

**EXEMPLARY MIDDLE GRADES TEACHERS' VOICES: EXPERIENCES WITH
USING TEXTS FOR INSTRUCTION**

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, educators in Tennessee have experienced changes in legislation that impact them daily. Laws that require educators to use curriculum materials from an approved list and that restrict teachers from supplementing these materials greatly impact student learning and success. This qualitative study examined exemplary middle grades language arts teachers' experiences with using texts and curriculum materials for instruction. Exemplary teachers in this study share their experiences with the use of texts and curriculum materials to meet the academic needs of their students.

Keywords: curriculum materials, middle grades, exemplary teachers, literacy, Tennessee legislation

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Chapter One

Introduction

Curriculum has played an important role in discussions among educators and policymakers since the late 1800s and continues to be at the forefront of debate amongst educators (Davis, 2019; Kliebard, 2004; Savitz, 2020). Two competing schools of thought regarding the purpose of curriculum materials have emerged from these long and ongoing discussions—one socioculturally-centered, the other student-centered. In 1892, scholars such as Charles W. Eliot, Harvard president and National Education Association member, determined that curriculum should reflect societal values and the views of a mental discipline, while others, such as G. Stanley Hall, a developmentalist, argued that the curriculum should be designed to meet the needs of students (Kliebard, 2004). John Dewey (1916), a student of Hall, moved away from viewing curriculum as a reflection of society to a new model of thinking, which supported the idea that knowledge is gained through interactions with the environment. Dewey and Tyler emphasized the student experience as the most important consideration when developing curriculum (Soto, 2015). This way of thinking remains popular (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006; Hodge et al., 2019; Pak et al., 2020).

Not surprisingly, since the 1890s, scholars have disagreed on what students should learn to be productive members of society. Creating a curriculum that relies on the context of contemporary society values creates a cycle that makes curriculum materials obsolete once removed from the time and place of their creation. The struggles between what has become known as the canon and what is portrayed as a differentiated curriculum based on student interest and need, not to mention changes in technology and definitions of literacy, has been debated for more than a century (Hodge et al., 2019; Pak et al., 2020).

In the United States, pushes for a common curriculum have been evident since the late 1800s. During the 1890s, Joseph Meyer Rice began collecting data in third grade reading and arithmetic classrooms to determine why some schools performed better than others (Kliebard, 2004). He was not pleased with his findings and became an advocate for standardization. An argument for a single curriculum was that the percentage of students enrolling in college increased beginning in 1900 (Reardon, 2011). Prior to this time, not all high schools were teaching content that was aligned with college admissions, which gave students from certain districts a disadvantage. The increased diversity of student populations manifested some distinct disparities in how students were prepared in their earlier schooling.

Hirsch (1983) noted a decline in verbal SAT scores, which he attributed to a decline in the use of common curriculum materials. Hirsch proposed a balance between prescription of texts and a student-centered view of curriculum, one that places value on both cultural literacy and canonical knowledge. This idea supports the concept of meeting students' academic and cultural needs by focusing on cultural values and common knowledge. This thinking has shifted to a global testing culture—buying into the belief that student test scores represent an accurate account of student learning and ultimately teacher performance. Not complying with this culture places teachers in opposition with current thinking (McKellar, 2021). This culture is perpetuated by connecting student test scores to teacher evaluations or a value-added model, which is used in Tennessee (Sanders & Horn, 1988; Smith & Holloway, 2020). Principals and other district administrators make curriculum decisions based on student test score data. Enacting a standardized curriculum sends the message that teachers cannot be trusted to meet the needs of their students (McKellar, 2021). This is at odds with the idea that students need a culturally and

personally relevant curriculum, which is missing in many of the texts used in contemporary schools (Husband & Kang, 2020; Muhammad, 2020).

The latest adoption of Tennessee's state standards, nearly identical to the Common Core Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), and enacted education-related policies support the use of complex, often challenging texts. As a result, research on text complexity has become the focus of numerous academics (Allington et al., 2015; Halladay, 2012; Hodge et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2000; O'Connor et al., 2002). This focus on the complexity of texts has led to placing further restrictions on the choice of texts a teacher might choose for instruction but disregards students' interests and needs (Duke & Cartwright, 2021).

There is emerging evidence that suggests reading texts that are difficult can produce readers who are proficient (Morgan et al., 2000; Shanahan et al., 2016). However, there is ample research that indicates the opposite, with studies suggesting that children learn best when they are given various opportunities to read texts on their reading levels (Allington, 1977, 1983; Allington & Johnston, 2002; Krashen, 2004; O'Connor et al., 2002; Pressley et al., 2023). Studies also show that students who are proficient at reading can and do read more (Allington, 2011; Brenner & Hiebert, 2010), which also supports the idea that students who read more learn more (Stanovich & Cunningham, 1992; Pressley et al., 2023). Still, researchers have yet to come to consensus around the role of text complexity in creating proficient readers.

Selecting appropriate curriculum materials and texts remains a concern, and recently, Tennessee lawmakers opted for standardization. State policymakers and Tennessee's 2021 Department of Education Textbook Commission enacted policies that restrict the choice of texts used in classrooms by limiting options for approved textbooks for adoption and requiring

implementation of mandated programs. According to Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-2207, local school districts are required to adopt textbooks and instructional materials that are on the approved list created by the Tennessee Textbook Commission. Furthermore, Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-2206 states that school districts in Tennessee are not permitted to use any textbook or instructional material that is not on the commission's approved list and that using materials not on the approved list could result in a loss of funding until the school or district is compliant. These laws leave districts with little choice but to comply by mandating that teachers use the adopted materials with fidelity (using only these materials only as they are written by the authors).

In 2022, the Age-Appropriate Materials Act, Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-3801, was passed, which states that schools must maintain and post a current list of materials in the school's library collection for review. The library collection, which includes any classroom library, means any material available for student use outside of the adopted curriculum, with materials defined as books, magazines, films, video games, apps, and newspapers. A process for review and removal of questionable materials must be in place. Currently, teachers are required to catalog their print and nonprint resources used during instruction and those that are accessible to students.

To comply with state laws, local school districts further limit the text choices teachers make by creating pacing and curriculum guides that stipulate which texts are used and when. These policies leave teachers with minimal autonomy in creating a developmental or student-centered classroom (Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-2207; Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-2206).

Policymakers, politicians, and for-profit organizations have taken the choice of curriculum away from educators (Pressley et al., 2023; Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-2206). Such policies also ignore recommendations of researchers such as Gallagher (2009), who insisted on a balance between student interest and standards-based pedagogy. Thus, many teachers find

themselves in a dilemma. They must comply with school, district, and state policies while making decisions that promote student achievement; yet they remain excluded from the decision-making process.

Statement of the Problem

Sociocultural factors have a profound impact on how people teach and learn literacy (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). Not all children learn to read in the same way or at the same rate (Adams, 1990; Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Pressley & Gaskins, 2006), and students begin school with a variety of experiences with literacy; some children are ready to read, and others are not. Federally funded projects have investigated the relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement, and findings have revealed that students from economically disadvantaged homes perform significantly lower on standardized tests than their economically advantaged peers. This phenomenon was outlined in the 1958 National Defense Education Act (Carlson, 1959), and many studies that followed are referred to as “the rich/poor gap.” The Coleman Report (1966) supported the relationship between parental education, income, and race regarding student achievement. The 1983 *Nation at Risk* report (Risk, 1983) spurred the idea that U.S. schools were failing compared to other developed countries. Hanushek et al. (2019) examined results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and found that the gap between students in poverty and their economically advantaged peers remains as large as it was in 1966. According to the NAEP results, not only were a mere 34% of eighth grade students proficient or above proficiency in reading, but only 20% of economically disadvantaged students were proficient or above proficient in reading (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), suggesting that the adoption of national curriculum standards did not close the income gap. Researchers continue to

investigate ways to close this gap. In 2000, the National Reading Panel impacted what was considered good reading instruction and spurred the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), which increased emphasis on standardized test scores as measures of school quality. Still, income disparity persisted. Coleman and Pimentel (2012) developed a national set of curriculum standards known as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which emphasized text complexity and analytic reading and writing.

Currently, researchers are also investigating and forecasting the impacts of the COVID-19 global pandemic, which caused widespread school disruptions and closures, particularly impacting students living in poverty (Bailey et al., 2021). Due to the pandemic, Bailey et al. predicted the rich/poor gap will increase over the foreseeable future. Teachers face greater challenges than ever in providing instruction that meets the needs of their students. Because of this disparity in the needs of students, a one-size-fits-all approach to reading instruction cannot work (Allington & Cunningham, 2011; McKellar, 2021; Pak et al., 2020).

Uniqueness of Teaching Middle School Students

In addition to the income disparity, the relationship between high poverty and low reading achievement continues to be an issue in the middle grades (Dotson & Foley, 2016; Savitz, 2020; Sirin, 2005; Tienken, 2010; Willingham, 2012;). Chall and Jacobs (1983) stated that the reading ability of students living in poverty begins to decelerate around Grade 4, placing them about one year behind their economically advantaged peers, and that by Grade 7, these economically disadvantaged students were more than 2 years behind their peers. Exacerbating the issues, middle school texts tend to be more complex, fueling the difficulty for readers who already struggle (Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Hodge et al., 2019; Toste et al., 2020). Middle school students who lack reading skills have both academic difficulties (Chall & Jacobs, 1983; Duke &

Cartwright, 2021; Guthrie & Davis, 2003) and a low motivation for reading (Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Toste et al., 2020), leading to disengagement in high school. To meet the developmental needs of middle school students, Bishop and Harrison, (2021) argued that an effective middle grades curriculum “must be challenging, exploratory, integrated, and diverse, from both the student’s and the teacher’s perspective...having valuable academic standards does not demand a uniform, prescribed curriculum” (p. 45). This might mean that by knowing the strengths and areas of improvement for middle grade students, educators can create an environment for student success (Savitz, 2020). This also suggests that a single curriculum proposed by states to be followed with fidelity is highly unlikely to meet the complex needs of middle grade learners.

Educators often focus too much on high-stakes tests to make instructional decisions (Dotson & Foley, 2016; Hodge et al., 2019). Educators must consider the unique needs of middle grades students, the accountability attached to high-stakes testing initiated by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), and the Tennessee Value Added Assessment System (TVASS; Sanders & Horn, 1998). These initiatives place additional pressure on teachers to comply with school, school district, and state expectations that focus on standards-based instruction and testing.

The pressure for students, teachers, and school administrators to perform is higher today than ever. Teachers experience not only the internal pressure of planning effective instruction that is in the best interest of students but also the external pressures placed on them by administrators, evaluations that use rigorous rubrics, system expectations, high stakes tests, and state mandates. Students arrive at middle school with unique needs and often have reading achievement gaps within their cohort (McKellar, 2021; Muhammad, 2020). Teachers’ beliefs about effective instruction and their desire to choose texts to meet the needs of their students become overshadowed by these external forces and pressures (Husband & Kang, 2020).

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

This study's purpose was to explore and better understand teachers' experiences using texts and curriculum materials for instruction. There is considerable research on effective teaching (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Fitchett & Heafner, 2018; Hall, 2005; Pressley et al., 1998; Pressley et al., 2023); however, there is a need for research that focuses on the experiences of using texts and curriculum materials (Pak et al., 2020; Pressley et al., 2023; Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). These experiences could provide a window into the complexity of using texts that support effective reading instruction and student success. This study was guided by the following research question: What are the experiences of exemplary middle grades language arts teachers with using texts and curriculum materials for instruction?

Methodology

This qualitative research study sought to explore and better understand exemplary middle grades language arts teachers' experiences using texts for instruction. The director of a nonprofit educational consortium, whose goal is to improve student outcomes by providing equal access to Tennessee state standards-aligned resources, helped identify school districts that have consistently produced above average achievement and growth on state assessments. Principals of the nominated schools selected teachers who have consistently produced above average achievement and growth on state tests. Teachers were contacted to schedule interviews via a virtual call platform, Zoom. Interviews were transcribed using Zoom's transcription feature and returned to each participant to ensure accuracy. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. The interview transcripts were analyzed for common themes from which findings were made.

Significance of the Study

For students to succeed in postsecondary education and in their careers, they need to become proficient readers and communicators, and these skills are developed during the elementary and middle school years (Pressley et al., 2023). The state standards require students to perform complex thinking with complex texts, and teachers must have the expertise to make decisions about using appropriate texts for instruction that meet the diverse needs of all students.

This study is significant for many reasons. The context that teachers find themselves in is complex due to several factors. For instance, teachers could find themselves facing this circumstance: Tennessee state legislators pass laws that limit which instructional materials are approved for adoption. To comply with state laws, districts develop policies and mandates for teachers to follow. This causes teachers to work within the narrow confines created for them. However, with the increased demands for students to become proficient readers of complex texts, teachers must make instructional decisions that promote reading proficiency. Additionally, teachers may experience a mismatch between instruction provided in teacher preparation programs and the messages received from their school, district, state administrators, and policymakers. With the increased focus on standardized testing scores, performance on internationally ranked tests such as the NAEP—sometimes referred to as the “Nation’s Report Card”—and PISA, which compares students globally, the pressure to perform placed on teachers continues to increase (Smith & Holloway, 2020). Thus, teachers are caught between compliance with state laws and district mandates and meeting the classroom needs of their students. This study aimed to explore and better understand the experiences of exemplary middle grades language arts teachers directly affected by this educational environment but who are still thriving.

Key Terms

Key terms used throughout the study are:

Curriculum materials: Any adopted reading curriculum formally adopted by a school district. In Tennessee, the Department of Education provides districts with an approved list of acceptable programs. At the district level, a committee of teachers reviews several materials from a variety of commercial publishers before agreeing on a curriculum they believe will best meet their instructional needs. Other terms that might be used interchangeably include adopted curriculum materials, off-the-shelf curriculum, or textbooks.

Exemplary teachers: Exemplary teachers are defined multiple ways. Scholars define exemplary as teachers who can produce greater than expected levels of literacy achievement and growth. Many researchers have tried to parse out the qualities that make a teacher an expert (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Kelly et al., 2019; Rice, 2003; Wayne & Youngs, 2003; Wilson & Floden, 2003). Goe (2007) used a framework to examine teacher quality featuring three categories: (a) inputs, such as qualifications and characteristics; (b) process or teacher practices; and (c) outcomes, or teacher effectiveness. Effective teachers are seen as those who accelerate literacy development in the lowest achieving students, as well as students of average and above average achievement (Allington & Johnston, 2002; McKellar, 2021; Pressley et al., 2023). For this study, the terms “exemplary” and “expert” are used interchangeably.

Middle grades: The Association for Middle Level Education (2021) stated that successful middle grades education is responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging. This grade band is significant as the reading demands become more rigorous and the need for students to become proficient readers becomes increasingly important as students move into high school

and postsecondary education (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Chall & Jacobs, 1983). For this study, middle grades represent Grades 5–8.

