their pedagogical beliefs and their students’ needs.

Ainsley, a first-grade teacher, reflected an even greater degree of integration between established and newly learned strategies. While she adopted decodable texts as required, she also designed a “Bookshop Station,” where students could “shop” for books to take home and share with their families. These included a variety of texts beyond decodables, offering opportunities for students to develop print awareness, reading stamina, and fluency. Drawing from the GLA modules, Ainsley created a “fluency station” where students record themselves reading passages and then listen to self-assess and build confidence. She also introduced a repeated reading routine for home practice where “parents time students in three, 60-second increments.” These initiatives demonstrate how Ainsley applied new learning creatively to strengthen class instruction and family engagement, illustrating meaningful translation of professional development into practice.

Summer, a third-grade teacher, represented the most confident synthesis of old and new approaches. She acknowledged continuing to use many of the literacy strategies that had proven effective in the past, stating, “I’ve made it work for my kids.” Her comment reflects the agency and adaptability characteristic of veteran teachers who selectively integrate new methods without compromising their instructional identity. In doing so, she demonstrated how strategies from the GLA modules were woven into her established instructional routines, adapting them to meet the specific needs of her students. One example of this integration is her approach to academic vocabulary instruction. Instead of simply introducing a word or posting it on a word wall, Summer conducts direct instruction using child-friendly definitions and provides multiple opportunities for students to hear, speak, and use the new words. Her practice demonstrates how the GLA modules reinforced and extended her established strategies, leading to more intentional and explicit vocabulary teaching. Collectively, these reflections illustrate how teachers transformed mandated learning into individualized practice, balancing compliance with creativity to enhance literacy instruction. Across experience levels, teachers balanced district mandates with professional judgment, applying what they learned in ways that supported their students and enhanced literacy instruction.

### **Inconsistent Follow-up**

When reflecting on their experiences after the literacy training, teachers described inconsistent follow-up across schools, highlighting a gap between initial professional learning and sustained instructional support. Hence, the theme of inconsistent follow-up support provided to elementary school teachers emerged. As the Georgia Department of

Education implemented new English Language Arts (ELA) standards in the 2025-2026 school year, some professional learning agendas shifted, and the time allocated for module follow-up was reduced. The degree and nature of follow-up support also varied considerably across schools in the district, suggesting that professional learning was implemented and operationalized differently from one school to another.

Ainsley, a veteran teacher, mentioned how the academic coach at her school supported professional learning by providing note sheets for teachers to use while completing the training modules. As they progressed through each module, teachers were encouraged to take notes, record ideas, and pose questions related to the content. After completion, the academic coach collected the note sheets and used them as conversation starters for individual follow-up meetings throughout the school year. These discussions allowed for deeper exploration of Science of Reading components, as teachers shared their successes and challenges with implementation. The academic coach also offered targeted feedback and instructional strategies to support ongoing implementation.

Charis, a novice teacher at the same school, shared a different approach facilitated by the academic coach. At the start of the school year, teacher groups were assigned specific modules for review. Each group created circle maps (visual tool for brainstorming a concept and its related ideas), discussed classroom applications, and presented their findings across grade levels to encourage cross-collaboration. This structure was designed to help keep the information current in teachers' minds and promote innovative instructional practices. However, Charis mentioned, "we had to stop reviewing information from the modules in order to shift and focus on the new standards." With the implementation of revised English standards, there simply was not

enough time to both address new requirements in the standards and revisit concepts from the GLA modules.

At another school, veteran teacher Maren explained how the academic coach adopted a more focused, month-by-month approach. Drawing from the GLA modules, the coach selected areas such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension to review. Each month, the coach facilitated discussions, modeled strategies, and provided opportunities for teachers to explore how these concepts could be applied in their classrooms. Maren felt this approach was effective, as it not only reinforced important content but also gave teachers time to ask questions and receive targeted feedback on their instructional practices.

Kris and Kathryn, both novice teachers at their elementary school, shared how they had the opportunity to attend the Georgia LitLink conference the summer after they completed the GLA modules. This teacher-focused event, hosted by the Georgia Department of Education in partnership with the Rollins Center for Language and Literacy – the same organizations who designed the Georgia Literacy Academy modules – provided an additional layer of professional learning centered on the Science of Reading principles. Upon returning to their school, Kris and Kathryn re-delivered key takeaways from the conference as part of the school’s professional learning plan. However, this presentation served as the only formal review of the GLA module content during the academic year, as the school’s professional development efforts shifted toward implementing the newly adopted English standards. Looking ahead to her new role as academic coach, Kathryn expressed her intention to reconnect teachers with SoR concepts embedded in the modules. She asserted, “as we are breaking apart our new

standards and trying to understand them, we will revisit much of the information teachers received in the training modules.” Because the Science of Reading principles align with and support the goals of the new standards, she plans to integrate strategies from the modules into the school’s ongoing standards-based instructional planning.

