

Literacy Experts as Classroom Teachers

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Teacher expertise can influence student experiences and achievement. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences, practices, and beliefs of early elementary classroom teachers who have supplementary literacy certification in order to determine their shared characteristics and changes to their practice after earning the literacy license. Characteristics of high quality literacy teachers have been identified in previous research, however a review of the current literature revealed a lack of information regarding classroom teachers with additional literacy certification. Understanding how they utilize this expertise could have implications for educational policy. Data was collected for this phenomenological study through semi-structured one-on-one interviews and analyzed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis procedure. The sixteen participants held a Wisconsin (WI) Reading Teacher license and/or WI Reading Specialist license and taught kindergarten, first, or second grade in WI at the time of the interviews. Interpretative phenomenology and social cognitive theory provided a theoretical framework for this study. Since earning the literacy certification participants reported: increased confidence, using their new knowledge to help students, families, and colleagues, a new capacity for going beyond the prescribed curriculum, and an increased ability to meet individual student needs. The findings of this study have potential to impact school district policies for hiring and professional development as well as individual teacher decision-making around the procurement and use of literacy expertise. Student achievement in literacy may benefit from the resulting actions of educators.

Introduction

With the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Report Card for 2019 showing only 35% of Grade 4 students scoring at or above the proficient level (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), improving literacy achievement in the United States is an urgent issue. Educators, including classroom teachers and specialists, have been found to be a major factor in student success (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010; Matsumura, Garnier, & Spybrook, 2013; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004). The International Literacy Association published a study on the ways in which specialized literacy professionals spend their time in schools (Bean, et al., 2015), including over 2,500 respondents from all fifty states found that they fulfill four different roles: instructional/literacy coach, reading teacher/interventionist, reading/literacy specialist, and literacy supervisors, with all groups reporting the support of teachers as one of their primary roles. By working with classroom teachers, literacy professionals influence teachers' beliefs and practices, which have resulted in higher reading achievement in students (Bean, Goatley, & Kern, 2015; Matsumura, Garnier, & Spybrook, 2013). Therefore, one way to address the challenge of improving literacy achievement is for specialized literacy professionals to collaborate with faculty to create access to high quality literacy learning experiences.

However, the lack of literacy growth across the United States suggests that this is not enough. Considering the positive influence literacy professionals have been found to have, it is reasonable to wonder what influence they might have when they fill early elementary classroom teacher positions, thus having the most direct contact with students throughout the day. What if the literacy expert *is* the classroom teacher? Further understanding about how teachers with supplementary literacy certification use their literacy expertise and how their practices changed after earning the literacy license has the potential to influence school policy decisions and student literacy achievement across the United States.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

Employing more teachers with additional literacy expertise has potential to improve literacy achievement and reduce achievement gaps between student groups. Although it requires a relatively significant amount of time and effort, earning a supplementary literacy license is a realistic and concrete way for classroom teachers to increase their literacy expertise, which has tremendous potential to impact student learning. The purpose of this study was to explore the shared characteristics of the participants and the ways in which they report changes in their practice since earning the literacy license. With more knowledge about how participants utilize their expertise and what changes they attribute to earning the license, school leaders could make more informed staffing decisions, create hiring policies, allocate funds, and use the practices of this group to inform high quality professional development for those who do not have the additional certification. Additionally, individual teachers could be compelled to obtain supplementary literacy certification, and school or district administration teams could be convinced to support teachers in doing so. At a time when school districts are desperate to address the learning loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic, increased teacher expertise, specifically in the form of a supplementary literacy license is worth exploring. This study aimed to answer the following research questions: What are shared characteristics of classroom teachers who hold supplemental literacy certification? What changes in practice do classroom teachers perceive after earning supplemental literacy certification?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This was a phenomenological study which, by definition, looked at the lived experiences of those who have experienced a specific phenomenon (Terrell, 2015), in this case, working as an early elementary classroom teacher while holding a supplementary literacy license. In addition, this study used a Social Cognitive Theory lens which operates with the assumption that people learn by observing and interpreting the behaviors of others (Tracey & Morrow, 2017) and that along with a higher level of self-efficacy comes greater effort, persistence, and accomplishment, regardless of one's actual ability (Bandura, 2010). Social Cognitive Theory also places value on the reciprocal interaction of three aspects: personal, behavioral, and environmental factors (LaMorte, 2019). They combine in the classrooms where the participating teachers work every day. This theory helped to frame the context of this study as the participants use their literacy knowledge (personal) in various ways to affect their instructional decision-making (behavioral) in the classroom setting (environment).

Historical Analysis

In order to understand the complexities of this phenomenon, it is important to look back at the history of specialized literacy professionals in the United States. When the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was first implemented in 1965, the role of literacy professionals was usually that of Title 1 teachers doing pull-out intervention with struggling readers (Dole, 2004). In 1994, ESEA was reauthorized as part of the Improving America's Schools Act that specified state accountability for ensuring Title 1 students are held to high standards (Hodge, Taylor, & Frankenberg, 2016). With ESEA's reauthorization in 2010, and under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), came three areas of new emphasis (Dole, 2004): the need for all teachers to be qualified to teach reading, the use of scientifically based programs, and a focus on assessment, especially progress monitoring, used to inform instructional decisions. At that point there was a shift in the role of literacy professionals from working exclusively with students, to working with teachers in order to better achieve these three goals (Dole, 2004). This is also when it became more widely accepted that the lowest performing students need the highest quality teachers (Dole, 2004). This shift has meant that the role of literacy professionals varies from district to district but often includes remediation with struggling students, leading professional development for teachers, coaching teachers, making curriculum decisions, or a combination of multiple aspects (Collins, 2020; Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Frey, 2003). Most recently, ESEA was reauthorized again in 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act (Sharp, 2016) which gave states the opportunity to set their own college and career standards.

