BEST PRACTICES FOR ELEMENTARY AT-RISK
READING INSTRUCTION IN GRADES 4 AND 5

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the Education Department
Carson-Newman University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the
Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education
By
Sarah F. Cates

May 2016
Dissertation Approval

Student Name/ CNU ID: Sarah F. Cates/ 0254019

Dissertation Title:
Best Practices for Elementary At-Risk Reading Instruction in Grades 4 and 5

This dissertation has been approved and accepted by the faculty of the Education Department, Carson-Newman University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education.

Dissertation Committee:

Signatures: (Print and Sign)

Brenda Dean
Dissertation Chair

Earnest Walker
Methodologist Member

Sharon Teets
Content Member

Approved by the Dissertation Committee
Date: March 30, 2016
PERMISSION STATEMENT

Title of dissertation: Best Practices for Elementary At-Risk Reading Instruction in grades 4 and 5

Name of Author: Sarah F. Cates Degree: Ed.D College: Carson-Newman University

I hereby grant Carson-Newman University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive and make accessible my dissertation in whole or part in all forms of media in perpetuity. I retain all other ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Print Reproduction Permission Granted

I, Sarah F. Cates, hereby grant permission to Carson-Newman University to reproduce my print thesis or dissertation in whole or in part. Any reproduction will not be for commercial use or profit.

Signature of Author: 
Date: 3.30.16

Print Reproduction Permission Denied

I, __________________________, hereby deny permission to Carson-Newman University to reproduce my print thesis or dissertation in whole or in part.

Signature of Author: __________________________ Date: __________________________

Inclusion in the CNU Archives

I, Sarah F. Cates, additionally grant to the Carson-Newman University Archives the non-exclusive license to archive and provide electronic access to my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media in perpetuity. I understand that my work, in addition to its bibliographic record and abstract, will be available to the worldwide community of scholars and researchers throughout the CNU Archives. I retain all other ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation, I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

I hereby certify that, if appropriate, I have obtained and attached written permission statements from the owners of each third party copyrighted matter to be included in my dissertation. I certify that the version I submitted is the same as that approved by my committee.

Signature of Author: 
Date: 3.30.16
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this grounded qualitative study was to examine teacher perspectives with regard to best practices for elementary at-risk reading instruction in grades 4 and 5. The data were gathered from 15 fourth and fifth grade teachers in a small rural school district in east Tennessee. The data in this grounded qualitative study were collected through semi-structured interviews. The findings of this study included developing a list of implemented best practices for at-risk reading students including writing embedded instruction, small group/center instruction, mini lessons focused on skill development as opposed to standard focused, an emphasis on vocabulary development, building on foundational reading skills, cooperative learning, and teacher modeling. In addition to the best practices discussed in this study, detrimental instructional practices were also examined by the researcher. The two detrimental instructional practices examined were utilization of grade level text without appropriate scaffolding and teaching to the whole group, also known as a one size fits all instructional approach.
Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank God. I have been blessed beyond measure and I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the One who gave it all to me.

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my committee chair, Dr. Dean, who has the attitude and the substance of a genius: she continually and convincingly encouraged me to continue on this journey. Without her continued support, this dissertation would not have been possible. She will never know the profound impact she had the day she called me her Jedi. That one statement gave me the determination to make it through this entire process.

I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Teets and Dr. Walker for their support and understanding through this entire adventure. Thank you for your kind words of encouragement.

I would like to thank my editor, Stephanie Dallmann, for dotting my i’s and crossing my t’s.

I would like to thank my dad, James Flanigan, for his support in my goal of pursuing all of my higher education degrees. Quitting was never an option.

I would also like to thank my sweet baby, Oliver. Thank you for your relaxed and “go with the flow” personality. You have been an awesome lap buddy during my nights of research and writing.

Finally, I would like to thank my amazing husband, Chris, for being the voice of reason when things got tough. He has taken on the role of Mr. Mom, housekeeper, chef, and psychologist the last three years and has done it all without complaint.
Dedication

This study is dedicated to my mom, Phyllis Flanigan, who loved me unconditionally. You always believed in me even when I did not believe in myself. My dream of a doctorate began because of you and your love of literature. Mom, I wish you were here to see the end product. However, I know you have been here every step of the way and are watching and smiling from Heaven.

I would also like to dedicate this study to my biggest cheerleader, my six-year-old daughter, Grace. Your excitement, encouragement, and understanding through this process kept me going and gave me the determination to reach this goal.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COPYRIGHT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCH COMMITTEE</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERMISSION STATEMENT</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES AND IMAGES</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Underpinnings for the Study</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical framework</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual framework</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations, Assumptions, and Design Controls</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Key Terms</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of Reading</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19th Century</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early 20th Century</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-20th Century</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late 20th Century</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21st Century</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Practices</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of Reading</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary Development</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background Knowledge</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At-Risk Readers</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to Intervention</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability Grouping</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Strategy Instruction</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Learners (ELL)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Language</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Practices for ELL students</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL and At-Risk Students</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Research</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of Qualitative Research</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons researchers choose Qualitative Research</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded Theory</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY .................................................................38
Introduction ..................................................................................38
Research Questions .......................................................................38
Qualitative Research ....................................................................38
Research Approach .......................................................................40
Research Participants and Setting for the Study .........................40
Data Collection procedures ..........................................................43
Ethical Considerations ..................................................................44
Data Analysis procedures .............................................................45
Summary ......................................................................................45

CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS OF DATA .......................................................47
Introduction ..................................................................................47
Presentation of Descriptive Characteristics of Participants ............47
Research Questions .......................................................................49
Analysis of Data ..........................................................................49
Describing a daily reading lesson ..................................................50
Writing embedded instruction.......................................................50
Small group/center instruction ......................................................53
Focus on skill development as opposed to standards focused .......56
Emphasis on vocabulary development ..........................................57
Integration of social studies content .............................................58
Personally defining best practices for reading instruction ..........59
Research based ...........................................................................59
Student focused/individualized instruction ..................................60
Successful best practices ...............................................................62
Vocabulary focused instruction ....................................................62
Building on foundational reading skills .......................................63
Cooperative learning ....................................................................64
Teacher modeling .......................................................................65
Examples of successful best practices in action .........................66
Improvements in student learning and reading levels ................67
Students building confidence .......................................................69
Increase in student engagement ..................................................70
Biography of a student who benefited from best practices ...........71
Listing of detrimental best practices ............................................76
Utilization of grade level text without appropriate scaffolding ....76
One size fits all instructional approach .......................................77
Examples of detrimental practices in action ..............................80
Lacking productive struggle/enabling students .........................80
Lack of scaffolded instruction ......................................................82
Students becoming disengaged or shutting down .......................83
Students who were negatively impacted from detrimental practices .84
The greatest challenge of teaching at-risk reading students .........86
Lack of foundational skills ................................................................. 86
Home life ......................................................................................... 87
The most rewarding aspect of teaching at-risk reading students .......... 88
Growth potential ............................................................................. 88
Internal motivation ........................................................................ 88
Attributes that are unique to at-risk reading students ....................... 89
Lacking home support ................................................................... 89
Lack of motivation .......................................................................... 90
One aspect of current at-risk reading instruction participants would change ........ 90
Lower student/teacher ratio ............................................................. 91
Additional instruction time ............................................................... 92
Summary ........................................................................................ 92

CHAPTER 5 Finding, Implications, and Recommendations .................. 93
Summary of the study ..................................................................... 93
Research questions ........................................................................ 94
Findings .......................................................................................... 95
Describing a daily reading lesson ...................................................... 95
  Writing embedded instruction ....................................................... 95
  Small group/center instruction ..................................................... 96
  Focus on skill development as opposed to standards focused .......... 96
  Emphasis on vocabulary development ......................................... 96
  Integration of social studies content ............................................ 96
Defining best practices for reading instruction .................................. 97
Successful best practices discussion and in practice ......................... 97
  Vocabulary focused instruction ................................................... 97
  Building on foundational reading skills ...................................... 98
  Cooperative learning .................................................................... 98
  Teacher modeling ......................................................................... 99
Detrimental best practices discussion and in practice ....................... 99
  Utilization of grade level text without appropriate scaffolding ...... 99
  Teaching to the whole group ....................................................... 100
Greatest challenge of teaching at-risk reading students and unique attributes ..... 100
The most rewarding aspect of teaching at-risk reading students .......... 101
Aspect of current at-risk reading instruction participants would change .... 101
Conclusions .................................................................................... 101
Describing a daily reading lesson ...................................................... 101
  Writing embedded instruction ....................................................... 101
  Small group/center instruction ..................................................... 103
  Focus on skill development as opposed to standards focused .......... 103
  Emphasis on vocabulary development ......................................... 105
  Integration of social studies content ............................................ 105
Defining best practices for reading instruction .................................. 106
Successful best practices discussion and in practice ......................... 107
  Vocabulary focused instruction ................................................... 107
  Building on foundational reading skills ...................................... 107
  Cooperative learning .................................................................... 108
Teacher modeling .................................................................................................................. 108
Detrimental best practices discussion and in practice ....................................................... 109
 Utilization of grade level text without appropriate scaffolding ..................................... 109
 Teaching to the whole group ............................................................................................... 109
 Greatest challenge of teaching at-risk reading students and unique attributes .......... 110
 The most rewarding aspect of teaching at-risk reading students ................................. 110
 Aspect of current at-risk reading instruction participants would change .................. 110
 Limitations .......................................................................................................................... 111
 Recommendations for Future Research ............................................................................. 111
 Summary ............................................................................................................................... 112
 References .......................................................................................................................... 113
 Appendices ......................................................................................................................... 130
# LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.1 Demographics of Teacher Participants</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.1 Themes within Daily Reading Lesson</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.2 Outcomes of Successful Best Practices in Action</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.3 POW TIDE</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.2 Productive vs. Destructive Struggle</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.1 Content-based instruction vs. Skill based instruction</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

“So it is with children who learn to read fluently and well: They begin to take flight into whole new worlds as effortlessly as young birds take to the sky.”

—William James (Beck, 2013, p.1)

Prior to being taught how to read, children have been “reading the world” for years. Through simply interacting with the world and experiencing life, children are constantly reading the world (Freire & Slover, 1983). By the time children have reached school age the foundation for reading has been set. Students are able to speak, and most understand a large quantity of environmental print by the age of four. Educators are then tasked with teaching all students to read. The key aspect of the above mentioned is “all students”. Educators are not given the luxury of only teaching the “smart and easy” students. All students must be taught to read fluently and on grade level. Once the reading process has been established and understood students must continue to make growth in both reading skills and development.

There is a long accepted myth that the goal of reading instruction changes from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” after the second grade; however, research has shown that prescribing to this myth can be detrimental to many students' acquisition of higher level reading skills (ASCD, 2012). Reading instruction is never complete and can never be pushed aside to make time for other subjects. Teachers cannot move away from explicit and systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, including oral reading skills, and reading comprehension strategies (Wrightslaw, 2009).
Reading is an inherent necessity for all subjects and in all grades of a student’s education. It is essential that teachers of all disciplines realize the importance of all students being equipped with effective reading skills. Teachers cannot simply teach their content isolated from reading; all content areas need to embed reading within the various curricula (Hurst & Pearman, 2013). The new era of intensified high-stakes testing and its use in teacher evaluations and employment decisions only accentuate the need for effective reading instruction of all students. Educators are now expected to consistently show a high level of achievement, while maintaining a steady growth pattern for all of their reading students. Extenuating circumstances and background stories do not lead to exceptions in testing accountability (Gulek, 2013).

With the above knowledge in mind it would seem common sense that the goal of educators should be to effectively prepare their students for the high stakes testing through consistent test preparation. Allington and Gabriel (2012) strongly disagreed. Test preparation is simply repetitive drills and redirection. Nothing is able to replace the impact that consistent, high quality reading instruction has on students’ ability to read fluently with a high level of comprehension (Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Crumly, Dietz, & D’Angelo, 2014). The question remains; what is the best way to establish the strong foundation?

Throughout the history of reading instruction there have been many different understandings of what comprises best practices. The earliest reading instruction focused solely on religious teachings and knowledge of Bible verses (Vogt & Shearer, 2007). In addition to the Bible, the next phase expanded to include other texts, and students began to work on alphabet recognition (Brown, 2014). The first major revolution in reading
instruction occurred in the early part of the twentieth century. E.B. Huey released research that stated reading was a process and everyone needed formal reading instruction (Brown, 2014). At the same time, phonics instruction became the best practice of the moment and significant research was devoted to validate the need for phonics instruction at all ages (Vogt & Shearer, 2007).

The integration of expository and informational texts began after it was discovered that the United States military was not adequately prepared to read drill manuals and battle plans during World War II. Following this discovery, cross-curricular content area reading instruction was implemented using the informational texts. Many other historical events impacted the country’s educational practices, including the “Race for Space”. The following decades brought about many different aspects to the debate of best practices with regard to reading instruction. For a short time, scripted basal programs with repetitive skill practice were considered to be the most effective instructional reading practice. Connection to the text and real world examples became the next preferred method. This was followed by a focus on the integration of technology into reading curricula and activation of background knowledge (Vogt & Shearer, 2007).

No consensus exists in the educational world about what constitutes best practices for reading instruction. At-risk readers and English language learners (ELL) present a unique challenge to educators when discussing best practices in reading. At-risk readers, readers who fall into the lowest two quintiles based on state standardized testing, require the use of best practices more than any other group of students (Ergul, 2013; Whitacre, Diaz, and Esquierdo, 2013). Through research it has been shown that establishing a strong foundation with at-risk readers will lead to growth in reading abilities (Biemiller &
Siegel, 1997; Swanson, 2008). The question remains: what is the best way to establish the strong foundation?

Researchers agree that all children need to be taught a love of reading (Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Duke & Block, 2012; Robb, 2013; Brown, Killingsworth, & Alavosius, 2014; Daniels, Pirayoff, & Bessant, 2015). Swanson (2008) found that the instruction given to at-risk readers was low quality and included little, if any, explicit reading instruction. At-risk readers are not allowed to read, and therefore, do not develop the love of reading that is essential to be successful (Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Duke & Block, 2012; Robb, 2013; Brown, Killingsworth, & Alavosius, 2014; Daniels, Pirayoff, & Bessant, 2015). The implementation of effective best practices for reading instruction is essential to ensure that all students’ needs are being met on a daily basis. Presently, there is no clear consensus about what those best practices are with regard to at-risk reading students.

**Conceptual Underpinnings for the Study**

**Theoretical framework**

Albert Bandura proposed the social cognitive theory in the 1960s. The social cognitive theory changed previously accepted theories because it took into account cognitive/personal factors, environmental factors, and behavioral factors (Pajares, 2002). Bandura believed that “people are both products and producers of their environment” (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 362). The theory states that learning is strengthened when a subject sees a specific behavior being either rewarded or punished. Moreover, subjects model personal behavior after behavior they witness in other children or adults (Afzaal, 2015).
In addition to the social cognitive theory, the zone of proximal development is another important theory. In 1978, Vygotsky introduced the concept of the zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is defined as the range of learning that occurs when a person is supported by someone who has a more advanced range of abilities. The zone of proximal development takes into consideration a multitude of factors including the child’s actual ability level, interaction with others in the environment, and the level of cooperation with peers (International Centre for Educators’ Learning Styles, 2015). Vygotsky’s ideas moved away from the traditional teaching technique of the instructor sharing all the knowledge to a more interactive model involving the students (Cherry, 2015).

Conceptual framework

Best practices for elementary at-risk reading instruction were studied based on the social cognitive theory. This was done because the interactions between teacher and the at-risk student vary greatly based on the instructional strategies implemented in the classroom. The social cognitive theory is founded on the premise that humans base choices on the perception of how others have received the same choice. The instructional practices implemented in a classroom are unique to each educator. By considering the feelings and experiences from a variety of educators who deal with at-risk reading students, a more accurate picture can be gained about what constitutes best practices in reading instruction. The study was qualitative in order to gain a deeper understanding of the instructional practices educators implement in classrooms to better serve at-risk reading students.
Best practices for elementary at-risk reading instruction were studied based on the theory of zone of proximal development as well. This was done because the interactions between the teacher and the at-risk student vary greatly based on the instructional strategies implemented in the classroom. In addition, interactions between the at-risk student and his/her peers vary greatly based on the instructional practices, specifically seating arrangements and grouping implemented in the classroom. One aspect of Vygotsky’s theory is that the level of potential for success increases when a student works “in collaboration with more capable peers” (Cherry, 2015). This qualitative research allowed the researcher to apply this theory to teacher response to at-risk students and implementation of different instructional practices.

**Statement of the Problem**

Increased testing and accountability in education have made effective daily instructional practices more important than ever (Gulek, 2003). These effective instructional practices are especially critical in reading instruction. A student’s ability to read effectively impacts more than grade cards and test scores (Bharuthram, 2012). Quality of life can be directly linked to a person’s ability to read because it impacts daily interactions, especially those dealing with any type of writing (Ghorbani, Gangeraj, & Alavi, 2013). Ensuring that all children, regardless of ability level, are given the proper literacy foundation is essential.

Through his examination of reading research, Ergul (2013) found those students who are struggling or at-risk readers in first grade are often struggling readers in the 11th grade. This research finding highlighted the importance of understanding the best practices for reading instruction throughout a student’s school career. Students need to
be engaged in meaningful reading from a young age in order to be successful lifelong learners (Martin, 2012; Whitacre, Diaz & Esquierdo, 2013; Weih, 2014; Chang, 2015).

Presently, there is a plethora of curricula claiming to provide a universal solution for teaching all students to read on grade level. The problem is instructional best practices cannot be packaged and sold. Best practices are learned and developed through implementation and collaboration. Throughout the breadth of research, there is a lack of studies focused on upper elementary reading best practices for at-risk students. In addition to the lack of studies, there is an even larger deficit in qualitative research related to reading best practices. Teachers are in the classroom on a daily basis and possess the most reliable data about instructional best practices. It is imperative that educators are aware of reading instructional techniques that work with at-risk students to prevent a society full of non-readers (Vogt & Shearer, 2007).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this grounded qualitative study was to identify best practices for teaching reading to at-risk students. There was a focus on at-risk readers and English language learners. The best practices organized in this study provide elementary reading teachers with a list of reading best practices proven to work in a variety of classrooms. The research was based solely on teacher perspective. Teachers are in the classroom and conducting individual research on a daily basis. The first-hand experience the teachers have with the discussed reading best practices allowed for honest evaluation of the instructional value.
Research Questions

The central research questions addressed in this qualitative study were:

1. From a teacher’s perspective, what instructional practices have a positive influence on elementary, at-risk reading students’ learning?

