

California State University,

Fullerton

SUPPORTING UPPER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH MILD TO  
MODERATE DISABILITIES IN THE AREAS OF READING AND WRITING  
IN THE AGE OF COMMON CORE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

A DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored how teachers of upper elementary school students with mild to moderate disabilities navigate the potentially competing demands of CCSS expectations and best practices for supporting students with learning disabilities in the areas of reading and writing. In total, 6 teachers participated in the study, 3 SDC and 3 RSP teachers. The methods used included interviews and observations. Observation notes and interview transcriptions helped unearth important findings. Key findings include that teachers viewed instructional level teaching as a best practice, time constraints and lack of resources and PD were viewed as challenges, there are more similarities in teachers' perceived best practices compared to their perceived CCSS practices, and some teachers identified areas where CCSS practices and best practices align.

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To my boys Ethan and Evan, along with any other future children,

and

To my wonderful wife, Lupe, who always believed.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have created a shift in learning expectations and teaching practices. These changes can be problematic, and it will take time for educators to adjust during this transition period, which undoubtedly impacts students. This is magnified when considering students with learning disabilities. Students with mild to moderate disabilities are typically functioning below grade level in core academic areas and tend to have diverse learning needs, meaning they learn differently than do typical students. Moreover, special education teachers rely on what are considered *best practices* for teaching students with mild to moderate disabilities in core academic areas. This dissertation investigates how upper elementary school teachers (Grades 3 through 5) of students with mild to moderate disabilities are meeting the unique learning needs of their students while implementing CCSS.

The implementation of the CCSS has created a seismic shift in teaching expectations, which impacts instruction. For example, “unlike some previous standards, the Common Core emphasizes skills that students will truly need to be college- and career-ready” (Gardner & Powell, 2013, p. 49). In effect, the college and career readiness skills standards illustrate a rise in expectations for students and increased rigor. In their study, Gardner and Powell (2013) found that teachers have reported increased levels of reading and analysis in language

arts instruction (p. 52). This emphasizes the importance reading and higher-level thinking skills have in the age of CCSS. Moreover, educators have reported that the CCSS have prompted teachers to dive “deeper into texts—either written words or images—while coaching students to make their own discoveries” (Gardner & Powell, 2013, p. 52). In essence, CCSS have coupled reading instruction with higher level, analytical skills. This is evident at the local-district level, where students are expected to go beyond answering text-dependent questions and begin to analyze and make inferences based on their reading. The level of rigor in expectations and instruction has risen, particularly in the area of reading.

In an effort to meet these demands, districts, schools, and educators have begun developing plans for instruction, which include creating units of study to help with commencing implementation of CCSS and purchasing curriculum that is CCSS based. At the local-district level, the emphasis has been on providing more depth to instruction, fostering a focus on academic language, collaborative conversations, and critical-thinking skills. with that said, there has been little focus on supporting students with learning disabilities, including those with mild to moderate disabilities. Murphy and Marshall (2015) acknowledge that “Much of the emphasis on preparing teachers in CCSS has, not surprisingly, been directed toward general education teachers” (p. 2). Special education teachers are being overlooked.

Students with mild to moderate disabilities tend to be an overlooked group. These are typically students that are either part of a self-contained

classroom (Special Day Class), or are being mainstreamed in the general education classroom for some subject areas and provided with resource specialist program (RSP) services in others. Many have the appearance of a typical student (i.e., some may be on the moderate side of the spectrum and exhibit a few characteristics that separate them from others), but their learning needs separate them from their peers. At the elementary school level, these students are typically reading below grade level and require a large amount of support in gaining and maintaining foundational skills of reading, writing, and math. In addition, this group of students may struggle with memory, processing (visual and auditory), speech and language, among other difficulties. There is limited understanding of how CCSS will impact the teaching of students with mild to moderate disabilities. Teachers need support in understanding how to reconcile CCSS instructional demands and what are considered best practices in instruction for students with mild to moderate disabilities.

This study will consider the implications of implementation of CCSS instruction for upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities. Specifically, the study identifies how teachers are managing the task of implementing CCSS instructional practices in reading and writing while considering the instructional practices they know work best with students with mild to moderate disabilities.

### **Background of the Problem**

School districts have begun implementing CCSS in various ways. In preparing for CCSS, the Bayside Unified School District (BUSD; a pseudonym)

has provided teachers with online CCSS resources to help support their instruction. These resources serve as blueprints to guide teachers in their implementation of CCSS and include different content areas (i.e., reading and writing). In addition, the district has dedicated funds and professional development (PD) resources that focus on presenting reading and writing units of study to support teacher instruction. Furthermore, the district has invested in a Eureka Math curriculum that aligns with the CCSS and PD opportunities in support of implementation.

Part of the shift that the CCSS have spawned emphasizes changing the ways in which teachers teach. Schools in the BUSD are stressing increased use of collaboration, better understanding of academic vocabulary, and critical-thinking skills, among other expectations. The units of study for reading and writing focus on supporting student critical-thinking skills, as well as on improving overall reading and writing. There is an emphasis on higher level thinking skills, which indicates a higher level of rigor is associated with the CCSS. While CCSS do include foundational skills as part of their focus, BUSD resources are invested more in collaborative conversations and critical-thinking skills and less in the foundational skills that many struggling students, particularly those with special needs, are lacking.

The BUSD leadership suggests using lower grade-level units of study for students with learning disabilities. However, this fails to support students in gaining access to grade-level curriculum. In addition, academic Individual Education Program (IEP) goals (as opposed to behavioral goals) are based on

CCSS standards, and special education students are supposed to be given access to them. This illustrates the disconnect between best practices for students with learning disabilities and what is actually occurring locally. There is no way of knowing if students are capable of accessing the curriculum if adjustments in instructional practices are not made. In essence, the issue for special education teachers becomes one of identifying how to use CCSS instructional practices to support students with learning disabilities while keeping in mind best practices for teaching students with learning disabilities.

In addition, the BUSD has placed little emphasis on identifying how special education students are to access the CCSS. This lack of focus on the needs of special education students is also seen on a larger scale. According to Haager and Vaughn (2013a), “the CCSS document and supporting appendices say very little about accommodating students with disabilities, only that some students may need extra supports to achieve competency” (p. 1). This term *extra supports* is ambiguous and does little to describe supporting students with learning disabilities. It leaves teachers in the position of needing to interpret the language in the CCSS documentation, which will likely be different across classrooms, schools and districts. A lack of support and acknowledgment for students with special needs and their teachers in terms of CCSS implementation is seen both locally and on a larger scale.

This lack of support is also apparent with PD and other resources. Professional development on instructional support has centered on general education teachers. While special education teachers are invited to the PD

trainings, they are left on their own in terms of finding ways to use the resources to meet the needs of their students. In essence, they are not provided with guidance or support in their implementation of CCSS. District PD opportunities relating to CCSS implementation have been directed towards general education teachers. The majority of PD opportunities supporting implementation have focused on presenting curriculum and units of study. These trainings have emphasized introducing the units of study by looking through lesson plans, highlighting important concepts and resources, and identifying how units align with CCSS. Considering the PD for general education teachers, there appears to be a lack of support for instructional practices. In addition, Murphy and Marshall (2015) suggest that there is a “need for both leadership and evidence base in CCSS, particularly in special education, that could serve both to support professional development opportunities across educational settings and provide teachers with research-based support for training and practice” (p. 16). There is a need to expand upon PD opportunities for special education teachers that target strategies to support teachers in implementing CCSS to benefit their students. Currently, there have not been PD opportunities relating to CCSS implementation that are specifically meant for teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities within BUSD.

The problems mentioned above, including a lack of resources (i.e., PD, curriculum supports for special education students, instructional supports) for teachers and their students, present an issue of equity, as special education students are not being provided with equitable access to appropriate resources

and instruction. Special education students, much like English language learners, are part of a subgroup that requires extra supports and services to be successful. Haager and Vaughn (2013a) acknowledge that, “though the language of this document indicates that the standards apply to *all* students, the burden is on teachers in the classroom to determine when and how to make the standards accessible” (p. 1). While the CCSS set the expectations and acknowledge that the standards apply to all students, there is little being said on how to implement CCSS and how to approach the standards when working with students with learning disabilities. Simply including students with learning disabilities in accountability measures related to CCSS is not sufficient, and again, highlights issues of equity.

This resonates with Howe (1997), who proposes that, “*mere* inclusion, for instance, physically including children with disabilities in regular classrooms but otherwise excluding them from meaningful participation, can do little to promote equality of educational opportunity” (p. 89). This speaks to what is occurring with the CCSS in regard to students with learning disabilities. There is acknowledgment of students with learning disabilities within the appendices of the standards and the district units of study, but it is far from meaningful. Upper elementary school students with mild to moderate disabilities are not being adequately provided with quality instruction. Students with learning disabilities require extra supports, strategies, and accommodations; therefore, simply providing them with CCSS resources and supports that general education peers receive is insufficient. Furthermore, another aspect to consider is the relationship

between best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities and instructional practices for CCSS.

For starters, the rise in expectations brought on by CCSS undoubtedly impacts instructional practices. Haager and Vaughn (2013a) point out that “setting rigorous expectations for all students may have serious implications for students who struggle with academic skills, including students with LD” (p. 1). The rigor of the CCSS forces educators to adapt and change instructional practices to support student learning. These changes likely do not align completely with best instructional practices for teaching students with learning disabilities. Teachers will most likely need support in reconciling the competing demands of CCSS and special education best practices in reading and writing instruction.

Haager and Vaughn (2013b) address some of these demands by suggesting that “the rigorous grade-level expectations, particularly the emphasis on increasing the amount and complexity of text and the application of deep analysis to text, set a high benchmark that raises questions about how teachers can best support students with LD in reaching them” (p. 6). One example of this problem is a whole language approach to lesson plans, where students are expected to read, comprehend, analyze and think critically about content. There is little attention given to foundational skills, such as phonics, grammar, and spelling, among others, that would support students in reading and writing. Interestingly, the CCSS include a focus on foundational skills in language arts. This is critical when considering the needs of special education students, many

of whom have learning gaps that include foundational reading and writing skills. “Based on recent research, a general consensus has emerged that students with learning disabilities demonstrate an early inability to manipulate phonemes, and this inability is the primary cause of subsequent learning disabilities in a variety of areas (NRP, 2000; Vaughn, 2006)” (as cited in Bender, 2008, p. 158). In effect, students with learning disabilities tend to struggle with literacy skills early on, and this proves to be a need that is inadequately addressed in CCSS instruction.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem that this study addresses is the challenge of adequately meeting the needs of upper elementary school students with mild to moderate disabilities in the areas of reading and writing. Under the CCSS regime, special education students will be held to similar expectations and complete similar assessments as general education students, making this a dire situation. This problem is complicated by the lack of support provided for teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities. This lack of support includes inadequate resources and instructional supports, such as PD and coaching. In addition, as previously mentioned, CCSS documents provide little guidance in terms of supporting students with special needs. Furthermore, there is lack of clarity in regard to the compatibility between CCSS reading and writing instructional practices and best practices for supporting students with mild to moderate disabilities.

## **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify how upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities are handling CCSS expectations and, specifically, how they are managing the potentially competing demands of CCSS and special education best practices in their reading and writing instruction. Teachers are being faced with the task of meeting their students' unique learning needs, which are particularly diverse when including special education students, and adhering to CCSS expectations. One key component is to consider the ways in which teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities are approaching reading and writing instruction when considering CCSS instructional practices and best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities. Are teachers balancing both initiatives, or are they leaning their instruction more in one direction? It is also important to consider teacher perceptions about CCSS instructional practices and best practices for special education students in terms of their compatibility. Are there points of overlap and to what extent are they conflicting? Finally, considering the lack of support being provided to teachers in CCSS implementation, it is critical to identify teacher perceptions of the challenges they face, areas of needed support, and current PD that already exist.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions will guide this qualitative study:

1. In what ways do upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities view CCSS and best practices in reading and writing as compatible or conflicting?

2. How are upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities meeting their students' unique learning needs while also implementing CCSS? In particular, in what ways are upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities aligning their instruction with CCSS instructional practices or with best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities in the areas of reading and writing?
3. What do these teachers view as the instructional challenges they are facing, the needs they have for support, and the opportunities that exist for them and their students in the era of CCSS?

### **Significance**

This research is important and will make a significant contribution to educational leadership because it focuses on the CCSS, which are fairly new and involve evolving policy implementation. With many schools and districts in the early stages of CCSS implementation, there is a demand for research in this field that will benefit stakeholders in education. In addition, this particular research study takes this a step further by narrowing the focus onto a specific area that has been scarcely represented: the implications for upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities and their students. The research will act as a means to better understand the ways in which upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities are maneuvering through current CCSS initiatives. Moreover, it provides insight into how teachers are currently managing the potentially conflicting demands of CCSS and special education best practices.

In addition, the research done in this study will be part of the early research that is done on this topic. The stakeholders who will benefit include teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities, students with mild to moderate disabilities, and program specialists. Teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities will be able to use this research to inform their practice, and administrators and leaders in education will gain insight into a topic that is current and under studied. In addition, findings of the study will provide leaders with information pertinent to, at minimum, begin addressing the need to adequately meet the needs of students with mild to moderate disabilities in the age of CCSS. This has the potential to lead to further inquiry on appropriate PD opportunities for these teachers, as well as other resources.

### **Scope of the Study**

This study will investigate the implications of implementation of CCSS for upper elementary school special education students with mild to moderate disabilities and their teachers. More specifically, the study investigates elementary school special education teachers and how they are navigating through CCSS expectations. It explores the extent in which teachers are adhering to CCSS instruction practice expectations and best practices for special education students, respectively. The study will include both self-contained mild to moderate classrooms (i.e., Special Day Classes), as well as RSPs within BUSD, and focus specifically on reading and writing instruction.

### **Assumptions of the Study**

The overlaying assumption of the study is that teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities are doing what they believe is best for supporting students. I have assumed that teachers are adjusting their instruction to support the demands of the CCSS curriculum because it is what they are required to do. In addition, I have also assumed that teachers are using instructional practices that best support students with learning disabilities. This change in instruction may range from very minimal to a completely new form of teaching for some teachers. Another assumption is that the methods used in this study, which are observations and interviews, reflect an authentic experience in regard to teacher instruction and CCSS. My assumption is that observations done of teachers during instruction will be a valid reflection of what those teachers do on a regular basis. In addition, I assume that in the interviews, teachers will respond truthfully and also reflect an authentic representation of their instruction.

### **Study Delimitations**

The delimitations of this study are based on the specific location of the study. This study will be based in BUSD and, more specifically, will be limited to upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities. In addition, the study will focus on the content areas of reading and writing. Furthermore, the study will consider Special Day Class (SDC) and RSP classroom settings.

These delimitations will provide a more focused and in-depth study that will provide an understanding of a complex issue. Limiting the study to a specific

district and small range of grade levels will allow more opportunities and time for detailed interviews and observations, which can provide deeper understanding of the topic at hand. There is a greater focus on quality than quantity in regard to the interviews and observations that will be presented in this study.

### **Study Limitations**

Limitations of the study refer to constraints that will restrict and bind the study to a specific setting; therefore, the study will not be generalizable. In effect, it will be confined to the context in which it is researched. One of the limitations to this study is a lack of time. There is a one-year time frame in regard to completing this study for the dissertation. In addition, the study will be limited to observations and interviews of six teachers within BUSD. This being a qualitative study, and considering time constraints, there will be a small sample size. However, the study will still have value and significance. The nature of the study, which is to better understand how teachers are managing the potentially competing demands of CCSS and special education best practices, lends itself to utilizing observations and interviews as research methods.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

*Common Core State Standards (CCSS)*. Educational standards describe what students should learn and be able to do in each subject in each grade. In California, the State Board of Education decides on the standards for all students, from kindergarten through high school. The California Department of Education helps schools make sure that all students are meeting the standards. (California Department of Education, 2016).

*Individual Education Program (IEP)*. This is a special education term outlined by Individuals with Disabilities Act to define the written document that states the disabled child's goals, objectives and services for students receiving special education (Understanding Special Education, 2016).

*Learning disability*. A learning disability is a neurological condition that interferes with an individual's ability to store, process, or produce information. Learning disabilities can affect one's ability to read, write, speak, spell, compute math, reason and also affect an individual's attention, memory, coordination, social skills and emotional maturity (Learning Disabilities Association of America, 2016).

*Mild to Moderate Disabilities*. These are considered low-incidence learning disabilities, which include students with specific learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, autism, other health impairments, traumatic brain injuries, orthopedic impairments, blindness, deafness, emotional disturbances, hearing impairment, multiple disabilities, visual impairment and intellectual disabilities. Students typically are placed in general education, resource programs or special day classes for students with mild to moderate disabilities.

*Resource Specialist Program (RSP)*. Term used to describe a program that provides instruction, materials and support services to students with identified disabilities who are assigned to general classroom for more than 50% of their school day (Understanding Special Education, 2016).

*Special Day Class (SDC)*. Term used to describe a self-contained special education class which provides services to students with intensive needs that

cannot be met by the general education program, RSP or DIS program. Classes consist of more than 50% of the student's day (Understanding Special Education, 2016).

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

In Chapter 1, I provided a context regarding CCSS expectations and the ways in which instruction in reading and writing has begun to change. Additionally, there is some focus on how the local district (BUSD) is managing those demands and expectations. The problem that this study addresses is how to adequately support upper elementary school students with mild to moderate disabilities in the areas of reading and writing. The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify how upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities are handling CCSS and, specifically, how they are managing the potentially competing demands of CCSS and special education best practices in their reading and writing instruction. In Chapter 1, I also further discuss the significance and scope of the study and provide definitions for key terms as well. Chapter 2 presents a critical review of the literature that pertains to this research study. In addition, Chapter 3 presents the research design, including the data collection methods and analysis. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, while Chapter 5 includes a discussion/conclusions section, along with interpretations and recommendations for policy, theory and practice.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The problem that this study addresses is how to adequately meet the needs of upper elementary school students with mild to moderate disabilities in the areas of reading and writing. There are a few issues that complicate this objective, the first being a lack of support provided for teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities. In referring to a lack of support, there is specifically a need for more resources and instructional supports (i.e., PD, coaching). At the local district level, this is evident in the lack of PD opportunities, which are mostly directed at general education students and teachers. While units of study have been utilized, their focus has been on general education teachers and students. Another factor to consider is the lack of guidance that CCSS documents provide for teachers of students with disabilities. There is also a lack of clarity as to the compatibility between CCSS reading and writing instructional practices and best practices for supporting students with mild to moderate disabilities.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify how upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities are managing CCSS and, specifically, how they are navigating the potentially competing demands of CCSS and special education best practices in reading and writing instruction. Teachers are being faced with the task of meeting their students'

needs, which are particularly diverse when including special education students, and adhering to CCSS expectations.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The theoretical foundation being used in this research study is critical disabilities theory. This research will use critical disabilities theory because it is linked to the problem of adequately meeting the needs of upper elementary school students with mild to moderate disabilities in the areas of reading and writing. The issues raised by the problem this study addresses pertain to equity, as the needs of students with learning disabilities are not being adequately met. Gutek (1997) states that critical theorists acknowledge and support students' diverse cultures and "they emphasize that learning should begin with the students' own autobiographies and family and community experiences" (p. 327). Acknowledging the diversity and differences among individual students is part of what critical theorists do.

Students with learning disabilities are not only distinct because of their exceptionalities, but they also come from varying cultures, backgrounds and experiences. Critical disabilities theory "addresses the meaning of inclusion in schools and encompasses administrators, teachers, and parents who have children with disabilities (Mertens, 2009)" (as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 33). This lens takes a detailed look at inclusion and what it entails. While the term *inclusion* can have different meanings depending on the individual asked to define it, it typically refers to either physically including students in classrooms/programs or providing equal and equitable opportunities. There is acknowledgment of

students with learning disabilities within the appendices of the standards and the district units of study, but it is far from meaningful. Equitable access to resources is only part of the problem, as equitable access to meaningful and quality instruction is also lacking. Moreover, the access to the curriculum being provided is what Dennett (1984) would consider a “bare opportunity” (as cited in Howe, 1997, p. 18). Howe (1997) suggests, “What makes such an opportunity ‘bare’ is that those who possess it are denied the information necessary ever to exercise it or even to know it exists” (p. 18). In this scenario, students and teachers are provided with access to CCSS, but they are being denied the tools, training, and information necessary to be successful.

### **Policy Foundation**

The shifts in the United States economy, coupled with a greater demand for a knowledgeable, educated and skilled workforce for the future, are components that spearheaded the creation of the CCSS, not to mention the data from international academic assessments, which suggest that students from the United States are behind when compared to students from other countries (Grossman, Reyna, & Shipton, 2011, p. 4). The developers of the CCSS have emphasized college and career readiness in an effort to develop a more skilled and educated workforce. with the implementation of CCSS come changes and challenges that educators, including teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities, must address.

In part, “implementation will require significant changes in instruction, assessment, educator preparation and development, curriculum and materials,

and accountability measures” (Grossman et al., 2011, p. 5). The focus of this is on the changes in instruction and instructional practices for teachers. The commencement of the CCSS will require teachers to teach more rigorous content and engage students in more difficult and challenging work in classrooms, which may require an improvement in teacher content knowledge (Grossman et al., 2011, p. 6). The strategies and practices that teachers have been using will require changes, and this particularly will impact the ways in which teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities teach, especially when taking best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities into consideration.

Some of the changes required are referred to as “key shifts,” and in the area of language arts these shifts include regular practice with complex texts and academic language; literary and informational reading, writing, and speaking that is grounded in textual evidence; and the building of knowledge through content-rich nonfiction (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2016).

The emphasis of CCSS is on increasing the complexity of read texts in an effort to better prepare students for college-level reading demands (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2016). The level of rigor in regard to reading text is to be elevated as students continue working on building reading comprehension and academic vocabulary, but in this case with the use of more advanced texts. While teachers have high expectations for all students, an increase in rigor will have a big impact on struggling learners, and this includes students with mild to moderate learning disabilities, who tend to function below grade level in many core academic areas. Furthermore, the focus on building

academic vocabulary will also “call for students to grow their vocabularies through a mix of conversation, direct instruction, and reading,” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2016), which acknowledges the flexibility educators will be required to display in their instruction.