Text selection: Text selection is the ability of teachers to make instructional decisions on texts used for instruction to meet the diverse needs of students. Numerous researchers have found that exemplary teachers keep student needs at the center of their decision making, resulting in higher levels of reading achievement for all students (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Allington et al., 2015; Dougherty Stahl, 2012; Husband & Kang, 2020; Moje, 2006; Muhammad, 2020; O'Connor et al., 2002). Therefore, exemplary teachers use information from various sources and their knowledge of students to decide which texts will support student achievement. These texts might include novels, picture books, short stories, informational articles, or other types of materials.

Summary and Organization of the Study

This qualitative research study aimed to explore and better understand the experiences of exemplary middle grade language arts teachers regarding using texts for instruction. Chapter TWO reviews the literature on state policies on textbook adoption, text complexity, and the unique characteristics of teaching middle grades students. Chapter Three presents the research methodology used to conduct the study, which includes a description of the research methods, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter Four presents the findings, and Chapter Five discusses the conclusions, implications, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

This study explored the experiences of exemplary middle grades language arts teachers' decisions regarding texts for instruction. This study used a sociocultural lens (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004) as the theoretical framework. I focused on three major research areas: (a) how contemporary educational policies have affected teaching and learning, (b) what constitutes exemplary middle grades teaching, and (c) the ways exemplary middle grades teachers make decisions regarding curricula and materials.

Theoretical Framework

I used Ruddell and Unrau's (2004) sociocognitive context framework outlined in their sociocognitive interactive model as the framework. Not only did their framework provide the groundwork for approaching the experiences of exemplary middle grades teacher decision making in this contemporary setting of high stakes testing and curriculum mandates, but they also provided a lens in which to view and interpret the data (see Figure 2.1).

As seen from Figure 2.1, reading is a complex, sometimes hidden social and cognitive process, the instruction of which occurs in a sociocultural context (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). The intersection of reader, teacher, text, and classroom community is the point at which students formulate goals and identity about themselves as readers. The reader brings prior knowledge, motivation, attitude, values and beliefs, cognitive knowledge, language knowledge, word recognition knowledge, and classroom knowledge into the learning environment. Surrounding communities also affect how literacy is taught and learned.

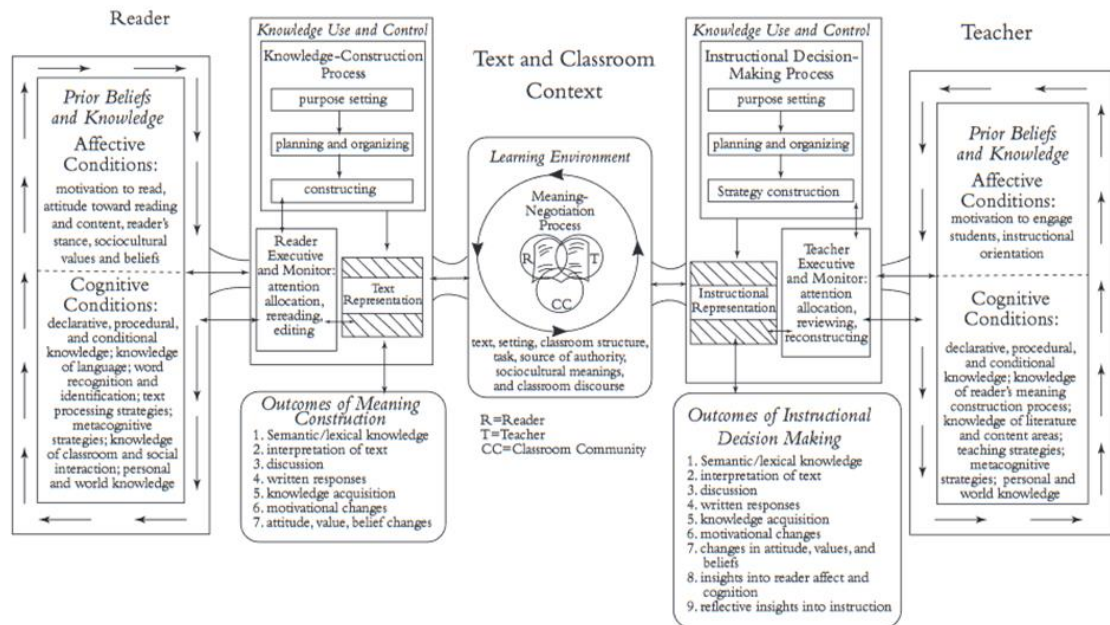


Figure 2.1 Sociocognitive Interactive Model

Students develop ideas about learning through interactions with those around them (Ivey & Johnston, 2015). Through interaction with the teacher, other readers, and the text, students begin to form goals and identities about themselves as readers (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). According to this model, the reader brings prior beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge about reading into the learning environment before instruction takes place. The reader's motivation and engagement also play an integral role in developing their decisions about reading (Wigfield & Guthrie, 2000). Thus, the reader's sociocultural beliefs and values impact the reading experience (Gee, 2001).

The teacher also brings prior beliefs, motivation to engage with students, cognitive knowledge, knowledge of students, teaching strategies, and content knowledge into the setting. The way teachers structure their text-related instruction impacts the way readers feel about their environment (Alvermann et al., 2004). In turn, these decisions influence the way the reader decides to approach the text. Simply put, the role of the teacher is critical in negotiating and facilitating meaning in the text and social context of the classroom (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004).

Along with the external expectations placed on them, teachers use prior beliefs and knowledge about reading, knowledge of pedagogy, and knowledge of students to make instructional decisions. Reading takes place in a social context that supports a meaning-negotiation process (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). Therefore, effective teachers must design instruction and create a learning environment that maximizes student learning (Brunner, 1996). Their decision-making process is key. Their planning practices are the point at which this complex process begins. This study examined the lived experiences of teachers in using texts effectively for their students and the pressure to comply with school, district, and state mandates.

For this study, the exemplary teacher typically keeps Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development construct at the forefront of decision making. Because of their extensive content knowledge and knowledge of students, expert teachers possess planning skills that allow them to anticipate situations and create contingency plans to meet the needs of their students (Housner & Griffey, 1985). Each of these decisions is bound by time, materials, and context, which is in constant flux (Berliner, 1986). The decision-making process of exemplary teachers is worth studying to gain a better insight into how exemplary teachers choose texts for instruction.

Figure 2.1 also depicts a model of the relationships among the myriad factors that contribute to the outcome of meaning construction from reading. This study collected data through interviews to understand how exemplary teachers experience this complex process. In this model, the teacher must prioritize data and execute instruction that meets the unique needs of each student. As Ruddell and Unrau (2004) explained, "It is the teacher who frequently assumes major responsibility for facilitating meaning negotiation within the social environment of the classroom" (p. 1015). In this study, teachers described their decision-making processes to provide insight into the methods, materials, and activities that they believe promote student achievement. However, as seen in the review of literature, teachers and their professional expertise have not very often been centered in educational policies in the United States, and those policies have a profound impact on the relationships between teachers, students, texts, and the educational contexts where teaching and learning occur.

United States Educational Policy: A Perpetual Literacy Crisis

Some researchers attribute the attention to academic success (or lack of) in United States to the Soviet Sputnik launch, which prompted the 1958 National Defense Education Act. To maintain America's place in the global market, this act was designed to counteract the impact of

poverty on school-aged children (Hanushek et al., 2019). However, other researchers argued that concern about student ability to read and write has been prevalent for over 150 years. The causes for this crisis are varied, including criticism of teachers and the culture of the time (Williams, 2007). Regardless of the catalyst, policymakers have attempted to enact policies that have impacted schools in hopes of ensuring American democracy. In their Equality of Educational Opportunity study, Coleman and Pimentel (1966) reported that family income and parental education contribute to student achievement outcomes, specifically the gap between rich and students living in poverty. Rather than families from these two socioeconomic extremes, Williams pointed out that middle class families are the ones sounding the alarm on the literacy crisis. Shuman (1975) echoed this idea that American schools are failing in reading, especially for secondary students. Still, the U.S. government report *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) reported that schools were in a crisis, prompting the need for accountability through standardized testing, which further spotlights the socioeconomic achievement gap. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) echoed the need for accountability, requiring the use of scientifically based instruction as outlined in the findings of the National Reading Panel Report (2000), profoundly affecting teaching and learning in U.S. schools. This policy restricted curriculum and reading programs to those that supported the ideas presented in the report. Despite the efforts to mandate scientifically based reading programs, Sirin (2005) found that the impacts of poverty on achievement increased and peaked in the middle grades, making this grade band a critical age to support and research.

In 2010, many states opted to adopt the CCSS (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012) in hopes that a rigorous curriculum would serve as an equalizer for low-income students. Also, states can compare student achievement data with ease with the adoption of a common curriculum. Critics

of the standards argued that a one-size-fits-all curriculum was counterintuitive, counterproductive, and derailed teacher autonomy (Dotson & Foley, 2016; Tienken, 2010). Since the adoption of a national curriculum, researchers have been tracking the achievement of students, especially those of low socioeconomic status. Reardon (2011) found large gaps in academic performance between students at socioeconomic extremes and that the gap remains as large as it was in 1966. More recently, researchers have found that the achievement gap has remained unchanged over the past 50 years, noting that the gap is roughly 3 years of learning by Grade 8 (Davis, 2019; Dotson & Foley, 2016; Hanushek et al., 2019). Additionally, results of the 2019 NAEP revealed that only 34% of eighth-grade students were proficient or above proficient in reading (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). These results show the need to study middle grades instruction.

Making matters worse, the COVID-19 global pandemic caused further disruption in teaching and learning. The full impact of this disruption is continuing to be known, and researchers are making projections to the learning loss that students are experiencing, forecasting that the gap for Grade 3 students will increase by an extra half year which will continue to widen (Bailey et al., 2021). New data are emerging leaving administrators floundering on the predicament of addressing learning loss—a term referring to the deficit in standardized test scores from before COVID-19 to after the global pandemic. Now more than ever, it is critical that teachers develop strategies to meet the increasingly diverse needs of the students they serve. Considering the factors that hinder student achievement, such as poverty, policies, and national crises such as a pandemic, it is the impact of teachers that matters the most (Davis, 2019; Jensen, 2009). Their importance in learning requires turning attention to them and what has defined exemplary performance.

History of Defining Exemplary Middle Grades Teachers

Successful schools consist of effective teachers (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Gabriel et al., 2011), and one could argue that the teacher is the single most in-school determinant of student achievement (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999; Goe, 2007; Wenglinsky, 2002). Although it is easy to identify an effective school, it is more complicated to define what makes an effective teacher. The use of standardized test scores has been the main method that policymakers use to label and sort teachers into categories of effectiveness (e.g., Allington & Johnston, 2002). Others may use nominations for teacher of the year, a program sponsored by the Council of Chief State Schools Officers designed to identify and honor excellence in teaching (Berliner, 1986). Schools and districts use various criteria to calculate and identify expert teachers, including classroom observations, student achievement, and student growth.

Using classroom observations, interviews, student achievement data, and other criteria, researchers have investigated qualities and factors that determine what defines a teacher as exemplary. Because teacher effectiveness is linked to student learning, researchers seek to identify the qualities that are impactful in hopes of duplicating what works through preservice teacher education programs and in-service professional development. Most researchers agree that student outcomes are the bases for identifying who might be considered an excellent teacher, but determining which aspects of teaching are the most impactful becomes challenging (Goe, 2007).

In studies of exemplary teaching, researchers have found that many exemplary teachers do not depend on curriculum materials to ensure student success (Sosniak & Stodolsky, 1993) but rely on instructional practices to ensure achievement. Exemplary teachers use their classroom time in a manner that maximizes student learning, including time to read, integration of subjects, creation of routines, use of diverse grouping, and opportunities for discussion (Pressley et al.,

1998). Creating a definition of exemplary teaching can be challenging. Berliner (1986) acknowledged that the problems of classroom teachers in contemporary American schools are so complex that “to be an expert public school classroom teacher is...much harder than to be an expert physics problem solver” (p. 9). It is accepted that teachers are important to student success, but the specific characteristics that support this success have been complex and contentious (Fitchett & Heafner, 2018; Parsons, 2012).

In selecting participants for study, many researchers use the criterion of student standardized test scores, which allows for comparison in studies on exemplary teaching. For example, in their study of exemplary fourth-grade teachers, Allington and Johnston (2002) described exemplary teachers as those who produce exceptional student achievement scores for consecutive years. This ability to meet the needs of their students seems to come from what Berliner (1986) referred to as “knowing in action”—i.e., using the comparison that reading a classroom is like reading a chessboard (p. 7). Exemplary teachers have the autonomy to make decisions about methods and materials that best meet the current needs of the students in their classrooms (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Duffy & Hoffman, 1999; Gabriel et al., 2011). Furthermore, exemplary teachers are those who not only make decisions based on student assessments but also make decisions in the moment students’ academic need, also called micro adaptations to their instruction (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Parsons, 2012).

Many researchers have sought to discover teacher qualities and practices that contribute to student achievement. Many have found that teacher knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy are key factors in student success in all grade levels (Darling-Hammond, 2002; Wayne & Youngs, 2003). However, Goe (2007) posited that there is a difference between teacher quality and quality teaching when contrasting the inputs, such as certification, degrees, and

dispositions, with outputs, such as the practices teachers exhibit in the classroom. Additionally, teachers can contribute to academic success in ways other than student achievement, such as mentoring colleagues, developing curriculum, and initiating school reform (Goe, 2007). Further contributing to school success is the idea of collective teacher efficacy, which can be defined as the shared belief that a group of teachers can impact student achievement (Bandura, 1993; Fisher et al., 2016; Goddard et al., 2000 Hattie, 2023).

Many qualities of exemplary teachers cannot be measured by standardized tests but are just as important in promoting student success. Dispositions and characteristics that foster student learning common to exemplary teachers include qualities such as warmth, flexibility, and enthusiasm. Exemplary teachers are those who believe all children can succeed, learning is a collaborative activity, and reading and writing are reciprocal (Ruddell, 1997; Thomas & Barksdale-Ladd, 1995). Several researchers found that the qualities and characteristics of exemplary teachers include the beliefs and attitudes that shape their instructional approach and philosophy. In his longitudinal study, Haberman (1995) found 14 characteristics of exemplary teachers. Some of these qualities include persistence, fostering learners and learning, perspective, respect, and fallibility. Likewise, Ruddell (1997) found that influential teachers are warm, caring, flexible, enthusiastic, and attend to students academically and personally. Furthermore, researchers found that exemplary teachers schedule their class time for extensive reading and writing, teach high-level skills, and promote student motivation (Pressley et al., 1997; Wigfield & Guthrie, 2000). These qualities and practices are common to exemplary teachers and the supportive environment they create.

There are many factors that teachers can control that support instruction, including the physical arrangement of the classroom, rules and routines, and their interactions with students.

