

A Grounded Theorizing of the Learning Opportunities Afforded to  
Third Graders Who Read Below Grade Level

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### **Abstract**

The research design is a qualitative research method that uses systematized methods of theoretical sampling, coding, categorization, constant comparison, and memoing to guide the researcher to a theory (Cohen et al., 2018). The study's qualitative phase explored research question one: can reading instruction/curriculum like phonics and the Science of Reading intervention increase scholars' reading below grade level to reach proficiency? Then, research question two, asked, do third-grade classrooms experience transitions that interfere with student learning? This researcher breaks down the transitions into categories that will be explained in the findings. Then, research question three asked whether students and parents contribute to and transform the students' learning process to improve student reading skills, to read at grade level before entering middle school, and to close the opportunity gap. In the final question, the researcher will see how much parental involvement in reading at home lends itself to the overall educational preparedness of students. According to Neuropsychology & Education Services for Children & Adolescents (NESCA) (2021), children who read 20 minutes per day, i.e., five days a week, are exposed to 1.8 million words in one school year. The students observed reported reading only 10 minutes per night or less, which equals possibly 564,000 words per school year, far lower than what's recommended, which may be the cause of some low Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) test scores and the inability to read leaving third grade.

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### **Historical, Sociocultural, and Sociopolitical**

I investigated the phenomena of why students, after reaching the third grade, are still unable to read on grade level. Historically, it was illegal to teach children of color, enslaved, or free, how to read or write in the United States before slavery ended. About ten years before the Emancipation Proclamation was issued on January 1, 1863, to end slavery, the Commonwealth of Virginia imprisoned Ms. Douglass for thirty days in jail for being found guilty of teaching Negro children to read and write in 1854 (New York Daily Times, 1851-1857). Throughout the antebellum South, laws were passed forbidding the teaching of reading and writing to an enslaved person or a free black person; in 1829, Georgia law called for a white man to be fined \$500 and imprisoned at the discretion of the court for teaching a Negro or enslaved person to write (Cornelius, 1999). Also, Cornelius (1999) said in 1833, Alabama's statute stipulated that an enslaved person caught teaching other enslaved people to read or write would be subject to fifty lashes for the first offense and one hundred lashes for the second offense. With the passage of the Reconstruction Act of 1867, followed by the Fifteenth Amendment, guaranteeing the right to vote "shall not denied or abridged" based on race ... literacy rates climbed, and educated Black people began to populate state legislatures, open schools, and initiate successful businesses (Hannah-Jones et al., 2021, p. 114). The state of educational equality in America before 1954's *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, was "separate but equal" based on the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. However, Thurgood Marshall skillfully and successfully argued that separate but equal was not equal, and years of segregation fell over time. This sort of deep trauma from White Supremacy systems of racism still seems to exist today. However, it replicates itself now as a lack of importance or enthusiasm in some Black families to teach their children how to read and write before entering the school system. However, learning to read is a

complex matter that begins long before a child starts school; researchers now know that the foundation for reading lies in the oral language children are exposed to and develop in the first three years of life (Hart & Risley, 1995, p. 2). DeVenny (2008) said children from homes with positive, spoken vocabularies during their earliest years started school with significantly better vocabularies than their peers. In some cases, children's homes were richer in language by 600 percent, sadly leaving some young learners at the kindergarten door having heard 32 million fewer words than their classmates (DeVenny, 2008). Therefore, you can see the achievement differences occurring in urban homes when students begin school; those rich in literature, properly spoken language skills, and parents reading to their children appear far ahead of those with less parent engagement in the home. DeVenny (2008) said in some cases, children's homes were more affluent in language by 600 percent, sadly leaving some young learners at the kindergarten door having heard 32 million fewer words than their classmates.

In St. Louis, Missouri, school segregation continued, however, based on its population of the district being 70% Black and 30% White students (42 U.S.C. § 1983). On February 18, 1972, five African American parents and their minor children filed this class action lawsuit in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri, *Liddell v. Board of Education for city of St. Louis* claiming racial discrimination in the operation of the St. Louis Public Schools [SLPS] (42 U.S.C. § 1983). The court rendered two choices: 1. Combine the city and county schools to achieve integration. 2. Use a transfer program to send Black students to the county, and the county would voluntarily send White students to city schools. Unfortunately, this sociopolitical fix allowed those with no behavioral or discipline referrals (best and brightest) to transfer to a participating St. Louis County school district. However, the program has failed to attract suburban White students to transfer into the impoverished inner-city school system. During the

2022-2023 school year at the proposed research site, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2023) reported that 340 Black students were enrolled compared to only 9 White students. The same attempt to bus students in the city of Boston and send Black students to integrate White schools also failed:

In 1974, a U.S. district court judge found the city of Boston had intentionally and unconstitutionally segregated its schools in *Morgan v. Hennigan*. By way of remedy, the city implemented two-way busing for Black students to attend predominantly White schools. Despite this court-ordered busing, research found students who were bused to schools outside their communities did not reap greater academic achievement after accounting for individual academic motivation and family resources. Not only did busing accelerate “White flight,” but it imposed a psychological and physical toll on Black students who had to travel longer distances to school and sometimes missed classroom instruction (Weadé, 2024).

Unfortunately, even when a district tries to fix diversity, there seems to be a downfall in some missed instruction by a noble cause, such as having students sitting next to someone different than their race to help build tolerance and equality.

However, As Roser (1984) states, "Whatever children and adults did in ancient Egypt, Greece, or Rome, and whatever they do today to derive meaning or apply meaning to print, is the same today" (p. 48). One common misconception about reading is that all humans "learn to read differently," although reading is a relatively recent cultural invention, the human brain is not prewired to learn to read naturally (Moats, 2021). Though opinions have changed over the years, someone had to teach students this important craft for society to make educational and technological advances. Therefore, what is the best way to teach students how to read in today's

integrated world? Can phonics increase reading levels via the Science of Reading or reduce transitions be the end all to closing the achievement gap for children of color living in poverty?

Kindergarten through third grade is a crucial time for students learning to read, and third grade is the pivotal bridge for the brain to flip and now read to gather specialized knowledge about the world. There are fears that if children cannot read proficiently by the end of third grade, they will face more hurdles that will not lead to success in school. According to O'Brien (2008), readers who have learned to read can extract and analyze information and expand their vocabulary by reading (p. 1). Additionally, struggling readers rarely catch up with their peers academically and are four times more likely to drop out of high school, lowering their earning power as adults and costing society welfare and other supports (Hernandez, 2011, p. 1).

Recently, "Read by Grade 3" laws have swept the United States, as of 2024 some twenty-five states and the District of Columbia have enacted legislation directing districts to retain students who have not made progress in reading on grade level by the end of third grade (Schwartz, 2023, p. 1). The Revised Statutes of Missouri (RSMo) 170.014 created the Reading Instruction Act and established reading programs that all public schools including charter schools establish reading programs in kindergarten through grade five based on scientific research (RSMo 170.14 § 2022). A year later, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) created the Reading Success Plan (RSP) (RSMo 167.645, 2023). This required districts across Missouri to create a plan for remedial reading services for anyone in kindergarten through third grade reading below grade level a success plan to bring them up to grade level (RSMo 167.645, 2023). The RSP had to be implemented each year based on reading scores or teacher observations (RSMo 167.645, 2023). Also, RSP added a new requirement for

newly enrolled students in grades one through five to be assessed and provided a similar plan to improve reading as needed.

### **Theoretical Framing**

The research design will be the same as Creswell & Poth's (2018) because it is a qualitative Grounded Theory approach to move beyond description and to generate or discover a theory (p. 82). Also, Cohen et al. (2018) said qualitative research can tell us the how and why - the processes involved in understanding and explaining how things occur (p. 304). After reaching the third grade, I investigated why students cannot read at grade level. Even with the introduction of classroom instruction/curriculum, phonics, and the Science of Reading since kindergarten, students still struggle, and some test results show below-grade-level reading scores. I looked at this year's second graders as they move to third grade in the fall and research the phenomenon, excluding those on grade level in or in the process of receiving special educational services.

My ontology or belief is that we are giving substance to a theory that, before did not exist or that does not have a tangible body to touch. When researchers study an abstract concept of why students in the third grade cannot read, it should draw us to look at the data surrounding the interviews and observations to see if other contributing factors were occurring.

Then, my epistemology stance understands how the student who can read gained the knowledge and may ignore the other data pointing to why some students fail to read on grade level. Being transparent in qualitative research is essential so the reader or next researcher can see its effect in any mixed or single-method approach as we try to understand and interpret the data collectively. Cohen et al. (2018) used the analogy of mixing water and milk and getting a new liquid, but combining it does not mean you have to lump all the data together but rather

introduce them as a blend to make sense of each viewpoint (p. 37). Thus, the theoretical framing will be fluid, i.e., following the data wherever it leads us to a plausible working theory.

### **St. Louis City**

Crime in St. Louis, Missouri, has been an ongoing battle for the city, according to the National Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 2006 released figures showing the murder rate in St. Louis jumped 16 percent from 2004 to 2005, compared with 4.8 percent nationally and the overall violent-crime rate increased nearly 20 percent, compared with 2.5 percent nationally (Leonard, 2006). Students in this proposed research live in these crime areas: North, south, central west, and east end (near downtown) in the city of St. Louis, and the crime rate has always been an issue for Missouri (FBI, 2024). In 2006, the St. Louis Cardinals won the World Series in baseball, but at the same time, the city was deemed the most dangerous city in the United States (NPR, 2006). Then, eight years later, on August 9, 2014, in a small Missouri town called Ferguson, while on summer break from Ferguson Middle School, I lived through an event that would touch the nation: in a community of poor Black residents, experienced violence that sparked a different reaction when Michael Brown, a Black teenager unarmed was murdered and left to lay in the middle of the street by the police. The protests and riots that this I saw began in Ferguson, Missouri, and soon spread across the St. Louis area, even closing one major transportation thruway on Interstate 64, East and West, stemming from crimes in the Black community and families left grieving without closure or justice. According to Erikson (2024), the St. Louis Police Department said severe crimes, including murder, car theft, and assault, are down overall compared to the last three years in St. Louis. According to Rieck (2024), juvenile crime for shooting victims so far in 2024 stands at 16 individuals compared to 18 in 2023

(p. 11). The Center for American Progress (CAP, 2014) talked with another lifelong resident who could explain the St. Louis phenomenon of race and local politics better: Sam Fulwood III, the regular writer of the “Race and Beyond” column, asked Eric Garland, who lives in the St. Louis area, to share his insights into how and why the shooting sparked national and international attention. Garland, who has been mentioned in this column on issues related to international relations and presidential politics, turns his attention to what is happening in his own backyard, arguing that the St. Louis area’s tangled and unaccountable political structure is culpable for what is transpiring in Ferguson (CAP, 2014).

Currently, what began as a system that represented a rural-urban divide evolved into a representation of the racial and socioeconomic divisions in the greater St. Louis region (CAP, 2014). When my family (Wife, son, and I) arrived in St. Louis in 1998, residents first asked, “What high school did you attend?” which I thought was odd, but later learned it was to establish my economic status and prolonged stereotypes between social classes in the city. In simplest terms, when locals ask this question, it tells them whether you grew up poor or wealthy, e.g., attending a county school equals wealth, and attending an urban school equals poor. The human impulse to create hierarchies runs across societies and cultures and predates the idea of race and thus is further reaching, deeper, and older than raw racism and the comparatively new division of humans by skin color (Wilkinson, 2020, p. 67).

## **Economics of the Region**

The United States Census Bureau (USCB, 2022) reported the poverty rate for St. Louis was 20.4 percent compared to 13.2 percent for all of Missouri. The most significant of those living in poverty were under 18 years old at 32.4 percent (USCB, 2022). Also, the USCB (2022) reports that 60 percent of the population, ranging from grades kindergarten to 12th grade, were enrolled in area schools in St. Louis (Population 301,578) compared to 69.1 percent for all of Missouri (Population 6,154,913). Therefore, if we do the math, it comes out to around 61,521 ( $301,578 \times 20.4$  percent) of the total impoverished population in St. Louis, Missouri (USCB, 2022). Children living in high-poverty environments are particularly at risk for failure in school (Gorski, 2013; Morgan, 2011; Vera, 2011). The National School Lunch Program (NSLP, 2024) provides low-cost or free lunches to children and operates in nearly 100,000 public and nonprofit private schools (Pre-kindergarten – 12th grade) and residential childcare institutions. Students from households with incomes:

- Students can receive a free lunch at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty line.
- Students between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty line can receive a reduced-price lunch.
- Students above 185 percent of the Federal poverty line can receive a low-cost, full-price lunch (NSLP, 2024).

The students in prior years of this research all received free meals at school (Breakfast and lunch) after the pandemic regardless of economic status. This was made possible with the invaluable support from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) and

the American Rescue Plan (ARP), as highlighted by Long (2023), which helped feed every eligible student in schools:

- This enumerates food assistance, including food assistance delivered through child nutrition programs like school meals, as an eligible for funding support in response to the impacts of the pandemic on households and communities.
- May be used to provide premium pay to eligible workers performing essential work, including educational, school nutrition, and other workers required to operate a school facility (Long, 2023).

The most significant intervention for engaging students is feeding them before class. For example, many of my students arrived late to school. Once breakfast has ended, I would have to walk students to the cafeteria to get breakfast because the lunch ladies would not give late students a breakfast bag (consisting of milk, cereal, and fruit), citing the cafeteria was closed until lunch even if students showed their late bus tardy slip. That is why we must change how all staff respond to students, not just the teachers. Being transformative and genuinely believing it takes a village to solve issues can help solve hunger in the classroom or one less issue affecting student learning. Also, we do not know the students' home life circumstances and why they are hungry or late arriving at school, etc., but the school needs to be ready to help reduce the ills of poverty so learning can happen without interruptions.

## Literature Review

### Reading Interventions

How and who should decide which reading curricula is used in a district, school, and classroom? According to Goodman (1970), reading is a sampling, selecting, predicting, comparing, and confirming activity in which the reader chooses a sample of helpful graphic cues based on what he sees and what he expects to see, and the reader attempts to reconstruct a message from the writer (p. 265). Goodman's definition is predicated on his belief that reading is a meaning-getting task and that readers' prior knowledge and psycholinguistic competence are most important. However, many theories have evolved over the past 50 years since 1970, like Reading Recovery (RR) swept the states as the Science of Reading is steadily replacing RR as the Science of Reading is now the focus in many school districts.

Scarborough (2001) created a graphic called the "Reading Rope" that depicts the components of the Simple View of Reading (SVR), where students recall instructional activities from memory (p. 2). To become a skilled reader, a student must develop increasing speed and accuracy in decoding and linguistic comprehension skills (Scarborough, 2001, p. 2). Specifically, this strategy of automatic decoding allows the student to free up their frontal lobe and comprehend the text systematically if there are no cognitive issues. To reach this level of automaticity, students required daily instruction focused on mastering decoding skills. If a number on a chart is used to determine each child's proficiency level has been reached to indicate to state agencies, districts, schools, and parents this child can read, well, who or what are making the baseline cuts to determine this proficiency? According to Sparks (2023), researchers tracked the reading growth of about 2,000 kindergartens to second-grade students in a dozen Texas charter schools, half of whom participated in intensive remote tutoring for part of

the school day in small-group video chats. Sparks (2023) also said Students who received supplemental lessons in phonics and decoding for 20 minutes a day, four times a week, via remote tutoring performed significantly better on two early reading tests by the end of the year. Though this study was situated in Texas among random charter schools (Unfortunately, the study did not reveal if the participants were in a rural or urban setting) which would have cast more light on my theory of learning loss. However, the study did find that intensive intervention proved useful even with online tutoring.