The expectation of having students ground reading, writing, and speaking in evidence from different types of texts (i.e., literary and informational) is another key shift in English language arts instruction. The focus is on the “students’ ability to read carefully and grasp information, arguments, ideas, and details based on evidence in the text” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2016). Students are no longer expected simply to answer comprehension questions, they are also expected to justify their responses with textual evidence. Moreover, students are expected to answer a variety of text-dependent questions that require an elevated level of focus when reading text (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2016). This suggests that questions will vary in difficulty and depth, which requires a more in-depth exploration and understanding of text. This resonates with the close reading strategies that are being emphasized at the local district level. Teachers are analyzing texts with students with the focus on depth as opposed to range. This seeps into the writing focus as well. “The standards’ focus on evidence-based writing along with the ability to inform and persuade” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2016) is, in itself, a shift from earlier practice. Furthermore, the types or genres of texts that students are accessing and reading have also shifted.

The focus of instruction nationwide has shifted to building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2016). The CCSS emphasize the use of nonfiction texts in reading instruction. This focus is also acknowledged within BUSD, as teachers are encouraged to utilize nonfiction texts at a higher rate. The idea is that students “be immersed in information about the world around them if they are to develop the strong general knowledge and vocabulary they need to become successful readers” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2016), which also brings to light the importance of reading across content areas. Not only is there a requirement to focus on nonfiction texts, but there is also an emphasis on aligning social studies and science instruction with language arts and math. Educators will need to have more access to nonfiction texts, and they must be able to make connections among disciplines and content areas when teaching. Overall, these shifts in English language arts instruction point to an elevated level of rigor that can be problematic for struggling learners, including those with learning disabilities.

Overall, while the CCSS goal of preparing students for college and career experiences is important, there are a variety of issues that come into play. The problem this study seeks to address is how to adequately support students with mild to moderate disabilities in language arts. The purpose of this study is to better understand how teachers are managing what are considered best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities and CCSS expectations.

Motivation, sentence construction, and writing fluency are challenging areas for students with learning disabilities, yet they are not addressed in CCSS

directly (Graham & Harris, 2013, p. 31). There is a discrepancy between what students with exceptionalities need and CCSS. Critics of CCSS have expressed concern that there is so much emphasis being placed on higher level critical reading skills while the foundational skills that special education students need are being overlooked.

Writing instruction is an area of English language arts that has shifted with CCSS implementation. While the standards continue to expect students to engage in narrative writing activities throughout grade levels, there is a focus on displaying an ability to provide sequencing and details in their writing in an effort to create effective argumentative and informative writing (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2016). In addition, the “standards’ focus on evidence-based writing along with the ability to inform and persuade” proves to be a significant shift from the previous writing expectations (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2016). Much as reading instruction has changed and the expectations have reached a new level of rigor, so too have the writing expectations.

When it comes to students with learning disabilities and other struggling learners, the writing expectations for CCSS “present a broader and more rigorous vision for the role of writing” (Graham & Harris, 2013, p. 29). In effect, just as reading instruction has increased the level of difficulty and complexity, writing instruction under the umbrella of CCSS has followed suit. Additionally, at the local district level, writing has become the main area of instructional focus. Students are not only expected to write during language arts instruction, but writing has also become a focus across the curriculum.

The areas of focus for writing under CCSS are broken down into four categories: text type and purposes, production and distribution of writing, research to build and present knowledge, and range of writing (Graham & Harris, 2013). There is a wide range of writing expectations that span beyond the actual writing product and include research and building a knowledge base to support that writing. Instructional shifts are important, with the greatest shift being noted in the increasing emphasis on text (Shanahan, 2015, p. 464). Whereas before students were expected to write about their own experiences, drawing in their personal backgrounds and own knowledge base at the elementary school level, the expectation now is for students to utilize text as the basis for their writing (Shanahan, 2015, p. 468). As a result, while narrative writing remains a component of standards for student learning, there is now a greater emphasis placed on writing with a text as a basis. From this perspective, it is obvious that reading and writing are strongly connected in CCSS instruction.

### **Review of the Scholarly Empirical Literature**

This study investigates implications for practice for teachers of students with mild to moderate learning disabilities in regard to CCSS language arts instruction. Its focus is addressing how to adequately support upper elementary school students with mild to moderate disabilities by providing quality instruction in reading and writing. However, there are a few issues that complicate things, one of which is the lack of clarity on the compatibility between best practices for teaching students with disabilities and CCSS instructional practice. Understanding how compatible these items are will help in finding ways to

adequately teach students with exceptionalities in the areas of reading and writing.

The research addressing best practice language arts instruction for students with mild to moderate disabilities is heavily focused on basic reading skills (i.e., decoding, phonemic awareness, phonics, sight word recognition). In this section, I focus my review of research addressing best practice language arts instruction on (a) foundational reading skills (e.g., phonics, phonemic awareness, decoding), (b) reading comprehension, and (c) writing.

### **Foundational Reading Skills**

The two approaches that guide this research are the whole language approach and the direct instruction approach, which directly aligns with instruction on phonics, word segmentation, and decoding, among other foundational reading skills. Bender (2008) states that "approximately 80% of students diagnosed with a learning disability have some difficulty in reading" (p. 155). According to the National Reading Panel, "based on recent research, a general consensus has emerged that students with learning disabilities demonstrate an early inability to manipulate phonemes, and this inability is the primary cause of subsequent learning disabilities in a wide variety of areas" (as cited in Bender, 2008, p. 158). In investigating reading practice for students with mild to moderate disabilities, the research focuses heavily on the foundational reading skills of phonics, phonemic awareness, decoding. It makes sense that the research views this as a focus area for teachers because it is an area of need for all students, particularly those with learning disabilities. However, while the

emphasis is on teaching foundational reading skills, the research calls for more of a blend in regard to instructional practices. The research leans towards implementing a combination of direct instruction and strategy instruction to maximize learning opportunities for students with learning disabilities.

Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, and Willows (2001) conducted a quantitative meta-analysis focused on comparing the effects of systematic phonics instruction with that of unsystematic instruction for students with low and middle socioeconomic status and also for students at risk for a reading disability (p. 393). Their findings suggest that "systematic phonics instruction helps children learn to read more effectively than non-systematic or no phonics instruction" (p. 427). Instruction that provides support in phonics (e.g., phonemic awareness, word segmentation, decoding) proved to be more effective in terms of supporting student reading than utilizing a more holistic approach. The study found that "systematic phonics instruction produced significant effects among children" and "small-to-moderate effect sizes were evident on reading comprehension measures as well as word reading measures" (p. 428). The systematic phonics instruction was beneficial to students with reading disabilities, and the study suggests that teaching phonics is critical to helping students improve in reading. However, Ehri et al. (2001) acknowledge the "importance of integrating systematic phonics instruction into whole language approaches rather than eliminating whole language from beginning reading instruction" (p. 430). In other words, whole language and phonics reading instruction should be blended to provide effective reading instruction. These findings somewhat support a study done by Swanson (1999).

Swanson (1999) utilized research databases, including PsycINFO, MEDline, and ERIC, to identify the impact of direct instruction models versus strategy instruction models in working with students with learning disabilities (p. 129). There were 180 intervention studies utilized, which illustrates the vast range of literature that was considered (p. 129). The direct instruction models were described in the research as differentiated from the strategy instruction model in the following ways: "(a) direct instruction focuses on subskills (sound units, such as letter sounds, or linguistic units such as *mat-cat-hat*) and (b) discussion of processes and use of general rules is minimized" (p. 129). In effect, the focus of the direct instruction approach is on teaching the foundational skills of reading (e.g., decoding, phonics, segmentation). On the other hand, strategy instruction is described as focusing on "process or global skills for a general approach to reading, whereas DI model focuses on word segmentation and 'sound-getting skills'" (p. 129). The strategy instruction model appears to be geared more toward a whole language approach to instruction. The instruction emphasizes meaning and comprehension, as opposed to basic skills. Moreover, several researchers have suggested that "there has been some lively debate over the years in the literature as to whether instruction should be top-down, via emphasizing the knowledge base, heuristics, and explicit strategies, or a bottom-up emphasis, which entails hierarchical instruction at the skill level" (see Palinesar & Brown, 1984; Vellutino & Scanlon, 1991; as cited in Swanson, 1999, p. 137). In essence, the bottom-up approach aligns with the direct instruction model that focuses on basic reading skills, while the top-down approach

correlates with the strategy instruction model. The question becomes is it more beneficial to support special education students through direct instruction methods, which based on the literature target foundational reading skills (e.g., phonics, decoding, word segmentation), or would it be more of a service to students to provide a holistic reading instruction experience in order to improve literacy skills? It appears that CCSS places a greater emphasis on the holistic approaches to reading, particularly when considering the shifting focus on text complexity, close readings, and critical analysis of literature.

Swanson (1999) asserts that "effective instruction is neither a bottom-up nor top-down approach in isolation" (p. 137), suggesting that each strategy in isolation is not sufficient. According to Swanson, considering "the magnitude of the effect sizes for the DI and SI models (.68 for DI-only and .72 for SI-only) in isolation, both approaches appear viable for students with LD. However, these approaches were smaller in the magnitude of effect sizes than the Combined model" (p. 137). While both strategies in isolation do benefit students with learning disabilities, the combination of the two provides greater success. Cohen (1988) suggests that an effect size of 0.80 is a "substantial finding," (as cited in Swanson, 1999, p. 136) which indicates that in isolation the direct instruction and strategy instruction approaches are not sufficient in terms of providing optimal instruction to students with learning disabilities. The direct instruction and strategy instruction models were found to be positive influences on instruction for students with learning disabilities; however, when both strategies are combined, they yielded a greater effect size. Based on the results, researchers found that

"the *Combined* DI and SI model is an effective procedure for remediating learning disabilities. The effects size ( $M = .84$ ) of the Combined SI and DI model meets Cohen's (1988) criterion of .80 for a substantial finding" (p. 136). What this suggests in relationship to this study is that reading instruction is most effective when instruction on foundational reading skills is combined with other strategies and approaches (Ehri et al., 2001; Swanson, 1999).

Swanson (1999) found that, within this combined instructional model, the following instructional practices and strategies yielded high effect sizes: "one-to-one instruction, controlling of task difficulty through prompts and cues, making use of technology (e.g., structured materials), the teacher systematically modeling problem-solving steps, and making use of small interactive groups" (p. 136). Interestingly, while some of these strategies specifically focus on content instruction, a few also place emphasis on maintaining student engagement. For instance, the practice of controlling the difficulty of a task through prompts and cues emphasizes maintaining a classroom environment where students can feel successful. While the instructional practices that specifically relate to teaching the content are important, so too are strategies that relate to maintaining student engagement, which is typically needed when working with special education students. The findings in this study indicate a need to move toward instructional practices that combine both the whole language and foundational skills approaches in order to best support student learning.

While the research on best practices for supporting students with learning disabilities in reading focuses on blending strategies for optimal learning, the

research leans toward emphasizing direct instruction strategies (which align with foundational skills building). In other words, while there is a call for combining strategies to best support students, direct instruction strategies appear to be favored over strategy instruction. Research that emphasizes strategy instruction in isolation as a method for best supporting students with learning disabilities in reading is scarce. However, research that supports direct instruction strategies in isolation for supporting students with learning disabilities is more prominent. Stronge (2002) suggests that "for many students with disabilities, teaching reading skills and strategies involves explicit instruction. Direct instruction can be used whereby the teacher models the skill or strategy, uses guided practice with feedback and uses independent practice to assess" (as cited in Boyle, 2008, p. 4). In a meta-analysis of 25 studies conducted by White (1988), it was found that the mean effect size of direct instruction on reading achievement for students in special education was 0.85, suggesting that direct instruction has a positive impact on reading success for students. Research indicates that direct instruction is an instructional strategy that has a positive impact on reading achievement for students with mild to moderate disabilities. This is important when considering the push being made for collaboration and student-centered learning within CCSS implementation.

While direct instruction is a critical instructional strategy, computer-based instruction is another means by which teachers can improve student achievement. Loeb, Gillam, Hoffman, Brandel, and Marquis (2009) conducted a study on how computer-based reading intervention programs were utilized to

help support students with language impairments. The programs focused on a variety of target areas, some of which included identifying matched syllable pairs, comprehending grammatical morphemes and complex sentence structures, phoneme discrimination and segmentation, rhyming and sound matching, blending/segmenting nonwords and making words (decoding), among other foundational based reading skills (p. 380). The goal of the study, which focused on foundational reading skills, was to “evaluate the extent that FFW-L [Fast ForWord Language] intervention affected the short- and long-term phonemic awareness and reading skills of children with language impairment and poor word reading skills as compared to alternative approaches to language intervention” (p. 383). The researchers found that “one phonemic awareness skill, blending sounds in words, but not reading skills, improved for the children in the FFW-L condition in the short term” (p. 383). In essence, the study discovered an improvement in specific reading skills; however, that skill was not translating or leading to overall improvement of reading. Given the computer-based learning tools, students have difficulty translating the skills they learn in phonemic awareness exercises over to text-based lessons. with the push to integrate technology that comes with CCSS implementation, it will be critical for educators to keep this point in mind. While this is only one study done in this area, it is important to keep in mind that successful use of technology should allow for successful transfer of skills from one activity to the next. Furthermore, successful instructional strategies should follow suit.

Allor, Gifford, Otaiba, Miller, and Cheatham (2013) conducted a study in which they “investigated the effectiveness of text-based reading lessons for students with intellectual disability (ID)” (346). Students with intellectual disabilities can fall anywhere on the mild-to-severe-disabilities spectrum; however, this study focused on students on the mild and moderate side of the continuum. The purpose of their study was to “add to the literature about individualizing interventions for students with ID” and they specifically asked “whether participating in the text-based application lessons and reading specifically designed storybook texts would result in more unitized words” (p. 354). The study found that students “demonstrated growth on the proximal measures of real word unitization,” however, “their DIBELS scores from the end of the larger study indicated small growth and they were still performing inconsistently and at early first-grade levels” (p. 354). Students were able to identify more words than when first starting the intervention; however, their overall growth in reading fluency, which is part of what a DIBELS assessment measures, was minimal. Furthermore, the text-based approach to teaching reading skills leans toward a more whole language approach to teaching, as opposed to teaching that focuses on phonemic awareness, phonics, blending, and decoding, among other skills. Considering that the DIBELS reading assessment is a reading fluency assessment with some comprehension components, it would seem that direct instruction on phonics would lead to generating the most positive outcomes on the assessment tools. While foundational reading skills prove to be critical learning objectives for students

with learning disabilities, these same students tend to struggle with reading comprehension.

Overall, the research on foundational reading skills and best practices for teaching students with learning disabilities tends to lean toward the need to combine direct instruction and strategy instruction to best support student learning. Some research leans more toward the use of direct instruction for supporting students in learning foundational reading skills. Furthermore, the literature tends to pair reading and reading comprehension together; the call for utilizing both direct instruction and strategy instruction may be a result of this. For instance, the literature presents direct instruction as relating to foundational reading skills (e.g., phonics, early reading skills), which would, therefore, link strategy instruction to comprehension.

### **Reading Comprehension**

The research in the area of reading comprehension for students with learning disabilities presents reading comprehension as an important skill that is neglected in instruction (Gajria, Jitendra, Sood, & Sacks, 2007; Klingner, Urbach, Golos, Brownell, & Menon, 2010). A study by Klingner et al., (2010), where 124 observations were conducted of 41 special education teachers, Grades 3 through 5, found that the majority of the teachers they observed “provided limited reading comprehension instruction to their students with LD” (p. 71). For instance, the researchers found many instances where students were asked to make predictions about text; however, this was the extent of the comprehension focus (p. 71). This illustrates an instructional attention on comprehension that is

superficial and neglects higher level thinking skills that support students in analyzing, synthesizing and making inferences. While making predictions about a text based on text features, such as the title and opening sentences, is an important skill, there is a need to expand beyond that level of comprehension when working with special education students. This is in part due to the expectations of CCSS, which call for increased rigor and use of higher level thinking skills. Furthermore, the researchers in the study “noted that the strategies of making connections with background knowledge and rereading were used more frequently than more difficult or complex skills, such as finding the main idea and summarization” (p. 71). Again, instruction in the area of reading comprehension does not go as in-depth as it should in terms of supporting students with learning disabilities in using critical thinking skills and expanding their reading comprehension. This surface-level instruction falls short of the more in-depth instruction that is expected with the CCSS. In effect, the study results present a lack of focus on teaching reading comprehension skills in-depth with students with mild to moderate disabilities.

Part of the issue may be best summarized by Gajria et al. (2007) who suggest that “although reading comprehension has not received as much attention as beginning reading, there is a general agreement that the ultimate goal of reading is to derive meaning from text” (p. 210). In my experience, special education students, particularly those in elementary school, tend to struggle with basic reading skills, many of which are introduced in the lower elementary grades. Typically, teacher instructional focus is on improving basic reading skills

in order to support reading comprehension. While the goal of reading may be to derive meaning or comprehension, the goal of teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities is to get their students reading text proficiently enough to utilize comprehension strategies and build those skills.

The literature on reading comprehension for students with mild to moderate disabilities views the use of strategies and techniques as key ingredients to supporting students. Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, and Baker (2001) reviewed literature, spanning 20 years, on reading comprehension for students with learning disabilities and generated some key findings (p. 279). For instance, they concluded that "teachers should incorporate careful modeling and provide extensive feedback to students to ensure that these students truly learn and incorporate strategies into their reading. To encourage maintenance and transfer, teachers should also model how the students can use these strategies as they read across a variety of materials" (p. 307). These findings suggest that teacher modeling of strategies and ongoing feedback is important. In thinking of my own practice as a special education teacher, modeling of techniques and strategies is a critical component to supporting student success. Students are more likely to use strategies effectively when provided with examples. In addition, the units of study at the local district level, particularly the units on writing, focus heavily on teachers modeling good writing in order to support students. Essentially, there is an emphasis on utilizing strategies in order to support reading comprehension skills, specifically anchored by the teacher. The expectation is that teachers are modeling and providing feedback in an effort to improve student reading.

Gersten et al. state that "for both narrative and expository texts, strategy instruction seems to consistently improve comprehension performance" (p. 307). However, these findings come with caveats, one of which is described in the following: "Even with multiple strategies, results illustrate how longer treatment durations may be needed to ensure long-term maintenance of effects" (p. 307). This is consistent with my experience as a special education teacher, as I have seen how longer-term practice and repetition of instruction can be helpful. Typically, some of the strategies used to support students are extra practice, repetition, chunking, and slower paced instruction in order to provide extra opportunities to practice instructional strategies. While strategy instruction supports student learning in the area of reading comprehension, the use of other strategies simultaneously, such as repetition and extra practice, is optimal for supporting students with learning disabilities. Furthermore, repetition is a typically used support for students with learning disabilities.

Other research studies have found similar results in regard to reading comprehension for students with mild to moderate disabilities. For example, one study found that "LD students may need more instructional examples and practice than used in this study before reaching complete mastery of critical reading skills" (Darch & Kameenui, 1987, p. 89). This highlights the need to provide examples or teacher modeling of strategies and opportunities to practice repeatedly in order to support student improvement. This resonates with my own experiences in teaching students with learning disabilities, where repetition of

strategies and explicit modeling of those strategies tends to help students in retaining information.

Darch and Kameenui (1987) conducted an experimental study with students identified as learning disabled, five of which were fourth graders and 16 of which were fifth graders (p. 84). The study focused on critical reading skills, and participants were given one of two treatments, either direct instruction or discussion/workbook (p. 82). According to Darch and Gersten (1986), direct instruction is described as being done at a quick pace and requires "individual and group student responses, using clear teacher signals, and applying highly defined correction procedures" (as cited in Darch & Kameenui, 1987, p. 85). This relates to the teaching of foundational reading skills, which in the literature is correlated with direct instruction practices. In addition, the discussion/workbook treatment is described as having an "absence of a highly structured teacher presentation utilizing an explicit strategy and specific correction" (p. 85). The discussion/workbook treatment is not as rigid; rather, the treatment is described as "loosely structured" (p. 85).

Darch and Kameenui found that, in order "to be optimally effective, instruction must be explicit; rules must be presented; and a carefully crafted strategy for how to apply these rules is necessary" (1987, p. 89). A level of structure is needed when providing optimal instruction to students with learning disabilities. This comes as little surprise to me, as my experience working with special education students has highlighted the importance of creating a structure where students can succeed. Being explicit or clear and providing rules or

guidelines is very helpful. Also, Darch and Kameenui found "superior performance across three varied dependent measures" when given the treatment of direct instruction (p. 89). So, in their study, the direct instruction strategies for teaching reading comprehension proved to be effective. However, there was one area where the results were identical, and this is expressed in the following excerpt: "Results indicate that if only literal comprehension performance is tested, discussion and corrective feedback may be sufficient for adequate performance" as both treatments yielded a 72% correct performance (p. 89). This suggests that, within the confines of the study, when students were provided with comprehension that is more literal (i.e., text-dependent questions), as opposed to that which requires higher level thinking, both treatments yielded similar results. However, when the ability to apply critical thinking skills was tested, explicit instruction proved to be more effective, as direct instruction yielded a 73% correct performance and discussion/workbook yielded 59%. In essence, while the literature on foundational reading skills reveals direct instruction as directly related to the teaching of basic reading skills, explicit instruction, as shown by Darch and Kameenui's study, can also support student comprehension skills.

The literature identifies reading comprehension as an area of needed growth for teachers of students with learning disabilities. The comprehension skills that teachers are working on with students tend to be surface-level and lack the use of higher level thinking skills. Much as shown in the literature in the first section, strategy instruction appears throughout the literature regarding reading comprehension with special education students.

## Writing

Several researchers have found that “writing instruction has typically focused on the instruction of mechanical skills rather than writing strategies important throughout the process” (see Barenbaum, 1983; Crisen, Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & McVicar, 1989; Isaacson, 1987; as cited in Englert, Raphael, Anderson, Anthony, & Stevens, 1991, p. 363). In effect, the instruction has been based more on repairing mechanical writing skills, such as sentence structure, punctuation, and grammar, than on more in-depth, complex tasks, such as narrative and expository writing. My experiences in special education have followed suit in regard to expectations and specifically suggested curriculum. Students lack many of the foundational writing skills needed to progress and complete complex writing tasks, so much of the focus has been on building grammar and punctuation skills, as opposed to focusing on higher level writing skills (e.g., paragraph and essay writing).