2. From a teacher’s perspective, what instructional practices have a negative influence on elementary, at-risk reading students’ learning?

Limitations, Assumptions, and Design Controls

The data were limited to 15 educator interviews from one rural East Tennessee school district. This limits not only the responses to the interview questions, but also the student population to which the educators are implementing the instructional “best practices”.

Definition of Key Terms

The following terms are used throughout this grounded qualitative study dealing with reading best practices for at-risk students.

1. At-risk reading student- readers who fall into the lowest two quintiles based on state standardized testing

2. Teacher- someone who imparts knowledge to or instructs (someone) as to how to do something (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015)

3. English language learner (ELL)- “students who are unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English, who often come from non-English-speaking homes and backgrounds, and who typically require specialized or
modified instruction in both the English language and in their academic courses” (Great Schools Partnership, 2013).

4. **Best practices**- existing practices that already possess a high level of widely agreed effectiveness (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

5. **Reading instruction**- explicit and systematic instruction in: (a) phonemic awareness, (b) phonics, (c) vocabulary development, (d) reading fluency, including oral reading skills, and (e) reading comprehension strategies (Wrightslaw, 2009).

6. **Zone of proximal development**- "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978, p. 86).

**Summary**

Reading instruction in today’s schools is of utmost importance especially when teacher evaluations and high stakes testing are taken into consideration. At-risk readers and English language learners present a unique challenge to educators when it comes to reading instruction. A concrete understanding of best practices in reading instruction for at-risk readers and English language learners is beneficial to everyone involved. This is a study to examine teacher perspectives with regard to best practices for elementary at-risk reading instruction in grades 4 and 5.

This study contains five chapters. The first chapter includes an introduction of the study, conceptual underpinnings of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, limitations, definition of key terms, and a summary. Chapter 2 contains a review
of literature pertinent to the study. Chapter 3 introduces the methodology used in the study to analyze best practices for elementary at-risk reading instruction in grades 4 and 5. Chapter 4 contains the means of data collection and the presentation of findings and Chapter 5 provides the conclusion and the application to future research.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

“Learning to read is not a natural process. There is a certain amount of drudgery inherent in learning to read” (Brown, 2014, p. 1). The debate over what defines effective reading instruction has been ongoing since the beginning of education. The increase in high-stakes testing and rigorous teacher evaluations has increased the search for the perfect formula of reading instruction techniques. The need to demonstrate high achievement and growth with all reading students presents an interesting challenge for all educators (Gulek, 2003). Educators have to be careful not to lose sight of the main goal: student learning. Student learning happens when best practices are consistently applied on a daily basis in the classroom (Crumly, Dietz, & D'Angelo, 2014). Gulek (2003) discussed the role of high stakes testing in today’s classroom. “The goal is to gather a variety of information to best inform educational decisions rather than limit our judgments to a single assessment” (Gulek, 2003, p.49). Educators must understand instructional best practices within their discipline.

At-risk students, especially those who are also English language learners, pose a greater challenge for reading educators. At times the required cognitive level that reading on grade level demands may simply exceed the ability of these students (Biemiller & Siegal, 1997; Elfenbein, 2006). It has been shown through effective daily reading instruction that both at-risk students and English language learners are able to make strides in the right direction toward becoming more fluent readers (Filippini, Gerber, & Leafstedt, 2012). Swanson (2008) stated, “It is critical for teacher education programs to focus on a deep knowledge of research-based reading instruction” (p.131). Teaching
educators and explaining what and how to implement best practices for reading instruction is essential to having success in today’s classrooms.

Chapter 2 contains a review of the related literature regarding best practices for elementary at-risk reading instruction in grades 4 and 5. The chapter is divided into the following sections: (a) history of reading, (b) best practices, (c) at-risk readers, (d) English language learners, (e) qualitative research, (f) grounded theory, and (g) a summary.

**History of Reading**

“The history of American reading instruction is an important, but generally neglected area of curriculum history” (Venezky, 1986, p. 129). Reading instruction in the United States can be dated to the first Jamestown settlement in 1607. Between 1607 and 1840, the majority of reading instruction was based on religion and taught primarily about “highly moral” men (Vogt & Shearer, 2007). Recognition of the alphabet, recitation of poetry, and knowledge of Bible verses were the focus of instruction (Brown, 2014). Textbooks were pieces of wood with the text either carved or printed on the separate pieces. Sometimes teachers would place a “transparent sheet of animal horn” on top of the writing to protect it (Vogt & Shearer, 2007, p. 6). The setting for the majority of beginning reading instruction happened in slave quarters, Indian reservations, or church schools (Venezky, 1986).

**19th Century**

At the beginning of the 19th century there was one key component of reading instruction found in the majority of the textbooks, the first extensively developed component of elocution. The principles behind elocution include “articulation, inflection,
accent in emphasis, instructions for reading verse, cultivation and management of the
voice, gesture and suggestions to teachers” (Venezky, 1986, p. 147). The focus on
elocution fell out of favor following the Civil War. With the departure from elocution,
there was a lack of focus on oral reading. This waning emphasis was especially evident
in upper elementary grades, but elocution was not brought back into the curriculum
(Venezky, 1986).

Reading instruction evolved as our country changed with the impact of the Civil
War and westward expansion. In 1841, Reverend William Holmes McGuffey published
the first “readers” (Vogt & Shearer, 2007; Brown, 2014). In total, there were six readers,
and each one increased in difficulty as the students progressed through them. The text
included in the readers was primarily moralistic and “presented a picture of white
Protestant America” (Vogt & Shearer, 2007, p. 7). The design of the first two readers
included studies in “alphabet knowledge, phonics, syllables, and sight words; and the
stories were written at increasingly difficult reading levels with some comprehension
questions” (Vogt & Shearer, 2007, p. 7). The first reader included fifty-five lessons
about a child’s code of ethics dealing with truthfulness, promptness, kindness, and
honestly. The second reader moved on to lessons about biology, history, astronomy, and
botany. Writings about how children should behave toward God, parents, teachers and
the poor were also included in the second reader. The final four readers were geared
toward middle and high school age students and even included works from Shakespeare
and Charles Dickens (Vogt & Shearer, 2007).
Early 20th Century

Education underwent a significant change at the beginning of the twentieth century with the massive influx of attendance in public schools. Additional support and funding became more readily available from both federal and state legislatures. Reading instruction continued to evolve in the first half of the twentieth century, largely in response to the writings of E.B. Huey. In his book, *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, Huey described reading as a scientific process and discussed the need for more universal education. Children of new immigrants, descendants of former slaves, and children of the poor factory and sweatshop workers still had limited access to growing formal education (Vogt & Shearer, 2007).

In many schools across the nation, reading instruction migrated from using the Bible as the main source for text toward reading for information on a range of topics. During this time in the history of reading instruction, phonics was first introduced and widely accepted (Brown, 2014). The question was not whether or not to teach phonics; it was what and how phonics should be taught. The main problem with this phonic instruction was the lack of preparation educators received prior to entering the classroom. Most educators received less than two years of teacher education prior to being sent into a full-time teaching position. This lack of preparation led to the incorrect understanding and teaching of phonics. Educators did not have enough knowledge of early literacy or the phonic principles and rules to effectively teach the concepts to their students (Brown, 2004).
Mid-20th Century

The 1930s and 1940s brought about the much-loved *Dick and Jane* books, which were meant to describe the typical American family of the time (Vogt & Shearer, 2007). The characters included the mother, father, Sally, Dick, Jane, and their pets. There was little diversity in the characters or story line of the first readers, and they stayed that way for more than forty years (Venezky, 1986). The second version of the first readers became more representative of the increasing diversity in America. Characters representing different ethnicities were included as classmates and neighbors. However, the main story line remained focused on Dick, Jane, and Sally (Vogt & Shearer, 2007).

World War II saw yet another change in reading instruction. It was found that the majority of soldiers was illiterate and was unable to read even the simplest manuals or battle plans. The introduction of content area reading instruction was a direct result from this failure to have our troops properly prepared to defend our country. A significant amount of expository and informational texts was added to most reading curricula around the country.

Beginning in the late 1950s, the “Race for Space” led to an overhaul in our country’s education practices. The government began to give millions of dollars to reform educational programs to better prepare students in mathematics, science, and reading. During the next few decades, there was significant debate about the “best” way to teach reading. One of the first major debates was over phonics instruction. Everyone agreed that there should be phonics instruction; the debate was over how it should be taught (Brown, 2014). There were two sides of the debate: synthetic phonics or holistic/analytic phonics instruction (Venezky, 1986; Vogt & Shearer, 2007). Everyone
found “his or her” way to be the best and most productive way to handle reading instruction.

**Late 20th Century**

One of the most interesting times in the history of reading instruction came during the late 1960s and early 1970s. During this time the Initial Teaching Alphabet (i/t/a) was experimentally implemented. This new alphabet was originally named the Augmented Roman Alphabet, and it contained forty-four characters. Twenty-four of the characters were from the conventional alphabet. Each of the forty-two characters had a unique phonetic sound. The purpose of the new alphabet was to allow children to read phonetically correct more easily. Sir James Pitman, the alphabet’s developer, felt that having children learn his alphabet would allow for easy transfer to the regular alphabet and text. The Initial Teaching Alphabet did not last because children were unable to transfer their learning to “conventional texts” (Vogt & Shearer, 2007).

The 1970s and early 1980s found the focus on basal reading programs that were scripted and used a good deal of skill practice in the form of worksheets. The basal readers “generally divided their skill interests across four strands or tracks: (a) decoding, (b) vocabulary, (c) comprehension, and (d) a potpourri that often is labeled life and study skills” (Venezky, 1986, p.145). There was an emphasis placed on content area reading and educators began to bring in texts about social studies, math, and science. Ensuring students were connecting to the text became the popular means of instruction in the 1980s and 1990s (Elfenbein, 2006; Vogt & Shearer, 2007).

Whole language or the stress put on reading the whole word became the new fad in reading instruction (Brown, 2014; Goodman, 1989; Maguire, 1989; Pearson, 1989;
Stahl, 1998; Watson, 1989). “In whole language, according to whole-language advocates, readers read to construct their own interpretation of texts written by authors whose genuine intent was to communicate” (Pearson, 1989, p. 232). Whole language is focused on putting the meaning behind the words not just reading the words (Goodman, 1989; Maguire, 1989; Pearson, 1989; Watson, 1989; Brown, 2014).

21st Century

The importance of activating background knowledge came to the forefront with the increase of technology in schools in the 1990s and early 2000s (Vogt & Shearer, 2007). A new resurgence placed emphasis on the importance of phonics instruction (Brown, 2014). There was research linked to MRI scans that showed the brain actually reads words sound by sound. In addition to the initial MRI scans, further brain researched showed “changes in the brain and reading improvement when phonics is taught to poor readers” (Brown, 2014, p. 5). In the National Reading Panel’s report (2000) phonemic awareness instruction was shown to dramatically improve the spelling ability of all children except disabled learners. This instruction also was linked to improvements in reading ability in at-risk students. Presently, reading instruction emphasizes phonics instruction in addition to numerous other best practices discussed throughout the research (Vogt & Shearer, 2007; Brown, 2014).

Best Practices

The debate over the best way to teach reading, also known as “best practices”, remains. According to extensive research by Steven Stahl (1998), throughout all of the fads and new “magical” programs, educators’ goals have remained constant; “Teachers want their students to: appreciate good literature and be motivated to read, be able to
comprehend what they read and to learn from texts, and to be able to read words accurately and automatically” (p. 37). There are several themes found throughout the present reading research.

**Love of Reading**

First, it is essential that educators teach students to enjoy reading for the sake of reading, not just to score well on a test (Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Duke & Block, 2012; Robb, 2013; Brown, Killingsworth, & Alavosius, 2014; Weih, 2014; Daniels, Pirayoff, & Bessant, 2015). Weih (2014) found that if students have intrinsic motivation to read, they will try harder and, in the end, be more successful in all aspects of reading curricula. If educators take the time to ensure that students feel connected to the text being taught and read, students will feel more invested in their own personal learning (Martin, 2012). Instruction needs to be meaningful to all students. Meaningful reading needs to begin prior to students being able to read on their own. In the primary grades, teachers need to take special care to ensure their students feel connected to the text and understand how they are able to relate to it (Chang, 2015). If teachers are excited about the text, then students will also be excited (Daniel, Pirayoff, & Bessant, 2013). Reading orally to students has been found to be a successful “best practice” for motivating students to connect to a text and want to read on their own. Students become more fluent readers when given an appropriate model (Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003). Salwa Darwish (2015) found that “a special bond forms between teacher and student during these read-aloud times” (p.81). A love of reading and literature is cultivated when teachers and students are reading together (Rasinski & Hoffmann, 2003; Daniels, Pirayoff, & Bessant, 2013; Chang, 2015; Darwish, 2015).
In their 2000 report, the National Reading Panel (NRP) agreed with the need to cultivate a love of reading. In addition to instilling a love of reading, the NRP emphasized the need for reading to be a classroom affair not simply an individual activity. When students see reading as a team effort it becomes an opportunity instead of a chore. In describing motivation in the 2000 report, the National Reading Panel included the following information:

Motivation, then, needs to be intrinsic. The teacher’s job is to create or allow situations where children want to read and are willing to work hard at it. Learning to read in this model involves “others” in many ways. Readers expand their vocabularies and background knowledge through listening to the teacher read stories aloud and conversing with their peers. They adopt and adapt strategies modeled by others. They modify their understanding of texts by listening to what others have to say. At the same time, roles continually change: the questioner is questioned, and the explainer is corrected. Thus, social interaction is a necessary component of this model (National Reading Panel, 2000, p. appendix A).

**Vocabulary Development**

Vocabulary development is a second vital element of reading instruction that can be found throughout the plethora of reading research (Otaiba & Fuchs, 2006; Pullen, Tuckwiller, Ashworth, & Lovelace, 2011; Roskos & Newman, 2014). A lack of vocabulary development has been linked to overall poor reading ability and also weakened verbal skills (Otaiba & Fuchs, 2006). If students do not understand the words they are reading, it is impossible for them to comprehend the author’s message. Vocabulary development does not just happen; it must be explicitly taught and
intentionally interwoven throughout a child’s educational career (Roskos & Newman, 2014). Explicit vocabulary instruction needs to happen from a child’s early school career so that by the time a child reaches upper elementary the beginning vocabulary can be applied as background knowledge to more difficult texts encountered (Pullen, Tuckwiller, Ashworth, & Lovelace, 2011; Roskos & Newman, 2014). Meaningful conversations about new vocabulary words have been found to be a major resource for vocabulary development of elementary school age children. This best practice has fallen to the wayside and has been replaced with a silent written practice of vocabulary (Pullen, Tuckwiller, Ashworth, & Lovelace, 2011). Silent learning impairs both the student and the teacher. It injures the student because a significant level of knowledge can be gained through the interaction during vocabulary conversation. The teacher is injured because misunderstandings and miscues on the part of the student can go undetected (Roskos & Newman, 2014). A strong foundation of vocabulary development starts all readers on the right path of being fluent readers who are able to comprehend complex texts.

**Background Knowledge**

A third theme of understanding the activation of background knowledge prior to moving into a reading text can be seen throughout the available literature (Pullen, Tuckwiller, Ashworth, & Lovelace, 2011; Finch, 2012). Every student comes into a classroom with differing levels of background knowledge. For true reading to take place a student needs to interact with a text prior to, during, and after reading (Darwish, 2015). In order to interact with a text prior to reading, background knowledge needs to be activated or front-loaded by the teacher (Finch, 2012). Activating background knowledge or having the ability to front-load students with required information demands
a knowledgeable teacher (Curwen, Miller, White-Smith, and Calfee, 2010). The teacher’s role is to model his or her own metacognition in order for students to understand how to think about their own thinking. This level of modeling and activation of background knowledge requires intentional preparation and instruction (Roskos & Neuman, 2014; Daniels, Pirayoff, & Bessant, 2015). Daily instructional reflection ensures educators are meeting the needs of all students (Roskos & Neuman, 2014). In addition to meeting the needs of all students, reflection allows teachers to brainstorm new ways to activate students’ prior knowledge. Activating background knowledge allows a student to feel more connected to the text and, in turn, feel more invested in their personal learning. Cengiz Gulek (2003) found that feeling a connection to the text fosters a higher level of student motivation to improve performance on high stakes testing. It is essential to remember that all students come to the classroom with various amounts of background knowledge. A lack of background knowledge is not necessarily a sign of an at-risk reader. It could simply mean that the student has not been exposed to the same life experiences of some peers (Finch, 2012). Differing levels of background knowledge must be taken into account without judgment prior to beginning a text. This is especially true when integrating social studies and science into literacy instruction (Duke & Block 2012).

One way to aid students with deficient background knowledge is to allow them to work in cooperative groups. The National Reading Panel (2000) utilized cooperative learning as a focal category for comprehension instruction. The NRP found that by incorporating groups into the classroom “readers learn to focus and discuss reading materials. Readers learn reading comprehension strategies and do better on
comprehension tests” (National Reading Panel, 2000, pp. 4-43). The utilization of cooperative groups can be found throughout Gail Tompkins’ 50 Literacy Strategies (Tompkins, 2004). Tompkins emphasizes the need for students to work together before, during, and after reading to truly benefit from cooperative groups.

**Fluency**

Finally, emphasis on reading fluency is necessary. Fluency instruction is often ignored or rejected as an important aspect of reading instruction (Rasinski, 2014). In order to fully gauge the extent of influence fluency can have an effective reading instruction, it must be fully understood.

Reading fluency is made up of two distinct components at two ends of the reading spectrum--automaticity in word recognition and expression in oral reading that reflects the meaning of the text. In a sense, reading fluency is the essential link between word recognition at one end of the spectrum and reading comprehension at the other (Rasinski, 2014, p.4).