With the MAP goal of proficient and advanced readers today in every grade level, how does past research show that young readers like me, who could read above grade level, thrive without the Science of Reading? According to Agostino and Murphy (2004), 36 Reading Recovery (RR) studies were conducted and designed for intensive intervention for low-performing first-grade students. Educators have turned to these interventions because they can be used to detect which student is behind early and provide the opportunity for learning strategies. RR was developed by Maria Clay in 1976 and started in her home country of New Zealand. After a trip to Ohio State University to train other teachers, a pilot program was introduced in the Columbus Public Schools from 1984 to 1990 (Pinnell et al., 1994). The selection process for students was based on teacher recommendations, and the student's performance on the early literacy achievement survey consisted of six tests; part one guided teachers on using the Running Record, and part two focused on identifying letter identification, word skills, print concepts, writing, hearing and recording sounds in words, and text reading (Clay, 1993a). By 2002 about 18,000 trained teachers offered RR to over 146,000 students in 10,451 schools located in 3,238 school districts nationwide (Gomez-Bellenge, 2003). Lyons (1998) reported replication studies of North American children across a decade of instruction using these RR methodologies;

researchers have shown that RR students made significant gains in reading achievement during this instruction interval. However, in addition to the RR treatment, forces such as maturation, reading instruction in the first-grade classroom, and various other school-related experiences occur during the interval between the pre and post-tests (Lyons, 1998, pp. 77-92). For example, Lyons and Beaver (1995) reported that in the State of Ohio, the number of RR program students referred to learning disability screening decreased from 1.26% to just 0.51% over five years.

### **Spelling Intervention**

Do you remember arriving at class and the teacher asking everyone to please take everything off the desk and handed you a black sheet of paper for the spelling test some students would excel at or fail? So, how did my peers and I learn to spell and form connections years ago? According to Rey & Jacobs (2000), graphemes serve as a functional bridge in the mapping process between orthography and phonology (p. 1). Knowledge of orthographic structure is theorized to make a crucial contribution to a student's reading fluency (Rey & Jacobs, 2000, pp. 1-2). Orthography is thought to be the same as spelling and refers to the essential workings in letter recognition, like sight word reading, according to Ehri (1995), is indicated by the absence of pauses between phonemes or syllables and the rapid reading of words, which are pronounced correctly rather than decoded phonologically (pp 116-125). Students can fluently say each word presented on a list or text without stumbling in pronunciation while reading. Also, a study conducted by the News Report (1996) found that 374 second graders lagging behind in a suburban school district in Houston reached the 42nd percentile on the Star Test after receiving intensive phonics instruction, unlike their peers who scored in the 23rd percentile with no intervention (News et al.,1996). Foorman (1996) was quoted as saying, "What we are doing here is getting these economically disadvantaged, low achievers almost up to the national average

with just good classroom instruction," who led the study at the University of Houston as an educational psychologist.

### **Phonics Intervention**

Like learning to spell, how did my peers and I learn to pronounce each word correctly without speech intervention? "Phonemes are the smallest units making up spoken language... Phonemic awareness refers to the ability to focus on and manipulate these phonemes in spoken words" (National Reading Panel, 2001, para. 10). Phonics in reading is "Learning how letters correspond to sounds and how to use this knowledge in reading and spelling" (National Reading Panel, 2001, para. 12). When students cannot sound out words, it can create an embarrassing situation and lead to misbehavior in the classroom rather than a raised hand for help. One of the potential participants in this study is far below her peers and struggles to read and pronounce common sight words, but this inability is covered up by misbehavior when called upon in class or when working on small group tasks.

Other researchers like Kilpatrick (2016) states that phonological awareness at the advanced level (substitution/deletion/addition) predicts reading acquisition and success most. Phonological awareness (called 'sound awareness') is the awareness of sounds and how they come together to make words. Awareness of the sounds in spoken language is required to learn letter-sound correspondences, to blend sounds to decode a word, and to "map" words into long-term sight vocabulary (Kilpatrick, 2015, p. 1). Phonological memory is the ability to temporarily store bits of verbal information and retrieve it from short-term memory (Shaywitz, 2003). According to Shaywitz (2003), there are general indicators in young English-speaking children that suggest reading difficulties, including delay in speaking, difficulty in rhyming and

pronunciation, insensitivity to phonemes in words, and lack of precision or specificity of words and descriptions.

With the introduction of Rapid Automatic Naming (RAN) is the ability to name a letter, number, object, word, or picture from long-term memory in random order and can be a skill predictive of efficacy in reading fluency, comprehension, and rate (Litt, 2010, p. 92).

Phonological awareness is usually the most pronounced deficit if students struggle with reading. It refers to the understanding and awareness that spoken words consist of individual sounds (i.e., phonemes) and combinations of speech sounds (i.e., syllables and onset-rime units such as f/ight, r/ight, t/ight). Two important phonological awareness activities are blending (i.e., combining phonemes to form words) and segmentation (i.e., breaking spoken words down into separate and discrete sounds or phonemes). As a special education teacher years ago, I worked daily with students on these skills.

Awareness of letter-sound production is so important that early learners in any pre-kindergarten classroom will benefit and thrive in kindergarten. According to Barras (2023), with time, the child learns to associate each grapheme with one or more phonemes and to blend strings of phonemes to make words. They can then turn a written word, such as cat, into a set of discrete phonemes – /k/a/t/ – and then into the word "cat" (p. 43). Last year, just 33 percent of nine- and 10-year-olds in the United States were assessed as being proficient or advanced readers (Barras, 2023, p. 43). "The US has done poorly in teaching kids to read for a long time," says Mark Seidenberg, a cognitive neuroscientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (p. 43). Many researchers have proposed that parents engage their child at home with lots of talk to increase the child's vocabulary, let children write out words and learn the correct spelling later,

and encourage parents to think like a first learner and let them read what kids enjoy so it is fun; kids will make meaning of it later.

### **Behavioral Awareness**

The new school year starts with new and old students filing in to get started. Teachers and principals do not know enough about each student's ability to transition around the school and if these students need more support. Mathewson (2023) said a 6-year-old in class would not budge from his seat while the rest of his peers had filed off to their related arts classes, but he refused to move, and he was not done with his work, and he did not want to go (p. 1). Many teachers have their go-to phrase to get around this struggling student, but the teacher soon found out he was not budging. The teacher turned to a script that has become such a routine part of her classroom that it seems to elicit an almost Pavlovian response – steering misbehaving students back on track at the sound of the words: "Aw man, you are having a rough time right now, we are going to do some learning later" (Mathewson, 2023). Some teachers use behavior momentum, which, if used skillfully, can get a kid's mind off what they are stuck on to help transition them what is next. However, some new general education teachers are not trained to handle certain behaviors and must learn strategies throughout their careers. In this DDP, student learning and behaviors (Transitions) will be investigated to see if it contributes to this phenomenon in this research.

Then, Garwood (2015) said especially in rural areas, the classroom may be one of the most critical settings for children's emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development (p. vi). For example, reading problems in first grade have been shown to significantly predict problem behaviors in third grade, but these same results also showed problem behaviors and off-task behaviors in first grade predicted reading struggles in third grade (Morgan et al., 2008, p. 1). Garwood (2015) hypothesizes in their research that classroom management quality – defined as

the proportion of high versus low quality classroom management – experienced across children's first four years (i.e., Kindergarten to third grade) in school will have a significant and positive association with their reading achievement (p. 15). In this DDP, classroom management is part of learning, and transitions will be researched to see if it contributes to this phenomenon in this research.

Getting to know each student in the school can have benefits like peers letting teachers or principals know the climate of the building and intervene where needed. Kreisberg (2017) said low-level misbehaviors may not be dangerous or harmful, but they certainly impact every stakeholder involved and take away time from instruction (p. 40). Unfortunately, teachers and peers can sometimes evoke surface-level behaviors by reacting to inappropriate behaviors or engaging in a power struggle (Smith & Bondy, 2007). In the school day observations and interactions, the administration has had several incidents from inexperienced substitute teachers bringing students to the main office and shouting at them for not responding to the substitute teacher like the substitute teacher would like students to respond/act. When the administration questioned the student and the teacher separately, our findings revealed that each did not want to give up power. The sub expressed his philosophy that children must respect him and do what he says without question. The student expressed feelings of being berated and felt she should not show respect to this sub who talks down to students. In a study by Armstead (2017), teacher reports of student frustration and aggression were associated with lower levels of closeness and higher levels of conflict in the student-teacher relationship.

In the last informed trauma practitioner training, the facilitator told teachers and principals to think of the students as “Not bad kids, but hurt kids.” The trainer believed some childhood experiences caused kids to act out in school, so the trainer stressed getting to know

these kids as the best pre-intervention. As concluded by Martin and Dowson (2009), "positive relationships with significant others are cornerstones of young people's capacity to function effectively in social, affective, and academic domains" (p. 351). Students who do not feel as if their teachers care about them may be less likely to engage in cooperative learning activities, which makes it less likely that they will receive positive reinforcement and feedback and more likely that they will have lower feelings of satisfaction and motivation (Ding & Hall, 2007). In the proposed research site was a little kindergartener who spent the day in between school lessons playing, fighting, eloping the class, and getting out of his seat. This student expressed one day; he was not welcome in the classroom. When asked why he felt like this way, he responded, "My desk and seat got moved outside the door." Teachers must be more aware of a student's perceived feelings, and misbehavior may increase if the student feels unloved or unwanted in the classroom.

### **Social Emotional Engagement**

Many years spent working in a self-contained classroom with other teachers helped train me on how to react to student behavior and was the biggest learning curve I had to learn coming out of college, because this could only be learned on the ground in a classroom with social emotionally disturbed students. Children with or at risk for social emotional behavior disturbance (EBD) demonstrate externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression, noncompliance; Wagner & Davis, 2006) and internalizing behaviors (e.g., depression, anxiety; Morris et al., 2002) and often display a lack of engagement in school and rate higher on feelings of disaffection than other students, which may adversely affect their academic achievement (Walker et al., 2004). When one little boy in kindergarten goes home, he shares a bedroom with five other brothers bigger than he is. They play, fight, and scream constantly, and this may be why he reacts with physical

pain to others in the classroom and causes numerous disruptions leading to his poor academics. Engagement should encompass behaviors, emotions, and attention. Desired outcomes would be for students to not only initiate interactions with the environment, but also encourage problem solving when obstacles or difficulties are faced (Skinner et al., 2009). The behavioral dimension involves effort, persistence, intensity, diligence, and resolve when faced with difficult tasks or obstacles. Emotional engagement includes enjoyment and satisfaction, and attention encompasses the cognitive realm of focus and desire to go a step further than is required (Skinner et al., 2009). Skinner is saying teachers must get into these students' heads to figure out what makes them tick and use that as a baseline for engaging in academic and appropriate social behavior.

### **Urban Life in Public Schools**

Does every teacher who does not look like the average urban Black student know the student's environment, which he or she comes from or wishes to know? According to Noguera & Alicea (2020) said any endeavor to understand the unique needs and challenges of urban education must begin with the understanding that the term urban has two different definitions; it can refer to a physical location but is also used to describe a "social or cultural construct to describe certain people and places" (p. 52). Crawford & Torgesen (2007) said the single most important skill learned in schools in the past, present, and the future is reading; therefore, if students are unable to read the written word, then doors of opportunity and success are unavailable. Vygotsky (1978; 1987) formulated the concept of a zone of proximal development (ZPD) to indicate the range of learning that students can achieve when they are engaged in meaningful activities with competent others (196). So, students with sociocultural and economic struggles suggest that a student's development is directly tied to their families' economic

disadvantages like poverty, under-education, or illiterate circumstances if they did not pursue higher education or ZPD. The parent's ZPD has a direct impact on the student's ZPD when they come to school, and the teacher must engage them to reach a higher level of ZPD to break the cycle of poverty, under-education, or illiteracy.

When schools engage in the urban communities they serve with back-to-school fairs at the neighborhood park would allow me to show teachers the historical background of what these students are dealing with while the teacher is trying to reach each student in the classroom. Also, Kreisberg (2017) mentioned during interviews, factors unrelated to school, such as environments like outside sources of misbehavior such as neighborhood fights with someone they live near or go to school with, may carry over into the school or punishments at home may cause a child to relay his or her frustration through low-level misbehaviors in the classroom (p. 68). Students at this proposed research site come from rough neighborhoods on the northside of St. Louis, Missouri, where one fifth-grade male was being recruited by gang members in his neighborhood, allowing him to hang out with them and shoot guns at empty cans in a vacant field. The boy and his sister have experienced some form of childhood trauma, and both often come to school and exhibit these pinned-up emotions by screaming at peers and teachers, eloping in the building, and having physical fights with peers.

Remember that old saying, "You are a product of your environment?" Parents are the first teachers, and students learn good and bad behaviors through no fault of their own. Recently, Brandy's (Pseudonym) mother went back to prison, and this young girl has spiraled out of control, cursing out staff when asked to walk in line or return from recess. Unfortunately, opportunities like long-term in-school therapies do not exist to assist this student. Hall (2017) said adults assist children in learning, however, adverse conditions such as poverty and

environmental dangers may obstruct a student's growth or resilience (p. 23). There are also delicate periods in brain growth that support opportunities for learning in early childhood and adolescence, and experiences and the environment affect the brain; caring adults in safe and secure homes promote learning (Boorn et al., 2010). For Example, at the proposed research site, a fifth grader from a loving two-parent family chose to steal from his grandmother thousands of dollars she had been saving to build a home on a vacant lot the family had bought. The student gave his fellow fifth-grade classmates large sums of this money to buy friendship, however, several of the students took it home and gave it to their parent/guardian (Many were young single-parent households). The school administration learned this was happening from one concerned parent and not the many who finally returned the cash when the school called to report the incident; just the one concerned parent acted. The one parent knew the fifth grader's mother and called her, who called grandma, which caused a frantic search for this missing money. What struck me was that out of nearly 60 students, only one parent reported it to the school's attention. Likely, poverty or living on the very edge of a broken society could be a reason many of these parents did not question how the children obtained the cash but instead used it for basic needs like food.

Like the last paragraph, teachers need additional understanding about those left in a crumbling inner city and the stagnation effect on education. According to Alexander et al. (2014), *The Long Shadow: Family Background, Disadvantaged Urban Youth, and the Transition to Adulthood*, was conducted in Baltimore, that city's struggles with deindustrialization, White flight, and concentrated poverty were characteristic of most East Coast and Midwest manufacturing cities. The National Report Card (2022) said Black students (4th Graders) in Missouri had an average score that was 34 points lower (179 points) than that for White students

(213 points). This performance gap was not significantly different from that in 1998, which was 33 points. So, again, what is going on in the urban classroom/school to cause this GAP in student learning? Like students in Baltimore, students in the St. Louis experience similar tragedies of poverty.

Today, there seem to be a gap in the prior decision to desegregate schools, there are far fewer Black teachers in public education today than when my parents went to school. Milner and Howard (2004) pointed to the existence of close links between Black families, Black teachers, and Black student achievement, and argued that the under-representation of Black teachers and the failure of many Black families to equip students properly with the tools and values needed to succeed in school are part of the story of Black student underachievement (relative to White students and also in terms of absolute No Child Left Behind standards) in American schools (p. 285-297). However, the research site has tried to recruit and retain Black teachers, but many Black teachers left stating they are tired of dealing with predominantly young single urban female parents who have cursed at them and refuse to intervene and help control their student's behavior in the classroom, see Table 3 Teacher Insights.

How do schools recruit Black teacher's and especially Black males into the education field if for some reason they are not choosing the field of education in colleges? Lewis (2006) study of African American male teachers in urban school districts in Louisiana examined why these men became teachers and their reasons for remaining in education. Based on these understandings from other researchers, Lewis suggested strategies for recruitment and retention of Black male teachers to school district personnel (see, e.g., Pabon, et al., 2011). Lewis wrote:

In this study, the top three recruitment mechanisms that were most important to African American male teachers were (1) helping young people, (2) needing a job, and (3)

contributions to humanity. School district officials must continue to stress at various job fairs the critical role of teachers, specifically African American male teachers, in helping young people reach their educational goals and become productive members of society. Second, as another recruitment mechanism, school district officials must continue to inform African American male college students that teaching positions are readily available upon graduation from college in a variety of subject areas. Third, school district officials must remind potential African American male teachers that their efforts are an excellent way to contribute to humanity in a way that cannot be done in many other professions, (Lewis 2006, p. 240).

We must get back to the “why” of what made Black teachers go into the field of teaching for the first reason. Like Lewis (2006) said it was not for money and schools must get back to those three reasons given above in the interview to sell the product of teaching in an urban setting. At the research site the principal noted a recruit may be interviewed by five other elementary schools and the school could lose out on talent to another competing school if the interviewer does not sell the candidate mission and vision in the thirty-to-forty-five-minute meeting. One aspect of the interview process was one candidate asked if she would like a tour of the facility and got to meet staff, the next day she accepted the human resource job offer to work in the facility. This kind of personal touch may be what is lacking in recruiting candidates in other schools.