At another school, Jamey, a novice teacher, mentioned how the faculty at her school read an article on the Science of Reading at the beginning of the school year, which aligned closely with the content from the training modules. However, she observed, “there hasn’t been much discussion of the information in the modules” since the initial activity. Similarly, veteran teachers Landis and Summer, reported minimal follow-up on the module content. While Summer recalled occasional references to module concepts during conversations about the new English standards, she noted these mentions were brief and lacked depth.

Taken together, these findings indicate that although the state-mandated literacy training established a shared foundation of knowledge, the nature and consistency of follow-up support varied widely across schools. In some contexts, academic coaches intentionally revisited module content through structured discussions, modeling, and collaborative reflection, while in others, follow-up was limited or deprioritized as attention shifted to the implementation of new English Language Arts standards. This variation underscores the central role of school-level structures in shaping teachers’ experiences with literacy-related professional learning.

### **Increased Literacy Self-Efficacy**

As teachers reflected on their experiences, many shared completing the state-mandated literacy training modules strengthened their confidence and sense of readiness

to teach literacy. The theme of strengthened literacy self-efficacy captures how teachers' participation in the training modules deepened their beliefs in their instructional abilities. All novice teachers reported experiencing enhanced confidence in their literacy instruction following completion of the state-mandated modules. Although the teachers described different reasons for their increased confidence, each connected their growth in self-efficacy to gaining stronger knowledge of literacy practices, observing encouraging student responses to revised instructional approaches, and feeling more capable and confident in their teaching.

Jamey noted her self-efficacy improved "a little bit" after viewing the modules, explaining how the training prompted her to consider multiple ways to reinforce literacy skills for students. She described feeling more capable of identifying and addressing skill gaps when students struggle and emphasized a shift in her focus from daily mastery toward long-term skill development.

Similarly, Charis reflected on how the integration of various reading programs at her school strengthened both her instructional approach and her students' outcomes. She observed assessment data from the beginning to the end of the year which showed measurable improvement, which contributed to her feeling "more confident in the classroom." Charis also remarked that as her students' abilities increased, she also gained a deeper understanding of language and word structures, further bolstering her confidence as an instructor.

Kris echoed these sentiments, highlighting that all her students showed Lexile (reading ability) growth during the school year, which was a departure from prior years when progress was inconsistent across groups. This consistent improvement reinforced

her confidence and prompted a shift in perspective, as she began to prioritize “individual growth and the success of each student” rather than relying on whole-group outcomes.

Finally, Kathryn expressed greater confidence in her ability to support struggling readers. She shared, “I feel more equipped to help a student when they are struggling to spell something or learning how to read.” By explicitly teaching the rules of language, Kathryn noted how both she and her students now share a common vocabulary for addressing challenges, which she believes has strengthened her effectiveness and her self-assurance as a literacy teacher.

While novice teachers largely described clear gains in confidence, veteran teachers’ experiences with the training were more varied. Though they approached the modules with greater prior experience, three of the four reported an eventual increase in literacy self-efficacy, while one, Landis did not report any noticeable change.

Ainsley shared the modules affirmed many of her existing practices, reinforcing her confidence in her instructional approach. For instance, she regularly has students engage in discussions about words and language, emphasizing the importance of academic conversations to support literacy development. Ainsley explained, “students need to be talking to each other to express, explain, and rationalize their own ideas.” She noted how the modules validated her belief that writing grows from students’ ability to verbalize and reason through their ideas. This confirmation strengthened her belief in her instructional effectiveness.

Two other veteran teachers, Maren and Summer initially experienced a temporary decline in self-efficacy before ultimately reporting renewed confidence. When first introduced to the SoR principles, Maren admitted she “cried over all of this because I’ve

wondered if I did something wrong before or if I hurt kids early in my career.” However, as she continued learning, she realized many of her instructional practices already aligned with the SoR framework. Recognizing the progress her students were making restored her confidence and deepened her belief in her teaching skills.

Similarly, Summer described feeling unsettled when she began viewing the training modules, questioning some of her prior instructional decisions. She initially felt as though she had been “doing it wrong” and “felt a little down” about her past teaching methods. Over time, however, her team implemented new practices inspired by the modules and observed students thinking more deeply and developing greater stamina when reading and writing. Seeing this improvement strengthened her confidence, leading her to reflect, “I am way more confident today than I was even a year ago teaching literacy.” She expressed pride in her growth and a continued commitment to refining her literacy instruction.