The number of professionals in literacy coaching roles expanded rapidly under Reading First because of mandates making grant money conditional with the hiring of reading coaches (Deussen, Coskie, Robinson, and Autio, 2007). With this influx of literacy coaches came the development of standards from the International Literacy Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. These standards are typically used by institutions of higher education in combination with program requirements for supplementary literacy licensure endorsement and were originally designed to bring consistency to literacy positions and provide common language (Collins, 2020). The new emphasis on scientifically based practice under Reading First and NCLB paved the way for Response to Intervention (RtI), which was developed in 2004 as part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as a replacement for the discrepancy model (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). When discussing the implications of RtI for reading teachers, Shanahan (2008) emphasized a number of ways in which they can enhance the classroom practices including the coordination of intervention and classroom instruction, adjusting to the student's specific level and needs, and increasing the amount and intensity of instruction students receive. This brings to light a central question for this study: What if the reading teacher *is* the classroom teacher?

Review of Related Research

The instructional practices of effective literacy teachers and effective professional development have received considerable attention in the field (Allington, 2002; Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017; Flynn, 2007; Kennedy, 2010). Although the specific topic of the practices and

impact of early elementary classroom teachers who hold a supplementary literacy license is currently under-represented, the existing literature presented some themes to inform this study and provide support for future research in this direction.

Teacher Expertise Matters

First, there appears to be relative agreement in the field that teacher expertise matters to student learning experiences and achievement, with studies finding that the teacher is the most important factor in addition to other aspects such as class size, programs, funding, and family involvement (Dole, 2004; Flynt & Brozo, 2009; Opper, 2019; Stronge & Hindman, 2003). The teacher has even been found to have a larger effect on students than socio-economic status (Nye, Konstantopoulos, and Hedges, 2004). Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor (2010) found that having a regular license, as opposed to an emergency license or no license, and being certified in the particular subject area are both factors associated with higher student achievement. In their work examining how school climate, teacher qualifications, and instructional practices differ by school type, Lubienski, Lubienski, and Crane (2008) also found that teacher certification led to higher student achievement in the area of mathematics. Conversely, in a study of nationally representative data examining the relationship between teacher educational background and Kindergarten student achievement, Leak and Farkas' (2011) investigation found that teacher degrees have little association with student achievement outcomes and showed mixed findings on the impact of teacher coursework in reading and child development on student achievement. Their discussion of these results pointed out the need to investigate this further.

Coaching and Specialized Literacy Expertise

The existing literature suggests that teachers with supplementary certification in literacy have specialized literacy expertise that can be utilized to increase student learning (Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Frey, 2003; Stevens, 2010). Additionally, literacy coaching appears to have a positive influence on teacher practices and increased student achievement. Mangin (2009) explored decision-making factors regarding literacy coaches and reported that districts recognize teacher professional development as a key factor in student learning improvement *in combination* with the specialized roles of literacy coaches, paraprofessionals, and reading specialists. In other words, literacy specialists alone are not enough. Rather, classroom teachers need expert literacy knowledge as well.

This was supported by a meta-analysis from the International Literacy Association aiming to contextualize the roles of literacy professionals (Bean, Goatley, & Kern, 2015). The authors differentiated between reading/literacy specialists, literacy coaches, and literacy coordinators/supervisors, while also acknowledging the overlap in responsibilities and the lack of consistency with which the titles are used across the United States. Regardless of titles used, the authors found that literacy professionals use their expertise to create opportunities that have resulted in higher student literacy achievement (Bean, Goatley, & Kern, 2015), often working collaboratively with other team members. Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter (2010), set out to determine whether literacy coaching was linked to significantly increased student achievement and concluded literacy coaching to be an effective factor for promoting changes in teachers' practices, thus improving student learning. Similarly, Matsumura, Garnier, and Spybrook (2013)

found that coaching in combination with specific professional development for coaches increased students' ability in both basic and higher-level comprehension skills. Considering the findings of this study, which supports the use of literacy coaching at the district, school, and classroom levels, it is reasonable to wonder what influence a literacy coach might have if they were in the classroom full time as the teacher.

Teacher Retention

The topic of teacher retention and attrition has received considerable attention as it has been examined as a possible factor in overall student achievement (Sass, Seal, & Martin, 2011). This is relevant to this study because teachers may choose to leave the classroom setting after earning additional certification, or they may choose to stay and utilize their new expertise in the classroom. Borman and Dowling (2008) found that teachers with more training, experience, and skills are more likely to leave teaching. Hancock, Black, and Bird's (2006) study suggested that teachers feel they can make a greater difference and gain more from an administrative position over a classroom teaching job. Crain (2013) did a multiple case study on National Board Certified teachers from Generation X who left the classroom, concluding that the reasons these teachers left the classroom had to do with characteristics of both the teaching profession and characteristics of Generation X. Similarly, Johnson, Berg, and Donaldson (2005) described how intrinsic and extrinsic factors, as well as the interaction of the two, affect teachers' decisions to stay in the profession of teaching. They found that retaining teachers long term may require districts to respond to teachers' need for growth inside and outside of the classroom setting and that strong professional development was linked to teachers feeling happier and more effective, which may lead to better retention. It is possible that the need for growth may be met by earning additional literacy certification, however the concept of licensure programs as professional development is under-represented in current literature. There is much to be gained by considering these studies, particularly those examining teachers who *left* the classroom after gaining additional expertise through a rigorous process, as compared to those in this study who decided to *stay* in the classroom setting.

Methodology

Sampling & Participants

This study included sixteen participants chosen through purposive snowball sampling. An initial call for eligible participants was put out through local education groups on social media, and these participants were then asked if they knew any other early elementary teachers with supplementary literacy certification in Wisconsin. All participants were current kindergarten, first grade, or second grade teachers who also hold a Wisconsin Reading Teacher or Reading Specialist license. They were from fourteen different school districts across the state of Wisconsin, including a mix of large, medium, and small public and private districts in urban, suburban, or rural settings.