My intersectionality of this phenomenon is significant, where I have been asked or put on almost every committee to help support, promote, and run programs, e.g., Black history program, coach other struggling Black teachers, and urban parent engagement for positive community relations. Parents have designated me, another person of color, to look after their children and

push them academically and socially like they were my own. I accepted this role because some of the urban students needed a Black male role model because their own father or male figure was out of the picture or being raised by grandmother's who experienced having a Black teacher and wanted the same for their student. Also, when I began teaching, I was the only Black male in the special education teacher certification program in 2012. Upon graduation, I was the only Black male teacher in the middle school where I worked, which was predominantly black students of color. The research site did not have any Black male teachers in the building. According to Bristol & Carver-Thomas (2024), students across all ethnic-racial groups also reported that Black teachers were more likely to hold them to higher academic standards and support their efforts to reach those standards (p. 8).

### **Poverty**

Most of the families I deal with are from low economic status and depend deeply on the school food pantry program to make ends meet. The United States Census Bureau (USCB, 2022) reported the poverty rate for St. Louis was 20.4 percent compared to 13.2 percent for all of Missouri. The most significant of those living in poverty were under 18 years old at 32.4 percent (USCB, 2022). Also, the USCB (2022) reports that 60 percent of the population, ranging from grades kindergarten to 12th grade, were enrolled in area schools in St. Louis (Population 301,578) compared to 69.1 percent for all of Missouri (Population 6,154,913). Therefore, if we do the math, it comes out to around 61,521 ( $301,578 \times 20.4$  percent) of the total impoverished population in St. Louis, Missouri (USCB, 2022). Children living in high-poverty environments are particularly at risk for failure in school (Gorski, 2013; Morgan, 2011; Vera, 2011). The National School Lunch Program (NSLP, 2024) provides low-cost or free lunches to children and

operates in nearly 100,000 public and nonprofit private schools (Pre-kindergarten – 12th grade) and residential childcare institutions. Students from households with incomes:

- Students can receive a free lunch at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty line.
- Students between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty line can receive a reduced-price lunch.
- Students above 185 percent of the Federal poverty line can receive a low-cost, full-price lunch (NSLP, 2024).

The students in prior years of this research all received free meals at school (Breakfast and lunch) before and after the pandemic regardless of economic status. This was made possible with the invaluable support from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) and the American Rescue Plan (ARP), as highlighted by Long (2023), which helped feed every eligible student in schools:

This enumerates food assistance, including food assistance delivered through child nutrition programs like school meals, as an eligible for funding support in response to the impacts of the pandemic on households and communities and may be used to provide premium pay to eligible workers performing essential work, including educational, school nutrition, and other workers required to operate a school facility (Long, 2023).

Again, the most significant intervention for engaging students is feeding them before class. I have seen many hungry students arrive late to school and I would have to walk students to the cafeteria to get breakfast.

### Statement of the Problem

This researcher will investigate the phenomena of why urban students, after reaching the third grade, are still unable to read at grade level. Even with the introduction of classroom instruction and curriculum like phonics and the Science of Reading since kindergarten, students still struggle, and some results show below-grade-level reading scores. I hope to look at 2024 to 2025 second graders as they move to third grade in the fall of 2024 and conduct research on the phenomenon of why third graders cannot read on grade-level, excluding those on grade level in or in the process of receiving special educational services. In a recent observation, a principal asked me to observe a first-grade teacher. Though this teacher was a colleague, I had to record honest and unbiased observation notes. The students who caused several transition issues were reading below grade-level and eloping from the classroom during instruction. Teachers are expected to engage students and uphold expectations so that students are always safe and learning. These two concepts must work to achieve academic success and meet the district's mission.

As explained by Allington (2013), because we know the precise instructional steps needed to aid striving readers, the educational system must look in the mirror and accept responsibility that many struggling readers are victims of the instructional practices currently employed in schools. Also, Allington (2009) said effective teachers engage students in reading 40 - 45 minutes of each hour allocated to reading instruction whereas ineffective teachers engage students in reading for only 15 - 20 minutes of each hour allocated to reading instruction. Data from the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed fewer than 40% of fourth-grade students reached or exceeded proficient in reading (United States Department of Education, 2017). This could explain the National Report Card (2022) reported earlier in the text

why Black students (4th Graders) in Missouri had an average score that was 34 points lower (179 points) than that for White students (213). This performance gap was not significantly different from that in 1998, which was 33 points. So, what is going on in the urban classroom/school to cause this GAP in student learning? My theory is that while in 3rd grade and prior grades something happened that may have contributed to this steady GAP over time. I examined different aspects to try and find out what one or many things contributed to this phenomenon. This project will move swiftly in the fall to research the phenomena and offer solutions that may help optimize student transitions, learning, and teacher engagement.

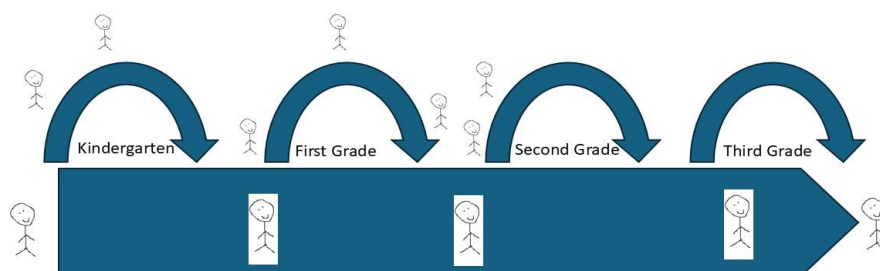
### **Looking for Proficiency**

In 2022, thirty-one percent of eighth-grade students performed at or above the NAEP proficient level on the reading assessment, which was 3 percentage points lower compared to 2019, the previous assessment year (NAEP, 2022). If third and fourth graders are struggling to read on grade level, we now see the trend is not isolated to just elementary students. The NAEP conducted the study but may have forgotten that the COVID-19 pandemic triggered global school lockdowns, which began around March 2020 and lasted for many school districts until August 2021. These eighth graders were placed in a learning loss gap, which I so eloquently coined the “Learning Loss Gap” (LLG). Students exhibiting this LLG concept are popping up in research data by hiding in plain sight, lacking mastery in reading skills that secondary teachers are now reteaching foundational skills, including phonological awareness, phonics, word recognition, print concepts, and fluency taught in elementary schools (Heubeck, 2024). Bennetts (2024), a literacy consultant and former elementary school teacher, believes that many struggling older readers have been hiding in plain sight for quite some time:

“My hunch is that the problem has always been there, we just haven’t been looking for it in the older grades and not in the right ways,” he said. Many students who fail to learn the basics of reading become increasingly sophisticated about hiding their struggles, explains Bennett. They grow their sight vocabulary by memorizing “high frequency” words. They often avoid reading aloud in class. Some eventually opt out of class and school altogether. (Bennett, 2024)

This leads to my concept that many students’ struggling to read on grade level are like two different travelers, one takes the hike over rough hilly terrain, see Figure 1, the Learning Loss Gap (LLG) below and on my DDP website. The other student found a tunnel to travel more easily. The same can be said for struggling students encountering a class with difficult academic material and receives extended help to climb the hill or strategy like memorizing content, once to the top he or she may accelerate to reach the next hill (assignment) and do the same over and over until the student catches up, if possible, to the other students. However, the other student that comprehends the material and reads proficient or advance, per se, it is like taking the tunnel with no issues as they progress on their academic journey. The tunnel students have mastered the foundational skills for phonics and decoding vocabulary for reading while those that took the hill have not fully reached mastery but skirt by with remedial instruction in phonics, and decoding but never reaches mastery.

Figure 1

*Learning Loss Gap*

Note. Illustration created by researcher.

### **Culture of Literacy**

So, what happened to the other sixty-nine percent of eighth-grade students who performed below the NAEP proficient level on the reading assessment? I think many have fallen through the cracks, and reading is not the only issue. Then, Boldt (2020) argues that in literacy research and teaching, conscious, language-based learning has been overvalued; contending that students' embodied identities create differences in how their expressions of vitality are received in classrooms (p. 1). Therefore, teacher engagement is vital to reading the classroom atmosphere, meaning that the teacher needs to be observant of a student's engagement and enthusiasm and know how to keep them attentive to increase the learning exchange.

Before my self-contained classroom engaged in a lesson, I guided students in activities like exercise to get blood pumping to the brain, is just one strategy for preparing students to read. Even Guthrie et al. (2013) said programs like Concept Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI)

emphasizes support for reading motivation, reading engagement, and cognitive strategies for reading informational text and created seven motivational constructs included: four motivations that are usually positively associated with achievement (intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, valuing, and prosocial goals) and three motivations that are usually negatively associated with achievement (perceived difficulty, devaluing, and antisocial goals) (p. 9). This new theory would allow teachers who are trained in engaging students with positive mindful exercises that motivate students to seek out reading engagement with their teacher and forming a social bond of respect for learning could improve outcomes while eliminating issues that undermine the learning environment.

Finding ways to motivate students to learn with external or internal rewards will have to be explored because each student is different. Torgesen (1998) discussed four effective preventative elements when working with students who may be at risk for reading failure. The first was the right kind and quality of instruction (p. 3). This entails providing structured, systematic and explicit instruction with phonemic awareness, in ways that are meaningful to the student in both reading and writing (Al-Bataineh & Sims-King, 2013, p. 59). The second element was that the lesson should be delivered with the right level of intensity depending on the needs of the students (Torgesen, 1998, p. 3). Some students may need more intensive lessons directly from the teacher one on one or even small groups (Al-Bataineh & Sims-King, 2013, p. 59). The third and fourth elements, the right children and at the right time, are considered together because it helps to focus on children who are most in need to more preventative instruction, mainly very early in the process of teaching students to read (Torgesen, 1998, pp. 3-4). Essentially, teachers must be engaged in the learning environment along with motivating the

student to yield positive results in this continuum of success and grouping them by need or risk may be the best way to address a student's reading problem.

### **Absenteeism**

The National Center for Education Evaluation (NCEE) states the United States is facing a chronic absenteeism crisis, over 14 million students nationwide during the 2021 - 2022 school year were chronically absent (NCEE, 2024). This means that these students missed at least 10 percent of school days, equivalent to approximately 18 days in the year (NCEE, 2024). Missing this much instructional time creates significant learning challenges for students and adversely affects student wellbeing (NCEE, 2024). School systems across the nation are looking for ways to address this crisis and the accompanying problems it presents. The Institute of Education Science (IES) has created four handouts that discuss research findings and research-based tools from across IES that educators and policymakers can use to improve student attendance and engagement:

Text Messaging with Families to Support Student Attendance. Using Data and Early Warning Systems to Improve Student Attendance and Engagement. Partnering with Families to Support Student Attendance and Learning: Resources from the Regional Educational Laboratory Program. Promoting a Positive School Climate and Safe Learning Conditions: Resources from the Regional Educational Laboratory Program. (NCEE, 2024)

When taking an in-depth look at chronic absenteeism Crouch (2016) said in some instances are varied such as transportation problems and clothing needs. In the Jennings School District, Superintendent Tiffany Anderson found when she began leading the district in 2012 that young children were missing weeks of school because they didn't have inoculations. So, the district

found a health provider to give vaccinations to children on school campuses. Anderson mentioned a girl in one school whose parents are dead and now the girl must watch younger children in the home, resulting in chronic absence (Crouch, 2016). In addition, two out of three schools nationwide had high chronic absenteeism in 2022, up from a quarter before the pandemic, according to an analysis of federal data by the nonprofit Attendance Works (Sparks, 2023). Sparks (2023) went on to say high-poverty schools have been the hardest hit, with absenteeism nearly tripling since the pandemic.

Unfortunately, chronic absenteeism is just one of the many issues theorizing that within school transitions contribute to the LLG variance in Figure 1. NCEE and IES offered different solutions like SMS text messaging to remind parents of the benefits of the student's need to be in school, but to set this up the district will have to upgrade its technology and find a messaging provider that could support these needs (NCEE, 2024).

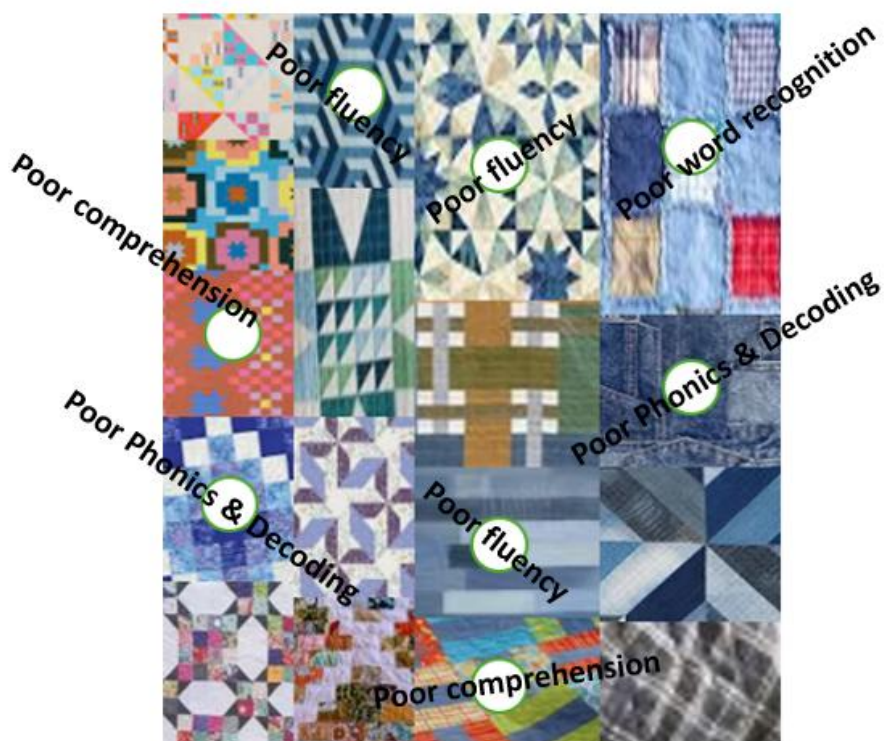
Getting students up and ready for school is a parental responsibility. Recently, a meeting with one parent whose three students have missed 35 to 37 days, respectively. She broke down crying when confronted with the results of keeping her students' home for no reason. Two of these students are reading below kindergarten in the second and third grades, respectively. This school year, the school district had given this family a curb-to-curb cab service due to a lack of dependable bus transportation. The cab driver reported that the mom would not send the kids out and said, "They are staying home today." According to Blad and Tomko (2025) when students frequently miss class, those absences affect more than their own grades. The authors described this phenomenon as the "Spillover" effect that has caused teacher engagement to revert to the beginning of the school year and having to reteach missed material like in Figure 2. The teacher is affected by having to reteach information that the regular attendance students have already

received, which may waste this student's time when this student can be learning new material. The emotional drain on morale that I have seen teachers experience is self-evident in their desire to quit or not return the following school year to work:

Children in classrooms with poorer attendance rates even those with good attendance exhibited lower reading, math, and executive function skills, the Penn researchers found when they analyzed the federal kindergarten data set. Researchers at the University of Delaware found schoolwide impacts in a 2023 study that analyzed academic records of 55,000 Delaware students. Kindergarteners who attended schools with higher absenteeism rates later had poorer performance on state assessments in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, they concluded. (Education Week, 2025)

In Figure 2, I hypothesize that absenteeism may also contribute to areas of learning loss when students are not in school to learn material and transfer it to short-term or long-term memory for the next grade level. Regular classroom teachers may not reteach this missed academic curriculum, which can also contribute to the dilemma. Then, what level of intensity and resources will be provided to fill the gaps will need to be evaluated depending on the grade level. Those in high school may need a higher intensity like Saturday School or Summer School intervention to earn academic credits for graduation.

Figure 2

*Clay Quilt Theory*

Note. Illustration created by researcher.