These findings demonstrate that the state-mandated literacy training contributed to positive shifts in teachers’ beliefs about their ability to teach literacy effectively. While the pathways to confidence varied, teachers consistently described growth in literacy self-efficacy as connected to deeper instructional understanding, intentional changes in practice, and evidence of student learning. This underscores the role of professional learning not only in helping shape instructional practices but also in strengthening teachers’ confidence in their ability to support diverse learners.

### **Ongoing Professional Needs**

When reflecting on their experiences after the mandated literacy training, teachers described a continued need for professional learning which extended beyond the modules

themselves. Their responses highlighted the importance of sustained support, practical resources, and collaborative opportunities to effectively implement literacy instruction aligned with new standards. Another theme found in the research was the diverse range of needs expressed by teachers following the completion of the training modules. Despite some instances of school-level follow-up on module content, teachers consistently highlighted the importance of further support in certain areas. These included additional guidance materials from the Georgia Department of Education, increased collaboration among teachers, and expanded opportunities for in-person professional development.

Ainsley and Summer, veteran teachers at different elementary schools, expressed their desire for additional instructional support from the Georgia Department of Education. Ainsley identified her need for a “literacy pacing guide,” emphasizing the challenges that arise in its absence. Such a guide would provide a structured timeline for teaching standards and sub-standards in each grade level. She explained without this crucial document, students who transfer between schools, both in the district and across the state, could encounter skill gaps due to inconsistencies in the timing and sequencing of literacy instruction. Similarly, Summer indicated she would value a curated list of “suggested texts” to use in her third-grade classroom. While affirming the importance of teacher autonomy in instructional decision-making, she also described the process of selecting high-quality texts as “overwhelming and time-consuming,” given the abundance of available resources. She noted how book selection can be complicated by a variety of factors, and having a recommended starting point of developmentally appropriate texts with strong analytical potential would be quite useful.

At a different school, Kathryn, a novice teacher transitioning into the role of academic coach, echoed the concerns of the veteran teachers, and she added, “there are so many available resources right now, it is a struggle to decide which one(s) to use for each standard.” She expressed a desire for the Georgia Department of Education to provide guided lesson plans that incorporate a variety of approved sources aligned to specific standards. Teachers indicated these supports would not only help standardize literacy instruction across schools, but also empower teachers at all experience levels to deliver effective, consistent, and engaging learning experiences.

Many teachers, both novice and veteran, emphasized the need for increased collaboration and more practical, hands-on professional development. Two novice teachers, Charis and Jamey, highlighted how working closely with colleagues and learning through real classroom experiences has been more useful than traditional training programs. Charis shared the value of observing teachers within her school. She explained, “there is so much power in seeing your next-door neighbor’s classroom and the kind of instruction they are doing with students.” Because classrooms at the same school often serve similar student populations, Charis found these observations particularly relevant. She emphasized how watching her colleagues differentiate instruction in real time helped her more than any manual or training session. Jamey expressed a preference for in-person, group-based professional development, explaining how she is more engaged and learns more effectively in those settings. She also underscored the importance of vertical planning within early elementary grades, sharing her desire to learn from kindergarten teachers’ strategies and better understand how to prepare her first-grade students for the next academic year.

Veteran teacher Ainsley echoed these concerns, emphasizing how meaningful collaboration cannot happen during a single annual meeting. While some teachers connect via text or email, she argued this is not enough to ensure consistency in interpreting standards or implementing effective instructional strategies across schools. She stressed, “teachers must be given adequate time to plan and collaborate together often.” Ainsley also noted a growing need for targeted literacy coaching, particularly considering the new English standards being implemented in elementary classrooms. However, she also observed how literacy coaches are also still learning the new frameworks themselves and are stretched thin across multiple grade levels, limiting their ability to provide sustained, individualized feedback. Ultimately, whether a teacher is new to the profession or a seasoned veteran, regular opportunities for collaboration and professional growth are essential for continued effectiveness and student success.

These findings suggest that teachers experienced the literacy training as a starting point rather than a comprehensive solution. The varied needs expressed by both novice and veteran teachers underscore the importance of coherent support systems that connect state guidance, school-based collaboration, and classroom practice. Teachers consistently emphasized that meaningful professional learning requires not only access to resources, but also time, collaboration, and opportunities to engage with literacy instruction in authentic, practice-based ways.

## **Chapter VI**

### **Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative study was to explore the experiences of K-3 school teachers as they completed the Georgia Literacy Academy (GLA) professional development program. Through in-depth narratives from eight Georgia teachers, this study sought to understand how educators made meaning of the required online training, how it influenced their instructional confidence and practices, and what professional needs remained unmet after completion.