Instruments

Two data collection instruments were used. A Google form was used to gather preliminary information from participants such as years teaching, years with the supplementary license, grade level, etc. A semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A) was used for one-on-one in-depth interviews with participating teachers. The questions were centered around the following topics: motivation and path to licensure, change in practice after earning the literacy license, use of literacy expertise with different groups (students, parents, colleagues), the importance of literacy licensure, and plans for the future. Interviews took place virtually and lasted roughly 30 minutes each.

Data Analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed and analysis was done to interpret the data using two main influences. The first was the seven step approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); (Charlick, Pincombe, McKellar, & Fielder, 2016) which included: reading and re-reading of the original data, initial noting of ideas, identification of emerging themes, looking for connections between themes, moving on to the next case, looking for patterns between cases, and finally deepening the analysis with more complex interpretation. Used concurrently, the second analysis approach used was Saldaña's (2015) coding techniques including code mapping and code weaving. More specifically, three specific types of coding techniques were used, which Saldaña (2015) suggests for interviews: Initial Coding, which is an open-ended method that involves breaking the data into sections to look for similarities and differences; In Vivo Coding, which uses actual words or phrases from the participants as codes; and Values Coding, which uses codes to represent a participant's perspective by reflecting their attitudes, values, and beliefs. By allowing for and emphasizing interpretation of the data, both analysis techniques were specific to the research design and theoretical framework. See Appendix B for a sample of the coding.

Additionally, I used Saldaña's (2015) suggested four phases of code mapping including: listing all codes, categorizing those codes, re-categorizing the categories, and finally developing higher-level concepts. This method complimented the spiraling nature of the IPA model and was particularly helpful for identifying strong themes from the complex raw data that was collected. Systematic coding processes also allowed me to stay grounded in the theoretical framework of this study. Smagorinsky (2008) conceived the idea that codes should manifest theory and make a researcher's theoretical perspective explicit. For example, by choosing "confidence" as a code, I was able to reflect self-efficacy as a major principle of Social Cognitive Theory.

Trustworthiness

Reflexivity, the acknowledgement of a researcher's role and positionality in the research, was an important component in establishing trustworthiness of this study. It operated under the assumption that "qualitative researchers involve themselves in every aspect of their work." (Lichtman, 2012, p. 163). This assumption, along with the interpretative phenomenological and social cognitive theoretical frameworks, require that the researcher acknowledges the role of self throughout the study. Cohen and Crabtree (2006) suggest that reporting perspectives, values, and beliefs can help foster reflexivity. As a former reading specialist currently working with graduate students earning supplementary literacy certification, I came to this study with experience and

knowledge on the topic. Consequently, I recognized possible bias in order to ensure trustworthiness of the results. In this case, I believe that the participants should have additional knowledge and skills as a result of their work to obtain supplemental literacy licensure and therefore I expected to find effective use of this expertise.

In addition to researcher reflexivity, validity strategies included member checking, peer debriefing, and the discussion of contradictory evidence. The purpose of these measures was to add credibility in a way that is appropriate for a qualitative study. Member checking helps to determine the accuracy of qualitative findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this study it occurred when I shared the identified themes with five randomly selected participants via email. I gave a brief description of the themes that I identified and invited them to voluntarily comment on these findings. I did not receive any responses to my email to the five participants.

While reflexivity and member checking concern those who are already involved in the study, peer debriefing and discussion of contradictory evidence provide an external check of the research process (Creswell, 1998). In the study, peer debriefing took place after I discerned central themes from fourteen interviews. Discussing the emerging themes with my peer debriefer and answering her questions added validity to the account and helped expand the audience that resonates with the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Specifically, disclosure and discussion of contradictory evidence with the peer debriefer were expected to help differentiate actual themes about the participants from findings that may also apply to the general elementary education teacher population. The peer debriefer shared the insight that the themes appeared to be exclusive to the target population, but suggested further examination of the amount of time each participant has been teaching. She felt that this variable might bring about the same themes. Specifically, when discussing the use of research to support practice, she felt that this might be something that teachers might do with a certain number of years of experience. Upon further examination of the amount of participants' experience, as well as which teachers specifically mentioned the use of research, there did not appear to be a pattern that would suggest this.

Additionally, the trustworthiness of this study was enhanced by the conscious effort to include examples of disconfirming data that are unrepresentative of the whole (Smagorinsky, 2008). By highlighting outlying participant responses alongside overall trends in the sentiments shared by the others, overly simplistic conclusions can more easily be avoided. This practice of pointing out contrasting evidence can also aide in preventing a researcher's preconceived assumptions (Smagorinsky, 2008), which is especially important in a study that relies on researcher interpretation.

Shared Characteristics

The participants' responses indicated both a wide variety of perspectives and individual circumstances as well as several overlapping components. Their responses are grouped below in order to report the ways in which they converge and diverge with clarity.

District Supported, Continue in the Classroom

LITERACY EXPERTS AS CLASSROOM TEACHERS

Six of the participants were motivated to earn the supplementary literacy license partly due to specific support from their school districts including:

- Courses taught on site at their school
- Courses paid for by the district partially or in full
- Certain courses required by district

For most participants, this district support served as one of several aspects that motivated them to earn the license, in addition to a desire to better meet student needs, a love for literacy, and a desire to increase their job marketability. By contrast, one participant reported that district support was her main incentive to earn the license. Eva said:

I had never thought that I would go back to school, it never even crossed my mind. It was one of those things where I was like, well, if they're paying for it, sure, I might as well jump at this opportunity.

Although this was her original motivation, after completing the Reading Teacher license, she continued the program to earn a Master's degree as well.