### **Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

During the pandemic I had 35 students with individual education plans (IEPs) that would be in virtual class for morning math and afternoon of reading. Four to five would not show up for virtual class and calling them via the iPad did not work because some students used the iPad for entertainment and forgot to charge it overnight for daily virtual class. Other issues I experienced were where students would sign on but turn off the camera and refuse to engage in the lessons (The attendance was met by signing on, but no instruction occurred with these particular students who may fall into the LLG). Jiménez et al. (2020) said during the COVID-19 pandemic,

traditional literacy instruction for students from nondominant communities largely had ceased or slackened (p. 342). Unless schools can figure out ways to better provide this instruction (through digital devices, access to the internet, curriculum that meets the needs of Black, Indigenous, or people of color [BIPOC] students), the literacy learning needs of BIPOC students will suffer (Jiménez et al., 2020, p. 342). During the pandemic many school districts for the first time ever pivoted to online learning and the proposed research site was no different to all the other schools that had to catch up with technology to service students. I spent two days in professional development learning Microsoft Teams to teach online from home. Even purchasing a document camera with my own funds (the district and school were closed) to further enhance the ability to teach basic math skills with a dry erase white board so students could follow on paper or their own dry erase board. My slogan was “Line it up or you will mess it up,” and students would repeat it as they drew math equations.

Making students accountable was difficult during the pandemic because parents had to work and sometimes students were home with older siblings also struggling with their own virtual challenges. Mansour & Enas (2023) said the positive and negative aspects of distance learning can be summarized as follows: On the positive side, the distance learning mode provides flexibility in terms of access, as students can contact their teachers and access their educational content easily (p. 4). On the negative side, it is difficult to apply tasks that require practical skills, as distance learning is limited to the theoretical cognitive aspects (Mansour & Enas, 2023, p. 4). The same held true for myself who saw older teachers that lacked computer skills, which limited their performance during distance learning, retired instead of teaching in the virtual environment.

## **Student Mental Health Post Pandemic**

Before the pandemic, the school had two outside therapists come twice a week (Tuesday and Thursday) to see 20 to 40 students in fifteen to thirty-minute sessions. Now, no one comes out, and the school can only recommend that parents seek outside help on their own to address students' mental issues. According to Caster & Warnock (2023) said research by the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) going into this school year, 19 percent of public schools had vacancies for mental health professionals. Panchal et al. (2024) said among schools with these vacancies, 84 percent reported it will be somewhat or very difficult to fill these mental health positions. Representative Castor and Senator Reverend Warnock have been tireless advocates for mental health resources, including leading the charge to expand Medicaid for non-expansion states, which would provide mental health resources to millions who fall in the coverage gap (Panchal et al., 2024). Further, although 96 percent of public schools offered at least some mental health services in the 2021-2022 school year, only 12 percent strongly agreed that they could effectively provide mental health services to all students in need (Panchal et al., 2024). Panchal et al. (2022) said that school-based mental health services can improve access to care, allow for early identification and treatment of mental health issues, and may be linked to reducing absenteeism and better mental health outcomes. School-based services can also reduce access barriers for underserved populations, including children from low-income households and children of color. Panchal et al. (2022) said Most public schools offer mental health services to students, although utilization remains unclear. In the 2021-2022 school year, 96 percent of public schools reported offering at least one type of mental health service to their students and the most frequently offered services are:

Individual-based interventions like one-on-one counseling or therapy (84 percent of public schools). Case management or coordinating mental health services (70 percent). Referrals for care outside of the school (66 percent). (Panchal et al., 2022)

My experience in the last school year, 2023-2024, saw more than five elementary students ranging in grades from kindergarten to fifth grade who were referred to an outside counseling agency due to the school counselor not being equipped or trained to handle the severe levels of trauma that require long-term care these students needed. Also, I keep a folder full of free mental health and outpatient services in the St. Louis area for parents to access when needed.

The American Psychological Association (APA) conducted research that revealed school violence toward Teachers reported the most significant increase in rates of verbal and threatening aggression (e.g., verbal attacks, verbal threats, sexual harassment, intimidation, public humiliation, bullying) and physical violence (e.g., objects thrown, objects used as weapons, physical attacks), experiencing a sharp rise since COVID-19 to levels well above pre-pandemic levels (APA, 2025, p. 5). As a school administrator who handles discipline in school, many urban students returned after the pandemic to school with undiagnosed mental and cognitive issues that parents have struggled with since adolescence, hoping it would not limit the child's school success. APA (2025) research found a mean score of less than 0.3 reported for verbal and threatening aggression compared to a post-pandemic score of above 0.7 mean scores just for teachers (p. 9). This research also covered other school-based staff, but not with such high numbers. I suspect general education teachers are bearing the brunt of verbal and threatening aggression because they spend the highest amount of time face-to-face

with all these students in eighty percent of the school day, excluding related arts (Gym, music, and art).

Help is coming, but it may be too late as many teachers in this researcher's career have left the field due to student violence and parents refusing to seek professional mental help for the student. According to APA (2022) and the APA's Task Force conducted in collaboration with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the National Education Association (NEA), and the School Social Work Association of America (SSWA) address congress in 2022 on YouTube with two members of congress present (McMahon et al., 2022; APA, 2022, pp. 2-3):

For example, some educators described their experiences: "I have been physically assaulted multiple times by students in the building and they know that not only is there no one to stop them, but there will be no consequences either. I ended up in the hospital the last time it happened." School personnel describe violence and aggression from parents and other adults in the school; students are not the only aggressors. "Parents have been more aggressive and verbally abusive to teachers in our district since COVID. The social media posts by parents are vicious and they don't seem to remember that teachers were already undervalued, underpaid, and overworked before the pandemic. Those feelings have only been made worse by the pandemic." "I have never had such aggression toward me from the community, the board of education, and my administration in my life. If I could financially quit, I would. The belittling of concerns and bullying of teachers from other adults has pushed so many of us to a breaking point. I have been called ungrateful, lazy, whiny, entitled, uncaring, heartless, selfish, stupid, and more by

adults (McMahon et al., 2022; APA, 2022, pp. 2-3).”

In the recent book *Pushout*, which this researcher discovered from LinkedIn members, the esteemed author Dr. Couvson, currently the co-founder and president of the National Black Women's Justice Institute (NBWJI), discusses what leads girls, particularly fourth graders, down a slippery slope. The NBWJI a nonprofit organization now focus on the reduction of racial and gender disparities in the justice systems affecting Black women, girls, and their families, by conducting research, providing technical assistance, engaging in public education, promoting civic engagement, and advocating for informed and effective policies (Couvson, 2025). Yael (2021) described her response to chapter five of the book *Pushout* that “Repairing Relationships, Rebuilding Connections” opens with an interview with Heaven, a Black girl who prioritized the needs of her boyfriend’s education in the juvenile justice system over her own (Couvson, 2016, p. 174; Yael, 2021).

The chapter identifies six themes for cultivating quality learning environments for Black girls: (1) the protection of girls from violence and victimization in school; (2) proactive discussions in schools about healthy intimate relationships; (3) strong student-teacher relationships; (4) school based wraparound services; (5) increased focus on student learning coupled with a reduced emphasis on discipline and surveillance; and (6) consistent school credit recovery processes between alternative schools and traditional district schools (Yael, 2021, p. 211).

The mental stress young people must go through to identify with a group can be confusing for young minds to see the whole picture of their actions. According to Jones & Couvson (2009/2016) Black girls are greatly affected by the stigma of having to participate in identity politics that marginalize them or place them into polarizing categories: they are either

“good” girls or “ghetto” girls who behave in ways that exacerbate stereotypes about Black femininity, particularly those relating to socioeconomic status, crime, and punishment. (p. 10). Urban students have stressful lives in conforming to home and school cultures that sometimes put them into a box, and once labeled, create a mental bias that makes it hard for teachers to see them as the perfect student and visa-versa for promising students who follow or befriend the “ghetto” urban student are often labeled by the guilt of association. In this researcher’s school, one female third grader who received an advanced certificate in reading hangs out with a group of Black girls, e.g., ghetto girls at lunch, who all tested below basic on reading in addition to numerous discipline referrals, and reflecting on it now makes sense as she is trying to fit into a group she encounters in her neighborhood who she may unconsciously identify with due to outside influences like wanting to belong.

## Research Questions

My title is “A Grounded Theorizing of the Learning Opportunities Afforded to Third Graders Who Read Below Grade Level.” My research questions are:

1. Can reading instruction/curriculum like phonics and the Science of Reading intervention increase scholars reading below grade level reach proficiency?

2. Do third grade classrooms experience transitions that interfere with student learning?

Transitions are defined as:

- Group 1: Curriculum/lesson stoppage or changes, teacher engagement, district/school policies (Drills, restroom breaks, lunch, parties, recess, field trips, and cell phone), and classroom schedule.
- Group 2: Classroom design, food insecurity or poverty, and COVID-19 pandemic aftermath, and family dynamics (Single parent, multiple households/caregivers, divorce, or neglect).
- Group 3: Discipline, elopement, attendance, and mental health support.

3. Do students and parents contribute and transform their personal learning process to improve student reading skills to one day read on grade level before entering middle school and close the opportunity gap?

This project is meaningful to the school community because so many students have come through the front office at the proposed research site with disciplinary referrals. After discussions and reflection, it was determined that the behavior stemmed from some sort of fear or embarrassment and the student had about reading and acted out to avoid the activity. Also, there

is pressure on districts to implement an RSP program that will bring students to reading at grade level due to the new Read by Third Grade laws, such as the revised statutes of Missouri 170.014.

### **Methodology**

This research design will be Grounded Theory approach to take on the qualitative research method to investigate the phenomena of why students, after reaching the third grade, are still unable to read on grade level making constant comparisons and applying theoretical sampling to obtain a theory grounded in the data such as concepts and key concepts, decisions taken, observations, relationships, and comparisons etc. (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 116-117; Cohen et al., 2018, pp. 714-724). Even with the introduction of classroom instruction/curriculum, phonics, and the Science of Reading since kindergarten, students still struggle, and some results show below-grade-level reading scores. I looked at this year's second graders as they move to third grade in the fall and conduct research on the phenomenon, excluding those on grade level or in the process of receiving special education services. This chapter aims to introduce the research methodology used for this study of how effective reading programs can improve reading on grade level, and reteaching phonics when students begin to fail can improve a student's reading level. I selected the qualitative research method for the present study based on its appropriateness in analyzing the association between specific reading issues and determining if there are any specific roadblocks. The qualitative methodology will allow me to address this approach in a single study (Mills & Gay, 2019, p. 8). In this chapter, the researcher discusses the applicability of this design method and its compatibility in collecting data across different venues to triangulate results.

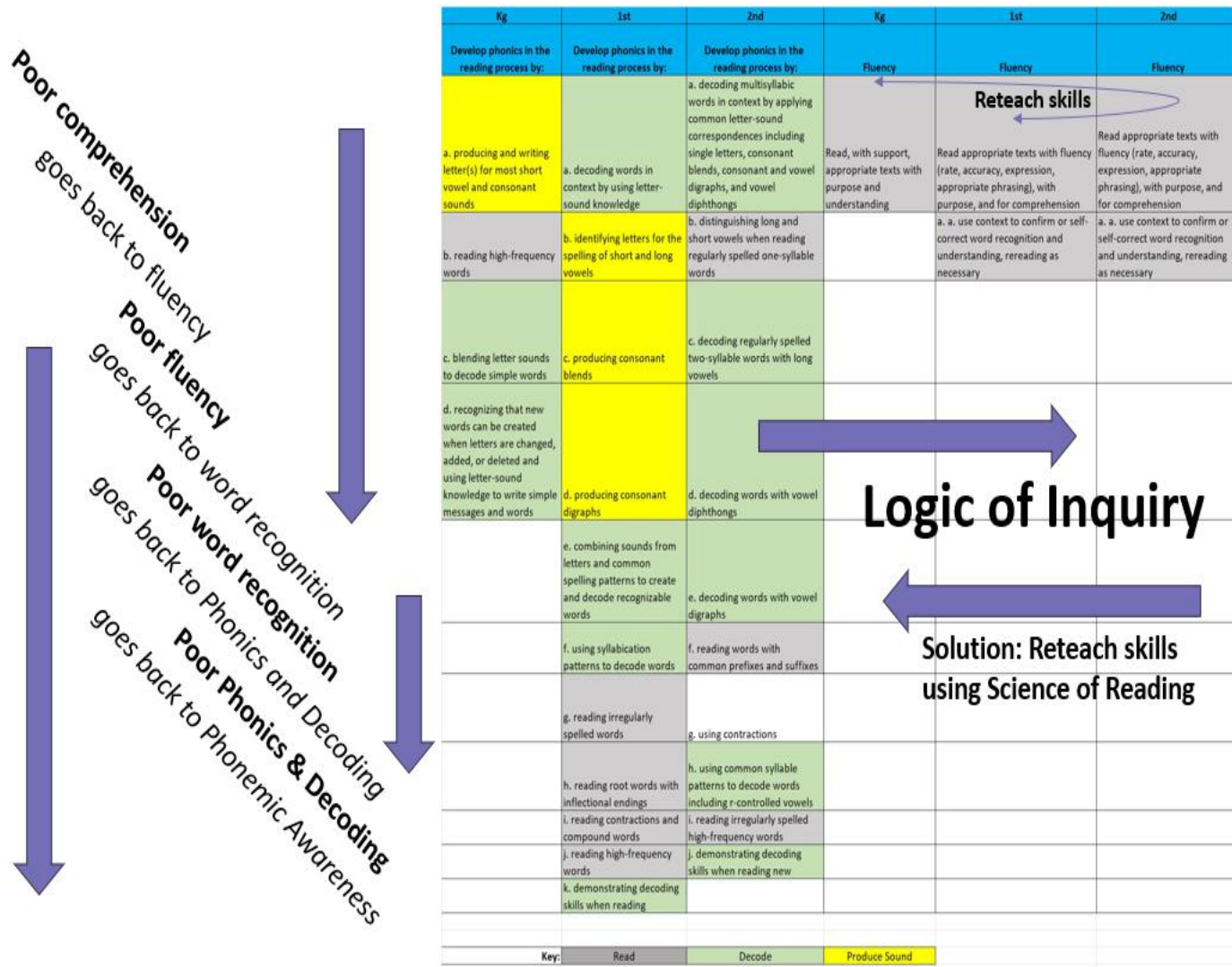
## **Logic of Inquiry**

Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) (2016) says that students entering kindergarten should be learning phonemic awareness to become better readers by second grade. The next chart shows my “Logic of Inquiry” of the normal progression that should be happening in each grade level from kindergarten to second grade in Figure 2.

However, testing has revealed that several students per grade level cannot read by the third grade unlike their peers. So, how did these students get here? Were students engaged during phonic lessons, absent, distracted, or in transition etc.? The arrows in Figure 3 represent normal progress as students move from kindergarten to second grade, until testing reveal a need to reteach the subjects and it may be too late as students move up to third grade. Part of the literature review is set around seeing students in transition regularly disrupt the academic environment when teachers presented lessons like phonics which unfortunately, many students struggled with already. In the literature review Goodman (1970) reported, reading is a sampling, selecting, predicting, comparing, and confirming activity in which the reader chooses a sample of helpful graphic cues based on what he sees and what he expects to see, and the reader attempts to reconstruct a message from the writer (p. 265). Goodman's definition is predicated on his belief that reading is a meaning-getting task and that readers' prior knowledge and psycholinguistic competence are most important. However, many theories have evolved over the past 50 years since 1970, like Reading Recovery (RR) swept the states as the Science of Reading is steadily replacing RR as the Science of Reading is now the focus in many school districts. The gap in the research is profound since little is out there to be found on the subject. One possible reasoning of this is school staff may limit what is really communicated to the outside world about students in

transition and the likely behaviors or other causes that are contributing to disruptions in the learning environment.

Figure 3  
Logic of Inquiry



Note. Chart created by researcher based on DESE goals for grade levels.

## Findings

The research design will be like Creswell & Poth (2018) and Cohen et al., (2018) take on qualitative research method in the grounded theory approach. The grounded theory approach uses systematized methods of theoretical sampling, coding, and categorization, constant comparison, memoing (Is the practice of writing reflective notes and observations about the data as it is being collected and analyzed), the identification of a core variable, and saturation (Meaning when all possible data is captured and coding produce no new insights or categories) to guide the researcher to a theory (Cohen et al., 2018). Cohen (2018) also suggest grounded theory starts with data which is then analyzed and reviewed to allow the researcher to generate their hypothesis. So, I observed and reviewed as much data in the research setting as possible to come up with a working theory on the issue. The methods of data collection and analysis include investigating the phenomena of why students, after reaching third grade are still unable to read on grade level by observations of the classroom environment and transitions of the school day.