With that said, Englert et al. (1991) conducted a study that considered and examined the effects of an effort to improve student expository writing utilizing an instructional emphasis on dialogue about writing strategies, text structure processes, and self-regulated learning” (p. 337). The study focused on evaluating the impact of these interventions on students both with LD and without (p. 337). There were approximately 55 special education students (fourth and fifth graders) who took part in this comparison study, with 33 being included in the Cognitive Strategy Instruction in Writing (CSIW) intervention (p. 342-343). Englert et al., (1991) described the CSIW intervention as having “many features of

effective strategy instruction, including the development of students' metacognitive knowledge about writing strategies through an emphasis on teacher modeling of an inner dialogue for directing the writing process, scaffolded assistance during lessons and writing sessions, procedural facilitation for students through the use of think-sheets, and peer collaboration in writing conferences" (p. 342). Essentially, the CSIW intervention includes multiple learning strategies and supports for students. In addition, Englert's description of the intervention draws some comparisons to the local district writing workshop curriculum that is the basis of writing instruction for all students district-wide. The program and trainings I have taken part in emphasize the teacher modeling, while also highlighting the importance of modeling the inner dialogue about writing. The expectation is for students to get a first-hand look at the mental processes throughout the writing process. Also, the peer collaboration and writing conferences are also important components of the writing workshop curriculum. In all, the results of the study "indicate strong support for the positive effects of such a program in terms of improved overall writing quality for expository texts" (p. 362). Based on the program description, there are some similarities between the intervention described and the writing workshop program used in BUSD. Overall, the study found that the impact of the intervention on student learning was positive.

Another insight this study found was that "students who participated in the CSIW intervention were successful in generalizing their knowledge to less structured writing situations in which they wrote about unconstrained topics and

used text structures of their own choosing” (Englert et al., 1991, p. 365). This indicates that students’ writing improvement was evident even when writing about different topics that were not used as models for instruction. Students displayed an ability to transfer strategies across topics. This is a critical piece to consider when working with special education students. Providing students with the opportunities to use learned skills in different contexts and throughout activities is crucial. In addition, “unless students are trained in the thinking strategies that underlie expository composition, these findings suggest that writing instruction alone may not ensure LD students’ writing independence” (p. 365). In other words, simply and solely teaching writing strategies to students with learning disabilities may not be sufficient in regard to improving their written language skills, particularly those that support students in writing longer compositions. This also speaks to the fact that student writing can be influenced by a variety of factors, including frustration, struggles with writing, and behavior. In my experience, writing instruction tends to lead to struggles with behavior, which in part is due to students’ lack of confidence in their own writing abilities combined with the rigor aligned with writing tasks. Writing instruction, particularly for students with learning disabilities, requires teachers to consider a variety of different components.

Another important finding was that “experimental students produced significantly better organized compositions than control students” and “the parameters addressed in the writing program (process, organization) were apparent in the experimental students’ increasing awareness of their audience

and ownership of their own writing (as measured by significant changes in their reader sensitivity) as well as their increasing use of the text structure features” (Englert et al., 1991, p. 365). In essence, the techniques and strategies taught through instructional practices were being transferred over to student individual writing. Much of this transfer of writing skills appears to be due to a focus on more than simply teaching writing skills. The intervention also focused on teaching self-regulation skills.

Another critical finding of the study was that “CSIW students showed increasing sensitivity to their audience and their ownership of the writing process, suggesting the power of the scaffolded intervention in developing students’ self-regulation” (Englert et al., 1991, p. 365). This level of skill requires more than simply memorization of writing steps. There is a level of critical-thinking skills that are needed. Self-regulation is an important skill, particularly in writing. There are many genres of writing and disciplines, which makes the ability to transfer over skills learned in one setting to another important. In addition, Englert et al. (1991) reports that “experimental students were not simply working by rote in applying trained text structures to produce better organized texts. Instead, experimental students appeared to internalize the perspective of the reader to communicate their ideas more effectively” (p. 365). Again, this illustrates a level of higher level thinking that is expected of all students, but particularly challenging to develop for those with learning disabilities. In this case, I would think that modeling internal dialogue when teaching writing skills could support this concept of self-regulation. These findings are quite impressive, considering that the focus of Englert et al.’s

research was on upper elementary school students with learning disabilities. The findings speak to the idea that students can internalize some higher-level writing skills and knowledge that can be transferred over to various writing tasks.

Like other researchers, Sexton, Harris, and Graham (1998) considered self-regulatory strategies in their study, which utilized the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) model, which was meant to support students in developing strategies for writing, specifically essay writing (p. 295). The study considered educational services for students with learning disabilities (Grades 5 and 6) that were provided within inclusive models of instruction (p. 297). Students were fully included in the general education classrooms and supported by special education staff within those classrooms. The special education program for these students was an RSP "push-in" model of support services. One finding of the study was that the students who took part displayed similar writing behaviors to those seen in previous research in this area, which reflected poor writing skills on the part of students with learning disabilities (p. 307). In my experience, writing tends to be a difficult task for students with learning disabilities. It requires an assortment of skills (e.g., grammar, punctuation, spelling, sentence structure) that students are typically lacking or struggling with. The research done in this study placed an emphasis on essay writing, which is a tall task for elementary school students, particularly those with learning disabilities. Through the use of the SRSD model, researchers found that students' "papers became longer, the number of reasons supporting the premise increased, text was coherently ordered, and overall quality improved" (p. 307). The self-regulation strategies

supported student progress in the area of writing. In addition, “participants were also positive about the effects of instruction and were generally more confident about their ability to write a ‘good’ essay following instruction” (p. 307), which indicates that, not only were students improving in their ability to write, but their confidence levels were also increasing through the process. This is a critical component when discussing students with learning disabilities because, in my experience, these students tend to lack confidence in academic skills. A lack of confidence can also lead to behavior issues and an overall decrease in work effort and completion. When supporting students with learning disabilities, it is important to consider the whole child, including the social, emotional and physical needs. Simply providing academic instruction and strategies is not sufficient.

In looking at their study and previous studies that have utilized SRSD as an instructional model, Sexton and colleagues suggest that, “studies indicate that neither writing practice alone nor knowledge of a powerful writing strategy is sufficient for students with LD” (p. 308). In essence, this research, backed by others, is suggesting that other components, beyond simply teaching writing strategies, are crucial to supporting students with learning disabilities. This may or may not include less tangible aspects, such as confidence levels, self-regulatory skills, among others. Moreover, the researchers make reference to strategies instruction, which is also found in the research on reading and reading comprehension for students with learning disabilities. Specifically, the researchers suggest that “Strategies instruction has been described as cold, nonchild centered, and decontextualized” (p. 308). The SRSD model is a form of

strategy instruction, and while Sexton and colleagues acknowledge the perception of strategy instruction by skeptics, they rebuff this sentiment by suggesting that “explicitness and structure need not equate with decontextualized learning of meaningless skills” and “SRSD depends upon teachers engaging students as active collaborators in their own learning and development; modeling, dialogue, sharing, and scaffolding are critical” (p. 308). This resonates with CCSS practices in regard to the focus on dialogue and collaboration. In addition, there is an emphasis on teacher modeling, which as mentioned before, correlates with the district writing workshop curriculum that focuses on teacher modeling and inner dialoguing to support student thinking processes. Essentially, strategy instruction includes components that allow for more active learning, collaboration, and an overall more enriching experience.

Troia and Graham (2002) also considered strategy instruction in their study; however, they focused on highly explicit and teacher-directed strategy instruction. Specifically, they examined the effectiveness of this instruction, focusing on three planning strategies for fourth and fifth graders with learning disabilities. The participants in the study received one of two methods of instruction: either advanced planning strategy instruction or a modified version of process writing instruction. Based on Calkins’s (1981, 1986) and Graves’s (1983) research (as cited in Troia & Graham, 2002), the study’s modified version of process writing instruction was “compatible with the process writing instruction that students regularly received in their classrooms” (p. 293). In effect, the comparative treatment coincided with typical writing instruction for students with

learning disabilities. Going back to the three planning strategies, Troia and Graham acknowledge that they “implemented three teacher-directed procedures to facilitate transfer” (p. 292), indicating that part of the focus was on making sure students were able to take their writing skills and transfer them to different contexts.

The first of the planning strategies is described as follows: “Instructors modeled how to use the three strategies (goal setting, brainstorming, and organizing) to perform several different types of tasks (including story writing), explaining how the strategies were adapted for each particular task and how they affected performance” (Troia & Graham, 2002, p. 292). This description does appear to emphasize the concept of transfer. Students are expected to use various strategies to perform multiple writing tasks and reflect on their effectiveness. The second planning strategy is described as follows: “Instructors identified multiple tasks and situations for which students could use the strategies” (p. 292). Essentially, this is directed more towards the teacher, but again, it highlights that idea of transferring knowledge from one context (or situation) to another. The third planning strategy is described as follows: “Students were given homework assignments in which they applied the strategies to activities other than story writing. For these assignments, instructors provided students with advice on how to apply the strategies to these new tasks and gave them feedback on each completed assignment” (p. 292). In effect, this is furthering the concept of transfer, as students were expected to transfer writing strategies to other contexts and content areas.

The strategies presented above suggest that a key component to effective instruction is emphasizing the use of the strategies across tasks. Troia and Graham's study compared not only the treatment groups but also the results of pretests and posttests in an effort to assess the impact of instructional strategies.

On the other hand, the process approach to writing, which the researchers based on the research of Graves (1983) and Calkins (1981, 1986), proves to be quite different (as cited in Troia & Graham, 2002). The process approach to writing includes "frequent opportunities for writing using a predictable routine" (p. 292) and instruction that has students use critical thinking skills when the opportunities present themselves. In addition, this approach includes "teacher and peer conferencing activities during which students receive individualized feedback about the substance and form of their compositions" (p. 292), as well as frequent opportunities to share and post their written work. Unlike the strategy instruction approach described before, the process approach appears to lack emphasis on transfer. It is quite routine based, and the feedback given is based solely on their writing product, as opposed to the strategies and thinking process that guided their writing. The two forms of instruction prove to be quite different.

One product measurement that was assessed was in the area of stories, which the researchers measured based on rubrics that considered story length, use of writing elements, organization, among other measurements (Troia & Graham, 2002, p. 297). The results in this section found that "significant treatment group differences were evident in posttest difference scores for story quality,  $t(18) = 2.11, p = .05$ , favoring the strategy instruction group" (p. 297).

Additionally, the researchers add that “closer inspection of the data indicates that children in the strategy instruction group wrote stories of higher quality at maintenance than at pretest, whereas students who received process writing instruction composed stories at maintenance that were judged to be of lower quality than those written at pretest” (p. 297). In effect, the strategy instruction strategies for writing helped support students in improving based on criteria within the rubrics. Moreover, the researchers state, “consistent with our predictions, teaching students with LD three basic planning strategies via an explicit and highly teacher-directed approach had a positive, albeit modest, impact on their writing performance” (p. 299), suggesting that while the impact on student performance was positive, it was somewhat minimal. However, considering the research presented in the reading and reading comprehension section of this literature review, one could suggest that longer treatment and repetition in teaching instructional strategies could increase effectiveness for students with learning disabilities. These students typically require extra supports, including time and access to instruction in order to reap the benefits. Nonetheless, Troia and Graham acknowledge that “immediately following the instruction that focused on story writing, students who were taught to use these strategies wrote stories that were qualitatively better than those produced by their peers assigned to the process writing condition” (p. 299). Essentially, the study found that, in this context, the strategy instruction approach to teaching helped support student writing performance, albeit minimally.

Previous studies have also examined the impact of strategy instruction on the writing performance of students with learning disabilities. Unlike the previous study discussed, Danoff, Harris, and Graham (1993) conducted a study in which they examined the impact of strategy instruction embedded into a process approach (p. 297). In describing the process approach to writing instruction, the researchers suggest that explicit instruction is typically not a common component of this strategy, but rather, “teachers tend to facilitate children’s ‘natural’ development over long periods of time through questions and ‘gentle’ response during conferences, sharing, and so forth” (p. 295). This suggests that the process approach is in many ways like the whole language approach to reading instruction. There is little focus on breaking down components of writing through direct instructional practices. Also, unlike the previous study, which compared both strategies, Danoff et al.’s study looked at using both cohesively. Wong et. al. (1991) suggest that “available evidence favors the conclusion that strategy instruction improves the academic performance for many students, including those with LD and normally achieving students” (as cited in Danoff et al., 1993, p. 296). As the research in this review has shown, strategy instruction consistently appears as an effective strategy for supporting students with learning disabilities. Danoff and colleagues (1993) conducted their study as a way to identify how to embed or incorporate this instructional strategy into instructional practices (p. 296). In addition, the study utilized a series of minilessons where students with and without learning disabilities were taught “previously validated writing strategy and procedures for regulating the strategy and the writing process” (p. 295). The

instructional components of these minilessons span beyond simply teaching strategies but also consider how students will regulate use of those strategies.

Danoff et al.'s study considered fourth and fifth graders working in an inclusive environment, where students were included in the general education classroom. They were RSP students who were part of a "push-in" model of support. Three of the students in the study were identified as having a learning disability based on the district's evaluation and assessment measures, while the other three students who took part were described as "normally achieving' classmates" (p. 300). In other words, they were students who were not identified as having a learning disability. The data collection and scoring procedures included a variety of measures, such as a story-grammar scale, consideration of number of words used in compositions, a holistic rating scale, strategy usage examination, self-efficacy measure, and social validity interviews (p. 308-309). A key finding in this study was that "integrating strategy instruction into classes that followed a writing workshop approach to composition instruction had a positive impact on the writing performance of students with learning disabilities" (p. 315). In addition, the researchers found that, in terms of the compositions created by the students, their stories "became broader and richer, papers also became longer and, for all but one of the participating students with LD, qualitatively better" (p. 315). Essentially, within the context of this study, the embedding of strategy instruction into writing instruction helped students in writing better stories. Not only was there an improvement in quantity, with regards to the length of the student writing, but the quality of the writing improved as well.

In all, much like the reading and reading comprehension research on instruction for students with mild to moderate learning disabilities, writing also considered strategy instruction to be an effective technique. While strategy instruction is defined differently throughout, the premise of teaching students strategies that they could use during language arts instruction remains. The research on writing also emphasizes the transfer of writing skills from one task to the next. So, it appears that this transfer is an instructional focus that is considered a "best practice." Furthermore, the research points to the fact that writing, for students with learning disabilities, encompasses a variety of components. Simply teaching writing skills is not enough, as providing extra time, repetition and teaching self-regulation skills in writing is also important to a child's overall progress.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in two broad concepts. The first of these is research addressing CCSS instructional practices in reading and writing. This is addressed in the policy foundations section of this study, and the instructional shifts in CCSS are a key component to this framework. The other concept is best practice pedagogy and instructional practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities in the areas of reading and writing. Teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities are tasked with supporting students in CCSS learning, while also considering what strategies, content and teaching approaches best suit student needs. The research suggests some similarities between both, but also some key

differences. Common Core State Standards instructional reading practices emphasize a focus on rigor, text complexity, and frequent use of nonfiction texts, among other changes. Research on best practices for language arts instruction for students with mild to moderate disabilities on the whole recommends a mix of direct instruction (with an emphasis on foundational skills) and strategy instruction for optimal results. In effect, the research suggests that there are some differences between CCSS instructional practice expectations and best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities in the area of language arts. Viewed from a critical disabilities perspective, this can be problematic because it suggests a gap between CCSS expectations and best practices for supporting special education students. Students may not be provided with adequate and equitable quality instruction due to this discrepancy between CCSS instructional practices and proven practices that are meant to support students with special needs.

Other factors to consider are the unique learning needs of students with mild to moderate disabilities and CCSS policy, both of which function as their own form of accountability measures. Teachers are obligated morally and ethically to attempt to meet the learning needs of their students, while CCSS implementation is what teachers are being held accountable for in their classroom instruction. Additionally, CCSS expectations are also addressed through student IEP goals, which is also an area of accountability for teachers. The focus then becomes on finding ways to blend or align the two in order to adequately meet the needs of our upper elementary school students with mild to

moderate disabilities. These needs include equitable access to quality instruction and CCSS, with use of best practices to support student-learning needs.

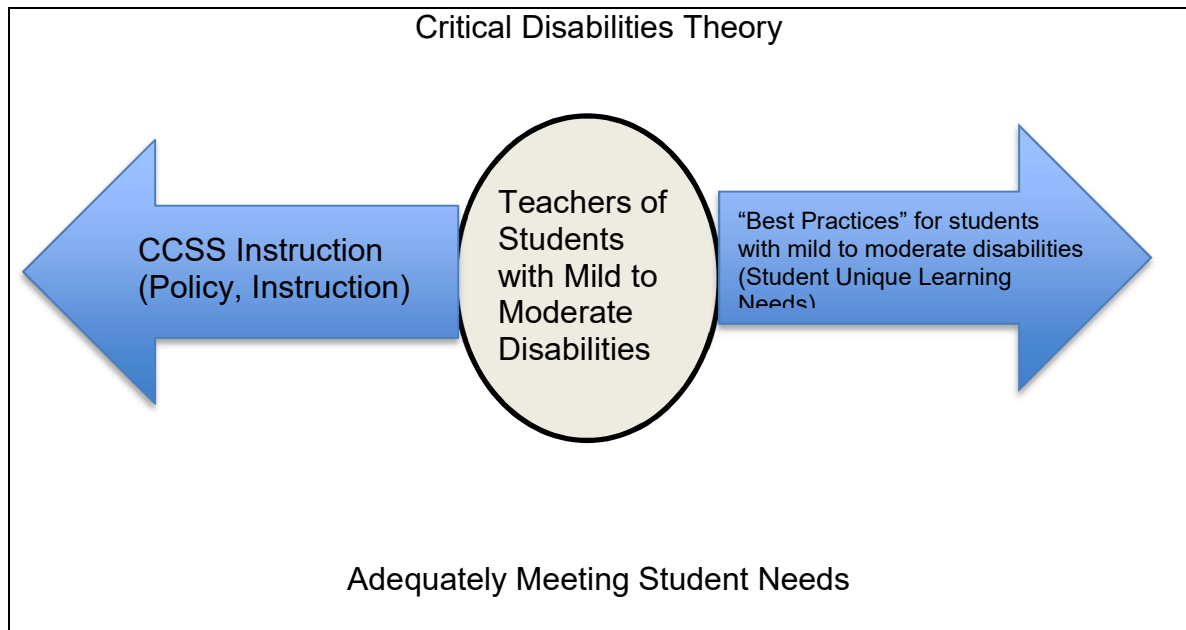


Figure 1. Conceptual framework diagram.

### Chapter Summary

The implementation of CCSS has created a shift in instructional practices. The level of rigor is escalated with the implementation of CCSS, which undoubtedly influences teacher instructional practices. In addition, there is an emphasis on higher level thinking skills that will also have an impact on students, particularly those with learning disabilities. In terms of "best practices" in the area of reading, the literature considers a combination of direct instruction and strategy instruction as the best means for supporting students with learning disabilities. Reading comprehension is specifically linked to strategy instruction in the literature, so it appears that the literature considers direct instruction to be the

best strategy for supporting foundational reading skills and strategy instruction to be the best approach for teaching reading comprehension. Similarly, the literature on "best practices" for writing also looks to strategy instruction for best supporting students with learning disabilities.

Some evident gaps in the literature include empirical research on CCSS instructional practices. The CCSS is rather new and therefore the literature regarding instructional practices for CCSS implementation act more as general recommendations than as actual best practices. A gap in the literature regarding best practices for students with mild to moderate learning disabilities is a lack of literature that specifically looks at upper elementary school students with mild to moderate disabilities. In addition, while strategy instruction appears as a best practice throughout the research, it is defined in varying ways depending on the study. Furthermore, the literature on SDC instruction practices is also lacking. Much of the literature regarding students with mild to moderate disabilities focuses on students who are being included in the general education classrooms (e.g., provided RSP support services), as opposed to those in a self-contained SDC. Finally, much of the research in this area is outdated. Current research in this area is limited, so this is an area of need.

This study will provide a more current look at this phenomenon. It will specifically look at upper elementary school students with mild to moderate learning disabilities and add to that limited research. Additionally, my study will not only include RSP students but will also investigate SDCs, which will help fill in the gap in that research area. It's not enough that special education students on

the whole are being overlooked, but subgroups within that subgroup have also been underrepresented.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHOD OF INQUIRY**

The problem that this study addresses is how to adequately meet the needs of upper elementary school students with mild to moderate disabilities in the areas of reading and writing. This is complicated by the fact that teachers are being provided with little support (e.g., PD), there is a lack of guidance from CCSS as to how teachers of students with learning disabilities should proceed in regard to implementation, and a lack of clarity as to the compatibility between CCSS instructional practices and best practices for students with learning disabilities in the area of language arts.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify how upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities are handling CCSS expectations and specifically how they are managing the potentially competing demands of CCSS and special education best practices in their reading and writing instruction. One key component to consider is the ways in which teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities are approaching reading and writing instruction when considering CCSS instructional practices and best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities. Are teachers balancing both goals, or are they leaning their instruction more in one direction? It is also important to consider teacher perceptions about CCSS instructional practices and best practices for special education students in terms of their compatibility. Are there

points of overlap and to what extent are they conflicting? Finally, considering the lack of support being provided to teachers in CCSS implementation, it is critical to identify teacher perceptions on the challenges they face, areas of needed support, and current opportunities (e.g., PD) that already exist.

The following research questions will guide this qualitative study:

1. In what ways do upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities view CCSS and best practices in reading and writing as compatible or conflicting?
2. How are upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities meeting their students' unique learning needs while also implementing CCSS? In particular, in what ways are upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities aligning their instruction with CCSS instructional practices or with best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities in the areas of reading and writing?
3. What do these teachers view as the instructional challenges they are facing, the needs they have for support, and the opportunities that exist for them and their students in the era of CCSS?

### **Qualitative Methods Research**

The methodology used in this study is qualitative. Creswell (2013), in addressing qualitative studies, writes about the four philosophical assumptions researchers consider when undertaking a qualitative approach to research: ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological (p. 21).

Components of these assumptions are embedded in this study, which defines it as a qualitative study. According to Creswell (2013), part of the ontological

assumption “includes the use of multiple forms of evidence in themes using the actual words of different individuals and presenting different perspectives” (p. 20). The methods used in this study for gathering data were interviews, transcriptions, and observations. These methods provided data and evidence that considered participants' words and actions. In addition, I anticipated that different perspectives would be presented due to the fact participants were from a variety of school sites and took on varying responsibilities. Another difference was the type of special education program the participants worked in, including RSP and SDC. Not only were the individual differences (i.e., grade level taught, gender, experience) going to play a factor in participants' perspectives, but their roles within a school would as well.