#### **Discussion**

Connecting to the theme of lack of preparation to teach literacy, both novice and veteran teachers felt insufficiently prepared to teach literacy to a wide range of learners in their classrooms. This perceived lack of knowledge is consistent with Moats (2020), Seidenberg et al. (2020), and Shanahan (2020), who argued that teacher preparation programs, curricula, and professional development often fail to sufficiently integrate research on evidence-based instructional practices. While all teachers had completed an approved teacher preparation program prior to entering their classrooms, they reported gaps in their literacy instructional knowledge. Similar to the findings of McCutchen et al. (2002) and Pittman et al. (2020), teachers in the current study did not report gaining increased knowledge and competence solely through classroom teaching. Instead, they emphasized their need for mentorship, collaboration, ongoing professional learning, and

direct coaching to build the skills required to provide effective instruction for the diverse learners in their classrooms. Additionally, consistent with the work of Cohen et al. (2017) and Pittman et al. (2020), participants also described challenges in offering remediation or specialized instruction for students who struggled with reading. As reflected in the narratives of Landis, Summer, and Kris, these difficulties contributed to feelings of frustration, as teachers believed that some students' needs exceeded their current levels of expertise in literacy instruction.

Participants were already familiar with the online format, as yearly training in the district is conducted in a similar manner. Teachers appreciated the clearly defined objectives, flexibility accessing information, and the multimodal presentation styles utilized; they also valued the ability to review content as needed, which aligns with the findings of Wynants and Dennis (2018). Both Jamey (novice) and Landis (veteran) noted the demonstration videos were particularly valuable, explaining that the visual models enabled them to conceptualize how specific literacy practices could be applied or adapted within their own classrooms. This observation is consistent with Lee et al.'s (2020) finding that online professional development must include elements that positively influence teachers' beliefs about instruction. However, instead of a collaborative endeavor, the GLA training was designed to be completed individually. As a result, teachers did not interact with one another in the online space, engage with new colleagues, or develop broader networks. These limitations contrast with the benefits of online platforms described by Parsons et al. (2018) and Powell and Bodur (2019).

Relating to the theme of confirmation of current practices, this study found that teachers' current instructional strategies and classroom practices were generally affirmed.

This alignment is not surprising given the school district piloted materials from the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) during the 2023-2024 school year.

Although the Early Literacy Act did not require teachers to complete training until July 1, 2025, the district mandated the training be completed by Summer 2024. Further, the school district formally adopted the UFLI materials as the “course of study” in the 2024-2025 school year. As a result, teachers in the district were utilizing portions of, if not all, of the UFLI materials at the time I interviewed participants about the training modules.

Veteran Ainsley expressed a concern that the density of the material found in the training modules could be overwhelming for novice teachers. Interestingly, the novice teachers in this study overwhelmingly reported the GLA modules validated their existing literacy practices and reinforced, rather than challenged, their developing instructional identities. This idea may be related to the notion that teachers often overreport their literacy knowledge. These findings are consistent with Cunningham et al. (2004) and Cohen et al. (2017), who observed that teachers often express confidence in their content knowledge that exceeds what is demonstrated through quantitative measures.

Connecting to the theme of changes to practice, the findings align with Tillema’s (2000) argument that teachers are more likely to embrace professional development content when it connects meaningfully to their current practice. Consistent with Desimone and Garet (2015), Kwakman (2003), and Steeg and Lambson (2015), teachers viewed the professional development as relevant to their instructional needs and selectively adopted or adapted strategies for use in their classrooms. Novice teachers Charis, Jamey, Kris, and Kathryn all noted specific instructional strategies they began using after completion of the GLA modules. Veteran educators Maren, Ainsley, and

Summer described how prior classroom experience allowed them to integrate new ideas with established practices, adapting the GLA strategies in ways that aligned with their students' needs and enhancing their existing instruction. Collectively, these findings suggest that the alignment of professional development content with teachers' existing knowledge and classroom realities is a critical factor in promoting meaningful engagement and practical application.