Also, I surveyed teachers, parents, and students. Even with the introduction of classroom instruction/curriculum, phonics, and the Science of Reading since kindergarten; students still seem to struggle, and some results show below-grade-level reading scores by third grade. Also, there are interruptions like behavior contributing to the event. Looking at this year's third grade class and conducting research of the phenomenon excluding those on grade level or in the process of receiving or already in special educational services I hope to shed new light on the subject. Classroom management, student behavior, engagement, and transitions (Any interruptions to the normal school day) were observed. Two days a week were spent at the school (One day in the morning and the other day in the afternoon) to capture realistic interactions of the school day. This research plan split the time observing five third-grade classes in the school.

Thus, Cohen et al. (2018) said qualitative research can tell us the how and why - the processes involved in understanding and explaining how things occur (p. 304). Thus, I hope to showcase in the findings section the results from the data collection and hopefully answer the research questions.

### **Demographics of Participants and the Community**

1. The school facility is in an urban center around the St. Louis, Missouri area like many other urban schools in the metropolitan area.

2. Participants are African American third or fourth generation third grade students after the 1954 landmark case to desegregate schools:

- One school principal (Black female) and two assistant principals (One Black female and one White male)
- Five third grade veteran teachers with 8 to 15 years minimum in the classroom
  - Two Black teachers and three White teachers
  - Teacher 1 – Black with 8 years teaching
  - Teacher 2 – Black with 13 years teaching
  - Teacher 3 – White Hispanic with 11 years teaching
  - Teacher 4 – White with 15 years teaching
  - Teacher 5 – White with 15 years teaching
- Students total 135 with 27 per classroom
- Families (All Black in this study) are hardworking low to middle class socio-economic status

3. Community Resources around the area are limited with one civic center, one community pool, one police department, two fire departments, and seven recreational parks with some located in the vicinity of the school.

The U.S. Census Bureau (2020) estimated the city population to be 12,737 with 7,745 made up of Black residents (The White population being around 3,008) and 1,009 being Black children between the ages of five and nine years old, i.e., kindergarten to fourth graders. The percentages the African Americans make up 61 percent of the population compared to Caucasians at 24 percent (U.S. Census, 2020).

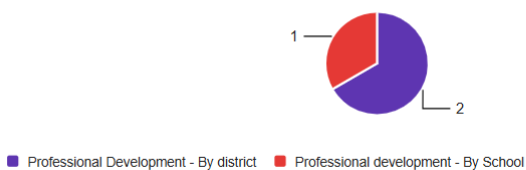
When I began the observational phase of my research and started observing teachers at Sunflower Elementary School (Pseudonym), I introduced myself and one teacher gave me a long stare as if thinking to herself “Oh no” while shaking my hand and obviously nervous due to my presence. The Sunflower staff were hard working third grade teachers tasked with a surmounting job of educating urban students in over-crowded classrooms which average twenty-seven students daily if all were present. The survey results of inquiry can be found below and reflections on the research and survey questions. The first survey question asked how teachers define phonemic awareness resulted in two different responses from two of the five teachers observed. One teacher said, “it is being able to distinguish between sounds” and another said it was “Letter sound recognition in isolation and within words.” According to Reading Rockets (2024) phonemic awareness is the ability to identify and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words. Though these two teachers gave different definitions may indicate the professional development (PD) leaders may need to be more specific in training modules and reach this specific grade level to have the same training terminology to build a culture of words teachers become comfortable using. For example, Figure 4 shows two of the five indicated

getting training in a PD at the district level, and one of the five indicated in a PD at the school level in question six. Additionally, three of those five teachers in question eight indicated they received phonics training via an online format offered by the school or district.

Figure 4

*Teacher Survey on Phonics Training*

Q6 - What additional training have you had to teach phonics in your classroom?



Q8 - What additional training have you had to teach phonics in your classroom?



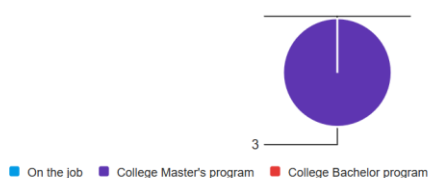
Note. Data collected by researcher.

The next question asked where these teachers learned about phonemic awareness, i.e., Figure 5 shows three of the five teachers responded training in a college master's program (Many received their master's degrees over five to ten plus years ago). Therefore, it is recommended that Sunflower may need a refresher PD on phonemic awareness to ensure everyone is fully trained again on all the latest terminology. Also, recommend Sunflower decide which supplemental curriculum will be best for everyone to use in the third-grade level rather than each teacher using different brands.

Figure 5

*Teacher Survey on Phonemic Awareness*

Q3 - Did you learn about phonemic awareness instruction in college or on the job?



Note. Data collected by researcher.

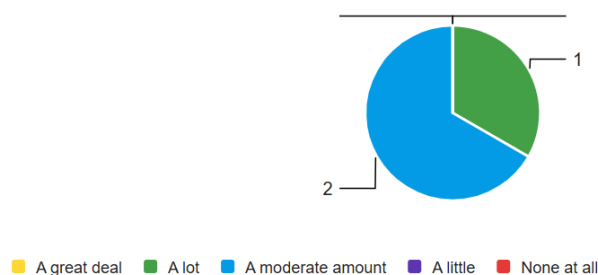
The next question asked in Figure 6, “How much time do you spend on literacy instruction daily?” The findings in surveying teachers revealed one said she spends a lot of time on literacy instruction and two others said they spend a moderate amount of time on literacy instruction. Also, Sunflower uses one identified third grade phonics curriculum in all five classrooms called 95 Percent. According to 95 Percent Literacy Intervention System (2024) schools will be able to quickly diagnose phonemic awareness and phonics skill deficits and

effectively group students to deliver precise intervention instruction to maximize student outcomes.

Figure 6

*Teacher Survey on Literacy Instruction*

Q4 - How much time do you spend on literacy instruction daily?



Note. Data collected by researcher.

However, per Figure 7 showed three of the five teachers also identified using supplemental curriculum called “Wit and Wisdom, Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS), LETRS Training, and University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) foundations. These three teachers responded that they have been using the resources in the past and did not see a need to stop using them as long as each was working. All support emerging readers with explicit phonics instruction, decoding practice, and a full system rooted in the Science of Reading. For example, one teacher used PALS, a more in-depth tool and requires teacher knowledge of student skill levels but supplements learning for elementary grades:

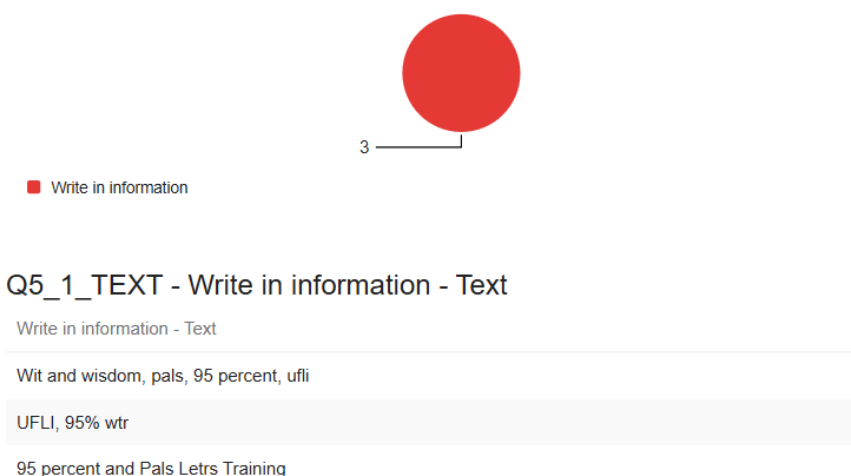
According to Institute of Education Science (IES) (2012) Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) is a peer-tutoring activity in which students are divided into pairs, with each pair alternating between the tutor and the tutee. This exercise allows students to practice reading with their peers and improves their literacy, decoding, and

comprehension skills. For this activity to work best, teachers should pair students based on their individual strengths and weaknesses. Where one student might be great at pronunciation but struggle with comprehension, their partner would fill in the gaps for them and vice versa. (IES, 2012)

Figure 7

*Teacher Survey on Curriculum Used*

Q5 - What resources and curriculum do you use? - Selected Choice



Note. Data collected by researcher.

Looking at our first research question, “Can reading instruction/curriculum like phonics and the Science of Reading intervention increase scholars reading below grade level reach proficiency?” I believe that this is occurring from the observations of teachers implementing the school base curriculum, however, some are using supplemental resources that may not be grounded in the Science of Reading. In the literature review, many theories have evolved over the past 50 years since 1970, like Reading Recovery (RR) swept the states as the Science of Reading is steadily replacing RR as the Science of Reading is now the focus in many school districts. Teachers preferred an older curriculum that they were more familiar with than the new

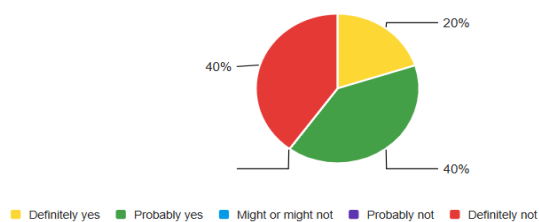
district focus of Ninety-five Percent materials. Intervention is intervention, and waiting for a miracle to happen is not the answer. Teachers are leaning on all the past interventions they know to get results in students reading on grade level at Sunflower Elementary.

Our next data interpretation is based on random parent surveys. In Figure 8, parents were asked if their child learned to read before entering school. Forty percent responded, “probably yes,” 40 percent said, “definitely not,” and twenty percent said, “definitely yes.” This may explain the second graph in Figure 8, which indicates 60 percent of parents are not teaching phonics in the home either because they may not understand the concept or lack the educational training to conduct it, while forty percent indicated their child learned about phonics in the home.

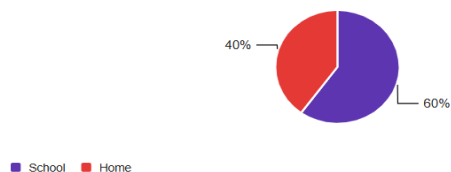
Figure 8

*Parent Survey on Home Learning*

Q1 - Did your child learn to read before entering school?



Q2 - Did your child learn about phonics at home or school?



Note. Data collected by researcher.

Though all the parents when asked if there were reading books in the home, all indicated they had children's books available, but one did indicate they could use more free books from the school if ever available. Which leads to our next question to parents if the school had provided reading materials for students to take home? Figure 9 shows seventy percent of parents indicated getting reading materials and other resources to improve student reading. I am very interested in this 30 percent who have no materials in addition to their homework to use for additional supports in the home. One hypothesis in Figure 2, is that this may be related to the daily absence ratio since the school's attendance per DESE (2024) is 67.6 percent compared to the state's overall average of 82.6 percent. Similarly in the literature review, I found two out of three schools nationwide had high chronic absenteeism in 2022, up from a quarter before the pandemic, according to an analysis of federal data by the nonprofit Attendance Works (Sparks, 2023). Sparks (2023) went on to say high-poverty schools have been the hardest hit, with absenteeism nearly tripling since the pandemic. When students frequently miss class, those absences affect them more than their own grades.

According to Blad and Tomko (2025) when students frequently miss class, those absences affect more than their own grades. The authors described this phenomenon as the "Spillover" effect that has caused teacher engagement to revert to the beginning of the school year and having to reteach missed material. The teacher is affected by having to reteach information that the regular attendance students have already received, which may waste this students time when this student can be learning new material. The emotional drain on morale of teachers is self-evident in their desire to quit early or not return the following school year:

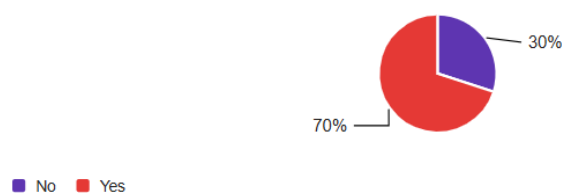
Children in classrooms with poorer attendance rates even those with good attendance exhibited lower reading, math, and executive function skills, the Penn researchers found

when they analyzed the federal kindergarten data set. Researchers at the University of Delaware found schoolwide impacts in a 2023 study that analyzed academic records of 55,000 Delaware students. Kindergarteners who attended schools with higher absenteeism rates later had poorer performance on state assessments in third grade, they concluded (Education Week, 2025).

Figure 9

*Parent Survey on School Sending Home Reading Books*

Q4 - Did the school provide any reading materials or resources?



Note. Data collected by researcher.

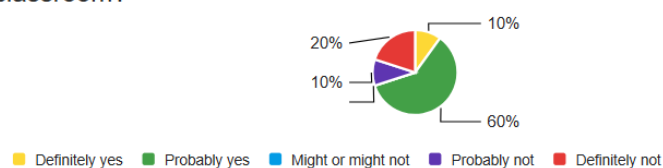
As we get into parent awareness of classroom disturbances it warrants to indicate how much parents indicate if they knew if their child refused to read at school. Results indicated sixty percent indicated “definitely not” while 40 percent indicated “probably not” which may mean they do not know precisely what their child does during the reading instruction. However, Figure 10, indicates over 60 percent of parents with students in the third grade have been informed of disruptions in their child’s classroom (“Definitely yes” – 60 percent responded and “probably yes” – 10 percent responded), which normally means their child is causing the disruption from an administrator point of view. More alarming is the number of disruptions parents indicated knowing in Figure 8 on question eight is split between research questions in group one, i.e., 43 percent and group three, i.e., 43 percent for a combined 86 percent are concerning. This brings in

mind of Scarborough (2001) who created a graphic called the "Reading Rope" that depicts the components of the Simple View of Reading (SVR), where students recall instructional activities from memory (p. 2). Yet, to become a skilled reader, a student must develop increasing speed and accuracy in decoding and linguistic comprehension skills (Scarborough, 2001, p. 2). Specifically, this strategy of building automatic decoding skills cannot happen when teachers are constantly being interrupted in delivering the lesson as this research found at Sunflower Elementary.

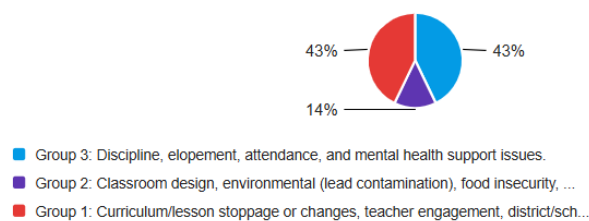
Figure 10

*Parent Survey on School Disruptions*

Q7 - Have you ever been informed of any disruptions in your child's classroom?