They can control the kind of instruction, the type of delivery, and the methods that are used to grade students. However, there are many factors that a teacher cannot control, some of which include the number of students in the classroom, family situations, physical size of the classroom, the quality of resources, and curriculum guidelines. Teachers cannot control the amount of time they have with students, nor the level of collegial or administrative support. Teachers must consider outward expectations placed on them by stakeholders, principals, district leaders, while considering standards, high-stakes assessments, evaluations, mandated curriculum, and pacing guides (Parsons, 2012). The careful balance of these factors can be challenging. Exemplary teachers are those who can produce above average reading growth despite these challenges.

Teacher Decision Making With Texts

Even though researchers have found common attitudes and beliefs among exemplary teachers, they have discovered that teachers' use of texts and materials varies greatly. Simply put, for exemplary teachers, instructional programs or materials are not associated with influential teaching (Allington & Johnston, 2002). Many studies of exemplary teachers found that these teachers use diverse classroom materials and texts rather than a single text (Haberman, 1995; Ruddell, 1997; Sosniak & Stodolsky, 1993). This suggests that texts and materials may not contribute to literacy growth and achievement as much as other factors. Several studies show that teachers who integrate reading and writing with other content areas can show better than average reading achievement (Pressley et al., 1997, 1998). In sum, these studies support the idea that teacher attitudes and beliefs determine their instructional decision making and in turn impact student success.

Because student success is highly correlated with teacher expertise, teacher decision making has been a topic of many researchers. Shavelson (1973) claimed that teacher decision making is the basic teaching skill, stating that exemplary teachers know how to choose an action at a given time that best meets the needs of each student. Though this idea appears straightforward, there are many factors that play into the countless decisions teachers make before, during, and after instruction. Factors that influence teacher decisions include school culture, beliefs about teaching and learning, curriculum materials, and teaching experience.

The Context and Micropolitics of School Culture

School culture plays a significant role in developing teacher identity, beliefs, and decision making, especially for novice teachers (Hoffman et al., 2005; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013). Teacher identity and belief systems may converge or conflict with the micropolitics of the existing school culture (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). Blase (1991) defined micropolitics as the “use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organizations” (p. 11). Therefore, teachers may experience constant tension between maintaining their identity and beliefs and the micropolitics of the school’s idea of good teaching (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). These factors complicate the decisions teachers make.

Contrary to the efforts of outside factors and the search for best practices, Smagorinsky (2018) argued that teaching and learning are relational and situational. In other words, teaching and learning occur within a relationship between teacher and students. Within this context, instruction is a purposeful, decision-making process by which careful considerations are made often based on their beliefs (Gee, 1996, 2001; Heath, 2013), content knowledge, knowledge of students, attitude, level of support (Morgan et al., 2000; Stahl & Heubach, 2005), and available resources.

Existing within a school and district, professional learning communities, also referred to as communities of practice, provide a context by which teachers learn through inquiry and interactions with colleagues and those with expertise (Brown & Campione, 1994). This suggests that independent teacher practice exists within a larger community of teacher practice (Stein et al., 1998). Through these communities, teachers begin understanding and navigating the micropolitical routines of school (Curry et al., 2008). Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) suggested that there is a relationship among beliefs, classroom practice, student outcomes, and professional development, and that through this process, teachers see themselves as a part of a learning community. Furthermore, Kang and Cheng (2014) posited that the learning community shapes teacher development along with teacher experiences with professional development, discussions with other teachers, classroom instruction, and student performance.

Decision Making and Teacher Beliefs

With hopes of finding meaningful purpose in their schools, teachers enter their role with certain belief systems. Gee (1996) suggested that the way teachers approach reading instruction is interwoven through a complex context of teacher beliefs, instructional materials, and the micropolitics of the school. Teachers develop their belief system through their own educational experiences, teacher education programs, and professional development sessions that often focus on how to teach literacy effectively. However, without investigating why practices are effective, teacher growth and development may not be sustainable (Broemmel et al., 2020).

Planning for instruction is as much a psychological process as it is a cognitive one. What teachers do in the classroom is influenced by what they think prior to entering the instructional setting (Buchanan, 2015; Kessler, 2024). The teacher brings a set of ideas, beliefs, and values about learning into the decision-making process. Zembylas (2006) described the role of emotions

in teacher pedagogy and argued that teacher identity serves as the “repository of particular experiences in classrooms and schools, the site of thoughts, attitudes, emotions, beliefs, and values” (p. 107). Zembylas characterized this identity as being in a constant state of construction, destruction, and repair of boundaries of self; these identities are “assigned to teachers through discourses, practices, and performances” (p. 108).

Teachers refine and reshape their beliefs about teaching by experimenting in the classroom (Kang & Cheng, 2014). Many teachers experience what researchers refer to as “praxis shock,” which is defined as the confrontation between teacher beliefs and ideas and the realities of being a teacher (Gold, 1996; Veenman, 1984). Additionally, researchers have studied the tension between teacher beliefs and the mismatch with the models in their environment (Cooper & Olson, 1996; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013; Urmston & Pennington, 2008).

Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) compared teacher development to a spiral in which teachers are in a continual negotiation between beliefs and practice. Other researchers have seen comparable results, finding that teachers are in flux caused by external factors versus internal beliefs. In turn, teacher development is a gradual process (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Howe, 2006). Therefore, exemplary teachers are those who navigate this tension effectively and realize that student success is at the center of their practice. They put aside factors that do not support student success, such as fidelity to programs and curriculums (Gabriel et al., 2011). In sum, these researchers define exemplary teachers as those who focus on student understanding, have a “success is up to me” attitude, and believe it is their job to reach all students.

Decision Making and Curriculum Materials

Curriculum materials and reading programs are prevalent in schools across the nation. Not only are these materials meant to provide learning opportunities for students, but they also

provide learning opportunities for teachers (Ball & Cohen, 1996). These materials shape beliefs about what is important and promote certain ideas about students. A common curriculum provides an avenue for teachers to collaborate and share ideas, but it can also restrict and control teaching and learning (Valencia et al., 2006). With the pressure of standards and high-stakes testing, teachers feel an obligation to use the curriculum materials purchased by their school or district. However, the goal is not just to use the materials; the main goal is student learning. Exemplary teachers find ways to use the materials to meet the diverse needs of their students (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Ankrum et al., 2020). Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) suggested that instructional materials supply a normative idea about good teaching. State policies that regulate curriculum materials impact not only student learning but teacher learning. Instructional materials, school culture, and teachers' beliefs all play a part in teachers' decision-making processes (Buchanan, 2015; Kessler, 2024; Valencia et al., 2006).

Teacher Decision Making and Autonomy

Exemplary teachers are adaptive in their instruction, meaning, they are flexible and skilled and use their knowledge to make decisions (Vaughn et al., 2020). They use knowledge of their students and respond to their diverse needs (Bandura, 1993). Teachers who are exemplary acknowledge that one perfect method is an illusion, and they realize that excellent teaching occurs in a sociocultural context rather than in curriculum (Lewis et al., 2007). Exemplary teachers could be seen as improvisational, mixing and matching from the best methods to meet the needs of their classrooms (Ankrum et al., 2020; Parsons, 2012; Sawyer, 2004).

Navigating curriculum materials is not always a straightforward task. Teachers use their experiences, attitudes, content knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge to navigate materials and to adapt and modify them to meet the needs of their students. They interpret the curriculum and

turn it into daily lesson plans, deliver the lesson, and adjust along the way based on student response; this requires constant improvisation (Karvonen et al., 2018). Therefore, even though curriculum materials are prescribed and must be used in certain ways, actual uses in the classroom might vary greatly.

Some teachers might view curriculum materials as an attempt to control what is taught and what is learned. Teacher beliefs and attitudes impact how the curriculum materials are implemented. McGrath (2006) found that teachers' attitudes toward curriculum materials ranged from viewing them as guidance and support (i.e., a resource) to seeing them as a restraint. In other words, the themes from McGrath ranged from the teachers controlling the textbook to the textbook controlling the teacher. However, some teachers might view prescribed curriculum materials as a convenient, time-saving solution and a vehicle for collaboration (Bakken, 2019). The solution is not a this-or-that approach but a balance between teacher professionalism and the autonomy to place students at the focus.

Contemporary Teacher Decision Making

Teachers make countless decisions daily—before instruction, during instruction, and after instruction. Each decision impacts students. With the emphasis on text complexity outlined in the Tennessee State Standards, teachers must make decisions about texts more carefully. There is an expectation to use texts for instruction that are of appropriate complexity.

Many factors impact teacher decision making regarding texts used for instruction. Many of these factors are out of the teacher's control, including state mandates and district expectations. Recently, Tennessee passed laws that determine which curricula are approved for adoption, for example Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-2207 (2021) which states that districts must adopt a curriculum from the approved list or forfeit funding. Many of these curricula are aligned

with ideas presented in the Science of Reading, a stance on reading that outlines the simple view of reading that focuses on decoding and developing background knowledge. For teachers, this suggests that these materials are seen as supporting good teaching. The ideas promoted in the Science of Reading are often presented as one single truth (Yaden et al., 2021). In the continuum of reading instructional methods, the science of reading is on one end of the spectrum. The researchers who support this viewpoint ignore a body of research that provides a wide range of ways that students learn to read (Vaughn et al., 2020). Researchers propose a more balanced approach that includes students as active meaning makers in a sociocultural context (Lewis et al., 2007).

The Tennessee state curriculum standards further outline and dictate what is to be taught and assessed at each grade level. These standards dictate curriculum, standardized testing, and teacher evaluations. To ensure that standards are achieved at each grade level, state tests are administered to measure whether standards are learned by the students and how well they are taught by the classroom teacher. Tennessee requires all students in Grades 3–10 to take the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) yearly in most subject areas. The results of these assessments, along with teacher evaluations, are used to calculate the level of teacher effectiveness. During a podcast interview, Alfie Kohn, an American lecturer on education, scribed that many teachers chafe at being referred to as “test-prep technicians”—the way policymakers and district leaders seem to view educators today (Chastain, 2020). The emphasis on standardized test scores shifts the focus away from student-centered instruction.

Teacher evaluations, which contribute to gaining tenure, and often contract extensions place further pressure on teachers to comply with accepted structures of planning for instruction, delivery of instruction, environment, and assessment. Many school districts use an observational

tool, the Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model (2012), that are used for the intention of helping educators improve their practice. The tool outlines indicators such as professional growth and learning, use of data, school and community involvement, and leadership. Rubrics are used to identify areas of reinforcement and refinement and to calculate levels of effectiveness.

School districts create policies that align with mandates and laws created by the state. District level leaders create a culture of compliance and accountability for delivering instruction that follows state guidelines. Additionally, school districts provide training and professional development that align with state initiatives and mandates. Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) argued that teachers grow professionally when they have opportunities to become agentic learners in their professional practice, rather than professional development based on a deficit model.

Within each school, leaders attempt to follow district and state expectations while building a culture of learning. Each school has its own micropolitics and normative ideas of what good teaching and learning look like. School culture impacts teacher growth. Teachers must develop skills to navigate the micropolitical system of roles, power, interests, and norms within their schools (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). This dynamic system is context dependent on the social groups it is serving (Curry et al., 2008). Teachers must negotiate between their own beliefs and the beliefs of the groups within their schools.

Within grade levels and content areas, teachers participate in professional learning communities. These communities of practice provide teachers with opportunities to share and refine ideas about good teaching and learning. Exemplary teachers reported that collegial support was a major influence on their development and growth (Allington & Johnston, 2002). During

both formal and informal meetings with peers, teachers have opportunities to collaborate, share ideas, ask questions, and express frustrations (Curry et al., 2008 Gabriel et al., 2011). These learning communities provide a space for shared ideas about good teaching and how it is achieved (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002).

The curriculum impacts what classroom instruction and student learning look like. Teachers are limited by the adopted materials. Classroom materials shape teachers' knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learning, and in some cases, adds a layer of complexity to teacher understanding (Valencia et al., 2006). Valencia et al. suggested that this narrowing of curriculum materials has an impact not only on student learning but also on teacher learning. However, many teachers hold tight to their beliefs (Parsons et al., 2017), whereas other teachers may abandon their beliefs (Urmston & Pennington, 2008). Not only do mandated curriculum materials narrow and restrict learning, but they often fail to provide teachers with support regarding the rationale for including specific instructional methods (Sosniak & Stoldolsky, 1993). Curriculum materials also run counter to what researchers have found as the conditions and practices of exemplary teaching (Ankrum et al., 2020; Bandura, 1993; Lewis et al., 2007). Additionally, most curricula offer a one-size-fits-all approach. No one core curriculum could work for all students (Gabriel et al., 2011).

Text Complexity

One area that contemporary education policy pays particular attention to is text complexity. The topic of text complexity surfaced with the adoption of the CCSS (2010), which state that U.S. students are not prepared to meet the expectations of college and career by Grade 12. This shift means that students in middle grades must read texts that are considered appropriately complex. By the time students reach upper elementary and middle school, the

demands for reading shift from learning to read to reading to learn. Many students arrive at a place in which they are not ready to tackle the demands of this situation. Due to a plethora of factors, many students are reading below grade level but are asked to read and write grade level materials. To complicate matters, one middle school classroom may have a wide range of reading levels with the same grade level expectation of each student. Additionally, each student should make adequate progress as defined by district and state expectations.

To combat this issue, teachers are caught in the middle between two opposing instructional approaches (O'Connor et al., 2002). One perspective to address the gap for students who perform below grade level is the use of developmentally appropriate materials—materials that are written at or just above a reader's reading level. The idea is that the use of these materials will strengthen decoding, word analysis, fluency, and reading comprehension (Allington et al., 2105). However, this approach lacks time for students to practice with age-appropriate comprehension strategies (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1991).

According to Heibert and Mesmer (2013), the highest increase in complexity appears in Grades 2–5. This increase leaves middle grades teachers at a loss for how to help students who continue to struggle. O'Connor et al. (2002) outlined two perspectives that address the use of texts with readers who struggle: using developmentally appropriate texts and using grade level texts. The results of this quantitative study suggest that students who read texts that are developmentally appropriate perform better than students who read texts above their reading level, or age-appropriate texts. In other words, the struggling students in this study who received the intervention of instruction with developmentally appropriate texts showed more growth than students who read texts above their level. Beginning with Betts (1946), the accepted instructional level of word-reading accuracy is 95%. Since this study, many researchers have supported Betts'

findings (O'Connor et al., 2002). Not only does reading texts with 95% accuracy result in reading growth, but students may also experience greater engagement in reading. When students can attend to comprehension rather than decoding, they are more independent and on task (Gambrell, 2015; Moje, 2006).

Conversely, another perspective to address the gap for students who perform below grade level is the use of grade-level materials. These are materials designed to attend to grade-level standards and grade-level demands, with the intent to teach grade-level vocabulary, word study, and comprehension (Guthrie et al., 1996). The downfall of this approach is that students lack the time to develop reading skills that contribute to the ability to read independently.

The ability to design reading instruction that meets the needs of all students in a classroom needs to be investigated. The decision-making process of choosing the best text for each student involves many factors. Teachers who can navigate this feat despite pressure from administrators and packaged programs is worth studying.