The role of the participants within a school setting is associated with the epistemological assumption in qualitative research. In addressing epistemological assumptions Creswell (2013) suggests that, “knowledge is known – through the subjective experiences of people. It becomes important, then, to conduct studies in the ‘field,’ where the participants live and work—these are important contexts for understanding what the participants are saying” (p. 20). The interviews and observations conducted for this study provided knowledge by focusing inquiries on issues within the fields where participants worked. Interviews and observations took place in the classrooms, and questions were geared toward instructional practices and student learning, which were components of the field in this study. In addition, by interviewing participants, I elicited subjective experiences of people, which relates to the epistemological

assumptions. Gathering subjective data and recognizing subjectivity as a component of qualitative research fits in well with the next assumption, which is axiological.

Creswell (2013) indicates that this assumption requires researchers to “admit the value-laden nature of the study and actively report their values and biases as well as the value-laden nature of information gathered from the field” (p. 20). This is a critical component of my study, in particular when considering that I am a member of the field, which I am studying. I am a special education teacher, and therefore I had to consider the values and biases held when conducting and analyzing the research data. Furthermore, I have worked as a special education teacher for 8 years. This is further addressed in the description of role and position section of this chapter.

The final philosophical assumption considered is the methodological. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative study methodologies “are characterized as inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researcher’s experience in collecting and analyzing the data” (p. 22). He adds that “during the data analysis, the researcher follows a path of analyzing the data to develop an increasingly detailed knowledge of the topic being studied” (p. 22). This qualitative study used interview transcriptions, as well as observations, as a tool for data analysis. From this analysis emerged themes that helped interpret the data. The methods used in this study supported the four philosophical assumptions that drive qualitative studies, which further defines this study as qualitative.

This study is a qualitative study because it reflects the definition and characteristics of qualitative research. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), in their *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, “Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 45). Interpreting information is part of a qualitative study, which requires the interpretation of interview data and observation data as used in this study. In addition, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) suggest that qualitative studies include “field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world” (as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 45). In effect, interviews function as qualitative study tools to help interpret events and situations being researched. This study, which included interviews, memos, and observations to help support interpretation and analysis of data, falls within the definition of a qualitative study. The study exhibits many of the characteristics that define qualitative studies.

Creswell (2013) addresses eight characteristics of a qualitative study, including natural setting, researcher as key instrument, multiple methods, complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic, participants’ meanings, emergent design, reflexivity, and holistic account (p. 45-47). Creswell (2013) suggests that in a natural setting “qualitative researchers often collect data in the field at the site where participants experience the issue or problem under study” (p. 45). In this study, interviews and observations were conducted at the school

site, so as to provide opportunities for participants to share artifacts and provide a more vivid picture of how teachers are teaching. As Creswell (2013) articulates, “They do not bring individuals into a lab (a contrived situation), nor do they typically send out instruments for individuals to complete, such as in survey research” (p. 45). This study garnered rich and detailed information from participants that a survey simply could not provide. Furthermore, “in the natural setting, the researchers have face-to-face interaction over time” (Creswell, 2013, p. 45), which is what the interviews and observations allow for in a qualitative study.

Another characteristic of a qualitative study has the researcher pegged as a key instrument. For instance, “Qualitative researchers collect data themselves through examining documents, observing behavior, and interviewing participants. They may use an instrument, but it is one designed by the researcher using open-ended questions” (Creswell, 2013, p. 45). This research study followed suit, in that the instruments used were interview and observation protocols developed by the researcher, with open-ended questions to gather rich information and data that a quantitative study would fail to do. Gathering rich and detailed information allows for a deeper analysis that basic survey data could not provide.

This leads into another characteristic of qualitative data, that being the use of multiple data sources. Gathering multiple sources of data allows for researchers to “review all of the data and make sense of it, organizing it into categories or themes that cut across all of the data sources” (Creswell, 2013, p. 45). To that end, the research done in this study followed similar steps in terms of

observing, interviewing, transcribing, and coding in order to reveal trends, patterns, and themes. Additionally, multiple methods suggest that “qualitative researchers typically gather multiple forms of data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, rather than rely on a single data source” (p. 45). This research study used observations and interviews (both pre- and post-) as data sources, and the researcher used multiple methods of data collection and analysis.

Another characteristic of qualitative studies that connects to this research is that of complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic, which helps qualitative researchers “build their patterns, categories, and themes from the ‘bottom up,’ by organizing the data inductively into increasingly more abstract units of information” (Creswell, 2013, p. 45). This research study utilized this level of logic and reasoning during the data analysis stage. There is a depth to the analysis that can only be garnered through a qualitative study. Creswell (2013) states that the “inductive process involves researchers working back and forth between the themes and the database until they establish a comprehensive set of themes” and adds that “researchers also use deductive thinking in that they build themes that are constantly being checked against the data” (p. 45). In effect, there is a depth to this research and analysis that a survey or analyzing statistics does not allow for; therefore, a qualitative study is best suited.

This depth relates to another characteristic of qualitative research, which is addressing participants’ meanings. Creswell (2013) addresses this when he states, “in the entire qualitative research process, the researchers keep a focus

on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not that meaning that the researchers bring to the research or writers from the literature" (p. 47). In essence, the participants play a critical role in the process of research and shape the meanings behind the data collected. Understanding the participants' meanings is done so effectively through the interviewing process.

Emergent design is another characteristic of a qualitative study. According to Creswell (2013), the research in a qualitative study is emergent, which "means that the initial plan for research cannot be tightly prescribed, and that all phases of the process may change or shift after the researchers enter the field and begin to collect data" (p. 47). This demonstrates the open-endedness of a qualitative study, where the data collection process provides opportunities to revise areas of focus and processes. The example that Creswell (2013) provides is that of data collection practices changing. Some possible changes could include adjustments to interview questions, protocol forms (both interview and observation), and the overall process of conducting the study. As the researcher, I anticipated and reacted to needed changes throughout the data collection process in the study. Part of being proactive in this respect was piloting interviews to adjust interview protocol questions as needed and piloting observation protocols as well.

Another characteristic of a qualitative study is the component of reflexivity. Creswell (2013) addresses reflexivity when suggesting that "researchers 'position themselves' in a qualitative research study" (p. 47). In a qualitative study a researcher must consider their role and position within the study. "This means that researchers convey (i.e., in a method section, in an introduction, or in other

places in a study) their background (e.g., work experiences, cultural experiences, history), how it informs their interpretation" (Creswell, 2013, p. 47). The nature of this research study obligated me to consider my role as a special education teacher. Since the study centered on components of special education programs and instruction, I was cognizant of my biases and subjectivity. I recognized that my position as a special education teacher has an influence on my interpretations of data, the interview protocol questions, and other components of the study.

The final characteristic of a qualitative study, based on Creswell (2013), is the holistic account. In speaking of the holistic account, Creswell (2013) indicates that "qualitative researchers try to develop a complete picture of the problem or issue under the study. This involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges" (p. 47). The research study took into consideration multiple perspectives from both special education teachers who worked at different school sites and those who worked in different special education programs (i.e., SDC or RSP). In addition, I recognized the many factors involved in the situation, including grade levels, classroom structure, and type of special education model used, among other components.

### **Research Design**

Much like the nature of a qualitative study, narrowing down a research design is difficult because of the open-ended disposition of qualitative studies. Hatch (2002) argues this concept when suggesting that "it could be said that

there are as many kinds of qualitative research as there are qualitative researchers" (p. 20). This research study shares some aspects of the more traditional qualitative research designs (e.g., case studies, ethnographies, narratives), and also falls under a unique type of research design, which Hatch (2002) identifies as "Interview Studies" (p. 23).

According to Hatch (2002), "informant interviewing can be the basis for another kind of qualitative study. While it is often a part of participant observation research and other approaches, interviewing can be the primary data collection strategy in a qualitative project" (p. 23). In the confines of this study the interviews and observations act as primary data collection strategies and support one another. The interview questions and observation protocols guide one another to an extent, as both helped to unearth similar information, but in distinct formats. For this particular study, I utilized the participant interview and observation data to construct the understandings and interpretations. In other words, the participants' interview responses were their voice in co-constructing interpretations and understandings with the researcher. The qualitative interview studies research design is unique in comparison to a quantitative studies approach.

According to Hatch (2002) "qualitative researchers utilized special interview strategies that are different in nature from interviews done in quantitative studies. Most quantitative interviews are closed-ended questionnaires with yes/no questions, forced choices, and Likert-scale categories" (p. 23). This research study utilized open-ended questions and face-

to-face interviews with participants, following the qualitative approach. It followed the formula for qualitative interview studies, which is described in the following statement: "they ask open-ended questions, encourage informants to explain their unique perspectives on the issues at hand, and listen intently for special language and other clues that reveal meaning structures informants use to understand their worlds (Mishler, 1986; Seidman, 1998; Spradley, 1979)" (as cited in Hatch, 2002, p. 23). Part of the process in this research study was asking open-ended questions and coding the transcriptions looking for clues and language to help support interpretations and understandings. The process itself allowed for change and emergent design adjustments as well, which is part of the interview studies design. Hatch (2002) states that "interviewers enter interview settings with questions in mind but generate questions during the interview in response to informants' responses, the social contexts being discussed, and the degree of rapport established" (p. 23). Again, this research study functioned similarly in that the interview protocol allowed for probes and open-endedness. I conducted interviews knowing that probes and further questioning would be a critical part of the process. Observation protocols were used particularly in comparison to the interview data. The goal was to identify the extent to which the interview data were reflected in the observation data and vice versa.

### **Research Methods**

In this section I will describe the specific research methods that utilized to apply interview studies design to this qualitative research. These include the setting, sample, data collection, data analysis, and steps taken to ensure validity

and trustworthiness. To begin, in this qualitative study, I used semistructured interviews, which Rubin and Rubin (2012) describe as the following: "In the *semistructured interview*, the researcher has a specific topic to learn about, prepares a limited number of questions in advance, and plans to ask follow-up questions" (p. 31). A similar format is used in this study. In addition, I prepared a limited number of questions in advance in the form of an interview protocol that included probes and follow-up questions to help expand upon participant responses when needed.

The other data collection method used was observations. The observations conducted were of language arts lessons and took place after the initial interviews. Observations were scheduled based on teacher availability. Two of the observations were conducted on the same day as the initial interviews, while the other four were completed on different days. An observation protocol that allowed for descriptive and reflective notes was used when conducting observations. Part of the reason for including observations as a method was the need to include multiple methods of data collection. This is important in regard to providing more validity to the results and findings of the study. According to Maxwell (2013), "This strategy reduces the risk that your conclusions will reflect only the biases of a specific method, and allows you to gain a more secure understanding of the issues you are investigating" (p. 102). So, again, it supports the validity and trustworthiness of the findings and results of the study. More specifically, it can also help support the other method used in this study. "Interviews can also provide additional information that was missed in

observation and can be used to check the accuracy of the observations" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 102). Adding observations provided an opportunity to compare data and findings to the information gathered from the interviews.

In this study, the role of the researcher in regard to observation data fell under the scope of a nonparticipant/observer as participant which, where "the researcher is an outsider of the group under study, watching and taking field notes from a distance. He or she can record data without direct involvement with activity or people" (Creswell, 2013, p. 167). I observed the instructional practices of teachers during instruction and was not directly involved in the activities or lessons. The focus of the observations was on teacher instructional practices during language arts (i.e., reading and/or writing) lessons.

### **Setting**

The study took place at five school sites within one school district. Table 1 lists the elementary schools in the district as well as their corresponding special education programs. The special education programs that the participants were gathered from for the purposes of this study are in bold. The schools that had teachers who participated in this study were School L, School M, School O, School S and School W.

Table 1

*School Sites Used in This Study*

School	SDC	Grade span	RSP	Grade span
School A	X	X	1	(K-8)
School H	X	X	1	(K-5)
School J	X	X	1	(K-5)
School L	2	(2-3) (4-5)	1	(K-5)
School M	X	X	1	<b>(K-5)</b>
School O	2	<b>(3-4)</b> (4-5)	1	<b>(K-5)</b>
School P	1	(K-2)	1	(K-5)
School S	X	X	1	<b>(K-5)</b>
School W	2	<b>(3-4)</b> (4-5)	1	(K-5)

School L serves students with mild to moderate disabilities and also has an autism focus class for students with more moderate to severe disabilities. There are currently four full-time special education teachers, one who teaches Grades 2 and 3, another who serves Grades 4 and 5 in an SDC environment, a resource teacher who supports kindergarten through Grade 5, and an autism focus class. The two SDCs are self-contained programs in which students are mainstreamed for approximately an hour daily with their general education peers. The rest of their time is spent in the special education classroom with a teacher and an instructional assistant. Class numbers fluctuate as students come and go, but on average class sizes range anywhere between 10 and 15 students. Furthermore, in terms of CCSS, the school is in its third year of CCSS

implementation, and they are utilizing reading and writing workshop curriculum to support teachers and students.

School M only has an RSP program for students (K-5), and one special education teacher that coordinates the program. The program serves students with mild to moderate disabilities. In this program students are pulled out of the general education classroom to the resource room and provided with specialized academic instruction.

School O had two participants for this study, one was an SDC teacher and the other was an RSP teacher. Also, School O has two mild to moderate SDC classes, one that focuses on students in Grades 3 and 4 and the other that includes students in Grades 4 and 5. In addition, School O also has an RSP program where students in kindergarten through Grade 5 are serviced.

School S, much like School M, only has an RSP program for Grades 5. As previously mentioned, this school only has RSP program for students with learning disabilities, so there is only one special education teacher on campus and that teacher took part in this study.

School W has two mild to moderate SDC classes, one that focuses on grades (3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>) and the other that includes grades (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>). In addition, there is an RSP program for grades (K-5), as well as two autism focus classes and 1 class for students with moderate to severe disabilities. Table 2 illustrates a comparison between school sites with information on different subgroups at the school sites.

Table 2

*Participating School Site Subgroup Information*

School	% of EL learners	% Socio-economically disadvantaged	%Students with disabilities	Total enrollment
L	22	84	13	581
M	18	72	8	439
O	20	79	13	408
S	19	85	9	479
W	37	87	18	358

**Sample**

The participants targeted in this study were educators who work with upper elementary school students (Grades 3–5). Participants were special education teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities. An appropriate number of participants for this study is six, particularly when taking time constraints and teacher availability within the school district into consideration. There are not many SDC upper elementary school teachers in the district; therefore, gaining access to three of them is a plus. This study included SDC teachers and RSP teachers, with the goal being to have three teachers per category (i.e., three SDC and three RSP). The idea was to gain information that may be useful in regard to how teachers within the same district are aligning their instruction and to consider the implications of those findings.

The selection of participants was based on certain criteria. To begin, the special education teachers selected were teachers of upper elementary school students with mild to moderate disabilities. Upper elementary school students

were defined as students in Grades 3–5. There are three types of potential special education programs, including SDC teachers (self-contained classroom with some mainstreaming), RSP “push-in” (special education teacher goes into general education classroom to provide support), or RSP “pull-out” (special education teacher pulls student out of general education classroom to provide support).

Sampling procedures took on a purposeful sampling approach, which according to Creswell (2013) takes three things into consideration: participant and site selection, specific type of sampling strategy, and the sample size (p. 155). Light et al. (1990) add to this by suggesting that, "in qualitative research, the typical way of selecting settings and individuals is neither probability sampling nor convenience sampling. It falls into a third category . . . *purposeful selection*" (as cited Maxwell, 2013, p. 97). Purposeful sampling is a strategy where "particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions and goals, and that can't be gotten as well from other choices" (p. 97). Considering that this study focused on upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities, including SDCs and RSPs, the participants chosen for this study were appropriate.

Interviewing special education teachers who teach language arts (i.e., reading, reading comprehension, and writing) produced information and data that was beneficial in gaining ideas as to how to optimize instruction in similar settings and support regarding CCSS instruction for students with learning disabilities. I

purposefully recruited upper elementary school special education teachers in mild to moderate programs because they best represented the type of participants who could help answer the research questions. Furthermore, in having been a teacher for the past 8 years, I have developed a network of educators whom I could reach out to. The goal was to reach out to a few of those educators and gain access to other educators through those associations.

Gaining access to the participants also required reaching out to school district personnel. The ideal interview locations would be at the teachers' school sites, and having district approval would allow for richer data, as opposed to meeting with teachers at a random location where the setting could foster a more casual atmosphere, rather than a professional one. In regard to BUSD, the assistant superintendent and special education director were notified of the study. The next step was to reach out to the individual school sites' administration and gain approval. The final step was to reach out to individual teachers and obtain consent to interview and observe.

Part of obtaining consent was having teachers sign consent forms. While the consent forms act as a sort of agreement between parties, I remained obliged to consider other ethical issues. Protecting participants' identities is one ethical issue to consider when conducting a study. According to Creswell (2013), "a researcher protects anonymity of the informants, for example, by assigning numbers or aliases to individuals" (p. 175). This study followed suit by assigning aliases to individuals in order to protect their identities and confidentiality. In addition, in order to "gain support from participants, a qualitative researcher

conveys to participants that they are participating in a study, explains the purpose of the study, and does not engage in deception about the nature of the study" (Creswell, 2013, p. 174). I made it a point to clearly define the purpose of the study to participants and district personnel. I provided opportunities for participants to dismiss themselves from the study throughout the research process, specifically during interviews and observations. The interview protocol included an introduction that clearly stated the purpose of the study, while also allowing participants to refuse being recorded and to refuse to participate if they so chose.

Finally, "reciprocity is an ethical issue in any research effort, but it is especially important when participants invest themselves in close relationships with researchers and trust them with sensitive information" (Hatch, 2002, p. 66). This concept is taken into consideration in this study. Part of reciprocating the time and effort that participants volunteered in this study was my offering a report on the findings once the study has concluded. In addition, I provided gift cards as incentives for participation as well.

### **Data Collection and Management**

Once procedural guidelines were followed for gaining access to participants, the data collection process began. According to Creswell (2013), there are nine steps in the data collection process for interviewing (p. 163). The first is to decide on the research questions, followed by identifying interviewees who are best suited to answer the questions (Creswell, 2013, p. 163). This research study followed this format in that I decided on research questions and

then developed criteria for selecting participants best suited to fit the study. The next step is to determine the type of interview that will be utilized (Creswell, 2013, p. 164). In this study, I determined that semi structured, one-on-one interviews would be the most effective in gathering significant and sufficient data.

Creswell (2013) suggests that another step is to "use adequate recording procedures" (p. 164). In seeking to record interviews, I took measures to assure that the recordings would be accessible. Part of this approach required me to pilot the interview in order to test for sound quality. Another reason the interview was piloted, which fits in with another of Creswell's steps for interview data collection, was to refine the interview questions listed on the interview protocol. Finally, Creswell (2013) suggests determining a location for conducting the interview that is "quiet and free from distractions" (p. 165), as well as having the interviewee fill out a consent form at the interview site. Similar steps are followed in regard to collecting observation data. I created an observation protocol and had it piloted. Furthermore, I identified myself as a nonparticipant observer in this study. These are aspects that were taken into consideration by the researcher.

**Instrumentation.** The key instruments used in this study, besides the researcher, were the interview and observation protocols (See Appendix A). Both protocols were developed to elicit responses and gather rich data from participants. In addition, the protocols consisted of an introduction that stated the purpose of the research, while also introducing the researcher. The protocols were piloted. Furthermore, in piloting the research, I selected participants who mirrored those who would be utilized in the study.

The protocols used for this study included an interview protocol, an observation protocol, and a follow-up interview that differed from one individual to the next. The initial interview protocol (See Appendix A) helped gather a large portion of the data in this study. There were a total of 13 questions and the interview was broken up into four segments. The segments focused on reading instruction, writing instruction, compatibility and tension (with CCSS and best practices), and professional background questions. Many of the questions were strategically linked to the research questions in order to provide insightful findings. The observational protocol (See Appendix B) allowed for a description of what occurred during the observation, which focused on instructional practices. In addition, the observational protocol included space for any comments/reflections made by the researcher during the process.

**Procedures.** I began by developing and piloting the interview and observation protocols. While this process took place, I also reached out to district personnel or gatekeepers that would need to provide me with access to the school sites. TI also reached out through email and phone as needed. In addition, based on a pilot study, I anticipated that interviews would last somewhere between 35 and 45 minutes. Observations covered reading and writing instruction, with a similar timeframe as interviews. Interviews and observations were conducted in the participants' classrooms. Participants were contacted through email or phone if necessary. A date for the initial interview, observation and follow-up interview were decided on. In some cases initial interviews occurred on one day and the observations and follow-ups happened

on another; however, this depended on participant availability. Interviews were recorded in all but one case. In the case where the participant chose not to be recorded, copious notes were taken. Furthermore, participants were given access to consent forms a few days before initial interviews took place, and they were also handed consent forms, which they signed before beginning the interview process.

**Data management.** Managing the data in this study computer software for qualitative studies. I chose Dedoose, which is a computer software system for storing qualitative research data. Davidson (1996) suggests that one principle on data storage for qualitative studies requires developing "backup copies of computer files" (as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 175). with this in mind, I took appropriate steps in generating backup copies of files, including using a flash drive. In addition, Creswell (2013) provides some other principles for data storage and handling, including use of high-quality tapes for recordings, developing a master list of types of information gathered, protecting the anonymity of participants by masking their identities in the data, and developing a data collection matrix as a visual means of locating and identifying information for a study (p. 175). Providing high-quality tape recordings was addressed during the piloted interviews. Furthermore, I created a data collection matrix in order to help expedite locating data from the study.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

The data analysis in this study was done primarily through looking at interview transcriptions and observation notes. Interviews were transcribed

verbatim in order to gather rich and accurate data. The process of transcribing interviews makes it necessary to organize the data in a manageable manner. Creswell (2013) adds that "at an early stage in the analysis process, researchers typically organize their data into computer files" (p. 184). with the large amount of data gathered through interview transcriptions, having a computer system or software to help organize that information was crucial. Creswell (2013) suggests that "a computer program helps a researcher locate material easily, whether this material is an idea, a statement, a phrase, or a word" (p. 201). Considering that interview transcriptions were the main source of data analysis for this study, statements, words and phrases were key components to the data analysis. Furthermore, "a computer program allows the researcher to easily retrieve memos associated with codes, themes, or documents," (Creswell, 2013, p. 202), which aligns well with this study. This research utilized coding as a main method of analysis.