For the others within this group, district support was one of many reasons they made the decision to pursue literacy certification. They all elaborated on the knowledge they gained during their courses, the importance of assessment, and specific examples of collaboration with colleagues. Claire, who teaches kindergarten, works for a suburban public district that requires and pays for all of their early elementary classroom teachers to take two specific graduate level literacy intervention courses. Because the district-supported courses counted toward a Reading Teacher license, she not only desired to learn more, but also felt it made sense to continue with the remaining courses required for the license. Similarly, Christina, who works for one of the smallest public rural districts in this study that is geographically furthest from the rest of the districts, emphasized feeling that earning the supplementary literacy license gave her more credibility with her students' parents. This topic of gained confidence was touched on by all participants.

These six participants all reported plans to continue to serve as classroom teachers with little to no desire to take on a different role. Sophia specified that she loves the ability to use her knowledge throughout the day and in different ways with her first graders. Eva articulated gratitude for the options the license gives her and the way in which it adds to her resume, but she feels it is much more important to apply what she knows to the classroom setting. Samantha, Christina, and Claire all spoke about the high value they place on their relationships with the students, and their concern that these relationships would not be as strong when taking on a different role. They felt that the type of bonds they experience with their students currently would not be replicated if they were only seeing students for brief portions of a school day.

The reasons behind Anna's plans to stay in the classroom differed from other participants in some ways. In addition to the factors mentioned by others, she expressed a desire to stay in the classroom because she wants to stay in her large public urban district. However, in order to do so, she feels she must stay in the classroom because of a lack of opportunities to fill other roles

within that district. She was the only participant to specifically articulate feeling like being a classroom teacher wasn't using her knowledge to the highest potential.

Leading From Within the Classroom

While all participants reported some degree of literacy leadership, these stood out as taking on literacy leadership roles as a major component of how they utilize their expertise. Kate, who teaches second grade, also teaches as an adjunct professor for a local university and shared a lot of insight about the complexities of teaching colleagues in compulsory coursework. While she reported strong beliefs in the philosophy behind the framework she teaches, she is also accepting of new, sometimes conflicting research that exists, as well as the reality of working with adult learners who, for a variety of reasons, may not want to be there. Kate stressed the importance of teacher language and questioning techniques to foster critical thinking and independence. She credits this as a major outcome of the learning she did when she earned the literacy license and reported using this principle throughout her day and across various subject areas in her classroom.

Similarly, Kira has taught as an adjunct professor at a different private college. She talked about the ways in which her new learning and experience gave her a powerful combination of confidence and expertise. This has affected her practices of assessment, creation of student goals, collaboration with colleagues, and parent interaction.

While Kenya and Rose do not have formal positions as literacy leaders in their schools, they both shared multiple ways in which they informally provide literacy leadership among their colleagues. Formally and informally, they serve as mentors to colleagues, host student teachers, and open their classrooms to fellow teachers for observations and discussion.

Classroom Returners

Four of the participants served as reading professionals outside the classroom setting at one point and then returned to the classroom teacher role. Allie and Mia, who teach at different mid-sized suburban public districts were both temporarily moved back into the classroom teacher role for the school year due to COVID-19 district adaptations. They both had the unique experience of moving from the literacy professional role back into the classroom teacher role by necessity rather than by choice. They both fully expect this to be a temporary change, which means they have a slightly different perspective than other participants. They spoke about this unique time as being positive due to: improved relationships and increased collaboration with colleagues; stronger knowledge of the universal curriculum; and expanded opportunities to share their literacy expertise with students and colleagues, especially regarding assessment and current literacy research.

By contrast, Liz and Becca decided to return to the classroom teacher role on their own after filling coaching, specialist, and interventionist roles for several years with populations that had high needs. Citing the increased demands on literacy leaders at their demographically different districts, they each decided to return to the classroom with the hope of having an impact on the students with whom they spend most of the day. Both teachers articulated many different ways

that they use their literacy expertise in this role and feel that the learning they did to earn the literacy license affected everything they do as classroom teachers.

Dual Role

Brooke, who teaches first grade at a large urban public district, reported many experiences, practices, and beliefs that overlap with the other participants, however her situation is unique among this group because she currently takes on a dual role as a first grade co-teacher and a literacy coach, with a portion of her time allotted for both. She was compelled to earn the supplementary literacy licensure when an administrator approached her about a coaching position which required the Reading Teacher license. This model of classroom-teacher-as-coach is used across her district, allowing coaches to gather for professional development and collaborate on a regular basis, which was a particular highlight Brooke identified. She emphasized the ways in which her dual roles inform one another. As a coach, she is able to share her expertise and continues to add to it by keeping up with current research. At the same time, she reported that being in the classroom and using the district-approved resources on a daily basis to provide universal instruction in first grade keeps her relevant.

Insufficient Knowledge with Initial License

While all participants placed a high value on the knowledge they gained in their literacy licensure preparation programs, more than half specifically emphasized feeling that their undergraduate preparation was inadequate. Allie said, "I don't feel like I was truly prepared to help students learn to read." Thinking back to her first year teaching, she said, "That was a disaster." Based on her undergraduate experience, Samantha said, "When you get your bachelor's degree you aren't even taught how to teach reading." Several participants specified experiencing a lack of knowledge in phonics before undertaking additional coursework for licensure, some of whom acknowledged that this may be a reflection of the continuously swinging pendulum in mainstream beliefs about literacy instruction. With several years of experience in inner city schools and with English Language Learners, Liz reflected on the lack of preparation she felt she received specifically for meeting the needs of the population she works with now.

Several participants reported feeling like supplementary literacy licensure would be beneficial for all early elementary classroom teachers but acknowledged the complexities that exist beyond the issues of time and money. Kenya shared her perception that well-roundedness is sometimes prioritized in undergraduate programs, therefore there isn't time to spend on everything that needs to be learned about literacy. She also articulated an appreciation for the years of teaching experience she had before her Masters and literacy licensure program, feeling that she would not have gained as much in her advanced coursework if she had not been able to put her new learning in context. Similarly, Kira also touched on the importance of experience and context when she discussed the need to avoid overloading new teachers when they may not be ready for the types of things learned in Masters and literacy licensure programs. Becca shared this stance, emphasizing that although she felt much better equipped due to her literacy expertise, she would not advocate requiring supplementary literacy licensure for early elementary teachers, saying:

I think that you also have to have that passion for it, and the desire to keep learning. Because not all educators want that. And I think that if you make it a mandate, you'll get kickback and not the openness to wanting to learn.