Chapter Summary

Currently, teachers find themselves in a dilemma for which there is no easy answer. The tension between prescriptive models and autonomy can leave educators torn between what is best for students and external pressures from districts and state mandates. To put it simply, teachers are caught in the middle between fidelity to external expectations regarding choice of materials and the needs of their students. The aim of this study was to better understand the experiences of exemplary teachers regarding choosing texts for classroom instruction. Duffy and Hoffman (1999) stated, "Pursuing a perfect method for teaching all children distracts us from the real key to improving reading instruction" (p. 10).

Chapter Three

Methods

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand exemplary middle grades language arts teachers' lived experiences using texts and curriculum materials. This chapter presents the purpose, research question, methodology, participants, data collection, and analysis procedures. The chapter concludes with a discussion of trustworthiness techniques, ethical considerations, and my positionality statement. The research question that guided this study was, What are the experiences of exemplary middle grades language arts teachers with using texts and curriculum materials for instruction?

In this study, I enhanced my understanding of the lived experiences of exemplary middle grades language arts teachers' use of texts and curriculum materials for instruction given the current sociopolitical climate in Tennessee. The ability to choose texts has changed significantly during the past decade with the adoption of language arts standards in 2016, the passing of laws in 2021 that restrict the use of materials outside the adopted curriculum (Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-2207), and most recently the passing of the Age-Appropriate Materials Act in 2022 (Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-3801). This study addressed what teachers have experienced before and since recent legislation regarding the role of texts and curriculum materials used in language arts classrooms.

Research Design

Because I wanted understand people's lived experiences in this study, I employed a qualitative design to examine how exemplary middle grades language arts teachers use texts and curriculum materials for instruction in the current climate of Tennessee. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth investigation of an issue, exploring the experiences of the participants to

determine how meaning is formed (Creswell, 2012; Leavy, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative research is employed when a researcher wants to understand how knowledge is constructed by people as they make meaning of their experiences, how they interpret their experiences, how they construct their world, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Therefore, I ascertained that conducting qualitative research was most appropriate for this study because it is the best methodology for answering my research question.

Qualitative Research

In qualitative research, the researcher's focus is to better understand the meaning that participants hold about an issue or problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Qualitative researchers hold certain assumptions—namely, that humans can construct meaning as they engage with the world they are interpreting. They have accepted the idea that a real world exists independent of people's constructions and that understanding of the world is shaped by prior ideas and assumptions about the world (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Data gathered using interviews can be considered the contents of people's minds as they have experienced the world (Koven, 2014; Roulston, 2010). Therefore, to better understand an issue, qualitative researchers often use open-ended questions and semistructured interviews so participants can share their experiences and perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These researchers accept the idea that humans engage with and make sense of their experiences based on historical or social perspectives, emphasizing the importance of understanding and reporting the complexity of a situation. They seek to understand and interpret findings, inductively generating meaning from the data (Crotty, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research requires researchers to work inductively,

building patterns, categories, and themes, and then deductively to determine whether more evidence can support themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Qualitative research has been used in studies to understand literacy educators' experiences using texts and curriculum materials (e.g. DeHart, 2020). Like the aims of this study, qualitative research has been employed to examine topics such as experiences with scripted programs and teachers' perceptions of the narrowing of curriculum in the era of high accountability (e.g., Broemmel et al., 2020; Newberg-Long, 2010).

In terms of analysis, I brought a constructivist worldview to this study as I sought to understand multiple participant meanings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A constructivist view is one in which the researcher seeks to understand the world by looking for the complexity of perspectives and relying on the participants' ideas on their situations. The researcher listens to what the participants say about their situations and how they make meaning of them socially and historically; the researcher also needs to recognize how their background shapes their interpretation of the data (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For the purpose of this study, I used constructivist view to explore the experiences and views of exemplary middle grades teachers and their decisions to use curriculum materials. I investigated the complexity of the issue of teacher decision making to better understand the underlying experiences through interpretations of the experiences of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2002).

Additionally, I was conscious of how my knowledge and experience shaped my study from beginning to end. I was constantly aware of what was framing my view of the issue by keeping a journal of reflections on my process. I recognize that I am not separate from the world in which the data were produced; instead, I inhabit a similar world with experiences that both

mirror and oppose the lived experiences of these participants. How I perceive the world became part of the lens in which I interpreted the data. I outlined my biases in a positionality statement and used my reflections during data collection and analysis to aid in constructing my understanding of the issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Leavy, 2014). Acknowledging there are multiple ways of being a successful teacher, my data collection focused on how these successful teachers used texts for instruction.

Participants

Participants in a qualitative study are typically chosen through purposeful (also called criterion) sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using a specific criterion ensures the participants have common experiences with a problem or issue and represents those from which the most can be learned (LeCompte et al., 1993; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposeful sampling requires specific criterion to be met by the participants at the time of selection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Recruitment Criteria

The criteria for participant selection in the study included exemplary middle grades language arts teachers in east Tennessee who have produced above average achievement and growth in language arts, as measured by TCAP. The participants for this study were nominated by the director of an education consortium that serves 24 school districts in east Tennessee. I considered this director to be a knowledgeable and reliable source, as she has served as a reading specialist for 15 years and had also been a district reading specialist and a former regional director and coordinator of reading content for the Tennessee Department of Education. She holds a doctorate degree in educational leadership. As the leader of a consortium whose vision is to improve student outcomes by giving students and teachers equal access to instructional materials, she had a broad view of which schools are most successful in terms of language arts

achievement. The consortium does not have a vested interest in any one set of materials or programs. Additionally, this consortium collects student achievement data, which are used to identify schools that have demonstrated above average achievement scores on standardized tests. This is a common method for comparing teacher quality (see Allington & Johnston, 2002), allowing for comparison among studies of teacher effectiveness. One advantage of having the director nominate exemplary teachers is that I did not know the teachers, nor had I worked with them, allowing me to conduct data with minimal bias. This director provided the names of three middle schools and their personnel who had the highest student achievement in middle grades language arts.

The Internal Review Board Process

A critical aspect of participant selection was ethical consideration. Before conducting my study, I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I used contact information for each of the three districts and sought permission to collect data. I submitted a letter outlining the nature of my study to each district (see Appendix C). One district granted permission immediately, allowing me to contact principals. After obtaining teacher contact information, I sent e-mails to teachers outlining my study and requesting participation. Two teachers agreed. The second district granted permission a few weeks later. It was that district's policy to forward letters to their principals. I did not receive any interest from teachers in the second district. The third district granted permission and provided e-mails of the principals for Grades 5–8. I sent e-mails to four principals, and three principals responded with teacher contact information. The fourth principal did not respond to the first or subsequent e-mails. When I did not receive responses to my request to interview, I sent a second e-mail requesting permission. No participants from the third district volunteered. I can only

speculate about the lack of interest by either administrators or teachers in these districts. Due to the political nature of the topic of using curriculum materials, I surmised that schools and districts would follow policies enacted by Tennessee on what curriculum materials teachers in their districts may use for instruction. Before legislation mandating that teachers must use an adopted curriculum with fidelity, educators were able to choose their own materials to address the state curriculum standards. The shift from teacher autonomy to top-down mandates must have caused some tension between teachers and administrators. Administrators granting me permission to collect data in their districts may have seen my study as controversial, and thus may have been hesitant for me to interview their faculty. I experienced this tension firsthand when I initially reached out to a district curriculum supervisor about collecting data in the district they served. When asked about the possibility of talking with some of the teachers in their district pending IRB approval, they responded in the following:

You know for the past two years we have followed the HQIM protocol in our district with the support of TNTP and only allow our current adoption materials to be utilized in the classroom. We have been working on prep and planning together as teachers to ensure that the materials are followed closely with fidelity. So, my question to you is who will that work with for your dissertation?

I can only assume that administrators in other districts feel the same way, resulting in the few participants willing to share their experiences.

When soliciting participants, I shared a brief overview of how they were nominated for participation in this study. Also, I wanted to ensure that my participants knew the study's purpose. I asked the two teachers who agreed to participate to share their availability with me so that we could arrange a time to schedule a Zoom meeting. Before starting the interviews, I

reviewed the consent form that outlined the purpose of my study and shared information about potential risks. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time. I took all precautions to maintain confidentiality, using pseudonyms and storing all data, transcriptions, and identifying information on a password protected computer.

Participant Description

Participants in this study were nominated by the director of an education consortium. The criteria were middle grades language arts teachers who had demonstrated that they had produced above average student achievement and growth as measured by results from the TCAP. The director nominated three exemplary middle schools, provided the contact information to gain permission from each school, and provided contact information for the curriculum supervisors. I contacted each curriculum supervisor through e-mail. The first district responded within a few days with the contact information of the middle grades language arts teachers. I e-mailed four teachers, and two responded that they were willing to participate.

I assigned pseudonyms to each participant: Robin, a sixth-grade language arts teacher, and Peggy, a fifth-grade language arts teacher. They have been in the education field for 21 years and 13 years, respectively. These educators each hold an Ed.S. degree in educational leadership, and one was enrolled in a doctorate program. Both had experience working in varied contexts—in public school settings and grant-funded programs designed to support underserved students. They had prior experience working in other districts in Tennessee before their employment in the district where they worked at the time of this study. Additionally, throughout their careers, they worked in various roles and grade levels, mostly in reading and language arts. More detailed individual participant descriptions are not provided to protect their identities.

Data Collection Procedures

Historically, qualitative studies focus on analyzing a special kind of information (Patton, 2002), specifically the “beliefs, values, and attitudes that structure the behavior patterns of a specific group of people” (Merriam, 2009, p. 27). For this study, I was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), with the goal of exploring the experiences, attitudes, values, and feelings of exemplary middle grades language arts teachers. I aimed to derive meaning and understanding from the data, and in the process, identify themes.

Data collection using interviews is informed by different theoretical perspectives and used for various purposes (Roulston, 2010). Qualitative researchers often conduct interviews during the data collection phase (Roulston, 2010; Seidman, 2012; van Mannen, 1990). The purpose of interviews is to better understand the complexity of an issue or problem. Often the information gained from interviews cannot be directly observed (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Because I was interested in the experiences of my participants, I wanted to generate a detailed description of the participants’ experiences in using texts for instruction (Seidman, 2012). Therefore, my interview protocol focused on beliefs, perceptions, and understandings of their experiences (see Appendix A). As I created my interview protocol, I was careful to adhere to ethical considerations of my participants. I also considered my research question and conceptual framework that I would use to analyze my data as I created my interview questions (Roulston, 2010). I considered what I already knew about the topic to guide my protocol development and designed questions that would allow the participants to share and elaborate on their experiences.

Semistructured interviews allow researchers to prepare structured questions to collect similar data from participants, while also allowing the researcher to respond to the participant's answers in an organic manner (Magnusson & Mareccek, 2015). Interviews begin with creating a list of questions designed to answer the research question completely and leaving opportunities for the interviewer to ask follow-up questions or follow a new line of thinking based on the responses of the participants (Roulston & Choi, 2018). I collected data to better understand the experiences, feelings, perceptions, and understandings (Roulston, 2010; Roulston & Choi, 2018).

To ensure a successful interview, I prepared adequately, demonstrated respect to participants, used active listening, and remained flexible to follow a topic introduced by participants. I began the interview session with the consent form. After each participant gave their consent to participate, I began with questions about their background experience and demographics. Next, I asked questions about the participants' experiences with instruction, students, and curriculum materials. Using a semistructured protocol also provided opportunities for me to both alter my protocol and explore a participant's response more in-depth (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). After the initial questions, I began each interview with open-ended questions that prompted the participant to "describe a time when..." (deMarrais, 2004) and followed up with questions that asked participants to explore the issue more deeply (Patton, 2002; van Manen, 1990). I took notes during the interview to remind myself of responses that needed clarification. Even so, during the initial analysis, I noticed areas for which I needed more information, so I created an additional list of questions to ask via a follow-up e-mail.

I used a web-based video platform, Zoom, to interview participants, which allowed for flexibility and convenience for the participants and for recording and transcribing to ensure accuracy in data collection (Gray et al., 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This face-to-face

format not only allowed me to observe the participants' nonverbal cues and to modify questions as appropriate, but it allowed for ease in screen sharing consent forms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Additionally, Zoom provided a means for obtaining data from participants who are geographically dispersed (Gray et al., 2020). Using the research question as a starting point and supplementing with follow-up questions based on participant's answers, I collected unique data from each participant (Leavy, 2014; Patton, 2002). Robin's interview took 60 min while Peggy's took 50 min. I used the Zoom platform to record the audio portion of the interviews and the transcription feature to ensure accuracy of data collection. I followed up with participants via e-mail to clarify and probe deeper. I used the transcriptions from the interview and written responses from the e-mail for data analysis (Gray et al., 2020).

Data Analysis

I began data analysis immediately after the first interview, as data collection and analysis are simultaneous in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After the first interview was concluded, I was able to download the audio transcript within 48 hr from the Zoom platform. I began analyzing the data immediately. I first read through the transcript to look for any recording errors, editing a few instances in which a word or phrase was transcribed incorrectly. Next, I sent the transcript to the first participant as a member check to verify accuracy and request any edits or additions to our conversation. After the first participant confirmed that the transcript was accurate, I began open coding (Saldaña, 2021), looking line by line and assigning a word that captured the meaning unit, keeping my research question at the forefront of my mind. I noted pieces of data that I coded *in vivo*, or *verbatim*, to capture the nuances, tone, and actual language of the participant. I made notes in the margins of topics that might need further explanation so that I could formulate follow-up questions. I read and reread the transcripts, noting bits of data,

assigning a word or phrase or codes, and considering how the codes might be similar (Charmaz, 2014). I used the notes in the margin and prepared follow-up questions, sending them to the participants via e-mail. During this process, I began placing the concrete data into similar categories.

After analyzing the first transcript, I noticed that many of the codes were similar to the components in the sociocognitive interactive model outlined by Ruddell and Unrau (2004). I chose to move from open coding to a priori coding, using the components of this model as a lens to analyze and make meaning of the data. King (1994) referred to a priori coding as a process that uses codes drawn from research or theory (Blair, 2015). This method seemed to be more aligned with my epistemology and ontology, a framework that spoke to my thoughts about the teachers' experiences with pedagogy and learning. Similar to Blair, it was my intention to "tell the story of my participants," giving the data a voice. I read and reread the transcripts using self-scrutiny and reflexivity, rereading the transcripts to look for patterns.

I followed this same process with the data from my second participant, using the a priori codes identified in the first transcript and coded data in vivo, comparing each piece of data with the existing codes.

Summary of Findings

Next, I began to synthesize the meanings into a composite description that represented commonalities and differences between the participants so that I could speak to their experiences in nuanced ways (Leavy, 2014). To put it simply, I aimed to understand the experiences of middle grades language arts teachers with using texts and curriculum materials for instruction through the context of the sociocultural interactive model (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). Table 3.1 shows some examples of the codes as applied to the participants' data.