Ensuring that students are fluent readers helps to avoid word-by-word reading, which greatly diminishes reading comprehension of any text (Craft & Robles-Pina, 2008). “Skilled readers read words accurately, rapidly, and efficiently. Children who do not develop reading fluency, no matter how bright they are, will continue to read slowly and with great effort” (National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 3). Fluent readers are better readers and automatically feel more connected to the text, which in turn motivates them to give a higher level of effort on the task at hand (Rasinski & Hoffmann, 2003; Daniel, Pirayoff, & Bessant, 2013; Chang, 2015; Darwish, 2015).
At-Risk Readers

At-risk readers, readers who fall into the lowest two quintiles based on state standardized testing, are especially susceptible to the different whims of reading instruction (Ergul, 2013; Whitacre, Diaz, and Esquierdo, 2013). The earlier best practices can be applied in the classroom of an at-risk reader the better chance that student has of overcoming the reading deficit (Allington, 2011; Ergul, 2013). Proper placement in reading groups through authentic and appropriate testing is essential to ensure that at-risk students are being taught using methods appropriate for their level of understanding and reading ability (Farrenkopf, 2004; Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Daniel, Pirayoff, & Bessant, 2013; Robb, 2013). Ergul (2013) found that lower reading abilities led to a higher percentage of overall academic failure. It is especially important for at-risk readers to be given an adequate foundation of reading skills prior to advancing toward increasingly complex reading and overall academic concepts (Beimiller & Siegel, 1997). Learning disabilities can also account for deficits in reading ability. Implementing instructional best practices for reading helps bridge the gap between the students with and without learning disabilities (Swanson, 2008).

Response to Intervention

Response to Intervention (RTI) is one best practice that educators can apply to attempt to bridge the gap between the one third of students who read on grade level and the two thirds of students who read below grade level (Allington, 2011). RTI is known for the tiered reading approached applied. There are several components recommended when applying RTI in a classroom: “high-quality, scientifically based classroom instruction, ongoing student assessment, tiered instruction, and parent involvement” (RTI
Action Network, 2015, p. 1). The “high-quality, scientifically based classroom instruction” needs to happen in the general education classroom and it needs to happen on a daily basis. Teachers need to be applying scientifically proven techniques while teaching all of their students, not only the at-risk readers. Ongoing student assessment needs to be completed to give a continual accurate picture of a student’s rate and level of learning and achievement. “Throughout the RTI process, student progress is monitored frequently to examine student achievement and gauge the effectiveness of the curriculum” (RTI Action Network, 2015, p. 1).

Another aspect of the RTI process is tiered instruction. There are three universally used tiers – Tier 1, 2, and 3. All students receive Tier 1 instruction on a daily basis. Tier 1 happens in the regular education classroom with the entire classroom of students. It needs to be “high-quality, scientifically based instruction provided by qualified personnel to ensure that their difficulties are not due to inadequate instruction” (RTI Action Network, 2015, p.3). While in Tier 1 all students are screened to develop a baseline of academic ability and to identify areas of deficit. Students who do not make adequate gains in Tier 1 are screened and placed in Tier 2. Tier 2 moves into the small group instruction and is in addition to the Tier 1 instruction time. There is more intense skill instruction during Tier 2 intervention time. Students who are still unable to make adequate progress while in Tier 2 are referred to Tier 3. At this level, students receive individualized, intensive interventions that target the students’ skill deficits. Students who do not achieve the desired level of progress in response to these targeted interventions are then referred for a comprehensive evaluation and considered for
eligibility for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (RTI Action Network, 2015, p.3).

Parent involvement is one of the final pieces to the RTI puzzle. The dialogue between the school and the parents is essential for Response to Intervention to be successful. The parents need to be given the following information: data about their child’s progress, the instruction techniques and specific interventions used, the name of the staff member working with their child, and the goals set forth for the child. RTI has proven successful in many schools and school systems. When applied correctly RTI is “a multi-tiered, problem-solving approach providing services, both prevention and intervention, that address academic and behavior difficulties of all students at increasing levels of intensity (Shenendehowa Central School District, 2009, p. 14). Response to Intervention is one of many best practices being implemented on a daily basis in at-risk reading classrooms around the country.

**Ability Grouping**

Ability grouping is another widely used educational practice to better meet the needs of at-risk students. The debate over the benefits and harms of ability grouping has continued for over eight decades (Kulik, 1992). Ability grouping is implemented and defined differently across countries, states, districts, and even schools (Clark-Ibanez, 2005). The benefits for lower achieving at-risk students can be found throughout the research. Lower achieving students are taught beginning at their level and do not have to be at the point of frustration from the onset of learning (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004; Lleras and Rangel, 2009; Robinson, 2008; Becker et al., 2014). The lower achieving classrooms
tend to have a significantly smaller number of students. This allows for individualized instruction and appropriate daily interventions (Robinson, 2008).

The benefits for lower achieving students are especially seen with students who are learning the English language for the first time (Robinson, 2008). It has been found that by placing students with limited English language exposure in ability grouped classrooms the achievement gap with their peers is significantly lessened with each additional year in the grouped classroom (Robinson, 2008). It allows them to feel successful, and therefore, the lower achieving students with limited English exposure want to try harder to be even more successful (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004). Even though ability grouping is considered controversial for many, it is one of the top best practices especially when dealing with at-risk students (Ansalone & Biafora; Robinson, 2008; Lleras and Rangel, 2009; Becker et al., 2014).

**Foundation**

A third best practice found throughout the research when instructing at-risk reading students is the focus on creating a solid foundation of reading skills before moving to the more abstract aspects of reading. Andrew Biemiller and Linda Siegel (1997) found the foundational reading skills to be sight words and phonemic awareness. They emphasized the importance of creating a large personal bank of sight words and adding to that bank over time.

**Cognitive Strategy Instruction**

Cognitive strategy instruction is the idea that educators must have the reader as involved as possible with their personal learning. Some of the most common cognitive strategies include the following terms:
1. The development of an awareness and understanding of the reader’s own cognitive processes that are amenable to instruction and learning;

2. A teacher guiding the reader or modeling for the reader the actions that the reader can take to enhance the comprehension processes used during reading; and

3. The reader practicing those strategies with the teacher assisting until the reader achieves a gradual internalization and independent mastery of those processes (National Reading Panel, 2000, pp. 4-40).

The utilization of cognitive strategy instruction slowly scaffolds children into becoming independent readers. Through self-awareness and modeling the students are able to become increasingly self-sufficient when they encounter an unfamiliar text. At-risk and ELL readers respond well to this approach because it releases responsibility slowly and after much guidance and modeling. Scaffolding is an excellent teaching technique that is universally beneficial for all students, especially at-risk and ELL students (Tompkins, 2004). At-risk readers do pose a unique challenge to educators; however, they can also give educators the greatest reward.

**English Language Learners (ELL)**

English language learners are a difficult group of students to define. It depends how broad a population a school wants to apply the term “ELL” and where the line is drawn. In a report by the National Council of Teachers of English the students in the ELL category can range greatly. “Some ELL students come from homes in which no English is spoken, while some come from homes where only English is spoken; others have been exposed to or use multiple languages. ELL students may have a deep sense of their non-U.S. culture, a strong sense of multiple cultures, or identify only with U.S.
The population of ELL in public schools has tripled in the last thirty years and is set to continue to grow significantly. The challenge with this growing population is the spectrum of needs these students represent. Some ELL students do not speak any English while others speak fluently. Meeting the needs of the wide range of ELL students is a task equal to meeting the needs of at-risk reading students. Many of the same best practices can be applied to ELL students’ reading instruction.

ELL students need and deserve the focus of educators throughout their educational career.

In 2005, 4 percent of ELL eighth graders achieved proficiency on the reading portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP) versus 31 percent of all eighth graders who were found to be proficient. Non-native English speakers 14–18 years old were 21 percent less likely to have completed high school than native English speakers. (The James R. Squire Office for Policy Research, 2008, p.1).

These statistics point to the fact that educators need to make a concerted effort to meet the needs of all the ELL students in their classroom. In order to better meet the needs of the ELL students in the classroom, educators need to be educated in what instructional practices work best with these types of students (Whitacre, Diaz, & Esquierdo, 2013).

Through their research, The National Council of Teachers of English has found that less than 13 percent of teachers have attended any ELL professional development. Knowledge of how to effectively instruct ELL students is only required in three states. The lack of teacher expertise in ELL instruction is causing educational problems for ELL
students. “Well-meaning teachers with inadequate training can sabotage their own efforts to create positive learning environments through hypercriticism of errors. Or they do not see native language usage as an appropriate scaffold and they ignore language errors” (The James R. Squire Office for Policy Research, 2008, p.6).

**Native Language**

One of the main questions related to reading instruction for ELL students surrounds the appropriate role of the native language (Slavin and Cheung, 2005). On one side of the argument, bilingual proponents say educators should allow a child to become a proficient reader in their native language prior to introducing English reading instruction. After reading has been mastered in the child’s native language the bilingual proponents believe reading instruction should be alternated between the child’s native language and English. The other side of the argument is English immersion strategies. This is where ELL students are required to learn English from the beginning without regard to their native language (Slavin and Cheung, 2005). The majority of school districts with smaller ELL populations use the English immersion strategy. The English immersion strategy is used out of necessity. There are not enough bilingual teachers to instruct the ELL students in their native language prior to introducing English.

**Best Practices for ELL students**

Research shows that a disproportionate number of ELL students are being placed into special education. This is mainly due to incorrect evaluation of placement tests without differentiating between language differences and learning disabilities. The response to intervention (RTI) program discussed earlier for at-risk students is also beneficial for ELL students because of the detailed screening conducted at the beginning
of the program. The instruments used for RTI screening identify the exact areas of deficiency, therefore allowing the administrator to differentiate between linguistic differences and actual learning disabilities (RTI Action Network, 2015). Correct placement into RTI tier groups or the special education setting is crucial for the continued educational growth of ELL students.

In addition to applying the RTI program, a second best practice that has proven effective with ELL students is a focus on developing academic skills that can be applied across the curriculum. These skills include instruction using “content specific and academic vocabulary” (The James R. Squire Office for Policy Research, 2008, p. 5). When ELL students are equipped with the necessary vocabulary they are able to make cross-curricular connections and real world applications. ELL students retain more information when they are able to establish personal connections to the material presented (Whitacre, Díaz, & Esquierdo, 2013).

A third best practice is allowing reading instruction to be student driven instead of teacher driven. This includes deliberately structuring opportunities throughout the lesson that allow students to speak. Educators need to apply appropriate prompting for ELL students to elicit the type of responses that will lead to more learning for the students. Prompting should be used when students need to elaborate on an answer to include more information, to expand their one-word answer, and to answer in complete sentences. After the students speak, educators need to make sure to “incorporate students’ responses, ideas, examples, and experiences into the lesson” (Whitacre, Díaz, & Esquierdo, 2013, p. 12).
ELL and At-Risk Students

ELL students can be at-risk readers in addition to their language barrier. This double-sided sword can cause major issues when educators are trying to meet the unique needs of all students. Educators not only have to figure out how to best serve the ELL students when it comes to their lack of mastery of the English language, but also with their inability to master reading in any language. Research has shown that these students in particular need to be closely monitored throughout their entire school career. Intensive intervention should be implemented early on with regard to phonological awareness and vocabulary acquisition (Flippini, Gerber, Leafstedt, 2012). One specific best practice that has proven effective with at-risk ELL students is when educators place instructional emphasis on the small units of structure throughout the English language. This allows the students to see the connection between letters, sounds, and words. ELL students begin to apply their phonetic knowledge to all words, thus decoding more effectively and efficiently. Decoding is one of the most important building blocks of productive reading instruction. “Decoding is important because it is the foundation on which all other reading instruction builds. If students cannot decode words their reading will lack fluency, their vocabulary will be limited and their reading comprehension will suffer. Teaching higher-level reading strategies to students stuck at the word level is ineffective” (Reading Horizons, 2015, p.1).

The research of reading instruction best practices for at-risk students, English language learners, and students who fall into both categories is lacking and needs to be further developed. The carrying out of qualitative research allows the researcher to
Interact and study teachers in their natural environment and discuss reading best practices with those who truly understand what it takes.

**Qualitative Research**

The definition of qualitative research is as open-ended as the research itself (Hatch, 2002). Qualitative research is essentially any research where the end results cannot be quantified or derived from statistical analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Qualitative research adds the answer to the “why” questions in addition to the “what” and “how much” questions. Instead of taking an answer at its face value, a qualitative researcher digs deeper into how the participants interpret or react to the answer (Merriam, 2009). Where quantitative research stops qualitative research begins. For example—Quantitative: Yes, teaching phonics in the lower elementary grades helps to lessen the percentage of at-risk reading students in the upper elementary grades. Qualitative: Why does teaching phonics in the lower elementary grades help to lessen the percentage of at-risk reading students in the upper elementary grades and what are some examples of phonics’ lessons in action?

**Characteristics of Qualitative Research**

There are several characteristics unique to qualitative research. Qualitative research allows a natural setting to be used throughout the research study instead of having to utilize a contrived mock-up of the natural environment. When interviews are used as part of the qualitative research, participants are asked to discuss ideas and concepts they have had the opportunity to actually experience. The ability to use the natural setting and first-hand knowledge of the material discussed are two characteristics that set qualitative research apart from other research techniques (Hatch, 2002). Another
important characteristic about qualitative research is that the participants drive the instruction. Teachers strive for student-led instruction. In the same vein, qualitative researchers strive to allow their research to be participant led. The research can be participant led through surveys, interviews, semi-structured interviews, and case studies. The involved role of the researcher throughout every aspect of the qualitative research is also a distinguishing characteristic. Through many types of qualitative research—interviews, case studies, and surveys—the researcher plays an integral part in every step of the research. “Qualitative research is a form of research in which the researcher or a designated co-researcher collects and interprets data, making the researcher as much a part of the research process as the participants and the data they provide” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 4). Qualitative research also removes the need to initially develop a hypothesis. The boundaries are limitless when conducting qualitative research and the researcher is able to follow the path the study goes down (Hatch, 2002).

**Reasons researchers choose qualitative research**

There is a time and place for all the different types of research available. Researchers who choose to conduct qualitative research do so for a variety of reasons. One of the main reasons is due to the “fluid, evolving, and dynamic nature” of the qualitative design (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 5). Qualitative researchers prefer the ability to part from the rigor and rigidity of the quantitative design. There is a degree of ambiguity in qualitative research, which is attractive to many researchers. Creativity and deviation from the “well-traveled path” is encouraged and applauded (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). One qualitative research theory that follows the same ideas of freedom to evolve
throughout the research is the grounded theory. For that reason the grounded theory is utilized often in qualitative studies (Hatch, 2002).

**Grounded Theory**

“Grounded theory is an inductive, comparative, iterative, and interactive method” (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012, p. 347). When conducting research through the grounded theory the researcher draws conclusions through repeated analysis and comparisons of the data and relationships between the data. Grounded research allows the researcher to have a more involved role throughout the entire process. It “refers to a systematic method for constructing a theoretical analysis from data, with explicit analytic strategies and implicit guidelines for data collection” (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012, p. 347). The explicit analytic strategies deal with the coding of collected data required by the grounded theory. The implicit guidelines allow for more allowances in the collection of data. One of the allowances that can be taken in research utilizing the grounded theory is revisiting aspects of the data. After several interviews have been conducted and patterns are beginning to emerge through the code analysis the researcher can return to an interviewee and ask additional follow-up questions. The follow-up questions can be strictly for clarification or to follow the trajectory of a certain trend developing from the data (Charmaz, 2006).

**Stages of Grounded Research**

In grounded research there are generally six stages of the research process. Preparation is the first stage and involves defining a broad research topic. Grounded research strives to remove all preconceptions and not focus on a specific problem. The goal is for the actual research to drive the remaining research. A researcher begins their
study without an end product in mind. Interviews are the most common form of data collection of the second stage of grounded research, data collection. Semi-structured interviews are used in a significant amount of grounded research because of the freedom they allow the researcher. When using semi-structured interviews, the researcher has a base question set but is able to follow tangents brought up by the interviewee (The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2008). The third stage of grounded research is the analysis stage. The analysis stage is where the repetition takes place in the coding of the data. The researcher analyzes the data to find similarities and patterns. After the first session of coding, the researcher reanalyzes the same data to evaluate for any additional relationships. The codes and relationships get more precise with each analysis until a clear theory has emerged about the data. Writing and journaling about the relationships between the different codes is the fourth stage. One important aspect of the grounded theory is that data collection, data analysis, and journaling happens simultaneously throughout the research study. The fifth stage of grounded research involves the sorting of the data. This is where the relationships that emerge from analysis stage are sorted and put into the form of a theory. Drafting the written analysis of the relationships and interrelationships between the data is the final stage of grounded research (Grounded Theory Institute, 2014).

**Grounded Theory Approach Summation**

The underlying idea behind the grounded theory approach is to analyze and re-analyze the available database to determine all known variables such as concepts, ideas, and properties and the interrelationships that are happening between them. “The ability to perceive variables and relationships is termed "theoretical sensitivity" and is affected
by a number of things including one's reading of the literature and one's use of techniques
designed to enhance sensitivity” (Borgatti, n.d., p. 1). One of the main goals of research
utilizing the grounded theory is to focus on making implicit ideas and beliefs explicit.
Through the application of the grounded theory the gray area is removed from the
information and a theory is clearly stated in terms that can be applied by others (Borgatti,
n.d.).

Summary

The implementation of correct best practices for reading instruction is essential to
ensure that all students’ needs are being met on a daily basis. American reading
instruction has changed throughout history as the country has evolved. Developing a
love of reading, focusing on acquisition of a diverse vocabulary, activating background
knowledge, cooperative grouping, and improving fluency are a few of the research-
documented reading instructional best practices for the average student (National
Reading Panel, 2000; Gulek, 2003; Tompkins, 2004; Craft & Robles-Pina, 2008;
Curwen, Miller, White-Smith, & Calfee, 2010; Pullen, Tuckwiller, Ashworth, &
Lovelace, 2011; Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Duke & Block, 2012; Finch, 2012; Daniels,
Pirayoff, & Bessant, 2013; Robb, 2013; Brown, Killingsworth, & Alavosius, 2014;
Darwish, 2014; Rasinski, 2014; Roskos & Neuman, 2014; Weih, 2014; Chang, 2015;
Daniels, Pirayoff, & Bessant, 2015). At-risk and ELL students present a distinct
challenge to educators because of their unique way of learning. At-risk students need
extra one-on-one instruction to make up for lost time and to bridge the gap of knowledge
between their more fluent peers and themselves. English language learners are another
group of students who require different instructional techniques to be implemented-to
meet their instructional needs, especially in the reading classroom. The response to intervention program and continued phonics instruction have been shown to work at times with both at-risk and ELL students (Vogt & Shearer, 2007; Shenendehowa Central School District, 2009; Allington, 2011; Brown, 2014; RTI Action Network, 2015). However, there is no clear consensus about what those best practices are with regard to at-risk and English language learner reading students.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to compile identified best practices for elementary at-risk reading instruction in grades 4 and 5. According to Curwen, Miller, White-Smith, and Calfee (2010), the main role of a teacher is “providing explicit meta-cognition instruction to students” (p. 130). Metacognition, or active personal reflection, while learning, is one of the major missing pieces in the learning process for at-risk students (Curwen, Miller, White-Smith, & Calfee, 2010). Ensuring students have a meaningful understanding and connection to what they are reading is an essential aspect of best practice instruction (Weih, 2014). A need exists for more exploration into a specific list of effective best practices for elementary at-risk reading instruction in grades 4 and 5.