As they looked back, many participants lamented the years they taught without what they felt was the necessary expertise to meet the needs of their students, but they also acknowledged that earning the literacy license is not easy or straightforward. Brooke summarized the views of most participants saying:

I haven't met a person who is opposed to learning... usually it's, "I don't have the time" or "It's too expensive". So if you can break down some of those barriers and make it more accessible, I think more people would take you on it.

Perceived Change in Practice

While each individual participant had a unique reality as a classroom teacher since earning the supplementary literacy licensure, commonalities were noted. The following changes in practice were reported by the participants.

Use of New Knowledge for Helping Others

All participants discussed new knowledge they gained as a result of their preparation programs for supplementary literacy licensure. Whether it was perceived as being gained through content courses or practicum, this new knowledge took many different forms including:

- Refined knowledge of specific components of literacy such as phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension
- Growth in understanding of the progression of literacy skills and child development
- Addition of and variation in instructional strategies
- Increased ability to recognize, assess, and address specific student difficulties
- Practical use of classic and contemporary research in literacy education
- General insight into one's own practice

In addition to the nature of the new knowledge gained, the common thread throughout this theme was the way in which this new knowledge was used: to meet student needs, to share with colleagues, and to share with parents.

Students

The above list of gained knowledge reflects both highly specific skills and resources, as well as much more general concepts and principles that teachers reported using to meet student needs. Most participants reported that working toward the literacy license added to their expertise in both ways, and that they utilize both kinds of knowledge in their current practice. For example, on a small scale, Kira talked about how her learning changed the way she taught guided reading

groups. In a more universal sense, she reported being more aware of the reasons behind her instructional decision-making. She said:

I'm more purposeful in my activities... I'm not just going to do a guided reading group with four kids in it because we should have four kids at this level. But I'm pulling this group because this is what they need... I know more about why I'm doing things and not just pulling groups because I'm supposed to pull groups right now.

Participants also reported building their knowledge base through study of the elements of literacy and the progression of literacy skills. Within this continuum of skills, the specific pieces most often mentioned by participants were phonemic awareness and phonics. Rose shared her perspective on what she learned about how to teach phonics:

Having the reading license really gave me the things that I needed to do phonics systematically in my classroom and just have a good progression of when students are introduced to different concepts and how to roll out a yearlong curriculum in first grade.

Another way that participants reported building their knowledge base during their literacy licensure programs and therefore impact their practices with students was through the use of research to inform practice. Nearly all participants talked about learning about specific researchers and literacy leaders as well as how they continue to seek out and use research to inform their decisions after completing their licensure programs.

Colleagues

All participants discussed ways in which they share their literacy expertise with their colleagues, including: regular collaborative meetings, facilitation of formal or informal professional development sessions, curriculum material research, and co-planning with grade level teams as well as other professionals within their districts, including English Language Learner teachers, Special Education teachers, coaches, and literacy specialists.

Attitudes about collaboration were generally favorable among the participants, although a few shared examples of when it was more difficult to share their knowledge with colleagues. These included: when colleagues have different interpretations of what the district expects of them, trying to provide the right amount of support, a perceived divide between lower and upper grade teachers, false starts for collaboration initiatives, and variation in teacher opinions. Many participants shared the belief that there is usually not just one “right” way when it comes to literacy learning, and that no matter how much expertise you have, there is always more to learn. Overall, all participants shared that they have had several opportunities to share their expertise with colleagues and appeared to value the ability to add to their colleagues’ knowledge.

Parents/Families

It was clear that all individuals valued communication and cooperation with parents and families in order to best serve students. Notably, many participants also expressed increased confidence in their ability to effectively communicate with parents about literacy because of their additional

expertise. There were three main ways in which this was done: explanation of reasoning for literacy activities at school; sharing data and insight about what their child knows; and giving guidance on what can be done at home.

Kenya described a specific example of dismantling a common misconception, sharing that parents have often questioned the use of phonetic spelling in her kindergarten classroom. She was able to convey the importance of this phase of spelling development and felt that her advanced coursework gave her the knowledge to handle these types of inquiries from parents. Teacher knowledge of the progression of literacy skills was also a component that was widely noted and connected to the aspect of assessment. Kira talked about how she needed to deeply understand the students, which she did through a variety of assessments and one-on-one conferencing techniques. Without doing this, she argued, she would have only been able to give parents a surface level answer about their child's literacy skills rather than robust understanding about their particular literacy skills and where to go from there.

Valuing the Individual

The second theme across participant responses was the complex way in which they valued their students as individuals. This came up across all interviews in a few main ways:

- understanding the progression of literacy skills;
- identifying where individual students are on that continuum of knowledge and skills;
- being able to respond to assessment with targeted instruction;
- fostering student independence; and
- encouraging engagement and a love of school

It appeared as though participants saw understanding of the literacy progression as a precursor to individualizing instruction. Many of them discussed the links between understanding the literacy continuum, using targeted assessments, and implementing differentiated instruction. Kenya said:

I definitely have an improved understanding of looking at the child as a whole in their reading development, rather than in small isolated areas... I have a clear understanding of where I want my students to be developmentally in literacy and I also know how to identify where they are and where I want to take them.

Sophia talked about the importance of recognizing and responding to individual strengths and weaknesses. Describing how her expertise changed the way she taught, she said, "Even though we as a class may be focusing on this, I can pull students into small groups and give them what they still aren't comfortable with."