Table 3.1 Examples of Codes

Themes	Codes	Examples	Description
Teacher Prior Beliefs and Knowledge	Instructional orientation	“every year you have to change your curriculum” “you can stick to what you’ve always done and think it’s going to work every year”	This is an attribute of an exemplary teacher, one who considers each group of students as having their own needs.
	World Knowledge	“I was formerly with a district that felt like their off-the-shelf curriculum was the Bible” “We were told to teach it with fidelity.” “in my new district we’re encouraged to create our own resources”	This reveals the experiences in other districts have different expectations. These expectations influence the instruction in classrooms
	Knowledge of reader’s meaning construction	“to take a more blended approach and not rely so much on those textbooks” “look at their students and determine what text they want to use”	The teacher’s knowledge and expertise of meaning construction allow her to make instructional decisions regarding texts and curriculum materials.

Table 3.1 Continued

Knowledge Use and Control	Instructional Decision-Making Process	“the freedom that teachers have” “I’ve had experience with the principal within the district that would support his teachers when they wanted to go against district beliefs.” “I’ve also been with principals that aren’t quite as supportive.”	District and school support impacts classroom learning. A school’s culture and micropolitics factor in what occurs in the classroom decision-making process.
	Reconstructing	“I get distracted by all the little pieces.” “They offer so many options, and we have a 60-minute period”	Exemplary teachers can create and design instruction to meet their students’ needs. This might require making executive decisions about what to teach and what to omit.
	Planning and Organizing	“my conversation the other day with a friend” “we work together, the social studies teacher and I”	This supports the idea that exemplary teachers do not work and plan in isolation to meet the needs of their students.

Table 3.1 Continued

Learning Environment	Classroom Structure	“it’s really difficult to squeeze it all in” “we have a 60 minute period” “being able to fit it all in”	Time is a constraint that all educators experience. In order to create their classroom structure, these participants share their priorities with given constraints.
	Sociocultural Meanings	“you just have to play around with what you think kids are going to connect with” “you might change a text because you can see that your group of kids are not going to be interested”	Participants felt that relationships with students was a priority. Getting to know their interests and abilities was important to student success.

Ethical Considerations

Although no known risks were expected from participating in this study, I took care to minimize harm. As outlined in my IRB application, I obtained informed consent and voluntary participation, ensured confidentiality, and engaged in maintaining the well-being of the participants. I also obtained approval from the University of Tennessee's IRB before contacting participants and collecting data. I reviewed the informed consent form with each participant before conducting the interviews. Furthermore, I informed participants I would remove any identifying information from all documents and transcripts and that all transcripts/data would be kept on a password-protected computer. I used pseudonyms to further reduce the possibility of participant identification.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, processes to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability support the trustworthiness of a study. Credibility is the extent to which the findings are believable from the perspective of the participant. Transferability refers to the idea that the findings can be transferred to other contexts. Dependability is the extent to which similar findings can be generated by other researchers. Confirmability is the extent to which the results can be corroborated by others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To develop trustworthiness of this study, I performed member checks, returning the data to the participants to ensure accuracy of the transcripts and findings (Birt et al., 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Shenton, 2004). Each participant had a chance to clarify any answers they gave and confirmed that responses were captured accurately. Additionally, to develop trustworthiness, I provided a thick, rich description of the findings (Roulston & Choi, 2018). I sought to describe the themes as completely as possible to allow for a clear understanding of the findings.

Another method of supporting trustworthiness involves describing the background and experiences of the researcher. As the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, the researcher's credibility serves as the basis for trust (Shenton, 2004). To support trustworthiness, I included a positionality statement with information about my educational and career experiences, my personal beliefs, and personal values. By providing this reflection, I attempted to suspend my personal judgments as much as possible from data analysis to create an objective view of the data (Roultonson & Choi, 2017). Lastly, to maintain trustworthiness, I performed peer debriefing, discussing my process, data collection, and data analysis with my committee.

Positionality

As an educator in the sociopolitical climate in Tennessee, I have experienced the tension between outside expectations placed on me by my school, district, and state to follow curriculum with fidelity, and what I know to be true from what researchers have found to be appropriate for developing student literacy skills (Pearson & Duke, 2002; Samuels & Farstrup, 2011). I have engaged in numerous conversations with teachers who expressed this same tension, even stating that they were “afraid of using anything outside the adopted curriculum.” As an instructional coach, I spend time with a variety of language arts teachers, and I hear them express similar sentiments. This study allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of these teachers to give their words and voice “full value” (van Manen, 1990).

I believe that student needs should be the center of decision-making regarding teaching and learning. Exemplary teachers know that learning is a social act and strive to build relationships by getting to know the strengths and preferences of each student they serve (Bruner, 1996; Fisher et al., 2016). They use assessments to identify where their students are ready to begin learning (Boushey & Behne, 2023; Vygotsky & Cole, 1978) and design lessons to

maximize student success. I believe that exemplary teachers are those who can balance standards, testing, mandates, and school politics, and place students at the top of their priority list, allowing them to act with knowledge and power (Foucault et al., 1988; Pressley et al., 2023).

I believe the lens that teachers look through in making decisions regarding texts for instruction should be based on what researchers have found to be effective in reading instruction (Adams, 1990; Duke & Pearson, 2002; O'Connor et al., 2002; Samuels & Farstrup, 2011; Wilson & Floden, 2018). I believe that exemplary teachers provide a variety of instructional strategies, taking in countless factors before making a choice for instruction, often in constant flux to regulate the learning environment (Foucault et al., 1988). Exemplary teachers know that learning occurs in a certain context, and the teaching of reading occurs at the intersection of reader, teacher, text, and the classroom community (Pressley et al., 2023; Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). Therefore, they make great efforts to curate an environment in which students can flourish (Goe, 2007).

My experiences affected the research process. As an educator in Tennessee, I experienced what teaching language arts entailed. I taught in a variety of grade levels, which allowed me to consider multiple perspectives. As an instructional coach, I had the opportunity to assist with increasing teacher capacity, creating district-wide pacing guides, and supporting delivery of the curriculum in classroom contexts. Along with this honor, I attended professional learning communities (PLCs) to listen and plan with teachers. During these meetings, we evaluated how much the curriculum met students' needs and discussed ways to remedy instruction for students who continued to struggle. Based on classroom observations and topics in PLCs, I planned professional development that supported teachers in better understanding teaching middle grades language arts. It is because of my experience teaching students and coaching teachers that I

chose the topic of this study. I acknowledge that I hold certain biases that stem from my experiences and educational background. For this reason, I maintained a journal that allowed me to distance my personal prejudices and the data collection and analysis process.

Chapter Summary

For this study, I interviewed exemplary middle grades language arts teachers in hopes to develop an enhanced understanding of their lived experiences using texts and curriculum materials for instruction. This chapter outlined my methodology, which included participant selection, data collection and analysis, IRB considerations, and trustworthiness strategies.

Chapter Four

Findings

What It Means to Use Texts and Curriculum Materials

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of exemplary middle grades language arts teachers and developed an enhanced understanding of their use of texts and curriculum materials for instruction. The research question that guided this qualitative study was, What are the experiences of exemplary middle grades language arts teachers with using texts and curriculum materials for instruction? I used sociocognitive interactive theory (Rudell & Unrau, 2004) to guide and shape the data analysis of exemplary middle grades teachers' decision making, as this theory highlighted the interaction between the reader, the text, the classroom context, and the teacher. This framework provided a guide in developing my semistructured interview protocol, as well as the lens in which to analyze and synthesize my findings.

I identified three interdependent themes from the data analysis process: (a) teacher prior beliefs and knowledge, (b) knowledge use and control, and (c) learning environment. Each theme described in this chapter contributes to the success of these participants.

Teacher Prior Beliefs and Knowledge

The teacher's prior beliefs and knowledge component consists of two domains: affective conditions and cognitive conditions (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). The affective conditions include attributes such as motivation to engage students and instructional orientation. Cognitive conditions include attributes such as (a) declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge; (b) knowledge of a reader's meaning-construction process; (c) knowledge of literature and content areas; (d) teaching strategies; (e) metacognitive strategies; and (f) personal and world knowledge. Participants developed the components in this domain through education and experience.

Participants' educational background consisted of formal education that impacted their career, including college degrees and additional certificates or training, which Allington and Johnston (2002) stated were a common characteristic of an exemplary teacher. Teaching experiences include those in which the participants were employed by an organization, including public school districts or educational nonprofit organizations.

The study participants had extensive educational backgrounds. Robin has a bachelor's in education, a master's in reading and literacy, and an Ed.S. in educational leadership. She stated that she hoped to one day earn a doctorate. This desire to continue to increase her capacity as an educator provided her with a strong knowledge base in both content and pedagogy. Additionally, acknowledging the hope to pursue advanced degrees highlighted that learning to be an effective educator is a life-long endeavor.

At the time of data collection, Peggy was beginning her 13th year as an educator. She held a bachelor's degree in human growth and learning, a master's degree, an Ed.S., and was enrolled in a doctoral program at the time of the study. Peggy's pursuit of advanced degrees demonstrates her drive to increase her capacity as an educator. Obtaining degrees from different institutions provides her with opportunities to build her content knowledge and pedagogy and also her relationships with colleagues across the region. She stated, "I have some really great friends in education, and I feel like you learn so much from all of the people around you." This statement reflects a core value of Peggy's: the importance of collaboration and growth.

At the time of this study, Robin was entering her 21st year as an educator and has served in various settings and grade levels. She began as a preschool teacher and then as a curriculum coordinator focusing on reading intervention for kindergarten through sixth grade in a county school district. After this position, she changed school districts to teach third grade, fourth grade,

and sixth grade. This vast diversity of experiences provided her with opportunities to apply her knowledge and pedagogy to students with a wide range of abilities, which has served her in her current position. At the time of this study, Robin reported she was beginning her fourth year in sixth grade. Robin has a sense of humor and seems to be able to see the positive in every role that she has held. She stated:

I really thought when I was in third grade, that that was it, that it was the perfect grade.

And then I went to fourth grade, and I thought the same thing. And now that I'm in sixth grade, I kind of feel the same way. So, I'm starting to feel like I can find something good about at any grade level. Really....just don't put me in a math classroom.

The ability to remain in one grade level has increased her knowledge of content, state curriculum standards, and standardized test matter for sixth grade students, which contributes to her success. Additionally, teaching four years in the same grade level allows her to work out the curriculum and to address areas of the content that the textbook/reading program may not. She can support her students with topics that may not be explored in depth in the curriculum materials. Additionally, having an in-depth knowledge of the content and standards from teaching in one grade level for several years provides the teacher with perspective on how to manage her time and adjust how much time to spend on the standards that students need to master by the end of the school year. Furthermore, having taught in various grade levels allows her to know appropriate texts to use for instruction that will meet students' interests and needs.

During the interview she stated, "I'm starting to feel like I can find something good about any grade level." This demonstrates her positivity in making any context a good experience for herself and her students. This comment reflects her willingness to adapt to new grade levels with a positive attitude. This also reveals that Robin is the type of teacher who takes her way of

knowing and her experiences with the content, standards, and pedagogy and applies this knowledge to a new context. Her diverse educational background and teaching experience allow her a rich perspective regarding curriculum materials and text for instructing students.

Peggy has taught for 13 years in various capacities, roles, and settings, including as a literacy coordinator at a nonprofit organization that works with students in kindergarten through sixth grade to improve literacy skills. She then was a fifth-grade language arts teacher in a public school district for 10 years. Peggy's extended time in one grade level provides her with deep content knowledge of her subject matter, deep knowledge of state curriculum standards, and knowledge of the culture and interests of fifth-grade students. Her experiences provide her with the opportunity to work with students with a wide variety of ability levels in literacy, as well as different contexts, which provides perspective on her teaching philosophy.

Furthermore, Peggy shared that she struggled as a child in school, putting extra time in at home to be successful. She says that is why she chose to become a teacher. She stated, "I just want to be that shining light to the students and see that potential in them. Maybe they just need a little bit extra. So yeah, that's why I teach." I interpreted this statement as her way of saying that her experiences as a student inform the ways she presents herself as a teacher. She seemed mindful of her students' needs and aims to be the teacher she would have preferred as a student.

Motivation to Engage Students

Teachers possess certain beliefs or dispositions that influence and shape their instructional purpose, plan, and strategy construction (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). Dispositions in this study refer to qualities of personality that allow one to be successful (Hattie, 2008; Ruddell, 1997; Thomas & Barksdale-Ladd, 1995). These qualities are sometimes directly articulated or indirectly implied through dialogue and descriptions. The dispositions outlined in this study were

attributes directly related to participant well-being and outlook in the classroom. Teachers' dispositions are translated into action and decision making, as they create a classroom environment and culture that contribute to their students' success.

Robin revealed certain dispositions that directly contribute to her success in the classroom. These affective conditions, as also outlined by Ruddell and Unrau (2004), include motivation to engage students, alignment of teacher and student with teaching and learning, and selecting, structuring the achievement experience. Robin considered one of her strengths as an educator to be her ability to adapt. She stated:

It's not always the same. I had a conversation with a teacher friend just the other day about different groups (students), and how every year you have to change your curriculum. And you're constantly evolving because their experiences are always different. Your incoming students—you have to adapt to that. You can't stick to what you've always done and think that it's going to work every year.

Robin planned to be adaptive. She prepared for it, recognizing that each group of students has different needs and experiences, and intentionally learned the needs of each student before planning for instruction. This type of thinking is in direct contrast to the expectations outlined by the state of Tennessee, which is that one must follow the curriculum with fidelity as it is outlined. Additionally, adjusting and adapting the curriculum every year places a greater time demand on teachers than those who use the same lessons year after year regardless of the needs of the students.

Peggy's adaptability is evident as a teacher during a unique time in recent history. Her experiences in teaching students before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic gave her the perspective of teaching online. Also, she had experience in student differences due to the

pandemic's social and academic impact. She contrasted herself with other colleagues in that she is constantly evolving, finding ways to better meet the needs of her students. She explained:

I don't really know that where I am now, we do things so differently, but I have been places that teachers stick to what they've always done, and they never make those changes as they see education is changing; changing as they see children changing.

It is evident that Robin is reflective of her own instruction and that of her colleagues. In other words, Robin values the ability to be adaptive to meet the ever-changing needs of the context. The instructional disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic forced many educators to rethink teaching and learning. Robin is the type of teacher who sought ways to overcome this obstacle to meet the needs of her students. This willingness to be adaptable for the sake of her students reveals that Robin is willing to leave her level of comfort and learn new ways of teaching.

Robin also shared that she sought help from others when needed. When first moving from teaching fourth grade to teaching sixth grade, she asked for help of another sixth-grade teacher whom she trusted to gain resources and tips on writing instruction. This shows that she acknowledges there is more than one way to meet students' needs. Learning from other educators is a valuable disposition and creates a culture of continuous growth. When a group of teachers collectively believe that they can promote learning and raise achievement, students receive the benefit.