Research Questions

The central research questions addressed in this qualitative study were

1. From a teacher’s perspective, what instructional practices have a positive influence on elementary, at-risk reading students’ learning?
2. From a teacher’s perspective, what instructional practices have a negative influence on elementary, at-risk reading students’ learning?

Qualitative Research

This was a qualitative study utilizing semi-structured interviews. Qualitative research was chosen by the researcher in order to better identify the best practices for elementary at-risk reading students. “Qualitative research is aimed at gaining a deep understanding of a specific organization or event, rather than surface description of a
large sample of a population. It aims to provide an explicit rendering of the structure, order, and broad patterns found among a group of participants” (California State University, 2015, p. 1). In addition to finding out what participants think, qualitative research allows a researcher to understand why the participants think that way (Marketing Donut, 2015).

Qualitative research was selected for this study for several reasons. Primarily, the ability to utilize the natural setting for the participants was one of the major deciding factors. Participants were interviewed about what they experience on a daily basis; conjectures were not necessary because first hand experiences were available for all questions in the interview. The research setting does not have to be remade or contrived; it is authentic (Hatch, 2002). Secondly, qualitative research was chosen because the voices of the participants drove the research. The researcher was able to follow the lead of the participants in order to have a more accurate picture of best practices for reading instruction. Thirdly, the fact that the researcher was able to be involved in every step of the research was a deciding factor. Utilizing interviews allowed the researcher to interact with participants throughout every step of the research. Finally, qualitative research is not driven by the need to prove or disprove a hypothesis. Qualitative research drives itself and is not narrowed by any boundaries (Hatch, 2002).

Patterns and trends about instructional best practices emerged through the interview process, which involved recording and journaling about the conversation between the participant and researcher. The utilization of semi-structured interviews gives the interviewer the freedom to follow the guide, but also “to follow topical
trajectories in the conversation that may stray from the guide when he or she feels this is appropriate” (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2008, p. 1).

**Research Approach**

The research approach was a grounded qualitative study utilizing interviews. In general, there are six stages of grounded research. The first stage is preparation, which includes removing all preconceptions, beginning with a broad research topic with no definite problem. The second stage moves into data collection; the most common form is “intensive interviews”. Analysis is the third stage of grounded research. The analysis is called “constant comparative analysis” and involves “relating data to ideas, then ideas to other ideas” (Grounded Theory Institute, 2014, p. 1). The fourth stage is journaling, which involves writing about the different codes and their ongoing relationships. It is essential to realize that data collection, analysis, and journaling happen at the same time and will continue to work together throughout the research. “Sorting and theoretical outline” (p. 2) is the fifth stage of grounded research. This stage involves finding the relationships between the emerging concepts. The final stage is drafting a writing of the relationships found throughout the research (Grounded Theory Institute, 2014).

**Research Participants and Setting for the Study**

The data for the research were gathered in eleven elementary schools in a small rural school district in east Tennessee. B.P. Dean (personal communication, February 15, 2016) gave the following description of the school district used in the research.

The school district for this study is located in Eastern Tennessee at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains and serves over 10,000 students. Seventy percent of students participate in the National School Lunch Program. The racial
and ethnic composition of the district experienced dramatic changes over the last 25 years. In 1992 the student populations included 93% White, 6% Black, and 1% other including 32 students who identified as Hispanic and English Language Learners. Currently, the student body is comprised of 68% White, 4% Black, 4% other, and 24% Hispanic including 1341 English Language Learners. The district has the largest number of migrant students in the state of Tennessee and ranks second among Tennessee districts in percentage of English Language Learners. This represents an anomaly in the Appalachian region.

Despite the rapid shift in demographics that present challenges for many districts, this school system is recognized across, the region, and nation as a high performing district. The district has been recognized with the SCORE prize as the most effective district in Tennessee in improving student achievement. Additionally, the district is an AP Honor District. The system offers 17 Advanced Placement courses to its economically challenged and diverse student body. This award is based on increasing participation, particularly among Hispanic and African American students, and the number of students scoring 3 or higher on the five-point scale.

Valerie von Frank in conjunction with Learning Forward described in the 2015 book, Reach the Highest Standards in Professional Learning: Learning Designs, the work of the district in understanding and advancing professional learning that leads to student success. Through the district’s case study, von Frank explored the implementation of the design standard, one of the seven Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning employed by the district.
This level of effective professional learning synergistically and effectively promotes teaching and learning. The district utilizes job-embedded professional development and focuses on student engagement and rigorous instruction for all students.

Seven of the eleven schools were identified as Title 1, meaning at least 40% of their population are low income and receive free/reduced lunch at the school (Title 1, Part A Program, 2014). The sample of the study consisted of $N=15$ fourth and fifth grade educators. The sample educators were selected for participation in the study by their respective principals. The principals based their selections on teachers who demonstrated success in reading best practice implementation with at-risk readers. Those particular grade levels were chosen because of the increased testing accountability for the educators.

The researcher contacted the superintendent’s office for official permission to obtain a list of the at-risk reading students in all eleven elementary schools and permission to interview educators in the schools. The principals were contacted to obtain permission to interview educators in their school building, as well as to select the educators to interview (see Appendix A for principal letter). Due to their expertise and knowledge of teacher effectiveness, the researcher allowed principals to provide the names of the participants.

After receiving the list of educators from the principals, the researcher drafted and sent a letter to each of the prospective participants describing the study and asking for their voluntary participation in the research (see Appendix B for letter to participants). After receiving contact from the participants willing to be a part of the study, an
appointment time was set for the interview to take place. Prior to the interview data, a reminder letter was sent to all the interviewees about the date, time, and place for the one-on-one interview. At the beginning of every interview, the researcher obtained a signed letter of consent from participants who voluntarily participated in the study (see Appendix C for informed consent form). Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time in the process.

**Data collection procedures**

After obtaining permission from the Carson-Newman University Institutional Review Board to proceed with the study, the process of data collection began. A public school system in East Tennessee was chosen for the research study. All eleven of the elementary schools were chosen to be part of the research samples. The researcher conducted fifteen interviews during the spring of 2016.

The interview guide was piloted prior to implementation on a small group of teachers representative of the population that were used for the study (See Appendix D for Pilot cover letter). Participants were asked to provide feedback on the clarity of questions and the responses. The pilot test interview responses were analyzed for inconsistencies or unexpected answers. Necessary changes were made to the survey prior to beginning the study.

The qualitative pieces of data were collected through semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is characterized by an interview with a predetermined set of questions, but the researcher has the freedom to follow “trajectories” that develop during the interview (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2008). The researcher used an interview guide but allowed for the freedom of additional conversation when applicable.
(see Appendix E for interview guide). Each interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed. The length of the interviews varied from 30 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes. Furthermore, the researcher kept a journal after each interview where thoughts and observations were recorded in order to fully understand the “feel” of the interview.

Ethical considerations

The first phase of the research was to procure authorization from the Carson-Newman University Institutional Review Board. The second phase was to obtain permission from the school system and then the individual principals. The third phase was to contact the chosen participants to see if they were willing to volunteer to participate in the study. The principals and teachers were made aware that the names of their school and personal names would not be revealed to anyone throughout the course of the research. All names remained private to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. All involved persons were given pseudonyms throughout the entire study and results.

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher had the participants sign an informed consent document (see Appendix C for informed consent form). Participants were also reminded that their participation in the study was voluntary and their answers to the interview questions would be kept confidential. The researcher acquired permission to audio-record the interview and to use direct quotes in the final report when necessary. The final report was made accessible to all participants prior to publication. The secure storage of audio recording and transcriptions was also discussed with each participant.

All methods and data were presented in the researcher’s written report to ensure complete transparency of the study. Accuracy and honesty were applied when
representing the data. Measures were taken to avoid any researcher bias throughout the study.

**Data analysis procedures**

Data analysis took place after each of the 15 interviews. Throughout each interview, field notes were taken. Immediately following the interview, these field notes were then analyzed and reflected upon in the researcher’s journal. An audio recording was kept for all of the interviews. After the completion of all 15 interviews, the researcher coded each interview’s transcript. The grounded theory was used to aid in the coding of interview data. Through Anselm Strauss’s grounded theory, the researcher first looks at field notes for patterns and categories. When a pattern or category was found it was named and coded. The researcher continued to check for consistencies between the codes. Eventually, certain patterns and categories emerged as prominent to the study (Ratcliff, n.d.).

**Summary**

The qualitative research design was used in this study due to the ability to utilize a natural setting and allow the participants to drive the research. Semi-structured interviews were employed so the interviews were flexible and could go in the direction that the participant led. The participants were interviewed individually. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. After each interview the researcher recorded notes and impressions from the interview. The data were then coded and analyzed for themes and patterns in connection to the research questions. The information learned from this study will be advantageous for application in elementary at-risk reading classrooms.
In summary the following steps were used to examine the qualitative data:

1. An audio recording was taken during each of the 15 interviews in addition to the hand written answers on a hard copy of the interview questions.
2. An additional transcription was done following each interview from the audio recording.
3. A journal was kept during and after each interview to record any feelings or ideas the researcher had during or immediately following the individual interview.
4. The researcher and a co-coder well versed in coding of qualitative data did a first round of coding.
5. The data were chunked into themes and analyzed for patterns.
6. A second round of coding was done by the researcher with the first round themes and patterns in mind.
7. Constant comparison took place between the 15 transcriptions during both rounds of coding.
8. Two editors well versed in qualitative research read the final product.
CHAPTER 4
ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of this grounded qualitative study was to examine teacher perspectives with regard to best practices for elementary at-risk reading instruction in grade 4 and grade 5. The information gathered and theories developed in this study provide a better understanding of which instructional best practices are the most effective for improving learning outcomes for at-risk and ELL students. The study involved collecting data through open-ended, one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 15 elementary school teachers. The interview questions ranged from recounting a daily at-risk reading lesson to describing beneficial and detrimental best practices for the same population. The final question for every interview was “If you could change one thing about your current at-risk reading instruction what would it be? Why?” The interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 105 minutes.

Presentation of Descriptive Characteristics of Participants

School administrators from each of the eleven elementary schools in the district selected the sample educators to be used as participants. Principals were asked to base their selections on teacher effectiveness scores, evaluation scores, and their overall opinion of the instructional techniques implemented in the classroom. Another selection criteria was demonstrated success in reading best practice implementation with at-risk readers. Fourth and fifth grade teachers were used in this research. Two county-wide educators were also part of the research sample: an ELL teacher who spent five years as a fifth grade classroom teacher and a 4th/5th grade instructional coach who spent six years as an ELL teacher. Fourth and fifth grade were used as the focus grade levels because of
the increased testing accountability for the educators. Table 4.1 presents pertinent demographic information about the participants in the study.

Table 4.1
Demographics of Teacher Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assigned Number</th>
<th>Years taught</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Subjects Taught</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Literacy and Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;, 4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;, and 5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>All subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Literacy and Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Literacy and Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Literacy and Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Literacy and Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; and 5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>All subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Literacy and Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>All grades</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Literacy and Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>All subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Literacy and Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; and 5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>ELL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Literacy, Math and Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Literacy and Social Studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Literacy includes Reading, Language (Grammar), and Writing*
Research Questions

The researcher examined teachers’ perspectives related to the following research questions:

1. From a teacher’s perspective, what instructional practices have a positive influence on elementary, at-risk reading students’ learning?
2. From a teacher’s perspective, what instructional practices have a negative influence on elementary, at-risk reading students’ learning?

Analysis of Data

The researcher utilized a twelve-question interview related to best practices for at-risk reading instruction. The twelve questions were aimed at answering the two research questions for the current study. The questions addressing the first research question were describing a daily reading lesson, personally defining best practices for reading instruction, listing successful best practices, providing examples of successful best practices in action and a biography of a student who benefited from successful implementation of best practices. The questions addressing the second research question were listing detrimental best practices, providing examples of detrimental best practices in action, a biography of a student who was negatively impacted from detrimental implementation of best practices. Additional questions in the interview were describing the greatest challenge of teaching at-risk reading students, describing the most rewarding aspect of teaching at-risk reading students, discussing attributes that are unique to at-risk reading students, and explaining one aspect of their current at-risk reading instruction the participants would change if possible.

The following sections answer the first research question discussing instructional practices that have a positive influence on elementary, at-risk reading students’ learning.
Describing a Daily Reading Lesson

The state standardized assessment in Tennessee, known as the TNReady assessment, requires that reading be infused in every subject. Therefore, a daily reading lesson never truly ends because it is ongoing throughout the school day. The researcher asked the participants to describe their daily focused reading instruction where new reading skills were introduced. Five themes emerged following analysis of participants’ responses to the first interview question involving their description of a daily reading lesson: writing embedded instruction, small group/center instruction, mini lessons focused on skill development as opposed to standard focused, an emphasis on vocabulary development, and integration of Social Studies content. Figure 4.1 represents the number of participants discussing the five themes in their daily at-risk reading lesson.

Figure 4.1
Themes within daily reading lesson

Writing embedded instruction. Writing embedded instruction was identified by ten of the fifteen participants. The writing lessons ranged from as small as five-minute quick writes, to writing in response to a reading passage, to a full writing prompt.
Participant 15 has students complete quick writes in response to both informational and literature based text. She explained:

After we dissect the text we either answer questions based on the text, create questions based on that text, or we complete a quick write based on that text. The third day the writing is normally a little more involved since we are more used to the text.

Five of the participants utilize writing as part of small group or center work. They were all quick to point out that explicit writing instruction has to take place prior to allowing at-risk students to work on writing in a small group or as part of a center rotation. In addition to the small group utilization of writing, three also included the Daily 5 as part of their daily reading lesson. The Daily 5 is an aspect of elementary reading instruction where five components—reading to self, reading to someone, listening to reading, writing work, and word work—are incorporated every day to increase students’ reading independence (Boushey & Moser, 2006). Without realizing it many of the other participants also include aspects of the Daily 5 in their classroom on a daily basis.

Participant 1 integrates writing throughout their lesson. Each reading lesson begins with a five minute “fun” quick write about something personal with the students: favorite time of day, experience from the summer, snow days, scariest moment, etc. Participant 1 recalled a reading lesson:

We start with a writing prompt where they write for five minutes. During that time they have to incorporate whatever language skill we are working on during
the week. This is more of a creative writing type where they are not using an anchor text.

Participant 1 then moves into her language skill lesson and then into her explicit reading lesson. Writing is incorporated again throughout her reading lesson:

We then move into our reading assignment. We try to do pre-read activities where they activate prior knowledge through three minute writes. During these writes they write about everything they know about the subject we are about to read about.

After Participant 1 finishes her teacher led close read of the text, which involves discussing unknown words and focusing on the chosen reading standard, her students complete an entire essay incorporating the above-mentioned reading skill. This third and final writing activity is text dependent.

Writing is also infused throughout every lesson for Participant 13. In addition to the focus on writing instruction, conferring is utilized daily. While the students work independently, participant 13 conferences with her students for at least 30 minutes every day. She keeps a conferring notebook and schedule for every student. Each student engages in conferencing a minimum of one day per week. During the conferences, the student’s writing is analyzed, discussed, and goals are set for the following week.

K12 Reader (2008), a curriculum based website for educators (classroom and homeschool), focuses on the importance of writing within reading instruction.

A child’s literacy development is dependent on this interconnection between reading and writing. They can apply their knowledge about the ways that they
chose to use particular language, text structure or content to better understand a professional author’s construction of his or her texts (p. 1).

The participants of this research study value writing instruction as evidenced by the daily incorporation of it into their reading lessons.

**Small group/center instruction.** Seven of the 15 participants mentioned small groups and/or center instruction during their discussion of a daily reading lesson. Small group/center instruction is used as a way to differentiate instruction for all students at the same time. Students rotate through different activities/centers; some of the centers are independent and some are with a teacher or teacher assistant. In the groups or centers students have a smaller teacher/student ratio and are able to ask more specific questions. The teacher can also reinforce skills needed by that particular small group of students (Meador, 2015). Small group instruction takes preparation on the part of the teacher and on the part of the students. In order for it to be productive, students need to be trained in how to properly behave during small group/center instruction. A teacher cannot jump in the first week of school with five different centers and expect learning to be taking place in all of the centers. Students need to build independent stamina and classroom expectations and rules need to be firmly in place prior to full implementation of small group/center instruction (DreamBox Learning, 2012).

Participant 2 uses small groups and centers in order to have reader’s theater in her classroom. Reader’s theater is described in Aaron Shepard’s book *Readers on Stage* (2004):

Reader’s theater is minimal theater in support of literature and reading. There are many styles of reader’s theater, but nearly all share these features:
- Narration serves as the framework of dramatic presentation.
- No full stage sets. If used at all, sets are simple and suggestive.
- No full costumes. If used at all, costumes are partial and suggestive, or neutral and uniform.
- No full memorization. Scripts are used openly in performance.

Popular first in colleges and universities, reader’s theater has now moved to earlier education, where it is seen as a key tool for creating interest and skill in reading. Repeated readings bring fluency, and if a script is based on an available book, kids want to read that too. What’s more, reader’s theater is a relatively simple activity for the teacher, with no required setup other than making copies of scripts (p. 9).

Participant 2 believes that reader’s theater is the reason some of her students have become fluent readers. She credits the “creative” nature of reader’s theater in allowing her to reach some normally “unreachable” students with literature.

Small groups that span the entire week are how Participant 11 spends the majority of her reading instruction. She begins everyday with a standards focused mini lesson and then her students immediately move into small groups. Participants 11’s “stations” or small groups include vocabulary work, comprehension with text dependent questions, a writing based station, and a skill focused station based on the standard focused mini lesson from the beginning of class. Every student completes two stations a day and rotates through all four of the stations twice a week.
Participant 10 sets up her reading lesson similar to Participant 11 with small groups throughout the entire week. Participant 10’s classroom is made up completely of ELL students. She states:

A typical lesson with reading is that I start every lesson with centers and they have five rotations that they complete throughout the week. Within those 20 ELL students, I still have a ton of different levels so within each center I color code which assignment they are supposed to do.

One station is the teaching station and this station changes every day depending on the group of students coming to her. Participant 10 focuses the teaching station on the skill where students have the greatest deficit.