While all teachers completed the same GLA modules, a clear difference emerged in the extent and quality of follow-up support across elementary schools. Most participants in the study emphasized their continued need for professional learning to effectively implement Science of Reading principles, echoing Weathersby and Harkreader's (1999) finding that ongoing, focused professional development is essential for strengthening instruction and improving student outcomes. Kathryn (novice), Ainsley (veteran), and Summer (veteran) highlighted the need for clearer guidance documents to support classroom implementation. However, Jamey (novice), Charis (novice), and Ainsley (veteran) expressed a desire for more consistent opportunities to collaborate, engage in hands-on learning, and discuss or practice new instructional strategies. This aligns with Carrillo and Flores (2020), who underscored the central role of teacher collaboration in the professional development process as educators must spend time learning from one another's experiences, solving instructional problems, and suggesting instructional strategies for classroom use. Such reflective and iterative learning aligns with Sims et al. (2021), who noted that teachers must reflect on their instruction and explore new approaches for meaningful change to occur. Jamey (novice) and Ainsley (veteran) also identified a need for vertical planning and alignment between grade levels,

particularly to ensure coherent literacy instruction and better prepare students for future expectations. Finally, several teachers described the need for ongoing literacy coaching. This need is consistent with Gulamhussein's (2013) assertion that teachers often require multiple opportunities, and a minimum of 20 instances of practice, to master new instructional skills.

**Meaning Making.** Kegan's (1980, 1982) meaning making theory provides a useful lens for understanding how teachers in this study interpreted the GLA training and subsequently made changes to their classroom practices. Although all participants completed the same set of training modules, each educator engaged with the content in different ways, reflecting Kegan's (1980) assertion that individuals construct meaning by encountering an event, reflecting on it, and integrating aspects of it into their existing belief systems. As each educator reacted to the training and adjusted their classroom practices in slightly different and nuanced ways, it was clear that participants made unique meanings of the GLA modules. This reflects Kegan's (1982) ideas that individuals are the meaning-making context, adults often create meanings in different ways, and teachers had varied experiences prior to completing the GLA modules.

All participants in the study were operating in Kegan's (1994) self-authoring phase of mental development, as all teachers had different beliefs about the training modules and the implementation of the materials in the classroom. While novice teachers in the study generally adopted new classroom instructional strategies after completing the GLA modules, veteran teachers tended to integrate new information with their prior understandings of literacy instruction. While all teachers modified their classroom instruction in different ways, it is possible that veteran educators, Maren, Ainsley, and

Summer were operating in the self-transforming stage of development. As these veteran teachers revised and extended their instructional practices in ways that reflected Taylor and Baxter Magolda's (2015) notion that those in a self-transforming mindset make connections between various perspectives and then enrich their unique, self-authored philosophies.

**Self-Efficacy.** In terms of literacy self-efficacy, all but one of the participants in the study reported increased literacy self-efficacy after engaging with the GLA modules and implementing elements of the training in their classrooms. Consistent with Bandura's (1977) work, many teachers described a strengthened belief in their ability to positively influence student literacy outcomes. The combination of explicit information and video demonstrations provided meaningful vicarious experiences that reinforced their confidence. Jamey, Kris, and Kathryn, novice teachers, also noted mastery experiences, such as observing measurable improvements in students' skills, that further enhanced their sense of confidence (Bandura, 1977; Guskey, 1987). In contrast, two veteran teachers, Maren and Summer initially experienced a slight decline in confidence, expressing concern about the quality of their prior literacy instruction. However, after reflecting on their practices and engaging in collegial conversations, supportive verbal persuasion helped them regain confidence. As they observed students engaging more deeply with literacy tasks and demonstrating improved outcomes, their sense of efficacy was restored (Guskey, 1986; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). These findings align with Holzberger et al. (2013), who found that teachers' self-efficacy fluctuates over the course of the school year, regardless of experience level. Increased self-efficacy may have encouraged teachers to set higher expectations for students and persist more when faced

with instructional challenges (Gibson & Dembo, 1984). As teachers' confidence grew, they also appeared more willing to integrate a wider range of instructional techniques (Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011). This pattern is consistent with prior research indicating that higher literacy self-efficacy is associated with the use of stronger evidence-based practices and the creation of more effective literacy environments (Guo et al., 2010, 2012; Justice et al., 2008; Varghese et al., 2016).

### **Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

It was clear from the research that K-3 teachers, both novice and veteran, were not adequately equipped to teach literacy to the wide range of learners in their classrooms. Notably, recent legislation (HB538) mandates that pre-service teacher preparation programs include explicit instruction in the development of fundamental reading skills, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. In addition, the legislation establishes standards to ensure that postsecondary students completing teacher certification programs in the state of Georgia graduate with the knowledge and skills necessary to teach reading effectively. As a result, individuals currently enrolled in teacher preparation programs should be better equipped to provide appropriate literacy instruction upon completion of their postsecondary coursework.