To begin, initial coding was the first step in research analysis. Strauss and Corbin (1998) indicate that "initial coding is breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences" (as cited in Saldana, 2013, p. 100). In addition, "initial coding is not necessarily a specific formulaic method. It is a first cycle open-ended approach to coding the data with some recommended general guidelines" (Saldana, 2013, p. 100). Essentially, initial coding includes few restrictions and is an open-ended process where the researcher has the ability to dictate how this coding will be accomplished. In this research study, process coding was used as an initial

coding tool. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), process coding is "appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for those that search for 'ongoing action/interaction/emotion taken in response to situations or problems, often with the purpose of reaching a goal or handling a problem'" (as cited in Saldana, 2013, p. 96). This research study looked closely at how teachers responded to managing multiple expectations and accountability measures (i.e., teaching CCSS while also balancing best practices). There is some connection between what process coding provides and what was needed for this study.

Furthermore, Saldana (2013) suggests that "process coding is not necessarily a specific method that should be used as the sole coding approach to data, though it can be with small scale projects," (p. 96), which relates well with this research study considering that second cycle coding is utilized. The initial coding and process coding processes were meant as a means to check data sufficiency. In other words, it is used as a means to account for data saturation. If the initial stages of coding illustrated a need for additional data, I would have considered finding more participants and/or utilizing other data collection methods. Throughout this process, I utilized analytic memos. Maxwell (2013) suggests that there should be on-going memo writing throughout the data analysis process because "memos not only capture your analytic thinking about your data, but also facilitate such thinking, stimulating analytic insights" (p. 105). Analytic memos also supported the transition to second cycle coding process. In this research study, the second cycle coding acted as a bridge to help the

analysis move from coding to categorizing. Saldana (2013) suggests that "the primary goal during Second Cycle coding is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of First Cycle codes" (p. 207). The second cycle coding process helped me move from the coding stage of analysis onto the categorical, thematic, and conceptual analysis. This research study utilized descriptive coding as its secondary analytical tool. Saldana (2013) states that descriptive coding "summarizes in a word or short phrase—most often as a noun—the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (p. 88). Additionally, "Descriptive Coding leads primarily to a categorized inventory, tabular account, summary, or index of the data's contents" (p. 89); thus, descriptive coding helps form the bridge to the second component of analysis, which is categorizing. Upon coding and categorizing data, I extracted themes through this data analysis process. The final step in the process was to move from themes to conceptual understandings.

**Procedures to ensure validity and/or trustworthiness.** My main concern as a researcher was to avoid allowing biases to dilute the data collection and analysis process. As a special education teacher interviewing other special education teachers, I needed to identify my biases before going through the data collection and analysis process. This began with the creation of the interview and observation protocols. In developing protocols, I took into consideration the wording used, particularly considering that I am interviewing different categories of teachers: both RSP and SDC. I identify myself as an advocate for special education students and a firm believer in providing equitable and quality

instruction to all students. One step in ensuring validity was to identify, address, and acknowledge researcher bias.

Reactivity was another component to consider in terms of validity. Maxwell (2013) describes reactivity thus: "The influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied, generally known as 'reactivity,' is a second problem that is often raised about qualitative studies" (p. 124). Considering that I am a special education teacher and I interviewed other special education teachers, reactivity had to be acknowledged. Maxwell (2013) addresses the relationship between interviewing and reactivity with the following: "For interviews, in contrast, reactivity—more correctly, what Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) called 'reflexivity,' the fact that the researcher is part of the world he or she studies—is a powerful and inescapable influence" (p. 125). Maxwell adds that, in the case of conducting interviews, "what the informant says is always influenced by the interviewer and the interview situation" (p. 125). In essence, the responses received from participants would be influenced by my positionality and the ways in which the interviewees viewed me. According to Maxwell (2013), when considering researcher bias in a qualitative study, "what is important is to understand how you are influencing what the informant says, and how this affects the validity of the inferences you can draw from the interview" (p. 125). This is a critical component of this research study when addressing validity, and the first step in this process was acknowledging how my presence alone could impact participant responses, including my actions during observations. It was important that I be cognizant of issues with validity when developing and refining

the interview and observation protocols. Through this process I worked on avoiding leading questions that may further drive issues of reactivity.

Maxwell (2013) provides a checklist for researchers to use when considering issues of validity (p. 125). I chose three components of the checklist to apply to the study. The first was to utilize rich data, which in this case were verbatim interview transcriptions and detailed observation notes. This allowed for an accurate representation of participants' responses and accurate representation of the learning environment. The second component was *respondent validation*, which Bryman (1988) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe as "member checks, a term that has become widely used for this strategy, [which] is systematically soliciting feedback about our data and conclusions from the people you are studying" (as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 126). In using this strategy, I sought to address researcher bias by gathering feedback from participants. I recognized my biases and that those biases could influence the ways in which I interpreted participant responses, so checking in with respondents about my transcriptions and interpretations helped speak to validity concerns.

The third strategy used in this study to address validity was comparison. This study used homogenous participants: all participants were educators. In addition, the five settings (school sites) used in this study were also similar in regard to student demographic data (i.e., total enrollment, special education population, socioeconomic status, ethnicity). Having the ability to compare samples helped generate rich data.

**Role of the researcher.** Acknowledging the researcher's positionality was a key aspect of this study. I am an insider within the confines of the study due to my background in special education. I am currently a special education teacher who works with students with mild to moderate disabilities, and I have worked in this position for the past 8 years. My work experience in special education has been solely based in an SDC environment. I have not had the opportunity to work as a resource teacher. My experience as a special education teacher has provided me with some insider knowledge; however, there were some limitations considering that I have only worked in SDC settings. According to Franks (2002), enforced positionality is "where one's position is forcibly defined by others in ways contrary to one's self-perception" (as cited in Huggins & Glebbeek, 2009, p. 331). With this in mind, my positionality can be viewed as enforced because the participants in my study, in knowing my background as a special education teacher, likely imposed that positionality onto me.

Another aspect to consider in regard to the researcher role was reflexivity. According to Creswell (2013), "qualitative researchers need to 'position' themselves in their writings. This is the concept of reflexivity in which the writer is conscious of the biases, values, and experiences that he or she brings to a qualitative research study" (p. 216). In considering my role as a special education teacher, other layers needed to be addressed as well. For example, I consider myself to be an advocate for students with special needs, which is a bias that I brought into this study. In addition, I value opportunities for special education students to have access to equitable resources and instruction. I believe that

special education students deserve access to social and quality learning opportunities. My experiences working with special education students have helped shape these perspectives.

### **Chapter Summary**

The research conducted in this study was designed to learn about CCSS implementation in special education programs. Specifically, the study sought to identify how upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities are managing the potentially conflicting expectations of utilizing best practices for teaching students with exceptionalities while also addressing CCSS instructional practices. My goal was to identify the ways in which teachers are aligning their instruction with CCSS instructional practices or best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities in reading and writing. Additionally, the research examined the ways in which teachers view CCSS and best practices as compatible or conflicting in the areas of reading and writing. Finally, there was a need to identify teacher views on instructional challenges and their current needs and existing opportunities for them and their students in this era of CCSS. The findings in this research provide information which educators can use to move forward in increasing quality instruction for students with mild to moderate disabilities.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

This qualitative study explored how teachers navigated the potentially competing demands of CCSS instructional practices and expectations and best practices for supporting upper elementary school students with mild to moderate disabilities in reading and writing. The study included six participants, all upper elementary school teachers (Grades 3–5) of students with mild to moderate disabilities. Three of the participants were teachers of a RSP while the other three were SDC teachers. In total there were five schools where research was conducted. The research methods included a pre-interview of approximately 45 minutes, a 40-minute observation of a language arts lesson that focused on teacher instruction, and one post-observation follow-up interview of approximately 5–10 minutes.

Interviews and observations were conducted in the classroom of each participating teacher. The tools used to conduct research included an interview and observation protocol developed by me and a follow-up interview protocol. Also, the follow-up interview differed from one participant to the next and included questions that followed up on the first interview and observation. This chapter will present findings for each of the three research questions in order. The final section of this chapter will include a chapter summary.

### **First Research Question**

Research Question No. 1 asked: In what ways do upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities view CCSS and best practices in reading and writing as compatible or conflicting?

Data regarding the first research question were gathered in part by considering responses to questions that directly ask about compatibility and conflict, which was framed as “tension” in the interview question protocol. Also, other data considered were the instructional practices that teachers deemed CCSS-required practices and best practices for supporting students with mild to moderate disabilities. I looked to see if there were similarities or connections between what teachers considered best practices and what they considered to be CCSS instructional practices. These practices were also cross-referenced with observations and any relevant follow-up interview data.

In an effort to answer this question, I started with the following codes: CCSS and best practices compatibility, CCSS and best practices conflicting, RSP views on compatibility, RSP views on conflict, SDC views on compatibility, and SDC views on conflict. These codes were created based on the first research question, and they made it possible to organize the information in a way that allowed me to make sense of the data. Through the process of organizing the data based on these codes, sub-codes emerged, such as “reading compatibility,” “writing compatibility,” and others. Throughout this process findings emerged that helped shed light on this research question. These themes will be presented throughout this section of the chapter.

### **Teachers Perceive Conflict with CCSS Grade-Level Expectations**

When questioned about their perceptions on compatibility or conflict between best practices and CCSS practices and expectations, teachers reported that they perceived conflict with the CCSS grade-level expectations. Essentially, they felt that the grade-level expectations were too difficult for their students to access. Four out of the six participating teachers suggested during interviews that grade-level CCSS expectations and practices were not appropriate for their students. Table 3 displays specific quotations from interview transcripts where teachers stated that they perceived conflict with CCSS due to grade level expectations.

For example, RSP 3, when asked about compatibility between writing best practices and CCSS practices stated the following: “Well, I think it does align as long as you keep in mind that a 4th grader isn’t doing 4th grade work. It scaffolds off each other. A student with disabilities isn’t working at grade level, so you catch them where they’re at.” In discussing reading, RSP 3 suggested that both sync “up nicely as long as you level it appropriately. To expect a 4th grade student with disabilities to meet the standards is not logical. You take down what the goal is and you soften it.” In effect, in terms of reading and writing, this teacher perceived the practices and expectations as being aligned; however, they suggest taking a students’ ability level into consideration when teaching.

Table 3

*Teacher-Perceived Conflict with CCSS due to Grade-Level Expectations*

RSP 1	Not Applicable
RSP 2	<p>“Yeah the, like the high expectations, it’s tough because they’re below their grade level, that’s the tension, and then it translates to the kids becoming frustrated about wanting to do it”</p> <p>Not, b-, not common core expectations or “best practice” I feel the tension is in state testing because it’s hard for parents to realize like why their kid isn’t at grade level. I don’t know if you get that, but I get that a lot, uh, why isn’t my kid at grade level, you know, they don’t understand that we’re working on material that’s below grade level because that’s where their instructional level is. That’s where the tension is. I don’t really feel that though, but I guess it does relate, it’s um, you know.</p>
RSP 3	<p>“Well, I think it does align as long as you keep in mind that a fourth grader isn't doing fourth-grade work. It scaffolds off each other. A student with disabilities isn't working at grade level, so you catch them where they're at.”</p> <p>“I think as long as you embrace that you're not trying to have a four-grader doing a fourth-grade paper if they're performing at second grade. Realizing that Common Core builds off each other. Doing work at their ability level because that is giving the foundation for eventually being able to write at their grade level, or not.”</p>
SDC 1	“Well, no, obviously, our students are 3 to 4 years behind, they can’t do, I mean, we can, we can, we can do informational, we can do opinion, we can do all that, but it’s going to be at a lower level.”
SDC 2	“Let’s see, just again when it comes to their grade level, you know, they’re expected to do or to be at a certain or to be at their grade level and umm doing a whole lot a lot of modifications and accommodations for the students uh just to write at a first-grade level you know we had to do a lot of modifications, to the lessons, um there might be something in a lesson that a grade-level student would understand but when it comes to students with disabilities it’s too much higher level thinking for them, so then we have to think um of a different example. Umm . . . let’s see. So there’s conflicts but when I do use the curriculum that is at their ability level then things flow more smoothly.”
SDC 3	Not applicable

Other participants reported similar feelings, including SDC 1, who when asked about compatibility in reading practices, suggested that “our students are 3-4 years behind, they can’t do, I mean, we can, we can, we can do informational, we can do opinion, we can do all that, but it’s going to be at a lower level,” which suggests that the grade-level expectations are not possible for their students; however, the CCSS practices and expectations at their ability level are appropriate. Participant SDC 2 similarly reported that “there’s conflicts, but when I do use the curriculum that is at their ability level then things are flowing more smoothly.” Essentially, teachers indicated that much of the conflict with CCSS are the grade-level expectations, not the standards and practices. In effect, they believe that the standards and practices are appropriate, as long as they are delivered at the child’s instructional level. For instance, fourth-grade children who are reading and writing at a second-grade level, should be taught at their ability level, not their grade level. Furthermore, even for the teachers that did not explicitly cite grade-level expectations as a conflict, the data suggests that they may have similar beliefs.

Participant RSP 1 did not believe that practices “synced up” at all, and many of that participant’s comments pointed to the difficulty students were having in their general education classroom with the grade-level expectations. For instance, RSP 1 reported that “depending on the grade level, but if they’re in primary, they’re usually not reading yet, so we’re teaching them just the basics, like the foundation of reading, so that’s not syncing up to their common core standards in their class.” In this case, RSP 1 is suggesting that when they pull

students out of the general education classroom the focus of their instruction is on basic foundational skills, while the focus for students when they go back to the general education classroom is on grade-level standards, which RSP students have difficulty accessing. Essentially, there is some indirect discussion that connects with the concept of grade-level expectations being too much for students with learning disabilities.

Participant SDC 3 also did not mention grade-level expectations when discussing compatibility and conflict. When asked about compatibility, SDC 3 stated the following: “the Common Core and ‘best practices’ for writing, I think are pretty aligned, like I said, it’s the reading and um, ‘best practices’ for our students is night and day.” However, SDC 3 did mention that their school site decided to use a fourth-grade writing curriculum and a third-grade reading curriculum to support all fifth-grade students, which shows that as a site, there is concern in regard to grade level expectations. In effect, they suggest there is compatibility; however, in teaching fifth graders, they are using a lower grade-level curriculum to support students. In addition, SDC 3 reported that they used a different set of texts when teaching the Reader’s Workshop curriculum (as opposed to the ones recommended by the program), because they were more appropriate for their students. In essence, they used text that aligned more with students’ reading abilities, as opposed to grade level. In the post-observation interview, when asked about the grade level of the text used during the lesson, SDC 3 reported, “That was a second-grade text, and it’s kind of in the middle of

the road for my kids,” indicating that they believe that the grade-level expectations for students are not appropriate for their students.

### **Teachers Feel Conflict/Tension in Reading**

Five out of six teachers referenced feeling tension or conflict between the CCSS reading expectations and best practices for teaching students with learning disabilities. They referenced these feelings in the ways in which they answered the interview question that specifically asked about potential perceived tensions with CCSS reading and best practices for students with learning disabilities. Participant RSP 1, in discussing whether or not CCSS practices and “best practices” sync up, reported that “they don’t sync up at all” and also suggested that students are “getting lost with the expectations of Common Core and there’s no like, um, like modifying the Common Core lessons that they have,” which illustrates a sense of disparity between practices according to this teacher. Table 4 is a display of statements made by teachers in responding to the interview question on conflict/tension in reading practices.

earlier theme of instructional-level expectations being emphasized more than grade level.

Table 4

*Teacher Feelings on Reading Conflict/Tension*

Teacher	<p>Teacher responses to the following:</p> <p>In thinking about your reading instruction, to what extent do you feel tension or conflict between CCSS instructional expectations and “best practices” of instruction for students with mild to moderate disabilities? Or do you feel that these sync up nicely?</p>
RSP 1	<p>“They don’t sync up at all. Umm, like I said, depending on the grade level, but if they’re in primary, they’re usually not reading yet, so we’re teaching them just the basics, like the foundation of reading, so that’s not syncing up to their common core standards in their class. And even the older kids, they’re expecting the kids to be more detailed, they elaborate a lot more and our kids, like upper grade kids, are barely understanding what they’re reading, so it’s hard for them to give more details when they’re just trying to learn how to read the text.”</p>
RSP 2	<p>“Um, then I feel it’s a lot also for them to hit, to hit every um, standard you know, because when they’re in gear at RSP I’m really focusing on their goals and you know, what we’ve decided and try to incorporate what they’re doing in class but there’s a lot to hit and I like to take little pieces of what they’re doing, um, so it is hard to keep up with the “best practices,” it’s, it’s always changing I feel. Just when you really get good in one strategy or something then something new comes around it’s like a pendulum”</p>
RSP 3	<p>Not applicable</p>
SDC 1	<p>“Well, no, obviously, our students are 3-4 years behind, they can’t do, I mean, we can, we can, we can do informational, we can do opinion, we can do all that, but it’s going to be at a lower level.”</p>
SDC 2	<p>“I think . . . sometimes I feel tension when we are expected to grade the . . . the students at grade level, especially when it comes to the report cards because, yes, you know the . . . the . . . standard is way above their . . . umm . . . what do you call it like their . . . ability level, however, we do touch some points . . . or some standards where it’s at the level that they are at. So if their level is at first grade then we try to zone in on those standards at that level. Ummm... but it is hard when it comes to the report cards and we have to grade them based on their actual grade level. Umm . . . I don’t know. That’s it . . .”</p>
SDC 3	<p>“Not for my students, I think they just need so much guidance and so much help with their reading that the Common Core, I don’t think is intended for special ed. kids.”</p> <p>“I think that goes back to what I just said, um, they don’t sync up at all because there is such a disparity between like the independence that the Common Core is expecting and what our students can actually do. Um, the expectations are nice but the Common Core has such higher expectation for kiddos, but I think that, um, it’s unrealistic for our students with disabilities. I don’t think there’s any cohesion, you know what I mean . . .”</p>

### **Teachers Agreed More on Best Practices for Reading**

Both RSP 2 and SDC 2 talk about accountability measures when discussing some of the conflict or tension. Participant RSP 2 references the difficulties in meeting all of the standards while also focusing on their IEP goals, and SDC 2 mentions tension with report cards and needing to grade students at grade level. Essentially, both teachers reported perceived conflict with accountability measures in regard to the CCSS practices and best practices. In discussing tension, RSP 1, SDC 1, and SDC 3 each suggested that the standards and expectations were too difficult for students, which ties into the

The research in this study showed that teachers differed in what they perceived to be CCSS practices for reading. Table 5 displays practices that teachers deemed as being CCSS practices, and these practices were gathered by scanning through interview transcripts and observation notes. The table illustrates that teachers differed tremendously on what they considered to be CCSS practices. The only three practices about which at least 50% of the participants agreed were “Pair-Share/Partner Talk,” “Foundational Skills Focus,” and “Using Textual Evidence.”

Table 5

*Teacher-Identified CCSS Practices*

Reading CCSS practices	RSP 1	RSP 2	RSP 3	SDC 1	SDC 2	SDC 3
Stopping to write ideas about a text	X	X				
Collaboration with general education teachers	X					
Pair-share/ Partner talk	X	X		X	X	
Multiple examples	X					
Pictures/Visuals	X					
Align IEP goals	X					
Align with district pacing guides				X		
Teacher modeling		X				
Shared read		X				
Sentence frames		X				
Foundational skills focus		X	X	X		
Whole language approach			X			
Focus on joy of reading			X			
Enrichment and expansion of ideas			X			
Summarizing reading			X		X	
Sequencing stories					X	
Graphic organizers					X	
Think alouds					X	
Perseverance (confidence)						X
More independence						X
Discovery learning						X
Different text types						X
Textual evidence		X	X			X

Table 6 displays what teachers deemed as best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities. As the table illustrates, teachers agreed more on what best practices were for supporting students with mild to moderate

disabilities than on what they considered to be CCSS-required practices. For instance, all teachers reported “Instructional Level Teaching” as best practice for reading. The special education teachers in this study perceived that teaching students at their instructional level is considered a best practice. In addition, five out of the six teachers also agreed that the use of visuals for instruction is another best practice for supporting special education students. Furthermore, there were a total of 10 categories in which at least 50% of participants agreed on best practices for reading. The data show that the participants in this study had more in common in terms of what they believed to be best practices for reading when compared to CCSS practices.

When it comes to compatibility across practices (i.e., CCSS and best practices), there were 11 categories in which some crossover emerged from the data. *Crossover* in this case refers to practices that were identified as a CCSS practice and a best practice. See Table 7. For example, “General Education Collaboration” was reported as being a CCSS practice and a best practice based on the interview data. As Table 7 illustrates, RSP 1 identified “General Education Collaboration” as a CCSS practice and a best practice. In addition, RSP 2 also identified it as a best practice. The data show that there were some categories in which both CCSS practices and best practices were compatible.

Table 6

*Teacher-Identified Best Practices for Reading*

Reading best practices	RSP 1	RSP 2	RSP 3	SDC 1	SDC 2	SDC 3
Scaffolding	X		X		X	
Align with general education teacher	X	X				
Instructional Level teaching	X	X	X	X	X	X
Visuals	X	X		X	X	X
Sentence frames	X					X
Choices	X					
Read alouds (shared reading)	X	X	X			X
Hands-on	X				X	
Multiple modalities for learning	X				X	
Checking for understanding		X	X	X		
Repetition		X	X		X	X
Graphic organizers		X				
Chunking (break it apart)		X	X	X		X
Vocabulary building			X	X		X
Slower pacing			X			
Frontloading			X	X		X
Small group instruction			X		X	X
Strategic grouping			X	X		
Review			X	X	X	
Discussion about texts, learning		X	X			X
Teacher-made assessments				X		
Think time				X		
Post-It notes (Jotting ideas during reading)				X		
Technology (iPads)					X	
Phonic books (reading)-foundational skills					X	
Positive reinforcement (incentives)					X	
Build student Confidence					X	
Find textual evidence						X
Teacher modeling						X
Pair share						X
Teach strategies						X

Table 7

*Practices Teachers Identified as Both CCSS and Best Practices*

Reading practices	Teachers who considered this a CCSS practice	Teachers who considered this a best practice
Align with general education teacher (Collaboration)	RSP 1	RSP 1, RSP 2
Visuals	RSP 1	RSP 1, RSP 2, SDC 1, SDC 2, SDC 3
Sentence frames	RSP 2	RSP 1, SDC 3
Read alouds (Shared read)	RSP 2	RSP 1, RSP 2, RSP 3, SDC 3
Graphic organizers	SDC 2	RSP 2
Post-it notes (Jotting ideas during reading)	RSP 1, RSP 2	SDC 1
Phonics books (Foundational skills focus)	RSP 2, RSP 3, SDC 1	SDC 2
Build student confidence (Perseverance)	SDC 3	SDC 2
Find textual evidence	RSP 2, RSP 3, SDC 3	SDC 3
Teacher modeling	RSP 2	SDC 3
Pair-Share	RSP 1, RSP 2, SDC 1, SDC 2	SDC 3

**Teachers Feel Conflict/Tension with Writing**

The data showed that out of the six teachers interviewed four stated feeling conflict or tension with writing expectations. The four teachers had varying reasons, as shown in Table 8. For instance, RSP 2 talks about the high expectations being difficult for students, as well as the amount of time they feel

they have to support their students, and SDC 1 simply believes that the expectations are too much for students. Of the two teachers who believed that the practices for CCSS and best practices synced up well, one of them was SDC 3, who reported that their school site used a fourth-grade writing curriculum to support fifth-grade students. So, it is possible that this has some influence on their responses. Overall, a higher number of teachers in this study felt some tension and conflict in regard to writing expectations for CCSS and best practices for supporting students with mild to moderate disabilities.