Participants 4 and 8 utilize technology in at least one of their small groups. Both of these participants have a center that strictly uses a computer-based program. The program both of these participants mentioned is IXL. IXL is an online membership required platform and curriculum for K-12 instruction. It offers “unlimited, targeted practice of grammar, spelling, and vocabulary” (IXL, 2016, p. 10). The schools where Participants 4 and 8 work have paid to have school wide membership access to IXL for their students. Both participants view IXL as an invaluable instructional tool for their students and believe it allows them to add another productive small group with minimal effort on their part.

Small group/center instruction is the backbone within many of the research participants’ instruction. It allows them to cover more material in a shorter amount of time and also to provide more individualized instruction to improve student-learning
outcomes. Small group instruction is their answer to the “how” question when it comes to at-risk reading instruction.

**Focus on skill development as opposed to standards focused.** Skill focused instruction is instruction where life applications are connected to what is being taught. Standard focused instruction is instruction where skills are taught in isolation with no connection to the bigger picture. Standard based instruction helps students understand a particular topic and can be successful with difficult and complex concepts. However, students miss the application of the knowledge outside of that specific content. Skill based instruction helps students develop foundational skills and academic strategies that can be applied to real world situations they will encounter on a daily basis (Ackerman & Perkins, 1989). Ten of the 15 participants discussed the fact that their instruction is more skill focused as opposed to standard focused.

Participant 13 teaches mostly ELL students and begins daily instruction with a skill focused mini lesson geared to their instructional needs. She describes it below:

I begin with a short skill focused mini lesson over a struggle the overall classroom is having. With ELL students you can’t just hit the standard, you really have to go deeper because you really have to get at what they are lacking…ELL students come to school with at least a five-year deficit from other kindergarteners and they are playing make-up the rest of their school career.

Participant 7 also focuses on skill-based instruction through student led learning. All of her instruction is scaffolded with gradual release to the students. Students are actively involved in every aspect of the lesson. She focuses on application of the skill through student discovery. She makes sure to have multiple “opportunities for students
to take an active role through turn and talk, stop and jot, and pause and reflect”. Through allowing her instruction to be skill based and student led, Participant 7’s students have shown more ownership of their individual learning. The increased personal ownership makes her classroom environment one of mutual respect.

One participant follows a scripted program, S.P.I.R.E., that is skill based. “S.P.I.R.E. is an intensive, multisensory reading intervention program designed specifically for nonreaders and struggling readers. The program integrates phonological awareness, phonics, spelling, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension in a systematic 10-step lesson plan” (EPS, 2016, p.1). The other participants who discussed skill-based instruction during their explanation of a daily at-risk reading lesson did so through their grammar or language lesson. The majority of the time the skill based instruction was done in whole group as a mini language lesson prior to moving into the application aspect of the reading comprehension lesson.

**An emphasis on vocabulary development.** Through research August, Carlo, Dressler, and Snow (2005) found that explicit vocabulary development is extremely beneficial to ELL students. A large number of ELL students are diagnosed as special education student because of their deficits in general vocabulary. With a little bit of time and effort in vocabulary instruction the number of ELL students misdiagnosed as special education students will greatly decrease (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005). Eleven of the 15 participants mentioned some aspect of vocabulary instruction during their description of a daily reading lesson.

Participants 5 and 6 include vocabulary work during their Daily 5. Participant 6 goes beyond the Daily 5 component with her vocabulary instruction. She begins her
lessons with a vocabulary focused guided reading where she includes fluency and retell practice. “I begin by going over the vocabulary for the week and then move into a lot of guided reading. We would move into our leveled groups even within the at-risk group to do the vocabulary work through guided reading.” Seven of the 11 participants who include daily vocabulary instruction do so through their small groups. Vocabulary instruction can be set up fairly easily as independent work so it works well in centers.

**Integration of social studies content.** The final theme that emerged through the coding of the data was the integration of social studies content into the daily reading lesson. Eight of the 15 participants choose their reading passages based on the social studies content they are being taught at the time. Participant 12 believes that utilizing reading passages based on the social studies content keeps her at-risk students more interested in the reading passages. She has them debate each other on issues in the text. One person goes to the front of the room and the other children have to either defend or refute what the first student has said.

Participant 14 likes to use social studies passages because of the high interest level they have for her students. She explained that when a teacher uses social studies content, both boys and girls are interested in the topic. She has found that the more interested the students are in the reading passage the more closely they pay attention to the content resulting in a higher level of comprehension. Participant 5 calls her instruction a “full integration” approach meaning that all of the social studies content standards are being taught through her reading lessons. She even does their vocabulary development through social studies embedded vocabulary in the content specific passages. Participant 3 made similar points as Participant 5. She does all of their writing
using social studies content texts. She believes that students develop a deeper understanding of the social studies content when she requires them to read the text at depth necessary to write extensively about the subject.

Through combining the two subjects, Reading and Social Studies, teachers free up time to spend diving deeper into the texts. Teachers are able to spend more time on modeling productive reading strategies when using social studies content text because they are teaching two subjects at once. The social studies content is discussed at a more rigorous level, and the reading standards are being applied to complex content specific text (Benchmark Education, 2016). Participant 1 views it as a “win-win situation”.

**Personally defining best practices for reading instruction**

Ask ten different people how they personally define best practices and you will get ten different answers. The researcher asked fifteen different teachers to define it and received fifteen different answers. Two themes emerged from the fifteen interviews when discussing best practices. The themes were the fact that best practices for at-risk reading instruction needed to be research based and student focused/individualized instruction.

**Research Based.** The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 have a list of specifications for what qualifies as scientifically based research (Dahlkemper, 2003; Slavin, 2015). The United States Department of Education (as cited in Dahlkemper, 2003) defines scientifically based research as one that utilizes experimentation, requires multiple rounds of data analysis, measurements are taken from multiple observations, has been evaluated for controls, allows for replication, and has been approved after a rigorous scientific review.
Eleven of the 15 participants discussed the fact that in order for them to consider something a best practice that it needs to be back by scientific research. Participant 14 talked about best practices in terms of experts. “Best practices to me mean you are doing the latest trends and following the experts’ advice as to what to do in your classroom.” The other research terms used by the participants were “rigorous researched thinking, research based, backed by research, shown by research, researched and proven to be effective, and doing what the latest experts advise.” Five of the 11 who mentioned research based in their best practices definitions also discussed the fact that they take it upon themselves to search out the newest peer reviewed research to find new instructional practices to utilize in their classroom.

**Student focused/individualized instruction.** Ensuring instruction is student focused and individualized was the second them for Question 2. The phrase “best for the students” was used often in the responses. Ten out of the 15 participants mentioned something about best practices needing to be student focused. Participant 5 cautioned educators “to not simply follow the popular fad, but actually do what is best for your specific kids.” She went on to discuss that just because it works in one teacher’s classroom does not necessarily mean that it is going to work in everyone else’s classrooms.

Participant 6 had a similar sentiment, “I feel like best practices are what relates best to the classroom and how your students learn. I really like Thoughtful Classroom and it focus on the types of learners.” Thoughtful classroom is a professional development program that was utilized by the school district in this research. The program includes instructional practices such as “compare and contrast”, “reading for
meaning”, “code-vocabulary”, “task rotations”, and also a learning style inventory (Silver Strong and Associates, 2013). The four different learning styles Participant 6 were referring to are:

Mastery Learners: students who enjoy learning “practical information and procedures”. These students learn best when “instruction is focused on modeling new skills, practicing, and feedback sessions”.

Interpersonal Learners: students who enjoy learning “about things that affect people’s lives”. These students learn best when the teacher “pays attention to their successes and struggles”.

Understanding Learners: students who enjoy learning when using “logic, debate, and inquiry to investigate ideas”. These students learn best when “they are challenged to think and explain their ideas”.

Self-Expressive: students who enjoy learning when using “their imaginations to explore ideas”. These students learn best when “they are invited to express themselves in unique and original ways” (Silver Strong and Associates, 2005, p. 4).

Participant 15 was quick to point out that just because an instructional practice is researched based does not mean that it will work in your personal classroom. Participant 11 expects to see student academic success from an instructional best practice on “a regular basis and it must be test-based and anecdotal”. In addition to individualized instruction, Participant 1 believes that:

Best practices would be to use rigorous thinking, pushing those children to see beyond the black and white of the text and actually engage in discussion.
Participant 3 believes that best practices for reading at-risk instruction need to be two things, “tried and true” and also “evolving and adapting”. She prides herself on being a life-long learner and always looking for new ways to better meet the needs of her students. However, she is quick to point out that she is not going to “reinvent the wheel” if there is something in place that works for her students.

**Successful Best Practices**

There were four recurring themes with regard to the responses the participants gave about successful best practices for at-risk reading instruction. The four identified themes were vocabulary-focused instruction, building on foundational reading skills, cooperative learning, and teacher modeling.

**Vocabulary Focused Instruction.** The first theme, vocabulary focused instruction, was a theme throughout the research. A lack of vocabulary development has been linked to overall poor reading ability and also weakened verbal skills (Otaiba & Fuchs, 2006). If students do not understand the words they are reading, it is impossible for them to comprehend the author’s message. Vocabulary development does not just happen; it must be explicitly taught and intentionally interwoven throughout a child’s educational career (Roskos & Newman, 2014).

ELL students tend to have the greatest deficit area in vocabulary development. Participant 10’s classroom is made up completely of ELL students. When discussing successful best practices they said:

Probably because they are all ELL, I need everything to be visual and vocabulary focused. The best practice in that means using lots of visual aids to help break down the vocabulary words.
Participant 4 discussed that there needs to be daily vocabulary focused instruction. She emphasized the fact that instruction needs to include real world application of the vocabulary words being taught. The instruction needs to move beyond simple drill and memorization and into true application. Participant 4 believes that at-risk readers, more so than other levels of learners, need to see the relevance to their personal life “in order to see the value in learning the material”. Participant 1 mentioned that it is important to ensure that students are not “simply word callers and are actually comprehending what they are reading”. Kelly Cartwright (2010), in her book *Word callers: small-group and one-to-one interventions for children who read but don't comprehend*, explains the term word callers. She says,

Have you ever zoned out during reading-pronounced the words, without processing their meaning? This is how "word callers" experience all reading. Word callers are so focused on letters and decoding that their minds don't knit together the meaning of the words they are reading (p.2).

**Building on foundational reading skills.** “Phonological and phonemic awareness, decoding and phonics, word analysis, and fluency are known as the cornerstones of proficient reading” (Roit, 2015, p.1). In the words of Participant 2 with regard to foundational reading skills, “if students do not have the foundational reading skills than it is an almost insurmountable challenge to get them reading grade level material”. Participant 9 also emphasized a need for building on foundational reading skills. She focused on giving the students the phonics practice they need to be able to decode multi-syllabic words. She found that “working with students using decodable text you see systematic sequential progress with even your lowest readers”.

In addition to work on the foundational reading skills, Participant 3 believes it is important to identify specific areas of deficit unique to each student. She has found the new RTI² program to show great positive impacts with her at-risk students. The California Department of Education (2015) defines RTI² as

A systematic, data-driven approach to instruction that benefits every student.

RTI² integrates resources from general education, categorical programs, and special education through a comprehensive system of core instruction and tiered levels of interventions to benefit every student (p.1).

**Cooperative Learning.** Cooperative learning or group work was mentioned by seven of the fifteen participants. Participants 11, 12, 13, and 14 all discussed that allowing their at-risk reading students to work with at least one other student increased learning for all students involved. Participant 12 reminded the researcher of the old adage, “whoever is doing the talking is doing the learning”. Participant 13 found that it is important to have the student lead the instruction. The “kids should be talking to kids”. Participant 15 mentioned choral reading as one of the most productive instructional practices for their at-risk reading students. She said that prior to implementing it in her classroom she was hesitant to use it because she had heard “horrible things about choral reading”. She tried it on a whim one day and her students immediately responded positively to it. She found that their at-risk reading students were “scared to read aloud by themselves, but they will read aloud in a group”. Her feelings on the subject of choral reading is “the more you read the better you read” and if choral reading gets them reading more then she is “all for using it” in her classroom.
Teacher Modeling. Teacher modeling was the fourth and final theme determined from the interview answers for Question 3 dealing with beneficial best practices. Eight of the 15 participants explained the importance of teacher modeling especially in their at-risk reading classes. Participant 7 agreed with Karen Lea’s 2013 article, “Modeling-Essential for Learning” with regard to the importance of modeling and then moving into gradual release of responsibility to your students. Participant 7 indicated beneficial best practices in her at-risk reading class,

I would definitely say modeling, using the gradual release of responsibility with the students. Definitely modeling the thinking process, chunking the information, being intentional through carefully pre-crafted read alouds. By that I mean having gone in and identified possible misconceptions ahead of time, knowing where you are going to stop, knowing which vocabulary is most critical.

The process Participant 7 discussed and the Participant 5 alluded to when she mentioned “differentiated guided reading” is further explained in Halsey’s (2011) book Brilliance by Design. In her book, Halsey introduces her readers to the ENGAGE model, which is implemented as a way to have the students become an active part of instruction through teacher preparation and modeling.

Energize learners by challenging thought patterns with pre-reading before session
Navigate content by presenting it in small chunks with interactive experiences
Generate meaning by helping learners determine the significance of the content in their lives
Apply to the real world by helping learners put into practice what they’ve learned
Gauge and celebrate by creating ways to assess and celebrate what has been
accomplished

Extend learning to action by following up and helping learners create action plans (p.47)

Examples of Successful Best Practices in Action

A best practice is just words on a page until it has been put into action and has shown positive results in the classroom. This study’s participants have all tried and been successful with many best practices in their at-risk reading classrooms. The examples of successful best practices in action fall into three outcome categories/themes: improvements in student learning and reading levels, students building confidence, and an increase in student engagement. Some of the participants’ answers fell into more than one of the themes for outcomes of successful best practices. See Figure 4.2 for participants’ answers coded in the themes.

Figure 4.2
Outcomes of successful Best Practices in Action
Improvements in student learning and reading levels. Thirteen of the fifteen participants reported seeing an increase in student learning after they implemented their successful best practice. Participants 1, 4, 8, 10, and 15 all discussed a vocabulary best practice. Participant 1 has her students participate in an activity she has named “Word Catchers”. The students are given a list of vocabulary words at the beginning of every week and throughout the week their task is to find those words in any text that they are reading. When they find the vocabulary word they “catch it” by writing the word and location on an index card and placing it in the “Word Catcher” box. Participant 1 draws a card out of the box at the end of the class every day and the winner gets a piece of candy. This encourages her students to learn the vocabulary words so they know what words they are looking for in the text. It also keeps them actively engaged in everything they are reading throughout the week because they have to read it closely to find the vocabulary words. She has witnessed an incredible response and her students have continued to look for previous weeks’ words in future text. They have truly added the words to their personal vocabulary, and this has made a major difference in their reading fluency and the vocabulary her students use in their writing.

Participant 15 works for her students to have ownership of their vocabulary words by having them complete vocabulary squares. Her students are required to research the word, write the definition in their own words, draw a picture of the word, and write a sentence using the word in context. She discussed that her students get excited about writing and illustrating the sentence using the word. “Sometimes it turns into a competition and they see who can come up with the most creative sentence using the word correctly in context.”
Participant 4 utilizes cloze reading activities and credits them with helping her students have a greater mastery of the vocabulary in the text and a higher level of comprehension. Hornsby, Parry, and Sukarana (1992) as cited on the Gallaudet University’s website, (2016) discuss what a cloze activity is in detail:

Cloze refers to the ‘reading closure’ practice required when readers must fill blanks left in text, using whatever knowledge and experience they have.

In a cloze activity words or letters are omitted from text in ways that require the readers to use specific reading strategies, or to focus upon specific cues in the text (p.7).

Participants 3 and 9 have both witnessed an increase in student learning and reading level by utilizing individualized skill based instruction. Participant 3 embeds this through her RTI² program, High Noon Reading. High Noon Books is a reading program specializing in “helping struggling readers succeed” (High Noon Books, 2013, p. 1). They offer “phonics-based chapter books, high interest/low level chapter books, high interest books, fiction, non-fiction and classics” (p. 1). In addition to their main reading program, High Noon also offers intervention programs. High Noon Reading is the intervention program geared toward students in grades 3 and above. It is designed to be implemented small groups or one-on-one, making it work for the RTI² intervention time.

Participant 3 discussed her personal experience with using the High Noon Reading program during her RTI² intervention time this year.

I am a firm believer in RTI². I have seen incredible growth this year. I believe honing in on their specific skill deficit has made all of the difference. Last year we only worked on fluency and comprehension, but some needed decoding and
phonics. I firmly believe in diagnosing their specific skill deficit, and High Noon makes that easy.

Participant 9 uses the S.P.I.R.E. program discussed earlier and believes that having a scripted RTI\(^2\) program has made a huge improvement in her at-risk reading students’ growth. She believes the “systematic sequential progress” of the program’s work with word sorting, spelling sorting, and forming of words provides her students the tools they need to decode grade level complex text.

**Students building confidence.** The second major theme for Question 4 that became evident through the interviews is the fact that at-risk students build confidence through the application of successful best practices. Ten of the fifteen teachers interviewed saw some degree of confidence boost through the application of their discussed best practice. Participant 7 discussed wait time as her successful best practice.

Private think time, also known as wait time, allows students additional time to process and respond. One lesson in particular… was a very heavily scaffolded close reading process and I used the chunk and summarize process. I kept it (wait time) consistent and established a consistent time frame of wait time. We then established, as a class, a signal for when they were ready instead of simply raising their hand.

Participant 7 went on to discuss that she saw a higher level of confidence with her students because they felt like they had enough time to answer and did not feel in competition to be the first to have the correct answer. More of the students ended up with the correct answer because they had time to process the information at their own pace.
After the students got the correct answer for the first couple of questions, they were more willing to attempt the additional questions.

Participant 13 believes that ensuring the teacher to student ratio is kept as low as possible leads to an increase in student confidence. When the teacher to student ratio is kept lower in a classroom there are more opportunities for student led instruction. “Students feel empowered by leading their own learning.” She also credits the increase in individualized instruction that takes place when there are fewer students in a classroom.

When instruction is catered to one specific child, of course they are going to have a higher confidence level because the individual needs are being met to a higher level than during a whole group lesson with a larger class size.