Q8 - If yes, please check which group it applies to below which disruption you are aware has happened. Write which may apply. - Selected Choice



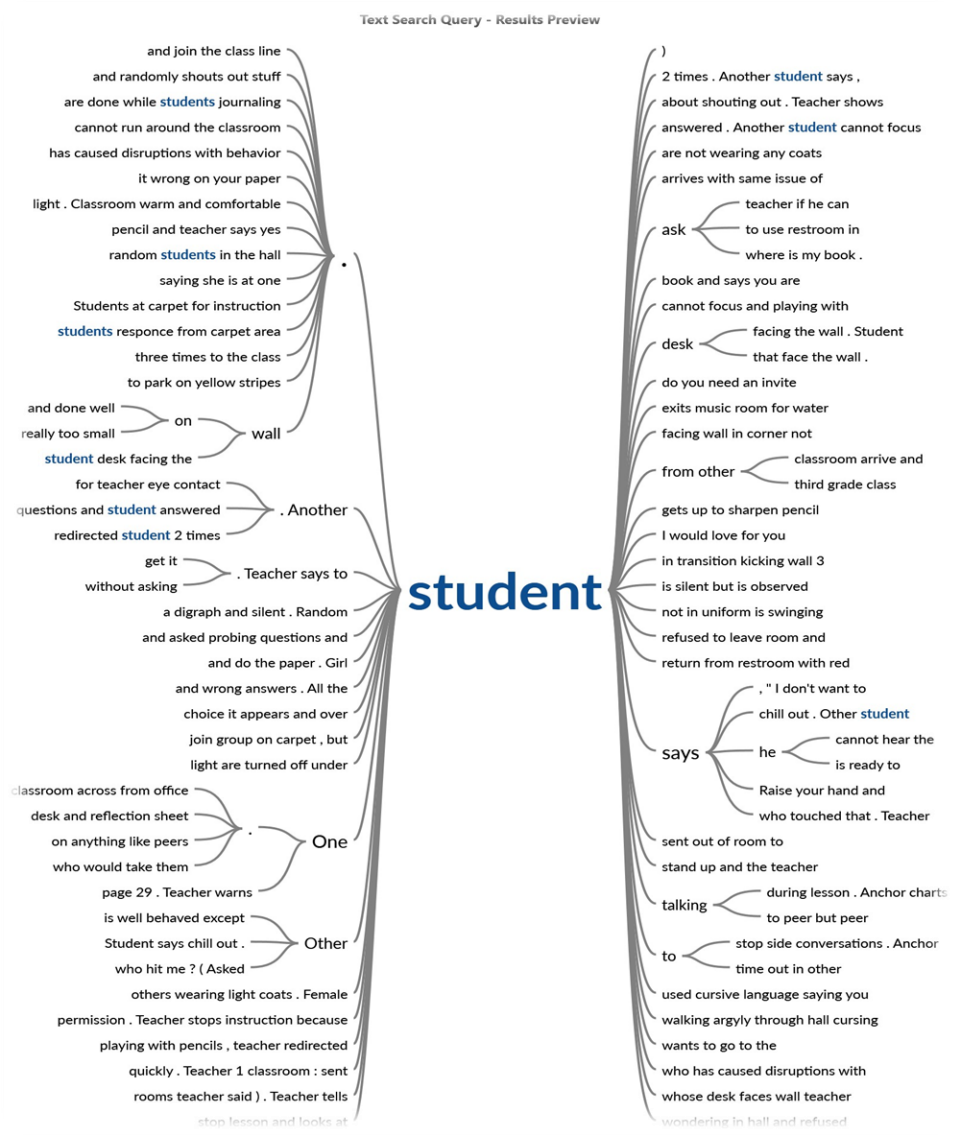
Note. Data collected by researcher.

Looking at the second research question about how many third-grade classrooms experience transitions that interferes with student learning? Transitions are defined as: Group 1: Curriculum/lesson stoppage or changes, teacher engagement, district/school policies (Drills, restroom breaks, lunch, parties, recess, field trips, and cell phone), and classroom schedule. Group 2: Classroom design, environmental (lead contamination), food insecurity or poverty, and COVID-19 pandemic aftermath, and family dynamics (Single parent, multiple households/caregivers, divorce, or neglect). Group 3: Discipline, elopement, attendance, and mental health support.” I believe that much of group one, two, and three are occurring from the observations at the Sunflower and witnessing students struggling with elopement, lesson stoppage, false fire drills, restroom breaks, lunch (Entire class waited in line outside room for one student who refused to exit class until he lined up so the whole class could go to lunch), discipline, attendance, and mental or cognitive issues. Also, I observed an unscheduled fire drill, which students in another grade level pulled the fire alarm and disrupted over 50 minutes of instructional time for the entire school. The two students involved were captured on video surveillance cameras and given a five day In-School-Suspension (ISS) consequence with a call home to parents by the office staff.

Parents surveyed also indicated disruptions in group one as teacher engagement, fire alarms, cell phones, and district/school policies; group two disruptions include single parent and food insecurity/poverty, and group three disruptions included fighting, talking over the teacher, bullying, name-calling, refusal to stop talking, disrupt teacher’s lesson, disrespect, and students arguing with the teacher in Figure 11, 12, and 13 helped me map out notes from observations and third grade referrals that revealed something hidden in daily instruction that all of the disruptions

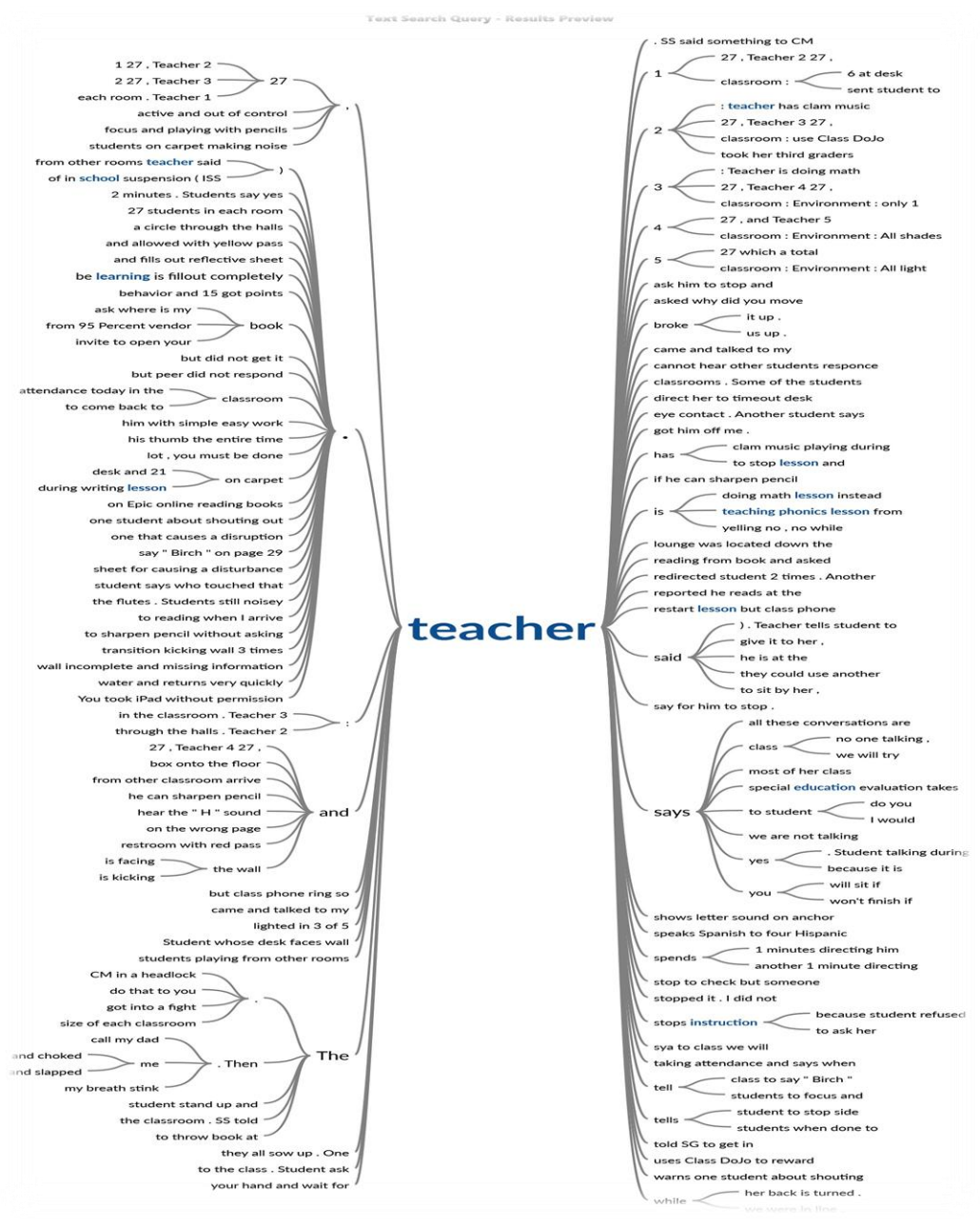


Figure 12  
Student Word Map



Note. Data collected by researcher.

Figure 13  
Teacher Word Map



Note. Data collected by researcher.

Then, I looked at research question three, “Do students and parents contribute and transform their personal learning process to improve student reading skills to one day read on grade level before entering middle school and close the opportunity gap?” In Table 1, I found parents did not spend the time in the home to contribute to transform the students learning process because the majority of those who returned the survey reported students only spent 10 minutes of reading activity per night in the survey. Neuropsychology and Education Services for Children and Adolescents (NESCA) (2021) says children who read 20-minutes per day, i.e., five days a week are exposed to 1.8 million words in one school year. NESCA also compared what if this one student only read five minutes per day would equal 282,000 words per school year they were exposed to, but parents reported 10 minutes or less, so it would equal about 564,000 words in Table 1. Still missing about 31 percent of the words NESCA recommends in this research.

Table 1

*Total Words Per School Year Potential*

| Minutes | Total Words Per School Year |
|---------|-----------------------------|
| 5       | 282,000                     |
| 10      | 564,000                     |
| 15      | 846,000                     |
| 20      | 1,800,000                   |

Note. Chart designed by researcher to reflect words per minute students can acquire from reading at least 20 minutes per night, five days a week recommended by NESCA. Majority of parents surveyed reported students only read 10 minutes per night.

Also, in Table 2, the amount of time spent at home reading indicated low usage of materials and time spent reading to improve overall academics. When surveyed, again, the third-grade parents indicated students spent only ten minutes reading at home, with only one parent indicating their child read thirty minutes or more at home daily. Time reading at home may contribute to the student's low reading readiness on district or state tests found in Table 1. As I looked for why parents are not making students read more at home, it could be the reality of parents leaving it up to their child to read or complete homework while the parent rest from a long work day or working while the student is home. Couvson (2016) explains in the book *Pushout* what parents can do at home to support their child in school (p. 210). By building a relationship beforehand with the teachers, parents can text or use technology like Class Dojo to communicate with each classroom teacher before parent-teacher conferences on how their child is progressing to guide students at home on maintaining a focus on education, which can increase daily academics at home. Many students indicated they are busy playing video games or on social media at home instead of focusing on reading.

Also, Table 2 sampling shows the mean score of 2.60 on the amount of time the student reads daily at-home questions for parents with a third-grade student. This table also shows the standard deviation of 0.92 (High probability that the data is correct); calculations were computed with the Qualtrics software. The line chart is sorted by the total minutes spent reading at home, as reported by parents. The standard deviation measures how dispersed the data is in relation to the mean. The line chart in Table 2 shows a relationship between readers reading from zero to thirty minutes. A low or slight standard deviation indicates data are clustered tightly around the mean, and a high or significant standard deviation indicates data are more spread out. The data for reading at home reveals data is clustered tightly around the ten-minute value. However, one

parent's data shows a student spent thirty minutes of daily reading, which could be rare for this group of readers. Also, this one thirty-minute reader may be the missing data in Table 2, which Sunflower does not share in their DESE report. When the number of proficient and advanced readers is very low, the school can request it be excluded I discovered by asking my own district office for testing and assessments about the missing data. I believe the numbers were omitted because it revealed a small percentage exists that might embarrass the school or district.

Table 2

*Parent Survey on How Much Time Does Your Child Read at Home*

Q1 - How much time does your child spend reading daily at home?

| Field  | Min  | Max  | Mean | Standard Deviation | Variance | Responses | Sum   |
|--|------|------|------|--------------------|----------|-----------|-------|
| How much time does your child spend reading daily at home? | 2.00 | 5.00 | 2.60 | 0.92               | 0.84     | 10        | 26.00 |

Q1 - How much time does your child spend reading daily at home?



Note. Data collected by researcher.

## Limitations

The research design will be like Creswell & Poth (2018) and Cohen et al., (2018) take on qualitative research method in the grounded theory approach. The grounded theory approach uses systematized methods of theoretical sampling, coding, and categorization, constant comparison, memoing (Is the practice of writing reflective notes and observations about the data as it is being collected and analyzed), the identification of a core variable, and saturation (Meaning when all possible data is captured and coding produce no new insights or categories) to guide the researcher to a theory (Cohen et al., 2018). Cohen (2018) also suggest grounded theory starts with data which is then analyzed and reviewed to allow the researcher to generate their hypothesis. So, I observed and reviewed as much data in the research setting as possible to come up with a working theory on the issue. The methods of data collection and analysis include investigating the phenomena of why students, after reaching third grade are still unable to read on grade level by observations of the classroom environment and transitions of the school day. Also, I surveyed teachers, parents, and students. Even with the introduction of classroom instruction/curriculum, phonics, and the Science of Reading since kindergarten; students still seem to struggle, and some results show below-grade-level reading scores by third grade. Also, there are interruptions like behavior contributing to the event. Looking at this year's third grade class and conducting research of the phenomenon excluding those on grade level or in the process of receiving or already in special educational services I hope to shed new light on the subject. Classroom management, student behavior, engagement, and transitions (Any interruptions to the normal school day) were observed. Two days a week were spent at the school (One day in the morning and the other day in the afternoon) to capture realistic interactions of the school day. This research plan split the time observing five third-grade classes in the school.

Thus, Cohen et al. (2018) said qualitative research can tell us the how and why - the processes involved in understanding and explaining how things occur, I hope to showcase in the findings and results to explain the research questions (p. 304).

Sunflower Elementary School did not reveal their actual STAR Reading scores during observations, but it was accessed via the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) MAP reading scores from spring 2024, which revealed the majority of third to fifth grade students scored below basic and basic with none scoring proficient or advance. Table 3 shows 49.4 percent are reading below basic in third to fifth grade, meaning students are struggling or cannot read on grade level and 39.2 percent are basic in third to fifth grade, meaning students can barely read on or above grade level. When compared to the state of Missouri showed overall 18.6 percent of students third to fifth grade are reading below basic, Sunflower numbers are disturbingly higher for below basic readers and may need additional research in the future to determine next steps for improvement. However, the readers at the basic level were closer to the state average and exceeded it slightly, but this may just mean they too can barely read on or above grade level with other students in the state. However, none of Sunflower students in third to fifth grade could read proficient or advance when compared with the rest of the state showed zero as their scores.

Table 3  
*DESE MAP Reading Scores 3rd-5th Grade 2024*

| Item       | Below Basic | Basic | Proficient | Advanced |
|------------|-------------|-------|------------|----------|
| Sunflower  | 49.4%       | 39.2% | 0          | 0        |
| Missouri   | 18.6%       | 38.1% | 27.1%      | 15.9%    |
| Difference | 30.8%       | 1.1%  | 27.1%      | 15.9%    |

Note. Table 3 shows 49.4 percent are reading below basic in third to fifth grade, meaning students are struggling or cannot read on grade level and 39.2 percent are basic in third to fifth grade, meaning students are barely reading on or above other students statewide.

<https://apps.dese.mo.gov/MCDS/Visualizations.aspx?id=45>.

### Researcher Biases

The research design will be like Creswell & Poth (2018) and Cohen et al., (2018) take on qualitative research method in the grounded theory approach. The grounded theory approach uses systematized methods of theoretical sampling, coding, and categorization, constant comparison, memoing (Is the practice of writing reflective notes and observations about the data as it is being collected and analyzed), the identification of a core variable, and saturation (Meaning when all possible data is captured and coding produce no new insights or categories) to guide the researcher to a theory (Cohen et al., 2018). Cohen (2018) also suggest grounded theory starts with data which is then analyzed and reviewed to allow the researcher to generate their hypothesis. So, I observed and reviewed as much data in the research setting as possible to

come up with a working theory on the issue. My methods of data collection and analysis include investigating the phenomena of why students, after reaching the third grade are still unable to read on grade level by observations of the classroom environment and transitions of the school day. Also, I surveyed teachers, parents, and students. Plus, I surveyed third grade students and write their responses on paper which will be destroyed after the data is saved electronically. Even with the introduction of classroom instruction/curriculum, phonics, and the Science of Reading since kindergarten; students still seem to struggle, and some results show below-grade-level reading scores by third grade. Also, are there any interruptions like behavior contributing to the event. This researcher's hope is to look at this year's third grade class and conduct research of the phenomenon excluding those on grade level or in the process of receiving or already in special educational services. The researcher will observe classroom management, student behavior, teacher/student engagement, and transitions (Any interruptions to the normal school day). The observer will spend two days a week at the school (One day in the morning and the other day in the afternoon) to capture realistic interactions of the school day. The researcher will split the time observing five third-grade classes in the school.