### **Teachers Agreed More on Best Practices for Writing**

Much like the CCSS reading practices, the writing practices were also different across the board in regard to teacher perceptions. Table 9 exhibits the categories of CCSS writing practices that appeared throughout data analysis. There was only one category that more than 50% (five out of six) of teachers deemed a CCSS writing practice and that category was “Focus on Writing Genres/Standards.” When addressing this category, teachers discussed either the standards or the different genres of writing (e.g., narrative, persuasive, opinion) that correlated with their districts’ curriculum and pacing guides. As with the reading practices, teachers agreed more on best practices for writing, which is shown on Table 10. There were eight different categories that at least 50% of teachers agreed were best practices.

Table 8

*Teacher Perceptions on How CCSS and Best Practices for Writing Sync*

Teacher	<p>Teacher responses to the following:</p> <p>In thinking about your writing instruction, to what extent do you feel tension or conflict between CCSS instructional expectations and “best practices” of instruction for students with mild to moderate disabilities? Or do you feel that these sync up nicely?</p>
RSP 1	<p>“These are like a huge difference when it comes to writing. That is the biggest conflict with Common Core expectations and best practices. Cause, at least here, they’re doing writing workshop, so there’s a lot of behavior expectations for writer’s workshop. So, the students have to sit on the floor, on the rug and the teacher talks about the lesson, and they have them kind of pair-share, with their partner, umm, there’s a lot of steps to the writing workshop for Common Core that they do. And for like all, for our mild to moderate students they can care less about that really. So, they’re really getting, their mind is somewhere else and so and then here we don’t do all of that writing workshop. We don’t have like a writing corner where they can get all their paper because we’re not really, to me that’s a behavior, right, that’s a stra, like a read, writers I don’t know uhh strategy, not a strategy, I don’t know workshop. So, there’s an agenda right, so there’s an agenda, so as here we’re focusing on the writing itself, so umm, there’s that huge gap there.”</p>
RSP 2	<p>“Well, my intention, in thinking about this, this is a good question, is because well I don’t see the kids every day. And the limited time thing, is trying to cram everything into a lesson, that’s the tension I feel. And sometimes struggling to come back to it when something else needs attention, like working, you know a typical session, typical RSP student has three days of instruction you know, 30-45 minute sessions, it’s just hard to get everything in, and then you know the conflict or the tension is addressing their goals, all of their goals, you know, to students who have needs with like writing, reading comp-comprehension fluency, math, you know organizational skills where it’s just being conscious of that, so I’m trying to work on planning out better.”</p> <p>“Yeah the, like the high expectations, it’s tough because they’re below their grade level, that’s the tension, and then it translates to the kids becoming frustrated about wanting to do it, and then, the parents being upset because they’re not at grade level. I think that’s, uh, one of the biggest struggles that I see and especially this year, once they’re starting to get testing results back, and parents don’t understand.”</p>
RSP 3	<p>“Well, I think it does align as long as you keep in mind that a fourth grader isn’t doing fourth-grade work. It scaffolds off each other. A student with disabilities isn’t working at grade level, so you catch them where they’re at.”</p>
SDC 1	<p>“Yeah, I think it’s just too much for them, yeah . . . ”</p>

Table 8, *cont.*

SDC 2	“Let’s see, just again when it comes to their grade level, you know, they’re expected to do or to be at a certain or to be at their grade level and mm doing a whole lot a lot of modifications and accommodations for the students uh just to write at a first-grade level you know we had to do a lot of modifications, to the lessons, um there might be something in a lesson that a grade-level student would understand but when it comes to students with disabilities it’s too much higher level thinking for them so then we have to think um of a different example. Umm . . . let’s see. So there’s conflicts but when I do use the curriculum that is at their ability level then things flow more smoothly. Yeah.”
SDC 3	“For the most part, I think they sync pretty well except for the fact like I said that they can choose what strategy they want to use, and I kind of guide them to specific strategies.”

Table 9

*Teacher-Identified CCSS Practices for Writing*

CCSS writing practices	RSP 1	RSP 2	RSP 3	SDC 1	SDC 2	SDC 3
Use notes (note taking)	X					
Teaching strategies	X					X
Focus on writing genres/standards	X	X	X	X		X
Technology		X			X	
Immerse child in reading		X				
Shared writing		X				
Preteach			X			
Connect to reading (text)			X	X		
General education alignment				X		
Get students comfortable writing					X	
Curriculum-based					X	
Chunking						X
Clear expectations						X
Choices						X

Table 10

*Teacher-Identified Best Practices for Writing*

Writing best practices	RSP 1	RSP 2	RSP 3	SDC 1	SDC 2	SDC 3
Graphic organizer	X	X	X	X		
Scaffolding	X		X	X		
Visuals	X	X			X	
Chunking	X	X	X			X
Foundational skills focus	X		X			
Teaching strategies	X		X			
Collaboration with general education teacher	X	X				X
Small group	X					
Story boards	X					
Choices (interests for writing)		X				X
Technology (iPads)		X	X		X	
Appropriate pacing		X				X
Provide accommodations		X	X		X	X
Multiple modalities of learning		X				
Ability level focus			X		X	
Word wall			X			
Textual evidence (go back into text)			X		X	
Modeling (concrete examples)			X		X	X
Prewriting activities				X		X
Editing				X		
Writing journals						X
Mentor text						X
Shared writing						X

In addition, teachers perceived eight categories of crossover between CCSS writing practices and best practices of writing for supporting students with mild to moderate disabilities. These are categories of practices that were identified as being CCSS practices and best practices. See Table 11. These categories included “Teaching Strategies,” “Technology,” “Shared Writing,” “Pre-teaching,” “Connect to Reading (text),” “General Education Alignment,”

“Chunking,” and “Choices.” The data show that there were some areas where writing CCSS practices and best practices were compatible.

Table 11

*Teacher-Identified CCSS Practices and Best Practices*

Writing practices	Teachers who considered this a CCSS practice	Teachers who considered this a best practice
Chunking	SDC 3	RSP 1, RSP 2, RSP 3, SDC 3
Teaching strategies	RSP 1, SDC 3	RSP 1, RSP 3
Collaboration with general education teacher (alignment)	SDC 1	RSP 1, RSP 2, SDC 3
Choices (interests for writing)	SDC 3	RSP 2, SDC 3
Technology (iPads)	RSP 2, SDC 2	RSP 2, RSP 3, SDC 2
Textual evidence (go back into text, connect to text)	RSP 3, SDC 1	RSP 3, SDC 2
Prewriting activities (pre-teach)	RSP 2	SDC 1, SDC 3
Shared writing	RSP 2	SDC 3

**CCSS and Best Practices Tension/Conflict for Struggling Students**

The data that tracked how teachers responded when asked directly about their feelings of compatibility and tensions with CCSS and best practices in both reading and writing for struggling students displayed findings similar to previously reported data. See Table 12. Four out of six participants reported tension or conflict with both reading and writing. The conflict and tensions varied from one individual to the next. For instance, SDC 1 related the tension to district curriculum, while RSP 2 related it more to grade-level expectations and parent expectations. Participant RSP 3 felt there was compatibility as long as instructional-level expectations were considered as opposed to grade level, and SDC 3 reported perceived compatibility in writing but not in reading.

Table 12

*Teacher Feelings on Compatibility and Tension Between CCSS and Best Practices for Struggling Students*

Teachers	<p>Teacher responses to the following:</p> <p>In considering students that struggle with reading and writing, how would you describe the compatibility between CCSS instructional practices and “best practices” for instruction for supporting students with mild to moderate disabilities? How about any tensions?</p>
RSP 1	<p>I don't think they're compatible at all. Umm, the Common Core expectations expect, way, a lot more writing, a lot more details in reading. Umm, yeah like more inferential type of reading thinking and the kids with disabilities, or mild to moderate disabilities can't like they can only do like one basic question. They're getting lost with the expectations of Common Core and there's no like, um, like modifying the Common Core lessons that they have. Yeah there's like strategies on how to scaffold it, umm, for the teachers, but there's nothing that's modified for them. So, either you get it or you don't. And they don't even get like extra time, so the teachers are forced to go by a pacing guide, so if our students are not grasping it, oh well, they got to move on.</p> <p>Yeah, I think that's kind of what I said, and it's really, I feel like, our kids that need more support, they're getting a lot more lost compared to, umm, when Common Core was not here and teachers were able to be kind of more flexible, umm in their expectations, or even the timing, but I don't think the timing really has to do with Common Core. I think that's more of a district thing, but even they just were more flexible before, so umm, if the teacher saw that the kids with the learning disabilities needed those visuals, or even the graphic organizers they were able, they would just embed it in there cause every student, even gen. ed. kids learn differently. But I feel like now with the common core it's like let's get rid of that and just, let's get rid of things that are going to help support the kids in general and now we just like move to let's just start thinking more and more in depth, which I get, yeah kids need it, but our kids with learning disabilities, they can't even get to that level unless they have the support and strategies.</p>
RSP 2	<p>Well, all I can say with compatibility, we have the standards and then we have, and then we have, you know, these companies that kind of interpret them in their own way and teach us what to do. Uh, with uh, so, I guess that might have to do with interpretation. Um, you know it's just their opinion in interpreting the standards so, for me, when I think about tension I just think about not being, I'm, I'm taking the standards and modifying it to meet their needs but it's, the tension is that they're not at grade level, and it's hard to communicate that to parents, I don't know if that makes sense.</p>

Table 12, *cont.*

RSP 3	I think as long as you embrace that you're not trying to have a fourth grader doing a fourth-grade paper if they're performing at second grade. Realizing that Common Core builds off each other. Doing work at their ability level because that is giving the foundation for eventually being able to write at their grade level, or not.
SDC 1	I don't even know if it's so much that its Common Core standards. I feel like it's our district that's using the, that writing program because other schools use Common Core and we use graphic organizers and we, we use like Nancy Fetzer writing strategy, strategy, strategies, I feel like it's just our district that chose the writing program that's not, it doesn't fit for special ed. and I don't know, how, how, if you feel the same way but . . .
SDC 2	<p>Compatibility . . . well I think you I think just picking and choosing which Common Core standard is how would you say it . . . like say which standard they would be more successful at . . . umm</p> <p>How about math? Just kidding. Thinking of math. Um let's see . . . yeah I, I, I guess both. A little bit of both, um because we know some of the best practices and you know getting the students to, oh like, like doing think pair, think pair shares, getting them to to talk out in class, and sharing, um sometimes those are difficult for the kids. Because there are some that shut down because they don't want to share or they are afraid to share. Um so helping them to overcome that can sometimes be a tension. But then the Common Core also helps to lead into those "best practices" I would say. So let's just say um one of the topics is to give an opinion either for writing, state an opinion, um maybe Common Core standard is for them to write a five-paragraph essay and you want to get the kids thinking about that so you have a little open discussion with the kids talking about it and then you break it down for them to talk to their partner but then when it comes to students with mild to moderate disabilities it might just be coming up with one opinion or one example and it might be a paragraph that they're able to respond with or just a sentence. Um so I think it's a little bit of both. I hope that answered the question.</p>
SDC 3	<p>Well, um, the Common Core and "best practices" for writing, I think are pretty aligned, like I said, it's the reading and um, "best practices" for our students is night and day, um . . .</p> <p>Yeah, when we first started doing the reader's workshop, I tried to follow the, the units that we were creating as a grade-level team, and the behaviors were coming out more that you could see just the frustration on the kids, more I can'ts, you know, those, the feedback from the kiddos that it's just overwhelming for them, um, you know, unfortunately a lot of the kids will shut down and start crying or act out in other ways to get out of, like I had one kiddo at the beginning of the year when I was trying it, he would like try to climb on top of my cabinets and anything, like reader's workshop time, and it was like instant chaos in the classroom when I first started it. You know those kiddos . . .</p>

## Second Research Question

Research Question No. 2 asked: How are upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities meeting their students' unique learning needs while also implementing CCSS? In particular, in what ways are upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities aligning their instruction with CCSS instructional practices or with best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities in the areas of reading and writing?

In an effort to answer this question, I considered interview questions that directly asked about how teachers were aligning their instruction with CCSS practices and best practices for supporting students. Also, I considered teacher responses to questions regarding perceived gaps in their CCSS and best practice alignment in the areas of reading and writing. Additionally, the observation data and follow-up interview data were also taken into consideration and used to cross reference responses in the initial interview. The initial codes used for this part of the research included "CCSS Instructional Practices (Reading)," "CCSS Instructional Practices (Writing)," "Best Practices' for Students with Mild to Moderate Disabilities (Reading)," and "Best Practices' for Students with Mild to Moderate Disabilities (Writing)." More than simply looking at what teachers believed to be CCSS practices or best practices, I analyzed how teachers talked about aligning their instruction to these practices and how they displayed this through the observation data. Since most lessons observed were reading lessons, much of the observation data will speak to reading practices.

For this section the data has been divided into four sections, including observable best practices reading and writing alignment, teacher feedback on best practice reading and writing alignment, observable CCSS practices reading and writing alignment, and teacher feedback on CCSS practices reading and writing alignment. In effect, the observable best practices and CCSS practices are heavily based on observation data, while the teacher feedback is based on the interview (both initial and follow-up) data.

### **Reading Best Practices and CCSS Practices Alignment**

**Reading best practices.** The data showed that there were some similarities in the ways in which teachers aligned their reading instruction with best practices. Table 13 includes information on how teachers aligned their instruction with best practices and CCSS practices. For example, two of the participants referenced aligning their instruction with the general education class. Both were RSP teachers (1 and 2), and one discussed using chunks of the general education class lessons and embedding it in their work during RSP. Three participants also talked about aligning their instruction with best practices by using repetition, one focusing on repetition of general education tasks done outside of RSP and the other on repetition of reading passages in an effort to build confidence. In addition, three teachers (RSP 3, SDC 1, SDC 3) reported that they align their instruction with best practices by utilizing appropriately leveled texts. RSP 3 suggested that they use leveled reading groups and gear their instruction in reading toward success by using appropriately leveled texts. Two out of the six participants also reported aligning their instruction with best

practices by using “read alouds” and focusing on phonics/foundational skills in their instruction. In effect, while minimal, there were some similarities in how the participants reported that they align their instruction with best practices.

**Reading CCSS practices.** There were no such similarities noted when looking at the data for alignment with CCSS practices. The data showed that teachers varied in how they reported aligning their instruction with CCSS practices. One commonality was between RSP 1 and SDC 2, who both reported using visuals to align their instruction with CCSS practices. What’s interesting about this is that, when asked to identify CCSS practices during the initial interview, only one teacher (RSP 1) suggested that the use of visuals was a CCSS practice, while five teachers reported that it was a best practice. In effect, SDC 2 stated that they aligned their instruction with CCSS by using visuals; however, they did not identify visuals as a CCSS practices when asked during the interview. Moreover, SDC 3 and SDC 2 discussed the use of choices as a method of aligning their instruction with CCSS practices; however, they reported using these in different ways. SDC 3 reported the use of choices as a way to provide students with different options in completing tasks, while SDC 2 discussed using it as an assessment tool (i.e., multiple choice tests as opposed to open-ended).

Table 13

*Teachers on How They Align Their Instruction with Best Practices and CCSS Practices*

Teacher	Best practices aligned	CCSS practices
RSP 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Align with what general education is doing, but at their ability level.</li> <li>-Using instructional level texts during RSP</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Collaborate with general education</li> <li>-Extra examples</li> <li>-Visuals</li> <li>-Stopping during reading to summarize</li> <li>-Teaching strategies to use in general education</li> </ul>
RSP 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Align to student IEP goals</li> <li>-Use chunks of what general education is doing and modify</li> <li>-Balanced literacy</li> <li>-Repetition of general education tasks</li> <li>-Visuals (Charts)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Modeling</li> <li>-Shared Read</li> <li>-Opportunities to practice</li> <li>-Mentor text</li> </ul>
RSP 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Leveled Reading Groups</li> <li>-Gear for success (i.e., appropriate reading-levels)</li> <li>-Building up to access higher level vocabulary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-whole language based (something that they've always done)</li> <li>-less foundational approach, more whole language</li> <li>-Brings back joy of reading/excitement</li> </ul>
SDC 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Students being involved in lesson</li> <li>-partner talk</li> <li>-jotting ideas on sticky notes</li> <li>-Read aloud by teacher- students get to focus on comprehension</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Align with district pacing and standards</li> <li>-Whole group reading, talking about text helps students</li> </ul>
SDC 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Visuals</li> <li>-Technology (ipads)</li> <li>-Hands-on activities</li> <li>-Phonic-type activities</li> <li>-Repetition of passages in read naturally, helps them build confidence.</li> <li>-Whisper read</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Giving different ways of answering questions, (i.e., multiple choice instead of open ended).</li> <li>-Use of visuals (i.e, picture books) and providing visuals for sequencing stories.</li> <li>-Use of graphic organizers- For note taking</li> <li>-Pair-share</li> <li>-Sequencing with visuals keeps student engagement</li> <li>-“Think alouds”</li> <li>-Choices on how to respond (instead of paragraph or essay, Instagram post page with a sentence).</li> </ul>
SDC 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Aligning practices with student needs</li> <li>-Pre-teaching vocabulary</li> <li>-“Pre-read aloud” by teacher</li> <li>-Pairing students up with the same text</li> <li>-More appropriate text (junior-grade books)</li> <li>-Embed Word Works for supporting phonics instruction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Choices on writing tasks (i.e., like what to write about)</li> </ul>

Moreover, all six participants, when asked which practices they emphasize most (best practices or CCSS) in their reading instruction, responded that it was best practices. Table 14 displays teacher responses when asked which instructional practices they focus on most when teaching.

Table 14

*What Teachers Emphasize Most in Reading*

Teacher	Response to the following: Do you emphasize one more than the other? (best practices reading or CCSS practice reading)
RSP 1	I don't, I emphasize more best practices.
RSP 2	Um I would say I emphasize "best practices" because I'm always thinking about the best way to approach something as I'm teaching, you know what's going to help fit their fit their need their individual needs. Umm . . .
RSP 3	Best practice is my focus. I think it aligns. There's a handful of us that are still around that were trained in the whole language approach. It's not a culture shock for us. I think the younger teachers weren't exposed to thinking outside of the box.
SDC 1	I mostly do what's best for the students, so I would say "best practices."
SDC 2	Mhmm. I think I probably do the best practices. I emphasize more on that. And then the standard that the student's ability is at.
SDC 3	Yeah, I mean, it's "best practices" I think trump over, even though you try to follow the standards and what they should be learning, like, you have to go with how they learn, not what's expected.

**Writing Best Practices and CCSS Practices**

Much like with the data on reading instruction, the data on writing shows that teachers reported using a variety of different strategies for aligning best practices with writing instruction. Participants RSP 1 and RSP 2 reported that the

use of visuals was a best practice that they used to align their writing instruction, as RSP 1 reported that, “using the visual check list really helps them.” There were a few other instances where two teachers reported using similar best practices to align instruction. These included use of technology, appropriate or slower pacing, teacher modeling of practices, and following the general education curriculum and pacing. Table 15 displays participant reporting on how they align best practices and CCSS practices to writing instruction. Teacher feedback on aligning best practices to their writing instruction varied.

The data show that teachers differed across the board in terms of how they align CCSS practices with their writing instruction. Participants RSP 2, SDC 1, and SDC 3 shared one common thread, which was aligning their instruction with district curriculum/pacing. Other than that connection, teachers did not respond similarly to interview questions regarding their alignment of CCSS practices and their writing instruction.

Table 15

*Teachers Identify How They Align Writing Instruction with Best Practices and CCSS*

Teacher	Best Practices Aligned	CCSS Practices
RSP 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Lessons based on student needs</li> <li>-Visuals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Learning to use strategies taught in class (listed in composition book)</li> <li>-Graphic Organizers</li> <li>-Thinking Maps</li> </ul>
RSP 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Graphic organizers</li> <li>-Visuals</li> <li>-Special Interest focus</li> <li>-Technology (iPads)</li> <li>-Appropriate pacing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-District Curriculum</li> <li>-Immerse child in reading to start (learning about books)</li> <li>-Keeping IEP goals in mind</li> <li>-Stopping to discuss</li> <li>-Conscious of the standards</li> <li>-Breaking things down</li> </ul>
RSP 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Scaffolding back to their level</li> <li>-Showing them strategies</li> <li>-Support with spelling words</li> <li>-Repetition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Formatting</li> <li>-Talk about supporting sentences, elaboration, and conclusion (structure of a paragraph)</li> </ul>
SDC 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Keep up with gen. ed.</li> <li>-Brainstorming</li> <li>-Prewriting/ organizing thoughts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Do what gen ed. is doing</li> <li>Reading books that align with genre of writing (i.e., narrative, opinion, etc.).</li> <li>-Examples of genre of writing.</li> </ul>
SDC 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Modeling</li> <li>-Technology (iPads)</li> <li>-Encyclopedia (resources)</li> <li>-Speech to text</li> <li>-Dictations for nonwriters or highlight/trace strategy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Instructional Level curriculum</li> <li>-Pick certain lessons to support needs</li> <li>-Nonwriters are encouraged to sound out sounds</li> <li>-Having students write and worrying about editing later</li> <li>-Support with penmanship as needed</li> <li>Speech to text (iPad)</li> </ul>
SDC 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Shortened/modified tasks</li> <li>-Slower pacing</li> <li>-Writer's workshop (gen. ed.)</li> <li>-More modeling</li> <li>-Discuss before writing</li> <li>-Visuals</li> <li>-Mentor texts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Writer's Workshop (curriculum)</li> <li>-Choices (different writing ideas)</li> <li>-Engaging students</li> <li>-Broken down (small steps)</li> <li>-Teaching Different strategies</li> </ul>

Overall, the data show a few examples of where teacher feedback on alignment of practices matched what teachers displayed during observations. It is important to recognize that the observations were just a snapshot of what teachers do, as their lessons likely change depending on topic and other factors. While they may not have addressed all areas of alignment during the observation visit, it does not necessarily mean that they were not being truthful when asked about how they align practices in their instruction. Moreover, the lessons observed were mostly reading based, so the data based on observations would focus on reading, as there is not enough observation data that reflects writing practices to report. This section of the chapter will consider how each individual teacher's feedback fared in comparison to the observation, common practices used by teachers across the board during observations, and a look at how the practices observed in the observations relate to what teachers reported they believed to be best practices or CCSS practices (which was discussed previously in relation to the first research question).