**Increase in student engagement.** Participant 11 credits ability grouping or leveling as the best practice that leads to the most success in her classroom. She uses the XYZ setting method of grouping discussed in “Research of Ability Grouping” by Kulik (1992). XYZ grouping is where, in a single grade, students are divided in high, middle and low groups and are taught in separate classrooms. This can be done for a single subject or the entire day. Boaler, William, and Brown (2000) subdivide the XYZ definition into “setting” and “streaming”. Setting is when ability group placement is done for a single subject. A student can be in different ability groups for different subjects based on performance. Streaming is when ability group placement is done for the entire day and the student stays in the same class for all subjects. Research has shown that in mixed leveled classrooms the higher achieving students tend to dominate the discussion (Preckel, Gotz & Frenzel, 2010). The domination of discussion by the higher
achieving students leads to passive non-engagement on the part of the lower achieving students. The lower achieving students are overwhelmed and may feel embarrassed at their lack of understanding (Robinson, 2008). Participant 11 believes that through ability grouping her students are given more individualized instruction, which leads to a boost in their engagement because they feel successful at some point every single day. The student’s success is a by-product of ability grouping and is also positive reinforcement to stay active in class.

Participant 12 believes that the utilization of technology, specifically an ELMO, a document camera, in conjunction with a SmartBoard, an interactive whiteboard, leads to a higher level of student engagement in her classroom. She uses the ELMO to give her students an additional visual aid for what they are learning.

What I do frequently with my children is to project what we are reading on the Smartboard and I actually go from word to word reading. I use it as kind of like a pre-reading strategy where they can hear those words read correctly. I read maybe two to three lines and then I stop and ask- What does that mean? What are they talking about there? At-risk groups that I have worked with respond very well to that.

Improvements in student learning, building confidence, and increased student engagement all work together to establish a more productive classroom environment.

**Biography of a student who benefited from successful implementation of best practices**

Question 5 dealt with specific student examples of the above-mentioned best practices. Participant 5 utilizes small group instruction on a daily basis with a focus on
vocabulary. She believes the preparation she does beforehand benefits her at-risk reading students. Prior to introducing any reading passage to her at-risk reading students, Participant 5 takes the time to pre-read the material and pull out the vocabulary words she believes her class will struggle with, and she finds visual aids to help them understand the meaning of the word within the context of the story. She discussed one specific ELL student who did not even know her sight words when she came to her fourth grade classroom. After a semester of small group instruction with this prepared vocabulary focus this student has gone from reading on a .7 level (midyear Kindergarten) to a 2.5 (midyear 2nd grade). Participant 5 said with full confidence, “I know this little girl will be reading on grade level by the end of the year. But even if she isn’t I have seen her grow to love reading, and I see the spark in her eye when she understands a text she is reading independently.”

Participant 10 recalls one occasion when making a home connection with a student’s parents became a turning point in a student’s performance in her classroom. She stated,

There was a student who was really struggling, so I met with his parents and gave them some strategies to use at home with him to help. But I began the conversation by bragging on how respectful their son was and how hard he tries in class. His parents responded well and have really helped with his background knowledge, and now I have really seen the light bulb go on for him in my class.

Participant 7 discussed the impact the POW TIDE organizer had on one of her student’s writing. The POW TIDE organizer is a mnemonic device used in writing to
help students remember the process. Figure 4.3 is an example of a teaching poster for POW TIDE.

Figure 4.3  
POW TIDE (Yoakem, 2016)

Figure 4.3. Teaching poster for POW TIDE writing technique. Copyright 2016 by Yoakem.

Participant 7 said that she feels like the POW TIDE organizer gives her students a starting point. One of her students was having a hard time getting starting on his writing and putting things in his own words. After she implemented the POW TIDE organizer in her at-risk reading class the student “felt like he had a voice”.

Participant 14 believes her self-contained classroom allows her at-risk reading students meet their full potential. She feels that it is essential to make a personal connection to all of her students but especially her at-risk students.

I have them all day long so I can build that relationship more in depth with them as opposed to only having them an hour here and there. So I know them and their personal life, and so I can pull in things that they like.
Participant 6, 8, and 11 mentioned cooperative learning in their personal story of a successful best practice with their at-risk reading class. Participant 6 discussed the benefits of pairing one of her higher students with one of her at-risk students.

Last week with a little close read passage we were doing some table work with butcher paper to organizer our writing. I first tried more homogenous groups, but then I felt like my lower students could actually benefit from my higher students so I switched some kids around. And the higher kids took more of a leadership role, and my lower kids really responded well to the peer learning.

Participant 8 believes that small reading groups within her genre study allows the students to feel more connected to the text and more invested in their learning. Using small groups for her literature circles allows the students to be in a group that is of high interest to them. “Everyone in the group has chosen to read that specific book from the genre study; therefore, everyone wants to be a part of the discussion.” Participant 11 discussed that cooperative groups allow leaders to emerge from her at-risk reading group.

When I ability group within that class through cooperative learning groups, I am able to individualize the instruction even more and I can challenge them at their specific level. This allows leaders to emerge at every level from their small cooperative groups.

Some of the participants discussed previously mentioned best practices in more detail for question 5. Participant 1 discussed her vocabulary activity, Word Catcher, in more detail. She mentioned a student in her classroom who shuts down often out of frustration over his lack of reading ability. He feels empowered by word catcher because he learns the words and feels like he can take part in the instruction. Also, he gets excited
about the competition aspect of it. Participant 2 explained the impact reader’s theater had on one of her students who was reading on a third grade level. That student is now reading on grade level, 5th grade, due to his daily involvement in complex text through Reader’s theater. Participant 3 mentioned the High Noon Reading intervention program again. Through the use of her cloze reading vocabulary activities, Participant 4 said one of her ELL students “had an “ah ha” moment and began thinking about what she was reading while she was reading it”.

Participant 15 reiterated the notion that choral reading allowed all of her students to feel comfortable reading a text aloud. Through numerous opportunities to read grade level text aloud, her students become more fluent readers. Participant 12 mentioned another read aloud technique she initiates through teacher modeling.

I encourage them to go back and reread with their partner when they don’t understand something they are reading with their partner. I try to pattern that with the first bit that I read. I say, “Now, I just don’t understand how that exactly fits together so I am going to go back and reread that section and make sure I understand what the author is trying to tell me.” It almost give the students permission to go back and reread when they see that as the teacher I even have to go back and reread.

The following sections answer the second research question discussing instructional practices that have a negative influence on elementary, at-risk reading students’ learning.
**Listing detrimental best practices**

Two themes emerged during the discussion of detrimental best practices: utilization of grade level text without appropriate scaffolding and teaching to the whole group, also known as a one size fits all instructional approach.

**Utilization of grade level text without appropriate scaffolding.** Eight of the fifteen participants mentioned that forcing their at-risk reading students to read grade level text without assistance led to students reaching their frustration point too quickly. Participant 8 explained that not having a balance between independent grade level text and scaffolded graded level text was harmful to her students.

There is a point where the students have to read something on level because at the end of the year they are going to be tested using text on grade level. So sometimes they do get text that is too hard for them but they have to learn to struggle through that. But I can’t let them get to their frustration level every day.

As their teacher it is my job to help them muddle through that too hard text.

Participant 11 agrees with Participant 8 with regard to not allowing her students to reach their frustration level too often. She immediately and adamantly said this when asked about detrimental instructional practices for her at-risk reading students.

Giving at-risk students a higher-level text without any reinforcement or skills to help them decode the text is hurtful. A lot of the at-risk (students) will just shut down and say the text is too hard or that they can’t read it or that it doesn’t make sense.

Participant 9 discussed how always using grade level texts leads to less learning for her at-risk reading students.
Grade level text will not allow them to ever become independent readers. They can access some of the thinking processes that are going on with grade level text, but as far as being independent readers, I think it needs to be on their (instructional) level.

Participant 15 believes that giving too much independent reading time is counterproductive for the at-risk reading students.

They struggle with independent reading. They would sit there silently and look at a book because they had no interest in reading. If was on their reading level, which most are 1st or 2nd grade reading level, they were not interested in the material. But the problem is they can’t read 5th grade books which have material about their interests. So I switched that time to teacher read aloud time, and we now dissect high interest grade level text together as a class.

**One size fits all instructional approach.** Seventy years ago in his book, *Foundations of reading instruction, with emphasis on differentiated guidance*, Emmett Betts discussed the necessity of differentiated instruction especially with regard to reading (Betts, 1946). Betts was one of the first researchers to discuss the terms “frustration level”, “instructional level”, and “independent level”. He put the responsibility on the classroom teacher to learn his/her students and pair text accordingly. He cautioned away from simply pulling a text from the shelf and handing it to a student.

He had this to say about the need to differentiate instruction:

> The wide range of capacities, abilities, needs, and interests in any classroom necessitates a differentiated approach to instruction at all school levels and in all areas learning. Teaching is the practical recognition of differences. Until
differences among the pupils of a given class are recognized, instruction cannot be on a sound, effective, systematic basis. A significant part of the dilemma in modern education has been brought about by a failure to admit differences- by the treating of all children alike (Betts, 1946, p.3).

Ten of the 15 participants agreed with Betts in their discussion of detrimental instructional practices for at-risk reading students. Participant 3 mentioned that she has seen teachers completely ignore the differences in their students reading levels and just teach whole group instruction all the time. She said it was like they were simply “sweeping it under the rug and hoping they will just catch up later”. Participant 3 went on to discuss that when these students get to her classroom they dislike school so much because they have not been active participants in their education for so long.

Students who were only a little bit behind at one point are now significantly behind their peers because they have stopped caring. It is like they can feel that their teacher didn’t care to help them so why should they care.

Participants 4 and 14 discussed that following a suggested curriculum or pacing guide without regard for their individual classroom and students was detrimental to all students but especially their at-risk reading students. Participant 4 said that she has seen teachers use the worksheets that come with the reading series “just because they were there and it is easy”. She discussed that “blindly” using the worksheets that come with the reading series or any curriculum is “reckless” and can end up hurting your students more than helping them. Some of the worksheets are “tedious and busy work”. Participant 4 believes that it is even more harmful to give busy work to at-risk reading students because every minute of instructional time with them “is precious and needed”.
Participant 14 mentioned the negative impact relying on a pacing guide has on her at-risk reading students.

If you just rely on the pacing guide and you don’t really take their needs into account no one learns. Just doing it because the pacing guide says it is time is not helpful to anyone.

Participant 6 also agrees with Bett (1946) about how a failure to recognize the different levels of students in your classroom is harmful.

I really feel like guided reading in a mixed ability classroom is hard. The lower reading students feel intimidated by the higher “smart” kids and may not participate. They (at-risk students) don’t want to not know a word or struggle over a term in front of them (on grade level or above students) so they just don’t participate.

Following along that same line, Participant 5 mentioned how detrimental round robin reading can be to the confidence levels of her at-risk reading students. Round Robin Reading is defined in The Literacy Dictionary as “the outmoded practice of calling on students to read orally one after the other” (Harris & Hodges 1995, p.222). On their website discussing best reading practice for ELL students, Opitz and Guccione (2015) have an entire section about how round robin reading is detrimental to all students but especially ELL students.

Emphasizing unrehearsed reading and correcting misspelled words, which most often occurs when using round robin reading, risks leaving students with an understanding that reading is more about accurate word calling than it is about
comprehension, a serious misconception of what constitutes effective reading of English (Opitz & Guccione, 2015, p.1).

Participant 5 had this to say about round robin reading,

I dislike the round robin reading with the at-risk reading students. I think making them read when they are not good readers really shuts some kids down. They are super uncomfortable with reading out loud in front of their classmates.

**Examples of detrimental best practices in action**

The classroom examples of detrimental best practices in action fall into three categories/themes: lacking productive struggle/enabling students, lack of scaffolded instruction, and students becoming disengaged or shutting down. Two of the teachers interviewed said they were unable to think of a time when they had witnessed any detrimental practices in action. The other teachers all had stories either from their classroom or from classrooms where they had witnessed detrimental instruction especially with regard to at-risk and ELL reading students.

**Lacking productive struggle/enabling students.** “Making mistakes and correcting them builds the bridges to advanced learning” (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014, p.7). There are benefits in allowing students to struggle with concepts and text in the classroom. In their 2010 book, *How to Support Struggling Students*, Jackson and Lambert discuss two different types of struggles that tend to happen in a classroom with struggling students: a destructive struggle and a productive struggle. Table 4.2 shows identifying clues as to which struggle is taking place in any particular classroom.
Table 4.2

*Productive vs. Destructive Struggle*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Productive Struggle</th>
<th>Destructive Struggle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leads to better understanding</td>
<td>Leads to additional frustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effort is rewarded and appreciated</td>
<td>Effort is often ignored if it doesn’t bring immediate success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvements can be seen</td>
<td>Little to no learning takes place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students feel inspired and creative</td>
<td>Students feel deserted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a feeling of hope in the classroom</td>
<td>There is a feeling of desperation in the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students believe in themselves and their ability</td>
<td>Students feel hopeless</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At-risk reading and ELL teachers are faced with the challenge every day in determining whether a particular student needs intervention or needs to work through it themselves through productive struggle. The problem arises when the teacher comes to the rescue of his/her students too quickly and too often without allowing students to work through it themselves. Eight of the 15 participants mentioned situations where either they or another teacher did not allow enough productive struggle in their at-risk classroom. By not allowing enough productive struggle, the teachers ended up enabling learned helplessness in their classroom. This balance of struggle is difficult to find with at-risk students. When should a teacher step in and help so as to avoid a destructive struggle and when should they allow students to struggle through a text in order to not enable them and lead to more learned helplessness? Participant 3 discussed the challenge between not allowing your students to get too frustrated but also not enabling them too much either.
A negative practice would be just reading it for them and not making them feel the struggle. I think I used to be an enabler because I hated to see them struggle. I know now that it is important to them work for it.

Participant 12 mentioned that enabling students too much leads to a higher degree of learning helplessness.

I have seen students who are enabled become completely helpless. An at-risk student will come in my classroom without their supplies. Since they don’t have a pencil, they believe it excuses them from having to do any work even though I have a pencil cup on my desk.

**Lack of scaffolded instruction.** Lack of scaffolded instruction leads back to utilizing grade level text without giving students the proper support to be able to handle the complexity of it. Participant 8 discussed that she has to find the balance between using instructional level and grade level text in her classroom. Also, her instruction has to completely change depending on which level text she is using. Her expectations of independence need to be significantly higher when her students are reading instructional level text. On the other hand, she needs to take additional time for pre-reading activities and modeling her expectations when giving her students grade level text. If she only uses grade level material then she constantly has to do a large portion of the work with the students. Yet, if she only uses instructional level text the students have a false impression of what is expected of them in fifth grade.

Participant 1 mentioned that during her first year of teaching she was instructed to use only grade level text with all of her students. She made the mistake of giving her lower reading students grade level text without any scaffolded instruction. Her students
were immediately at frustration level and all started shutting down on her. She quickly learned that there would need to be more of a gradual release of responsibilities in her classroom with her at-risk reading students.

**Students becoming disengaged or shutting down.** Students becoming disengaged or shutting down can be a byproduct of the first two discussed themes. Participant 1 saw it with her students when she gave them grade level text without the appropriate scaffolding and modeling. Participant 5 has also witnessed students shutting down and becoming disengaged. She discussed a time when a teacher had not modeled enough with a complex text and began asking difficult questions that were text-dependent.

You could actually see the students beginning to shut down and a bunch began asking to go to the bathroom. They were spending all of their time worrying instead of learning. It wasn’t productive for anyone.

Using lecture style instruction the majority of time while teaching fourth and fifth grade students also leads to disengagement. Participant 4 and 7 both discussed that just because you have a quiet classroom while you are teaching does not mean there is learning taking place. Participant 7 made the point that “students can be compliant without being engaged”. Participant 15 mentioned again the silent reading she used to do in her classroom. “All of my students would sit there silently looking at a book for the entire time I required but wouldn’t have read a single word on any page.” Discussion is an essential part of instruction with at-risk students in order to gauge how much they are processing and learning.
Students who were negatively impacted from detrimental implementation of best practices.

Participant 5 had a little boy who ended up having to get on stomach medicine because the constant worry of having to read aloud in front of his classmates began to impact his health. She had no idea that asking her students to read aloud was causing that degree of anxiety. She was following the Daily 5 and wanted her students to practice fluent reading.

Participant 10 discussed a time when she used a new grade level text during whole group instruction and witnessed the negative effects it had on her students.

There would be lessons where I would go against my gut and use too difficult of text. I would see my whole class fall apart. They would sit there for 15 minutes and just stare at it. I would go to ask them a question and I would get nothing in return.

Participant 4 witnessed students completely giving up and quit trying because they were given too hard of text and were immediately at frustration level.

When a student is a struggling learner and they just get to the point where they quit trying. The student is like “this is too hard, this is too hard, I am going to quit trying”. I have seen that when they get that negative connotation with themselves, they just shut down.

Participant 1 has seen a similar situation happen with students shutting down when they are given text that is too difficult.

This happens a lot especially around testing time. I can see that the students who have worked really hard and have built up their self-esteem when they get to that
test it is all over. It is just too long for them or they have a hard time looking at it for that long.

Participant 13 discussed experiences with ability grouping where she has witnessed the low group being held back and the long-term negative impacts she sees with these students. Her feelings about the negative impact ability grouping has on at-risk students can be found through the entirety of research about ability grouping. It has been shown that placement in the lower achieving classrooms comes with a significant number of lower standards—teacher expectations are lower, teacher experience and expertise is lower, time spent preparing for class is lower, value placed on academic achievement is lower, and perception of student worth is lower (Chorzempa & Graham, 2006; Davidson, 2009; Lleras & Rangel, 2009; Catsambis, Mulkey, Buttaro, Steelman, & Koch, 2012). In addition to the lower standards, there is also a significant amount of time spent on nonacademic activities in the lower achieving classes. There tends to be more behavior problems in these classes, meaning the teachers have to spend more time on classroom management than in other levels of ability grouping (Chorzempa & Graham, 2006). A decline in the rigor of questioning from the teacher and less student-led learning are also negatives for the lower achieving classrooms (Chorzempa & Graham, 2006; Ireson and Hallam, 2007).

There are disadvantages for the lower achieving students in society as well as those found in the classroom (Oakes, 1985; Worthy, 2010; Becker et al., 2014). The negative expectations and feelings the teachers have toward the lower achieving students tend to become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Becker et al., 2014). Lower achieving students are not immune to the assumptions teachers have about them and their ability level
(Worthy, 2010). Through placement in the lower achieving classes students tend to have a lower self-esteem and a lower self-worth leading to lower graduation rates (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004). Without even realizing it teachers have lower expectations for at-risk reading students when there is entire classroom full of them (Missett, Brunner, Callahan, Moon, & Azano, 2014).

Participant 13 spoke about the difference ability grouping has on the performance of at-risk students.

I have found that low populations do not show the growth in an ability-grouped classroom that would be possible if they had some peer models in their classroom. Day after day they are only given one model and that is the teacher. Plus the teachers feel like they need to teach on the instructional level of the majority of the kids, and that is always going to be lower in an at-risk ability grouped classroom. The exposure to more difficult text does not happen often enough.