Further, as districts seek to improve teachers' practices aligned to the Science of Reading, it is vital that ongoing, job-embedded professional development for literacy instruction are implemented consistently across all elementary schools within the district. A coherent, districtwide approach could help ensure that teachers receive equitable feedback, guidance, and instructional support, regardless of school context. In addition,

professional learning should encourage and foster a culture of collaboration while still allowing teachers the flexibility to integrate SoR concepts in ways that align with their classroom needs. While expectations and instructional priorities should remain consistent, professional development may be more effective when differentiated to honor teachers' varying levels of prior knowledge and classroom experience. Districts must also ensure that teachers have access to high-quality instructional materials, assessment tools, and protected planning time to apply newly acquired practices. Finally, because self-efficacy influenced how teachers engaged with and applied the training, districts should intentionally design professional learning experiences that build teachers' confidence through supported practice, peer feedback, and opportunities to observe student growth.

Based on the results of this study, several recommendations emerge for teachers and the school district they work in. These recommendations center on strengthening instructional coherence, increasing collaborative learning opportunities, and ensuring teachers have consistent, responsive support as they implement Science of Reading practices.

First, a coordinated district effort to create guidance documents is needed to ensure all students receive high-quality literacy instruction. Because the Georgia Department of Education allows individual school districts discretion when implementing SoR practices, substantial variation in instructional practices can occur between schools. Several teachers in this study expressed a need for practical, easy-to-use literacy resources. District leaders could consider developing resources such as pacing guides and lists of curated texts to help streamline expectations across the district. These resources would not only support teachers' daily planning, but they would also strengthen

instructional consistency across grade levels and schools, reducing gaps for students who move between classrooms or schools.

Second, the district should offer ongoing opportunities for teachers to observe one another, receive coaching feedback, and engage in structured debriefs focused on Science of Reading instructional practices. Peer observations and coaching cycles can help see evidence-based literacy instruction in action, reflect on how to apply new techniques, and receive targeted guidance from instructional coaches. To ensure consistency, debrief protocols should be standardized so all teachers receive supportive, actionable feedback that directly aligns with their needs and the district's instructional priorities. Such responsive feedback is particularly important as educators navigate the complexities of early literacy instruction.

Third, teachers in grades K-3 need protected time for grade-level collaboration and vertical planning. Participants emphasized the value of discussing literacy strategies, sharing classroom successes, and problem-solving challenges with their colleagues. Regular, structured time for collaboration would allow teachers to learn from one another, consider how strategies could be adapted across student populations, and identify the skills students need to enter the next grade prepared. However, to maximize the effectiveness of these collaborative sessions, the district should provide clear agendas or facilitation protocols to ensure conversations remain focused, purposeful, and grounded in instructional needs.

Finally, as SoR implementation continues to evolve, it may be beneficial to intentionally pair teachers with those who have different levels of professional experience. Veteran teachers can help novice teachers understand how to integrate new

programs and materials into existing instructional routines, while newer teachers may bring fresh perspectives on recently introduced state or district initiatives. These partnerships would promote a two-way exchange of ideas, support professional growth for both groups, and help teachers move beyond viewing SoR as a set of programs toward understanding it as a cohesive approach to literacy instruction.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations to the study. First, the findings were constrained by participants' ability to accurately recall and articulate their thoughts and feelings at various points during the professional development process. Second, the data were limited to the information the participants remembered and chose to share during the interviews, which may not fully represent the breadth of their experiences. Third, all participants in the study identified as female, which restricts the gender diversity represented in the findings. Fourth, the research was conducted within a single school district in northeast Georgia, which may limit the transferability of the results to other contexts.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research might address these limitations by including classroom observations as an additional data source for analyzing teachers' use of instructional strategies aligned with the Science of Reading. Including participants with greater demographic diversity (for example, individuals who identify as male or non-binary) could also strengthen the findings by representing a broader range of perspectives. In addition, conducting a similar study in other districts could offer valuable comparative insight into how contextual factors shape teachers' engagement with mandated literacy

training. Examining teachers' knowledge of multiple reading concepts might prove useful for comparing perceived knowledge and actual literacy content knowledge. Additionally, seeking teachers' opinions about professional development before, during, and after training would help minimize the ability of participants to remember their experiences at various points in the professional development process. Finally, expanding the participant pool to include teachers with a wider range of professional experience could deepen the understanding of how educators engage with the GLA training, make meaning of the professional development, and integrate the associated practices into their classrooms.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to understand elementary school teachers' experiences before, during, and after completing the GLA training modules. Additionally, I sought to understand how teachers made meaning of the professional development, how this impacted their confidence and instructional practices, and what needs of teachers remained unmet. Through the interview process and data analysis, Charis, Maren, Jamey, Ainsley, Kris, Landis, Kathryn, and Summer's stories provided insight into the experiences of classroom teachers and their deep dedication to teaching literacy to their students. Five themes emerged that provided an understanding of their experiences, how the training impacted their classroom practices, and the ensuing changes in their literacy self-efficacy.