When asked which practices for writing teachers emphasize most, three participants responded that it is best practices. Participant SDC 2 responded that it was CCSS, but with the caveat of instruction being at the students' ability level. Participants SDC 3 and RSP 3 both suggested that there is balance, and both are emphasized equally. Table 16 displays teacher responses when asked which practices they focus on more during writing instruction.

Table 16

*What Teachers Emphasize Most in Writing*

Teacher	Response to the following: Do you emphasize one more than the other? (Best Practices Reading or CCSS Practice Writing)
RSP 1	I do, yeah I emphasize more of the best practices. Umm . . .
RSP 2	I would say, again, “best practices” that I’ve learned in these trainings, um, especially trying, I, each year I feel like improving on keeping the writers notebook, that’s one, that’s one of the “best practices” like an organized writers notebook, different teaching points written in there for them to keep organized.
RSP 3	I think they align well. I’m not scared off by Common Core. I think it’s best practice and it’s a balanced program. Our kids need to learn to think again. They haven’t had to for a while, it’s been given to them.
SDC 1	Um, “best practices”, we do whatever’s best . . .
SDC 2	When it comes to writing I think because I’m focusing so much on the Common Core but at their ability level
SDC 3	Yeah I think they’re kind of equally because I, teaching the strategies that they’re recommending, but one at a time and having them use that rather than letting them have that menu of option, choices, yeah so, kind of, uh, a mixture of both.

**Observable Reading Best Practices and CCSS Practices Alignment**

The observation data show that teachers used a variety of strategies during the observations. Table 17 shows the strategies that were used during the observation. Four out of the six participants used small group instruction, checking for understanding, read aloud and visuals during the observed lessons. Three of the six participants used teacher modeling, vocabulary support, phonics focus, and pair-share strategies during the lesson. Other strategies, such as alignment with general education and graphic organizers, were only seen in one of the observations. Alignment with general education was referenced by RSP 2

when introducing the lesson to students; however, other teachers did not mention any connection between their lesson and what the general education classrooms were doing. This does not mean that there was not a connection or alignment; however, it does mean that it was not clearly stated or made apparent during other observations.

In total there were 16 different practices/ strategies noted as being used in the observations that were also reported as either best practices or CCSS instructional practices by teachers. Of these practices, eight were reported as being either a best practice or a CCSS practice based on teacher interview data. Table 18 shows all 16 strategies that were both seen during observations and mentioned in interview data as either being a best practice or CCSS practice. The practices that are labeled with a BP and a CCSS represent the eight practices that were identified as being best practice or CCSS practice. Small group instruction, vocabulary support, instructional level support, checking for understanding, read alouds, scaffolding, and technology were strategies that were observed but solely considered best practices based on teacher feedback. Pair-share was the only strategy that was both observed in some of the observations and also reported solely as a CCSS practice.

Table 17

*Best Practices Observed*

	RSP 1	RSP 2	RSP 3	SDC 1	SDC 2	SDC 3
Small group instruction	X	X	X		X	
Visuals	X		X	X		X
Engaging activities	X					
Teacher modeling	X	X			X	
Vocabulary support	X		X	X		
Instructional level support	X					X
Checking for understanding	X	X			X	X
Phonics focus		X	X		X	
Align with general education		X				
Graphic organizer		X				
Making real life connections		X	X			
Read aloud		X	X	X		X
Students use same texts			X			X
Stopping to discuss			X	X		
Post-Its to jot ideas				X		
Pair-share		X		X		X
Sentence starters				X		X
Technology (iPads)					X	
Scaffolding					X	
Textual evidence						X

Table 18

*Practices and Strategies in Observations Also Reported as CCSS or Best Practice During Interviews*

	Number of teachers who used practice during observation	Number of teachers who consider strategy a best practice	Number of teachers who consider this a CCSS practice
Small group Instruction (BP)	4	3	0
Visuals (BP) (CCSS)	4	5	1
Teacher modeling (BP) (CCSS)	3	1	1
Vocabulary support (BP)	3	3	0
Instructional level support (BP)	2	5	0
Checking for understanding (PB)	4	3	0
Phonics focus (PB) (CCSS)	3	1	3
Align with general education (BP) (CCSS)	1	2	1
Graphic organizer (BP) (CCSS)	1	1	1
Read aloud (BP)	4	4	0
Post-Its to jot ideas (BP), (CCSS)	1	1	2
Pair-share (CCSS)	3	0	4
Sentence starters (BP) (CCSS)	2	2	1
Technology (iPads) (BP)	1	1	
Scaffolding (BP)	1	3	
Textual evidence (BP) (CCSS)	1	1	3

### Third Research Question

Research Question No. 3 asked: What do these teachers view as the instructional challenges they are facing, the needs they have for support, and the opportunities that exist for them and their students in the era of CCSS?

The data that was considered in answering this research question relies heavily on the interview protocol questions that directly ask the participants about perceived challenges, needs for support, and opportunities that exist. This section will be broken into three parts, each related to one of the questions embedded in the third research question (i.e., challenges, needs for support, opportunities).

#### Challenges

All teachers suggested that there are challenges for their students and themselves, but their responses varied in terms of their perceived challenges. The data has been broken up into three categories, as shown in Table 19. The interview question that asked about challenges was: What are some challenges you face in regard to instruction in this era of CCSS?

Table 19

#### *Teacher Perceived Challenges*

Scheduling/Time	Resources	Other
RSP 2, RSP 3, SDC 1	RSP 3, SDC 1	RSP 1, RSP 2, SDC 3

Participants RSP 2 and SDC 1 both spoke about time being a challenge. Because students were pulled out of class for 30- to 45-minute sessions, RSP 2 reported a tendency to struggle with managing student IEP goals, while also

providing them with access to the standards. Participant SDC 1 discussed how being involved with other rotations with the general education students, like intervention groups and ELD groups, cut into instructional time with students. Furthermore, RSP 3 referenced some difficulty when they have to “blend groups that are not leveled. Having to sit there and put kids that are barely reading with those that are more successful due to time and scheduling is the only time when I have a hard time aligning them.” When RSP groupings are not leveled based on abilities of student because of issues with scheduling, there are challenges for this teacher. In essence, three out of five teachers discussed challenges that related to scheduling and time.

Two of the five teachers also referenced challenges due to issues with resources: RSP 3 discussed challenges with limited resources and appropriate resources for students and suggested that “resources that will support Common Core within a special education program are not around,” which illustrates that there is a gap in providing students with access to appropriate resources. Participant SDC 2 indicated that there is no curriculum for teaching students grammar structurally and suggested that the writing program the district currently utilizes can be difficult for students to grasp at times. Three of the teachers discussed other challenges, such as class size (SDC 3), difficult expectations (RSP 1), and lack of feedback on the effectiveness of their instruction as teachers (RSP 2).

## Needs for Support

The data that were heavily considered when looking at teachers' perceived needs for support revolved around interview protocol questions that asked about PD and available resources for teachers. The data showed that all participants in the study stated that they had not been provided with PD opportunities that specifically related to instructional support for students with mild to moderate disabilities. Rather, the PD opportunities have been centered on general education teachers. Participant SDC 2 stated the following: "Yes, but its geared to the general education population so it's hard to focus on how can I gear it to my students with the disabilities." In addition, RSP 1 suggested that "our special education department has not, umm, given me any PDs as far as like how do we teach our kids with learning disabilities," which illustrates that there is a lack of support for teachers in this study in regard to providing instruction for their students with disabilities.

Two of the participants also suggested that the PD presenters are not helpful in terms of providing strategies or ideas as to how to support their students with special needs. For example, RSP 1 stated that "PD in Common Core reading and writing, sometimes the group is so large that I don't even get a chance to ask, and so it's like okay, well, what about the kids with IEPs? What about the kids who are struggling?" Participant SDC 1 also acknowledged similar sentiments and suggested that the presenters for PD do not recognize the fact that each child has a need that may be different from the next child, and teaching concepts in one specific way is not supporting students with disabilities. Not only

are teachers reporting an absence of PD that is tailored to instructional support for students with disabilities, but the presenters who run the PDs that are general education centered are not helpful in providing teachers with ways in which to support their students with special needs.

The data show that teachers in this study believe that resources are another area of need. Four of the participants referenced resources for instruction as an area of need. Participant SDC 2 went into detail about resources, suggesting that they have to search for the resources themselves and that resources for reading do not support comprehension. In addition, SDC 2 referenced the difficulties that students have in accessing grade-level standards, so other resources need to be searched for. These teachers suggested that resources are not readily available and need to be searched for by special education staff. Participant SDC 3 discussed having leveled reading books, but teachers typically have to search, and at times purchase, supplemental materials to support students.

### **Opportunities That Exist**

The data gathered on opportunities that exist for teachers and students mainly comes from the interview protocol question that asks the participants about their perceptions of opportunities that exist for teachers and students in this era of CSS. Two of the teachers (RSP 1 and SDC 1) flatly stated that they did not foresee any opportunities for students or teachers. One teacher talked about opportunities for PD in regard to CCSS; however, these opportunities do not address the needs of their students. Among the four teachers that identified

opportunities, there were some opportunities that crossed over. Table 20 illustrates what teachers in this study identified as opportunities that exist.

Table 20

*Teacher Responses to Perceived Opportunities*

Teacher	Teacher responses to the following: What opportunities do you believe exist for you and your students in this era of CCSS?
RSP 1	No opportunities, Teacher opportunities are general education centered, PDs do not help
RSP 2	Foster life-long learning for teachers and students, standards build off each other (growth), college readiness, build confidence in students, Goal book tool, reading coach support
RSP 3	Higher level thinking, application of knowledge, enrichment, prepare students to be competitive as adults
SDC 1	No opportunities
SDC 2	Opportunities for critical thinking, learn problem solving strategies
SDC 3	PD on Common Core, reading coach support, choices (reading and writing Interests), different paths to answer questions

One of the similarities is seen in responses by RSP 2 and SDC 3, who acknowledged that working with a reading coach is an opportunity that currently exists at their school sites. In addition, RSP 3 and SDC 2 reference higher level/critical thinking skills. They suggest that students have opportunities to apply these higher-level thinking skills. In addition, RSP 2 and RSP 3 identified post K-12 opportunities, such as college readiness and ability to compete as adults. In effect, four out of the six participants identified opportunities that exist that support their students in a variety of ways.

## Chapter Summary

There were many insights and findings that were concluded in conducting and analyzing the research. One of the more significant findings was that teachers in this study reported using instructional-level instruction as opposed to grade-level instruction. In addition, most teachers considered doing so a best practice. Most teachers also reported feeling that CCSS and best practices aligned only when instruction is at the students' ability level. Teachers differed in what they considered to be CCSS practices and also in how they reported aligning their instruction with those practices. The data shows that there were some similar instructional practices between CCSS and best practices. Time and resources were identified as challenges for teachers and they reported that there were not PD opportunities offered that focused on instruction specifically for students with mild to moderate disabilities. Finally, some teachers reported that opportunities exist in this era of CCSS for students to use higher level thinking skills.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

The chapter includes a discussion and analysis of the findings of this qualitative study. It will begin with an overview of the study and key findings. It will include a discussion of significant interpretations and conclusions. The chapter also includes a section on the implications and recommendations of this study, with a focus on policy, practice, theory and future research. The chapter concludes a review of the dissertation study.

#### **Summary of the Study**

The problem that this study addresses is the challenge of adequately meeting the needs of upper elementary school students with mild to moderate disabilities in the areas of reading and writing. This problem is complicated by several issues, including the lack of support provided for teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities, including resources and instructional supports (i.e., PD, coaching). In addition, there is little guidance provided in CCSS materials and a lack of clarity in regard to the compatibility between best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities and CCSS practices. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify how upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities are handling CCSS expectations and specifically how they are managing the potentially competing

demands of CCSS and special education best practices in their reading and writing instruction. The study focuses on the following three research questions:

1. In what ways do upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities view CCSS and best practices in reading and writing as compatible or conflicting?
2. How are upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities meeting their students' unique learning needs while also implementing CCSS? In particular, in what ways are upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities aligning their instruction with CCSS instructional practices or with best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities in the areas of reading and writing?
3. What do these teachers view as the instructional challenges they are facing, the needs they have for support, and the opportunities that exist for them and their students in the era of CCSS?

The methods used to conduct research were qualitative and included interviews with teachers and classroom observations.

Overall, this study provides early research on a topic that is current and somewhat uncharted. The study considers the potential conflict teachers may have in regard to instruction with best practices and CCSS practices and expectations. It reflects the possibility that teachers are being pulled by two different forces, one being best practices of instruction for students with mild to moderate disabilities and the other CCSS instruction. The findings in this study indicate that participating teachers aligned their instruction more with what they perceived to be best practices. Teachers responded with more similarities in

what they perceived to be best practices in comparison to CCSS practices. They also displayed use of those perceived best practices during observations, more so than CCSS practices. Teachers differed more in what they considered to be CCSS practices, which is significant. For teachers to differ in what they consider best practices is understandable, in the sense that each individual special education class is different; therefore, some may be more apt to use certain best practices as opposed to others. However, CCSS practices and expectations should be uniform across grade levels and the fact that the participants differed in their perceptions of these practices may be problematic.

### **Interpretations**

Four key findings emerged through data analysis. These findings will be presented below, along with an interpretation and discussion of possible significance of each.

#### **Teaching to Student Instructional Level as a Best Practice**

One of the key findings of the study is that teachers recognized the practice of teaching students at their instructional level, rather than grade level, as a best practice of instruction. This included using texts that are instructional reading-level appropriate. The literature reviewed on best practices for reading and writing does not mention this as a best practice; however, it should be assumed students are being provided with instruction that they can access and that is not too difficult, but not too easy. In addition, this could be considered a best practice when looking at best practices in general, not just reading and writing, for students with mild to moderate disabilities, as they typically are not

working at grade level in many academic areas. The literature for this study looked specifically at best practices in reading, reading comprehension, and writing.

This finding was relevant in regard to the first research question, which focused on compatibility and tension between best practices and CCSS practices. Most teachers viewed grade-level expectations and reading and writing standards as a tension between CCSS practices and best practices. It appears that teachers of students with learning disabilities perceived that the CCSS practices and expectations were too rigorous for their students, many of whom are working two to three years below grade level in language arts. In considering the conceptual framework (see Figure 1 in Chapter 2), which has the teacher at the center and the two forces of CCSS and best practices pulling them in different directions, the data illustrates that the teachers in this study were more influenced by best practices, and emphasizing instructional level instruction for students was considered a best practice by most teachers in the study.

### **Time, Resources, and Professional Development are Areas of Need**

This finding was based on the third research question in this study, which considered challenges, areas of needed support, and opportunities. Due to the multiple responsibilities special education teachers have, I was not surprised to see that time was considered a challenge. Special education teachers balance the accountability measures set by districts, education policies set by the state, and federal regulations, including the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). Not only are they reporting on student progress on state standards, but they are also

expected to report on student progress toward meeting IEP goals, along with the other responsibilities (e.g., instruction, behavior intervention plans, IEP meetings, IEP testing, district assessments). They balance many responsibilities and are constantly on a time crunch, especially when considering timelines for IEPs and other deadlines.

That teachers identified a lack of resources as a challenge and area of need seems appropriate. Considering the relatively recent adoption of CCSS, it is not surprising that there are few resources available for teachers of general education students, let alone teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities. The question becomes, how do districts support teachers in balancing accountability measures and instructional needs, particularly when there is a lack of resources available for supporting our special education teachers? As stated in Chapter 1, the CCSS document and supporting appendices provide little to no guidance in regard to meeting the needs of special education students (Haager & Vaughn, 2013a, p. 1). These are challenges that will need to be addressed in order to support students' unique learning needs as well as provide teachers with adequate resources to help those students.

The data also showed that, while teachers mentioned some PD opportunities that were available to them, all stated that they had not been provided with PD that specifically targeted instruction for students with mild to moderate disabilities or implementation of CCSS for these students. Professional developments that have been provided specifically for special education teachers have focused on IEP compliance issues, transition planning (student placement),

and teacher self-care strategies. In addition, much of the focus on teacher preparation and CCSS has been on general education teachers (Murphy & Marshall, 2015), and the data in this study supports that. Drawing on my own experiences, there are PDs on curriculum that support CCSS implementation in this district; however, they tend to focus on familiarizing teachers with the curriculum, as opposed to focusing directly on instructional practices.

For special education teachers, being provided with the same PD opportunities as their general education peers can be useful in some aspects; however, when considering the nature of special education instruction, teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities would benefit more from PD opportunities that explicitly target the population of students with whom they work. Special education students require specialized instruction; therefore, PD for their teachers should be specific to their students' learning needs. The challenge may be in developing PD opportunities that can be effective for special education teachers. This study contributes to this by providing early research relating to special education teacher perceptions of CCSS practices and best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities.

### **Similarities in Perceived Best Practices Compared to CCSS Practices**

The data in this study reflected that teachers agreed more on best practices when compared to CCSS practices in both reading and writing and showed a lack of consensus in terms of CCSS practices among special education teachers. It can be problematic that teachers do not have a basic agreement on CCSS instructional practices and it also reveals a potential area of

need. Teachers differed in what they perceived to be CCSS practices, but two out of the four practices that 50% or more of teachers identified as such correlated with the CCSS literature. The policy foundation identified the use of textual evidence in reading and an emphasis on different text types in writing (Graham & Harris, 2013, p. 29) as part of CCSS practices and expectations. Teachers' agreement about CCSS practices are minimal. The different writing types align with the district pacing guides for the Writer's Workshop curriculum, which may explain why teachers were apt to identify the different genres of writing as a CCSS practice for writing.

As previously mentioned, the data illustrates that teachers agreed more on best practices of instruction. There were 19 categories of practices that 50% or more of the participants identified as best practices for reading or writing, in comparison to four for CCSS practices. Many of the best practices appear to be best practices of instruction for all subject areas, not specifically for reading or writing. For instance, the use of visuals was identified by most teachers as a best practice; however, visuals may be used to support all students, particularly those who struggle with auditory processing, in all core subject areas. There were a few areas of identified practices that correlated with the best practices identified in the literature review. For instance, repetition, phonics instruction, foundational skills focus, teaching strategies (strategy instruction), small group instruction and teacher modeling were all identified in the literature review as reading or writing best practices. Teachers also reflected more similarities in how they aligned their instruction with best practices as opposed to CCSS practices. This is not

surprising considering that the responses on perceived best practices yielded similar results. In effect, the participants in this study appear to be more in agreement related to best practices.

There is a need to support teachers in identifying and aligning their instruction with CCSS practices consistently across the district. It is possible for teachers to differ in terms of the best practices because each group of students come with individualized learning needs that dictate practices teachers emphasize. However, with CCSS being part of what educators are expected to implement, there should be more consistency across the district. In other words, the district needs to support teachers in getting on the same page in regard to CCSS practices and implementation.

### **CCSS Practices and Best Practices Aligned**

In addressing what teachers considered best practices for reading and writing, there were 12 and eight practices that crossed over or aligned, respectively. In other words, each these practices was identified as being a CCSS practice *and* a best practice. Additionally, there were seven practices that not only aligned but also were observed during teacher observations. The practices that crossed over and were also noted during observations included the use of visuals, phonics focus, alignment with general education, use of graphic organizers, repositionable notes for jotting ideas, sentence starters/frames, and use of textual evidence. The use of visuals, alignment with general education, and the use of graphic organizers appear to support students with disabilities in

all academic areas, while the others appear geared more toward reading and writing.

Phonics instruction appeared throughout the literature review in the best practices for reading section. Ehri et al. (2001) found that “systematic phonics instruction helps children learn more effectively than non-systematic or no phonics instruction” (p. 427) when considering instruction for students at risk for a reading disability. They found that the combination of whole language instruction and phonics instruction was most effective in supporting student learning (p. 430). Swanson (1999) found similar results, as strategy instruction and phonics instruction in isolation help improve student reading, but together they yield an even greater impact (p. 136).

In addition, the policy foundation identified the use of textual evidence in reading and an emphasis on different text types in writing (Graham & Harris, 2013, p. 29) as part of CCSS practices and expectations. It is interesting to note the various strategies that teachers not only perceive as best practices or CCSS practices but that were also apparent in their instruction through observation. Finding where practices crossed over was valuable information in regard to providing a gateway into better understanding how these practices could be merged or balanced. If there are places in which these practices coexist, it allows teachers to focus their attention on the practices that do not coexist and consider ways to balance those practices that do not sync up to best support student unique learning needs.

## **Implications**

The findings in this study helped generate implications for policy, theory, and practice. To begin, implications for policy, practice and theory will be discussed below.

### **Implications for Policy**

One key finding was that teachers reported using instructional-level standards and expectations when teaching students, as opposed to grade level. In addition, most teachers reported that they considered this a best practice of instruction. This may conflict with what IDEA demands, which is that students be given IEP goals that are grade-level based. According to a guidance provided by the U.S. Department of Education (2015), an IEP for “an eligible child with a disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) must be aligned with the State’s academic content standards for the grade in which the child is enrolled.” In essence, students with learning disabilities must have IEP goals that are aligned with CCSS grade-level standards, meaning that at some point instruction must be geared toward grade-level expectations.

The policy could use more clarity in regard to the extent in which instruction must be based on a students' grade level. Do the materials need to be grade-level based as well, or could a child that is reading below grade level be taught using materials at their instructional reading level? How are teachers to balance student needs with grade-level expectations according to the policy? These are all components that need to be clarified in order to provide teachers with guidance as to how to move forward in supporting students in this era of

CCSS. The guidance does give alternatives to students with significant cognitive deficits; however, students with mild to moderate disabilities typically would not fall into that category. A rationale given in the guidance for this policy is that “Research has demonstrated that children with disabilities who struggle in reading and mathematics can successfully learn grade-level content and make significant academic progress when appropriate instruction, services, and supports are provided.”