Similarly, Peggy demonstrated a desire to increase her capacity as a teacher, as is evidenced by her pursuit of the desire to learn more through advanced degrees. She said she wanted to learn new things to implement them into her classroom to be more effective.

Specifically, she mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic caused her to learn and implement new ways of using technology that have helped her students. She shared:

Some of the things I've had to just take upon myself and be eager to learn and implement into my classroom that have helped me be more effective. Especially after COVID-19. I feel like, you know, a lot of the technology that we use really helped by instruction.

Along with her desire to be more effective, she stated that what makes her different from other educators in her district is that she has a drive to succeed and willingness to “put it all out there.” This disposition of self-motivation was a thread that ran through most of her responses. As she mentioned, “taking it upon herself” was an option for Peggy as she was not constrained by following a curriculum with fidelity. She had the autonomy to grow and change, designing new ways of using curriculum materials and texts to meet the needs of her students. Because of the school leadership, she can take ownership of her professional growth, as she is not willing to settle for the status quo.

In contrast, she noticed that some educators become complacent after teaching for several years, explaining:

I'm not, you, looking down upon anybody else, because we all have a life outside of school, and we've all you know, we can't put in a hundred percent all the time at school. I think I just have a drive to want to succeed, and I think sometimes that leaves some after they've taught for years.

She wanted to prevent that from happening to her, supporting her reason to pursue advanced degrees. I can infer from her statements that Peggy considers it her responsibility to take control of her professional trajectory. This disposition highlights her responsibility to be a lifelong learner for her and for her students' sake. Additionally, Peggy's awareness of the effect of

complacency other teachers exhibit shows that she wants better for herself. She is taking steps to be proactive in preventing this from happening to her.

Knowledge Use and Control

Like dispositions, knowledge use and control translate into teacher decision making and classroom environment, with the teacher taking the major responsibility of creating an environment of meaning negotiation (Ruddell & Unrau, 2010). These values and beliefs are realized by the participants' language and descriptions of instructional choices regarding texts and curriculum materials. It is within these values and beliefs that pedagogy is transformed from thought into action, contributing to student success (Hattie, 2008).

Robin noted that she was careful to align her teaching values and beliefs with that of her students. First and foremost, she valued student needs, stating that her conception of the perfect classroom was when students were engaged and took ownership of learning. She described:

I'd like it if I was to walk into the perfect ELA [English language arts] classroom, and the kids are already engaged, where they are taking notes, whether they're working in a notebook or working in groups, even independently, students should be engaged in what they're doing, asking questions.

Robin believes students are her top priority in instructional decision making. Clearly, she recognizes the relationship between student engagement and achievement. To realize the perfect classroom, she strives to create a culture of engagement in her own classroom. Throughout her interview responses, she repeatedly mentioned that she places student interest and need as the determining factor when making decisions about curricular materials and texts for her classroom.

Robin valued her relationships with both colleagues and students. This belief was shown through her descriptions of her frequent conversations with fellow teachers and her students as

she was planning instruction for her students. She stated, “Students should always be involved in conversations, not just taking in, but actually involved in what is going on in the classroom.” She believes students should have a voice in their learning, aligning herself with scholarship that reader engagement is central in making sense of achievement experience (Hattie, 2008). This idea contrasts with recent legislation that states districts must follow an approved curriculum with fidelity, a curriculum that does not consider student interest, need, or choice. Nor does such a policy rely on the expertise of teaching professionals.

Likewise, Peggy considered her biggest strength to be her ability to relate to and build relationships with most students. She stated, “If you can’t build a relationship with a child, you can’t teach that child.” She spent the first 2 weeks of the school year building relationships and allowing students to get to know her. She shared, “I don’t care if it takes two and a half weeks, I’m going to get to know them, and they’re going to get to know me, and I think that’s just equally as important.” She used this information about her students’ interests and academic needs to create a personalized curriculum for them, stating that a textbook:

May or may not relate to that group of kids that you have in your classroom that year, whereas you know the interests of the kids that you have in your room right then. And so, if you create something, you can create something that they want to read, and that makes such a difference.

This statement shows that Peggy values her ability to adapt curriculum materials and texts based on her students' needs. She clearly places students at the center of her decision making. She demonstrates her confidence in her ability to develop a curriculum, rather than follow a curriculum developed by a textbook company. Her experience has taught her that when students are able to read texts that they are interested in and have a voice in their learning they respond

positively. Because of her experience teaching in contexts that did not allow for teachers to adapt their instruction, she values this ability in her current instructional setting.

Like Peggy, Robin mentioned she wanted to feel valued by believing that her voice was heard when making decisions regarding student learning. She shared:

Conversations should be open, and I've had principals where I felt like I could go into their office, and I can say, 'Hey, I see that this is happening.' And I've had other principals where I've not felt like I could do that; where I didn't feel like my voice was heard.

It is clear that she values the professional freedom and trust she feels in working in her current district—in contrast to the lack of autonomy she had in her previous district. Having a voice is important to Robin. She would not want to work in a setting in which her voice was not heard. Robin believed that the needs of students were more important than the off-the-shelf curriculum. She expressed:

When it came to curriculum, your teachers are there with students. They see what's going on every day, and it's not the principal's job to be in there with the students every day. Something might look good on paper, but in practice it may not be.

This fact is overlooked by legislators who develop laws that take the teacher out of the decision-making process. Teachers spend their instructional time getting to know the interests and needs of students and are the best ones to make choices concerning curriculum materials and pacing. In addition, Robin recognizes the mismatch between laws and external expectations and translating these expectations into practice. This belief, grounded in her expertise in her academic and professional career, allowed her to feel confident in her ability to choose and use texts for instruction for her students. She used the off-the-shelf curriculum as a guide, not a mandate. Her

knowledge use and control regarding her decision-making process reflected her instructional intent, remaining true to her priority of student-centered decision making.

Although she believed that a student-centered curriculum serves her students, Peggy advised the off-the-shelf curriculum as a support for beginning teachers because “supposedly everything you need is inside that textbook.” Her doubt, highlighted by her use of the descriptor “supposedly,” that an off-the-shelf curriculum would meet all the needs of her student stemmed from her years of experience and is evident through her choice to create her own curriculum. Her view also arose from her experiences, as she shared that in the beginning of her teaching career, she used the off-the-shelf curriculum because she didn’t have the time or the energy to make her own curriculum. She stated:

I did follow that textbook for a while, just getting started because it was there, and I didn’t have the time or the energy to make my own things and my own curriculum. But, as I became less novice, I started developing my own passages and my own content and stay strictly to that now.

She stated that the benefit of creating a personalized curriculum over using the off-the-shelf curriculum is that she was able to create something that was relatable to the students, recognizing that the off-the-shelf curriculum does not meet all the needs of all of her students, which emphasizes that a one-size-fits-all curriculum is not a reality. Different grade bands often adopt different curriculum materials produced by different companies, producing a mismatch between what is taught from one year to the next. Without the ability to adapt the curriculum materials to meet students' needs, students may experience fragmented instruction. Her belief that classrooms should be student-centered was central in her interview responses. Still, she saw the utility of having materials on hand for new teachers who might not have as much experience or

their own sources to draw upon. It was her view that an off-the-shelf curriculum was more a scaffold to build from than a plan to strictly adhere to, particularly given that she learned that students would have diverse needs.

Robin's chief view on education was centered on her own interests and background, with her advice to a new teacher being "do the things you love." She believed that attitudes and feelings about learning start at the top, emphasizing the teacher's role in setting the tone for learning. She wants her students to love reading, so that they can grow, sharing, "The data, test scores, is great, but I want kids to love reading or at least tolerate reading. And if they see me loving it, then they're gonna grow from that." For her, the effect was more important than teaching materials, supporting the idea that off-the-shelf curricula disregard student interest and choice.

Peggy described her perfect classroom as respectful and engaging, with behaviors conducive to learning. Within this positive culture and environment, students are exposed to repetitive practice of skills, often presented using the gradual release of the responsibility framework (Pearson & Duke, 2002) of "I do, we do, you do." She believed students were successful when they learned skills in a spiral approach, revisiting skills throughout the school year. In an attempt to cover all of the standards, often textbooks do not provide the opportunities for students to continually revisit skills throughout the year or when students need them. Peggy strives to create this culture with her students every day. She models learning and provides scaffolding when it is needed, using her knowledge of student needs and achievement level to make instructional decisions of pacing the materials. Often, this instructional choice is not provided in off-the-shelf curricula that require teachers to follow the materials with fidelity and integrity.

Instructional Decision-Making Process

Within the constraints of time and resources, teachers must make countless decisions about what to teach, how to teach it, what to use, when to use it, and sometimes when to teach it again (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). Therefore, teachers must prioritize their decisions and tasks. The participants in this study prioritized their students' needs in all their decision making. Students played a central role in their priorities, particularly in choosing texts for instruction.

Robin's freedom to create her own curriculum allows her to prioritize student interest, ability levels, and diversity when choosing texts for her students. She described:

You might change a text because you can see upfront that your group of kids are not going to be interested in that. I had taught *Restart* for a while, and I had a group of students that I just didn't think would connect with it. So, I switched, and we read *Freak the Mighty* this year instead, which this group loved. You just kind of have to play around with what you think your kids are going to connect with.

This line of thinking seems to be in direct opposition to what off-the-shelf textbook companies claim, which is that their scope and sequence is designed to be delivered with specific texts in a specific order. Off-the-shelf curricula provide little, if any, choice for students. They are designed to be followed in a sequential order, and according to the recent legislation, without fail. An off-the-shelf curriculum cannot meet the needs of every student in a classroom. Robin sees the benefits of using whole texts rather than the strict use of excerpts and shorter texts included in off-the-shelf curriculums. These longer texts require more student engagement and a greater opportunity for finding an affinity with the topic at hand, as well as developing reading stamina. Her desire for students to connect with these texts shows that she acknowledged her understanding that engagement is an important component in reading comprehension and student

achievement. Furthermore, considering student background knowledge and interest when choosing texts reveals that Robin values the student as an agent of their own learning. Robin's educational background and teaching experience, along with her belief in the importance of student interest, provide her with the knowledge to choose appropriate texts for her classroom.

Similarly, Peggy stated she prioritizes student relationships by learning student interest and ability when creating her curriculum. She shared:

If you have a textbook, there may or may not be things in there that related to that group of kids that you have in your classroom that year. Whereas you know the interest of the kids that you have in your room right then. As so if you create something, you can create something that they want to read, and that makes such a difference.

She believes that she has the autonomy to teach the skills students need. Within the constraints of time, Peggy places the highest emphasis on determining what students need. She uses assessments to make accommodations regarding text complexity and chooses appropriate levels of texts for her students to read. She noticed a clear mismatch between what textbook publishers provide as appropriate for students and the actual needs of students in classrooms. Additionally, recent legislation did not take into consideration student interest or ability. She discussed making these adjustments in her classroom by considering reading levels of texts to meet the individual needs of her students. She accomplished this by describing:

Even though those few kids are struggling, you are going to pull them, with the little bit of time that we're given, to let them practice the skills that they need more help on. So spiral activities, center activities, things like that.

Robin chose to use one unit from the off-the-shelf curriculum and created the units for the rest of the school year. Within the limited constraints of instructional time, it was clear to me that

this teacher prioritized student ability when choosing texts, recognizing that not every student is ready to take the next step. Textbooks do not always provide an option for students to practice the skills that they need to master. However, she was clear about her priorities and elaborated on her viewpoint:

I don't want to sound like I'm against an off-the-shelf curriculum because I'm not. I do feel like, especially for new teachers, it's nice to have a guide to go by. But. I do think that you should watch your students and pay attention to what's going on. If you know, there needs to be supplemental materials and the freedom to use those.

She considered students' abilities when determining which texts to read. Many times, she used online platforms such as Commonlit and Readworks to find texts that were written at levels that her students could read and learn. This practice allowed her to adapt to diverse groups of students she taught each year. These ideas are not supported in off-the-shelf curriculum. I noticed that more than once she advocated for teachers' freedom to make decisions regarding texts for instruction. She valued that she had "the professional freedom to make those kinds of decisions for your classroom and your students."

When making decisions about what to teach, Robin considered what was most important within the constraints of time. One factor she used was assessment data, which she examined to determine what students still needed to learn, which is in line with a sociocultural view of pedagogy in which teachers gather information on readers and then decide on how to fine tune instruction (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). Considering student performance helped her think about how to maximize her classroom time. Flexibility to create a personalized curriculum allowed her to respond to individual student needs in a timely manner, not just when it might appear in the textbook again.

Additionally, Robin prioritized spiraling skills versus using state standards as a checklist. Even though she created her own units, she still used “skills lessons out of my textbook.” Her focus on skills was woven into her interview responses. For new teachers, she recommended incorporating the spiraling of skills throughout the school year.

Support is important for teacher and student success. Due to the many external accountability measures, teachers are held accountable for their students’ performance on state assessments (Parsons, 2012). Teachers in this study received support from their principal and peers. Their principal supported and encouraged teachers to make decisions based on what students needed to achieve. Also, these participants received support from their colleagues in sharing ideas and strategies to best meet their students' needs.

Robin valued the time she spent in collaboration with friends and colleagues, both inside and outside her school building. At the beginning of each year, she spent time with the fifth-grade language arts teacher reviewing data and student academic achievement. She used this time to build knowledge so she could begin the school year ready to meet her new students' needs. She believed that “all good teachers are thieves,” acknowledging that she gains support from other educators. She stated that she frequently had conversations with teachers in her grade level, which helped her determine which topics and texts to choose for instruction. For example, the unit she used from the off-the-shelf curriculum aligned with sixth-grade social studies. She stated that the unit “almost directly aligns to what our social studies teacher is doing, so I use that unit.” She collaborated with the social studies teacher and described when she used the off-the-shelf curriculum:

We work well together, the social studies teacher and I. We do a lot of things together.

When they’re doing some of their Greek unit, we’ll read things in class and pair up. We

try to kind of align together and do some projects together. We did chariot races last year and read some things that went along with that. So, I think working together is a big component, and having teammates that support you is important.

Robin wants her students to see that learning is relevant, and reading is connected to other content areas. She realizes that completing projects, not completing textbook worksheets, is what increases student engagement. When teachers support each other, a collaborative culture of continual improvement is created.

Robin's district allows her to create her own pacing guide, which is not a typical practice considering her experiences working in another school district. This level of support from her district allows her to personalize classroom learning. She shared, "We are able to design our own pacing guides, which is nice, but it's also scary, because I feel like I'm solely responsible for whether or not we get everything done or not." I inferred that Robin takes the responsibility of student learning seriously; she knows it is up to her to ensure student success. One year she had a family who was sensitive to violence in the Middle East. Because she was able to change her pacing guide, she chose another text over the book *I am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai, stating this would not have been possible in the district that she taught previously. I would say that this dilemma is not unique to Robin. Many teachers across Tennessee likely encounter texts that may not be ideal for their students. Having the freedom to adjust and pivot when a text is not appropriate for a group of students is an option every teacher should have.