There was resistance toward this researcher conducting research that captures lesson interruptions on students' regular school day because teachers appeared nervous during observations. A few of the teachers this researcher talked with politely refused to fill out the paper surveys or talk with me about their students who struggle with literacy and daily behaviors that were being exhibited. Yet, some teachers felt more comfortable filling out the anonymous online survey instead, and I got at least three replies out of the five third-grade teachers at that grade level. During the first days in the building, I brought Dunkin Donuts and set them up in the teacher's lounge, and the donuts were gone within a few hours of my arrival. Also, I added a QR

code and a short introduction about the research in case other teachers wanted to participate. However, this researcher still only got three responses out of the five third-grade teachers who may have been encouraged not to spill the tea, i.e., tell all. When observing each class for a 10 to 15-minute micro-burst and just recorded disturbances and any stoppages to reading and phonics lessons, that was eye-opening to what the teachers did not want me to see. So far, considerable minutes were spent redirecting and dealing with student behavior. If this happens daily, it will mean there is truth in my research questions. Then, on one observation, a student pulled the fire alarm; I could see the teacher's expression of dread and the principal's secrecy in trying to quietly catch who did it before I caught on to what had happened. Looking back over this data reminds me of the long staring look I got from one teacher when she heard I was there to observe the classes for reading instruction and disruptions on daily learning. It was not an image of joy, but "Oh no," someone will see what is really happening at Sunflower Elementary and document it. This fear of seeing the data folks collect can shed light on how administrators can help solve or prevent issues and increase academic success for all students. For example, when I was a teacher, the principal observed that there were not enough math anchor charts for explaining simple steps to solve a subtraction math problem when borrowing from another number was involved, so that evening I created a few to hang on the wall of the classroom. This anchor chart eliminated stoppage to explain a simple function students could access on their own while building agency in their educational expectations.

I always wanted to celebrate parents' achievements like other prominent educators whose parents were educated themselves. However, my dad and mom did not have a high school diploma or college degree. They had a seventh and ninth-grade education, respectively, coming out of the Jim Crow South in Alabama. They both became New York public school custodians

who brought home discarded books my siblings and I would read every night, much longer than the students in this research. Through grit and determination, my parents, from humble beginnings, rose to own their own home and ensure all their children graduated high school and I sought a college education in an urban city. To pay tribute to them, I must situate their story within the broader context of the historical barriers Black people in the South have faced and endured while surviving. However, they had the inner courage to leave family and friends in the South for generational change. My newly arrived parents at an urban city school held teachers in esteem and championed teaching reading at home first so my siblings and I could learn the "big stuff" at school, as my dad would put it. For example, I learned how to program computers in high school, which has benefited my military and teaching career. Currently, many urban parents drop off their children without many basic reading skills needed to advance smoothly but instead expect teachers to do the whole job of teaching students to read the words in books and the big stuff. "Reading to children, even before they can understand words, teaches them to associate books with love and affection (Unknown)." Students in transition have setbacks from the disruptions in the daily life of school and, unfortunately, are sometimes still learning to read in middle and high school.

Living in St. Louis as an educational researcher and teacher, I have seen how an external force like crime impacts students in the classroom. Watching Ferguson burn after the death of Mike Brown on August 9, 2014, and the riots and protest of Black Lives Matter even reached the schoolhouse. Culture changed and I witnessed a former district stopped requiring Black students to participate in the pledge of allegiance to the American flag, allow the wearing of uniform pants with t-shirts labeled Black Lives Matter. Then, living through the COVID-19 Pandemic era, its shutdown of the public school system, and the district's move to virtual learning and

calling students to class reminded me of the old one-room schoolhouse bell that would ring, telling students school is beginning. When I called students to an online class however, some would not join or would join and disappear because parents did not monitor their activity. Then, student behavior increased even for the best student in online class to disrupt lessons for attention. Some students learned how to hack the online system and shut the teachers out of the online class network. Some of the behaviors students responded to may have been a result of having lost a parent to crime, reincarceration, death of a sibling to gun violence, or witnessing a violent crime. The student's adolescent brain is unable to rationalize the trauma, and there is no sort of ongoing therapy in place at home or limited counseling in school to help students rise above the trauma to be resilient.

### **Impact in the Field on Transformative Education**

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Also, I surveyed teachers, parents, and students. Even with the introduction of classroom instruction/curriculum, phonics, and the Science of Reading since kindergarten; students still seem to struggle, and some results show below-grade-level reading scores by third grade. Also, there are interruptions like behavior contributing to the event. Looking at this year's third grade class and conducting research of the phenomenon excluding those on grade level or in the process of receiving or already in special educational services I hope to shed new light on the subject. Classroom management, student behavior, engagement, and transitions (Any interruptions to the normal school day) were observed. Two days a week were spent at the school (One day in the morning and the other day in the afternoon) to capture realistic interactions of the school day. This research plan split the time observing five third-grade classes in the school. Thus, Cohen et al. (2018) said qualitative research can tell us the how and why - the processes involved in understanding and explaining how things occur, I hope to showcase in my findings and results to explain my research questions (p. 304).

This research is transformative because it will show that reteaching primary phonics well into the third grade might be a resisted solution. Students with transition issues may have caused interruptions in the learning environment. Students with transition or socialization issues may have higher referrals for behavioral problems. Why did students experience learning loss during the pandemic in kindergarten and forward? Students may have started kindergarten with no prior preschool foundations. Student engagement may have been affected by interruptions in the learning environment. Were students engaged in learning during virtual education and now? Hopefully this contributes to new ideas of what barriers exist to why children in grades kindergarten through third grade are not reading at grade level.

School systems need instructional leadership teams (ILT) aimed at school improvement or a team for a specified initiative like reading on grade level to allow students to catch up. Effective teams can significantly impact student learning and behavior, especially when the team taps into the expertise and diverse perspectives within the school community. The ILT will lead the professional learning community (PLCs) and teacher teams in: Analyzing school data, learning about powerful instructional practices via professional development (PD), challenging all community members in examining beliefs regarding the abilities of all students, identifying, and eliminating barriers to improvement, and facilitating two-way communication between the ILT and other school community members (SLPS, 2024).

Learning must be engaging and, when possible, fun for all students. Teachers must teach reading, but it needs to be engaging, and if students say it is not, someone needs to listen to them and find another fun and engaging curriculum. For example, when I was a teacher, I used games like Scrabble, Sight Word Bingo, and Wordle to build vocabulary with fun and engaging activities to speed up learning. So, students will be transformative learners who participate in solving the problem related to themselves and peers.

### **Benefit to the Research Community and Marginalized Populations**

The research design will be like Creswell & Poth (2018) and Cohen et al., (2018) take on qualitative research method in the grounded theory approach. The grounded theory approach uses systematized methods of theoretical sampling, coding, and categorization, constant comparison, memoing (Is the practice of writing reflective notes and observations about the data as it is being collected and analyzed), the identification of a core variable, and saturation (Meaning when all possible data is captured and coding produce no new insights or categories) to guide the researcher to a theory (Cohen et al., 2018). Cohen (2018) also suggest grounded theory starts with data which is then analyzed and reviewed to allow the researcher to generate their hypothesis. So, I observed and reviewed as much data in the research setting as possible to come up with a working theory on the issue. The methods of data collection and analysis include investigating the phenomena of why students, after reaching third grade are still unable to read on grade level by observations of the classroom environment and transitions of the school day. Also, I surveyed teachers, parents, and students. Even with the introduction of classroom instruction/curriculum, phonics, and the Science of Reading since kindergarten; students still seem to struggle, and some results show below-grade-level reading scores by third grade. Also, there are interruptions like behavior contributing to the event. Looking at this year's third grade class and conducting research of the phenomenon excluding those on grade level or in the process of receiving or already in special educational services I hope to shed new light on the subject. Classroom management, student behavior, engagement, and transitions (Any interruptions to the normal school day) were observed. Two days a week were spent at the school (One day in the morning and the other day in the afternoon) to capture realistic interactions of the school day. This research plan split the time observing five third-grade classes in the school.

Thus, Cohen et al. (2018) said qualitative research can tell us the how and why - the processes involved in understanding and explaining how things occur, I hope to showcase in my findings and results to explain my research questions (p. 304). In another study by Hamre & Pianta (2005), kindergarteners identified as at-risk for school failure were found to have higher achievement scores in first grade, comparable to those of at-risk students, when placed in classrooms that offered more robust instructional and emotional support. Hall (2019) said that in those classrooms, teachers were aware of and responsive to students' needs, provided practical and proactive behavior management, and created a positive classroom climate (p. 23). More specifically, within urban school settings, it has been found that lack of adequate educational resources and higher student behavioral issues impact the teacher attrition rates greatly (Camacho et al., 2018). Teacher burn-out when working with difficult students and parents has resulted in teachers transitioning to other careers. Nine teachers I have worked with in the past three years have either left the field or transitioned to a suburban or rural school setting with predominantly White students with less behavioral issues.

So, some insights gained as a past teacher and administrator should provide success in the three research questions centered around improving reading intervention, fixing transitions, and student/parent interactions to get students to reading on grade level can work if teachers regularly keep in contact with families outside the classroom. If teachers only reach out to parents when students are in trouble, crisis, or time to do what they are obligated to do, i.e., parent teacher conferences or open house, parents can feel it, and they will be more resistant and less likely to participate in the school community, everyone must feel they belong. Teachers must speak on the family's level, without speaking over parents or intimidating. Allow and encourage parents to invite family members or someone they feel comfortable helping to make decisions for their

child to the parent-and-teacher conference. Holcombe (2021) said the most impactful aspects of working conditions can be controlled regardless of funding because they are tied to human behaviors (p. 176). In simpler terms, treat people how you would want to be treated and informed of school events or issues. Teachers can create a biweekly/monthly informative newsletter to send home with the students regularly. This newsletter can contain essential school dates, volunteer opportunities and club activities that students can join, and community resources parents need to know about. Schools can ask parents what they like/dislike in parent engagement meetings, how they feel about the entire school, including teachers, and what information they would like to learn more about. With this information, leaders can create opportunities for families to participate in the school day.

Reeves (2022) said instructional pathways intended to result in optimal student achievement are as vast and unique as the students themselves, but good intent alone falls well short of what is needed to ensure successful student outcomes (p. 11). Effective educators work to reach each child and help spur growth, but knowing how to meet this challenge for each student and their specific instructional needs can be puzzling for many education professionals (Reeves, 2022, p. 11). Years ago, the Parent-as-Teachers (PAT) program started in St. Louis, Missouri, around 1981, to go into homes and teach parents how to be good parents and curve behaviors before children entered school (Best & Poor, 1994).

The new website reported PAT (2024) builds strong communities, thriving families, and children that are healthy, safe, learning, and ready for school by matching parents and caregivers with trained professionals who make regular personal home visits during a child's earliest years in life, from pregnancy through kindergarten. As ESSER funding comes to an end for family engagement in many districts, PAT might be a vibrant alternative to partner with for decreasing

school behaviors in ground zero like the family home. Now, a nonprofit with international offices recently received \$7 million in unrestricted funds from philanthropist MacKenzie Scott, and a priority of Scott's giving is to fund organizations that directly support communities (PAT, 2024).

One of my guiding inquiries was how this study can benefit the research community and the marginalized population. Just being present to make changes to the system, like the practitioner's proposed site, will help create solutions to issues like students not reading on grade level. Also, it would be helpful for general education classroom teachers to take introductory courses in applied behavior analysis (ABA) techniques to better understand and broaden teacher knowledge and awareness of how to approach and respond to student behavior. Unfortunately, this exceptional training may not have been part of the general education teacher's background the study wants to observe. Providing veteran teacher mentors, research-based classroom management strategies, and ABA training early in the school year in professional development (PD) might help staff like new teachers from overreacting to a student's behavior. The connections to this research topic may lead others to even study the racial or gender equity gap of teachers who may be penalized inadvertently due to random students placed in classrooms with traumatic experiences in their home life, socioeconomic, poverty, and mental issues in the home that manifests in the classroom environment during the school day.

According to research conducted by the University of North Carolina, "Many of the studies using Epstein's 2009 model do not take into account differences in race and ethnicity; rather, they provide a general approach to parental involvement, regardless of race, class, or sociocultural factors" (Bower & Griffin, 2011, p. 79). Further, Bower & Griffin (2011) stated:

Parental involvement strategies are largely based on school cultures formed from middle-class, European American cultural norms; therefore, schools need to consider differences

in cultural norms by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status to use parent involvement effectively as a strategy for student success. (p. 79)

Chen (2022) stated the nationwide policy of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) was an attempt to address parental engagement because one of the purposes was to encourage parents of disadvantaged or underachieving students to get involved in their children's education. This goal is accomplished by requiring the education system to reach out to parents by communicating effectively with parents and by providing opportunities for parents to learn how to assist their children (Chen, 2022, para. 24). Since the COVID-19 Pandemic, the proposed research site has only recently held its first in-person parent engagement night. The school sent home over 300 flyers in backpacks and emailed all parents with a working email in the school database inviting parents out to the school for dinner with childcare provided. In all, there were 23 Black families and around 40 kids that showed up; 20 of the parents were single mothers, so the school may need to do something different to reach the 87% of Black families at the school who did not attend. None of school's Hispanic families were in attendance, so the invite flyer needs to be in Spanish in the future. Alexander et al. (2014) said younger single female parents of disadvantaged urban youth face obstacles greater than what we may know, and parenting skills are radically different. Alexander et al. (2014) notes the following for instance:

Becoming a parent before marrying can be problematic or not, depending on a host of considerations. On the surface, the situation of the jobless teen mother who drops out to care for her asthmatic daughter with no support from the baby's father and no parents or extended kin to help looks the same as the situation of the thirty-year-old never married mother with a close-knit family and on leave from a good job. By the standard of yesterday's expectations, the family transitions of both would be considered disorderly,

but the conditions of their parenting in fact are radically different. To see that difference requires a broader view that encompasses strands of development in other domains, and one suspects the road ahead will be bumpier for the younger unmarried mother (p. 89).

So, how do schools meet the needs of Black single parent families in urban households while becoming a transformative school? New City School may have the answer to addressing transitions, their four pillars of its mission called for; 1. Academic excellence, 2. Joyful learning, 3. Diversity beyond the numbers, and 4. Personal intelligences. New City's School video explains it works to prepare students to succeed in life, not just in school, and that's not easy to capture (Wright, 2024, 0:45). Wright (2024) said the school does not want students to be bystanders, but actively engaged in solving problems, leading for change, being part of the solution to problems big and small, how to recognize when someone needs help and how to help them (0:38). Wright (2024) also said the school's mission to empower students to lead for a just and equitable society as well (0:33). Though this school is located on the central west end of St. Louis and considered a private learning institution, it fosters Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences and acceptance that public education can learn from to close the learning gap. Its students, yet in an urban city are majority White families with some students of color whose parents can afford the tuition will benefit from the school's culture of rigor.

To become transformative a school must embrace thinking out of the box, such as when I came across an email from Time Magazine's offering for kids to get in person print and digital reading resources that included teacher guides for each classroom, lesson plans and resources to combat knowledge equity, i.e., information about a variety of topics to increase skills in reading, social studies, math, and science (Time for Kids, 2024). A one-year subscription would cost about \$1,766 for a school delivering articles at three reading levels for students. For example, my

school used its final pandemic funding to purchase take home reading packs for kindergarten through fifth-grade leveled reading books for the 2024 to 2025 school year for home use in hopes to have parents engaged and supporting student learning in countering the LLG.

New research by Terada & Merrill (2023) who also noted a study called the Science of Classroom Design made sense using the qualitative and a multi-level method to observe what the researchers discovered. A team of researchers in England conducted research looking at the layout of the classroom, i.e., size of room, lighting, wall decorations, seating, temperature, air, and sound quality. For example, when three coal-fired power plants closed in Chicago, Illinois researchers found three typical elementary schools in their sample,” researchers studying the shutdowns reported, there was a 7 percent reduction in student absences, translating “into around 372 fewer absence-days per year (Terada & Merrill, 2023). The study noted that schools downwind of the coal-fired plant and perhaps neighborhoods I would hypothesize saw some impact in student health, allowing more to come to school. Barrett et al. (2015) who started the first study with 3,766 students saw a 16% academic progress achieved (p. 118). The researchers noted light, temperature, air quality, ownership, flexibility, complexity, and color play a role in achieving academic success (Barrett et al., 2015, p. 118). So, using creative design in remodeling old school buildings and new facilities considering this research could mean creating successful outcomes for students behind the seams with careful design techniques to aid learning. The researchers also found high levels of carbon dioxide, i.e., a by-product of human breathing in the rooms could be remedied by opening a classroom window or door to increase fresh air flow can help with higher-order thinking (Allen et al., 2016, pp. 810-811; Terada & Merrill, 2023).