Describing how she met individual needs within the framework of a workshop model required curriculum, Kira said:

I feel like the heart of the work is the time when they go off to read. And that's when some teachers don't know what to do. But I feel well equipped to progress my students forward in their reading, other than just a mini lesson that maybe gets at like 50% of the

kids, as opposed to trying to reach all kids and wherever they are in their learning journey.

Several participants mentioned the use of assessment and how this gave them the ability to meet individual needs. Rose emphasized how the assessment knowledge she has allows her to pinpoint particular areas of difficulty, such as visual processing, phonological awareness, etc. She said, “Knowing that a kid is struggling doesn't really help you unless you know exactly what area they're struggling in.” Kim shared this sentiment, emphasizing a new understanding of individualized goal setting that came out of her graduate work.

Individualization also came up in several interviews as being a key aspect in student engagement. Participants talked about how important it is to know students well enough to be able to instill a passion for learning and a love of literacy. “I don't think I was as student centered as I thought I was.” This is how Kate described her practice before earning the literacy license. However, after her advanced coursework and experience, she said, “I have learned how to really research the child as a reader.” She went on to talk about how her learning changed the way she used language to promote student independence and motivation. Several participants also talked about matching books to readers and the role this plays in fostering a love of literacy.

Teacher Confidence

All participants brought up that they had experienced growth in confidence through their licensure programs and that this directly carried over to their professional practice and ability to go beyond the curriculum. For several teachers, this meant having a large toolbox of knowledge and ideas, and the confidence to try new techniques. For others this meant relying less on what was mandated to cover, and more on their beliefs and experiences to guide their decisions. For others this meant feeling prepared to answer questions about literacy from students, faculty peers, parents, and administrators. Additionally, one participant mentioned no longer being intimidated when students entering her class were not where they needed to be in literacy. She used the example of starting the academic year with a group of second graders who had missed out on a large chunk of first grade, saying, “When the kids came to us a lot lower than what we're expecting in second grade, I was okay with that because I knew what to do.”

Reported increased teacher confidence is significant considering the theoretical framework for this research. Bandura's (2010) assertion that a higher level of self-efficacy is connected to greater effort, persistence, and accomplishment, regardless of actual ability appears to apply to this group of teachers. Additionally, feeling more equipped to do their jobs was connected to the participants' ability to rely more heavily on their expertise than on following a curriculum. Teachers' articulation of this aspect of their practice provides evidence of two factors: being able to diagnose a need to supplement curriculum materials and experiences, and the ability to plan and implement learning experience to accomplish this goal.

It is clear that enhanced self-efficacy has positively affected the experiences of the teachers in this study. They unanimously expressed stronger belief in what they were able to do professionally as a result of their literacy licensure programs. This elevated self-efficacy was at work in the participating teachers when they talked about how their learning affected their

practice as well as how they handled challenges. For example, Samantha spoke passionately about fighting to implement intensive literacy interventions herself rather than having an interventionist or literacy specialist pull her students out of her classroom. She said, "That's been a big thing for me, that getting my literacy license has allowed me to do... I can say I am an expert. And I can do [the interventions] myself." She believed in her ability so much that she changed the structure of how literacy interventions were implemented in her school. When asked about how her practice changed before and after her Masters and literacy licensure program, succinctly stated, Kira said, "I feel better equipped as a teacher." This reflects similar statements made by several other participants, indicating the relationship between expertise and self-efficacy.

Going Beyond the Curriculum

Another clear theme across the data collected was the participants' ability to go beyond the prescribed curriculum. The teachers in this study all touched on this to some degree, many of whom directly talked about how and why they added to what their respective districts required of them. It appeared as though the participants were able to go beyond the curriculum due to a combination of the following components: new literacy knowledge and skills, increased confidence, and leverage of assessment to meet individual student needs. Speaking about the knowledge she gained in her literacy licensure program, Samantha said:

And it's also allowed me to not follow a program. Because I do have the expertise, I don't have to necessarily just march through the program, day by day. I can use some of the pieces that I know are best practice with my kids. And it's gotten them a lot farther than just marching through those lessons.

Similarly, Liz said:

Teachers get really stuck on curriculum and coverage and they don't think about needing to use more than just [specific curriculum program]. You have to be flexible, to be able to move in and out of the curriculum to some degree.

She stressed the importance of doing what students need. Kenya echoed this, describing how she taught before going through her literacy licensure program, "I really relied heavily on the scripted curriculum that we had and I didn't know if we needed to go back and revisit something. I just kept plugging through."

Discussion

What are shared characteristics of classroom teachers who hold supplemental literacy certification? To summarize, many of these teachers received some kind of district support for obtaining the license, they are generally content filling various leadership roles from within the classroom setting, and they agree that their initial licensure was not fully adequate preparation to effectively teach students literacy. What changes in practice do classroom teachers perceive after earning supplemental literacy certification? The participants reported gaining new knowledge which they use with students, families, and colleagues, increased confidence, and the ability to go beyond the curriculum to meet the needs of individual students.

Taken together, the shared characteristics and themes within the participants' perceived changes in practice after earning the literacy license also seem to suggest that these teachers experience a continuous cycle of learning in order to meet individual student needs. This cycle begins with a desire to know more. Over and over, participants voiced the pervasive nature of literacy knowledge and listed the ways students and teachers can use their literacy knowledge in other academic areas throughout the school day, as well as beyond the school setting. These teachers sought new knowledge in order to fill gaps in their students' understanding, to learn how to supplement required curricula, and to gain better understanding of literacy development and instruction. They recognized the ways in which their knowledge and skills affected their students' school experiences and wanted to increase their expertise to improve upon what they were already doing. This was true even for those who were partially motivated to do licensure programs due to district support.