Peggy stated she also valued the ability to create her own pacing guide. She explained, "We actually do not have a pacing guide. And so, I just make my own, according to what I thought fit together, and I follow my own routine. A lot of it was trial and error." She further expounded:

When I first started, I would find a pacing guide that some other district used that was online. Now, I know what works. I know what goes together. And what foundational skills students need before they learn the next thing. So, I just kind of grouped it in a way that makes sense to me.

She stated that she believes expertise, content knowledge, knowledge of students, and knowledge of content are crucial to creating a curriculum for student success saying, “Luckily I have that freedom—I know a lot of districts do not.”

Even though Robin described her autonomy to create her own curriculum and pacing guide, her department requires teachers to have 10 PLC meetings per year. During these meetings, teachers look closely at pacing guides and make changes as needed. Lesson plans that stem from these pacing guides are monitored by administration in a shared Google folder. Ultimately, Robin executes, monitors, and evaluates ongoing instructional practices in her classroom, negotiating the factors that support success with her students, a set of practices espoused in responsive, socioculturally-based pedagogy (e.g., Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). Based on my own experiences, this district demonstrates that they value time for teachers to collaborate and develop curriculum for their students throughout the year, suggesting that they expect the curriculum to evolve throughout the year. In contrast, teachers in other districts are given a standard pacing guide to follow, one that is often created by the textbook company, and they are not allowed to deviate from it.

Learning Environment

Learning environment includes the autonomy to create a space in which a negotiation process can occur. This occurs within the intersection of the teacher, reader, and classroom community. Professional autonomy in this study refers to the ability for teachers to make

decisions regarding instruction and instructional materials to meet the needs of students in their classrooms. The ability to match curriculum materials and texts to student interest and academic need has been highly researched (Allington et al., 2015; Allington & Johnston, 2002; Dougherty Stahl, 2012; Husband & Kang, 2020; Moje, 2006; Muhammad, 2020; O'Connor et al., 2002).

Autonomy can be likened to professional trust. The participants in this study were given professional freedom to choose the texts they used for instruction. The participants recognized that this freedom was not present in other districts that they had worked in before.

Robin was grateful that her current district encouraged teachers to create a blended curriculum, meaning both off-the-shelf curriculum materials and self-compiled, curated texts and materials. She contrasted her former district's vision toward off-the-shelf curriculum as viewing "the curriculum as the Bible...we were told to teach it with fidelity." She was expected to follow the script regardless of student success, stressing:

They wanted us to use the scripted program. You see your students struggling because either the concept they're not understanding, but you're not supposed to get off script.

Then you might see your students flying through a certain standard. But again, you're not supposed to get off the script. So, you're just double teaching something they already know.

She contrasted that with her experiences in her current district, highlighting that she had the ability to use the off-the-shelf curriculum if she saw the need. She believed that students were the ones benefiting, stating, "Teachers have to be able to look at their students and determine what text they want to use." The logic behind using any curriculum with fidelity negates the purpose of promoting student learning. Fidelity to a curriculum is not a virtue one should strive to

achieve, especially when students are the ones who pay the price when the goal is to follow a scripted program.

Like Robin, Peggy stated that she creates her own content because it relates to the students she serves at the time. She creates her own pacing guide based on her experiences and expertise with the grade level, content, and standards. Her knowledge from teaching fifth grade for 10 years allows her to make instructional decisions that best meet the needs of her students. She stated her gratitude for this ability: “Luckily, I have that freedom—I know a lot of districts do not.” Based on my experiences, a teacher’s ability to have executive control to make instructional decisions in their classroom is central in the meaning-making process (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004).

Robin said that although there are many external constraints on teachers today, she plans to stay in education. Still, she wondered about the future and summed up:

In the past few years, I have seriously considered if I will be able to stick it out for the rest of my career, but I truly can’t imagine doing anything else. There are many things that I feel like are out of my control in education, but as long as I am able to do what I feel like is needed in my classroom, I will stay.

It is clear that Robin is referring to the recent legislation and mandates that place constraints on what materials can be used for instruction (i.e., following a scripted program). The freedom to meet the needs of students is more important than the laws that force teachers to use an adopted curriculum program.

Summary of the Experiences of Using Texts and Curriculum Materials

After analyzing the interview data with both teachers, I noted that there are multiple features involved in the decisions exemplary middle grades teachers make when using text and

curriculum materials. Teacher decision making for participants is an evolving practice that drives them to seek out different curricula and better ways to meet their students' needs. Both Robin and Peggy shared many common traits, including their desire to increase their learning about teaching by pursuing advanced degrees. For them, teaching was not a profession that one can simply train for one time and be finished or polished, because of changes in technology, pedagogy, and policy. They saw the worth in being lifelong learners, and both were also veteran teachers with more than 10 years of experience as educators so perhaps the element of time also adds to their being identified as exemplary.

Both teachers were student-centered, considering their students first when making decisions in their classrooms regarding texts and the environment. Their educational backgrounds, teaching experience, and content knowledge give them tools that allow them to carefully create and recreate their curriculum and pacing guides as students respond to instruction. In crafting this sort of responsive instruction, they use the off-the-shelf curriculum as a guide, rather than a mandate, placing student interest, engagement, and ability at the forefront of their decision making.

For both teachers, autonomy is an important aspect of their professional decision making and job satisfaction. Robin and Peggy said they are supported and encouraged by their district to create their own curriculum. They realize that this ability was not present in other school districts, and they are grateful for this freedom. These teachers want to feel valued in their work for students and to have a voice when making decisions for their profession. The findings in this study are similar to the findings in other studies on exemplary teaching (e.g., Allington & Johnston, 2002) that are further discussed in Chapter Five.

Even though these participants came from different backgrounds and received training at different universities, the findings reveal that they share many common traits. Since these participants work at the same school, they talk about teaching and learning frequently and are friends. Meeting out of school and over the summer, they discuss students and teaching strategies. Over time, they began sharing what works for students and focusing on ways to make their classrooms the best they can be. This synergy has contributed to student success, which, in turn, fuels their synergy.

The findings in this study may be a rare occurrence due to the laws passed in Tennessee, described in Chapter One and Chapter Two, that districts must follow or risk losing funding. The participants in this study acknowledged that their experiences in the districts in which they worked were not the same as the experiences of teachers they knew who teach in other districts. As described in Chapters One and Two, the topic of texts and curriculum materials has been an ongoing debate for over a century. The views expressed by the participants in this study support the ideas of a student-responsive curriculum as outlined by Dewey (1916), who emphasized that the student experience is the most important consideration with developing curriculum.

Chapter Summary

This chapter contains data analysis and findings from this study. Participants' in-depth experiences led to three themes: (a) teacher prior beliefs and knowledge, (b) knowledge use and control, and (c) learning environment. The data revealed that exemplary middle grades language arts teachers use their educational background, vast teaching experience, continuing professional development, collegial support, and knowledge of current student needs to make decisions regarding texts and curriculum materials for instruction. Perhaps most importantly, they also are afforded professional autonomy to make instructional decisions to meet the needs of their

students. These exemplary teachers create a learning environment in which students are placed first by designing a curriculum that meets students' needs.

Chapter Five

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of exemplary middle grades language arts teachers to understand their reality with using texts and curriculum materials for instruction. This study was guided by one research question: What are the experiences of exemplary middle grades language arts teachers with using texts and curriculum materials for instruction? Through a qualitative design, participants were interviewed to learn about their past and present experiences.

This chapter contains a summary of the findings described in Chapter Four as they relate to the theoretical framework and current literature outlined in Chapter Two. It also discusses the implications for teachers, administrators, and state policy, and includes recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

The findings in the study resulted in three major themes and three subthemes, described in Table 5.1.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework

The sociocognitive interactive model (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004) is a framework that depicts interaction among the reader, the text, the classroom context, and the teacher. These components work interdependently in a meaning-constructed process. However, Ruddell and Unrau posited that it is the teacher who “assumes major responsibility for facilitating meaning negotiation within the social environment of the classroom” (p. 1015). The reader component includes affective conditions, such as prior beliefs and knowledge, cognitive conditions, knowledge use and control, reader executive control, and outcomes of meaning construction. The

Table 5.1 Summary of Findings

Summary of Findings	
Theme	Summary of Findings
Teacher Prior Beliefs and Knowledge	Participants in this study held advanced degrees, including bachelor's, master's, and educational specialist. One participant reported pursuing her doctorate. This suggested that participants felt that teaching expertise is a career-long process, demonstrating years of continued growth. Additionally, participants served years in various teaching roles and contexts, which provided a vast perspective and experience with educating a variety of students.
Subtheme: Instructional Orientation	Participants in this study revealed dispositions and attitudes that allowed them to be successful in their classrooms. They shared that they were flexible in situations that were uncharted territory and a willingness to give their all to their students. They have indicated they could deal with ambiguity of teaching.
Subtheme: Motivation to Engage Students	Participants explained that they had a vision for their students. They desired that their students were engaged in meaningful learning. They viewed relationships as a vital part of the classroom, creating contexts that foster teaching and learning.
Knowledge Use and Control	Participants considered students' ability and interest first when making decisions regarding texts and curriculum materials for instruction. Within the constraints of time, teachers in this study considered current student achievement in deciding what and how to teach the next topic and skill. Participants said they had the professional freedom to adjust their pacing to meet the needs of their students.

Table 5.1 Continued

Subtheme: Instructional Decision-making Process	Participants reported that they received support from their colleagues, meeting regularly in professional learning communities to discuss student progress and achievement. Participants collaborated with their colleagues cross-curricular and vertically to ensure they create a curriculum that serves their students.
Learning Environment	Participants expressed gratitude for feeling professional freedom to create and choose texts and curriculum materials that best served their students. They acknowledge that they worked in other districts and that this freedom was not present, explaining that other districts had to use the off-the-shelf curriculum with fidelity.

teacher component includes similar affective conditions, such as prior beliefs, values, and teaching philosophy; and cognitive conditions, such as content knowledge of reader's meaning-construction process, and teaching strategies. The text and classroom context serve as the learning environment in which the meaning construction process occurs (Alvermann et al., 2013). The findings of this study align with the interdependence among the three components of this model.

The Teacher. Affective conditions are qualities and attributes that teachers hold stemming from educational background and experiences. These experiences translate into values and beliefs and then into action. As noted by Ruddell and Unrau (2004), teacher beliefs have a direct impact on and shape instructional purpose, plan, and strategy. The participants in this study rely on their prior beliefs and knowledge to make instructional choices regarding texts and curriculum materials. Additionally, these beliefs and values reveal a desire to create an optimal learning environment in which students can thrive. The participants in this study emphasized a student-centered classroom, one that students can be fully engaged in learning.

Robin noted that she is careful to align her teaching values and beliefs to that of her students, much in the same way that Gee (2001) noted that the alignment of these beliefs can have a significant impact on relationships with students, instructional decision making, and understanding of texts. Likewise, Peggy shared that a perfect classroom would be one in which students are engaged in behaviors that promote learning. Each participant created an environment that placed students as the decision-making factor in choosing texts and curriculum materials for instruction, which optimizes student motivation.

Teacher values and beliefs contribute to their dispositions. Ruddell and Unrau (2004) described influential teachers as warm, caring, flexible, and concerned with students as

individuals. They have high expectations of both students and themselves. The participants in this study demonstrated their flexibility through sharing their experiences teaching during COVID-19. They showed commitment to their beliefs and values by asking for help when needed and learning new platforms to ensure that students were learning during school closures.

The findings from this study are like the description of Ruddell and Unrau:

These [influential] teachers consistently use clearly formulated instructional strategies that embody focused goals, plans, and monitoring for student feedback. They possess in-depth knowledge of reading and literacy processes as well as content knowledge, and they understand how to teach these processes effectively to students (p. 1017).

Participants in Ruddell and Unrau prioritized students' ability and interest when making instructional decisions. They considered their knowledge of readers' meaning-making processes to develop teaching strategies that yielded high achievement. The participants in this study created their own pacing guides, demonstrating declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, and conditional knowledge (Alvermann et al., 2013). In other words, participants used their beliefs, values, educational background, teaching experiences, and knowledge of students' abilities to make decisions of what to teach, when to teach, and why to teach. Participants prioritized student need in making decisions regarding which texts to use, when to use the texts, and why they were using them.

The Reader. The reader enters the classroom with preexisting attributes that influence comprehension and meaning construction, including prior beliefs and knowledge, motivation, and attitudes toward reading (Alverman, 2013). The exemplary teachers in this study used their previous teaching experiences and knowledge of current students' ability and interest to make decisions regarding curriculum and pacing. Their vast knowledge allowed them to adjust their

instruction to meet the needs of the students. The participants accomplished this partly by investing in time to build relationships with their students. Additionally, they prioritized their instructional time, using it to teach skills that students needed at that moment. They made accommodations within the class to match students' reading ability with appropriately difficult texts, seeing the potential in all students.

Text and Classroom Context. The text and classroom context in the sociocultural model (Alvermann et al., 2013) consists of the environment in which the meaning-making process can occur. This includes the text, task, source of authority, and sociocultural meanings. The participants in this study chose the text and task. As the source of authority, they assisted in the meaning-negotiation process by carefully choosing the texts and tasks that matched students' interests and needs. They created a learning environment that enhanced motivation and activated prior beliefs and knowledge, making learning personally relevant. Ruddell and Unrau (2004) posited that meaning is “not entirely in either the text or the reader but is created as a result of the interactions among reader, text, teacher, and classroom community” (p. 1049). This idea is not represented in off-the-shelf curricula, which politicians take the position that meaning is in the text itself, nor does it factor in laws that rely solely on one curriculum.

Further Findings

The participants in this study shared their vision for their students and their classrooms. They use their knowledge and experiences to design curriculums that focus on student interest and ability. The findings of this study echoed the findings of Allington and Johnston (2002). Allington and Johnston's study of fourth-grade exemplary teachers revealed ideas that were like the findings of this study. The researchers found that exemplary teachers had a vision for their

students, one that translated into their decision making and classroom context (Parsons et al., 2017). They also shared a belief that collectively they could impact student achievement.

Exemplary teachers in this study were effective in dealing with the ambiguity of teaching by responding to student needs that seldom fit into a prescribed curriculum (Allington & Johnston, 2002). The participants in this study demonstrated their ability to deal with ambiguity by considering, monitoring, and adjusting to the current needs of the students in their classrooms. This was evident in their descriptions of their experiences teaching during COVID-19 and of constantly evolving versus doing what has always been done. Furthermore, exemplary teachers not only depend on classroom assessments to make decisions in choosing texts for instruction, but they also microadapt during instruction (Parsons, 2012).