Another implication for policy is a need to identify whether or not the research done is reflective of CCSS standards and expectations, or only of previous content standards. In addition, even if this research only reflects the previous standards, how does that transfer over when considering CCSS? In essence, the policy requires more clarity because, as currently constructed, it leaves much to interpretation.

If teachers are basing their instruction on student ability levels, as opposed to grade-level expectations, are they not addressing grade-level standards? Are teachers not writing goals that are based on student grade levels, or are they creating grade-level goals and simply not teaching to those expectations? Teachers in the district are using the Goalbook Toolkit software meant for generating IEP goals; however, goals generated based on student needs tend to include goals that are not at a students’ grade level, as well as goals that are grade-level centered. It is possible that teachers are choosing to use goals that are below the child’s grade level. Also, it could be that teachers are taking grade-level standards and teaching them at the students’ ability level

(e.g., a standard on using textual evidence can be covered using a lower level text). What about standards such as “Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words” (Grade 5 Reading Standard), which call for at-grade-level expectations? Moreover, there are other standards such as “Read on-level text with purpose and understanding” (Grade 4 Reading Standard), which could be considered ambiguous in regard to what is meant by “on-level.” Furthermore, what role does curriculum have in this? If teachers are teaching students at their instructional level, are the resources and curriculum they use at the child’s instructional level? Or are grade-level resources being modified to support student instructional needs? This is significant because there is potential for teachers’ being out of compliance in regard to the IDEA expectations. If the policy were clearer on the expectations, there would be less room for interpretation and less possibility for teachers to be unknowingly out of compliance. Again, policy makers should revisit IDEA and revisit the research that they used to develop the original policy.

### **Implications for Practice**

The implications of these findings in regard to practice speak to PD opportunities for teachers for instruction. Teachers reported that they had not received explicit PD on instruction for supporting students with special needs. This is an area that is lacking and needs to be developed within the district. Much of the PD, as teachers and the literature suggest, has targeted general education teachers and their students. Having special education teachers join in those PDs may not be detrimental; however, they need targeted and specially designed PD

to support their students who require more support than most students in general education. During the initial interview, RSP 1 talked about attending PDs and how the individuals conducting the PDs were not able to provide the needed support in terms of helping students with learning disabilities. A recommendation for practice is to provide teachers with PD that specifically focuses on instructional needs for students with mild to moderate disabilities but that is also presented by someone that has some background in special education and in working with that particular population of students. In other words, it needs to be meaningful PD for teachers.

Another recommendation is to provide peer coaches to special education teachers, specifically coaches who are knowledgeable about special education and best practices. Participant RSP 2 mentioned benefitting from a peer coach; however, this was the only teacher who mentioned peer coaching. It is possible that RSP 2's coach had some background in special education or experience working with struggling students. Nonetheless, providing teachers with some one-on-one support with instruction from a person with background knowledge in special education could be valuable.

Teachers could also benefit from some PD that focuses on introducing CCSS practices and expectations. The fact that teachers varied in what they deemed as CCSS practices may be problematic. Considering that CCSS is expected of all teachers, and the expectations and practices are universal and meant for all students, differences in what teachers perceive to be CCSS practices is troubling. There should be more uniformity in terms of teachers'

perceptions of CCSS practices. Teachers have distinct opinions on what constitute CCSS expectations and practices, which means that they likely differ in instructional practices. This leaves room for questioning the quality of instruction being provided to students. While there is some disparity in teacher perceived CCSS practices, the curriculum used for reading and writing is uniform across the district.

Another recommendation is to either find or create instructional materials and/or resources to support teachers in supporting their students with mild to moderate disabilities with CCSS. Currently, the district uses a Reader's and Writer's Workshop curriculum for language arts, and the expectation is that teachers across the district, including special education teachers, are using these resources. However, these resources are not designed for students with learning disabilities; therefore, PDs that reflect these resources are more relevant to general education teachers. So, my recommendation is to either look for resources and materials or to modify the resources available to support instruction for students with disabilities. This ties into the recommendation of having a peer coach, as the peer coach could be involved in either searching for the much-needed resources and materials or they could take part in modifying what is available to meet the needs of teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities and their students.

### **Implications for Theory**

To review, this study's theoretical foundation is grounded in critical disabilities theory, which according to Mertens (2009), is a theory that "addresses

the meaning of inclusion in schools and encompasses administrators, teachers, and parents who have children with disabilities” (as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 33). Inclusion does not necessarily mean having students with disabilities in the same environment as general education students, although that can be part of it. The concept of inclusion spans beyond a self-contained space and reflects the idea of students having equitable access to quality instruction and the general education curriculum. Students with disabilities must be included in efforts to provide the best possible education for students with the least amount of restrictions. This study reflects this concept by highlighting the need to better support our special education teachers, as they are key individuals in providing quality instruction for students and ultimately adequately meeting their unique learning needs.

One recommendation that relates to theory, but also reflects practice, is for the district (especially the special education department) to reflect on their vision of inclusion and identify areas of needed growth, as well as strengths. This could mean gathering stakeholders and having an open dialogue and discussion about the special education programs, culminating in developing an action plan to support those areas of needed growth. Individual school sites in the district do provide opportunities for mainstreaming, particularly for subject areas such as science, social studies, art and physical education. The question becomes how inclusive are these environments? Are students being adequately supported when mainstreamed and included in the general education classrooms? If anything, the findings in this study suggest that teachers need more support in

aligning their instruction with CCSS practices, which in turn, could help them better support their students' learning needs. If teachers are not being provided with enough support, their students' needs are not being adequately met.

### **Implications for Future Research**

I have already alluded to a few implications for future research. For policy, the future research recommendation is to investigate the research gathered in developing the U.S. Department of Education guidance (2015), specifically the research that reflects the idea that “children with disabilities who struggle in reading and mathematics can successfully learn grade-level content and make significant academic progress when appropriate instruction, services, and supports are provided,” as the guidance states. This could be helpful for teachers in identifying strategies, supports, and services that prove to be helpful in allowing students to learn grade-level content and make progress.

Future research should also be conducted in other districts and with other teachers to see if they are taking similar steps in regard to emphasizing instruction that is at the child's instructional level, as opposed to grade level. Research here could push this study further by asking about IEP goals and determining whether or not teachers are using grade-level IEP goals. Future research could investigate what, if any, strategies teachers use to meet grade-level expectations through instructional level teaching.

Another area to consider for future research is to take into account other core subject areas (i.e., mathematics, science, social studies). Are teachers being met with similar challenges when considering the other core academic

areas? For example, a study could investigate whether teachers identify similar best practices and CCSS practices for mathematics. In addition, at the local district level, there could be further investigation to see if there are appropriate math resources available for meeting CCSS expectations and the needs of students with mild to moderate disabilities. If there are no resources available, how can teachers and other stakeholders go about creating those resources.

### **Recommendations**

Recommendations were introduced throughout the implications section, above. Below is an overview of the recommendations based on findings and analysis.

#### **Investigate Research Gathered in Developing IDEA Guidance**

There should be some investigation on the research that was used to develop the IDEA guidance that suggests that students with disabilities can access grade-level expectations with appropriate instruction, services, and supports. Does the research align with CCSS expectations or are they based on previous standards? What are these appropriate instructional methods, services, and supports that are proven to support students in accessing grade-level expectations?

#### **Clarify IDEA Expectations Regarding Grade-Level Alignment**

There is some ambiguity in regard to the extent in which IEP goals should be grade-level based or aligned. Does “aligned” mean that goals must be grade-level based, or must they simply have some connection to grade-level

expectations. This policy should be revisited and written with more clarity in order to avoid potential compliance issues in regard to IEP goal writing.

### **Clarify the IDEA Policy Regarding IEP Goal Writing**

Districts should decide on how they would like to interpret the policy on IEP goal writing. Either they interpret it as IEP goals being based on grade-level standards, or they find some room for flexibility with the term *aligned*. Special education teachers in the district are currently using the Goalbook Toolkit when writing IEP goals, and goals generated tend to span through multiple grade levels, meaning that it is possible that teachers using this program may be writing goals based on standards that are below the child's grade level. Depending on how the policy is interpreted, there may be potential for compliance issues.

### **Investigate Instructional-Level Practices**

Are special education teachers using instructional-level curriculum or grade level? Are grade-level resources modified to support student instructional needs? Are teachers in compliance with IDEA? Are grade-level goals being developed? This will help identify if there are issues of compliance with IEP development and implementation.

### **Provide Teachers with Targeted Professional Development**

Teachers reported not having access to PD on instruction for students with mild to moderate disabilities. They also indicated that PD provided by the district was done so by individuals with little to no experience working with students with disabilities. This helps fill that gap and supports teachers, which in turn, supports students.

**Provide Special Education Teachers with Peer Coaches**

The BUSD provides peer coaches; however, only one participant mentioned this. Peer coaches specifically for supporting special education teachers are not available at the district. These could function as support systems and experts that could help in delivering quality instruction to students.

**Provide Targeted Professional Development on CCSS Practices**

Teachers differed in what they considered CCSS practices, so this could provide clarity and uniformity. They also reported aligning their instruction more with best practices, so this can support them in aligning their instruction with CCSS as well.

**Find or Create Targeted Instructional Materials and Resources**

Curriculum and resources provided by the BUSD are not designed for supporting students with mild to moderate disabilities. Teachers mentioned lacking resources to support students in this age of CCSS. One strategy could be to create an instructional leadership team of special education teachers and have them work together on creating materials to support their colleagues and students.

**Reflect on District Vision of Inclusion**

My final recommendation is for districts with special education departments to gather all stakeholders to engage in dialogue and discussion regarding their vision of inclusion, to identify areas of strength and need, and to develop in an action plan to support areas of growth.

### **Summary of the Dissertation**

The results and recommendations presented in this dissertation are based on early research in an area that is current and in many ways uncharted. What is not current is the idea that students with learning disabilities require specialized instruction and learn differently than their general education counterparts. In essence, there is an expectation that special education teachers teach differently than general education teachers. This research helps identify some potential areas of need in regard to implementation of CCSS practices for teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities, with the ultimate goal of adequately meeting the unique learning needs of students with special needs.

George Evans reminds us that, “Every student can learn, just not on the same day, or in the same way.” with this in mind, it is our responsibility as educators to identify those ways of learning in order to provide a quality education for our students. The recommendations laid out here help as first steps in this process. The recommendations for future research will help in regard to pushing this initiative forward and providing adequate support for our struggling students.

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## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### **Introduction Script:**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in today’s interview. My name is Nasser Cortez and I will be conducting this interview. I am currently a graduate student in an Educational Leadership Program at Cal State Fullerton. The purpose of today’s interview is to better understand how teachers are navigating the demands of CCSS and special education “best practices” in their reading and writing instruction.

Is it okay with you if I record this interview? [Wait for answer] If you choose not to be recorded, I will take notes during the interview instead.

This interview should last no longer than 40-45 minutes. Your comments will remain confidential. My research will not identify who said what, nor will you be identified in any way in the research. Lastly, I would like to repeat that your participation is voluntary and you can cease to participate at any point in time without consequence. I have provided the consent form and you have signed it. Thank you. Do you have any questions before we proceed? [Wait for answer]

Great, let’s begin . . .

#### **Interview Questions**

Let’s start by discussing reading instruction.

1. Thinking about how you currently teach reading, how would you describe your instruction?
  - a. Why do you take this approach?
  - b. Can you give me an example of a lesson or unit?
2. What do you consider to be “best practices” for teaching reading to students with mild to moderate disabilities? Why?
  - a. What are some examples of these “best practices?”
  - b. In what ways, if at all, do you intentionally align your reading instruction with “best practices” of instruction for supporting students with mild to moderate disabilities? (Probe: Why?)
  - c. Describe how these strategies support students who struggle with reading.
  - d. Are there gaps in how your reading instruction does not align with “best practices/”
3. What do you consider to be CCSS-aligned practices for teaching reading to students with mild to moderate disabilities? Why?
  - a. In what ways, if at all, do you intentionally align your reading instruction with CCSS instructional practices? What specific strategies do you use?

- b. Describe how these strategies support students who struggle with reading.
- 4. In thinking about your reading instruction, to what extent do you feel tension or conflict between CCSS instructional expectations and “best practices” of instruction for students with mild to moderate disabilities? Or do you feel that these sync up nicely?
  - a. Do you emphasize one more than the other? How so? Or, do you emphasize both equally? How do you decide which will guide your lesson planning?

## Writing

Now let's turn to writing.

- 5. Thinking about how you currently teach writing, how would you describe your instruction?
  - a. Why do you take this approach?
  - b. Can you give me an example of a lesson or unit?
- 6. What do you consider to be “best practices” for teaching writing to students with mild to moderate disabilities? Why?
  - a. What are some examples of these “best practices?”
  - b. In what ways, if at all, do you intentionally align your writing instruction with “best practices” of instruction for supporting students with mild to moderate disabilities? (Probe: Why?)
  - c. Describe how these strategies support students who struggle with writing.
  - d. Are there gaps in how your writing instruction does not align with “best practices/”
- 7. What do you consider to be CCSS-aligned practices for teaching writing to students with mild to moderate disabilities? Why?
  - a. In what ways, if at all, do you intentionally align your writing instruction with CCSS instructional practices? What specific strategies do you use?
  - b. Describe how these strategies support students who struggle with writing.
- 8. In thinking about your writing instruction, to what extent do you feel tension or conflict between CCSS instructional expectations and “best practices” of instruction for students with mild to moderate disabilities? Or do you feel that these sync up nicely?
  - a. Do you emphasize one more than the other? How so? Or, do you emphasize both equally? How do you decide which will guide your lesson planning?

## Compatibility and Tension

- 9. In considering students that struggle with reading and writing, how would you describe the compatibility between CCSS instructional practices and “best practices” for instruction for supporting students with mild to moderate disabilities? How about any tensions?
- 10. What opportunities do you believe exist for you and your students in this era of CCSS?
- 11. What are some challenges you face in regard to instruction in this era of CCSS?
  - a. Have you been provided with PD opportunities that address this need? (IF YES) Please describe, how so?
  - b. (If the answer is yes): Has this PD been specifically for supporting students with mild to moderate learning disabilities?
  - c. To what extent, if at all, has PD focusing on CCSS instruction been provided?

- d. Describe the resources, if any, which have been provided to you in terms of supporting students with mild to moderate disabilities with CCSS.

### Professional Background

The following questions will focus on your experience in education . . .

12. What is your current job title (or position)?
  - a. How long have you worked in this specific position?
  - b. How long have you worked at your current school site?
  - c. How long have you worked in the district?
  - d. How long have you been a teacher?
13. What credentials/certifications/degrees do you hold?

I want to thank you for your time and participation in this interview. Do you have any questions or concerns? If you would like, I can provide a copy of my research upon completion. Again, thank you for your time and participation.

**APPENDIX B**  
**OBSERVATIONAL PROTOCOL**

<b>Date:</b>  <b>Time:</b>  <b>Content Area (Reading/Writing):</b>  <b>School Site:</b>  <b>Participant:</b>	
<b>Descriptive No</b>	<b>Reflective Notes:</b>
<b>Summary:</b>	

**APPENDIX C**  
**CODING TREE**

Research Question #1:

In what ways do upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities view CCSS and best practices as compatible or conflicting?

**1A. CCSS and best practices compatibility**

*1Ai. CCSS and “best practices” standards and expectations*

*1Aia. Reading Compatibility*

*1Aib. Writing Compatibility*

*1Aii. CCSS and “best practices” instructional practices*

*1Aia. Reading Compatibility*

*1Aib. Writing Compatibility*

**1B. CCSS and best practices conflicting**

*1Bi. CCSS and “best practices” standards and expectations*

*1Bia. Reading conflict*

*1Bib. Writing conflict*

*1Bii. CCSS and “best practices” instructional practices*

*1Bia. Reading conflict*

*1Biib. Writing conflict*

Research Question #2:

How are upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities meeting their students' unique learning needs while also implementing CCSS? In particular, in what ways are upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities aligning their instruction with CCSS instructional practices or with best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities in the areas of reading and writing?

**2A. CCSS instructional practices (Reading)**

*2Ai. Foundational Reading Skills*

*2Aii. Reading Comprehension*

**2B. CCSS instructional practices (Writing)**

*2Bi. Foundational Writing Skills*

*2Bii. Comprehensive Writing*

**2C. “Best Practices” for students with mild to moderate disabilities  
(Reading)**

*2Ci. Foundational Reading Skills*

*2Cii. Reading Comprehension*

**2D. “Best Practices” for students with mild to moderate disabilities  
(Writing)**

*2Di. Foundational Writing Skills*

*2Dii. Comprehensive Writing*

Research Question #3:

What do these teachers view as the instructional challenges they are facing, the needs they have for support, and the opportunities that exist for them and their students in the era of CCSS?

**3A. Instructional Challenges**

*3Ai. Common Core Reading and Writing*

*3Aii. Common Core Reading and Writing*

**3B. Needs for Support (RSP)**

*3Bi. Professional Development*

*3Bii. Resources*

*3Biii. Coaching*

**3C. Needs for Support (SDC)**

*3Ci. Professional Development*

*3Cii. Resources*

*3Ciii. Coaching*

**3D. Opportunities for Teachers and students (RSP)**

*3Di. Professional Development*

*3Dii. Resources*

*3Diii. Coaching*

**3E. Opportunities for teachers and students (SDC)**

*3Ei. Professional Development*

*3Eii. Resources*

*3Eiii. Coaching*

## APPENDIX D

RESEARCH QUESTIONS MAPPED THROUGH  
DATA SOURCES AND ANALYSIS

Research Questions	1. In what ways do upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities view CCSS and best practices as compatible or conflicting in reading and writing?	2. How are upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities meeting their students' unique learning needs while also implementing CCSS? In particular, in what ways are upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities aligning their instruction with CCSS instructional practices or with best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities in the areas of reading and writing?	3. What do these teachers view as the instructional challenges they are facing, the needs they have for support, and the opportunities that exist for them and their students in the era of CCSS?
Data Sources- Interview Protocol Appendix A	Pre-Interview Questions: #2, #3, #4, #6, #7, #8, #9	Pre-Interview Questions: #2, #3, #5, #7 Observation of Lesson Notes	Pre-Interview Questions: #10, #11
Data Analysis (Codes)- Coding Tree Appendix C	1Aia, 1Aib, 1Aii, 1Aiiib, 1Bi, 1Bia, 1Bib, 1Bii, 1Biiia, 1Biiib, 2A, 2B, 2C, 2D	2A, 2B, 2C, 2D Observation of Lesson Notes	3A, 3B, 3C, 3D, 3E

## APPENDIX E

### CONSENT FORM

California State University Fullerton  
Research Study Consent Form

**Study Title:** Supporting upper elementary school students with mild to moderate disabilities in the areas of reading and writing in the age of Common Core.

**Researcher:** Nasser Cortez, Department of Educational Leadership Student (CSUF),  
Email: [Nasser.cortez@gmail.com](mailto:Nasser.cortez@gmail.com)

You are being asked to take part in a research study carried out by Nasser Cortez under the guidance of Dr. Jennifer Goldstein in the Department of Educational Leadership. Her contact information is as follows: Email- [jengoldstein@fullerton.edu](mailto:jengoldstein@fullerton.edu) and Phone-(657) 278-3963.

This consent form explains the research study and your part in it if you decide to join the study. Please read the form carefully, taking as much time as you need. Ask the researcher to explain anything you don't understand. You can decide not to join the study. If you join the study, you can change your mind later or quit at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of services or benefits if you decide to not take part in the study or quit later.

#### **What is this study about?**

This research study is being conducted to better understand how teachers are navigating the demands of CCSS and special education "best practices" in their reading and writing instruction. You are being asked to take part because you are an upper elementary school teacher of students with mild to moderate disabilities. Taking part in the study will take about 70 minutes.

#### **What will I be asked to do if I am in this study?**

If you take part in the study, you will be asked to participate in an interview (approximately 45 minutes). Next, an observation of a reading or writing lesson by you (approximately 30 minutes) will be conducted by the researcher. Lastly, there will be a follow-up interview to occur shortly after the observation (approximately 15 minutes).

#### **Are there any benefits to me if I am in this study?**

The potential benefits to you for taking part in this study is providing information for important issues in the field of special education.

#### **Are there any risks to me if I am in this study?**

The risks in this study may include some discomfort associated with interview questions or being observed. It is important to note that the research done in this study is not in any form evaluative. Rather, it is only meant to provide information on an important topic. Aliases will be assigned to participants in order to protect confidentiality.

**Will my information be kept anonymous or confidential?**

The data for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. No published results will identify you, and your name will not be associated with the findings. Aliases will be used to protect confidentiality of all participants. Data will be stored in a password protected computer. Consent forms and any audio recordings will be locked in a cabinet at researcher's residence. Only the researcher and research staff will have access to this data. Audio recordings will be destroyed after transcription.

The results of this study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identities of all research participants will remain confidential. The data for this study will be kept for 3 years.

**Also, note: (All California State University employees are mandated reporters under California's Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act ("CANRA"). Whenever a CSU employee, in his/her professional capacity or within the scope of his/her employment, has knowledge of or observes a person under the age of 18 years whom the employee knows, or reasonably suspects, to have been the victim of child abuse or neglect, the employee must report the incident to the appropriate authorities).**

**Are there any costs or payments for being in this study?**

There is no cost to you for participating in this study. Participants will receive a \$30 Barnes and Noble gift card.

**Who can I talk to if I have questions?**

If you have questions about this study or the information in this form, please contact the researcher Nasser Cortez, Email: [Nasser.cortez@gmail.com](mailto:Nasser.cortez@gmail.com). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or would like to report a concern or complaint about this study, please contact the Institutional Review Board at (657) 278-7640, or e-mail [irb@fullerton.edu](mailto:irb@fullerton.edu)

**What are my rights as a research study volunteer?**

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to be a part of this study. There will be no penalty to you if you choose not to take

part. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time.

**What does my signature on this consent form mean?**

**Your signature on this form means that:**

- You understand the information given to you in this form.
- You have been able to ask the researcher questions and state any concerns.
- The researcher has responded to your questions and concerns.
- You believe you understand the research study and the potential benefits and risks that are involved.

**Statement of Consent**

I have carefully read and/or I have had the terms used in this consent form and their significance explained to me. By signing below, I agree that I am at least 18 years of age and agree to participate in this project. You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep.

Name of Participant (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Your signature below indicates that you are giving permission to audio/video tape your responses.

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_