Without even realizing it teachers are not allowing their students to reach their individual full potential on a daily basis by implementing some of the above-mentioned harmful practices.

**The greatest challenge of teaching at-risk reading students**

The participants’ answers to the question about the greatest challenge of teaching at-risk reading students fell into two themes: lack of foundational skills and the student’s home life. Nine of the 15 participants discussed the students’ lack of foundational reading skills and the other six mentioned having a harmful home life.

**Lack of foundational skills.** Throughout their research Biemiller and Siegal (1997) found that in order to move forward with complex reading strategies, students
need to have a strong foundation in reading. This includes sight words, phonics, and decoding. Participant 2 has found that her at-risk reading students have a lack of phonemic awareness and have “no basic understanding of how to decode during reading”. Participant 11 also mentioned the lack of phonetic background as the greatest challenge.

Participant 5 has found a similar dilemma with her at-risk reading students.

The greatest challenge would just be them coming and not having the foundation.

It starts all the way back with they don’t know how to decode words; it is just a struggle. My kids have no reading strategies.

**Home life.** At-risk and ELL reading students tend to come from a different home life background than other students. This is not always true, but it was a trend this research’s participants have found. Participant 14 spoke about the different values focused on in the home of her at-risk reading students.

I would have to say home life is the greatest challenge. I am so surprised sometimes when you ask them (at-risk students) what books they have at home and they tell you none. And then you say, “Ah, come on. I know you have to have books at your house.” But then you meet the parents and you do a home visit and you see that they really don’t (have any books).

Participant 13 works mainly with ELL students, and she discussed the disadvantage these students face even entering school.

Honestly, I think with ELL students it is the fact that they are born and then nothing until they enter school. They go to school and they have five years of learning to catch up on. Their parents have spoken only Spanish to them and no
one can read past 1st or 2nd grade reading level in the home. They are five years behind their non-ELL classmates.

The most rewarding aspect of teaching at-risk reading students

The most rewarding aspects of teaching at-risk reading students revolve around the growth potential and internal motivation the students show in the classroom. There was some overlap in the answering of this question; participants mentioned multiple rewarding situations with their at-risk reading students. The answers were coded into two different themes: witnessing the growth potential and experiencing the students wanting to learn and better themselves.

Growth potential. Four of the 15 participants mentioned specifically the “light bulb” moment when their students finally understand a complex concept or were able to read a difficult text. Participant 4 feels successful since there is “visible progress” with her students throughout the year. She also discussed that her students’ confidence increases as they make progress academically. Participant 9 says she feels like crying every time one of her students has a “light bulb” moment. Participant 12 mentioned that it is “so exciting to see the growth, and it reminds me as well as my students that hard work pays off”.

Internal motivation. Participant 5 said that the most rewarding aspect for her was that at-risk reading students have a willingness to learn. “They want to do better and are willing to try whatever you tell them to do.” Participant 10 discussed she feels like she can their eyes saying, “Please teach me, I want to do more”. Participant 14 said her most rewarding moment is when her students finally develop the love of reading.
Attributes that are unique to at-risk reading students

At-risk reading students are different from other students by reading ability and by many other attributes. The participants mentioned two different themes in their answer to this question: home life and lack of motivation. Fourteen out of the fifteen participants discussed something about lacking home support. Twelve of the fifteen participants mentioned a lack of motivation as being a unique attribute to at-risk reading students.

Lacking home support. NEAToday published an article in 2014 entitled “The Enduring Importance of Parental Involvement” that discusses the positive impact parent involvement can have on student achievement (Garcia & Thornton, 2014). “By monitoring, supporting, and advocating parents can be engaged in ways that ensure that their children have every opportunity for success” (Garcia and Thornton, 2014, p.1). Students need to feel that their hard work at school is going to reap benefits at home. Participant 1 said that she has found more often than not parents of students who read significantly below grade do not value education at home. Participant 2 had this to say about unique attributes of her at-risk students.

Mostly, home life or previous home life and it isn’t just a lack of support but a history of drugs or a history of being arrested. This is why they are not going to bed at normal times. They have no structure or support.

Participant 11 mentioned some of the same issues that Participant 2 discussed with parent problems. Participant 11 added that she has seen her at-risk students having a much greater amount of exposure to mature situations and adult knowledge. She said, “Learning to read does not rank as one of their priorities anymore.” Participant 10
discussed that some of the issue with a lack of parent involvement is due to a difference in culture.

All of my ELL kids are Hispanic and the Hispanic culture is very respectful of teachers and people in education. Due to that respect, they are also very hands off with their children’s learning because they trust the teacher.

**Lack of motivation.** Participant 1 believes that the lack of motivation does not always begin that way. She believes that her at-risk students began by simply having a reading difficulty that has turned into apathy toward reading. She said,

A lot of it is their lack of motivation. They are just not interested in it. I think it started as a difficulty reading especially maybe in the younger years and now they have just decided that they don’t want to read.

Participant 9 talked about her at-risk reading students lacking internal and external motivation.

A lot of times there is a greater lack of motivation with at-risk students. They begin with a lower level of internal motivation and then they feel defeated about reading and the level gets even lower. Also, there is a lack of external motivation from home- no home support. They (at-risk reading students) get it from all sides.

Participants 4 and 11 both discussed their students having no personal motivation. Their at-risk reading students would be completely happy sitting an entire day at school and doing nothing.

**One aspect of current at-risk reading instruction the participants would change**

When asked what they would change about their current at-risk reading instruction all fifteen participants had something they would change. The two themes
that emerged from the coding of this question were lower student/teacher ratio and more time for instruction. Wanting additional assistants in classroom was coded as wanting a lower student/teacher ratio.

**Lower student/teacher ratio.** Nine of the 15 participants desire a lower student/teacher ratio in their classroom. Participants 3, 5, and 14 all mentioned simply wanting fewer students in their at-risk reading group. Participant 5 discussed this challenge.

Lower achieving reading students require more time and one-on-one instruction.

I sometimes feel like I cannot give them all the attention they deserve and need because there are so many of them and only one of me.

Participants 1, 2, 11, 12, 13, and 15 indicated wanting more personnel in the classroom with them. Participant 11 mentioned wanting additional help to increase the length of her small groups.

One thing would be to have another assistant in my classroom or having my assistants longer. I feel like I could accomplish a lot with that smaller group instruction.

Participant 12 also expressed the desire to have additional assistants in her room during her small group instruction time.

You need an adult in the majority of your small groups. It helps to keep all of the students on task. Sometimes the student leaders in the group are not leading in the right direction. A lot of them do not have the ability, yet, to take a little bit of information and move forward with applying it.
**Additional instruction time.** Participant 12 went on to discuss that she wishes should could have her at-risk students for two different blocks of time during the day.

I would like to have two times a day with that group. I would like to have them in the morning to present new material and then have them in the afternoon to go over what we have done in the morning.

Adding more instructional time with her at-risk reading group was the focus of Participant 8’s answer.

I would love to have more time. With my at-risk kids it seems like I can never have enough time with them. I am always searching for strategies that will get to the core of their issues and streamline my instruction.

**Summary**

Through this qualitative study, instructional best practices that are most effective for improving learning outcomes for at-risk and ELL students were discussed. The four identified themes for instructional best practices were vocabulary-focused instruction, building on foundational reading skills, cooperative learning, and teacher modeling.

Detrimental practices were also discussed. Those themes were utilization of grade level text without appropriate scaffolding and teaching to the whole group, also known as a one size fits all instructional approach. The participants discussed in detail the daily routines in their at-risk reading classrooms, in addition to what they would change about their at-risk instruction. Chapter 5 will discuss recommendations and implications of this study on at-risk and ELL reading instruction.
CHAPTER 5
FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to address the findings of this study, this chapter is divided into five sections. The first section is a summary of the study. The second section discusses the findings of this study and how they helped answer the research questions. The third section examines the conclusions that can be made from the analysis of the literature and information gathered through this study. The fourth section addresses possible limitations of this study, while the fifth section suggests recommendations for future research that may be undertaken to develop additional suggestions for instructional best practices for at-risk and ELL reading students.

**Summary of the Study**

The purpose of this grounded qualitative study was to examine teacher perspectives with regard to best practices for elementary at-risk reading instruction in grade 4 and grade 5. The study involved collecting data through open-ended, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with 15 elementary school teachers. Throughout the history of reading instruction, there has been significant variation in understandings about what comprises best practices. The first reading instruction consisted of the memorization of Bible verses and reading using only religious texts (Vogt & Shearer, 2007). E.B. Huey revolutionized reading instruction in the early twentieth century when his research found that reading was a process that needed to be taught formally (Brown, 2014). Phonics instruction began to filter in to reading instructional practices around the same time. In the early 1940s, the integration of expository and informational texts
began due to a lack of preparedness by the United States military. This was followed by an emphasis on development of a connection to the text and the utilization of real world examples. Presently, there is a focus on the activation of background knowledge and application of technology. However, there is no consensus in the education world about what constitutes best practices for reading instruction with regard to at-risk readers and ELL students.

The information gathered and theories developed in this study provide clarity for instructional best practices that are the most effective for improving learning outcomes for at-risk and ELL students. The best practice recommendations developed through this study included the following instructional techniques: writing embedded instruction, small group instruction, focus on skill development as opposed to standard based instruction, emphasis on vocabulary development, and integration of cross curricular content in reading, specifically social studies. In addition to best practice recommendations, detrimental instructional practices were also discussed. The two detrimental instructional practices focused on in this study were the utilization of grade level text without appropriate scaffolding and teaching to the whole group, also known as one size fits all instructional approach. Many of the best practice recommendations made through this study focused on ensuring that individual student needs were at the forefront of instructional decision-making.

**Research Questions**

The researcher examined teachers’ perspectives related to the following research questions:

1. From a teacher’s perspective, what instructional practices have a positive influence on elementary, at-risk reading students’ learning?
2. From a teacher’s perspective, what instructional practices have a negative influence on elementary, at-risk reading students’ learning?

**Findings**

The research questions were answered through semi-structured interviews of the fifteen teacher participants. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. All of the answers were initially coded by two researchers and then coded a second time by the primary researcher. After the second round of coding, individual themes emerged from each of the 12 questions. The following is a brief discussion of the findings related to the developed themes.

**Daily Reading Lesson**

The first question was one of the most telling questions of the interview because it pertained to the actual instructional techniques put into practice by the participants in their classroom at the time of the interview. The five themes that emerged from the present best practice question were writing embedded instruction, small group/center instruction, mini lessons focused on skill development as opposed to standard focused, an emphasis on vocabulary development, and integration of social studies content.

**Writing embedded instruction.** Two thirds of the participants incorporated some type of writing instruction during their reading block every day. The writing instruction ranged from 3-5 minute quick writes, to writing in response to a reading passage, to a full writing prompt. Writing was seen as a complementary subject to reading and necessary for a complete reading lesson.
Small group/center instruction

Almost one half of the participants (7 out of 15) mentioned incorporating some type of small group or center instruction during their daily reading lessons. Small group/center instruction is used as a way to differentiate instruction for all students at the same time. Students rotate through different activities/centers; some of the centers are independent and some are with a teacher or teacher assistant. In the groups or centers students have a smaller teacher/student ratio and are able to ask more specific questions.

Focus on skill development as opposed to standards focused. Two thirds of the participants spoke about incorporating skill-based instruction in their daily lessons as opposed to focusing solely on what the standards said. Skill focused instruction is instruction where life applications are connected to what is being taught. Standards focused instruction is instruction where skills are taught in isolation with no connection to the bigger picture.

An emphasis on vocabulary development. The teachers interviewed for this research saw the importance of daily vocabulary instruction. Vocabulary instruction was mentioned by 11 of the 15 participants in this study. The vocabulary lessons ranged from direct instruction to embedded vocabulary discussion during teacher led read alouds.

Integration of social studies content. The utilization of social studies content passages during core reading time was mentioned by eight of the 15 participants during their description of a daily reading lesson. The participants discussed that they purposely searched for grade level appropriate reading texts that related to the topic they were covering in Social Studies at the time.
Defining best practices for reading instruction

When asked to personally define at-risk reading instruction the participants focused on two major themes: research based and student focused/individualized instruction. The majority of the teachers interviewed for this research believe that best practices need to be backed by scientific research. When they are implementing a practice in their classroom, they want to know that it has been shown to work through scientific research. The participants put time and effort into staying abreast of the newest developments in best practices for reading instruction especially with regard to at-risk readers and ELL learners.

The participants also mentioned student focused/individualized instruction as a way of explaining how they define best practices. The participants want to ensure they are implementing practices that are in the best interest of their students. They do not want to blindly apply a best practice just because the experts recommend it.

Successful Best Practices Discussion and in Practice

When discussing successful best practices the participants mentioned many of the same practices discussed during their daily reading lessons. The four identified themes were vocabulary-focused instruction, building on foundational reading skills, cooperative learning, and teacher modeling. There were three major outcomes coded from the implementation of the discussed best practices—improvements in student learning and reading levels, students building confidence, and an increase in student engagement.

Vocabulary-focused instruction. The participants in this study who taught mostly ELL students focused more on vocabulary intensive instruction. The language barrier leads to a large gap in vocabulary words the students have been exposed to in their
home or at school. Vocabulary-focused instruction requires daily implementation in order to help the students reach their full potential. The “Word Catchers” activity discussed by Participant 1 is a daily occurrence. It ensures that her students are working with their vocabulary words every day. The vocabulary squares completed by Participant 5 helps the students take ownership of their vocabulary words. Participant 4’s cloze reading activities have her students practice using context clues to better understand vocabulary. Vocabulary development is one aspect of reading instruction that is applied across the curriculum on a daily basis. Through application of vocabulary development best practices student learning improves and reading levels are increased. In addition, student confidence increases when they feel like they are better able to understand a text.

**Building on foundational skills.** RTI² was the focus of the discussion when the building on foundational reading skills was brought up. Beimiller and Siegel (1997) found that at-risk readers, more than other readers, need to have a solid base of foundational reading skills before moving to more complex text and applications. When students have difficulty sounding out words or decoding words, comprehension does not occur. Students are too worried about reading the material; the author’s meaning is not considered or understood.

**Cooperative Learning.** The participants of this study found that allowing their at-risk and ELL students to work with at least one other child increased learning for everyone involved. Students learned from each other, built on each other’s strengths, and helped with each other’s weaknesses. The participants had the students working in cooperative groups during small group/centers and whole group instruction. Often it was
as simple as turn and talk to your shoulder buddy, but the discussion between students about their learning was occurring on a continual basis.

Teacher Modeling. Teacher modeling is important in all classrooms but especially those containing at-risk and ELL readers. The teacher needs to show the students her expectations, in addition to verbalizing them. The participants in this study discussed modeling their thought process while working through a reading passage, in addition to discussing expectations with their students. Participants used technology as an aid for teacher modeling. Specifically an ELMO, a document camera, and a SmartBoard, an interactive whiteboard, were used to project reading passages and allowed the teachers to work with a text along side the students.

Detrimental Best Practices Discussion and in Practice

The detrimental best practices discussed by the participants fell in to two themes: utilization of grade level text without appropriate scaffolding and teaching to the whole group, also known as a one size fits all instructional approach. The majority of the participants discussed detrimental practices they had witnessed in other teacher’s classrooms. A few talked about situations in their own classrooms where they used detrimental practices “before they knew better”. Both of the themes for detrimental instructional practices lead to at-risk and ELL students reaching their frustration level too quickly and too often in the classroom. A student elevating to frustration level is not productive for anyone and does not allow for learning to take place.

Utilization of grade level text without appropriate scaffolding. The utilization of grade level text with at-risk and ELL students was a much discussed topic. All of the participants acknowledged that at some point all students need exposure to grade level
text. However, they all believe that it needs to be given to the students will some degree of scaffolding, including teacher modeling and gradual release of responsibility. At-risk and ELL students lack the necessary tools to break down grade level text on their own.

**Teaching to the whole group.** Ignoring the fact that there are different levels of ability in a classroom was one of the major detrimental practices discussed by the participants. At-risk and ELL students tended to give-up and quit trying when they were unable to have any success in the classroom. Having a lack of skills and overall reading ability negatively impacted active participation in classroom activities for at-risk and ELL students. This also took into account situations where a pacing guide or curriculum was followed without consideration of individual student needs in the classroom. Lessons that were not aligned with grade level expectations were used in classrooms out of convenience.

**Greatest challenge of teaching at-risk reading students and unique attributes**

The greatest challenges of teaching at-risk readers are unique to this group of students. A lack of foundational reading skills was one of the major challenges discussed when teaching at-risk reading students. Home life and lack of motivation were the other two themes found as challenges when teaching at-risk and ELL reading students. Home life is a challenge that teachers cannot change. At-risk reading students tend to come from homes with a lack of involvement in education. The lack of involvement at home can lead to a lack of motivation in the classroom. These two challenges work hand in hand to negatively impact the learning of at-risk reading students. There is a lack of motivation because of the lack of home support (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995).
Most rewarding aspect of teaching at-risk reading students

The most rewarding aspect of teaching at-risk and ELL reading students was their potential for growth and the visible learning that takes place with these students. The participants discussed being able to see the “light bulb” go off in their students’ learning. Academic progress is more visible with at-risk and ELL reading students because they have greater growth potential. Seeing growth more frequently motivates the teachers and the students to try harder and reminds them that hard work pays dividends.

Aspect of current at-risk reading instruction the participants would change

The participants in this study mentioned two major changes they would make to their current instruction if they had complete control of the situation. The first one was to have fewer students in their classroom or more teachers. The end goal would be to lower student/teacher ratio. The second major change the participants would make is to increase the instructional time they have with at-risk and ELL reading students. Through lowering the student/teacher ratio, the participants feel like it would increase their productive instructional time with their at-risk students. It would allow them to have more time for small group/individualized instruction, which has been proven as a best practice for at-risk reading students.

Conclusions

Daily Reading Lessons

Writing Embedded Instruction. Learning to read and learning to write go hand in hand and should not be taught independent of each other. Writing about a topic being read about helps students become more engaged with the text and become more actively
involved in their own learning. The Institute for Writing and Rhetoric of Dartmouth College suggest that teachers should

Ask students to write in their texts. Students are too often passive readers. If they are instructed to write in the margins the reading process becomes far more active (Institute for Writing and Rhetoric, 2015, p.1).