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**Appendix A:**  
**School System Agreement to Allow Research**



**HABERSHAM COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION**  
P.O. Box 70, Clarkesville, Georgia 30523  
Ph: 706-754-2110 Fax: 706-754-3519  
Patrick Franklin, Superintendent  
Susan Davis, Director of Elementary Schools

April 2, 2025

To Whom It May Concern:

Kelli Holland, Doctoral Candidate at Valdosta State University, has submitted a request to conduct research to the Habersham County Schools central office. All appropriate documentation of study approval from Valdosta State University is on file and system approval to conduct the research study entitled, *Literacy Professional Learning: A Qualitative Study Among Elementary School Teachers* in Habersham County Schools is granted. Principal permission will also be required prior to contacting school staff members.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Susan Davis'. The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Susan Davis

**Appendix B:**  
**Valdosta State University IRB approval**



***Institutional Review Board (IRB)***  
***for the Protection of Human Research Participants***

**PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT**

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**Protocol Number:** 04595-2025

**Responsible Researcher(s):** Kelli Holland

**Supervising Faculty:** Dr. Jamie Workman

**Dissertation Research Member:** Dr. Jamie Workman

**Project Title:** *Literacy Professional Learning: A Qualitative Study Among Elementary School Teachers.*

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**Institutional Review Board Determination:**

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that the exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator ([irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu)) before continuing your research study.

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**Comments:**

- *Your research study may begin at the following approved research locations: **Habersham County School District (04.02.2025)**.*
  - *Each gift card recipient must sign a **Participant Payment Log Sheet** upon receipt of a gift card. The signed log sheets must be maintained securely with research data.*
  - *Per the exempt guidelines, it is permissible to record interviews for the specific purpose of creating an accurate transcript to be utilized for documentation or analysis. Once the transcript has been constructed, all recorded interview sessions must be deleted immediately from all devices, including electronic files used to store recordings.*
  - *To comply with consent guidelines, audio recordings must capture the researcher reading the consent statement aloud, ensuring the participant's understanding and willingness to participate. **Each transcript must document the researcher's reading of the consent statement and the participants' verbal consent.** A copy of the consent statement is to be provided to participants.*
  - *Upon completion of the research study, all data (e.g., data, email lists, payment log sheets, transcripts, etc.) must be securely maintained (e.g., locked file cabinet, password-protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a **minimum of 3 years**. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*
- Researchers must submit proposed modifications to the IRB Administrator at [tmwright@valdosta.edu](mailto:tmwright@valdosta.edu) for review and approval. Modifications are not to be implemented before receiving approval by the IRB.**

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*Elizabeth W. Olphie*

*04.01.2025*

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator

Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.

Please direct questions to [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu) or 229-259-5045.

**Appendix C:**  
**Principal Email Request to Conduct Research in School**

Dear [Principal Name],

I hope this message finds you well. I am writing to seek your permission to recruit teachers from Fairview Elementary School as participants in a research study that I am conducting. The study aims to understand how teachers made meaning of the literacy professional development modules completed on the Georgia Learns platform. I have been approved to conduct research by Habersham County Schools and the Institutional Review Board at Valdosta State University.

The participation of the teachers would involve two interviews. The study will not interfere with their teaching responsibilities, and all participants will have their identities and responses kept confidential.

I would be grateful for your approval to proceed with recruiting teachers from your staff. If you have any questions or need more details about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for considering my request. I look forward to your response.

Many thanks for your consideration,

Kelli Holland

**Appendix D:**  
**Recruitment Email to Teachers**

Dear [Possible Participant Name],

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Keli Holland, and I am a doctoral candidate at Valdosta State University. I am conducting research regarding teachers' experiences before, during, and after the completion of the Georgia Literacy Academy instructional modules. My study aims to understand how teachers made meaning of the instructional modules and learn how the information may have impacted their classroom instruction. Your unique insights and experiences would be incredibly valuable to my research, and I believe that your participation could make a significant impact. As a token of my appreciation for your time and input, you will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card for participating in the study.

Participation in this study involves participating in two 60-90 minute interviews. All information collected will be kept confidential and used solely for research purposes. I would be delighted to have you on board to contribute to this important research. Please let me know if you are interested in participating in this research by replying to this email.

Thank you for considering this invitation. I look forward to the possibility of working with you.

At the best,  
Kelli Holland

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Kelli Holland at [kdwills@valdosta.edu](mailto:kdwills@valdosta.edu). This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu).