Developing teacher expertise is a career long process, with years of continued growth (Allington & Johnston, 2002). The participants in this study indicated they seek new ways to meet their students' needs, such as pursuing advanced degrees, collaborating with peers and colleagues, and committing to improve. These participants shared that over time they refined and reshaped their beliefs about teaching and learning through experimentation, which helps them constantly evolve (Kang & Cheng, 2014). Peggy stated her reason for pursuing an advanced degree was so that she did not become complacent like some of her colleagues.

Most importantly, teaching takes courage. The pressures of high-stakes testing and district standards causes some teachers to just follow the mandates (Allington & Johnston, 2002). Like each of the teachers in Allington and Johnston, the participants in this study resisted following the off-the-shelf curriculum and state mandates. Their responses revealed that they had experienced tension or a mismatch between their beliefs and external expectations in the district for which they worked previously (Cooper & Olson, 1996; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013; Urmston &

Pennington, 2008). The participants in this study shared their experiences with working in other districts that followed the off the shelf curriculum with fidelity, along with the external expectations of high-stakes assessments, evaluations, and pacing guides (Parsons, 2012). These opposing experiences allowed these participants to compare the environment where they work now with the one they worked in previously. To teach against the grain takes great effort and courage. At this political moment, a lack of courage could explain the lack of volunteers for this study. Teachers may not have been willing to talk about what they do in their classrooms for fear of retribution from their administrators. Likewise, many schools and districts may not be willing to allow their teachers to share what curriculum materials and texts they use for instruction.

Implications for Teachers

There are several important implications for teachers based on the findings from this study. Regarding teacher effectiveness, curriculum materials are not nearly as impactful in fostering student achievement as teacher expertise and experience. The teachers in this study were nominated as teachers in a district identified as in the top three districts that hold high student achievement in middle grades language arts. If students in this district are performing above average in language arts without using prescribed curriculum materials, then the curriculum materials may not be as important as legislators believe. There must be other factors that impact students' achievement than an off-the-shelf curriculum. Seeing these participants' professional educational histories and developing teacher expertise in content and pedagogy appears to be a beneficial use of time and resources.

Hattie (2008, 2023) stressed that effective teachers know their impact. Teachers who keep students at the center of their decision-making process acknowledge that they can make a difference in student achievement. The exemplary teachers in this study reflected on their impact

and adjusted their instruction to ensure that all students had access to the teacher's expertise. influence. The participants in this study realized that teaching and learning are relational and situational (Smagorinsky, 2018). Each year, these teachers evaluated the needs of the students who entered their classrooms, and they made decisions about texts and curriculum materials specific to students' needs.

Finally, collaboration is key. Relationships with colleagues provide support and growth. The teachers in this study collaborated with teachers within their grade level and teachers in the adjacent grade levels, keeping student need at the center of their discussions. They believed that together they could make a difference in student achievement. Hattie (2008) listed collective teacher efficacy as the highest effect size in contributing to students' achievement.

Implications for Administrators

There are important implications for administrators based on the findings of this study. Participants in this study stated that they valued professional freedom and having a voice. One suggestion is to listen to teachers. They are the ones who experience how the curriculum unfolds successfully or unsuccessfully in the classroom. They are acutely aware of important factors, such as engagement, background knowledge, skill knowledge, and knowledge gaps—factors that an off-the-shelf curriculum cannot address. Develop a system for listening to what teachers are noticing and saying about curriculum materials.

Participants in this study had the freedom to make decisions about pacing guides and curriculum materials to maintain high achievement. Consider a balance between using the off-the-shelf-curriculum and being able to adjust it to meet the needs of students. Furthermore, within the constraints of the Tennessee legislation, develop teacher pedagogy. Hattie (2008) ranked teacher qualities and teaching and learning strategies as having higher impacts on student

achievement than curriculum programs. Administrators should view curriculum as a tool, not the answer. Teachers are a key factor, and they need to know that teacher attributes outweigh curricular programs. Administrators should investigate ways that they can help develop these attributes in their teachers.

Having a common curriculum is not enough, and providing opportunities for professional development is essential. These opportunities should not simply be training on a new program but expanding teacher expertise, as that investment will last much longer than a single program. Additionally, administrators should allow opportunities for teachers to learn from each other, fostering time and space for a culture of collaboration and incorporating classroom observations and classroom visits.

Finally, administrators should communicate with policymakers and speak up about the impact on students when teacher expertise is ignored by mandates. Creating opportunities that allow all voices to be heard, especially voices that directly impact teaching and learning, is important.

Implications for State Policy

As school districts move toward top-down mandated curriculums and standardization, teachers and students become less of the focus. Laws that continually narrow the curriculum by requiring districts to adopt curriculum from a list cannot meet the needs of every student. To abide by these mandates, schools and districts focus their energy on curriculum materials rather than student success. As schools focus only on learning that can be measured, other types of learning are not emphasized, such as inquiry-based learning (Campbell-Phillips, 2020). Perhaps, using a model similar to that of the experiences of the participants in this study would better serve the teachers and students in Tennessee.

Most importantly, society is changing much faster than curriculum and standards. To be successful in today's world, students must be equipped with the latest technology and skills, making investing in mandated curricula not a good use of resources. Currently, students have access to artificial intelligence platforms that allow them to write essays, calculate complex math and science problems, and create projects without the use of curriculum materials (Holmes & Tuomi, 2022; Lin & van Brummelen, 2021). Creating an educational culture that embraces expanding standards and curriculum to accommodate these advancements and prepare teachers and students to be successful in the future would be a better use of resources.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study aimed to better understand teachers' experiences using texts and curriculum materials for instruction. This study did not attempt to generalize or suggest causation. To better understand teachers' use of texts and curriculum materials for instruction, additional research is needed, including about the experiences of teachers who work in districts that mandate the use of the off-the-shelf curriculum. Specifically, more information is needed to understand how the experiences of teachers mandated to use the off-the-shelf curriculum are similar to or differ from those of this study's participants.

Additionally, research should be conducted on the long-term impact of using off-the-shelf curriculums on student achievement. Furthermore, more information is needed on the repercussions of legislation that dictates curriculum teachers must use. Currently, these laws mandate the adoption of curriculum, not only narrowing the content that students can learn but restricting teachers from supplementing with materials to meet the needs of their students. Both teachers and students will ultimately pay, filling the pockets of companies.

Finally, more information is needed to determine how teachers continue to meet the needs of their students within the constraints of state and district mandates that control textbook adoption and prohibit supplementation of materials. More information is needed on districts that have high student achievement using off-the-shelf curriculums, despite having students who continue to struggle in language arts.

Conclusion and Reflection

I was surprised by the findings in this study. As an educator in Tennessee for 20 years, I experienced the gradual squeeze from both the district and state regarding what to teach, when to teach, and how to teach. I experienced the tension between following the laws and mandates and meeting the needs of my students. As a curriculum coach, I heard from other teachers that they experienced the same phenomenon. They were afraid to teach anything that was not in the purchased curriculum. Before collecting my data, I predicted that I would hear experiences that echoed my own and the teachers with whom I work.

Instead, I found something even better. I found teachers who are producing high-achieving students using a curriculum that they created, designed to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms at any given time. They had the professional freedom to shift their instruction in a moment. They believed they are supported by their district in their ability to design their pacing guides and choose texts for instruction. Their students benefited from this, and that has made all the difference (Frost, 1915).

I recently learned about the concept of desire paths (Bramley, 2018). Desire paths are created when humans and other creatures carve out paths they deem more desirable, ones that will get them to the places they want to go or help them move through complicated terrain more smoothly or safely. Often, these paths resist imposed boundaries. MacFarlene (2018 as cited in

Bramley, 2018) described them as “paths and tracks made over time by the wishes and feet of walkers, especially those paths that run contrary to design or planning” (para. 2) and as “indicating the yearning of those wishing to walk” (para. 4). These paths represent the tension between wanting, wishing, and what it is.

I am grateful for the opportunity to give voice to the teachers who are treading their own desired paths. These teachers demonstrated the ability to produce above average student achievement in language arts while creating their own curriculums and pacing guides and choosing their texts for instruction. May their paths be ones that others consider. After speaking with my teacher participants, I am convinced that placing students at the heart of teaching and learning should be the intent of all who are involved in education.

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Appendix

Appendix A

PARTICIPANT E-MAIL

Hello,

I am completing the requirements of a doctoral degree at The University of Tennessee. The research study hopes to understand and describe the experiences of exemplary middle grade language arts teachers using texts for instruction to capture how these everyday experiences transform into thoughts and beliefs.

I am asking you to be in this research study because I aim to gain a deep understanding of the experiences of exemplary middle grades language arts teachers experiences with using texts for instruction. We believe that exemplary teachers are those who can produce above average student achievement in reading, and we believe that you hold specific experiences and knowledge.

If you agree to be in the study, your participation will include one interview, lasting between 50 minutes and one hour. Additionally, if you agree, you might be asked to be contacted a couple of weeks after your interview for any follow-up questions. If you agree to be in this study, your participation will last for two months and will involve one interview over a virtual call sent from a University of Tennessee link. I will not keep your information to use for future use or other purposes.

Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from your research data collected as part of the study. We may share your research data with other researchers without asking for your consent again, but it will not contain information that could directly identify you. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be compensated for your time with a \$20 gift card from Amazon. This gift card will be mailed to you upon completion of the interview. After the gift card is mailed, I will delete all contact information.

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers, Cheryl Richardson at cricha37@vols.utk.edu or Stergios Botzakis at sbotzaki@utk.edu.

Sincerely,

Cheryl Richardson

Appendix B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Can you share your educational background with me?
2. Can you share your work history/experience?
3. Are there any additional experiences that contribute to your success as a teacher?
4. What do you consider to be a strength in your teaching?
5. Describe a favorite lesson or activity you like to do with your students?
6. What does a typical lesson look like?
7. What lesson components do you consider essential?
8. What do you think are the most prominent issues to consider when planning learning activities?
9. Are there any external factors that influence your decision making?
10. How do you address different ability levels of students in your classroom?
11. How do you design your instruction to maximize learning?
12. What, if anything, do you think you do differently from your peers or other teachers in your building?
13. How do you keep track of what students need to learn next?
14. What are some of the challenges you encounter when creating learning activities?
15. Where do you find the materials for your learning activities?
16. Complete the following sentence with a simile or metaphor: Curriculum materials are...
17. What is your idea of a perfect classroom?
18. Is there anything that we have not discussed that you would like to share with me?

Appendix C

CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

Research Study Title: Exemplary Middle Grades Teacher Voices: Using Texts for Instruction

Researcher(s): Cheryl Richardson, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Stergios Botzakis, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this research study because we aim to gain a deep understanding of the experiences of exemplary middle grades language arts teachers experiences with using texts for instruction. We believe that exemplary teachers are those who can produce above average student achievement in reading, and we believe that you hold specific experiences and knowledge. The school where you teach was nominated as having above average achievement, and we would like to gain an understanding of your experiences.

What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to describe the experiences of exemplary middle grades language arts teachers with using texts for instruction to capture how these everyday experiences transform into thoughts and beliefs.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in the study, your participation will include one interview, lasting between 50 to 60 minutes. Additionally, if you agree, you might be asked to be contacted a couple of weeks after your interview for any follow-up questions.

If you agree to be in this study, your participation will last for two months and will involve one interview over a virtual call.

What will happen if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research study”?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to participate in one virtual meeting via Zoom and share your experiences with using texts for instruction. Your responses will be recorded and

transcribed. We will begin looking for big ideas and patterns. We will keep your identity confidential and your information on a password-protected laptop.

If you agree, I will contact you to determine a day and time that will work best for you. I will send you a link to a virtual meeting. This meeting will last approximately one hour.

I will record and transcribe the interview. I will send the transcription to you to make sure your responses are recorded accurately.

What happens if I say “No, I do not want to be in this research study”?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later.

Either way, your decision won't affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, please send me an e-mail. I will delete any or all of your interview responses. After the study is completed, all information that ties you to the study will be deleted.

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

We don't know of any risks to you from being in the study.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about the experiences of using texts in classrooms. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by using pseudonyms and providing general descriptions of you and your place of employment. The data gathered from this study will be housed on a password-protected laptop. After identifying information has been removed, I will share my data with my research advisor/chair.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will not keep your information to use for future use or other purposes. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from your research data collected as part of the study.

We may share your research data with other researchers without asking for your consent again, but it will not contain information that could directly identify you.

Will I be paid for being in this research study?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be compensated for your time with a \$20 gift card from Amazon. This gift card will be mailed to you upon completion of the interview.

What else do I need to know?

About 12 people will take part in this study. Because of the small number of participants in this study, it is possible that someone could identify you based on the information we collect.

If we learn about any new information that may change your mind about being in the study, we will tell you. If that happens, you may be asked to sign a new consent form.

We use procedures to lower the possibility of these risks happening. Even so, you may still experience problems, even when we are careful to avoid them. Please tell the researcher in charge, Cheryl Richardson (423-426-3870), about any other problems that you have during this study.

The University of Tennessee does not automatically pay for medical claims or give other compensation for injuries or other problems.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers, Cheryl Richardson at **cricha37@vols.utk.edu** or Stergios Botzakis at **sbotzaki@utk.edu**.

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

1534 White Avenue

Blount Hall, Room 408

Knoxville, TN 37996-1529

Phone: 865-974-7697

E-mail: utkirb@utk.edu

Appendix D

LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Hello,

I am completing the requirements of the doctoral degree at The University of Tennessee. This research student hopes to understand and describe the experiences of exemplary middle grade language arts teachers with using texts for instruction and capture how these everyday experiences transform into thoughts and beliefs.

I am asking you to be in this research study because I aim to gain a deep understanding of the experiences of exemplary middle grades language arts teachers' experiences with using texts for instruction. We believe that exemplary teachers are those who can produce above average student achievement in reading, and we believe that you hold specific knowledge and experiences.

If you agree to be in the study, your participation will include one interview, lasting between 50 minutes and one hour. Additionally, if you agree, you might be asked to be contacted a couple of weeks after your interview for any follow-up questions. If you agree to be in this study, your participation will last for two months and will involve one interview over a virtual call sent from a University of Tennessee link. I will not keep your information to use for future use of other purposes.

Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from your research data collected as part of this study. We may share your research data with other researchers without asking for your consent again, but it will not contain information that could directly identify you. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be compensated for your time with a \$20 gift card from Amazon. This gift card will be mailed to you upon completion of the interview. After the gift card is mailed, I will delete all contact information.

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researcher, Cheryl Richardson at cricha37@vols.utk.edu or Stergios Botzakis at sbotzaki@utk.edu.

Sincerely,

Cheryl Richardson

Vita

Cheryl A. Richardson is an educator in Tennessee. Throughout her career, she has taught Grades 5–11 and has served as a district literacy coach in Grades 3–12. She has dedicated her career to finding the best ways to teach students to become better readers.

Cheryl holds a Bachelor of Science in K–8 education and a Master of Arts degree in PK–12 reading. Currently, she is completing the requirements for her Doctor of Philosophy in literacy studies. After graduation, she hopes to continue to build capacity in the teachers and students she serves.