This leads to the next phase in the cycle which involves gaining new knowledge. By completing their courses and other certification requirements, participants each added to their existing literacy knowledge base. The wide variety of program formats and requirements provided diversity in learning experiences in addition to the numerous demographic differences across the participants. The common thread across all cases was additional knowledge being gained and valued. While this could be related to the willingness to be interviewed for this study, there were no participants who expressed feeling that they did not learn anything new and useful while seeking the literacy license. All participants placed high value on the knowledge they gained during their licensure programs and articulated numerous ways that this new learning impacts their practice.

After gaining new knowledge, these teachers then went on to implement, practice, and test their new understanding in their job setting. This included trial and error of new instructional techniques, new focus on specific literacy content, collaboration with colleagues, and observation of students with a new perspective. Central to this phase is reflective practice. Teachers reported thinking about their practice in a new way, with new awareness of the continuum of literacy skills, a new focus on students as individuals, and confidence with the use of assessments to determine instructional decisions. During this phase of implementation of new knowledge, teachers identified new areas in which they desired more knowledge. By putting their new knowledge into practice and reflectively observing the outcomes, they were able to evaluate what was working and what needed to be adjusted. Thus new opportunities for learning are revealed and the cycle repeats. All participants mentioned multiple ways that they continue to add to their knowledge.

This notion of teachers going through a cycle of learning is not new. Models of continuous improvement and professional learning in education exist and are already used to inform professional development in schools (DuFour & DuFour, 2013; Hirsh & Crow, 2016). However, the fact that early elementary classroom teachers with supplemental literacy certification fall into this pattern is worth noting.

Implications for Practice

Given the reported positive characteristics of this group of supplementally certified teachers, their perceived changes in practice could inform the practices of others in the education field. The study showed how these teachers felt more equipped to do their jobs, which is a phenomenon that has several positive implications and potential to benefit multiple groups of stakeholders. The results of this study suggest that it would be beneficial for schools to have more early elementary classroom teachers with increased literacy expertise either through supplementary literacy certification or an alternative that mimics this pathway.

Promoting Literacy Licensure

One way in which these positive characteristics could be spread to more schools could be to support more teachers to earn supplemental literacy licensure. Because the impact was not limited to any particular program, location, or school type, the process teachers could go through to do so could look similar to the paths taken by the participants in this study. This has potential to be impactful on both small and large scales, affecting the experiences of individual students as well as entire schools, all the way to the district level. This is a logical way to ensure that more well-prepared, high quality teachers are serving as classroom teachers.

The results of this study support multiple paths to accomplishing this including: providing district support for licensure programs, giving hiring preference to those with this qualification, and incentivizing the license with salary increases. District leaders who are serious about having highly qualified early elementary teachers should create policies that support literacy licensure programs as meaningful professional development and reward teachers for adding to their expertise. The results of this study showed that time and money are the main barriers to this license. While districts may not be able to completely eradicate these burdens, they could make resource decisions to mitigate these factors in order to make this commitment to their teachers, students, and families.

Alternatives to Licensure

Alternatively, there are ways in which teachers could develop their literacy expertise without specifically earning the supplementary literacy license. Although the benefits to completing an entire literacy certification program seem clear, it is not realistic that every early elementary teacher will do this. Lessons can be gleaned from the data gathered from participants that could support expertise without licensure. For example, many teachers in this study mentioned specific courses and topics that had large and direct impacts on their practice. These included literacy development, systematic phonics, and intensive intervention, to name a few. It could be more manageable to support teachers to take one or two graduate literacy courses that are most impactful, rather than a whole graduate program.

Format of professional development is another area to consider. Perhaps it is the characteristics of the graduate courses that effectively promote expertise rather than actually being enrolled in a program. It could be possible to mimic the graduate course experience in the district professional development setting. To do so, districts could include aspects of effective graduate courses such as: extended study of a specific topic, performance-based accountability, a community of

learners, focused outcomes, and applicability to the job setting. Districts that are providing isolated, “sit and get” type of professional development could benefit the most from this.

Implications for Research

Due to the lack of research on this particular phenomenon of teachers staying in the classroom while holding a supplemental literacy license, the findings of this study add to the body of knowledge that exists. However, the limitations of this study, which included the small sample size of teachers and the limited geographical area of the participating schools, provide ample opportunity for further research to better understand this phenomenon. First, this topic could be further explored qualitatively with different foci and perspectives such as the perceptions of students who have teachers with this supplementary literacy licensure, their parents, or their administrators. This could provide information to affirm the impact of literacy expertise on the various stakeholder groups.

Moreover, this topic should be examined quantitatively in a variety of ways. Indeed, measuring student outcomes of teachers who have supplemental literacy certification is necessary and seems to be an important next step. Examining the relationship between having a teacher with additional literacy expertise and the literacy knowledge, skills, and test scores of their students, as compared to students who do not have a teacher with those credentials could provide important rationale for suggested practical implications. While this study shows a pattern of positive attributes of these teachers, linking the licensure to increased student achievement would be even more meaningful. This type of data analysis has potential to confirm or challenge some aspects of the self-reported results of this study and identify groups of students for whom having a teacher with specialized literacy expertise might have the largest impact.

Conclusion

Classroom teachers with robust literacy expertise and the passion expressed here have enormous potential for meeting individual student needs and spreading their knowledge and skills throughout the communities in which they serve. Students need and deserve expert teachers. This phenomenon is worthy of further exploration to examine the capacity of the impacts discussed in this study as well as possibilities for future development in the education field.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Beginning script: Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. The purpose of this interview is to learn about the lived experiences of early elementary classroom teachers who have supplementary literacy certification. There are no desirable or undesirable answers, so I would like you to feel comfortable saying what you really think. I will be recording our conversation so that I don't miss any of the details that you share. Do I have your permission to record the interview?

Everything you say will remain confidential and you may choose to stop the interview at any time. You may also skip any questions.

Can you confirm that you received and signed a copy of the consent form? Do I have your permission to begin the interview?