The Masai tribe in Africa has a traditional greeting: "Casserian Engeri," which means "And how are the children? (Sutherland & Shultz, 2014)." The Masai, renowned for being fierce

warriors, measure the strength of their society in terms of the safety and well-being of its youngest and most vulnerable members (Sutherland & Shultz, 2014). The traditional response is said to be, "All the children are well." Oddly, the members ask about the children who will replace the parent rather than ask about the health of the parent. The Masai believe that monitoring the status of the children might be the best way to ensure the health of the entire tribe and if the parent has the best interest being the child. Transformational education must start asking parents to partner with schools that put students at the center of the educational community because they will one day be the next generation of literate or illiterate adults in society.

### **Conclusion**

The research design will be like Creswell & Poth (2018) and Cohen et al., (2018) take on qualitative research method in the grounded theory approach. The grounded theory approach uses systematized methods of theoretical sampling, coding, and categorization, constant comparison, memoing (Is the practice of writing reflective notes and observations about the data as it is being collected and analyzed), the identification of a core variable, and saturation (Meaning when all possible data is captured and coding produce no new insights or categories) to guide the researcher to a theory (Cohen et al., 2018). Cohen (2018) also suggest grounded theory starts with data which is then analyzed and reviewed to allow the researcher to generate their hypothesis. So, I observed and reviewed as much data in the research setting as possible to come up with a working theory on the issue. The methods of data collection and analysis include investigating the phenomena of why students, after reaching third grade are still unable to read on grade level by observations of the classroom environment and transitions of the school day. Also, I surveyed teachers, parents, and students. Even with the introduction of classroom

instruction/curriculum, phonics, and the Science of Reading since kindergarten; students still seem to struggle, and some results show below-grade-level reading scores by third grade. Also, there are interruptions like behavior contributing to the event. Looking at this year's third grade class and conducting research of the phenomenon excluding those on grade level or in the process of receiving or already in special educational services I hope to shed new light on the subject. Classroom management, student behavior, engagement, and transitions (Any interruptions to the normal school day) were observed. Two days a week were spent at the school (One day in the morning and the other day in the afternoon) to capture realistic interactions of the school day. This research plan split the time observing five third-grade classes in the school. Thus, Cohen et al. (2018) said qualitative research can tell us the how and why - the processes involved in understanding and explaining how things occur, I hope to showcase in my findings and results to explain my research questions (p. 304).

The data collection and analysis of literacy interventions like phonics can show success in later grades was dependent on students' learning outcomes in earlier grades, but many students, in Sunflower Elementary, come out of third grade still needing basic reading skills. No one could read proficiently or advanced in third grade in my research subjects. As I heard students read and get interrupted by other students, it reminded me that this could be the issue due to teachers being distracted by student behaviors or other distractions; teachers do not seem to have time for students who do the right thing by showing up to learn all they can. Parents and guardians are trying their best at home, but still, there is a LLG, which I see overall since 49.4 percent of the third through fifth-grade students read below basic and only 39.2 percent could read on or slightly above the basic level (None were proficient or advanced) on the MAP. That's where some Transformative Learning needs to happen. For example, a hospital's Intensive Care

Unit (ICU) delivers life-changing care; we need something like a school literacy lab to reteach all the phonemic awareness skills lost on daily disruptions. As Cohen (2018) suggests, grounded theory starts with data, which is then analyzed and reviewed to allow researchers to generate a hypothesis (p. 714). Also, as I reviewed my logic-of-inquiry and looking at Figure 3, we see the decline in phonemic awareness may be caused by others in the classroom. It was hard watching students fail, and I could not do anything at the time to reteach or provide instruction to struggling students, but hopefully, this dissertation will be added to the field of research.

Hopefully, my digitalized representation to summarize the findings graphically and via videos will create ways to disseminate my findings in a meaningful way for the reader audience. Also, please visit <https://sites.google.com/view/joseph-clay-dpp/home> to review my online DDP digital version.

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## Appendix A: Informed Consent for Semi-structured Interview

A Grounded Theorizing of the Learning Opportunities Afforded to Third Graders Who Read  
Below Grade Level

I am conducting research on A Grounded Theorizing of the Learning Opportunities Afforded to Third Graders Who Read Below Grade Level. I am investigating this because reading levels over the Pandemic became stagnant or dropped, and I want to know if any other factors are causing it. If you decide to do this, you will be asked to fill out a survey which should take less than 30 minutes to complete. Participation will not involve any discomfort or risk to anyone.

Specific information about participants will be kept strictly confidential and can be obtained from me if desired by that participant only. The results that are published publicly will not reference any parent, guardian, student, teacher, principal, or school by name but use numbers in analyzing information given by participants gathered from an unidentified school in the U.S.A.

If you take or your child takes part in this project will help me identify if the Science of Reading is being implemented or other transitions (Other items causing the issue) are contributing to the issue. Taking part in this project is entirely up to you, and no one will hold it against you or your child if you decide not to do it. If you do take part, you may stop at any time without penalty. In addition, you may ask to have your data withdrawn from the study after the research has been conducted.

If you want to know more about this research project, please contact me at 618-910-4923 or email address [clayjos@webster.edu](mailto:clayjos@webster.edu) or my college adviser Dr. Lee-Johnson, phone number 314-246-7643. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can contact the Webster University Institutional Review Board at [irb@webster.edu](mailto:irb@webster.edu).

You will get a copy of this consent form.

Sincerely,

*Joseph Clay*

B. Consent Statement(s)

I agree to (take part) take part in this project. I know what I will have to do and that I can stop at any time.

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Signature

---

Date

## Appendix B: Consent Form

Joseph L. Clay

Letter of Informed Consent

October 31, 2024

Study Title: A Grounded Theorizing of the Learning Opportunities Afforded to Third Graders Who Read Below Grade Level

Dear Participant,

I will be researching reading loss that students may be experiencing now or in the coming school year from November to December 20, 2024. I will research:

1. Can reading instruction/curriculum like phonics and the Science of Reading intervention increase scholars reading below grade level reach proficiency?
2. How many third-grade classrooms experience transitions that interferes with student learning? Transitions are defined as:

Group 1: Curriculum/lesson stoppage or changes, teacher engagement, district/school policies (Drills, restroom breaks, lunch, parties, recess, field trips, and cell phone), and classroom schedule.

Group 2: Classroom design, environmental (lead contamination), poverty, and COVID-19 pandemic aftermath, and family dynamics (Single parent, multiple households/caregivers, divorce, or neglect).

Group 3: Discipline, elopement, attendance, and mental health support.

3. How will students and parents contribute and transform their personal learning process to improve student reading skills to one day read on grade level before entering middle school and close the opportunity gap?

This research proposal will benefit students, parents/guardians, and the school district because choosing to study reading and why some are under grade level is life changing. Please review the information on the following page to decide if you would like to consent for your child to participate in my study. It is entirely voluntary, and he/she can withdraw at any time without penalty. This research is considered minimal risk and hopefully shines a light on what schools/districts can do better. Also, this research will be available on social media like the researcher's website with pseudonyms for identifying any participants/location and reducing any likely risk of disclosure.

I look forward to working with you and your student.

Sincerely,

*Joseph L. Clay*

Joseph L. Clay

Researcher

---

Please print & sign your name

## Appendix C: Interview Questions

Teacher/Admin/Staff Survey Code # \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you so much for completing the Admin/Teacher Survey. Our discussion topics and themes, as well as the information gathered through my survey will help to develop meaningful professional development opportunities that can improve student learning of phonemic awareness skills and awareness of any classroom transitions that may disrupt learning. Your personal information will not be connected to any of the results obtained.

## Questions

1. How would you define phonemic awareness?

---

2. Did you learn about phonemic awareness instruction in college or on the job?

---

3. How much time do you spend on literacy instruction daily? What resources and curriculum do you use?

---



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4.

a) What training have you had to teach phonics to your classroom?

b) What specific coursework have you had, or professional development have you had on it?

5. Please describe student behaviors that have disrupted literacy instruction.

6. How do you decide what behavior rises to the need of an office visit for discipline?

7. What strategies do you find the most effective in dealing with student behaviors?

8. Is there anything you would like to share with me that I didn't ask?

-----

9. Circle all elementary positions held.

a) Kindergarten teacher

b) First-grade teacher

c) Second-grade teacher

d) Third-grade teacher

f) Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

10. How many years have you been in your current position?  
a) \_\_\_\_\_
11. Are you a certified elementary school teacher or other staff?  
a) Yes b) No c) Other \_\_\_\_\_ (Also, check other if not certified)
12. What is the highest level of education?  
a) Less than a Bachelors  
b) Bachelors  
c) Masters  
d) EdS / Reading Specialist / ELL (Circle which apply)  
e) Doctorate  
f) Other (explain) \_\_\_\_\_
13. Do you or your school currently use reading interventions in the classroom/school?  
a) Yes  
b) No
14. How do you identify students that need reading intervention in your class/school?  
a) Testing  
b) Observation  
c) Both
15. How well do you feel your or staff elementary certification program prepared you or peers to use phonics reading interventions in the classroom?  
a) Not at all prepared  
b) Somewhat prepared  
c) Moderately prepared  
d) Very prepared  
e) Extremely prepared
16. Are all your students screened for reading deficits?  
a) Yes  
b) No
17. How often does your school screen students for reading issues?  
a) Monthly

- b) Yearly
- c) I do not know

18. How comfortable are you using the reading intervention strategies at your school?

- a) Not at all comfortable
- b) Somewhat comfortable
- c) Moderately comfortable
- d) Very comfortable
- e) Extremely comfortable

Parent Survey

Code # \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you so much for completing the Parent Survey that was sent out earlier. Our discussion topics and themes, as well as the information gathered through this interview will help to develop meaningful professional development opportunities that can improve student learning of phonemic awareness skills. Your personal information will not be connected to any of the results obtained.

### Questions

1. Did your child learn to read before entering school? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

Did your child learn about phonics at home \_\_\_\_\_ or school \_\_\_\_\_?

2. How much time does your child spend reading daily at home? (Circle one)

None          10 min          15 min          20 min          30 minutes or more

3. Do you have children's reading books available in the home? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

4. Did the school provide any reading materials or resources? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

If no, did you purchase them? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

5. Does your child refuse to read at home? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

Does your child refuse to read at school? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

6. Have you ever been informed of any disruptions in your child's classroom? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_.

If yes, please check which group it applies to below & circle which disruption you are aware has happened.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Group 1: Curriculum/lesson stoppage or changes, teacher engagement, district/school policies (Drills, restroom breaks, lunch, parties, recess, field trips, and cell phone), and classroom schedule.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Group 2: Classroom design, environmental (lead contamination), poverty, and COVID-19 pandemic aftermath, and family dynamics (Single parent, multiple households/caregivers, divorce, or neglect).
- \_\_\_\_\_ Group 3: Discipline, elopement, attendance, and mental health support.

7. Have you talked to the school about any of these disruptions? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_. Is there anything you would like to share with me that I did not ask about the school?

## Appendix D: Institutional Review Board Approval



*Office of Academic Affairs*

November 21, 2024

**TO:** Joseph Clay  
**FROM:** Webster University Institutional Review Board  
**RE:** A Grounded Theorizing of the Learning Opportunities Afforded to Third Graders Who Read Below Grade Level  
**STATUS:** Expedited – Conditionally Approved

**NOTES:**

- The IRB Proposal Number for this research project is FA24-24.
- If any changes are made to the study, the IRB must be notified.
- You are also required to promptly notify the IRB Chair of any problems that arise during the course of the research.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vicki Callan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "V".

Vicki Callan, Associate Professor, Nurse Anesthesia  
Chair, Webster University Institutional Review Board, FWA00024297

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## Appendix E: Qualtrics Survey

Q1

The purpose of this study is to explore literacy in school and if any transitions (Like disruptions) are the cause. By completing and submitting the questionnaire, I understand that my free and informed consent is given.

- Yes, I want to participate.
- No, I do not want to participate.

Q2

How would you define phonemic awareness?

- Write in information

Q3

Did you learn about phonemic awareness instruction in college or on the job?

- College Bachelor program
- College Master's program
- On the job

Q4

How much time do you spend on literacy instruction daily?

- None at all
- A little
- A moderate amount
- A lot
- A great deal

Q5

What resources and curriculum do you use?

Write in information

Q6

What additional training have you had to teach phonics in your classroom?

Professional development - By School

Professional Development - By district

Q7

What additional training have you had to teach phonics in your classroom?

Professional development - At School

District wide Professional Development

Q8

What additional training have you had to teach phonics in your classroom?

Professional development - Online

Professional Development - You sought

Q9

What specific coursework have you had, or professional development have you had on it?

Write in information

Q10

Please describe student behaviors that have disrupted literacy instruction (Example, tardy & enter late, elope, or fighting).

Write in information

Q11

How do you decide what behavior rises to the need of an office visit for discipline?

- Write in information

Q12

What strategies do you find the most effective in dealing with student behaviors?

- Write in information

Q13

Is there anything you would like to share with me that I did not ask?

- No
- Yes, write in information

Q14

Which elementary position you perform.

- Third-grade teacher
- Write in position

Q15

How many years have you been in your current position?

- Write in number of years

Q16

Are you a certified elementary school teacher or other staff?

- Yes
- No
- Working on certification (Describe how, i.e, in college etc.)

Q17

What is the highest level of education?

- Associate degree
- Bachelor
- Masters
- EdS
- Doctorate

Q18

Do you or your school currently use reading interventions in the classroom/school?

- Yes
- No

Q19

How do you identify students that need reading intervention in your class/school?

- Testing
- Observation
- Both

Q20

How well do you feel you or staff elementary certification program prepared you or peers to use phonics reading interventions in the classroom?

- Not well at all
- Slightly well
- Moderately well
- Very well
- Extremely well

Q21

Are all your students screened for reading deficits?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Q22

How often does your school screen students for reading issues?

- At the beginning of the school year
- Quarterly
- I do not know

Q23

How comfortable are you using the reading intervention strategies at your school?

- Extremely uncomfortable
- Somewhat uncomfortable
- Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
- Somewhat comfortable
- Extremely comfortable

## Parent Survey

Q1a

The purpose of this study is to explore literacy in school and if any transitions (Like disruptions) are the cause. By completing and submitting the questionnaire, I understand that my free and informed consent is given and permission for my child to complete a surveyed in school.

- Yes, I consent and would like to participate with my child. Add child first name (will be given code for privacy).
- No, I do not want to participate or my child.
- I do not want to participate, but my child can to see if reading is an issue. Add child first name (will be given code for privacy).

Q1

Did your child learn to read before entering school?

- Definitely not
- Probably not
- Might or might not
- Probably yes
- Definitely yes

Q2

Did your child learn about phonics at home or school?

- Home
- School

Q3

Do you have children's reading books available in the home?

- Yes
- No

Q4

Did the school provide any reading materials or resources?

- Yes
- No

Q5

Does your child refuse to read at home?

- Yes
- No

Q6

Does your child refuse to read at school?

- Definitely not
- Probably not
- Might or might not
- Probably yes
- Definitely yes

Q7

Have you ever been informed of any disruptions in your child's classroom?

- Definitely not
- Probably not
- Might or might not
- Probably yes
- Definitely yes

Q8

If yes, please check which group it applies to below which disruption you are aware has happened. Write which may apply.

- Group 1: Curriculum/lesson stoppage or changes, teacher engagement, district/school policies (Drills, restroom breaks, lunch, parties, recess, field trips, and cell phone), and classroom schedule.
- Group 2: Classroom design, environmental (lead contamination), food insecurity, and COVID-19 pandemic aftermath, and family dynamics (Single parent, multiple households/caregivers, divorce, or neglect).
- Group 3: Discipline, elopement, attendance, and mental health support issues.

Q9

Have you talked to the school about any of these disruptions?

- Definitely not
- Probably not
- Might or might not
- Probably yes
- Definitely yes

Q10

Is there anything you would like to share with me that I did not ask about the school?