Kelli Holland  
Valdosta State University  
[kdwills@valdosta.edu](mailto:kdwills@valdosta.edu)  
706-968-4644

**Appendix E:**  
**Informed Consent Document**

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**VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
**Consent to Participate in Research**

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You are being asked to participate in a research project entitled “*Literacy Professional Learning: A Study Among Elementary School Teachers.*” This research project is being conducted by *Kelli Holland*, a *student* in [*Curriculum & Instruction*] at Valdosta State University. The purpose of this research is *to understand how teachers made meaning of online, literacy professional development training.* Your participation is entirely voluntary.

As described in more detail below, we will ask you to [*participate in two 90-minute interviews to discuss your experiences with the online, literacy professional development and describe its impacts on your classroom instruction*]. Someone in your position might be interested in participating because [*it will help school leaders understand the needed aspects of literacy professional development for elementary school teachers*]. Because there are some risks, such as [*briefly discuss the risks here*], you may not wish to participate. It is important for you to know that you can stop your participation at any time. More information about all aspects of this study is provided below.

This form includes detailed information to help you decide whether to participate in this [*study*]. Please read it carefully and ask any questions that you have before you agree to participate. Please be sure to retain a copy of this form for your records.

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**Procedures:** Your participation will involve [a series of two 90-minute interviews where you answer questions about online, literacy professional development. Your total participation in this project is expected to be 3 hours].

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer.

**Possible Risks or Discomfort:** This is a minimal risk research study. That means that the risks of participating are no more likely or serious than those you encounter in everyday activities.

*“Although there are no known risks associated with these research procedures, it is not always possible to identify all potential risks of participating in a research study. However, the University has taken reasonable safeguards to minimize potential but unknown risks.”*

By agreeing to participate in this research project, you are not waiving any rights that you may have against Valdosta State University for injury resulting from negligence of the University or its researchers.

**Potential Benefits:** *“Although you may not benefit directly from this research, your participation will help the researcher gain additional understanding of how teachers made meaning of online, literacy professional development training modules. Knowledge gained may contribute to addressing the professional development needs of elementary school teachers regarding literacy.*

**Costs and Compensation:** If you participate in the research, to any degree, you will receive a \$25 electronic gift card to Amazon.com. This gift card will be emailed to you at the conclusion of your participation in the study.

**Assurance of Confidentiality:** Valdosta State University and the researcher will keep your information confidential to the extent allowed by law. Members of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a university committee charged with reviewing research to ensure the rights and welfare of research participants, may be given access to your confidential information.

*To safeguard confidentiality, all data will be stored on a password-protected computer and a secure hard drive. Only the researcher will have access to participant data. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym, and any identifying features will be removed from the reporting of data.*

**Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to participate in this research project is entirely voluntary. If you agree now to participate and change your mind later, you are free to leave the study. Your decision not to participate at all or to stop participating at any time in the future will not have any effect on any rights you have or any services you are otherwise entitled to from Valdosta State University.

*You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer.*

*Should you decide to withdraw after data collection is complete, your information will be deleted from the database and it will not be included in the research results.*

**Information Contacts:** Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to [*Kelli Holland*] at [*kwills@valdosta.edu*]. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

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**Agreement to Participate:** The research project and my role in it have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, I am indicating that I am 18 years of age or older. I have received a copy of this consent form.

I would like to receive a copy of the results of this study:      \_\_\_\_\_ Yes      \_\_\_\_\_ No



## **Appendix F:**

### **Interview Guide for Participants**

- What kind(s) of training in teaching literacy did you have in your preservice courses?
- What types of literacy professional development training have you experienced during your career?
- Will you tell me about how the statewide, mandated literacy training was announced to the teachers at your school?
- How are teachers being asked to complete the modules? (independently, collaboratively, teacher in-service days, outside contract hours)
- Tell me about the content in the modules.
- What were your experiences with the content in the modules?
- In what ways were the modules like you expected?
- In what ways were the modules different than you expected?
- What content, included in the modules was the most useful to you and why?
- If you were going to make changes or suggestions to the people who created the modules, what might you say?
- Can you walk me through the experience of completing module 1?
- Tell me about the activities and delivery of the information in the modules.
- How prepared did you feel to teach literacy prior to completing the literacy modules?
- In what ways did the information you learned in the modules impact your confidence teaching literacy in your classroom?
- Are there training experiences that would help you feel more confident about teaching literacy in your classroom?
- Tell me about your experiences teaching literacy.
- How did the ideas presented in the modules make you think about your literacy instruction?
- In what ways did the modules help you reflect on your classroom practices?
- In what ways has the literacy training impacted your classroom instruction?
- Is there still information you feel that you need to adequately teach literacy in your classroom?
- Are there types of follow-ups that you believe might be useful for helping you teach literacy in your classroom?