Questions & Probes:

- Describe your teaching background...
 - What/where have you taught and for how long?
 - What grade do you teach?
- Describe the process you took to earn the literacy license...
 - What made you decide to earn the literacy license?
 - How long have you had the literacy license?
 - How did you earn the literacy license?
- Describe how you utilize your literacy expertise...
 - While teaching literacy?
 - While teaching non-literacy subjects?
 - While making decisions about the learning environment?
 - While interacting with colleagues?
 - While interacting with parents/families?
 - While teaching during the COVID 19 pandemic?
 - Other ways?
- What was something specific you did differently after going through your program/obtaining the license?
- In terms of classroom environment, practices, and/or beliefs, can you compare yourself to colleagues without the literacy license?
- What have you noticed about student outcomes since going through your program/obtaining the license?
 - What other benefits beyond student outcomes do you think have been gained?
- Has earning the certification changed how you feel about being a teacher? How?
- What are your thoughts on the need for early elementary classroom teachers to have supplemental literacy certification?
- In what ways do you continue to add to your expertise? What do you want to be doing in 3 years?
- Do you have anything else that you want to add that we have not talked about yet?

Ending script: Thank you for your time and thoughtful answers. If there is anything else you would like to add, please feel free to contact me.

Appendix B: Coding Sample

Coding Sample – This shows an example of how I completed my coding. Below are all of the interview passages that were labeled with the code *confidence*.

Name	<i>Confidence</i> Code Samples
Anna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This gave me the knowledge to then be confident in my choices that if the canned curriculum was garbage, I wasn't going to do it if it didn't actually back up to what all the research was saying and what I was seeing was successful with my students. • I just know a little more precisely what to focus on. • Again, I have the years experience also, but now this, yeah this confidence to say “no, that's not gonna work for my students”.
Allie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am more willing to offer help to my colleagues. • I think having my expertise is very helpful. Like in conferences, for example, I felt much more prepared. Just because I really understand informal observation records and running records, and because I've spent a lot of time studying literacy.
Becca	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's so ingrained in me. Now, it's very natural for me to not only instruct my students and be able to give them that detailed support as needed. But I also feel like I am able to share that with my team. • I was putting myself in a position so that not only I could succeed, but my students could succeed. And I think that all of that prep helped me a ton this fall.
Brooke	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I just summed it up in one word, it would be more intentionality. • I'm using my expertise to establish what I would consider to be the proper learning environment for the learner. • When I'm speaking to other teachers about the phonics, I can tell them firsthand what works and things that I've been trying. • My expertise typically comes in giving them a more developmental view as far as what's appropriate for a child at that age, and sometimes I'll go and I'll do some assessment to be able to reference during those conversations.
Claire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • And then after I did it the first time, then I would say I became more confident and then I carried it over into sight words that we've been using, or even carried over into math at that point because we're having to read lot of numbers.
Christina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel more knowledgeable and I feel like I have more ideas. • So sometimes there's little holes in the curriculum so I know how to add those extra pieces and it just gives you that much more knowledge of what you should be doing and adding when the curriculum is lacking sometimes.

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- Eva
- I definitely think I became a lot smoother in my presentation and before in my early years of education before I had taken this class, I tried the same thing with everybody and it just wasn't effective, so I know more now.
- Kate
- While I have a lot of information about literacy and literacy research, it's still taught me how to work with other people that maybe don't always agree on the same things that I do.
 - I feel like I have some skills, like about researching the child as a reader, that might come through when I'm talking to the parent.
 - I don't think I was as student centered as I thought I was until I took the course. And then I felt much more student centered really transferring that responsibility to them.
 - I know what I should be trying to teach that kid developmentally.
- Kim
- I would be really excited to take on an interventionist position, especially with my classroom knowledge.
- Kira
- I'm more able to try new things knowing that I don't have to do whatever my district says just because they're saying that, but also rely on my own beliefs and what I value.
 - I feel better equipped as a teacher just having more background to go off of.
 - And some teachers don't know what to do with that. But I feel well equipped to like, how can I progress my students forward in their reading, other than just a mini lesson that maybe gets at like, 50% of the kids, as opposed to, you know, trying to reach all kids and wherever they are in their learning journey?
 - And like feeling confident now to be able to try that in the room is really helpful.
- Kenya
- And so I found that I was prepared for those questions.
 - So I now know what to look for, to see what students are understanding and what we need to go back and what needs to happen in a strategy group, what needs to be delivered whole group, things like that.
- Liz
- I'm doing what my students need.
 - I think I can speak more on my feet, by far.
- Mia
- I think I just have more refined skills and strategies that I knew I could keep and I can return to every day.
 - I know I have more skills and strategies that I learned.
- Rose
- When you have a gut feeling about something, that you know, you're able to voice it because you have a little bit more background.
 - These are things that I think definitely helped me feel more comfortable, that I'm able to communicate to that parent that I'm doing absolutely everything that I can.

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- Samantha
- I feel like when the kids came to us a lot lower than what we're expecting in second grade I was okay with that because I knew what to do, where some of my colleagues don't know all the ins and outs.
 - I will stand up if it is impacting my kids and it is not a best choice for kids.
 - So then I did have the confidence to say "I'll be pulling from a lot of different pieces and depending on what he needs at the time".
 - ...talking with parents and families, just having that confidence to be able to say I know.
 - And so I think that's been a big thing for me that getting my literacy license has allowed me to do, because I can say I am an expert. And I can do it myself.
 - Because I do have the expertise, I don't have to necessarily just march through the program, day by day, I can use some of the pieces that I know are best practice with my kids.
- Sophia
- I feel more comfortable. The last year or two that, oh yeah, I can do this. My literacy instruction, I think just really helped me know different things that were important.
 - It's easier for me to recognize when kids need that and give that to them. Even though we as a class may be focusing on this, I can pull students into small groups and give them what they still aren't comfortable with.
-