Writing requires students to process information while they are producing an original piece of text. This requires higher order thinking skills and does not allow students to surface read any text they are using as anchor (Institute for Writing and Rhetoric, 2015). Guaranteeing that all students (on grade level and at-risk) become effective readers and develop the ability to comprehend complex text necessitates skilled instruction in the following practices: phonics, decoding, fluency, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension strategies (National Reading Panel, 2000). All of these things are worked on through the writing process (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Through learning to write students are working on their reading fluency and comprehension (Graham & Hebert, 2001).

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) concurred with Graham and Hebert. The NCTE asserted that writing enables children to become better readers. “In their earliest writing experiences, children listen for the relationships of sounds to letters, which contributes greatly to their phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2016, p.2). Further, in order to create original text, writers have to have a degree of understanding of text structure. When a reader has had to plot their own story or outline a research report, they gain a new appreciation and understanding of text they are asked to read.
In the new era of education writing must be included in daily reading lessons in order to fully prepare them for what is expected of them in future years of school and in the real world.

**Small group/center instruction**

Small group instruction is a highly effective best practice for reading instruction with at-risk and ELL students (Buckingham, Wheldall, & Beaman-Wheldall, 2014). The small group approach...better enables teachers to meet the needs of each student. Small-group instruction is more effective... because teachers can differentiate instruction to meet each student’s needs, better match instruction to each student’s level, and respond to children’s reading more effectively (Wilson, Nabors, Berg, Simpson, & Timme, 2012, p.31).

Small group/center instruction allows teachers to meet the individual needs of all of their students. This is especially important for at-risk readers and ELL learners because of the diverse reading deficits of these children.

**Focus on skill development as opposed to standards focused**

“To become good readers, most students require explicit, intensive, and persistent instruction” (Texas Education Agency, 2015, p.1). This explicit instruction needs to focus on the specific skill deficits for each individual child with a larger connection than simply the standards for that grade level. When students are able to see the big picture and application of what they are learning, they become invested in their personal learning. After students become personally invested in their learning, there is no end to the success that is possible (Ferlazzo, 2015). Table 5.1 compares content based (standard based instruction and skill based instruction.
Table 5.1

*Content-based instruction vs. skill-based instruction (LiteracyTA, 2016, p.3)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content-Based Instruction</th>
<th>Skill-Based Instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The central focus is on acquiring content knowledge through gathering and organizing facts, dates, and names.</td>
<td>The central focus is on learning transferable literacy skills that help students independently make meaning from new information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are engaged in classroom activities that help them study and memorize information. Learning is dependent on the teacher.</td>
<td>Students reach mastery of literacy skills and critical content knowledge through a process of rehearsal and relearning of ideas. Responsibility for learning transfers to the student over time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessments are used to measure what students have memorized. Little to no reteaching occurs.</td>
<td>Assessments are used to measure growth and to identify supports to help students meet standard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading, writing, and speaking tasks are assigned for points and may not teach students what it means to read and write in a particular discipline.</td>
<td>Reading, writing, and speaking in the content area is explicitly taught and practiced every day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The classroom teacher does most of the thinking and presents solutions.</td>
<td>Students are taught how to think critically and are expected to solve problems on their own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are asked to take notes on what they read and answer comprehension questions as a way to assess understanding of the reading.</td>
<td>Students engage in authentic reading experiences. They practice various reading skills and explore written and spoken texts as readers and writers. Students seek to understand how meaning is constructed in texts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The teachers interviewed for this research understood the importance of equipping their students with life skills, not just skills to score well on one test.
An emphasis on vocabulary development

Vocabulary development is a fundamental aspect of reading instruction that benefits at-risk readers and ELL students greatly (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Otaiba & Fuchs, 2006; Pullen, Tuckwiller, Ashworth, & Lovelace, 2011; Roskos & Newman, 2014). A lower level of reading fluency and comprehension can be linked directly to a lack of vocabulary development (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Otaiba & Fuchs, 2006). If students do not understand the words they are reading, it is impossible for them to comprehend what the author is trying to convey through the text. Vocabulary development does not just happen; it must be explicitly taught and intentionally focused on during the course of daily reading instruction (Roskos & Newman, 2014). Through the incorporation of vocabulary development in daily reading instruction teachers are ensuring their students are better equipped to tackle complex text independently (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Otaiba & Fuchs, 2006; Pullen, Tuckwiller, Ashworth, & Lovelace, 2011; Roskos & Newman, 2014). This is especially true with at-risk reading and ELL students because vocabulary is normally one of their major deficit areas (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005).

Integration of social studies content

In their book Teaching Reading in the 21st Century, Graves, Juel, and Graves, (1998) point out that in order to make students lifelong learners reading skills need to be applied across the entire curriculum. Students need to move beyond learning to read and move toward reading to learn. Through the integration of social studies content into daily reading lessons with at-risk readers and ELL students, teachers are ensuring that students
are learning that reading can be done to learn new information not just to answer a set of comprehension questions.

**Defining best practices for reading instruction**

Being able to wade through the plethora of available curriculums, instructional techniques, and programs that claim to be the one to fix all classroom problems is a challenge educators face every day. Ensuring implemented instructional techniques are research based is a step in the right direction. The next step is to ensure that the researched practices work in that specific classroom with those individual children. On the Educational Opportunity Association’s (EOA) website best practices are defined and divided into levels. The researcher found this especially helpful because it brings light to that not all research based practice should be given the same weight in the decision making process.

The EOA Center defines Best Education Practices as the wide range of individual activities, policies, and programmatic approaches to achieve positive changes in student attitudes or academic behaviors (Educational Opportunity Association, 2015, p.2).

All three levels of research-based practices contain detailed instructions describing the practice and how educators should implement it. The first level of research based practices is promising education practice. This occurs when the data collection about the instructional practice has begun but has not yet been evaluated. The second level of research-based practices is validated education practice. A validated or evidence-based practice is one that has undergone the rigorous evaluation but has only been tested in one education setting. The third and final level is exemplary education practice. This is a
practice that has been validated in numerous education settings resulting in positive student outcomes in every instance (Educational Opportunity Association, 2015).

Successful Best Practices Discussion and in Practice

**Vocabulary-focused instruction.** Through her research Joanne Carlisle (n.d.) found that knowledge of vocabulary positively correlates to overall school achievement through reading comprehension, decoding, and spelling. Students retain more information when they are able to make sense of the vocabulary and apply it their lives. Also, cross-curricular connections and success can be linked to an understanding of the necessary vocabulary to make real world applications (Whitacre, Diaz, & Esquierdo, 2013). Vocabulary development can be linked to increases in student learning and confidence (Otaiba & Fuchs, 2006; Pullen, Tuckwiller, Ashworth, & Lovelace, 2011; Roskos & Newman, 2014).

**Building on foundational reading skills.** Through the development of foundational reading skills, teachers are able to increase student learning, student confidence, and student engagement. The RTI² program allows teachers to determine every at-risk student’s individual deficits and how to close the gap on that deficit. The participants of this study found that the RTI² intervention program allowed the freedom to take the time to work with their at-risk and ELL readers on foundational reading skills. The extra time put in for the Tier II and Tier III students allows the additional skill work without taking instructional time away from the core-reading block. With the extra foundational skill work during the RTI² intervention time, at-risk and ELL readers are able to be more productively involved during regular core reading time. When at-risk
and ELL readers are given the foundational reading skills, they gain more confidence in themselves as readers and become more actively involved in the classroom.

**Cooperative Learning.** When students are allowed to collaborate, they are given the opportunity to discuss their ideas with a few peers prior to talking in front of the entire class. Also, it is beneficial to confer about complex or new concepts with someone close to their age and understanding level. When students are given the time to respond to, discuss, and defend their answers or ideas with their peers, it teaches them to work through their own problems, to be prepared with text evidence, to be able to explain why they feel a certain way or got a certain answer. Also, students are learning to think critically about their answers after they hear classmates’ rationale. It teaches them that learning starts and ends with them personally (Success for All Foundation®, 2012).

**Teacher Modeling.** At-risk and ELL readers often have a difficult time knowing how to start a complex reading passage, a writing assignment, or answering comprehension questions. Through modeling, a teacher can give the students ideas about a starting place or strategies to apply. Modeling can also include gradual release. The Texas Education Agency (2015) found that teacher modeling and gradual release will also improve self-monitoring of students. The agency discussed the following strategies to use during teacher modeling: activating background knowledge before and during reading, being cognizant of whether or not they are understanding what they are reading, utilizing context clues and deciphering strategies to identify unknown words and concepts. The goal of teacher modeling and gradual release is for students to independently apply the strategies. It is important for teachers not to ask students to work
on their own until the students have demonstrated competency of the reading strategy (Texas Education Agency, 2015).

Through the implementation of teacher modeling and gradual release, students’ confidence is built and they are more likely to be actively engaged. There is an increase in confidence because knowing a teacher’s expectations and requirements is less daunting than guessing. Also, an increase in confidence leads to more engagement on the part of the student because they are not scared of being wrong.

**Detrimental Best Practices Discussion and in Practice**

**Utilization of grade level text without appropriate scaffolding.** Problems arise when grade level text is given without the appropriate tools given to the students. Normally, two things happen in classrooms where grade level text is implemented without scaffolding. In one situation, the teachers become enablers and end up not allowing the students to have any type of productive struggle (Jackson & Lambert, 2010). In the second situation, the students immediately shut down out of frustration and no learning takes place.

**Teaching to the whole group.** When the different levels of students are ignored and everyone is taught the same, both ends of the spectrum are negatively impacted. Teachers end up teaching to the middle. The at-risk and ELL students are consistently at their frustration level; advanced students are consistently bored and unengaged because the material is too easy for them. No one benefits when a “one size” instructional approach is used. This is not a new issue. In 1946, Emmett Betts warned against blindly assigning texts to students without taking into consideration the differing ability levels in any particular classroom (Betts, 1946).
Greatest challenge of teaching at-risk reading students and unique attributes

Home life and lack of motivation are the two greatest challenges that the participants discussed as unique attributes to at-risk and ELL students. An ELL student’s home life is unique due to the fact that our participants found that the majority of the time English is not spoken in the home. It is difficult for ELL students to become fluent readers when the only exposure they have to the English language is at school (Richards-Tutor, Baker, Gersten, Baker, & Smith, 2015). The home life for at-risk reading students at times can be tumultuous leading to the students not seeing the value in learning to read because they are trying to survive.

Most rewarding aspect of teaching at-risk reading students

The potential for growth was the most rewarding aspect of teaching at-risk and ELL reading students discussed by the participants. When asked what the purpose of education or teaching is everyone will have a different opinion. Nevertheless, when analyzed all of those different opinions come back to the simple fact of student learning and success (Sloan, 2012). At-risk reading students have a larger growth margin; therefore, success tends to be greater and occur more frequently. This is extremely motivating to teachers because the learning is visible. Teachers are able to feel like they are the ones who have made the difference in the student’s life (Polick, Cullen, & Buskist, 2010).

Aspect of current at-risk reading instruction the participants would change

At-risk and ELL reading students have more needs than other students in terms of reading deficits. Teachers of at-risk reading students also need more: more assistants and
teachers to lower the student/teacher ratio, and more time instructional time to close the achievement gap. Lowering the student to teacher ratio for at-risk and ELL reading students has shown lasting benefits in terms of closing the achievement gap, giving the students differentiated individualized instruction, and ensuring the students have personal accountability (Brozak, 2016). The academic gains are greater when the student to teacher ratio is lowered, especially for at-risk and ELL populations (Great Schools Staff, 2012). The participants in this study agree with the research and feel like they are able to better meet the individual needs of their at-risk reading students when there are fewer in the classroom or in their small group.

**Limitations**

There were limitations in this research. The participant population served as a limitation. The population was limited to 15 educators from one rural East Tennessee school district. The use of such a specific population could potentially impact the scope of at-risk reading instructional best practices discussed. Also the interview guide developed by the researcher limited the study. The twelve-question interview guide could have possibly limited the responses given by the participants. The student population to which the educators were implementing the instructional best practices was also limited to the fifteen classrooms in the one school district in which the participants taught.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

In order to fully understand the scope of the benefits of the implementation of instructional best practices some additional research needs to take place. There is a lack of research dealing with which instructional best practices students feel are the most
beneficial. A future study suggestion would be to interview at-risk and ELL students about their experiences with reading instructional practices. Another area where there is a lacking of research is the impact of students’ home life on their reading achievement. There are studies about parental involvement in the classroom and the impact that has on students, but there is limited research about actual home life.

Further research could also be conducted to determine the effectiveness of the best practices discussed in the current study. A quantitative study could be conducted examining student achievement scores before and after the suggested instructional practices have been put in place in an assortment of classrooms. Another recommendation would be to look at the same instructional strategies with regard to the entire student population and not limit it to the at-risk population. Applying the research to all students would allow the researcher to see the full scope of influence the instructional best practices have on reading performance.

**Summary**

The conclusions of this study resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of which instructional practices should be implemented with at-risk and ELL reading students. In addition, these findings may help to bring to light instructional practices that should not be implemented with at-risk and ELL reading students due to the detrimental effects they have on student learning. There has to be effort made to ensure that the instructional best practices implemented are suited to the needs of the students in that specific classroom. It is this researcher’s hope that, through implementation of the discussed instructional best practices, at-risk and ELL students along with their teachers will be able to find more success in the classroom on a daily basis.
References


http://www.education.com/reference/article/ability-grouping/


http://www.marketingdonut.co.uk/marketing/market-research/what-is-qualitative-research-


http://www.successforall.org/elementary/powerful-instruction/our-instructional-design/cooperative-learning/


Texas Education Agency. (2015). What is effective comprehension instruction?


Principal Letter

Dear (Principal’s name),

I am a doctoral student in the education department of Carson-Newman University and a Hamblen County teacher. I am conducting a research study to examine teacher perspectives with regard to best practices for elementary at-risk reading instruction in grades 4 and 5. Dr. Dale Lynch, director of schools, has approved this study for research.

I am requesting your help, which will involve the choosing of one or two faculty members to be interviewed about their instruction techniques. Please choose one or two 4th or 5th grade faculty members who teach or have taught at-risk and/or ELL reading. When choosing which faculty member to recommend please take into consideration teacher effectiveness scores, evaluation scores, and your overall opinion of the instructional techniques implemented in the classroom.

The results of the research study may be published, but your name, your school’s name, and your teacher’s name will not be used. If you have any questions concerning the research study, please call me at (865) 773-7398 or e-mail me at sfcates@cn.edu.

This research has been approved by the CNU Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions concerning the CNU IRB policies or procedures or your rights as a human subject, please contact Dr. Gregory A. Casalenuovo, IRB Committee Chair, at irb@cn.edu.

I look forward to hearing from you within the next two weeks.

Sarah Cates
1165 Hickory View Drive
Morristown, TN 37814
Dear (Participant’s name),

I am doctoral student in the education department of Carson-Newman University and a Hamblen County teacher. I am conducting a research study to examine teacher perspectives with regard to best practices for elementary at-risk reading instruction in grades 4 and 5. Dr. Dale Lynch, director of schools, has approved this study for research.

I am requesting your participation, which will involve a thirty minute to one-hour interview. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please call me at (865) 773-7398 or e-mail me at catess@hcboe.net.

This research has been approved by the CN Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions concerning the CN IRB policies or procedures or your rights as a human subject, please contact Dr. Gregory A. Casalenuovo, IRB Committee Chair, at irb@cn.edu.

If you are willing to participate please send me your break and lunch schedule. Attached you will find the informed consent form. I will have a hard copy the day of the interview for you to sign. Thank you so much.

Sarah Cates
1165 Hickory View Drive
Morristown, TN 37814
APPENDIX C

Informed Consent Form

Best Practices for Elementary At-Risk Reading Instruction in Grades 4 and 5

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study. This research has been approved by the University Institutional Review Board.

Purpose of the research study:
The purpose of this study is to examine teacher perspectives with regard to best practices for elementary at-risk reading instruction in grades 4 and 5.

What you will be asked to do in the study:
You will be asked to participate in a twelve question interview dealing with the reading instruction best practices you implement in your classroom. Your answers will be audio recorded and then transcribed.

Time required:
1 hour

Risks and Benefits:
We anticipate minimal risk to you by participating in this study. We do not anticipate that you will benefit directly by participating in this study.

Confidentiality:
Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Your information will be assigned a code number and a pseudonym. The list connecting your name to this number will be kept in a locked file in my committee chair’s office. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report.

Voluntary participation:
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

Right to withdraw from the study:
You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:
Sarah Cates, (865) 773-7398 or sfcates@cn.edu

Agreement:
I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: ___________________________ Date: ________________
APPENDIX D

COVER LETTER FOR PILOT

I am Sarah Cates and I am currently working on my doctoral degree at Carson-Newman University. My dissertation research is entitled, “Best Practices for Elementary At-Risk Reading Instruction in Grades 4 and 5”. The purpose of this grounded qualitative study is to examine teacher perspectives with regard to best practices for elementary at-risk reading instruction in grades 4 and 5. I am collecting my data through semi-structured interviews with fourth and fifth grade teachers who teach or have taught at-risk reading.

Prior to beginning my official research, I need to pilot my questions to check for any misunderstandings or confusion. Would you be willing to read over the questions and give me feedback about the wording, need for clarification, ideas for additional questions, etc.? There is no need for you to answer the questions at this time.

While reviewing the interview guide please keep the following questions in mind:

1. Do I fully understand what the question is asking or do I need further clarification?
2. Does this question make sense or could better wording be used?
3. Am I able to answer this question completely?
4. Do I feel comfortable answering this question?
5. Are there any additional questions that should be asked in order to address Best Practices for Elementary At-Risk Reading Instruction in Grades 4 and 5?

Thank you for taking the time to review my interview guide. I appreciate all of your feedback.

Sarah Cates
APPENDIX E

Interview Guide

1. Describe a daily reading lesson with your at-risk students.
2. In your opinion, what is meant by the term “best practices” in reading instruction?
3. In your experience, which instructional best practices benefit your reading students the most?
4. Provide an example of one of these instructional best practices in action and explain the impact on student learning.
5. Select one student with whom you have successfully implemented one of these instructional best practices and explain how the strategy impacted their learning.
6. In your experience, what are some instructional practices that are detrimental to your at-risk reading students?
7. Provide an example of one of these instructional practices in action and explain the negative impact it had on student learning.
8. Select one student who has experienced one of these detrimental experiences and explain the impact on this student's learning.
9. What do you see as the greatest challenge with regard to teaching at-risk reading students?
10. What do you see as the most rewarding aspect of teaching at-risk reading students?
11. What attributes do you believe at-risk reading students possess that less struggling students do not?
12. If you could change one thing about your current at-risk reading instruction what would it be? Why?